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PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY AMIDST CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEOLOGIES | JAKE MEADOR

I don't think I'll ever forget the day that I actually began to understand some of what Reformed theology means on a day-to-day basis. I was a sophomore in college, living near campus in a small one bedroom apartment by myself. One rainy evening I was sitting in my living room reading *Far as the Curse is Found* by Michael Williams. Williams was talking about the value of the physical creation to God, arguing that God isn't simply saving human souls or even human individuals, but will actually, one day, restore all of creation. It was something I hadn't heard before, having grown up in an old school dispensational church where it was simply a matter of common agreement that all of creation would one day be destroyed by God and, therefore, evangelism and Bible study was really all that mattered. "Only three things are eternal," we were told, "God, his Word, and human souls."

Williams' book was dismantling that idea in front of me in ways that both disoriented and delighted me. It disoriented me because it seemed to reject, explicitly or tacitly, so much of the theology I had known as a child. It delighted me because it meant that the delight I took in created things was, in fact, a good thing. Indeed, thanking God for those things and the joy they gave me was suddenly an act of worship rather than the simple indulgence of weakened flesh. As I finished the chapter, I put the book down, put a kettle of tea on the stove, and grabbed Ted Kooser's *Delights and Shadows* off my shelf. I had long been interested in poetry but had struggled to justify that love as a Christian. "Shouldn't you be reading the Bible or some devotional book instead?" - people had asked me. I had asked myself the same question a time or two. But Williams was helping me to understand something about my love for poetry. And so I went out

to the front porch to watch the spring rain. It seemed like the right thing to do.

The question of how the institutional church should relate to civil society is, of course, one of the oldest in Christian theology. In the contemporary West, a few separate schools have emerged. Several see the contemporary liberal order as being unsalvageable and thus in needs of some sort of fairly dramatic repudiation. Others want to work within the order to promote the common good, believing that liberalism is no better or worse than any other way of organizing society.

Let's begin by defining liberalism and then we will briefly sketch out the various schools before developing the magisterial Protestant approach at greater length. A liberal social order sees each individual person as being a free, unattached, and self-defined whole. The true and just society is the society that allows or enables the maximal amount of freedom to each individual person. Consequently, liberal social orders will generally be suspicious of institutions that claim to have some level of authority to bind individuals or curtail individual freedom. Part of this is epistemological in nature—we have lost faith in our ability to know things about the world and *especially* about morality, metaphysics, or the supernatural with any confidence. Thus public claims that are based in those disciplines are viewed with suspicion. This epistemological uncertainty also means that, so far they go, our ethical deliberations cannot really progress beyond the "do no harm" principle because we simply do not trust claims about things like a human individual's proper end, let alone the proper ends of human society.

The strength of liberalism is that it generally does resist most forms of social injustice or tyranny. The fierce individualism of the order causes its members to be sparked to action when something occurs which is seen as violating an individual person's right to freedom and self-definition. Even this strength can be overstated, of course, as one glance at the number of aborted babies since *Roe v Wade* will demonstrate. But it is true that as America has become more deeply liberal, it has also become less tolerant of a number of social evils - racism most particularly. And that is not an empty point.

That being said, the weaknesses of liberalism are many. T. S. Eliot made the point well in *The Idea of a Christian Society* when he said that liberal democracies are defined less by a fixed central point and more by a trajectory. Liberal democracies accumulate a great deal of energy and wealth, but then have no means for telling their members what to do with that wealth. They are centrifugal rather than centripetal. Thus we see the sort of social decline and breakdown lamented across the political spectrum today by thinkers like Bob Putnam and George Packer on the left and Rod Dreher and Yuval Levin on the right. Liberalism does not really have a strong mechanism for shaping social life and so liberal orders tend to develop communal norms through a parasitical relationship with whatever order came before it in a given place.

With that introduction out of the way, we should review six distinct approaches to this question. We'll describe the first five briefly before developing the final version, magisterial Protestantism, in much more detail.

There are three distinct post-liberal strategies which all agree on one basic point: liberalism has failed. The first school, Roman Catholic integralism, would follow the lead of traditional Roman political theology and argue that the just society is a society ordered toward its proper spiritual ends and thus is a society existing beneath the authority of the Roman church, which is the instrument by which people can realize their proper spiritual end.

The second school, Radical Anabaptism, descends from the 16th century Radical Reformation and embraces a strict biblicism, a simple lifestyle, some form of Christian non-violence, and often some kind of shared living arrangement which sometimes goes so far as renouncing all forms of private property. For radical Anabaptists, to borrow from their preeminent theologian Stanley Hauerwas, "the church does not *have* a politics, it is a politics." The church is the true and complete society and so we commit our lives fully to the building up of *that* society. We are only involved in society outside of the church to the extent that necessity requires us to be.

The third post-liberal school is post-liberal retreatism. This category is something of a catch-all for Protestant Christians who basically share the Radical Anabaptist critique of civil society and perhaps even aspects of Radical Anabaptist ecclesiology, but do not embrace

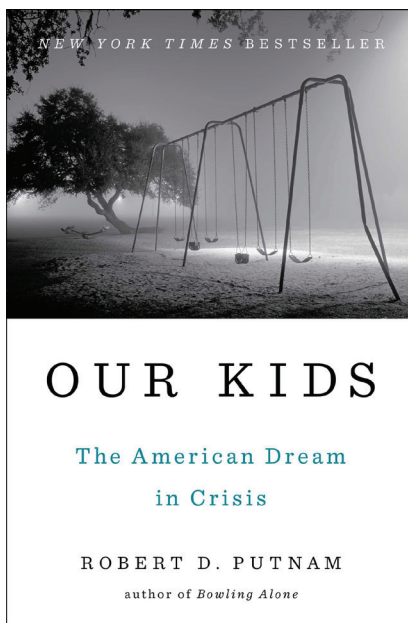
other aspects of their theology, such as their biblicism, non-violence, or denunciation of private property. For the post-liberal retreatists, the church might not be a complete society unto itself, but it is the safe society we have today and it is the refuge out of which the new post-liberal order will emerge. Thus we must commit ourselves to its life and well-being and mostly scale back our ambitions for society outside the church. If we must participate in that society, then we are best off to do so in purely defensive ways that will carve out as much freedom for Christians as possible so that we can better ride out the storm.

