

# ADFONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT RESOURCEMENT

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## ADFONTES:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE JOURNAL AND THIS SERIES

*Ad Fontes*, “to the sources,” was a rallying cry of the Reformation. The Reformers bequeathed to us a heritage, thick in the discourses and tools of humanism, which sought to address the hard questions of theology, philosophy, and culture in a way that was true to the revelation of God’s word and God’s world. Through this journal, we attempt to channel this ethos into a modern context, seeking to explore *our* questions alongside the great cloud of witnesses and the many exemplars who have gone before us. The goal is to aid ourselves and our neighbors in the wise pursuit of common goods.

*Ad Fontes* is intended to be a monthly publication. Four of these editions (published quarterly) will contain two larger articles apiece on a common theme to be explored throughout that year. The theme for this year (September ‘16 through August ‘17) is ecclesiology. The other eight editions will contain four shorter articles apiece which will contain biographical sketches, book reviews, and annotated translations.

## THE CHURCH QUESTION IN A DISORIENTED AGE | JOSEPH MINICH

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS YEAR'S THEME

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, it is to be expected that such an iconic date will occasion an overwhelming proliferation of published materials. No doubt, many of the usual suspects will be addressed: justification by faith, the sacraments, the solas, church government, the priesthood of all believers, the lives of the Reformers, and even contemporary issues like women in the Reformation, the Reformation and social justice, etc. It would not be surprising, however, if very little was written concerning the Protestant doctrine of the “essence” or “definition” of the church. This is not because it is unimportant. Indeed, it was one of the key insights of the Reformation, and in historical context, among its most scandal-

ous proposals. A more plausible explanation is that we have forgotten what this question might even mean or why it is important. Certainly there are volumes which discuss the “definition” of the church broadly considered, and even the Reformed view of it. But to ask the question of the “essence” of the church is not an attempt to aggregate its biblical descriptions, to list its attributes, or to otherwise taxonomize the body of the Christ. It is rather to ask what it is *in virtue of which we can speak about “the church” at all*, or alternatively, how many of its ordinary features can be removed while its essence remains intact. Perhaps this strikes the reader as a rather fanciful exercise, but this was a question of direct relevance to the Reformers and to their gospel. This year, we will be attempting to address this question from a historical, biblical, and pastoral perspective. It is the goal of this journal to expand and collect these essays, along with a few additional pieces, into a stand-alone volume by October of 2017.



## INTRODUCTION: THE “WHO” AND “WHEN” OF THE CHURCH QUESTION

No question is approached from nowhere. It always begins with questioners. Who are the we asking the question of ecclesiology? What concerns make up our world? And, likewise, to what sorts of problems do we imagine the question of ecclesiology to provide a potential solution?

In this particular case, we the questioners are inhabitants of late modernity and its concerns. Chief among these is the liquid nature of modern identity—wherein “all that is solid melts into air.” Most humans in history have navigated their way through this world suspended atop given identities—including identities of time, place, culture, language, religion, nuclear and extended family, local customs, gender, etc. The late modern world, by contrast, while one of comparative technological comfort, is an age of anxiety as it pertains to our sense of the self and our relationship to a larger community. The causes are manifold and need not detain us here. But not a few commentators have identified the modern West (and particularly America) as deeply fractured, a place and a time wherein basic identities cannot be taken for granted. And this is the case whether we speak of individuals, groups, or the whole of society. Like an apparition looking for its reflection in a cracked mirror, there is fundamental instability in both the parts and the whole which emerges from and, in turn, supports them.

It is in this situation that we ask questions about the church. Consequently, we tend to approach the question concerning ecclesiology as a question related to authority, identity, and community. It is worthy to note, in this regard, how the same concerns show up in apparently different conversations. The debate over what it means to be “Reformed,” for instance, largely parallels the debate over what it means to be American, the relationship between American values and documents, the debate over what America’s “trajectory” and “story” are, etc. And, indeed, there are not even settled and commonly agreed upon reference points. All of us are necessarily left to exercise judgment in piecing these things together. It is not clear whether we are receiving and passing on the original or its distortion, especially since our intellectual exemplars are never without equal among those who inflect our heritage differently than we do. We are left, therefore, with two options. We can either outsource our judgment or we can exercise a significant degree of agency in seeking to be persuaded concerning wisdom. In either case, we all find ourselves addressing these

questions via an intellectual collage—an attempt to piece together a picture of reality from a massive pile of particulars, an ambiguous sense of the end product, and (what is key) the felt arbitrariness of our particular community’s vision of reality alongside our freedom to abandon it.

## OUR CONCERNS: THE “WHAT” OF OUR CHURCH QUESTION

This is our situation, and in it, our world of concern and our sought for reference points will tend to revolve around questions of reliable authority and stable community. Given the massive confusion in which we find ourselves, who has the right to define what it means to be American, to be Reformed, to be a Christian? Who has the right to define the implicit content of these terms? And what are the essential truths or essential markers that unite persons in a group and in a project despite their differences? These questions are obviously related. To ask what unites a group of persons is, in our world of freedom and disagreement, also to ask who has the authority to make a judgment call concerning this question. Ironically, however, the problem of skepticism and its inevitable termination in submission to a person or to a community who reasons on your behalf, is a hallmark of *modern* rather than ancient thought. Not the act of outsourcing itself, of course, but rather the contention that such outsourcing is *inevitable* for the finite person. While it is popular to locate the origin of Modern skepticism in Renaissance finitude or in Reformation individualism-cum-Enlightenment, its practical “on the ground” hold was arguably birthed in the Roman counter-Reformation and its attempt to render the Reformation vulnerable on precisely the question of epistemic chaos.

