

RENEWING THE EVANGELICAL MISSION

Edited by
Richard Lints

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

*In honor of David F. Wells,
whose prophetic voice has exposed
the idols of the age in evangelicalism while
generously pointing the movement to the Living God
who alone will satisfy its deepest longings for truth and holiness*

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Contributors

OS GUINNESS
Author and Social Critic
Senior Fellow, East/West Institute

MICHAEL S. HORTON
J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary

RICHARD LINTS
Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

BRUCE L. MCCORMACK
Frederick and Margaret L. Weyerhaeuser Professor
of Systematic Theology
Princeton Theological Seminary

MARK A. NOLL
Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History
University of Notre Dame

J. I. PACKER
Board of Governors' Professor in Theology
Regent College, Vancouver, B.C.

CONTRIBUTORS

GARY A. PARRETT

Professor of Educational Ministries and Worship
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

RODNEY L. PETERSEN

Executive Director
Boston Theological Institute

CORNELIUS PLANTINGA JR.

President Emeritus
Calvin Theological Seminary

TITE TIÉNOU

Senior Vice President of Education and Academic Dean
Professor of Theology of Mission
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

Blanchard Professor of Theology
Wheaton College

ADONIS VIDU

Associate Professor of Theology
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

MIROSLAV VOLF

Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology
Yale Divinity School
Founding Director, Yale Center for Faith & Culture

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IT IS NOT DIFFICULT to make the case that evangelicalism (generally speaking) exhibits a low doctrine of the church. Emerging out of the churches of the Reformation as well as the Anabaptist heritage, pietism — especially in the United States and Britain — evangelicalism was defined by a series of “awakenings” and a subsequent history of revivals. Often, these movements were celebrated as extraordinary works of the Spirit in contrast with the ordinary ministry of the church and they spawned a vast network of parachurch ministries.

It is possible today for a professing believer to go from the nursery to children’s church to the youth group to campus ministries to groups for singles, then young marrieds, all the way to “empty nesters” and “golden oldies,” without ever having actually joined a church, or at least without having been immersed in the cross-generational and cross-cultural communion of saints that is generated through the public ministry of Word, sacrament, and discipline. Is it then any wonder that so many evangelical young people abandon the church by their sophomore year in college, especially when they have routinely heard the distinction between “becoming a Christian” and “joining a church”?

Sometimes it is even the church itself that creates a panoply of “ministries” that unintentionally convey the impression that this is where the real growth occurs and that the public gathering of the saints for the Word, the sacraments, fellowship, and the prayers is secondary. And given the evidence that there has been no real growth in the number of new professions of faith — in fact, decline — it seems hardly effi-

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cient even in practical terms to move Christians from the churches of their youth to megachurches with the appeal to anonymity. In short, evangelicalism has a pronounced tendency toward losing the reached in the name of reaching the lost. It is not simply that evangelicals tend to embrace a “low ecclesiology.” It is that the evangelical movement, held together largely by a common attachment to revivals and the parachurch societies that emerge from them, is a practical subversion of particular churches of any ecclesiological stripe. In *The Courage to Be Protestant*, David Wells observes that parachurch ministries are increasingly replacing the church itself.¹ Focusing on the essentials, conservative ministers within established denominations often downplayed their confessional distinctives in order to cooperate in a common evangelical vision for mission.

Furthermore, a critical attitude toward visible ecclesiastical structures was occasioned by the perceived hostility of mainline Protestantism toward the fundamentals of the Christian faith. The post-World War II renaissance (usually called neo-evangelicalism) was led mainly by mainline Protestants who were increasingly marginalized within their own denominations and the second half of the century witnessed a wide-scale flight to conservative evangelical congregations. The “Jesus Movement” in the 1970s fused fundamentalism with the charismatic movement, offering an alternative to the ecclesiastical establishment analogous to that generation’s more general suspicions of organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies. Doubtless, there are many factors behind the lack of interest in ecclesiology (including sociological factors) that cannot be rehearsed in any depth in this essay.

There are hopeful signs of renewed interest in ecclesiology among evangelicals in recent years.² However, in spite of rewarding engage-

1. David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Markers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 10-12, 209-25.

2. Setting the standard in this respect is Miroslav Volf’s *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Stanley Grenz and Amos Yong have pointed up the need for a more robust ecclesiology in evangelical and Pentecostal circles. More recently, see Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009). The emergent movement has also sparked renewed interest in ecclesiological questions. See for example Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009).

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ment with Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anabaptist, Free Church, and Pentecostal views, evangelicals have generally shown little interest in the seminal ecclesiological insights of Reformation traditions. Evangelicalism is not neutral with respect to ecclesiology. Although the movement's leaders often explain the lack of ecclesiological emphasis as a way of focusing on the truths that unite us, the movement's working assumptions seem chiefly to be indebted to Anabaptist, pietist, and revivalistic traditions. Often, this means that churches of the Reformation that would otherwise share an evangelical faith must either opt out of participation in the evangelical movement or must accept the working assumptions of a quite different ecclesiological paradigm. At least since the Second Great Awakening, the Reformation and its confessional distinctives have played a less discernable role than pietist and revivalistic emphases. In fact, at the end of his U.S. tour, Dietrich Bonhoeffer could summarize his observations concerning American religion generally as "Protestantism without the Reformation."

In this essay I compare and contrast evangelical and Reformed approaches to ecclesiology. Recognizing the danger in generalizations, I focus on broad trajectories in an effort to locate different theological paradigms that, while not offering exhaustive explanation, may go some distance toward understanding the strengths and weaknesses of evangelical ecclesiologies. I offer these remarks in the hope of sparking further conversation for the church's life today, not simply to defend my own tradition.

Ecclesiology is a significant part of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Anglican theologian Paul Avis has observed, "Reformation theology is largely dominated by two questions: 'How can I obtain a gracious God?' and 'Where can I find the true Church?' The two questions are inseparably related. . . ."³ According to the churches of the Reformation, the true church is found "wherever the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments are properly administered." In the remainder of this essay, I want to highlight, from a Reformed perspective, three chief assumptions of evangelical approaches to the church that should be made more explicit in our conversations. Obviously, these are generalizations, but I do think that there are enough family resemblances to identify a working evangelical ecclesiology.

3. Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), p. 1.