In addition to these three systems, there are two systems which hope to retain aspects of liberalism. These two groups are the Liberal Protestants and Liberal Revanchists. These two groups are similar in many ways. They both affirm liberalism as a social order, valuing

the freedom it affords from previous oppressive regimes. Where they drift apart is, for the most part, generational. The older members of this group tend toward revanchism, which is to say they think that the West has lost its way in recent years, but that we can and should take back the ground we lost and embrace a civil society that basically affirms the core tenets of liberalism, perhaps with a few slight hand-brakes included to ward off the most pernicious forms of liberal self-expression. The liberal Protestants are younger and probably are more comfortable with the current order as is, provided said order does not become much more hostile to religious faith than it already is. or liberal Protestants (which is not to be confused with theological liberalism), the current order is mostly a good and healthy thing which protects individual rights by weakening the social institutions that can cruelly and unjustly abuse individual people. The responsibility for Christians, then, is to participate in the existing institutions of civil society on all levels, working for the good of all people by strengthening the institutions that shape our social life. (I have written in more detail on each of these approaches at Mere Orthodoxy, which you can read more about here: <https://mereorthodoxy.com/benedict-option-political-theology/>)

The final school, which we will now spend the remainder of this essay discussing, is the Magisterial Protestant. For the Magisterial Protestants, none of these schools get the answer quite right, although the Catholic Integralists come the closest. Magisterial Protestant political theology and ecclesiology begins with a simple idea: there are two separate governments or realms by which Christ mediates his rule over his people and over creation. Significantly, however, these realms are not "church" and "state" or the "public" and "private" spheres. The answer is more complicated than that and does not neatly map onto contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life.

The two kingdoms of the Magisterial Protestant school are the temporal or visible kingdom and the spiritual kingdom. If we are to understand how Magisterial Protestants relate church to society,



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we must understand this distinction rightly. In order to do that, we need to trace the distinction back to one of the core ideas of the Reformation: *sola fide*. When Luther said that man was justified by faith alone, his opponents were quick to accuse him of essentially destroying moral order. If our works have *nothing* to do with our salvation, why should we do good? Luther responded with his famous claim in “On the Liberty of the Christian” that, “[a] Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.” What is often missed by readers is how this teaching relates to social order. For Luther the two halves of that statement lay quite neatly atop the two realms he articulated elsewhere. In the spiritual realm, man stands before the face of God and, by faith, is justified. “Christ reigns mysteriously and invisibly over the kingdom of conscience, and no human authority may dare to interpose itself as the mediator of this rule.”¹ The temporal kingdom, in contrast, is the realm in which the Christian is a servant to all as a member of the Christian commonwealth and as a person called to love his neighbor as Christ has loved him. This realm covers all human institutions, including individual local Christian congregations and denominational institutions.

The trouble many of us have in understanding this idea is that there is a natural inclination here to ask, “So if membership in the church has nothing to do with our justification, then what is the church for?” When we try to answer that question, there is a desire to sneak some sort of Romanism in through the back door. So you might hear congregationalists talking about the institutional church as an embassy for the Kingdom to come or Anabaptist radicals talking about the church *being a polis*. But these are simply muted versions of the same Roman error which elevates the institutional church to a place it was never intended to fill—as the center of the Christian life and a pivotal agent in the salvation of souls. But this cannot be the case—Christ is

the center. The institutional church is one means, amongst many others, for helping to further his work in creation. It is a unique means in that, as the institution entrusted to preach the Gospel, it is, one might say, *closer* to the invisible kingdom in some sense, but it is still part of the visible kingdom.



There are three ideas which follow from this basic insight into the true nature of the institutional church.

First, the institutional church once again becomes apostolic in the original sense of the term—being “sent out.” The church does not simply gather Christians into its bosom and shelter them from the storm nor does it somehow elevate those who belong to it toward a higher order of existence. The church largely exists to send people out into the world. Here, reflection on the traditional three marks of the church as defined by the Reformed tradition can be of help here. The institutional church is defined by three traits: the preaching of the Gospel, the administration of the sacraments,

and the practice of church discipline. Rightly understood, all three of these marks serve the purpose of equipping the saints to be sent out into the world to witness to the love and grace of God as they go about their daily lives. The thought of 16th century reformer Martin Bucer is especially instructive on this point. Bucer saw an intimate relationship between Christian love and Christian discipline. (I have written about Bucer on this point in particular in *Beyond Calvin*.) We might even paraphrase John Piper’s famous line, “Missions exist because worship does not,” and say that, for Bucer, discipline exists because love does not. The purpose of Christian discipline is to help shape us in such a way that we are capable of living in Christian love with our neighbors both inside and outside of Christ’s covenant community. Church discipline, thus becomes simply an institutionalized form of Christian discipline to be used in emergency situations, as it were. Moreover, our reflection on the sacraments and particularly the Eucharist might be enriched by a closer attentiveness to the missional nature of the meal. The Reformed tradition generally has held that the Supper is not simply a memorial, but that there is some real

1. W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Two Kingdoms: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Davenant Guides (Moscow, ID: The Davenant Press, 2017), 15.

sense in which it unites us to Christ. Because he is spiritually present in the Supper, we are united to him. Indeed, you may even reverse the normal way we tend to think of movement happening in the Supper. Rather than Christ coming down to us, we are caught up with him in a foreshadowing of the world to come where we partake with him of the Supper of the Lamb. Having feasted with him, we are then sent out, strengthened, at the close of public worship in order to witness to the glory of God amongst our neighbors.

Second, the other institutions of the temporal realm take on new significance. There is not some sort of unique quality that the institutional church possesses which elevates it above other human institutions. It has a role to play in the Christian commonwealth, but so too do other institutions. This means that our work matters, not simply because it provides an income to support us and our families, but because it is a means by which we fulfill the divine command to fill and subdue creation. Likewise, vocation matters. The unique callings we are given carry enormous significance and should not be deemed as being less valuable simply because they are not formal, full-time ministry work. These realms become practical ways of showing love to neighbor and, by extension, love to God. In other words, there is no sacred/secular split in the way this term is often used.

