

The Literature of Ecclesiology: A Ten-Year Retrospective

By Fred Guyette

PROLOGUE: AVERY DULLES AND *MODELS OF THE CHURCH*

M*odels of the Church* by Avery Dulles (1918-2008) has become a landmark in the field of ecclesiology. First published in 1974, Dulles's book describes five models: The Church as Institution, The Church as Mystical Communion, The Church as Sacrament, The Church as Herald, and The Church as Servant.¹ The *institutional* model owes much to the hierarchical descriptions that come from the Council of Trent, Vatican I, and Cardinal Robert Bellarmine. For the second model, *mystical communion*, Yves Congar's reflections on the Holy Spirit's role in creating fellowship in the Church are especially important.² For *Church as Sacrament*, Dulles draws heavily from the work of Henri de Lubac, who has a lively sense that the Church's sacramental life is crucial for making Christ present to human beings.³ If the church is taken to be a *herald*, its primary purpose is to proclaim Christ and His kingdom to the world. A *servant* church is one in which *diakonia* comes to the fore—deeds of mercy, ministry to the poor, and hope for social transformation. In the second edition of his book, Dulles draws from these five models to propose a sixth: *a community of disciples*.⁴ As a community of disciples, the church seeks to follow Christ and learn from him. 1 John 1:1-7 is especially instructive for this model, as it describes discipleship as "walking in the light" and drawing closer to Jesus over time: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands touched...we proclaim to you also."

The models introduced by Dulles have proven to be very useful in pedagogical and ecumenical settings as catalysts for friendly discussion and debate about the nature and tasks of the church. They are sometimes criticized, however, for being too simple to account for such a complex reality as the church.⁵

The present essay seeks to supplement Dulles's project by showing how the horizon of the discussion has continued to expand in the last decade (2000-2010). A reading of more recent studies suggests that: (1) There are more ways to construe the relationship between scripture and ecclesiology than Dulles was able to foresee in *Models of the Church*, and more recent approaches can in fact lend support to the models sets forth. (2) Many denominations continue to reflect on their own specific identities and traditions without making reference to Dulles's models, though in many ways they draw close to the themes his book develops. (3) New ground is being broken in ecclesiology by those who use social scientific approaches to understand the concrete experience of parish. (4) Many churches are also trying to articulate public theologies in new and complex situations.

Consequently, our discussion here will follow an arc from Biblical perspectives on ecclesiology to theological accounts of the church, and then from congregational studies to broader questions concerning church and society.

¹ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, 1974).

² Dennis M. Doyle, "Journet, Congar, and the Roots of Communion Ecclesiology," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 461-479; Douglas M. Koskela, "The Divine-Human Tension in the Ecclesiology of Yves Congar," *Ecclesiology* 4 (2007): 88-106.

³ Lam T. Le, "The Eucharist and the Church in the Thought of Henri de Lubac," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 71 (2006): 338-347; Raymond Moloney, "Henri de Lubac on Church and Eucharist," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005): 331-342.

⁴ *Models of Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Image Books, 1987), 195-218.

⁵ Thomas A. Baima, "Models of the Church and Its Contribution to Ecclesiology and Ecumenism," *Chicago Studies* 47 (2008): 173-189; Thomas G. Guarino, "Why Avery Dulles Matters," *First Things* 193 (May 1, 2009): 40-46; Jukka A. Kääriäinen, "In Memory of My Teacher, Avery Cardinal Dulles, S. J.," *Concordia Journal* 3 (2009): 123-125.

RECENT LITERATURE CONCERNING THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ECCLESIOLOGY IN MATTHEW: KINGDOM AND CHARACTER

Two recent books try to show how The Sermon on the Mount shapes moral character and ecclesiological vision: Glen Stassen's *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*,⁶ and Charles Talbert's *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7*.⁷ Both books draw attention to three ways in which Jesus's teaching offers alternatives to the values of the world. (1) When human beings are threatened or hurt by others, it is natural for them to defend themselves or to seek revenge. However, the church is to be guided by a non-violent ethic, one in which Christ's disciples offer the other cheek to their adversaries and bless those who revile them. (2) With respect to natural human acquisitiveness, Jesus challenges people of faith to become less greedy, to be more willing to share with others, and to trust in God's providential goodness. (3) In the wider world, sinners are often judged harshly and treated as outcasts, but in the church, sinners are welcomed as brothers and sisters who are seeking reconciliation and newness of life. In a society that is marked by hostility, domination, exclusion, and injustice, The Sermon on the Mount nurtures values that are embodied in a range of practices that are both astonishing and subversive.

The church is indeed called to a "higher righteousness," but the parables of Matthew 13 also indicate that, for the time being, the church is a *corpus mixtum* (a mixed body). It is like a field in which the wheat and the tares will be allowed to grow together until the last day.⁸ One way Matthew tries to sharpen the church's vision is by an extended reflection on "The Two Ways." There are trees that yield good fruit and others that give bad fruit (7:15-20). Strong houses are built on rock, while others are built on sand (7:24-27). Wise maidens keep their lamps trimmed and burning, but foolish maidens will run out of oil, even as the bridegroom is approaching his chamber (25:1-13). It is easy to imagine, then, as David Scaer does in his essay "Matthew as a Catechism," that Matthew's gospel is a teaching document, and that, at its conclusion, those seeking to enter the church by baptism have been prepared to answer a very important question.⁹ In Matthew 28 there are two communities. One seeks to maintain the status quo by denying that Jesus was raised from the dead (28:11-15). There is also a new community that looks to him as the risen Lord, seeking to obey him in all things (28:16-20). To which of these two communities does the catechumen want to belong?

MARK'S ECCLESIOLOGY: THE CHURCH AS BOAT AND FROM BLINDNESS TO SIGHT

Tim Woodroof's reflection on Mark's ecclesiology bears the title "The Church As Boat in Mark: Building a Seaworthy Church."¹⁰ The boat functions as a *gathering place*, one in which the disciples simply enjoy the presence of their master. The boat is also a *boundary marker* between the crowds on shore who are as yet "outsiders" and the disciples in the boat, who are already "insiders." The boat serves as a *teaching platform* from which Jesus addresses the crowds and invites them to follow him more closely. Later, when terrible storms threaten to swamp the boat

⁶ Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

⁷ Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount: Character Formation and Decision Making in Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

⁸ Tarsicius J. van Bavel, "Church," in *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 169-176; Richard T. France, "A Pure Church? Ecclesiological Reflections from the Gospel of Matthew," *Rural Theology* 4 (2006): 3-10; Robert H. Gundry, "In Defense of the Church in Matthew as a *Corpus Mixtum*," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 91 (2000): 153-165.

