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FINDING ZION: THE CHURCH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT | STEVEN WEDGEWORTH

Any contemporary student of Scripture assigned with the task of finding the Christian Church in the Old Testament will quickly throw up the white flag of traditional dogmatics. After all, “the church” is a New Testament creation. There are no uses of the term “church” in English translations of the Old Testament, and any attempt to use the Greek term *ekklesia* requires navigating the Septuagint and its layers of lexical, religious, and political history. Distinctively Christian, even sectarian, assumptions as to what the church is “all about” control what it is we think we are looking for when we search out the Old Testament. We look to the temple, the incipient synagogue system, or the nation of Israel, or we resist looking to any of these, because we have already defined “church” before reading the Old Testament.

In an effort to improve this situation, even if only partially, this essay will attempt to give us a better understanding of the nature of our question. What exactly is “the church” from the Old Testament’s point of view? To this end, we will summarize the more recent historical attempts to locate “the church” in Old Testament socio-ecclesial structures, particularly the *qahal*. We will then compare that quest with other key Biblical-theological images and concepts that are often neglected in these investigations. Finally, we will highlight a few apparent points of dissonance in the Old Testament picture, as well as its eschatological imagery, all of which should have informed circumspect readers of ancient times of the need for some resolution or eschatological fulfillment to come.

READING BACKWARDS: EKKLESIA AND QAHAL

Within Protestantism, there have always been two poles regarding the definition of the church. The more “Lutheran” position emphasizes true faith as the essence of the church, and it is therefore reluc-

tant to construct a church with fixed temporal boundaries.¹ Instead, “the church” is “the people of God,” understood simply in the sense of actual believers gathered around a spiritual or charismatic manifestation of the word. The opposite emphasis, sometimes conceived of as “Presbyterian” and at other times as “High Church,” prioritizes the external structure of the church to such an extent that it looks for historical institutions as constitutive of the church.

While some outside the bounds of Protestantism are content to claim that Jesus created the offices of the church *de novo*, most within Protestantism, particularly Reformed Protestantism, have preferred to see “the church” as a continuation of Israel and its polity. Thus they have looked to specific social and political structures within Israel as keys to identifying and defining Christian ecclesiastical law and government. This assumption tends to dominate one’s study of the Old Testament, predisposing the reader to look for church government in the Torah or to locate the priesthood or the civil government as potential antecedents to “the church.”

The most pervasive instance of this is somewhat generic, basing the office of “ruling elder” upon the tribal elders of the Old Testament. There were, however, other claims that were made about specific historical institutions, namely the Sanhedrin. It was John Calvin who

1. On this point see Jonathan D. Trigg’s insightful work on baptism and ecclesiology in Martin Luther, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 174–203. The challenge of holding this somewhat ethereal definition in harmony with the strong emphasis on the sacraments has, over the years, led to a reaction within Lutheranism, and one can find “high church” and “low church” parties there as in other traditions. In this section we must content ourselves with generalities. Amidst a summary of the “modern consensus” on defining the church, James Tunstead Burtchaell provides a quote from Rudolph Sohm which nicely summarizes the thoroughgoing “Lutheran” point of view: “Church law stands in contradiction to the essence of the church” (*From Synagogue to Church*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pg. 87).

identified the presbytery with the Jewish Sanhedrin,² and while Calvin did not fully resolve this with other aspects of his theology, he did make the claim that the Christian Church “maintained” the “order” which existed under the law.³ Later *de jure divino* Presbyterians⁴ hardened this claim of institutional succession, even sometimes rooting the Sanhedrin in divine law, usually the instruction of Jethro in Exodus 18 and the 70 elders of Exodus 24:9.

As influential as these traditional explanations are, they have both received ample criticism over the years. More recent scholarship has provided a much more thorough understanding of the Old Testament and Intertestamental ecclesiastical structures.⁵ Very few argue that the New Testament church is an actual continuation of any Old Testament institution, yet most do agree that there is a sort of continuation of key themes. The most common argument along these lines is that the New Testament term *ekklesia* was simply understood, among Jews, to be the way to express the Hebrew term *qahal*.⁶ This means that the New Testament term *ekklesia* most naturally referred to the “assembly” of the people of God. The most prominent *qahal* in Jewish memory was the festival assembly at Sinai. It is important to note that the term could also carry a more occasional meaning, as it does in Ezekiel 27:34 and then again in the New Testament in Acts 19:32, though these would be exceptions determined to be such by their contexts. Still, there was a known concept of the assembly, and most scholars point out that the technical point of distinction for *qahal* was that it had a universal intent. When used in connection to the assembly of Israel, it did not refer to any one small-group gathering (not a “congregation”) but rather all of the people, the entire nation. As such, in the New Testament, *ekklesia* would include all of the people of Jesus.⁷

When we look at the various uses of *qahal* in the Old Testament, we see the most pronounced instances in Exodus through Deuteronomy,