Third, we recover the idea of the Christian *commonwealth* rather than a sort of hierarchically structured society existing under the church or a secular society in which freedom of religion is respected, thereby leaving “a place” for the church (but little more than that). This is a central idea in the history of Reformed thought. Indeed, the legacy of this idea can be found in the official names of several American states, such as the Commonwealth of Virginia. Briefly stated, the idea is that human beings are inextricably social and so human societies must be understood as a shared enterprise amongst all the members of a community. Moreover, because all the institutions that shape society are part of the visible rather than the spiritual kingdom, society should not be understood as a hierarchical structure in which the church sits atop the rest of the social institutions. Rather, social power is diffused across a variety of different institutions and groups. There are roles within a society properly given to the institutional church, but also roles properly ascribed to the family, to schools, to the market, and to the magistrate. All these different social bodies together comprise the Christian commonwealth.



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This idea of a Christian commonwealth, which clearly is not the same thing as an ecclesiocracy (as you might have in Roman Catholic states or even in Puritan New England), is a difficult thing to convey since the entire notion of a Christian commonwealth has been forgotten not only in the contemporary American republic generally, but even within much evangelical reflection on social order. This is not surprising—the notion of a Christian commonwealth is by definition a pervasive criticism of the way American social order is often defined and discussed. The American liberal order rests largely on the assumption that human beings are essentially private, self-enclosed individuals. At his most basic level, man is solitary. Thus the system of government exists to facilitate and enable that individual freedom as we have already said. But it also rests on an assumption that man is not

an intrinsically political creature given to societies and communities he has not chosen. This, of course, is nonsensical. We are all born into a multitude of communities which we have not chosen but which will, nevertheless, do a great deal to shape and define who we are as individual people. A political system which fails to reckon with this fact will prove to be brittle and unsustainable, as we are seeing quite clearly in the contemporary United States. Understanding society not as a group of individuals knit together by a tacit social contract, but instead as people belonging to a shared commonwealth, helps us to understand concepts like

solidarity more clearly - as well as why specific Christian teachings work in the way that they do. For example, Christian sexual ethics make far more sense if man is a rooted member of a commonwealth than they do if he is a detached and autonomous individual.

The relevance of this point in particular to contemporary American political disputes should be abundantly clear to anyone who pays a passing attention to the circus-like atmosphere that prevails in our nation's politics. As the recent election of Donald Trump made plain, there is a large portion of our nation's electorate which, whatever else you might say about them, desperately longs for someone in power to stand with them. The typical Trump voter supported President Trump not least because he believed, almost certainly falsely, that Trump would represent him and his interests in Washington. This is why so many of the people who flocked to Washington for Trump's inauguration spoke of how they'd never been to Washington before. Trump was tapping into something real, a felt longing amongst a certain class of Americans to be *seen*. Of course, on the other side of

the spectrum there is a similar sort of fear we might call solidarity anxiety: Consider the underlying fear that explains movements like Black Lives Matter. The fear for African Americans is that they will do everything America tells them to do and it won't matter. They will *still* not belong, still will not be treated as a normal member of the American republic. The same concern drives a great deal of the activism from pro-LGBT activists. One friend of mine framed the debate about bathrooms and transgenderism as a debate about a person's right to exist in public. You can (and should) disagree with that assessment of the debate, but the framing is suggestive. Once again, the longing is to be seen and recognized as one actually is. The irony, of course, is that in matters of sexual ethics in particular, we demand both the freedom to define ourselves however we wish *and* that society recognize whatever identity we land on - regardless of the costs to society entailed in such an act. It is incoherent, but in a way that tells us something about the base difficulty with liberalism. There is, in our deeply individualistic society, an undeniable longing for solidarity, for communal membership and recognition - for roots. A Christian political theology will recognize this longing and identify it as a function of living in a state that functionally denies those needs.

The magisterial Protestant vision of a Christian commonwealth is particularly equipped to do this work for the simple reason that belonging and social capital are diffused more broadly than they are in other social orders precisely *because* single earthly institutions are not privileged over others in such a way that the laity are second-class citizens or that one loses all rights as a citizen if one is under church discipline. The institutional church does not control social capital, nor does a small Christian community become a social body unto itself, removed from broader civil society. The magisterial Protestant approach sees a missional church integrated into the basic structure of a society, equipping people to love and serve their neighbors. This focus on outreach and the common good, as well as the proper placement of the institutional church relative to civil society, should all help to militate against totalitarian tendencies that could emerge in a movement.

Here we might return to that experience I had during a spring storm while reading *Far as the Curse is Found*. The reason I smiled, made some tea, and then sat on the porch to read some poetry is simple: As I began to understand what the Reformed tradition teaches, I realized that my work as a student was valuable in itself. The university where I was studying was not simply a convenient tool for rounding up all the godless youths into a single place to facilitate easier evangelistic outreach, as many campus ministries seem to believe on a functional level. Studying literature and history (I was an English and History major) were worthwhile pursuits in themselves. In studying these subjects, I was learning about wisdom and virtue and politics and beauty and a host of other things which make life worth living and help communities live well together. This work was good because it equipped me to be a better neighbor, citizen, and churchmen and

so it was work that God smiled upon. These interests of mine, then, were not simply personal proclivities that might be made into a career, as many of my peers in these programs believed, but were actually intimately related to the work God had given me to do in the place where he had put me. What better way to celebrate such a realization then by watching a spring storm and thanking God for the rain while reading a magical description of the storm like this? "I sat in the cellar / from six to eight while fat spring clouds / went somersaulting, rumbling east. Then it poured, / a storm that walked on legs of lightning, / dragging its shaggy belly over the fields." That image, playing out before my eyes as I watched the storms roll in helped me see God's creation more clearly and to delight in the goodness of God all the more.

Critics of the magisterial tradition might charge that it so dramatically curtails the power of the institutional church that the church loses its significance as a social body. But the reality is quite the opposite:

It elevates the life of the commonwealth such that *every* honorable vocation is now glorious and worthy of pursuit. It makes accessible to all people the contentment and sense of eternal purpose in one's work that the western church has far too often limited to only ministers and missionaries. Magisterial Protestant ecclesiology does not diminish the church; it exalts the commonwealth.