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God's Covenant versus Our Contract

The churches of the Reformation maintain that the church is *creatura verbi*, the creature of the Word.⁴ Just as “faith comes from hearing the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17), the church is created out of the darkness and chaos of this passing evil age through the living and active speech of the Triune God. The Father speaks this new creation into being, in the Son, and by the Spirit. The context created by this speech is a covenant.

Eschatology and ecclesiology converge at this point. As I have argued in-depth elsewhere, Reformed interpretations of the kingdom of God embrace the paradox of the “already” and “not-yet” that seems so evident in the New Testament. Given the fall of humankind in Adam, history would have remained closed — a vicious cycle of violence, sin, death, and condemnation — had God not opened it up by proclaiming the gospel. From the woman will come a seed who will crush the serpent’s head, lifting the curse (Gen. 3:16). It is this heavenly Word, coming to sinners from outside of themselves, that breaks up the present evil age and creates a community of hearers.

In the upper room (John 14–16), Jesus prepared his disciples for his departure. After he ascends, he will send the Spirit who will bring understanding of everything that he had spoken during his ministry. Christ’s ascension, reported at the end of Luke and at the beginning of Acts, and referred to repeatedly in the Epistles, marks a real absence of Jesus in the flesh. He is truly gone. Yet this departure marks his royal entrance into the heavenly temple as the faithful High Priest and conquering King. From there, he reigns through the Word of his apostles and the Spirit whom he and the Father have sent. Where his Word and Spirit are present, Jesus Christ himself is present as well. Yet we await his bodily return at the end of the age.

So this is the paradox. Jesus’ departure opens up a fissure in history. It is not allowed to go its own way, but is drawn into his own history of descent, resurrection, ascent, and return in the flesh. In this precarious crevice (to borrow a phrase from Douglas Farrow), the new covenant

4. There is a fine summary of this position in “Lutheran-R.C. Dialogue,” *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, and William G. Rusch (Geneva: World Council of Churches; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 802-3. For the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue on this point, see pp. 495-98.

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community is born and flourishes against all odds.⁵ Like a patch of grass on the cliff of a sea rock, it is battered and blown, but this serves merely to scatter the seeds with verdant life.

The Reformers spoke of the Word of God pre-eminently as the eternal Son, but also as both a *written canon* or rule of faith and life and as a *sacramental Word* — that is, a means of grace, primarily as preaching.⁶ In the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, God tells the prophet to preach to the dry bones and they come together with the breath of life. Especially in our Western culture, words merely refer to reality. They describe certain states of affairs. However, in the biblical worldview, God's Word creates reality and new states of affairs. Just as the Triune God spoke the world into existence (from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit), the same God speaks salvation — the new creation — into existence here and now. Even the sacraments of baptism and the Supper are Word-events in the sense that they ratify the saving activity of God in the covenant assembly.

The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God, not just a discourse on biblical subjects. In preaching and sacrament, Christ is present in the power of his Spirit, raising those who are spiritually dead and constantly breathing his life into his people. The weekly gathering of the covenant people is God's service to sinners, divine theater in which the church — threatened on all sides from within and without — flourishes and expands to the ends of the earth.

*Covenant: The Triune God Creates the Church
through the Means of Grace*

Thus, the church is a covenant community that comes into being and is sustained in its growth by the action of the Triune God, rooted in God's gracious election. Believers receive Christ and all of his benefits through the gift of faith, but this response does not create the church. Rather, it is the Spirit's working through the ministry of Word and sacrament that creates faith itself. Therefore, the church's existence is ob-

5. This is a repeated metaphor in one of the most helpful treatments of eschatology and ecclesiology I have come across: Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

6. B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), pp. 84-85.

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jective, in spite of the ambiguity of its inherent holiness and faithfulness. The church exists wherever *God* is at work. And because God has pledged his saving activity to these creaturely means, there will be faith and it will bear the fruit of good works.

The Spirit applies Christ's redeeming work through the preaching of the gospel and ratifies the gracious promise through baptism and the Lord's Supper. In this conception, the covenant community (or visible church) in both Testaments is *constituted* by the decision and action of the Triune God, not by the decision and action of human beings — whether individuals or a magisterium. It is with faith in the sovereign grace of the triune God that professing Christians embrace the covenant promises not only for themselves but for their children. It is not our contract with God, but God's covenant with us and our children that gives rise to a church.

The covenant community (the visible church) is wider than the company of the elect (the invisible church). Put more eschatologically, the invisible church is the church as it will be fully revealed only on the last day. As in the Old Testament, the visible church or covenant community is at present a "mixed body": "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Rom. 9:6). There are weeds sown among the wheat (Matt. 13:36-43). In short, the visible church is the field in which the Father is at work, in the Son, and by his Spirit, producing a harvest for the end of the age. It is not simply the sum total of regenerate believers deciding and acting in concert, but the heavenly embassy on earth, where Christ is building his kingdom.

The pattern in Acts is consistent with the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace. Just as Abraham believes and is circumcised, and is then commanded to circumcise his sons as heirs of the promise, Peter declares in his Pentecost sermon, "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). Cut to the quick by Peter's sermon, many believe and are baptized, and bring their whole household under the covenant promises through baptism (Acts 16:14-15, 31; 1 Cor. 1:16). The children of believers are holy, set apart by God's promise (1 Cor. 7:14), although some will reject their birthright (Heb. 12:16; cf. 6:1-9). Responding to God's promise, parents — and indeed the whole church — vow to raise these children in the covenant. There is the expectation that their children will come to profess faith publicly before the elders and this will be ratified by their being welcomed to the Lord's Table.

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Therefore, although it may in some cases begin with a definable experience, conversion is understood primarily as gradual and lifelong growth in repentance and faith through the ordinary means of grace. The inner working of the Spirit is mysterious and varied, but the outward means are always the same, ordained by Christ as the public mark of his abiding and active presence in the world by his Spirit. God's sovereign work is not bound to the outward means of the covenant's administration, but he has pledged to work through them as he pleases. In this view, it is God who makes the church visible in this world and it is his external work that is visible, not his secret operations. The believer's confession of faith is the *fruit* of the Spirit's ministry through the church, rather than the *source* of ecclesial existence.