In any case, *our* question concerning ecclesiology is a question of community and of authority. Movements as diverse as Reformed confessionalism, the recent version of “two kingdoms” theology, the Federal Vision, the New Perspectives on Paul, Radical Orthodoxy, neo-Anabaptism, The Emerging Church movement, the Acts 29 movement, the shepherding movement among charismatics, the popularity of IX Marks ministries among Baptists—all have the doctrine of the church at their forefront. Each is interested in how the church is the “family and house of God” and how we can know its content and members. Their emphases differ in terms of high and low ecclesiologies, in their relative emphasis on the church as an organism or as an institution, on the church as visible or as invisible, as local institution or as a family of the baptized across geographic or political boundaries, on the church as a people or as a place, as the new humanity and solution to human strife or as the antithesis to the world, as a voluntary society or as a unique polis with its own distinctive government, weapons, and charter, etc. But all are united in addressing our questions of community and of authority in thinking about the doctrine of the church.

## OUR SOLUTIONS: SEVERAL CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO THE CHURCH QUESTION

There is, of course, nothing innately problematic about this state of affairs. We cannot escape ourselves or our questions. But our questions conceal as much as they reveal, limiting (as they do) the poten-

tial resonances between ourselves and the reality with which we are attempting to come to terms. For instance, a renewed emphasis on the church's authority, on its spiritual power, on reading the Bible with the church, on the democracy of the dead, on the recovery of church fathers, sacramental life, corporate liturgy, and even on the church as the site of our "eternal family" and "eternal identity" vis and vis our temporal identities and families—can cover a multitude of pastoral and intellectual sins.

Let us take, for instance, the notion of the church's "spiritual" power or "spiritual" authority. It is normally emphasized, at least in Reformed circles, that this does not refer to something beyond the authority of the Word itself. But then the question becomes what the difference is between the authority of the institutional church and the authority of an individual Christian with respect to the object of judgment. If a church falsely condemns someone (say, Martin Luther), then there are no spiritual implications. Conversely, if a church fails to condemn someone (say, Pope Alexander VI), the spiritual "power" of judgment obtains no matter what the church says or does. Nor, in each of these cases, is the church's pronouncement or lack of it binding on the conscience of any believer. What happens when the church makes such pronouncements? Certainly there might be earthly communal and political implications, but ultimate spiritual implications are neither created nor prevented in the church's pronouncements. Its spiritual power is simply the power that the Word has by itself. And the Word, in simple point of fact, can be channeled by both the church as an institution and by an individual believer. Who, for instance, would deny that many have been converted because an ordinary layperson shared God's word of promise with another person?

Similarly, let us take the language of the "church as polis," or the church as our "eschatological family"—our identity in which shall outlast our identity as members of our natural families. Well, everything depends upon what this means and it has often meant something quite classically cultish. For instance, while our corporate identity in Christ will obtain in eternity, the particular "local church" of which we are a part will not. This local institutional expression of the church is actually temporal in all of its particulars. The eternal bond we have with one another is a bond we also have with all other believers—including those in our family and, in principle and potential, with all persons. The relationship between our temporal and eternal identities, then, does not map neatly onto institutional boundaries. And when they are forced to, pastoral dangers await. Many churches, for instance, insist on the local church as one's primary site of obligation and focus, over against one's obligation to their natural family or even to other institutional churches. Inevitably, this category confusion leads to the attempted binding of a free conscience.

As a final example, let us consider what is meant by the recent popularity of the phrase "Reformed catholicity." Normally contrasted to more "narrow" Reformed (or "True Reformed") ethos, Reformed

"catholicity" is concerned about the church fathers, about sacraments, about liturgy, etc. It often remains ambiguous, however, whether the Reformed tradition itself contains essential deficiencies in this area. Does the Reformed tradition require principled supplementation from other groups so that we can arrive at some hoped for *tertium quid*—a new age for the church? Or is "catholicity" a call for Reformed persons to take up what is already part of their heritage at its best and in principle? Often, it means the former, and the inevitable "supplementations" rather quickly strike at what are arguably "essentials" of Reformed identity while preserving those bits which are "accidental" only. The continuity implied in the "Reformed" part of "Reformed Catholic" is, then, superficial.

## REFORMING THE QUESTIONS

In all of the above examples, lack of clarity inevitably terminates in pastoral and theological malpractice. Often, lack of clarity reveals that formulations have been developed in reaction to other errors rather than in conversation with reality as such. Discourse concerning church authority, for instance, is often a reaction to the perceived problem of

individualism and autonomy rampant in America. What is at stake in discussing the church as a "polis" is often the idolatrous marriage of the gospel of Christ with the agencies of empire. Reformed Catholicism, as I have mentioned, postures itself over against an aggressively ignorantly but nevertheless confident and navel-gazing community which cannot imagine the larger world of ecclesiastical discourse—and often of its very own history!

And yet, while each of these might be considered legitimate concerns, theological and pastoral formulations shaped around them will only tend to be their alter-ego. It is not, of course, that these problems and the

questions they pose cannot be a spring-board into the reality at stake in the doctrine of the church. But it is precisely *reality*, fine-grained observation, and first principles which must be sought if we are to develop adequate theological and pastoral tools to navigate our modern situation in all of its difficulty. And it is the judgment of this project that the early Protestant claim concerning the church's definition and essence really did capture precise *reality* as it pertains to the "what" of the church. It becomes our calling, then, to appropriate their insight as we ask the question concerning ecclesiology in our context. While there is much positive theological work to build on top of this, the guiding principle in all Protestant ecclesiology faithful to its founding insight is simply this: *The church, at its most basic, is just the people of the promise.* This is all that is absolutely *necessary* for there to be "the church." Other things might be normative, but this is the "essential form"—the most basic thing. The church is the community of those who have been claimed by God's promise—who have said "yes" to the gospel message.