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Therefore, in closing, we return to Luther: A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one. The first step in building a Christian commonwealth is a simple one: We look for opportunities to serve the places in which we live by promoting common life and, when questioned as to *why* we serve in these ways, "giving an account of the hope that is within us." Such a payoff may perhaps seem too modest: "So you're telling me that the first step toward social transformation is volunteering with a refugee resettlement group, starting a business to provide employment for local people, or leading a Bible study at the homeless shelter? That seems... small?" Answer: It is small. But we serve a king whose kingdom, by his own admission, is upside down, who tells us that the first shall be last and the last first. The first step to cultivating a Christian commonwealth is becoming a more thoroughly Christian citizen. And the first step toward *that* is serving faithfully in the "small" matters of life.

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PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY AS GOOD THEORY

ANDREW FULFORD

INTRODUCTION

What makes a good theory? Though it's certain that philosophers could debate this endlessly (and what can't they?), for our purposes we can limit the criteria to three. First, it fits with the clearly evident facts of the matter. Second, it resolves puzzlement over unclear issues, and adds none through incoherence. Third, it does not offer multiple explanations for data where one is sufficient.

Protestant ecclesiology isn't merely an interesting historical artifact; it's a good theory. In fact, this essay will argue that it's the best theory we have. Resting on the cardinal insight of justification by faith alone, magisterial Protestant soteriology is transparent to the clear biblical and real-world evidence about the *ecclesia*, and elegantly dissolves the aporias about it. In order to make this case, this essay will first present the scriptural data, and then show how it makes sense of some common, real, and difficult pastoral cases.

THEORY

Faith Justifies Us

At the opening of Romans 5, Paul concludes from his argument thus far: "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."¹ Comparing this text with 3:25-26 and 4:16-18, Luther's insight into the concept of justification is undeniable: it is a judicial declaration contrary to condemnation. But the inquisitive mind naturally wants to know why the instrument of faith is sufficient to justify us. Thankfully, Paul illuminates the reader on that question just before this verse. As NT Wright points out in his commentary on Romans,² in 4:17-21, the apostle describes the attitude of the patriarch in striking contrast with his image of the human soul in Romans 1:20-21. There, human beings knew God but did not glorify him, and as a result their minds were darkened and their hearts hardened. Abraham, however, recognized God's omnipotence and trustworthiness, and believed the Lord's promise. In the former case, human beings were condemned, and in the latter, one man was justified. According to the apostle, the beginning of the world's problems arrived when human beings stopped thinking of God as the evidence directed them to, and in God's plan to make all things new, salvation begins with the human mind and heart turning back to God in self-forgetful trust based on knowledge of him. The site of the fun-

damental problem in the universe is also the place where redemption is first applied.

The Object of Faith

But trust in what, exactly? In Hebrews 11:6 we learn that to please God one must believe he exists and rewards those who seek him (v. 6). Moving beyond Hebrews, we can see that in Adam's day the content of saving faith was Genesis 3:15, and in Abraham's it was Genesis 12:5. During Jesus' ministry it was "the kingdom of God is at hand" (in him) (Mark 2:15). After his ascension, the content of saving faith, sometimes called "the Gospel," could vary in size from the books whose titles possess that term, to the idea that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9), or Christ and him crucified (1 Cor 2:2), or a combination of the two (1 Cor 15:3-4), or simply Christ (Col 1:27, cf. 2:3-4).

SAVING FAITH IS SUCH BECAUSE IT IS THE TURNING OF THE WILL BACK TOWARDS GOD IN LOVE AND TRUST.

At this point it is useful to keep Hebrews 11:6's basic point in mind as we consider some other texts. Isaiah 66:2 and Psalm 51:17 similarly state that what God ultimately commends is a humble and contrite heart towards God. And on the contrary side, James 2:19 tells us: "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." Demons, lacking sav-

ing belief, do not lack orthodox content. In the traditional definition of the parts of faith, consisting of the content believed, the assent to it, and personal trust, the demons lack only the last part, and it makes the difference between salvation and condemnation. What they crucially lack is not an intellect in contact with reality, but a rightly ordered will. As Richard Muller says about John Calvin's view of the matter: "It is the intellect that knows and recognizes its knowledge to be true and assents to that truth; only when the heart—that is, the will and its affections—grasps that truth in trust can the truth be appropriated savingly by the individual."³

We can perhaps now see the hinge point that holds all these cases in common. First, all saving faith is aimed toward God as he promises salvation to those who believe. That is, simply believing that God condemns us in our sinfulness is not sufficient for saving faith. At the same time, that God's special revelation consistently includes a promise of grace is evident from Genesis 3:15 to John 3:16. And second, while the believing saints have differing propositional content in their saving faith, it nevertheless has in common a will that

1. All quotes from the Bible are from the New American Standard Bible.

2. N. T. Wright, *Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, vol. 10, The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 500.

3. Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 170.

humbly trusts in God and his promises as good for us; the demons, on the other hand, have accurate propositional content, but a will that opposes rather than trusts him. The demonic beings are of course not alone; this is precisely the attitude of heart that we have already seen in Romans 1, where humans suppressed their accurate knowledge of God and in turn were spiritually lost. And in sum, saving faith is such because it is the turning of the will back towards God in love and trust. This direction of will can entail different belief content depending on what God has revealed and promised to a person, but whatever he has shown, a person with this kind of volition will believe it, because they trust the Revealer. Herman Bavinck sums up the larger point we've been making so far:

In studying the relation between faith and theology, we need to frame the question properly. It should not be: what is the minimum of truths a person must know and hold as true to be saved? ... Faith on the side of the Reformation ... is special (*fides specialis*) with a particular central object: the grace of God in Christ. Here an arithmetic addition of articles, the knowledge of which and the assent to which is necessary for salvation, was no longer an option. Faith is a personal relation to Christ; it is organic and has put aside quantitative addition. ... On the side of the Reformation, faith is trust in the grace of God and hence no longer calculable.⁴

Faith Unites Us to Jesus

As many in recent years have noted, for Calvin at least, justification by faith is of a piece with union with Christ. In this regard, Calvin is a faithful interpreter of scripture. While earlier in the letter Paul speaks of believers receiving no condemnation, in Rom 8:1 he awards that blessing to those “in Christ Jesus”. In Ephesians 2:5-9 the apostle explains that God saved believers through faith, making them alive in Christ. In Eph. 3 he further writes:

By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power (Eph. 3:4-7).