⁹ David Scaer, "Matthew as a Catechism," *Missio Apostolica* 10 (2002): 14-23.

¹⁰ Tim Woodroof, "The Church As Boat in Mark: Building a Seaworthy Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 39 (1997): 231-249.

(chapters 4 and 6), it becomes both *a place of testing* for the disciples and *a place of safety*, where they are protected by Jesus. Further, the boat serves as an *environment for building faith in Jesus* and a place in which *Jesus's saving power is experienced*. In Mark 5, the boat takes on yet another level of significance, as it becomes the means by which they travel *to reach out to those in need*. It bears them across the lake, where Jesus casts the demons out of the man who lives among the tombs, and then back again to Jairus, who asks Jesus to heal his daughter. "Mark has taken a lowly fishing boat and packed it full of metaphorical meaning, he has found an inventive and colorful way to talk about the church."¹¹

A more polemical essay by Leif Vaage claims that The Twelve should be regarded as failures.¹² They do not comprehend the meaning of the miracle of the loaves in 6:52. Left to themselves, they begin to argue about who is the greatest (9:33). In the days before Jesus's death, one betrays him, another denies having ever known him, and the others forsake him and run away (14:50). Whoever wants to see what normative faith looks like, says Vaage, will have to look elsewhere, to the *minor* characters in Mark's narrative. The woman with a hemorrhage who dares to touch Jesus's garment (5:33), the Syro-Phoenician woman who persists in asking Jesus to heal her daughter (7:26), the uninvited woman who anoints Jesus' body in anticipation of his death (14:8)—these are the ones who respond to Jesus in faith. Taken together, these minor characters make up a fictive kinship group with Jesus at the center. In short, they *are* the church.

More nuanced views of The Twelve emphasize that Mark's portrait of the disciples makes use of both shadows and light (3:21). When Jesus calls the disciples, they leave their nets on the shore and begin to follow him. Jesus commissions them to preach repentance, to heal the sick, and to cast out demons. True, they fail to understand that their vocation also involves suffering for the sake of the kingdom. Yet, near the middle of Mark's gospel, there is hope for the disciples, and it comes in the form of two blind men. Jesus touches The Man from Bethsaida (8:22-26), but at first he can only "see men as trees walking." His imperfect vision symbolizes the disciples' flawed understanding of Jesus. Mark is hopeful, however, that soon the disciples will be more like Blind Bartimaeus. As soon as Bartimaeus regains his sight, he begins to follow Jesus on the road to Jerusalem (10:46-52). For Mark, then, the church is a community that is struggling, with God's help, to move from blindness to sight.¹³ Their response to Jesus is much better than that of other groups. The crowds? They come for miracles, but not for Jesus's message. The Pharisees? They oppose Jesus and plot to kill him. His family? They are afraid that he has gone mad and they want to put him away.

In contrast to studies that focus on the implications of Mark's imagery for understanding the church—boat, home, blindness/sight—I. L. Ao proposes that more attention be given to the historical context in which Mark is situated.¹⁴ Mark's call to deeper commitment should be seen as a response to the upheavals of The Jewish War (66-74 CE). Isaiah had long ago said that every nation would stream to the light of The Temple, so it is understandable that the disciples would be especially distressed to see it lying in ruins. However, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid." The church will move out *away* from Jerusalem and take the gospel *to* every nation (13:10). Jesus' church will be a

¹¹ Woodroof, "The Church as Boat..." 248.

¹² Leif Vaage, "An Other Home: Discipleship in Mark as Domestic Asceticism," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 741-761.

¹³ James Hanson, "The Disciples in Mark's Gospel: Beyond the Pastoral/Polemical Debate," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 20 (1998): 128-155; Marie Noel Keller, "Opening Blind Eyes: A Revisioning of Mark 8:22-10:52," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31, no. 4 (2001): 151-157.

¹⁴ I. L. Ao, "The Markan Community in the Midst of Catastrophe: The Emergence of the New Face of the Church," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 38 (2006): 154-170.

confessing community, bearing witness before governors and kings (13:9). Unlike the Gentiles, who love to exercise dominion over others, it will be a community that *serves* those in need (10:42).

TOWARD A JOHANNINE ECCLESIOLOGY: FRIENDSHIP AND TESTIMONY

C.F.D. Moule spoke for many scholars in 1962 when he wrote that John's Gospel has no discernible ecclesiology at all.¹⁵ Much of the action in the Fourth Gospel happens on a one-to-one basis rather than in the midst of a community. Support for this view could be found, he said, in the story of Jesus and Nicodemus (John 3), the woman taken in adultery (7:53-8:11), and the healing of the man born blind (John 9). Moreover, claimed Rudolf Bultmann, there is no celebration of the sacraments in John, nor are there any visible structures of institutional authority.¹⁶

J. P. Meier calls for a more dialectical reading of ecclesiology in John, however. Even if John never uses the word "church," there is a deep bond of affection and unity between Jesus and the disciples, and in John 21 Peter is given the role of shepherding them in Jesus's absence.¹⁷ M. L. Coloe strikes a similar note: John's Gospel is suffused with an ecclesiology of solidarity and mutual indwelling.¹⁸ The church is a flock that listens to the voice of The Good Shepherd (10:1-30). It is Jesus, The True Vine, who sustains the life of the branches (15:1-17). According to John Fitzgerald and Paul Wadell, this figurative language shapes the bonds of the Johannine household and helps build it up in friendship, brotherly love, and mutual service.¹⁹

Two recent articles highlight the importance of testimony and witness in the life of the Johannine church. Eric John Wyckoff takes John 4 as a model for cross-cultural ministry.²⁰ The Woman at the Well enters the scene as someone who is less than respectable. Her five marriages have all failed, and as a Samaritan her religious beliefs, too, are beyond the boundaries of normative Judaism. Nevertheless, Jesus enters into a dialogue with her about "living water" and the worshipping "in spirit and in truth." Later in the day she returns to Jesus, bringing with her many people from the village. She has become something of an evangelist, inviting many to "come and see the man who told me everything I ever did." In John 4, then, the church is a community in which bearing witness and giving testimony are more important than any of those considerations—gender, ethnicity, past moral failures—that might have "disqualified" her from joining and serving in the beloved community.