But surely, one might think, this is trivial. What is at stake in this claim? The project of which this essay is the opening foray attempts to

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present this basic Reformation insight to a modern audience. Of first importance is that *the church does not make the Word, but that the Word makes the church*. The conscience of the Christian, therefore, is free in relation to God and His gospel and His Word. The church's authority might be declaratory or persuasive, but it never stands in any absolute sense "between" the believer and the Word. Furthermore, the church is where the gospel is believed. While it is normative (and indeed, in a very distinctive sense, necessary) to be marked out by baptism and the Lord's Supper, these do not have the same type of *absolute* necessity as the promise itself. The believer in prison, in fellowship with other believers in prison (even if forced *not* to receive baptism) is no less a member of the visible church than the apostle Paul. And note this third emphasis, then. Even what we call the *visible* church is prior to any of its institutional expressions. The church is more like an extended family with many institutional expressions, but it is most fundamentally the fellowship of those who are marked out by gospel profession. While the church is normatively (but not essentially) made objective in baptism, this normative/essential distinction is crucial for discussing the "essence" of the church. And, let it be admitted, we are not left without ambiguity. Like any Italian family, there are in-fights about which members are the purest Italians, and fights about who is not Italian at all. There are arguments about whose food (or doctrine) is the best, whose practices are the least authentic, who has deviated the furthest from Romulus and Remus, etc.

Be that as it may, the ambiguity is not one of our making, but rather maps precisely onto reality as it has always been actually experienced in the Christian church. The modern condition only makes this more clear. Even if a Medieval Christian, for instance, thought they were a member of the church because they were in communion with the bishop of Rome, their subjective belief about what makes them a member of the church does not change the fact that *we* can claim them even if they wouldn't claim us. Why? Because we do not define the family the same way they do. We claim them as family because we claim as family anyone who believes God's gospel promise. Children of the Reformation can claim Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas as our forefathers just as much as a Roman Catholic can. The Reformation did not create a different church. It was and is a purifying movement within the *one* church, the *one* family of God, which cannot (even in its visibility) be conflated with any single earthly institution.

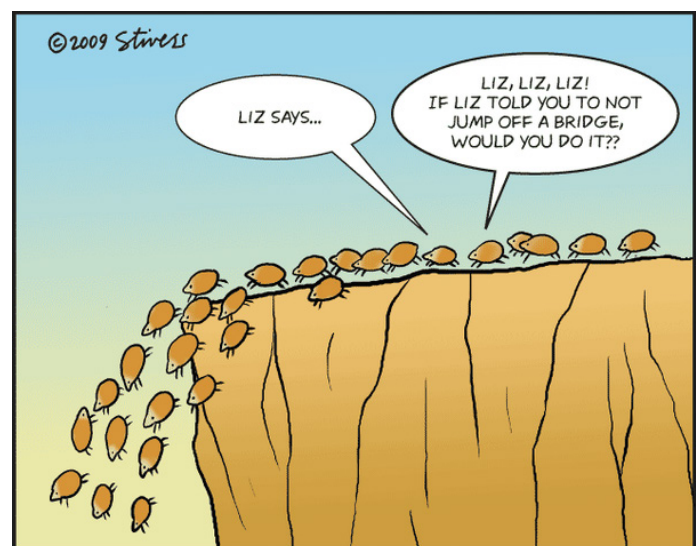
## REFORMING THE QUESTIONERS

It is urgent that we grasp how radical the Reformation claim was. A Christian living in these tumultuous times might perceive much continuity of liturgy, church structure, and even of doctrine—but the entire definition of what the church was had changed. It's essential relation to the word had changed. The relation of the latter to the individual and their conscience changed. And, bringing us full circle, these sorts of emphases might be alarming to those who are reacting to modernity. Even if the Reformation clarified our principles and re-defined the essence of the church, did it not also lead to all of *our* problems? Was it not through the world created by the Reformers that we have received a culture rife with church division, individualism, idolatrous nationalism, etc?

Of course, as one might suspect, "it's complicated." More urgent, however, than explicating this answer is getting at the anxiety itself. Can the Protestant doctrine of the Christian conscience, of its freedom in

relation to God's word, and of the priesthood of all believers in their common relation to the gospel be abused? Absolutely. But they are also simply fine-grained reality. Even Rome has had to concede that it cannot technically force someone to go against their conscience and that the church has (at times) erred in failing to condemn one or failing to receive another. But it is just this—a concession. And even Rome technically admits that the unbaptized person on the island can be in Christ. But this is an afterthought to the definition of the church. The Reformers integrated these two concessions into the very definition of the church and its authority. And the resulting focus concerned essentials—the hard lines of reality—the fruit of which is a tremendous theological cash-value in the actual world, as actually lived.

Take, for instance, our anxiety concerning individualism. Arguably, the Reformation doctrine (Luther's two kingdoms of Christ's immediate reign in the soul versus the mediation of human governments in church, state, and family) captures precisely what remains both "individual" and "corporate" in the lived world and in Scripture. Paul, for instance, tells the Galatians that they are free in Christ, but that they must not use their freedom as an opportunity to serve the flesh. Note that this abuse is not a condemnation of freedom. The freedom is rather for obedience and maturity. And so with the doctrine of the Reformers. The doctrine of the free conscience in relation to the word can certainly be abused by cocky persons who pretend that they do not need anyone. It can certainly be abused as a recipe for laziness and sloth. But the Reformation never intended to fully avoid these things because these things *cannot* be fully avoided. Rather, the freedom of the conscience, and the building of ecclesiastical and civil institutions around an honoring of this basic insight, is a call to both individuals and to communities *to grow up!* Individuals are called to submit to earthly authorities within their legitimate jurisdictions (Luther's "three orders" of ecclesial, civil, and familial) and earthly governments are called to recognize the pretension of attempting to manipulate a free conscience that they cannot and should not ultimately attempt to control. As it pertains to matters of conscience, then, the resultant trajectory is the development of a culture of persuasion.



In any case, maturation requires a significant degree of individuality - ownership over one's convictions, personal persuasion, a seeking to stand on one's own two feet confidently in Christ. Note, then, that Paul expected the Galatians to be aware if even he himself taught



a different gospel! He expected them to be confident in the face of angels and apostles who taught something other than the gospel of Christ. This expectation necessarily assumes confident and persuaded believers—mature conviction. But the expectation of maturity leaves room for the possibility of abuse and of failure. This is precisely why Paul warns against it. Our calling to read the Bible with the church, then, is transformed in this light. It is not that the church fathers have a special “spiritual authority” that our Christian neighbor does not. Rather, *not* to read the Bible with those who spent their lives reading and bleeding for it is, in a word, stupid. It would likewise be immature for a physicist to neglect the works and insights of other physicists and the corporate judgments of the physics community. In this context, catholicity is more an ethos than a supplement to a perceived problem of insularity. A devolution from basic principles already bedevils the latter—principles which would rather demand a wise self-awareness such that confidence was had in proportion to one’s actual competence. The irony is that the flame of catholic doctrine burns hottest when it is preserved through channels of persuasion. We carry the torch because we believe the promise and its doctrinal explication as it has been proclaimed to us. As agents who have freely received and imbibed the proclamation, we are then driven to pass it on to other agents by the very same means of persuasion.