Through the gospel, i.e., faith in it, Gentiles are made fellow heirs, fellow members of the body (cf. Rom 12:4; 1 Cor 1:2, 6:15), fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. In short, believers are in

4. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 614.

Christ by their faith, just as much as they are justified by it. And insofar as they are in Christ, as they are His body, then they are *ipso facto* members of the church, for the apostle also regards the body of Christ and the church as coterminous (Eph 1:22-23, emphasis add): “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to *the church, which is His body*, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

Invisible

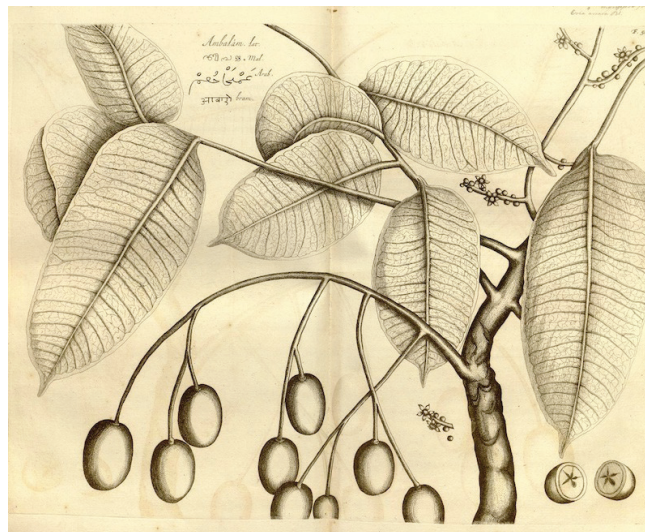
As a disposition of intellect and will, faith is intrinsically as invisible as those faculties. This point is confirmed by the apostle, if biblical proof were needed for it (1 Cor 2:11a): “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” It is for this reason that the Protestant tradition has affirmed the concept of the invisible church. Not, to be clear, because believers as human beings are invisible, but because membership in the church is accomplished by faith, which is invisible *per se*, though as we will see, its effects are not. And because faith itself is a gift of God (Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29), Protestants have affirmed that only God ultimately controls who is a part of the invisible church, though humans can perform sacraments and other outwardly good actions.

Faith Working Through Love

The idea that faith generates effects is mentioned in numerous places. Faith works through love (Gal 5:6), it issues love (1 Tim 1:5), it has works (2 Thess 1:11), it is completed by works (James 2:22), and anything that does not issue from it is sin (Rom 14:23). Similar things are said

of repentance. As the negative turning away that correlates with the positive turning toward faith in God (Mark 1:15; Acts 26:20), it is an attitude of the heart which issues in action: John the Baptist calls for fruit (Luke 3:8), and Paul for deeds (Acts 26:20), in keeping with repentance. And given that faith is a disposition held by people, it's not surprising to also find texts that link fruit to the nature of people. John the Baptist calls for his hearers to be trees that bring forth good fruit (equivalent with the fruit of repentance, Luke 3:9), and Jesus continues the charge (cf. Matthew 3, 7, 12; John 15). As a negative corollary, various texts indicate that people who lack these works lack the faith that produces them. James 2 arguably contains the clearest of them (14, 17): “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ...So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

At this point we run into another tension. The texts so far paint a simple picture: faith produces good works, and if they are absent, so is the faith. Yet the NT is also realistic about the ongoing presence of sin in the lives of believers. For example, after describing the experience of “the body of death” in Rom 7:17-24, Paul affirms in 8:10 that believ-



ers still possess it. And In 1 John 1:8-2:2 we see clear indications that believers can at least possibly sin, and that if they say they have no sin, that they are lying. Innumerable exhortations to believers to flee from sin throughout scripture confirm this doctrine: the writers anticipate the possibility of believers sinning, and exhort them not to do so.

But the tension is not irresolvable. We have already encountered a hint towards its dissolution, in the form of the metaphor of faith as a tree that produces fruit. Natural living substances by definition have characteristic ways of being and action that correspond to their natures, yet observation shows us that these ways of being can be interrupted and damaged, such that defective effects are produced instead of good ones. In a sermon aimed at comforting those lacking assurance of salvation, Richard Hooker applies this metaphysical insight to one fruit of the Spirit, joy:

Hence an error groweth, when men in heaviness of spirit suppose they lack faith, because they find not the sugared joy and delight which indeed doth accompanie faith, but so as a separable accident, as a thing that may be removed from it...⁵

A tree may still be a good tree even if it sometimes produces defective fruit, and faith will generate joy, and good works, though it may sometimes be mixed with sadness and sin.

Yet, in coming to know the natural world, we proceed by way of observing a thing's operations to knowing what kind of thing it is. That is, the kind of thing that characteristically is and acts in such a way. Characteristic action can allow for exceptions, but when something we might have originally thought to be exceptional turns out to be the rule, we have an indication that we are observing a different thing, with a different nature, than we thought at first. Occasions of sin, even occasions of habitual sin eventually ended with repentance, are different than regular pattern of sin without any sign of good fruit in keeping with repentance. They are different precisely in how they point to a different nature, a different internal state, a different kind of faith: one with the humble will that makes it saving faith, and the other without.

This is compatible with a great deal of complexity in the life of the believer. Because of indwelling sin, because of the partial darkness of intellect that results from it, and because grace begins with saving faith and not a complete renovation of all habits, there are many causes of sin inside the true believer. God may and does in some times and places immediately remove certain habits from believers; but in other cases he does not, and requires a more cooperative process of rooting out sinful dispositions. In that category, sins of ignorance may persist for a while; yet when God illumines the believer to recognize them, the changed volition will oppose it. This does not mean it will do so with absolute constancy or that this will result in an immediate elimination of the disposition; that will depend on the force of

5. Richard Hooker, *A learned and comfortable sermon of the certaintie and perpetuities of faith in the elect especially of the prophet Habakkuks faith*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1612), 8.

will, mental health, wisdom in strategy, and ultimately the sanctifying grace of God. But it will at least resolve not to simply give up the fight to want to obey.

And so we find the answer to our question. When a soul can say truthfully that it “joyfully concur[s] with the law of God in the inner man” (Rom 7:21), even if it sins (cf. Rom 8:10), if at minimum it can say it has not willed to give up the fight against sin, it possesses a saving faith; if on the other hand it is set on the flesh, hostile toward and unable to submit to God’s law (Rom 8:7), then even if it affirms orthodox ideas or produces outwardly good works, it does not possess saving faith.