For Sandra Schneiders, John 20 is also a key to the meaning of "testimony."²¹ In light of Jesus's arrest, trial, and crucifixion, the disciples have gathered together in secret, fearing for their lives. In this meeting, however, the risen Jesus appears to them. Standing in their midst, Jesus blesses them and says, "Peace be with you!" Showing them the wounds in his hands and side, he sends them into the world, conferring on them the mission of reconciliation and peace-making.

¹⁵ C.F.D. Moule, "The Individualism of the Fourth Gospel," *Novum Testamentum* 5 (1962): 171-190.

¹⁶ Bultmann described John as "anti-sacramental" in his *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 2: 70-92.

¹⁷ J. P. Meier, "The Absence and Presence of the Church in John's Gospel," *Mid-Stream* 41, (2002): 27-34.

¹⁸ M. L. Coloe, *Dwelling in the Household of God: Johannine Ecclesiology and Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007).

¹⁹ John T. Fitzgerald, "Christian Friendship: John, Paul, and the Philippians," *Interpretation* 61 (2007): 284-296; Paul Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

²⁰ Eric John Wyckoff, "Jesus in Samaria (John 4:4-42): A Model for Cross Cultural Ministry," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 89-98.

²¹ Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Raising of the New Temple: John 20:19-23 and Johannine Ecclesiology," *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006): 337-355.

ECCLESIOLOGY IN LUKE-ACTS: REPENTANCE, TABLE-FELLOWSHIP, MISSION

In the last decade, ecclesiology has also been a significant theme in the study of Luke-Acts. Gordon Lathrop proposes that Luke was written for a first-century church already in serious need of reform. Even at that early date there were practices in the church that departed from the teaching and example of Jesus. Luke reminds the church how glad Jesus was to receive sinners and to eat with them. A church that turns its back on them, for the sake of “purity” or “respectability,” is certainly headed in the wrong direction.²² The story of Zacchaeus, who is despised because he collects taxes for the Roman Empire, shines important light on this dynamic. After Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from his perch in the sycamore tree, he does not hesitate to break bread with the tax-collector in his house. Zacchaeus responds by promising that whatever he has gained unjustly he will restore four times over (Luke 19:1-10). Christo Thesnaar shows how this same story about Zacchaeus illuminates a very difficult situation in South African society. Christian leaders have been very active in the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Thesnaar’s essay, “Restorative Justice as a Key for Healing Communities,” is informed by their experiences.²³ Thesnaar observes that many of those who harmed black people during apartheid did so in their role as government officials, much as Zacchaeus did. In most cases, what the victims and their families have sought is not legal retribution but honest disclosure from the perpetrators about what happened, acknowledgement from them that they violated a moral standard, and some indication that they have repented of their deeds.

Several recent articles focus on Luke 24 and the extent to which the church is a Eucharistic community.²⁴ As two of the disciples are walking away from Jerusalem, toward the little village of Emmaus, a stranger approaches and joins in their conversation. They tell him of Jesus’s crucifixion and how their dreams of a new kingdom have come to nothing. Their unknown companion reframes their disappointment, showing them how the scriptures indicate that the Messiah must suffer, be put to death, and only then enter into his glory. By the time they reach their destination, hope is beginning to dawn again in their imaginations, and they beg the stranger to stay with them for supper. Only when he breaks bread with them do they realize that the stranger is Jesus. Suddenly he vanishes from their sight, and between themselves they muse over the day’s events: “Were our hearts not burning when he spoke to us on the road?”

Robert Thompson’s book *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts* identifies several overlapping themes that make it possible for a richly textured account of the church to emerge in Acts.²⁵ The Church’s Unity: People from many nations are present in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost: Parthians, Medes and Elamites, Arabs and people from Crete, Libya, and Cappadocia. Each of them is astonished to hear the news of Christ’s resurrection being proclaimed in his own language (2:1-33). Meeting the Needs of Others: In Acts 6, Stephen is among the first deacons of the church, and he is remembered for his important role in distributing

²² Gordon Lathrop, “The Reforming Gospels: A Liturgical Theologian Looks Again at Eucharistic Origins,” *Worship* 83 (2009): 194-212; David Pao, “Family and Table-Fellowship in the Writings of Luke,” in *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, eds. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 181-194; Richard P. Thompson, “Gathered at the Table: Holiness and Ecclesiology in Luke’s Gospel,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*, eds. K. E. Brower and A. Johnson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007): 76-94.

²³ Christo Thesnaar, “Restorative Justice as a Key for Healing Communities,” *Religion & Theology* 15 (2008): 53-73.

²⁴ Raymond Blacketer, “Word and Sacrament on the Road to Emmaus,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 321-329; Steven Dunn, “The Eucharistic Context of ‘The Breaking of the Bread’ in Luke-Acts: A Catholic View,” *Nova et Vetera* 3 (2005): 703-717; James Maxey, “The Road to Emmaus: Changing Expectations. A Narrative Critical Study,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 32 (2005): 112-123.

²⁵ Robert Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

food to the poor and the widows.²⁶ God's Presence and Blessing: Signs of God's blessing and presence with the community include the overwhelming response to Peter's preaching (2:41), the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (3:1-12), and Paul's miraculous conversion (9:1-31) just as he was about to intensify the organized persecution of the church. An Expanding Vision of God's People: Philip baptizes an Ethiopian official (Acts 8). Peter recognizes that Cornelius, too, wants to be a follower of Christ (Acts 10-11). Paul, the early church's most effective missionary, also has a pivotal role in the growth of the church. The widening scope of mission that was forecast in 1:8—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth—is becoming a reality. However, it is The Holy Spirit, rather than any human messenger, who is leading the church beyond the barriers of race, culture, and economic status to become a shining example of God's justice and love.

Yet the word "church" can take on multiple levels of meaning in just one chapter of Acts, says Beverly Gaventa. Her article "Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech" focuses on Paul's farewell address to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20.²⁷ In Paul's speech, it is clear that the word *ecclesia* is beginning to refer to (1) the local congregation, (2) the groups of believers scattered around the Aegean Sea that together make up a "trans-congregational church," and (3) the universal church. Paul's speech connects all three levels of *ecclesia* to the larger scope of the Father's mission, the action of the Holy Spirit, and the teaching of Jesus.