These covenantal presuppositions generate particular ways of articulating our belief in the church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." To take just catholicity as an example, Reformed ecclesiology emphasizes the point that God not only chose us for himself but chose our brothers and sisters for us as well. We have failed in all sorts of ways to practice this truth in our history, but it remains a potent force for transforming concrete church life. Our modern culture catechizes us in the opposite faith. It claims to be generically catholic (global), but it is deeply sectarian and anti-social. It teaches us through the most pervasive words and sacraments of our daily routines that we are the sovereign choosers. By carving up humankind into niche demographics based on personal choice, this false catholicity feeds both our narcissism and our sense of loneliness. Yet when we enter God's house, we discover an entirely different order where the powers of the age to come are at work even in this present evil age. We are all here together not because we share the same demographic niche, generational profile, or special interests, but because we have been chosen, redeemed, and called into one body by one Spirit. We share "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). We may not have the same playlist on our iPods or share the same political views, but we eat of one loaf in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:17). Through these outward means the Spirit binds us together in the deepest inner unity. The church is catholic because Christ "redeemed for God people from every tribe, kindred, tongue, people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9) and our location "in Christ" is more decisive than the sectarian allegiances of ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, politics, and consumer preferences (Gal. 3:28).

As I look around in the public gathering each Lord's Day, and see

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many whom I would not ordinarily know, much less choose, for my circle of friends, I catch a glimpse of the everlasting *shalom* that awaits us. We cannot summon this “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” into being. We cannot work toward it. It is not a human project. Like the gospel itself, this ecclesial reality can only be received as a gift, through the means that God has promised to use to create it.

Contract: Believers Create the Church by Personal Decision

Against the absorption of personal faith in Christ to the faith of the church, the Reformation emphasized that each of us must repent and believe the gospel. However, as Anabaptist scholars observe, justification was not a concern of the radical reformers for whom the central doctrine was obedient discipleship and the imitation of Christ.⁷ Rather than means of grace, baptism and the Lord’s Supper were seen as the believer’s act of commitment. Some even questioned the validity of these covenantal ordinances and later movements, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), abandoned them in favor of fellowship and spiritual conversation, each according to his or her “inner light.” If Rome virtually eliminates the need for personal decision and identifies the Body of Christ univocally with a particular organization in history, radical Protestants have tended to place the emphasis on personal choice and a voluntary society over against the visible church.

Under the conditions of modernity, everyone has to choose his or her religion and this is salutary for anyone who maintains the importance of personal faith. However, the autonomy of the self has argued for more than this: namely, the recognition that faith is *only* a matter of

7. In his excellent volume, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), contemporary Anabaptist theologian Thomas Finger observes, “Robert Friedmann found ‘A forensic view of grace, in which the sinner is . . . undeservedly justified . . . simply unacceptable’ to Anabaptists. A more nuanced scholar like Arnold Snyder can assert that historic Anabaptists ‘never talked about being “justified by faith”’” (p. 109). Finger believes that Anabaptist soteriological emphases (especially on divinization) can bring greater unity especially between marginalized Protestant groups (Pentecostals and Quakers) and Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologies of salvation (p. 110). Finger observes that recent Anabaptist reflection is no more marked in its interest in this topic than its antecedents, with discipleship (“following Jesus”) and the inner transformation of the believer as central (pp. 132-33).

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personal choice. To the extent that certain forms of Protestantism have given theological sanction to this emphasis, they have not only survived but thrived. If conversion is a matter of “signing up” for salvation, then the church will be conceived as a market niche or a club. Dietrich Bonhoeffer poignantly observed, “What is the point of admitting infants into an association?” he asks. “No chess player, no matter how passionate, would enroll a small child in a chess club. . . . Only a community [*Gemeinschaft*], not a society [*Gesellschaft*], is able to carry children. Infant baptism within an association is an internal contradiction.”⁸ By the way, Bonhoeffer’s main point was to remind paedobaptist churches in Germany of the obligation that they were neglecting.

Although the emergent church movement offers bracing critiques of the megachurch model, is it really a radically new paradigm or is it an updating of the revivalistic paradigm? Stanley Grenz observes, “The post-Reformation discussion of the *vera ecclesia* formed the historical context for the emergence of the covenant idea as the focal understanding of the nature of the church.”⁹ With its insistence on the marks of the church, “the Reformers shifted the focus to Word and Sacrament,” but the Anabaptists and Baptists “took yet a further step,” advocating an independent ecclesiology. “This view asserts that the true church is essentially people standing in voluntary covenant with God.”¹⁰ Of course, this principle of personal decision excludes the practice of infant baptism, Grenz argues. “As a result, in the order of salvation the believer — and not the church — stands first in priority.”¹¹ “Because the coming together of believers in mutual covenant constitutes the church, it is the covenant community of individuals,” although it has a history as well.¹² Although the language of “covenant” is used, notice the crucial difference: it refers to the mutual covenanting of consenting adults, not first of all to the mutual covenanting of the persons of the Trinity and the priority of God’s promise.

8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1, ed. Joachim von Soosten; English edition ed. Clifford J. Green; trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 254, 257.

9. Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), p. 609.

10. Grenz, *Theology*, pp. 610-11.

11. Grenz, *Theology*, pp. 610-11.

12. Grenz, *Theology*, p. 614.

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It was especially in the Second Great Awakening that the centrality of human decision and effort became especially dominant. As Roger Olson observes, the nineteenth-century evangelist Charles Finney was closer to Pelagianism than Arminianism.¹³ Rejecting the doctrines of original sin, substitutionary atonement, justification through faith, and the miraculous character of the new birth,¹⁴ the evangelist insisted that salvation was due entirely to human decision and effort. Consequently, the new birth is as dependent on predictable laws of cause-and-effect efficiency as any other natural process. Although Finney's cause-and-effect view shares superficial similarities with the Roman Catholic concept of *ex opere operato* sacramental efficacy, there are two crucial differences: (1) he claimed this efficacy for his new measures rather than for the sacraments that Christ ordained and (2) he denied that their efficacy depended even ultimately on God's grace.

The connection between soteriology and ecclesiology is clear enough in Finney's own thinking. Just as the new birth lies entirely in the hands of the individual, through whatever "excitements" are likely to "induce repentance," the church is conceived primarily as a society of moral reformers. In a letter on revival, Finney issued the following: "Now the great business of the church is to reform the world — to put away every kind of sin. The church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers . . . to reform individuals, communities, and governments." If the churches will not follow, they will simply have to be left behind, Finney contended.¹⁵

Remarkably, Finney seems to have been fully convinced that Scripture provided clear commands for social reform while remaining virtu-

13. Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), p. 28 (including footnote 20). Furthermore, I have been amazed that Arminian friends like Methodist theologian Thomas Oden have defended core evangelical (i.e., Reformation) teachings like justification even while some conservative Protestants seem to be losing their interest in the doctrine. Clearly, the theological divide in our day is less denominational than it is theological.

14. Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology* (reprinted, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), pp. 31, 46, 57, 206, 209, 236, 320-22.

15. Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1835), pp. 184-204. "Law, rewards, and punishments — these things and such as these are the very heart and soul of moral suasion. . . . My brethren, if ecclesiastical bodies, colleges, and seminaries will only go forward — who will not bid them God speed? But if they will not go forward — if we hear nothing from them but complaint, denunciation, and rebuke in respect to almost every branch of reform, what can be done?"

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ally silent on the ministry of the church. Eventually, the new measures instituted in the protracted meeting (or revival) were adopted as regular features in many regular church services. The chancel, with its prominent pulpit, font, and table, was often replaced with a stage, a choir, and, of course, the very mobile preachers, unchained — literally and often metaphorically — from the text they were expounding. It was no longer clear to many at least what role that the ordinary preaching of the Word, teaching, administration of the sacraments, discipline, and diaconal care fit in and increasingly the burden for outreach, fellowship, and mercy ministries shifted to parachurch agencies.

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that “means of grace” do not seem as relevant as practical methods of attaining our own personal and social transformation, church growth, and daily problem-solving. *If salvation is not a miracle, then the church is not a miracle. If salvation can be orchestrated through clever methods calculated for pragmatic success in terms of numbers, then church growth is a purely natural phenomenon based on the same methods as any other business.* Finney defined his “new measures” as “inducements sufficient to convert sinners with.”¹⁶

At least Jonathan Edwards had taught that a revival was “a surprising work of God,” an extraordinary blessing of God’s ordinary means of grace. However, Finney insisted, “A revival is not a miracle.” In fact, “There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else. . . . It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means — as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”¹⁷ “God Has Established No Particular Measures” is a chapter subheading in Finney’s *Systematic Theology*. “A re-

16. Ironically, Finney held to an *ex opere operato* view of his own new measures that he would never allow to baptism and the Supper. As for Pelagian charge, Finney’s *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976) explicitly denies original sin and insists that the power of regeneration lies in the sinner’s own hands, rejects any substitutionary notion of Christ’s atonement in favor of the moral influence and moral government theories, and regards the doctrine of justification by an alien righteousness as “impossible and absurd.” In fact, Roger Olson, in his defense of Arminianism, sees Finney’s theology as well beyond the Arminian pale (*Arminian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006], p. 27). Thus, it is all the more remarkable that Finney occupies such a distinguished place among evangelicals, as the tribute to him in the Billy Graham Center (Wheaton, IL) illustrates. It is little wonder that American religion struck Bonhoeffer as “Protestantism without the Reformation.”

17. Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), pp. 4-5.

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vival will decline and cease,” he warned, “unless Christians are frequently re-converted.”¹⁸ A revival could be planned, staged, and managed. The Great Commission just said, “Go,” says Finney. “*It did not prescribe any forms.* It did not admit any. . . . And [the disciples’] object was to make known the gospel in the *most effectual way* . . . so as to obtain attention and secure obedience of the greatest number possible. No person can find any *form* of doing this laid down in the Bible.”¹⁹ This may seem like an odd interpretation, since the substance of the Great Commission is to preach, baptize, and teach.

Writing against the “new measures,” a contemporary Reformed pastor and theologian, John Williamson Nevin, pointed out the contrast between “the system of the bench” (precursor to the altar call) and what he called “the system of the catechism”: “The old Presbyterian faith, into which I was born, was based throughout on the idea of covenant family religion, church membership by God’s holy act in baptism, and following this a regular catechetical training of the young, with direct reference to their coming to the Lord’s table. In one word, all proceeded on the theory of sacramental, educational religion.” Nevin relates his own involvement in a revival as a young man, where he was expected to disown his covenantal heritage as nothing more than dead formalism. These two systems, Nevin concluded, “involve at the bottom two different theories of religion.”²⁰

Like the revivals of Finney and his successors, the “new measures” of the church growth movement have been treated by many as science, like the law of gravity. Those who fail to adopt these new models of ministry will be left behind in the spiritual marketplace.

IN 2007, WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH released its findings from a study of its members. Surprised by the revelation that the most committed members described their Christian life as “stalled” or in decline, the leadership nevertheless concluded that it was not because the ministry itself was failing to deepen believers in faith and worship, even though that was the verdict of responders. Rather, the leadership drew the conclusion that as believers grow in their faith, they need the

18. Finney, *Revivals*, p. 321.

19. Quoted in Michael Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 24.

20. John Williamson Nevin, *The Anxious Bench* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1987), pp. 2-5.

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church and its programs less. They concluded that the sheep must become “self-feeders” who are able to carry out their workout program without the aid of the church. Ironically, the analogy of church-as-parent was employed to suggest that when believers reach maturity they find the church less important.²¹ Where Calvin (following Cyprian) referred to the church as the “mother of the faithful” who carries her children throughout their whole life, this study compared the church to a personal coach at the gym who creates personalized work-out plans and leaves the long-term success in the hands of the customer.²²

Taken to its extreme, contractual thinking easily leads to the view expressed by George Barna, an evangelical pioneer of church marketing: “Think of your church not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency — an entity that exists to satisfy people’s needs.”²³ Not surprisingly, Barna has recently suggested that the institutional church is no longer relevant and should be replaced by informal gatherings for fellowship and Internet communities. In fact, he has introduced a new demographic: the “Revolutionaries,” the “millions of believers” who “have moved beyond the established church and chosen to be the church instead.”²⁴ The Revolutionaries have found that in order to pursue an authentic faith they had to abandon the church.²⁵ Intimate worship, says Barna, does “not require a ‘worship service,’” just a personal commitment to the Bible, prayer, and discipleship.²⁶ Where Luke reports that the church gathered regularly “for the apostles’ teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers” (Acts 2:42-47), Barna suggests that preaching is simply “faith-based conversation” and the means of grace are no more than whatever it takes for “intentional spiritual growth,” “love,” “resource investment,” and “spiritual friendships.”²⁷

Whereas a covenantal approach begins with God’s Word and forms a communion of saints, in Barna’s paradigm everything begins with the individual’s personal decision, strengthened by more personal disci-

21. Greg Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Resources, 2007).

22. Hawkins, *Reveal*.

23. George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), p. 37.

24. George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), back cover copy.

25. Barna, *Revolution*, p. 17.

26. Barna, *Revolution*, p. 22.

27. Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 24-25.