## CONCLUSION: A CALL TO MATURITY

Finally, then, this call to maturity can be either killed or cultivated by a culture’s choices concerning the legitimate uses of persuasion and coercion. The world that grew out of the Reformation was a world which increasingly demanded persons to come to convictions about their faith—to own it through their own agency. And this is admittedly a scary prospect. The most prominent live options seem to be

insecurity and hubris. But a culture whose main goal is to avoid either will, to that extent, avoid wisdom as well. Fortunately, what stands behind this call to maturity is precisely what we need to attain it. To wit, the free Christian knows local churches and nations to constitute “penultimate” identities. We are united to Christ through His word and to one another through love, and this is our ultimate identity. The shakiness and confusion of our earthly identities (whether ecclesiastical, civil, familial, etc), while perhaps a matter of great importance,

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are suspended atop something absolutely and eternally solid. And this encourages the very mental and spiritual relaxation that helps us to cultivate wisdom, to love finitude, and to pursue the truth *together*. In this light, there need be no anxiety or skepticism to parasitically feed off of one another. The most basic things—that we are children of the most high God (made in His image), forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and called to maturity through His Spirit—do not render all other things dispensable, but rather dependent on

deeper fundamentals. And these fundamentals become an anchor to the questioner in the storm of his or her questions—reference points of reality for a pilgrim people who still cling to a promise. In my judgment, these reference points have never been more insightfully captured than in Luther’s famous words in his 1520 *On the Freedom of a Christian*: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” One way of summarizing the project before us is to say that it is an attempt to understand this one statement more fully—and what it means for us today. Such is our attempt to honor and cultivate that flame that started five hundred years ago.

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*Joseph Minich is a Ph.D student in intellectual history at The University of Texas at Dallas. He lives in Garland, TX with his wife and four children.*

# THE PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH AND ITS RIVALS

BRADLEY BELSCHNER

Throughout Christian history there have been four main ecclesiologies:

- papal sacerdotalism (Roman Catholicism)
- magisterial sacerdotalism (e.g., Eastern Orthodoxy)
- magisterial evangelicalism (e.g., historic Protestants)
- anarchic evangelicalism (e.g., Anabaptists like the Amish and Mennonites)

The most important distinction above is sacerdotal vs. evangelical. Sacerdotalism refers to the role of the “priest” as a spiritual mediator between God and man, and also the notion that bishops represent the apostles by virtue of apostolic succession. In this view the clergy do not exist merely to promote good order in the church; rather, their offices are imbued with unique spiritual power that lay Christians do not possess. The church is conceived of as an institution, and the boundary of that institution is defined by the clergy. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox affirm different versions of sacerdotalism, since the former insists on a supreme Roman bishop within the clergy, but either way both churches share the same fundamental belief in the mediatorial role of the clergy.

Evangelicalism, on the other hand, affirms the universal priesthood of all believers. Christ is the only true mediator between God and man, and consequently we do not believe our church leaders are imbued with any magical power by virtue of their status; rather, their role is to promote good order in the human society that we call the visible church community. Evangelicals believe that wherever two or three believers are gathered, there you will find the church. This core belief is shared by both Magisterial Protestants and Anabaptist Protestants. (For the purposes of this essay “protestant” and “evangelical” are synonymous.)

The second distinction is Papal vs. Magisterial vs. Anarchic. This distinction concerns the relationship of the church to temporal society, especially civil government.

Papal ecclesiology, strictly speaking, teaches that *all civil and spiritual power* on earth is invested in the Roman Pontiff. Dogmatically the Pope has been given authority over all kings and civil magistrates. By divine right the two swords of spiritual and civil power both belong to the Pope, and he merely delegates the usage of one sword to the civil magistrate. Crazy as this may sound, the doctrine is actually enshrined in *Unam Sanctam*, the papal bull issued by Boniface VIII in 1302 AD:

Certainly the one who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter has not listened well to the word of the Lord commanding: ‘Put up thy sword into thy scabbard’ [Mt 26:52]. Both, therefore, are in the power of the Church, that is to say, the spiritual and the material sword, but the former is to be admin-

istered for the Church but the latter by the Church; the former in the hands of the priest; the latter by the hands of kings and soldiers, but at the will and sufferance of the priest. However, one sword ought to be subordinated to the other and temporal authority subjected to spiritual power.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, the Pope has authority to coerce the faith. In Rome, spiritual authority has temporal teeth. It is no accident that Roman Catholics historically set up systematic inquisitions and burned heretics; the Pope is explicitly and theologically granted the authority to perform such coercion, though of course he may also exercise gentler measures as he sees fit.<sup>2</sup>

But let’s not forget about that first sword in *Unam Sanctam*, the spiritual one. He owns that one too. As Boniface says,



1 Accessed on the website “Papal Encyclicals Online” on 15 August 2016 at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Bon08/B8unam.htm>

2 For an excellent treatment of this by a Roman Catholic philosopher, see Professor Thomas Pink’s paper, “What is the Catholic doctrine of religious liberty?” available online at several locations, including [https://www.academia.edu/639061/What\\_is\\_the\\_CatholicDoctrine\\_of\\_religious\\_liberty](https://www.academia.edu/639061/What_is_the_CatholicDoctrine_of_religious_liberty) (accessed on September 8, 2016).

We believe in [the Church] firmly and we confess with simplicity that outside of her there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins. [...] we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.