2. Commentary on Matthew 18:16.

3. Calvin claims that Jesus appealed to the Jewish model as an order that “was lawful and approved by God” and as something that was “handed down to them from the fathers.” Calvin adds, “Yet there is no reason to doubt that the form of discipline, which prevailed in the kingdom of Christ, succeeded in the room of that ancient discipline,” “what had been preserved under the Law Christ has conveyed to us, because we hold the same rank with the ancient fathers,” and “He reminded us that the order, which had been formerly established in a holy manner under the Law, must be maintained in his Church” (*ibid*). Calvin elsewhere advocates the distinction between the visible and invisible church and even maintains that true believers have always been a remnant within the visible church (for instance, “But because a small and contemptible number are hidden in a huge multitude and a few grains of wheat are covered by a pile of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church, whose foundation is His secret election,” *Institutes* 4.1.2). Calvin’s emphasis on the visible church, and particularly its government, is what most distinguished “Reformed” ecclesiology from Lutheran, particularly as those traditions developed.

4. *De jure divino* is a theological conviction regarding church government. The phrase means “of divine right,” and those who subscribe to this position argue that there is one Biblically-commanded form of church government that is required for churches to be true churches.

5. The survey in Burtchaell is especially helpful, 61-179.

6. See for example, D. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church Historically and Exegetically Considered* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1887), 92-97; Walter Lowrie, *The Church and Its Organization In Primitive and Catholic Times* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1904), 104; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 277-279; James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 209-215; and James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 513-514.

7. Douglas Bannerman writes that the term *qahal* “denotes properly the whole body of any people, united by common bonds in one society, and constituting some kind of republic or commonwealth” (90).

the Solomonic period (especially 2 Chronicles), Ezra-Nehemiah, and Ezekiel. The overwhelming majority of instances refer to the calling together of Israel for a religious activity, though many of the uses in Ezekiel are actually in reference to various gatherings of the enemies of Israel (usually military units).

There is at least one case in the Psalms where *qahal* is applied to the heavenly assembly:

And the heavens will praise Your wonders, O Lord;
Your faithfulness also in the *assembly* of the saints.
For who in the heavens can be compared to the Lord?
Who among the sons of the mighty can be likened to the Lord?
God is greatly to be feared in the *assembly* of the saints,
And to be held in reverence by all those around Him.
(Ps 89:5-7)

The idea that there is a heavenly *qahal* on which the earthly one is modeled will become an important point for New Testament theology. It is only hinted at here.⁸

What we also see from this and other uses is that *qahal* is an activity, an *assembling* of people (or perhaps angels) around a civil or religious leader for an official purpose. It is very much connected to the etymology of *ekklesia*: those who are called out.

The nature of *qahal* in the Old Testament already challenges easy assumptions that the church will have an obvious institutional structure. It is one thing to claim to be the historical successor to the Sanhedrin or the synagogue system. It does not make the same kind of sense to speak that way about the *qahal*, especially when there has been a change in the larger civic realm. Indeed, we see a rather complicated relationship between the various teachers of the Torah, the temple leaders, the Sanhedrin, and the civil magistrates in the gospel narratives.

THE CHURCH AS “HOUSE”

D. Douglas Bannerman, one of the sons of the more famous James Bannerman, points out that before *qahal* attains regular usage, the primary description for the covenanted people of God was simply “house” or “household.”⁹ Early on in Genesis we meet the household of Noah (Gen. 7:1), and it is important to remember that the New Testament identifies the Ark-experience as a type of the church (1 Peter 3:20-21). We then move on to the house of Abraham, the house of Jacob, and, once Jacob becomes a larger figure and takes his new name, the house of Israel, each having a covenantal significance. The term originally carried the meaning of family or dynasty, as in Genesis 15:2-3 or Exodus 19:2.

We soon meet a second meaning of “house,” the more literal expres-

8. There has been a vast output of literature known as “temple theology” which seeks to explain the way in which the Hebrews understood their worship to relate to heavenly worship. See Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008); Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2004); and *Heaven on Earth*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander & Simon Gathercole (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004). However, there has thus far not been an extensive connection of this temple theology to the *qahal*.

9. Bannerman, 74-88.

sion of a dwelling place. This is the primary meaning of “the house of God” when that phrase occurs in the Old Testament. It is an altar, a tent, or a temple. The expression “house of God” first appears in Genesis 28:19, 22. We see the name and concept of “house” expanded upon as God establishes a “tabernacle” or a “tent” for His dwelling place (Ex. 25:8-8, 26:7). This tabernacle is itself referred to as “the house of the LORD” (Ex. 23:19, Josh. 6:24, 2 Sam. 12:20) or “the house of God” (Judges 18:31, 1 Chron. 6:48), and it would eventually make its way into the temple.