Gaventa is also the author of "Witnessing to the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles: Beyond the Conversion or Conversation Dilemma."²⁸ For contemporary *conversationalists*, she says, it is enough for the church simply to enter into dialogue with other traditions, to give an account of Christian beliefs that stands in the public square beside other faiths, such as Buddhism and Islam. That is the approach Paul takes when he addresses the philosophers on Mars Hill, or the silversmiths devoted to Artemis in Ephesus. For others, however, *conversion* must always be the goal of the church's proclamation. The paradigms they cherish are Paul's dramatic Damascus Road experience and Peter's insistence in Acts 4: 12 that, "There is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." However, both perspectives attribute too much to human initiative, neglecting the crucial question of what it is that *God* is doing. To ask whether the church should be conversing with the world or converting it is to neglect two factors that are very important to Luke. (1) "Luke narrates a witness that changes from one location to another, adapting to new environments and new challenges," and (2) the real agent in these encounters is God, His action in Jesus Christ, and the inspiration given by The Holy Spirit."²⁹

What is the cumulative impact, then, of these studies at the intersection of scripture and ecclesiology? Taken together, they do not usurp Dulles's models so much as they add a deeper Biblical dimension to them. What Dulles describes as a "community of disciples" is given greater specificity in the accounts of Matthew offered by Stassen, Talbert, and Scaer. His discussions of the church as "servant" and "herald" take on a new urgency when read in light of what Luke and Acts have to say about mission. Similarly, the models "church as sacrament" and "church as mystical communion" are only strengthened when joined to recent scholarship on the role of friendship and testimony in John's Gospel.

²⁶ See also Kim Paffenroth, "Famines in Luke-Acts," *Expository Times* 112 (2001): 405-407.

²⁷ Beverly Gaventa, "Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech," *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 36-52.

²⁸ Beverly Gaventa, "Witnessing to the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles: Beyond the Conversion or Conversation Dilemma," *Word & World* 22 (2002): 238-245.

²⁹ Gaventa, "Witnessing to the Gospel in Acts..." 245.

ECCLESIOLOGIES ROOTED IN THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

America is “awash in a sea of faith,” says church historian Jon Butler, and many of those faiths are Protestant: Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, Anabaptist, evangelical....³⁰ On occasion critics have described Protestants as “ecclesialogically challenged,” but there are good reasons to question that assessment, as the following books and articles indicate.

LUTHER AND THE “MARKS” OF THE CHURCH

Among those in the Lutheran tradition, it is well understood that the church is not a voluntary association that one *chooses* to join in the Enlightenment’s sense but an assembly of believers *brought together* by The Holy Spirit to hear God’s Word.³¹ *The Augsburg Confession* (Section 7) memorably and succinctly defines the church as “The gathering of all believers, in which the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accord with the gospel.” This church is *simul justus et peccator*, simultaneously both just and sinful, and those who preach the Word must take this theological description with the utmost seriousness. Their vocation is to console consciences, to associate in a friendly spirit with the people, to carry the weak, and to heal the sick.³²

Discussion of “the marks of the church” also continues among Lutherans. In *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age*, Gordon Lathrop and Timothy Wengert note that on several occasions Luther lists as many as ten marks of the church.³³ These include (1) baptism, (2) the bread and wine of the Eucharist, (3) the confession of sins and absolution—the “keys” of Matthew 16:19, (4) the preaching of God’s Word, (5) the teaching and confessing of The Apostle’s Creed, (6) faithful praying of The Lord’s Prayer, (7) rendering proper obedience to civil authorities, (8) the blessing of marriages, (9) suffering persecution for the sake of the cross, and (10) offering up prayer for all human beings.³⁴

REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY: THE CHURCH AS COVENANT

The Church, by Edmund Clowney, is an influential account of ecclesiology in the Reformed tradition.³⁵ Shaped by John Calvin’s theology, Clowney’s discussion bears an unmistakably Trinitarian and covenantal stamp. (1) In Deuteronomy 4:10, God’s people assemble as a covenant community, gathered before Him in order to hear and to obey His commands. (2) In the gospels, the disciples of Christ answer the call to follow him and receive him as the long-expected Messiah. (3) Testifying to the truth of God’s promises, renewing the hearts and minds of the disciples in their devotion to Christ, and empowering them for service to God—that is the work of The Holy Spirit.

People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology, by Michael S. Horton, emphasizes that from the Reformed perspective, “It is not the people who create the church by their pious experience, discipleship, or social agendas, but the covenant

³⁰ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

³¹ Charles P. Arand, “What Are Ecclesialogically Challenged Lutherans to Do? Starting Points for a Lutheran Ecclesiology,” *Concordia Journal* 34 (2008): 160-161.

³² Veli-Matti Karkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 39-49.

³³ Gordon Lathrop and Timothy Wengert, *Christian Assembly: Marks of the Church in a Pluralistic Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 81-106.

³⁴ Martin Luther, “Against Hanswurst” (1541), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41, *Church and Ministry III* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 194-198.

³⁵ Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

that defines this otherwise heterogeneous community as the body of Christ.”³⁶ The sovereign God showed His love for the Hebrews by rescuing them from their bondage in Egypt. God established a covenant of obedience with them at Mount Sinai. Though they broke this covenant, God remained faithful to it, continuing to call them and sending His Word through the prophets. Still they would not listen, and finally God sent His Son to establish a new covenant with them. The bread and the cup of the Lord’s Supper, instituted before Christ’s crucifixion, are signs of this covenant.³⁷ As Acts 1 says, after the cross and the resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven, and there the disciples were, looking up into the sky. It is a nearly perfect picture of the church’s worship, but there is now work to be done, before Jesus comes again. That is why two messengers appeared and said, “Why are you standing here looking up into heaven?” The Holy Spirit will come, convicting the world of sin, conveying forgiveness to them through the Word of God, and giving them the gifts of hope and love.³⁸