Visible

If the invisibility of the disposition of faith entails the “invisible church”, the outward operations that properly follow from it entail the reality of the “visible church.” As before, the idea here is not that there are non-overlapping churches; the point is instead that only God can see with certainty who has saving faith, while outwardly some can falsely appear to possess it, and others can at times appear not to have it when they actually do. Nevertheless, as we will see, scripture teaches that certain actions will reliably follow from saving faith, and these serve as marks of the church. Given that faith is a gift of God only, and that it alone makes one a member of Christ’s body, the church, none of these marks are constitutive of the church as such. Rather, they are descriptive of those properties that naturally (and so, for the most part) follow from faith.

Marks of the Church

Word: Profession of Faith

Protestants have traditionally enumerated two or three “marks” of the church (distinct from the “notes” mentioned above). The first of these marks is the true “word,” which referred to the true doctrine that a church was teaching. We will return to the teaching of the word below; for now, we will dwell on the profession of it. As noted above, Romans 10:10 makes profession of faith an instrument of salvation, and in Matt 12:36-37, Jesus warns that people will be condemned or justified based on the words they speak. This raises yet another tension to consider: in the language of Romans, if believing in the heart makes one justified, how can confessing with the mouth make one saved? Isn’t one already saved at that point? One could raise a similar question about the petition of the Lord’s prayer (Matt 6:12) that instructs followers of Jesus to regularly ask God for forgiveness.

Here it’s useful to recall that the NT speaks of faith saving people in an ongoing way. For example, 1 Peter 1:5 says that Christians “by God’s power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time,” and Gal 2:20 along with Hebrews 11 speak of them living by faith in an ongoing way. Faith does not merely save at the outset, but all along the Christian life serves to keep the

pilgrim church on the path to final salvation, and in that sense saves them progressively through life. Understanding this function of faith, we can then see how scripture could teach that certain speech acts save those who make them: because, as is clear in a profession of faith, such acts express saving faith, God commends them accordingly. He grants continuing salvation to continuing faith, considered as enduring disposition and considered in discrete moments. And thus scripture speaks of moments of profession as resulting in salvation.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

The second Protestant mark of the church is the true sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Scripture itself does not call these ritual actions "sacraments", but longstanding tradition has labelled them as such. In Matt 28:19 and Acts 2:38 we see Baptism commanded (indirectly and directly) for followers of Jesus, and in 1 Cor 11:23-25 we see the same for the Supper. Given that humble faith naturally produces obedience to God, those who have faith will in general also seek to be baptized and participate in the Supper, and thus Baptism will be a mark that picks out Christians from among the human race. Insofar as 1 Peter 3:21 calls Baptism and pledge or appeal, and 1 Cor 11:23-25 describes the action as a proclamation, one can also see them more directly as communicating faith on the part of the participants.



Discipline

Anabaptists and some Reformed thinkers added a third mark of the church, variously described as "holiness" or "discipline" or "love", based on texts such as Hebrews 12:14 or John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." Lutherans and other Reformed thinkers have tended not to include this as a mark, largely because of the logic of *sola fide*.⁶ Nevertheless we need not reject the third mark, if we continue with our understanding of the marks of the church as descriptive and not constitutive of the church, following always or for the most part from saving faith, but not being coordinate independent instruments of salvation, nor necessarily present in every moment of a saved soul's life. Since faith naturally works through love (Gal 5:6; 2 Thess 1:11), good works and love will be a regular sign of saving faith, and membership in the church, in the life of believers.

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6. See Jordan Ballor and W. Bradford Littlejohn, "European Calvinism: Church Discipline," *European History Online (EGO)*, March 25, 2013, accessed May 25, 2017, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/ballorj-littlejohnw-2013-en>. for further discussion on the varieties of conceptions of church discipline in the Reformed tradition.

The whole life of the corporate church flows from what we have seen thus far, and can be viewed as an aspect of the third mark (though not in abstraction from the other two). The common union with Christ by faith creates one body out of all believers, as we have already seen. Paul teaches that the body of Christ has a common good (1 Cor 12:7). As people who love rightly and do good, then, Christians will seek to uphold the common good intertwined with their personal good.

There are various ways that this is done in practice. In concrete reality, the church is numerous and spread across the globe, making regular meetings of the entire body practically impossible. Nevertheless, while such meetings may be impossible, practical demonstrations of love are not. Thus we see, for example, Paul seeking in various trips and letters to take up funds from Gentile churches to support Jewish churches experiencing famine (e.g., Rom 15:22-33).

Yet, where meetings are possible, many reasons require more from Christians in a geographic location than those spread across different ones. A couple of them are the following: First, performing Baptism and the Lord's Supper require more than an individual participant. Second, the reality of indwelling sin, of human forgetfulness, and of unsaved members of the visible church makes the need for regular meetings crucial, as scripture

confirms (Heb 10:25). This is because individual Christians need to be reminded, encouraged, exhorted, and warned as their personal state of soul requires.⁷ In some cases, in fact, such individuals need to be told that, in the judgment of the body, their actions show they are no longer members of it (e.g. 1 Cor 5). This is also true when unsaved members reveal their lack of faith through a consistent absence of holiness and love in the sense we have defined it. At the same time, reason shows that Christians cannot spend all of their time in these types of meetings. This point implies what was meant traditionally by the first mark of the church, which is that the doctrine taught by a local church must be true (since to properly build up one another, Christians must share God's word with each other).

It is important to see that, from what has been said, the church can exist, at least temporarily, in places without leaders. This point is rooted in *sola fide*. If human beings are justified and united to Christ, and his body, by faith, then it does not depend upon the intermediating work of human leaders for its very existence. Yet, for a number of

7. See Carl Mosser, "Torah Instruction, Discussion, and Prophecy in First-Century Synagogues," in *Christian Origins and Hellenistic Judaism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, vol. 2, *Early Christianity in Its Hellenistic Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2013) for an historical survey of how first century Jews and Christians actually did this: i.e., synagogue services consisted of a short running commentary on a biblical text given by a teacher, followed by an extended time of community discussion, which in Christian circles also included the exercise of charismatic gifts.

reasons, love for the common good of the body in a local context will also lead to creation of church offices. First, it is a commonly accepted observation that a group of individuals can achieve greater profit if the group engages in some degree of division of labour and specialisation. This is true even when some of the labour involved is in instruction and care of souls. Prudence alone would thus highly suggest the creation of church offices, staffed by people who have more experience and skill in these practices necessary for the common and personal good. Second, scripture tells us that Christ regularly gives gifts to his body in the form of people with gifts for the building up of the body (Eph 4:11), and it encourages members of churches to submit to their leaders (e.g., 1 Cor 16:15-16; Heb 13:17).