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plines, and ends with the abandonment of the visible church. God's ordained means of grace are replaced with whatever is calculated to facilitate our own means of commitment. "Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul is what honors Him. Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it might not."²⁸ As the embodied communion of the saints is replaced by the Internet "explorer," the phrase "invisible church" takes on a new and ominous meaning. Yet it is part of a long history in which the public gathering of the covenant community for the means of grace was made subordinate to conventicles or "holy clubs." In the name of reaching the unchurched, evangelicalism increasingly tends to unchurch the church.

LIKE FINNEY, GEORGE BARNA asserts that the Bible offers "almost no restrictions on structures and methods" for the church.²⁹ Indeed, for Barna, the visible church itself is of human rather than divine origin. Nature abhors a vacuum and where Barna imagines that the Bible prescribes no particular structures or methods, the invisible hand of the market fills the void. Barna recognizes that the shift from the institutional church to "alternative faith communities" is largely due to market forces to which he frankly insists we must conform.³⁰ The foretaste of heavenly catholicity surrenders to this powers of this present age in Barna's vision.³¹ "So if you are a Revolutionary," Barna concludes, "it is

28. Barna, *Revolution*, p. 37.

29. Barna, *Revolution*, p. 175.

30. Barna, *Revolution*, pp. 62-63. Following "the 'niching' of America" on the part of global marketing in the effort to "command greater loyalty (and profits)," we now have "churches designed for different generations, those offering divergent styles of worship music, congregations that emphasize ministries of interest to specialized populations, and so forth. The church landscape now offers these boutique churches alongside the something-for-everybody megachurches. In the religious marketplace, the churches that have suffered most are those who stuck with the one-size-fits-all approach, typically proving that one-size-fits-nobody."

31. Perhaps Barna's emphases are the logical outworking of a more general trend that drew much of its strength from the pioneering missiology of Donald McGavran. See his *Understanding Church Growth*, ed. and rev. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). Here he especially introduced the model of "homogeneous church growth" (pp. 163-75). C. Peter Wagner defends McGavran's approach in *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979). However, some Reformed theologians in South Africa responded in the 1970s and 1980s that this principle

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because you have sensed and responded to God's calling to be such an imitator of Christ. It is not a church's responsibility to make you into this mold. . . . The choice to become a Revolutionary — and it is a choice — is a covenant you make with God alone."³² Though he employs the word "covenant," his assumptions are more suggestive of a contract: a consumer's decision to accept certain terms in exchange for certain goods and services.

More recently, Barna and Frank Viola co-authored *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*. As the title and subtitle suggest, this sweeping indictment dismisses public worship (including the sermon) along with "pastoral office" (p. 136), and the Lord's Supper is rejected as "a strange pagan-like rite" (p. 197). [In an earlier book, Viola insists that what we really need are "electric" events: "informal gatherings permeated with an atmosphere of freedom, spontaneity and joy," ". . . open and participatory meetings" with "no fixed order of worship" and therefore "impromptu."³³ In this setting, there is no place for "human officiation."³⁴ Instead, "the Lord Jesus Christ" presides "invisibly" through every-member-ministry.³⁵ To borrow terminology from Charles

was precisely the church's justification for apartheid. Allan Boesak responded, "Manipulation of the word of God to suit culture, prejudices, or ideology is alien to the Reformed tradition" (*Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, ed. Leonard Sweetman [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984], p. 87). According to John de Gruchy, Reformed churches were not segregated until the "revivals in the mid-nineteenth century" by holiness preacher Andrew Murray and pietist missionaries. "It was under the dominance of such evangelicalism," says de Gruchy, "rather than the strict Calvinism of Dort, that the Dutch Reformed Church agreed at its Synod of 1857 that congregations could be divided along racial lines." He adds, "Despite the fact that this development went against earlier synodical decisions that segregation in the church was contrary to the Word of God, it was rationalized on grounds of missiology and practical necessity. Missiologically it was argued that people were best evangelized and best worshipped God in their own language and cultural setting, a position reinforced by German Lutheran missiology and somewhat akin to the church-growth philosophy of our own time." *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 23-24.

32. De Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology*, p. 70.

33. Frank Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church? First Century Styled Church Planting for Today* (Jacksonville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2003), p. 88. I am grateful to my colleague, Peter Jones, for pointing out these quotes in his review at Reformation21.

34. Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church?* p. 234.

35. Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church?* pp. 234, 246.

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Taylor, the revivalistic trajectory celebrates the “disengaged self” of modernity over the “embedded self” of a covenantal consciousness.]³⁶

Miroslav Volf recognizes the possibility of taking Free Church logic down this contractual path:

Whether they want to or not, Free Churches often function as “homogeneous units” specializing in the specific needs of specific social classes and cultural circles, and then in mutual competition try to sell their commodity at dumping prices to the religious consumer in the supermarket of life projects; the customer is king and the one best suited to evaluate his or her own religious needs and from whom nothing more is required than a bit of loyalty and as much money as possible. If the Free Churches want to contribute to the salvation of Christendom, they themselves must first be healed.³⁷

Volf also points out that the privatization of faith that warps ecclesiology also makes Free Church ecclesiologies more effective in contemporary cultures.³⁸ Yet he recognizes that when decisions have been privatized, “the transmission of faith” is threatened.³⁹

We can see how inextricably linked are soteriology and ecclesiology. If one’s relationship to God is determined by personal choice, entering a contract to perform certain regular disciplines in exchange for salvation, then the church exists as a niche market based on personal choice: in Barna’s own words, a “service provider.” While Reformed and Presbyterian churches are often unfaithful to a covenantal ecclesiology, the dominance of personal choice and pathological church shopping seems entirely consistent with the logic of revivalism. No doubt, this contractual way of thinking is as much a source of evangelicalism’s success as it is an indicator of the movement’s growing inability to represent an alternative society, a colony of heaven in this passing age.

36. For more on this covenantal anthropology, see Michael Horton, *Lord and Servant* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), pp. 91-119.

37. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 18.

38. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 17.

39. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 16.

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Outside In vs. Inside Out

Reflecting its roots in radical Protestantism, the revivalistic paradigm exhibits a tendency to regard everything that is visible, external, and formal as a threat to that which is invisible, internal, and spontaneous. If the danger in the medieval church was to reduce the sovereign work of the Spirit to the visible ministry of the church, the reformers challenged the radical Protestants for exhibiting a nearly Gnostic dualism between body and spirit. The reformers called this “enthusiasm,” meaning literally, “God-within-ism.”