ECCLESIOLOGY FROM A METHODIST PERSPECTIVE

A number of recent works have returned to John Wesley’s sermons in order to develop Methodist conceptions of ecclesiology.³⁹ The call to holiness is especially prominent in “Of the Church” (Sermon 74), says James Charlesworth, as is love for God and neighbor.⁴⁰ According to Randy L. Maddox, creeds and doctrines also have their place in Methodism, but it is more important that the church welcome The Holy Spirit, who nurtures faith, hope, and love in the hearts of the people.⁴¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater draws attention to “The Duty of Constant Communion,” a sermon that shows how much Wesley loves the sacramental life of the church, and how he regards it as a means of transforming grace.⁴² As Sermon 43 puts it, the church is meant to be the first place that honors Christ in all his offices as Prophet, Priest, and King. Continuing with this theme, Theodore Runyon says that the New Creation begun in the church anticipates a much wider renewal of God’s image in humanity and a restoration of the wholeness that was first given to humankind in Creation.⁴³

Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase asks Methodists to rekindle their Wesleyan zeal in *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*.⁴⁴ Schnase believes Methodists are most faithful to their identity in Christ when they engage in radical hospitality, passionate worship, intentional faith development, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity. Radical hospitality is found in Matthew 25:35: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.” Passionate worship is reflected in the enthusiasm of Psalm 84: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!” Acts 2:42 points to the importance of faith development: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the

³⁶ Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), 199.

³⁷ Horton, *People and Place*, 105.

³⁸ Horton, *People and Place*, 28.

³⁹ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975-1983). Wesley’s sermons are also made available online through a website sponsored by The United Methodist Church: <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umhistory/wesley/sermons>

⁴⁰ James H. Charlesworth, “Return to the Sources in Twenty-first-century Methodist Ecclesiology: John Wesley’s Ecclesiology,” in S.T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Randy L. Maddox, “Wesley’s Prescription for Making Disciples of Jesus Christ: Insights for the Twenty-first Century Church,” *Quarterly Review* 21.3 (2003): 15-28. John Wesley, “The Marks of the New Birth,” Sermon 18.

⁴² Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Wesleyan Ecclesiology: Methodism as a Means of Grace,” in S.T. Kimbrough, ed., *Orthodox and Wesleyan Ecclesiology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 119-128.

⁴³ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998). But see also the critique of Runyon’s argument by Kenneth Collins in “The New Creation as a Multivalent Theme in John Wesley’s Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (2002): 77-102.

⁴⁴ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

breaking of bread and the prayers.” Methodists find inspiration for risk-taking mission in Micah 6:8—“What does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness; and to walk humbly with your God?” There is no better example of extravagant generosity than the woman in Mark 14:3 who came to Jesus with an alabaster flask of costly spikenard oil, broke the flask, and poured it on his head.

ANABAPTIST/MENNONITE ECCLESIOLOGY

The Schleithem Confession of Faith, an important document for many Anabaptists and Mennonites, places a special emphasis on a believer’s baptism. “Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” For Mennonites and Anabaptists, discipleship is matter of deciding, choosing to follow Christ and his way. The renunciation of war is part of this decision, as discussed in section 6 of the *The Schleithem Confession*.

In light of the Anabaptist/Mennonite commitment to peacemaking, Neal Blough considers how the world today, marked by imperialism, urbanization, and the worship of technology, resembles The Tower of Babel. Genesis 12 ends bleakly, revealing a world of scattered peoples who are divided by culture and language, prone to continual conflict and incapable of mutual understanding. “Biblical salvation history begins as a conscious response to this situation and, in Abraham, identifies the beginning of a new people, a new socio-political reality, called to be a blessing to the scattered families of Babel.”⁴⁵ According to this vision of the church, the Messiah came for that very purpose: to bring *shalom* to the peoples of the earth.

“Church and Empire: Free-Church Ecclesiology in a Global Era,” by Earl Zimmerman, is especially critical of churches that align themselves too closely with nation-states.⁴⁶ When they grant their support to imperial actions through “just-war” reasoning, they are practicing a form of idolatry. Devout Christians in America are even being mobilized to support aggressive foreign policies that include preemptive war. The challenge, says Zimmerman, is to free the Christian imagination from imperial violence; to do that, a clear differentiation must be made between the church and the nation-state.

EVANGELICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

The title of Bruce Hindmarsh’s essay poses a very direct question: “Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective.”⁴⁷ The history of evangelicalism does involve leaving the Catholic Church, and exiting also from the established national churches of Europe. Yet in another sense, the earliest evangelicals were also conscious of belonging to a trans-Atlantic fellowship of shared piety.⁴⁸ In 1648, The Treaty of Westphalia sought to put an end to Europe’s religious wars by introducing new forms of political freedom and religious toleration. It would be difficult to imagine the evangelical revivals that came about in the eighteenth century without the formal recognition of these liberties. George Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, and John Wesley were not so much interested in ecclesiology as they were focused on the economy of salvation, including the need for a profound sense of

⁴⁵ Neal Blough, “From the Tower of Babel to the Peace of Jesus Christ: Christological, Ecclesiological and Missiological Foundations for Peacemaking,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76 (2002): 26.

⁴⁶ Earl Zimmerman, “Church and Empire: Free-Church Ecclesiology in a Global Era,” *Political Theology* 10 (2009): 471-495.

⁴⁷ Bruce Hindmarsh, “Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron? A Historical Perspective,” in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed., *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 15-37.

⁴⁸ Susan O’Brien, “A Transatlantic Community of Saints: The Great Awakening and the First Evangelical Network, 1735-1755,” *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 811-832.

personal sin, individual repentance and conversion, heartfelt trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, and obedience to Jesus' command to reach the world through missionary preaching.

John Webster also believes that evangelicals go astray if they begin by first thinking about the church as a community. Webster's reasons are more theological than anthropological, however. A proper ecclesiology is the result of having reckoned first with God's own perfection.⁴⁹ God's perfection includes a movement outwards, a turning toward His creatures as lordly creator, reconciler, and consummator. God's holy love sanctifies human beings for fellowship with Himself.

The church, therefore, lives in that sphere of reality in which it is proper to acknowledge and testify to reconciliation because its members have already been reconciled, in which it is fitting to make peace because peace has already been made, in which it is truthful to speak and to welcome strangers because they have already been spoken to and welcomed by God, and so are no longer strangers but fellow-citizens.⁵⁰ The church comes into being thanks to a very simple and entirely unfathomable divine declaration: "I am the Lord your God." This declaration is followed by another: "And you will be My People" (Leviticus 26:12). Only then does the creedal statement begin to make sense: "I believe in the communion of saints."