Implication: Organic and Institutional

The preceding points require an organic/institutional distinction. When the Lord by various means requires his body to periodically meet together, to regularly speak the word, baptize, celebrate the Lord's Supper, to discipline the flock, and to appoint wise leaders, he directs the church to create persisting institutions. At the same time, when scripture requires Christians to scatter to do their temporal work and earn a living (1 Thess 4:11), it requires an organic church, united by faith while separated by space and activity.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

With this outline of a Protestant theory of the church, we can now turn to practical applications of it, to show how it helps us make realistic and accurate judgments in lived experience.

What About Christians Who Disagree?

One issue the Protestant theory is well equipped to discuss is the pluriformity of Christian confessions. The basic point is this: all differences in doctrine can be explained by ignorance of the full scope of scripture's teaching in intellect, or a bad will which persistently rejects known truth. (Traditionally this insight was reflected in the distinction between material and formal heresy.) Sometimes ignorance can be exploited, intentionally or not, by an incorrect tradition or teacher. Nevertheless, the points we have made about indwelling sin in real Christians and false professors in the church enable Protestants to deal realistically with pluriformity. The former point allows us to recognize that even saved Christians can be mistaken due to ignorance, doubt temporarily (Jude 1:22; cf. the case of Thomas), or profess falsely because of some temporary sin. Now, there comes a point at which persistent error in the face of clear evidence to the contrary makes the possibility of false profession more likely than not. This is because the basic content of saving faith is repeated clearly in scripture numerous times, and would be regularly presented by any true church, with the result that continuing rejection of that faith could not plausibly be explained by ignorance. Rather, rejection in such cases will be better explained by a bad will, which as we saw

above makes the difference between saving and dead faith, and which merits church discipline. But the principle of charity should lead us to assume a cause of ignorance before malice, and it's clear from experience than in many cases bad will is not likely. There are too many cases of obviously pious, humble believers who disagree with each other to rule out the possibility of this reality. Further, examination of scripture shows that some matters are not as clear as others. Obscurity of writing and reference, along with the multitude and plurality of texts which speak to various loci of doctrine, make error easily possible without a bad will bent on rejecting a known truth. And while it would be ideal for all Christian doctrine and discipline to be both right and commonly respected by other churches, given sin and its consequences, it is more prudent for the goals of the whole church for local churches to allow some disagreements, rather than wasting time endlessly debating matters unlikely to be resolved in the near future. Paul's warning in various cases against debating supports this

contention (e.g., Rom 14:1; 1 Tim 6:4; Titus 3:9-10). In other words, Protestant ecclesiology can not only explain the existence of denominational differences, but it can justify allowing at least some them to exist in the present.

What About Christians in Sin, and Apostasy?

The New Testament speaks on many occasions of how believers should handle other Christians engaged in some kind of sin. A comprehensive survey is impossible, but we can note a few cases. Historically the earliest case is obviously Jesus' detailed instructions for how to deal

with offending brothers in Matthew 18:15-18, with repeated calls to repentance made by increasing numbers of church members, concluding with a call to shun the recalcitrant. Another often discussed case is 1 Cor 5. But we should note others, like Titus 3:10-11, James 5:19-20, and Jude 1:22-23.

A common feature of these texts is the adequacy or proportionality of the response to the behaviour evidenced. The central issue once again seems to be the presence of a bad will. Before shunning comes a warning, expressing a hope that the sin is a result of temporary forgetfulness or weakness. With further persistence in sin comes more severe responses, culminating in having "nothing to do with" the person. Given the corporate logic made clear in the more detailed texts like Matt 18 and 1 Cor 5,⁸ it seems most likely that the texts commending eventual shunning are primarily intended for application by the local body of believers as a whole, no doubt ultimately in refusal of the Lord's Supper, rather than private individuals *per se*.⁹ The case of restoration mentioned in 2 Cor shows that eventual repentance was not considered impossible, other texts like 2 Thess 3:14-15 remind

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8. See V. George Shillington, "Atonement Texture in 1 Corinthians 5.5," *JSNT* 71 (1998): 29-50, who convincingly demonstrates a concern for the purity of the corporate body is foregrounded in that text, contrary to some readings which see it as aimed at the restoration of the offender primarily.

9. Thanks to Patrick Stefan in personal correspondence for this insight.

THE POINTS WE HAVE MADE ABOUT INDWELLING SIN IN REAL CHRISTIANS AND FALSE PROFESSORS IN THE CHURCH ENABLE PROTESTANTS TO DEAL REALISTICALLY WITH PLURIFORMITY

those doing the shunning: “Do not regard [the offender] as an enemy, but warn him as a brother”, and the whole tenor of Christianity is about calling sinners to repentance; it therefore seems unlikely that an absolute refusal of communication is what is in view here.

Nevertheless, it is evident from scripture and from experience that sometimes members of the church abandon their faith. Even among magisterial Protestants, there has been no consensus on the question of whether salvation can be lost.¹⁰ But from what we have demonstrated above, there is certainly no indication in scripture that salvation can be lost while saving faith is still present, and this is sufficient to maintain the truth of the Protestant theory.

What About Those Who Have Never Heard?

When one accepts a real distinction between the visible and invisible church, the possibility becomes real of saved people existing at a given moment outside the recognition of any or all visible local churches. From a different angle, the question about “those who have never heard” has arisen from early days in church history, and persists to the present. The theory presented above provides a careful way into the resolution of this problem.

We have seen that saving faith has in common a humble will towards God’s revelation, but that the content of the faith can differ depending on what revelation has been given to a person at a particular time and place. This opens up the possibility of individuals having saving Noahide faith at the same time as Abraham, without having heard of the patriarch. In this type of person, they would have “heard” what Noah did, but not what Abraham did, and yet would still be saved.