In other words, the Pope is a *sine qua non* for salvation. It's not hard to find statements like this in Roman Catholicism. They are not anomalies. In 1516 the Fifth Lateran Council—to Catholics the infallible 18th ecumenical council—reasserted the authority of Unam Sanctam and reiterated its claims:

since subjection to the Roman pontiff is necessary for salvation for all Christ's faithful, as we are taught by the testimony of both sacred scripture and the holy fathers, and as is declared by the constitution of pope Boniface VIII of happy memory, also our predecessor, which begins Unam sanctam, we therefore, with the approval of the present sacred council, for the salvation of the souls of the same faithful, for the supreme authority of the Roman pontiff and of this holy see, and for the unity and power of the church, his spouse, renew and give our approval to that constitution<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably therefore, the Roman Catholic version of sacerdotalism overlaps with their doctrine of temporal government: in both cases the Pope reigns as the supreme figure on earth.

Magisterialism denies this vehemently. For magisterials of both sacerdotal and evangelical persuasion—both Eastern Orthodox and historic Protestants—the *civil magistrate* is the guardian of the church. The Second Helvetic Confession describes his role as such:

**THE MAGISTRACY IS FROM GOD.** Magistracy of every kind is instituted by God himself for the peace and tranquillity of the human race, and thus it should have the chief place in the world. If the magistrate is opposed to the Church, he can hinder and disturb it very much; but if he is a friend and even a member of the Church, he is a most useful and excellent member of it, who is able to benefit it greatly, and to assist it best of all.

**THE DUTY OF THE MAGISTRATE.** The chief duty of the magistrate is to secure and preserve peace and public tranquillity. Doubtless he will never do this more successfully than when he is truly God-fearing and religious; that is to say, when, according to the example of the most holy kings and princes of the people of the Lord, he promotes the preaching of the truth and sincere faith, roots out lies and all superstition, together with all impiety and idolatry, and defends the Church of God. We certainly teach that the care of religion belongs especially to the holy magistrate.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Note also that they call the church the "spouse" of the Roman pontiff! Accessed on the website "Legion of Mary -Tidewater, Virginia" on 15 August 2016 at <http://www.legionof-marytidewater.com/faith/ECUM18.HTM>.

4 *Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter XXX, accessed on the "Christian Classics Ethereal Library" on 15 August 2016 at <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>.

The Westminster Confession of Faith elaborates and provides a more detailed job description:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.<sup>5</sup>

This is not a uniquely Protestant position. An historically minded Eastern Orthodox Christian would cheerfully agree here. However, there are tensions in Eastern Orthodox between their sacerdotalism

and magisterialism—what is their institutional church, a holy thing or a civil temporal thing? In Magisterial Protestantism the principles are much clearer. For us the visible church is, by definition, a temporal human society. And of course, the civil magistrate is the man charged with promoting peace and order within temporal human society.

It may sound strange to speak about the civil magistrate in such explicitly Christian terms, but frankly, what is the alternative? An officially agnostic and (increasingly) functionally atheist secular government? Perhaps no civil government at all? That last option is basically the anabaptist position. Anabaptists like the Amish and Mennonites are anarchists, strictly speaking, insofar as they believe civil government should be eliminated entirely and the peaceful church should reign in its place. They believe promoting justice and peace via the sword, coercively, is counterproductive and contrary to Jesus' commands. Consequently the anabaptists are pacifists, and refrain from most participation in government.

Putting this all together then, we get the four main ecclesiologies listed above.<sup>6</sup> In theory each group is clean and theologically distinct, but in practice it gets a lot messier. Not all individuals are aware of their group's guiding principles, and those that are aware do not necessarily stay faithful to them.

Roman Catholics today have tried to backpedal away from the sort of extreme statements made in their 18th ecumenical council. But of course they aren't allowed to backpedal, because their dogma is in-

.....  
5 *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XXIII, accessed on the "Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics" website on 15 August 2016 at [http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster\\_conf\\_of\\_faith.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html).

6 Technically we might add a fifth ecclesiology, *anarchic sacerdotalism*. If any church matches this description it would be Coptic Orthodoxy. They've been living under disapproving civil magistrates for 15 centuries, ever since they rejected the Imperially-approved Council of Chalcedon in 451. Historically their church has been somewhat associated with pacifism and extreme monastics. However, their overall ecclesiology is ambiguous, and it would be unfair to straightforwardly characterize them as 'anarchic' in the same way that modern Mennonites are.

fallible, so they're stuck between a rock and a hard place. The result was the second Vatican council in the 1960s, the hard place crushing them. This famously ambiguous synod introduced an ecclesiological fog that still enshrouds Roman Catholicism. Regardless of such doctrinal obfuscations, it must be granted that Popes today certainly act a lot less papal than in previous centuries. There's no risk of Pope Francis I burning anybody at the stake, or damning Christians who don't have faith in him. So although the Pope technically has not renounced any of these ecclesiological errors, he at least has the good character to live in denial that the worst of these errors ever existed.

Eastern Orthodoxy has historically been magisterial, and in some places like Russia this emphasis is on the rise again. However the Eastern Orthodox church in America is much less magisterial, and in some quarters is leaning towards pacifism and a vaguely anabaptist view of government<sup>7</sup>, though usually not in a consistent or wholesale way.

Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are just as sacerdotal as ever, though in America this is downplayed a bit and they also emphasize personal bible reading and other stereotypically evangelical practices.

Traditional Protestants in America—Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, etc.—are today largely unaware of their historical tradition and its corresponding philosophical and biblical exegesis, particularly as it relates to the civil magistrate, and consequently they tend to default to a semi-anabaptist ecclesiology. In some places tenets of outright anabaptism are becoming more common, and advocates for political withdrawal and pacifism are increasing. Overall in our Western and increasingly post-Christian society, anabaptist flavors of ecclesiology seem to be strengthening in every group. Nevertheless, on the whole, American Protestants retain vaguely magisterial instincts, as seen in petitions to publicly display the Ten Commandments at courthouses, a desire for our political candidates to be overtly Christian, etc.

## WHERE DID THESE ECCLESIOLOGIES COME FROM? A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

Tracing the historical development of each of these four ecclesiologicals is a complex task, but the following sketch should help to orient us historically.