In some respects, *Models of the Church* succeeds in sparking ecumenical discussion because Dulles is willing to gloss over the specific convictions of many diverse churches. As these publications indicate, though, Protestants have continued to reflect on their distinctive heritages in a lively way. It is still possible, nonetheless, to note certain convergences between Protestant discussions of the church and the models proposed by Dulles. The Methodist emphasis on compassionate action in society is very much akin to what Dulles says about the church as *servant*. The Reformed vision of the church as a covenanted community that hears God's call and proclaims His Word is very much like the church as *herald*. Dulles's sixth model, *a community of disciples*, has affinities with the teaching of the Anabaptists on following Jesus and his teaching.

ECCLESIOLOGY AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: MICRO/MESO/MACRO LEVELS OF INQUIRY

Most of the studies of the church examined so far in this essay begin with something of a "blueprint" that shows what the church *should* look like. This prescriptive approach is vital for informing the church's own understanding of its identity and mission. But there is also a growing body of literature that is interested in (1) taking a more *descriptive* or *empirical* approach to the study of church life and (2) inquiring about the intersection of the real and the ideal in the concrete experiences of church communities.⁵¹ Carl Sterkens provides a helpful paradigm for understanding studies of this sort. They are typically oriented, Sterkens says, to one of three levels: micro, meso, or macro.⁵²

SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES: MICRO-LEVEL STUDIES

Lewis Rambo's "seven stages of conversion" approach is representative of the studies that focus on religious commitment and affiliation at the micro-level.⁵³ Rambo's model synthesizes many accounts from psychology,

⁴⁹ John Webster, "On Evangelical Ecclesiology," *Ecclesiology* 1 (2004): 12-13.

⁵⁰ John Webster, *Word and Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2005).

⁵¹ Roger Haight and James Nieman, "On the Dynamic Relation between Ecclesiology and Congregational Studies," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 577-599; Neil Ormerod, "Recent Ecclesiology: A Survey," *Pacifica* 211 (2008): 57-67.

⁵² Carl Sterkens, "Challenges for the Modern Church in Empirical Ecclesiology," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology*, eds. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary E. Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 295-331.

⁵³ Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 16-18, 165-170.

sociology, and anthropology. (1) Having been shaped by prior socialization into their socio-cultural, political, and family context (2), some individuals experience a crisis (3) that leads them to become religious seekers. (4) When a seeker enters the religious “market,” he encounters (5) agents of various religious groups. If a seeker feels comfortable with a certain agent and group, a gradually intensifying interaction may follow (6) through rituals,⁵⁴ rhetoric,⁵⁵ learning,⁵⁶ or trying on a new religious role.⁵⁷ (7) These interactions may lead to a commitment to the new group, which in turn can have far-reaching consequences in the convert’s life.

Susan Ridgely’s essay “Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation and the Nurturing of Post-Vatican II Catholics” focuses on the experience of church at the micro-level.⁵⁸ After closely observing the preparation of children for their first confession in a parish in North Carolina, Ridgely notes that in religious education sessions, the “soft” image of God as Loving Father has replaced the image of God as Judge. “God as Judge” was the image favored in instruction given for first confessions before Vatican II. Ridgely recalls Andrew Greeley’s dismay over the large number of young Catholics today who feel free to reject various aspects of the Church’s moral teaching:

From the results of repeated sociological studies, Greeley argued that Catholics who saw God as “lover” (as opposed to “redeemer,” “judge,” or “father”) felt supported in their decision to disregard Catholic teaching with which they disagreed, even as they maintained their relationship with the Church. If we apply these findings to Catholics who have received religious instruction in the style that I observed — or at least to the large proportion of these Catholics who seemed to view God as love rather than as a judgmental father—then we may find a future generation of Catholic adults whose initial introduction to their faith has prepared them to be less accepting of Church doctrines.⁵⁹

In this way, then, her study sees a connection between the images used today in the education of children and the later consequences for their beliefs and commitments as adults.

SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES: MESO-LEVEL STUDIES

A number of studies on religious life at the meso-level are undertaken from the perspective of the “rational choice theory” of religious affiliation. Rational choice theory owes much to Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*.⁶⁰ There Smith imagined a radical form of religious pluralism in which a national government would allow a public space in which *many* churches could “compete” with each other for members.⁶¹ Smith believed this competition would yield two significant goods: civil peace and purer religion. Churches would succeed in the religious marketplace only if by their words and deeds they were able to persuade religious “consumers” that

⁵⁴ Scott O’Brien, “The Pilgrimage: Conversion as Journey,” *Liturgical Ministry* 12 (2003): 38-46; Roy Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ Peter Stromberg, *Language and Self-transformation: A Study of the Christian Conversion Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David Yamane, “Narrative and Religious Experience,” *Sociology of Religion* 61 (2000):171-189.

⁵⁶ Robert E. Webber, “Liturgical Evangelism,” *Covenant Quarterly* 64 (2006): 144-153.

⁵⁷ J. A. Belzen, “On Religious Experience: Role Theory and Contemporary Narrative Psychology,” in *Sundén’s Role Theory—An Impetus to Contemporary Psychology of Religion*, eds. N. G. Holm and J. A. Belzen (Abo: Abo Akademi, 1995), 47-76.

⁵⁸ Susan B. Ridgely, “Decentering Sin: First Reconciliation and the Nurturing of Post-Vatican II Catholics,” *Journal of Religion* (2006): 606-634.

⁵⁹ Ridgely, “Decentering Sin,” 633.

⁶⁰ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁶¹ Scott Peterson, “Rational Choice, Religion, and the Marketplace: Where Does Adam Smith Fit In?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2009): 185-192.

the claims of their sect would lead to levels of morality and happiness higher than those being offered by their competitors. According to Smith's theory, a tolerable war of words would then replace intolerant inquisitions, and no single denomination would be able to gain a monopoly of power of the sort that would allow it to dominate others in society.⁶² Smith does not concern himself with what this pluralism might mean for the public's willingness to listen to a deeply prophetic and possibly unpopular message. He left it for others to wrestle with the question of whether *costly* forms of discipleship will be able to gain a hearing in a society where there are so many other "more attractive" options, both religious and secular.⁶³

Robert Putnam suggests that religious congregations are good at building two kinds of social capital at the meso-level: "bonding" social capital and "bridging" social capital.⁶⁴ Bonding social capital is related to a strong sense of group cohesion. Congregations also have the potential to build "bridging" social capital, which is linked to ministry to others *outside* one's group.