Echoing the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, Thomas Müntzer contrasted the voice of the Spirit within with the external Word that merely beats the air. Why put so much stock in the ordinary preaching of Scripture, teaching, sacraments, church order, when the Spirit works immediately and inwardly, apart from creaturely means? Why indeed require a learned ministry or continue the ordination of formal officers, hold synods and presbyteries, and imprison the spirit in the body of earthly forms? Comparisons between Müntzer and Finney come pretty easily to me, but my comments on this point will be more general.

The churches of the Reformation were united in their insistence that the saving reign of Christ comes to us from outside of ourselves, whether as individuals or as a group. However, as Calvin especially emphasized, it is the Spirit’s role to unite us to Christ here and now, so that the work that he has accomplished for us, outside of us in history, can be received by us personally and inwardly. We will never appreciate sufficiently the role of the Holy Spirit in our ecclesiology unless we reckon with the real absence of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Yet this secret work of the Spirit within us remains inseparable from the Word, as the Spirit inwardly enlightens and convinces us to embrace the gospel. We are transformed inwardly and personally through an external and public Word. By contrast, “enthusiasm” assumes an “inside-out” approach. Salvation is conceived as an inner experience — a personal relationship with Jesus that is direct and private — that may come to public expression.

Over against the “enthusiasts,” Lutheran and Reformed confessions insist that whenever the Scriptures are faithfully expounded, God is the primary speaker and the speech is an effectual means of grace even if the minister were an unbeliever. Following Romans 10:17, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, the gospel that comes to us from outside of ourselves, through the lips of an ambassador, is actually the means through

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which the Spirit creates faith in our hearts. Or consider the sacraments. It makes literally all of the difference in the world whether baptism and Communion are the believer's expression of an inner experience and commitment or God's official ratification of his promise.

In this perspective, the movement is from the external ministry of Word and sacrament to the inner response of the covenant people. The true church is visible wherever Christ is proclaimed and delivered to sinners, regardless of the spiritual effects that the Spirit generates. Yet precisely because God's Word is "living and active" and the gospel is "the power of God unto salvation . . .," it produces its intended effects. It is through this external announcement from a herald that the Spirit creates faith in the heart to confess Christ publicly (Rom. 10:5-17). So it moves from the public and external Word to personal and inward conviction and then back out to public confession and works of love.

Christ established a visible church on the earth, not an invisible movement. Ephesians 4 repeats for emphasis the phrase, "it is he [Christ] who gave" the offices of prophet and apostle and now pastors and teachers for the completion of his body. Calvin explains,

For although God's power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching. Fanatics, refusing to hold fast to it, entangle themselves in many deadly snares. Many are led either by pride, dislike, or rivalry to the conviction that they can profit enough from private reading and meditation; hence they despise public assemblies and deem preaching superfluous. But . . . no one escapes the just penalty of this unholy separation without bewitching himself with pestilent errors and foulest delusions.⁴⁰

Miroslav Volf points out that according to Separatist leader John Smyth, those who are "born again . . . should no longer need means of grace," since the persons of the Godhead "are better than all scriptures, or creatures whatsoever."⁴¹ By contrast, Volf notes, the reformers strongly affirmed God's saving activity through creaturely means — even to the point of calling the church the mother of the faithful.⁴²

40. John Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.5.

41. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 161-62.

42. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 162.

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Alas, however, John Smyth seems to have had the last — or, at least, the most recent — word on the matter. William McLoughlin reminds us that the effect of pietism in American religious experience (especially culminating in the Second Great Awakening) was to shift the emphasis away from “collective belief, adherence to creedal standards and proper observance of traditional forms, to the emphasis on individual religious experience.”⁴³ If the Enlightenment shifted “the ultimate authority in religion” from the church to “the mind of the individual,” pietism and Romanticism located ultimate authority in the *experience* of the individual.⁴⁴ All of this suggests that for some time now, evangelicalism has been as much the facilitator as the victim of modern secularism.

Just as the Spirit’s inward call is often contrasted with outward means, evangelicalism celebrates the charismatic leader who needs no formal training or external ecclesiastical ordination to confirm a spontaneous, direct, inner call to ministry. Historians may debate whether the Protestant enthusiasm is more of a consequence than a cause of the distinctively American confidence in intuitive individualism over against external authorities and communal instruction, but the connection seems obvious. In *Head and Heart*, Catholic historian Garry Wills observes,

The camp meeting set the pattern for credentialing Evangelical ministers. They were validated by the crowd’s response. Organizational credentialing, doctrinal purity, personal education were useless here — in fact, some educated ministers had to make a pretense of ignorance. The minister was ordained from below, by the converts he made. This was an even more democratic procedure than electoral politics, where a candidate stood for office and spent some time campaigning. This was a spontaneous and instant proclamation that the Spirit accomplished. The do-it-yourself religion called for a make-it-yourself ministry.⁴⁵

43. William McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 25. I am grateful to Toby Kurth for providing this and the following reference.

44. Ned C. Landsman, *From Colonials to Provincials: American Thought and Culture, 1680-1760* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 66.

45. Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007), p. 294.

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Wills repeats Richard Hofstadter's conclusion that "the star system was not born in Hollywood but on the sawdust trail of the revivalists." Where American Transcendentalism was the version of Romanticism that attracted a wide following among Boston intellectuals, Finney's legacy represents "an alternative Romanticism," a popular version of self-reliance and inner experience, "taking up where Transcendentalism left off."⁴⁶ Emerson had written, "The height, the deity of man is to be self-sustained, to need no gift, no foreign force" — no external God, with an external Word and sacraments or formal ministry.⁴⁷ And revivalism in its own way was popularizing this distinctly American religion on the frontier.

In the light of this history, Wade Clark Roof's findings are hardly surprising when he reports, "The distinction between 'spirit' and 'institution' is of major importance" to spiritual seekers today.⁴⁸ "Spirit is the inner, experiential aspect of religion; institution is the outer, established form of religion."⁴⁹ He adds, "Direct experience is always more trustworthy, if for no other reason than because of its 'inwardness' and 'withinness' — two qualities that have come to be much appreciated in a highly expressive, narcissistic culture."⁵⁰ In fact, Roof comes close to suggesting that evangelicalism works so well in this kind of culture because it helped to create it.