### Apostolic Church (1st century)

The Eucharist was initially coterminous with the agape feast. Practical order necessitated that one man should act as formal leader during the Eucharistic celebration, i.e., somebody had to say the prayer of thanksgiving (the literal meaning of "eucharist"), break the bread, and generally oversee the meal. To quote Walter Lowrie,

7 E.g., F. Alexander Weber, *The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998).

The Eucharistic feast requires a president—that was one of the first suggestions which prompted the development of formal office in the Church. All could not preside at the Eucharist at once, neither was it appropriate that each should preside in turn, from the greatest to the least. Who then shall preside at the Eucharist? The answer presented no theoretical difficulty ... substantially it was equivalent to the question, Who, among those present at the particular time and place, is most worthy to sit in the seat of Christ? ... it is obvious that in the same community and under the same conditions there would be a certain permanence in the presidency—it was ever the most highly revered disciple that must preside. But this did not imply as of necessity a formal appointment<sup>8</sup>

If an apostle was visiting then obviously he would preside over the Eucharistic feast. Otherwise, the local prophet or charismatic leader would do so. The *Didache*, written in the 1st century, retains this emphasis on the charismatic prophet as the default president for the Eucharist. But what to do if no prophet was available? Enter the bishop or "overseer", the virtuous prophet-substitute. A bishop in the apostolic church

was an elder chosen to preside over the Eucharistic feast.

Historically there has been some confusion over the terms "elder" and "bishop", with some arguing they were simply synonyms, but this is only partially true. To quote Lowrie again,

The name elder indicated originally no formal office whatever, but only a vaguely defined class of persons who were distinguished for their greater age, or longer experience of the Christian life. The bishops were selected from this class, and so might be spoken of generically as elders.<sup>9</sup>

The terms presbyteros and episkopos in the ancient church should therefore be considered *partial* synonyms, similar to the words "college" and "university" in American English. The former is a looser and more generic term, whereas the latter is a more specific and formal term. E.g., "I met my wife at college" vs. "Did the candidate attend a university or a community college?"<sup>10</sup>

Of course, none of these guiding offices and roles compromise the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Theoretically any believer might be capable of breaking the bread of the Eucharist, but under normal circumstances it made sense and promoted good order and virtue for "elders" in communities to do the "overseeing."

The doctrine of magisterialism was certainly present in the apostolic era, but it might be more accurate to describe it as a theological undercurrent, mostly irrelevant until later centuries. Nevertheless, Paul

8 This quote is from page 271 of Walter Lowrie's fantastic book, which we commend to you heartily: *The Church & Its Organization in Primitive & Catholic Times: An Interpretation of Rudolph Sobm's Kirchenrecht* (Longmans: New York, 1904). It is available free online.

9 Lowrie, 276.

10 Thanks to Alistair Stewart for this analogy, from *The Original Bishops* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2014), 13.

presumably preached the gospel to the emperor (Acts 9:15, 27:24), and the apostles explicitly commanded Christians to pray for the emperor and to respect his role of promoting peace and order in society.

### Early Church, Pre-Magistrates (2nd-3rd centuries)

Eventually as the church grew, Christians separated the Eucharist from the agape feast and combined it with the general service of instruction and worship.<sup>11</sup> This change facilitated larger congregations and greatly increased the formal importance of the bishop's role in presiding over Eucharistic celebration. Over time the office of bishop expanded into the "moniscopacy" we are familiar with today, with one bishop taking administrative responsibility over multiple congregations. The term "bishop" in this era therefore takes on a new hierarchical meaning, closer to modern usage. Historical evidence indicates that the shift from episcopacy to moniscopacy emerged in the early 2nd century in some locations, and by the end of the 2nd century it had become pervasive.<sup>12</sup> This administrative evolution seems to have been uncontroversial at the time.

Arguably there is a universal human temptation to sacralize our leaders and treat them as if their office gives them spiritual power, or brings them closer to God somehow. Christians in the early church were no exception, and they fell prey to this temptation. Historical circumstances of persecution probably amplified this tendency. If the church was an army of peace, then the bishops were her generals. Over time it became easy to think of these "generals" as *sine qua nons* of the church, even defining its very structure.

During this era a rudimentary form of sacerdotalism began to sprout, with the clergy mediating as 'priests'. However, it is difficult to tell exactly how 'sacerdotal' these early Christians really were, and how deeply or consistently they followed these tendencies. Some fathers still clearly assumed a universal priesthood over against sacerdotalism<sup>13</sup>, whereas other fathers give us statements that affirm sacerdotalism. Many of these sacerdotal statements are ambiguous though and can be interpreted in softer or more pragmatic ways. We must avoid the temptation to anachronistically read current debates back into their texts. It is true that the 20 canons of the council of Nicea take for granted that the church is structured episcopally, but back then there simply were no Christians outside of episcopal structures. It was a simpler and less polarized time, at least in terms of structural ecclesiology.

Magisterialism remained a theological undercurrent. However, we also see a rise in pacifism during this era (which perhaps should not be surprising given the intense persecution). Such pacifist principles were far from universal though. Civil servants who converted to Christianity were generally not expected to leave their posts, unless their office required them to sin or engage in idolatry in some way.

11 Lowrie, 278.

12 Lowrie, 280.

13 For example, Tertullian writes, "Are not even we laymen priests? It is written, 'A kingdom also, and priests to His God and Father, hath He made us'. It is the authority of the church, and the honour which has acquired sanctity through the joint session of the order, which has established the difference between the order and the laity. Accordingly, where there is no joint session of the ecclesiastical order, you offer, and baptize, and are priest, alone for yourself. When three are present, there is the church, although they be laymen" (*De Exhortatione Castitatis*, chapter VII). Note that Tertullian is not arguing for the priesthood of all believers here, he is taking it for granted and using it as an uncontroversial premise in order to argue for a different conclusion, namely, the moral superiority of monogamy over bigamy.