As history moves on, the question persists: could such people still exist at “this” moment? We know from cases like Josiah’s restoration of the law and Jesus’ criticism of Pharisaic oral tradition that the beliefs of a society can be corrupted through time, and that this is in fact a good reason to have written scriptures. Yet oral tradition is also not inherently incapable of passing on true information, so this tendency entails no absolute consequences. Nevertheless, by the time of the Psalms (e.g., 96:5), and certainly by Paul’s time (Rom 3:9-18, Eph 2:12), it is clear that scripture regards the generality of the human race as lost. The apostle’s reasoning for the necessity of missionaries also assumes this point (Rom 10:13-14):

for “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.”
How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed?
How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And
how will they hear without a preacher?

At the same time, the occasional example of repentant or believing Gentiles in the later OT narrative (e.g., Namaan the Syrian) suggest that the general Psalmic and Pauline judgment probably assumed the possibility of rare exceptions. But exceptions they must be, given the generalisations. However many rare cases like these that might exist in the Gentile world outside of the reach of the gospel, there are not enough to undermine the necessity Paul proclaims for sending missionaries.

10. E.g., the Lutherans and Wesleyans vs. most of the Reformed.

Bringing the question up to the present day, there are further complicating factors. Christianity is now the largest religion in the world numerically, and has been present in various forms across through globe throughout the centuries. The days are gone when the visible church was a small sect in the Roman empire. On the other hand, the Reformation reminds us that not every form of Christianity that has spread preserves saving faith intact, or at least not clearly, and the de-christianization that has happened to various peoples at various points in history shows us that the knowledge of the gospel can be forgotten, making once reached areas into new mission fields. The result is that the call to proclaim the gospel is as needed as ever, but that we cannot rule out the possibility of a rare individual member of the invisible church in the midst of largely unbelieving populations.

What About Church Authority and Membership?

In our discussion of discipline we noted that justification by faith makes sacerdotalism impossible: if one is saved by faith as soon as there is faith, there is no room to make salvation contingent upon subsequent actions or rituals, even including Baptism and the Lord’s Supper administered by a priest or pastor. And if salvation includes membership in the invisible church, then neither can membership in the church be prevented or caused by such subsequent actions. Further, if judgments by church members can be mistaken, as is obviously the case, then those judgments cannot have intrinsic power to exclude people from the invisible church and salvation.

Recently, some evangelicals associated with 9Marks have attempted to defend an institutionalist Protestant ecclesiology. Joseph Minich has explored this project in greater depth through reviewing Jonathan Leeman’s *Political Church*,¹¹ but we can make a few summary points here. First, in light of the above restrictions on the power of visible church members (whether individual or in groups, as elders or as not), church authority must be understood as fallible and declarative of God’s judgment, rather than infallible and/or intrinsically creative of them. Second, at the same time, as human institutions, local churches have the same kind of human powers as all human institutions do, in subordination to natural and divine positive law. This includes the power to set rules about the common life of the members, such as when and where they will meet, who will lead the community, what kind of activities will happen in their meetings and outside them, and who will be included and excluded from them. Therefore, third, no Christian, individually or in community, has a right to knowingly exclude someone contrary to God’s command that they be included. However, as long as they do not perceive a contradiction between their own judgment and God’s, they are permitted and required to make fallible judgments of this nature. The well being of the church requires it, and fallibility alone is not a sufficient reason to forego making necessary judgments. Fourth, such judgments will take into account not just what Scripture says, but also the appropriate decisions and realities of the community, such as who has been given the office of elder, whether disciplined individuals have received previous warnings, and other relevant facts.

11. See Joseph Minich, “Reviewing Jonathan Leeman’s “Political Church” Pt 1,” Mere Orthodoxy, June 13, 2016, accessed May 25, 2017, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/reviewing-jonathan-leemans-political-church-pt-1/> and “Reviewing Jonathan Leeman’s “Political Church” Pt. 2,” Mere Orthodoxy, June 15, 2016, accessed May 25, 2017, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/reviewing-jonathan-leemans-political-church-pt-2/>.

Another practical question related with 9Marks authors is whether members must make a covenant of membership with their local church. Once again a detailed discussion is impossible, but a few notes can be made. First, it is important to be clear about the meaning of the term “covenant”, in light of the overuse of the term. More relevantly, as Gordon Hugenberger has noted, covenants as such include an oath, which itself is implicitly self-maledictory.¹² This means that in the formation of a covenant, a person at least implicitly asks for divine punishment to be imposed in the case that they break their promise. Third, there is no clear evidence in scripture that members of the apostolic church were bound by such an oath to remain in their local communities. Fourth, as in the present day, so in the ancient world, there could be many morally licit reasons to change churches, such as business requiring a change of location. Fifth, then, the problem with church hopping and consumerism should not be opposed with an unfounded idea of membership covenants, but rather with an honest search into motives of heart. Individuals ought to only make changes in church communities if such are compatible with a real desire for the well being of both communities, and with wisdom. It is certainly true that a general rootlessness through a community begets a lack of knowledge about the lives and hearts of its members, and this cannot be compatible with real love for them.

12. Gordon Paul Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 168-215.

CONCLUSION

In his famous essay on the freedom of the Christian, Martin Luther summed up his message in his memorable aphorism: “A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.”¹³ This also summarizes the argument of this chapter. By faith, a person is united to God, and his soul and fate are secured, beyond the power of any mere human to harm. Yet, that same faith generates love in that person for God and his creatures, which results in words and actions that promote their good. The life of the visible church in its many forms flows from this one root. When we see this fact, we can understand everything God has said about the church, and everything that we know about it from experience, in sharp clarity. And this, in the end, is why all churches should adopt this Protestant ecclesiology: because it is manifestly true.

Andrew Fulford is currently studying for a PhD in Reformation history at McGill University. He is the author of Jesus and Pacifism and a contributor to the recently released Richard Hooker and Reformed Orthodoxy.

13. Martin Luther, “On the Freedom of a Christian,” in *First Principles of the Reformation*, ed. Henry Wace and C. A. Buchheim (London: John Murray, 1883), 1998, accessed May 25, 2017, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/luther-freedomchristian.asp>.

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