One exemplary study of bonding social capital deals with a neighborhood of Vietnamese immigrants who left New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.⁶⁵ Known locally as the Versailles community, they were a close-knit community from the time of their arrival in America in the 1970s until 2005, when Katrina flooded their homes. At that time, they were uprooted again and forced to flee to distant cities, such as Houston and Dallas. Nevertheless, their parish church in New Orleans continued to operate as a special center, first for information about the status of family and friends who had left the neighborhood. Later, as residents began to return to New Orleans, the church became a place where meals and medical care could be provided and home repairs could be organized. Then in 2006, when the City of New Orleans wanted to open a landfill in the Versailles neighborhood, the church became an effective center for organizing protest, and the landfill was shut down as a result.

With respect to "bridging" social capital, we can ask a series of inter-related questions that will help reveal the ways congregations reach out beyond their own group to care for people in need:⁶⁶

1. What kinds of social services do congregations do?
2. Do they engage in social services in particular kinds of ways?
3. Which congregations do more social services?
4. With whom do congregations collaborate in social service delivery, and with what consequences?

Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions, by Paul Lichterman, offers an ethnographic study of nine congregations involved in social ministries.⁶⁷ Each of the nine churches has its own special theological vocabulary and practices. Some of them focused on quietly helping the poor with food and clothing, along the lines

⁶² Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 791-794.

⁶³ Henri Gooren, "The Religious Market Model and Conversion: Towards A New Approach," *Exchange* 35 (2006): 39-60; C. Kirk Hadaway, "Congregationally-Based Religion: Boon or Bane for Faith in the West?" *Review of Religious Research* 51 (2009): 117-133.

⁶⁴ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 22-24.

⁶⁵ Christopher Airriess, et al. "Church-Based Social Capital, Networks and Geographical Scale: Katrina Evacuation, Relocation, and Recovery in a New Orleans Vietnamese American Community," *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 1333-1346.

⁶⁶ Jerome P. Baggett, "Congregations and Civil Society: A Double-Edged Connection," *Journal of Church and State* 44 (2002): 425-454; Mark Chaves and William Desitso, "Congregations and Social Services: What They Do, How They Do It, and With Whom Do They Do It?" *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 30 (2001): 660-683.

⁶⁷ Paul Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

of “Golden-Rule Christianity” as described by Nancy Ammerman.⁶⁸ Others tried to reach out to the surrounding community through a parish nurse, or by trying to help prevent families from being evicted from their homes. Another church group focused on Meals on Wheels for the elderly. Not every effort was successful, but it shows at the very least that religious congregations are willing to *try* to help their neighbors in new ways.

MACRO-LEVEL: THE CHURCH AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Beyond the level of the congregation, however, there is also the question of the church’s presence on the national and global scene. Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* describes the Catholic Church’s opposition to abortion and euthanasia in the strongest possible terms, referring to a struggle between a culture of life and a culture of death.⁶⁹ The encyclical rejects the legitimacy of any law that is based simply on public opinion or a parliamentary majority. “Laws which authorize and promote abortion and euthanasia are therefore radically opposed not only to the good of the individual but also to the common good; as such they are completely lacking in authentic juridical validity.”⁷⁰ Recognizing that it is often difficult “to mount an effective legal defense of life in pluralistic societies because of the presence of strong cultural currents with differing outlooks,” nonetheless, the encyclical urges legislators and voters to defend the lives of the unborn, the weak, and the elderly.⁷¹

Nico Vorster’s essay “Preventing Genocide: The Role of the Church” describes a different set of challenges for the church at the macro-level.⁷² In the recent past—in Cambodia, Rwanda, Kosovo—the churches did not speak up soon enough or loudly enough to make a difference. Recent events in Sudan, for example, show that despite developments in international law, genocide is still a real threat. To prevent genocide, the churches need to be involved at many levels of civil society—protesting, “naming and shaming,” to be sure, but also helping to form the virtues of solidarity, compassion, and hospitality and shaping the deeds that spring from them. A church that fully commits itself to those tasks, with God’s help, will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.⁷³

AND IN THE YEARS AHEAD?

An *homage* to Avery Dulles and his book *Models of the Church*—that’s how this little sojourn began. Remember? Then the path of articles and books on ecclesiology wound through studies of scripture and various denominational perspectives, followed by sociological reflections on the experience of church. If we find it hard to draw any overall conclusions about a whole decade of literature on ecclesiology, we might bring the discussion to a momentary close by posing several questions about the *next* ten years.

⁶⁸ Nancy Ammerman, “Doing Good in American Communities: Congregations and Service Organizations Working Together,” *Research Report from the Organizing Religious Work Project* (Hartford, Connecticut: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2001), http://hrr.hartsem.edu/orw/orw_cong-report.html

⁶⁹ *Evangelium Vitae*, <http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0141/INDEX.HTM>

⁷⁰ *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 72.

⁷¹ *Evangelium Vitae*, No. 90; James T. McHugh, “Building a Culture of Life: A Catholic Perspective,” *Christian Bioethics* 7 (2001): 441-452.

⁷² Nico Vorster, “Preventing Genocide: The Role of the Church,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 59 (2006): 375-394.

⁷³ Christopher Vogt, “Fostering a Catholic Commitment to the Common Good: An Approach Rooted in Virtue Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 394-417.

1. A Generation of Seekers?

One of the fastest-growing groups on the American scene is made up of people who have no church affiliation—those who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”⁷⁴ Wade Clark Roof describes them as “consumers in a spiritual marketplace,” or more simply as “a generation of seekers.”⁷⁵

But what if Roof’s “seekers” are no longer even looking? In an increasingly globalized world, certainly there is more awareness of radical religious pluralism than ever before. With so many religious “options” available, the unique claims of any religion are more likely to be regarded as arbitrary rather than absolute. Perhaps, too, when *some* forms of religion are perceived to be at the root of violence and terrorism, it becomes easier to keep all forms of religious faith at arm’s length. Or, when the moral failures of *some* religious leaders are so well publicized, it is harder to trust in “organized religion,” easier to turn away and settle into indifference. Then, is there a different form the church might take? One that might make it easier to reach through those kinds of barriers?