### Early Church, Post-Magistrates (4th-5th centuries)

In the 4th century rulers like Tiridates of Armenia and Constantine of Rome started converting to Christianity, and magisterialism finally came to the forefront. Constantine's conversion is often treated as a watershed moment in Christianity, and rightly so. But the change was primarily a sociological one, not theological. Anabaptists can



look back at the church before Constantine and emphasize their favorite elements, like pacifism or hostility between the church and the empire. But after Constantine that narrative can no longer be taken seriously. There can be no pretext of a pacifist, quietistic Christianity after it becomes the official state religion. Christians had been praying for the conversion of the emperor since at least the time of Paul, but it never happened until Constantine.

Magisterialism began to produce good fruit quickly. When the bishops in Constantine's empire could not agree on the divinity of Christ, they appealed to their emperor to help them sort out the issue and enforce the result. It was only natural to invoke his aid in defending the institutional church within his country. In 325 Constantine famously convened the Council of Nicea.<sup>14</sup> Of course, only the bishops within the borders of the Roman Empire were invited to the council, and the result was only enforced within those borders. It was Constantine who made this ecumenical council possible, and it was only "ecumenical" insofar as he happened to rule over most of the known

14 Roman Catholics claim the Bishop of Rome called the council, but that's just anachronistic wishful thinking.

# NOTHING IS MORE TOXIC TO SACERTODALISM THAN PERVASIVE READING OF THE BIBLE, THANKS NOT ONLY TO ITS TEACHINGS BUT ALSO TO THE VERY ACT ITSELF.

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civilized world at the time.<sup>15</sup> The same applied to the other ecumenical councils in later decades, all of them called by Christian emperors.

## Medieval Church (6th-14th centuries)

After the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, a power vacuum was created, which was gradually filled by the Bishop of Rome, for good and for ill. In a sense the Bishop of Rome had become a shadow of the emperor, residing in an imperial capital and naturally taking a prominent role in ecclesiastical affairs. After the emperor was gone, the Roman Bishop remained, and he gradually began to fill some of the pragmatic roles the emperor had in society.

This era also saw the dramatic conversions of Germanic “barbarians” in Western Europe. These barbarian cultures were extremely superstitious, even by Roman polytheistic standards, and their influence naturally lent itself to a much higher and much more superstitious form of sacerdotalism. During this early medieval period, sacerdotalism became hardcore.

In the 11th century the Roman Bishop began burning heretics and taking other measures to directly coerce faith. It is no accident that the schism between the Eastern and Western Church happened around this time. This was the true birth of the Papacy, and doctrinal justifications for it continued to develop over the next couple centuries. All of this culminated doctrinally when Pope Boniface VIII issued *Unam Sanctum* in 1302. Politically, however, his power was not universally accepted; in fact, it was political struggle that motivated Boniface to make such outlandish claims in the first place. Nevertheless, the political power and influence of the Pope continued to grow in Europe, until the time of the Reformation. In short, the Western Church ended up with: *papal sacerdotalism*.

The Eastern Church, meanwhile, developed along different ecclesiological lines. The Eastern half of the Roman Empire proved to be much more politically stable and never fell until the 15th century, consequently their church retained its Christian civil magistrature and never had occasion to develop anything like a papacy. Eastern Missionary outreaches to pagan Russia in the 9th century eventually resulted in the conversion of Vladimir I in the 10th century, and for most of their history the Russians have also retained an explicitly Christian magistrate.

Sacerdotalism in the East deepened over time, in much the same way it did in the West. Interestingly the Eastern combination of magisterialism with extreme sacerdotalism caused them to ‘sacralize’ their emperors and civil magistrates to an unusual degree, with many of them ending up as canonized saints! To this day the Eastern Orthodox use the titles “Constantine Equal to the Apostles”, “Vladimir Equal to the Apostles”, etc.

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<sup>15</sup> Technically Constantine ruled over less than 20% of the world’s population, but he did rule over the majority of Christians, therefore he was providentially well positioned to call a council that represented the majority of Christians.

Contrasted with the West, the Eastern Church saw a stronger emphasis on asceticism and the spiritual power of monks, with a few (like Simeon the New Theologian) controversially teaching that the special charisma of the bishops passed on to monks and monasteries. Monks have therefore played a more prominent role in Eastern Orthodoxy than in Roman Catholicism, which remains true even today.

Setting aside charismatic monks though, the reins of power in Eastern Orthodoxy remained solidly with the bishops and the magistrates. Over the centuries they retained a self-conscious magisterial ecclesiology, despite marching deeper down the broad path of sacerdotalism. We can therefore accurately and succinctly describe their ecclesiology during this era as: *magisterial sacerdotalism*.

## Reformation Era (15th-17th centuries)

During the Middle Ages the text of scripture had been largely inaccessible, partly due to historical circumstance and partly by design. Obtaining a copy of the bible was prohibitively expensive, and reading it in Latin or Greek required a level of literacy and linguistic training unavailable to most. To top it all off, the Roman Church punished men like Wycliffe who sought to translate and circulate the scriptures. If the words of scripture are water from heaven, then the Middle Ages were a pretty big drought.

The Reformation changed that. After the bible was translated into Czech, it wasn’t too long before Czechs like Jan Hus (1372-1415) began rejecting the Pope, icons, indulgences, transubstantiation, etc. Unfortunately none of these reforms really gained steam in Europe until the advent of the printing press. Arguments and texts and scripture itself simply couldn’t circulate quickly or widely enough. But after Gutenberg, a reformation of some sort became inevitable.

Nothing is more toxic to sacerdotalism than pervasive reading of the bible, thanks not only to its teachings but also to the very act itself. It’s much harder to defend the notion of a priestly ‘mediator’ when readers have direct access to the words of God.

In 1520 Luther published his three famous treatises (*On the Freedom of a Christian*, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and *Letter to the Christian Nobility*), reclaiming the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers and articulating the core of Protestantism. This was nothing less than the re-birth of historic evangelicalism, and a corresponding rejection of sacerdotalism and all its superstitious and corrupt entanglements. His treatises also sparked the rebirth of magisterialism in the West, with Luther directly appealing to civil magistrates to guard the church and providing clear arguments to back up his case.