Stanley Grenz defended this inside-out approach. "Although some evangelicals belong to ecclesiological traditions that understand the church as in some sense a dispenser of grace," he observes, "generally we see our congregations foremost as a fellowship of believers."⁵¹ We share our journeys (our "testimony") of personal transformation (p. 33). Therefore, Grenz celebrates the "fundamental shift . . . from a creed-based to a spirituality-based identity" that is more like medieval mysticism than Protestant orthodoxy (pp. 38, 41). "Consequently, spirituality is inward and quietistic" (pp. 41-42), concerned with combating "the lower nature

46. Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 302.

47. Quoted in Wills, *Head and Heart*, p. 273.

48. Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 23.

49. Roof, *Generation of Seekers*, p. 30.

50. Roof, *Generation of Seekers*, p. 67.

51. Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 32. Hereafter, page references will be given parenthetically in the text.

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and the world” (p. 44), in “a personal commitment that becomes the ultimate focus of the believer’s affections” (p. 45). Nowhere in this account does Grenz locate the origin of faith in an external gospel; rather, faith arises from an inner experience. “Because spirituality is *generated from within the individual*, inner motivation is crucial” — more important, in fact, than “grand theological statements” (p. 46; emphasis added).

The spiritual life is above all the imitation of Christ. . . . In general we eschew religious ritual. Not slavish adherence to rites, but doing what Jesus would do is our concept of true discipleship. Consequently, most evangelicals neither accept the sacramentalism of many main-line churches nor join the Quakers in completely eliminating the sacraments. We practice baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but understand the significance of these rites in a guarded manner. (p. 48)

In any case, he says, these rites are practiced as goads to personal experience and out of obedience to divine command (p. 48). “This view marks a radical shift in the relationship of soteriology and ecclesiology, for it exchanges the priority of the church for the priority of the believer” (p. 51).

“Get on with the task; get your life in order by practicing the aids to growth and see if you do not mature spiritually,” we exhort. In fact, if a believer comes to the point where he or she senses that stagnation has set in, evangelical counsel is to redouble one’s efforts in the task of exercising the disciplines. “Check up on yourself,” the evangelical spiritual counselor admonishes. (p. 52)

The emphasis on the individual believer is evident, he says, in the expectation to “find a ministry” within the local fellowship (p. 55).

All of this is at odds with an emphasis on doctrine and especially, Grenz adds, an emphasis on “a material and a formal principle” — referring to the Reformation slogans, “sola fide” (justification by Christ alone through faith alone) and “sola scriptura” (by Scripture alone) (p. 62). In spite of the fact that the Scriptures declare that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ,” Grenz says, “Faith is by nature immediate” (p. 80). Consistent with his emphasis on the priority of inner experience, Grenz urges “a revisioned understanding of the *nature* of the Bible’s authority” (p. 88). Our own religious experience today

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needs to be included in the process of inspiration (p. 122). Accordingly, Grenz believes that this will “chart the way beyond the evangelical tendency to equate in a simple fashion the revelation of God with the Bible — that is, to make a one-to-one correspondence between the words of the Bible and the very Word of God” (p. 130).⁵²

When Luther said that “The church is not a pen-house but a mouth-house” he was pointing up the importance of hearing the Word in the public assembly even over the private reading of the Bible which he had translated into the vernacular.⁵³ Similarly, the Westminster divines confessed that the Spirit blesses “the reading but especially the preaching of the Word” as a “means of grace” precisely because through it the Spirit is “calling us out of ourselves” to cling to Christ.⁵⁴ They were asserting that faithful, meditative, and prayerful reading of Scripture in private or family devotions was essential but nevertheless subordinate to the public ministry of the Word in the common life of the church. Just as the Word creates the community, it can only be truly heard, received, and followed in the concrete covenantal exchanges within that community. In the widely held perspective articulated by Grenz, the visibility of the church is identified more with the inner work of the Spirit than with the means of grace. The result is that the church’s visibility is subjective rather than objective and individual rather than corporate. The visibility of the church becomes located in spiritual effects rather than the means of grace that God has promised to make effectual.

Marks vs. Mission

Often today, the ordinary ministry of preaching, baptizing, teaching, and sharing in the Lord’s Supper is separated from the mission of the

52. At stake in this loss of *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone) are the corollaries: *solo Christo* (by Christ alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), *sola fide* (through faith alone), and *soli Deo gloria* (to God alone be glory). These stakes are not too high for Brian McLaren, for example, who scolds Reformed Christians for “their love-affair with the Latin word ‘sola.’” Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 23.

53. Quoted in Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and a Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), p. 143, from Martin Luther, *Church Postil of 1522*.

54. Westminster Shorter Catechism in *The Book of Confessions* (PCUSA General Assembly, 1991), Q. 89.

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church in the world. This is frequently posed in the form of a contrast between “going to church” and “being the church.” The church is not a place where certain things happen, we are told, but a people who do certain things.

Although it is often considered new and “emerging,” this dichotomy belongs to a long history in radical Protestantism, from Thomas Müntzer to representatives as varied as Charles Finney and Harvey Cox. As George Marsden has shown, the Second Great Awakening is in many respects the common source of both Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism.⁵⁵ In *The Secular City* (1965), Cox wrote, “The insistence of the Reformers that the church was ‘where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered’ will simply not do today.” Rather, he says, “the church appears” wherever “a new inclusive human community emerges” through social action.⁵⁶ It is increasingly common today to hear evangelicals shifting their focus from the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation and redeeming work to talk about the church as a community of disciples extending Christ’s incarnation and his redeeming work in the world. Evangelicals have long spoken of “living the gospel,” as if our lives could be any more than an often ambiguous testimony to it.

According to Dan Kimball, for example, “We can’t *go* to church because *we are* the church.”⁵⁷ From this Kimball draws the familiar contrast between evangelism (mission) and the marks of the church (means of grace). Appealing to Darrell Guder’s *The Missional Church*, Kimball thinks that things went wrong at the Reformation.

The Reformers, in their effort to raise the authority of the Bible and ensure sound doctrine, defined the marks of a true church: a place where the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and church discipline is exercised. However, over time these marks narrowed the definition of the church itself as a “place where” instead of a “people who are” reality. The word church be-

55. George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

56. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London: SCM Press, 1965), p. 145.

57. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 91.