2. Believing without Belonging?

Commitments in all sorts of social settings are said to be in decline. Loyalty between companies and workers is not as prevalent as it once was. Loyalty to political parties is less reliable than in the past. Life-long commitment to one marriage partner appears to be part of that general trend. “Cocooning” might play a part in declining social involvement, too—the tendency for families to stay at home in their media nest, without feeling the need for social involvement outside a very small circle of friends. Is declining commitment to church part of that same overall trend?⁷⁶

Looking at the low levels of participation in the churches of England and Europe, sociologist Grace Davie speaks of “believing without belonging.”⁷⁷ Even if religious institutions have fallen on hard times, she says, religious faith persists. Yet, how can that kind of confidence be sustained for more than one generation?⁷⁸ Concerning God’s commandments, Deuteronomy 6:7 says, “Thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children....” And if that doesn’t happen? What kind of future will religious communities have?

3. Megachurches or Small Groups?

To state the obvious, churches come in all sizes. Consider, though, two countervailing trends in American church life, one toward megachurches, the other toward small groups. Will both trends continue?

The majority of America’s “megachurches” identify themselves as evangelical or conservative. The Hartford Institute for Religious Research defines a megachurch as one that has an average weekly attendance of 2,000 persons

⁷⁴ Ryan Wilson, “The New Ecclesiology: Mega-Church, Denominational Church, and No Church,” *Review & Expositor* 107.1 (2010): 61-72; Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, “Being Religious or Being Spiritual in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002): 289-300.

⁷⁵ Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993); Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷⁶ Paul A. Djupe, “Religious Brand Loyalty and Political Loyalties,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39.1 (2000): 78-89.

⁷⁷ Grace Davie, “Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?” *Social Compass* 37. 4 (December 1, 1990): 455-469.

⁷⁸ Henk de Roest, “The Precarious Church: Developing Congregations in an Individualized Society,” *Ecclesiology* 4 (2008): 204-221.

or more. By Hartford's count, that criterion is met by more than 1,200 congregations in the United States.⁷⁹ Megachurches have their critics, to be sure. They are said to be too homogeneous in race, class, and political affiliation; more oriented to mass media and entertainment than to worship and community service; focused too much on what one charismatic leader says rather than on the teachings of Jesus.⁸⁰ Yet big churches must be doing something right, or why would they be growing? Scott Thuma, Dave Travis, and Rick Warren provide a spirited defense of what big churches can do in their book *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches*.⁸¹

Other Christians feel a deeper affinity for small groups. Confession and forgiveness of sin face fewer obstacles in face-to-face settings.⁸² The same might be said for Bible study and prayer.⁸³ In a small group, it might be easier to feel a sense of belonging and participating, as opposed to being a passive spectator in a large church.⁸⁴

4. New Developments in Technology: Will They Help or Hurt the Church?

This question is posed in a direct way by Brett McCracken.⁸⁵ Like-minded Christians can be enthusiastic about their favorite blogs—*First Things*, *Word on Fire*, to name just two. Pastor Rick Warren has more than 150,000 followers on Twitter. Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle offers messages available as iTunes podcasts. But suppose social networking begins to displace traditional churches, as they seem to be doing with the Millennial generation. Traditional churches are made up of flesh-and-blood people who do not always agree with each other and do not always share the same social attitudes. Yet there comes a point at which they put their differences aside and worship together. If most of our religious conversations are taking place online instead, and if they are almost always with like-minded people, we may begin to feel that the church as a physical location, with its “difficult people,” is something we just don't need anymore. We might have a new kind of community, then, but will it be a church?⁸⁶

There is more, of course, much more to the unfolding story of ecclesiology. No human being will ever be able to know or tell it all in its entirety. Another bibliographic essay might try to give an account of the literature dealing

⁷⁹ “Megachurch Definition,” (Hartford, Connecticut: Hartford Institute for Religion Research), <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>

⁸⁰ The Hartford Institute's website has a very useful list of recommended readings on megachurches: <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/bibliography.html>

⁸¹ Scott Thuma, Dave Travis, and Rick Warren, *Beyond Megachurch Myths: What We Can Learn from America's Largest Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

⁸² Theresa F. Latini, “Confession and Healing in Small-group Community,” *Word & World* 30.1 (2010): 33-40.

⁸³ Daniel Castelo, “Perfecting One Another: Friendship and the Moral Implications of Wesley's Small Groups,” *Asbury Journal* 64.1 (2009): 4-21; Kevin E. Lawson, “A Band of Sisters: The Impact of Long-term Small Group Participation: Forty Years in a Women's Prayer and Bible Study Group,” *Religious Education* 101.2 (2006): 180-203.

⁸⁴ Kevin D. Dougherty and Andrew L. Whitehead, “A Place to Belong: Small Group Involvement in Religious Congregations,” *Sociology of Religion* (2010) doi:10.1093/socrel/srq067 Advance Access Online: <http://socrel.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/09/03/socrel.srq067.full.pdf+html>

⁸⁵ Brett McCracken, “The Separation of Church and Status: How Online Social Networking Helps and Hurts the Church,” *The Princeton Theological Review* Issue 43 (2010): 21-33.

⁸⁶ Leonora Rand, “The Church on Facebook,” *Christian Century* (June 30, 2009): 22; Richard Beck, “How Facebook Killed the Church” *Experimental Theology* (March 5, 2010): <http://experimentaltheology.blogspot.com/2010/03/how-facebook-killed-church.html>

with the ecclesiology of the Black Church,⁸⁷ or Pentecostal ecclesiology,⁸⁸ or what the church means in the lives of Hispanic immigrants.⁸⁹ Looking beyond our borders, as Phillip Jenkins does in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, we will certainly find other challenging visions of the church and its tasks from Africa, Asia, and South America.⁹⁰ When I consider my own limited experiences and abilities, I turn again to the words of Jesus in John 3:8, and I find them mysteriously comforting: “The Spirit blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from, nor where it is going....”



⁸⁷ Sandra Barnes, “Then and Now: A Comparative Analysis of the Urban Black Church in America,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 29.1 (2002): 137-156.

⁸⁸ Peter Althouse, “Towards a Pentecostal Theology: Participation in the Missional Life of the Triune God,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18.2 (2009): 230-245.

⁸⁹ Gregory Lee Cuéllar, *Voices of Marginality: Exile and Return in Second Isaiah 40-55 and the Mexican Immigrant Experience* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁹⁰ Phillip Jenkins, *Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).