During this era the anarchic evangelicals (anabaptists) also emerged. Though initially violent revolutionaries, they eventually settled down to become the secluded, peaceful schismatics that we know today. At the risk of oversimplifying, one could summarize the anabaptists as



being driven by a radical interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. They interpreted Jesus' commands to forgive criminals and to tolerate cheek-slapping as commands for outright pacifism. Consequently, there could be no room for civil justice any more; the kingdom of the church must supersede all that. The result was an odd imitation of one key tenet of sacerdotalism, even amidst their fierce reaction to it: they too made the external visible community part of the *esse* of the church, rather than a manifestation of an identity hidden in Christ. By contrast, Luther placed the radical words of Jesus in their broader scriptural context and drew distinctions between the "two kingdoms", spiritual and temporal. Christians have one foot in this temporal kingdom of scarcity and penal justice, and one foot in the spiritual kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount speaks to the latter, giving commands that we Christians must obey as spiritual followers of Christ. Nevertheless, if a viking horde invades our country to rape and pillage then it is good for us *as citizens* to join the civil magistrate in defending the weak against such oppressors. Temporal justice requires it. This speaks to the temporal kingdom, which will remain with us until passing away in the eschaton. Luther therefore explains that all Christians are dual-citizens, living in both the spiritual and temporal kingdoms, and each citizenship requires different duties of us. The anabaptists failed to draw these distinctions, preferring instead to deny (inconsistently) participation in the temporal realm.

Meanwhile in the Eastern Church, attempts at reformation largely failed. Constantinople had fallen to the Turks in 1453, therefore Muslims ruled over the Eastern Christians for the entirety of the reformation era. The environment was not one conducive to theological change, but some attempted anyway. Cyril Lucaris (1572-1638) became persuaded of evangelicalism, and when he was appointed Ecu-

menical Patriarch of Constantinople he sought to reform the Eastern Orthodox church accordingly. He sent theologians to study under Protestants in England and Geneva, and he successfully introduced the first printing press to Greece in an attempt to make the scriptures more widely available. Cyril was persecuted by both Romanists and Ottomans, and was ultimately murdered by the latter for political reasons. The attempted reforms of Cyril were controversial when he was alive, and after his death they were officially denounced by most other Eastern patriarchs and bishops at two synods.<sup>16</sup> The Eastern Church therefore remained staunchly sacerdotal.

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MAGISTERIAL PROTESTANTISM

When we debate ecclesiology, the issue at stake is the very definition of Christianity itself. What is the church? What is our relationship to God and man? The two greatest commandments are to love God, and to love thy neighbour. Magisterial Protestantism speaks to both of these in central ways.

Starting with the second commandment: Magisterialism concerns the way we go about loving our neighbor. Over against the papists, the doctrine of magisterialism and the two kingdoms enables us to explain clearly why faith may *not* be coerced. One of Luther's heresies that Pope Leo X ordered him to recant was, "That heretics be burned is against the will of the Spirit."<sup>17</sup> Luther famously responded to Leo's demands:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen.<sup>18</sup>

Freedom of conscience. There's a reason we don't have inquisitions anymore. The religious freedom enjoyed in the Western world today is ultimately, through a long and complex process of development, a product of the reformation's ecclesiology. We believe faith cannot be coerced, because the sword belongs to the civil magistrate and the temporal kingdom. In the same breath magisterialism allows us to explain, over against anabaptists, why *civil justice* in fact *should* be coerced. These are not just heady academic arguments, this is practical stuff. Bishops should not burn heretics, but the magistrate should punish criminals. It sounds obvious to say it that way, but it is our doctrine of the two kingdoms that sets the natural foundation for it.

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16 After Cyril's death some Eastern Orthodox bishops retroactively claimed that he had never advocated for such reforms, that it was all just a big misunderstanding, that his confession of faith was actually a forgery, etc. Reading Cyril's letters gives a much different impression and clearly reveals his commitment to evangelical principles. See *Lettres Anecdotes de Cyrille Lucar*, (Amsterdam: Chez L'Honoré et Chatelain, 1718).

17 *Exsurge Domine*, item 33. Accessed on the website "Papal Encyclicals Online" on 15 August 2016 at <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Leo10/110exdom.htm>.

18 Translated by Heiko Oberman in *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Regarding the first commandment: Evangelicalism clarifies our direct relationship with God. We deny any fictitious mediators like priests on earth or demigod saints who receive our prayers in heaven. There is only one mediator between God and man, Christ Jesus.

Evangelical doctrine defines the church as the people of God, not as an institution or a hierarchical structure like Catholics and Orthodox believe. For Protestants, the church is not limited by the workings of man or his structures. The church moves as the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of men. Wherever men profess Christ, there the dominion of Christ's body reaches. The Kingdom of God is not a little tree growing in a pot, with people standing around arguing over how many trunks or branches it might have. The Kingdom of God is an expanding forest, a river flooding out uncontrollably.

Ultimately, sacerdotalists like Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox do not believe in the church. They believe in bishops. For them Jesus does not stand at the center of the church as the *sine qua non*. My local presbyterian church definitely has Jesus, but by their standards we do not have all that matters most for a church, because we don't have a bishop with apostolic succession. Ecclesologically they place bishops at the center of the church, alongside Jesus. Two or more believers might gather together, but apparently they are only guaranteed to have the Holy Spirit in His fullness if they acknowledge the authority of a bishop.

In a sense, our ecclesiology points to what we value most. How do we define "the church"? Buildings? Written constitutions? Leaders that we call bishops? No. All those things might be good, but none of them define the center or the essence of the church. The definition of



the church is *Christ*. Do you have faith in him? Do you follow him? Then you are part of the church. The church is Christ's body, not the body of a bunch of clergy. Faith in Jesus is of central importance.

In short: Protestant ecclesiology places Christ at the center.

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*Bradley Belschner is a systems analyst at EMSI, a determined generalist, and an enthusiast of Reformation theology. He lives in Moscow, ID with his wife and two children.*

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