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came defined as “a place where certain things happen,” such as preaching and communion.⁵⁸

However, there are at least three problems with this increasingly widespread thesis. *First, it confuses the law and the gospel.* Unless the church is first of all a place where God judges and justifies the guilty, renewing them by his Word and Spirit, it cannot be a people who constitute anything more than another special interest group. Believers are called to do a great many things, but this is the third use of the law, not the gospel. The logic of the apostle in Romans 10 moves seamlessly from the content of the gospel (grace, Christ, and faith) to the means (hearing Christ proclaimed). Yet the oft-quoted line attributed to Francis of Assisi, “Always preach the gospel, and when necessary use words,” assumes that we are the good news. Our good works bring glory to God and service to our neighbor. They flow from the gospel and adorn the gospel, but to suggest that they are in any way part of the gospel itself is a fatal confusion.

Second, this view introduces a dilemma between the church’s essence and its mission that is not found in the New Testament. There is not first of all a church assembling by its own decision and then certain things that the church does. Rather, the church itself comes into being, is sustained, and grows, through the same Word that it proclaims to the world. Wherever this gospel concerning Christ is proclaimed to sinners, and ratified in the sacraments, a fragile piece of this passing evil age becomes a theater for God’s performance and the site of a mysterious intrusion of the powers of the age to come. In that precarious crevice between these two ages, a church is born, grows, and becomes an embassy of Christ’s heavenly reign on earth. Christ himself instituted a visible new covenant assembly, delivering not only its message but its public rites and offices.

From the Great Commission and the Book of Acts, we hear of a kingdom that descends from heaven and expands to every nation precisely through the marks of preaching, sacrament, and discipline. There are many things besides these marks that identify a *healthy* church, such as the gifts of hospitality, generosity, administration, and service. However, all of these gifts are given and strengthened through the Word and the sacraments. Hence, a church that lacks *friendliness* is

58. Kimball, *Emerging Church*, p. 93.

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unhealthy, but a church that lacks the *Word* is *not a church*. And a church that is not missional is not faithfully proclaiming the Word, baptizing, and teaching all that Christ delivered, just as a church that is not faithful in executing these marks is not missional.

We do not need a proliferation of marks (almost all of which shift the focus from God's action to our inner experience and activity), but to fulfill the Great Commission each week, delivering Christ to the sheep already gathered ("to you and your children") and "to those who are far off . . ." (Acts 2:39). Where confessional churches sometimes fail by losing their missional zeal "for all who are far off," revivalism creates a revolving door, as "you and your children" starve under a diet of often unscriptural imperatives abstracted from gospel indicatives.

Third, this view confuses the church-as-gathered with the church-as-scattered. Or, to put it differently, it tends to assimilate the visible church to the invisible church. We do not have to choose between the church as place and as people. Because it is first of all a place where God is at work, it becomes a people who leave the assembly as forgiven, renewed, and strengthened disciples who are prepared to love and serve their neighbors in the world. Of course, the church is not a building, but it *is* a public assembly where the Triune God is the primary actor. We are not the church merely as individuals and our private spiritual disciplines and moral activity are effects of grace, not the means of grace. Therefore, we must *go* to church if we are to *be* the church. The suggestion that we cannot go to church because we are the church invites the obvious question as to why we should participate regularly in church services at all. As George Barna has reminded us, resources for personal spirituality and social action may be found on any number of Internet sites. However, if the public service is the place where the Triune God is the playwright, central character, and casting director in the drama of redemption, then a new society emerges that participates even now in the powers of the age to come. We are not "self-feeders." The church is the creation of the Word, not only initially but throughout its growth in history.

The church gathers to receive God's judgment and forgiveness and, to hear an external Word, to receive it as it is ratified in the sacraments, to indwell it through teaching, fellowship, singing, and the prayers. And then, renewed with God's saving gifts, the church is scattered into the world as salt and light. In relation to God and his gifts, we are passive recipients; in relation to the claim of our neighbors, we are active distrib-

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utors of God's gifts, in both our witness and service in our daily callings. God works from the outside in, not from the inside out. It is a public faith that creates a personal response, not a personal faith that creates a public response.

Conclusion

In my view, evangelicalism remains an important gathering place or rallying point for Christians from a variety of churches. Yet it is not merely an empty space. It is dominated by ecclesiological assumptions that often work against as well as for the cause of the church to which Christ pledged his undying presence. To the extent that evangelicalism knows its place, as a non-ecclesiastical meeting place for mutual edification and admonition, it remains important. Yet to the extent that it substitutes itself for the church and its parachurch ministries for the ordinary ministry of Word and sacrament, it subverts the intention of its Lord.

In treating the continuing significance of evangelicalism, I have suggested on occasion the analogy of an old village green, framed by various churches.⁵⁹ Evangelicalism is not the Big Tent or the cathedral that reduces these churches to chapels, but the place where they spill out from their own churches into mutual fellowship, encouragement, admonition, service, and witness. While avoiding a sectarianism that shuns the green, we should also recognize that it is in those particular churches where our Savior promises to establish and increase his gracious empire.

C. S. Lewis employed a similar analogy, whose intent seems too often ignored:

I hope no reader will suppose that "mere" Christianity is here put forward as an alternative to the creeds of the existing communions — as if a man could adopt it in preference to Congregationalism or Greek Orthodoxy or anything else. It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall,

59. Michael Horton, "Is Evangelicalism Reformed? Re-evaluating the Marsden-Dayton Debate," *Christian Scholars' Review* 2 (Winter 2001): 3-15.

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that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. . . . And above all, you must be asking which door is the true one; not which pleases you best by its paint and panelling.⁶⁰

This essay has not taken up inconsistencies in the history of Reformed churches. A covenantal ecclesiology is as easily subverted by ethnocentricity and mere formalism as by individualism and enthusiasm. We have not lived up to our professed ecclesiological values. Positively, churches in the Reformed tradition have not only contributed to evangelical coalitions over the last three centuries, but have benefited significantly from mutual encouragement and critique.

Nevertheless, the church is not a dead planet. For all of its weeds, it is this field that Christ has purchased with his own life and in which he has planted his wheat that even now is growing into a worldwide harvest. And it is to this real world that we must return for our own life as well as our corporate witness. For all of her failures, the church is the mother of the faithful and only under her care can we flourish as part of that new creation that Christ has inaugurated by his resurrection from the dead. There is life in the real church, however devastated the landscape. There are fertile valleys and rivers. Her pools are not a mirage but are fountains where the dead are raised and the thirsty drink to their heart's content.

60. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), Preface, p. 11.