Understanding this dual meaning of “house” in the Old Testament can help us to see the temple and its ministry as broader than and, in some ways, distinguishable from the sacerdotal cult. Obviously the temple and the Levitical ministry are intimately related, and yet it is still undeniable that the house of God is a theme which relates to dynasty and kingdom as much as it does the priesthood. For their part, the priesthood and the sacrificial system pre-date the temple and are said to have their own spiritual analogues (for instance, Ps. 51:17). This is significant for the long-standing opposition of a “temple model” to a “synagogue model” because, while there are certainly key differences, both, it would seem, also have key parallels to the New Testament church.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the “house” theme in the Old Testament is the famous Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7. The two meanings of family and dwelling-place are united in the promise made to David, and it is God Himself who brings them together. This dual meaning of “house,” then is also related to the temple, since the play on the meaning of “house” made by God is itself a response to David’s desire to build the temple:

Would you build a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about with all the children of Israel, have I ever spoken a word to anyone from the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd My people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built Me a house of cedar?”

...When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son. If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men and with the blows of the sons of men. But My mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:4-7, 12-16)

There is an important play on words in this passage. David will not build God a house, but instead God will build David a house. This “house” is a family dynasty, represented by Solomon, his offspring. But intriguingly, it will be from that family succession (that “house”) that the temple (God’s “house”) will be built: “He shall build a house for My name...”

To only read this as a reference to Solomon’s building of the temple, however, misses an important layer to the rhetorical play. Solomon will indeed build a literal house for God, but Solomon’s dynasty, his family “house,” will also be the earthly line for God’s Son. “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My Son.” Solomon’s son will be God’s son. Solomon’s family will be God’s family. Solomon’s house will be God’s house.

The Christian interpretation of the everlasting Davidic kingdom is that it is indeed the kingdom of the Son of God, the kingdom of Jesus Christ. The “house” that Solomon builds for God is the literal temple as well as the line of Christ. The “throne” that is established forever comes through the familial descent of David, and so David’s house and God’s house culminate in the same point, the messianic heir. Jesus is David’s son and David’s lord.

JESUS WAS
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While exegetes and theologians alike rightly stress the distinction between “church” and “kingdom,” it seems that the use of “house” in the Old Testament, especially David’s house, necessarily brings them together on an important level. Douglas Bannerman also points out the relevance of this association when Jesus says that He will “build” His *ekklesia*. Bannerman quotes Hermann Cremer saying, “When Christ says, *oikodomeso mou ten ekklesian* [‘I will build my *ekklesia*’], we are scarcely reminded that *ekklesia* denoted in profane Greek the place of assembly as well as the assembly itself, but rather that the Old Testament community was “the House of Israel.””¹⁰ Jesus was building an assembly when He built His church. He was also building a house.

OTHER SQUARE PEGS

In addition to the two concepts of assembly and house, there are other complicating factors in finding the church in the Old Testament. Prior to the establishment of the priestly and tabernacle ministry, there are various people who are both priests and kings. Melchizedek is the most famous, thanks to his significance in the New Testament, and, it is important to note, Melchizedek is offered as a superior type of priestly order (Hebrews 5:5-11, 6:20-7:25) to that of Levi and, therefore, to the Aaronic line and the Mosaic covenant. Melchizedek is not alone in this dual office, however, as Noah, Abraham, and Jacob also carry priestly and princely prerogatives. In fact, Jethro appears to also be this sort of priest-king, as he is explicitly identified as a “priest of Midian” (Ex. 2:16, 3:1). Yet, importantly, Jethro is also the owner of the flock of sheep which Moses tends in Ex. 3:1, and Jethro instructs Moses in clearly political matters in Ex. 18, when he gives advice on how to arrange a system of varying jurisdictions and subsidiarity.

Whether or not Jethro was a priest-king like those in the book of Genesis, one thing is certain about him. He was a Gentile. The existence of a gentile priest after the establishment of the tabernacle¹¹ is fasci-

10. Bannerman, 95.

11. Note that in Exodus 18:27 Jethro went “to his own land.” We are given no indication that he should have joined Israel instead, and based upon his confession in vs. 10-12, we have every reason to believe that Jethro returned to Midian as a priest of the true God.

nating and stretches the boundaries of the Old Testament “church.” Indeed, this is the sort of arrangement that would not be possible in the fully-formed conception of the New Testament church. Any true believer would be a member, by definition, and yet, in Exodus, Jethro is both a true believer and someone who is very much outside Israel and its assemblies.

Jethro is not the only believing Gentile depicted in the Old Testament. Hiram, king of Tyre, certainly seems like a believer when the text says that he “had always loved David” (1 Kings 5:1). He then offers to help finance the temple, saying “Blessed be the LORD this day, for He has given David a wise son over this great people!” (1 Kings 5:7ff). The recording of this event in 2 Chronicles is even more pronounced (2 Chron. 2:11-15). We also see important believing Gentiles in the Elijah-Elisha narrative. Jesus Himself highlights the fact that the widow of Zarephath and Naaman were Gentiles (Luke 4:25-27). When we look at these characters in their Old Testament contexts, we can see that they are portrayed as becoming believers in Israel’s God (1 Kings 17:24, 2 Kings 5:14-18). This theme of believing Gentiles will also loom large in the prophets, where the conversion of Gentiles is both a sign of judgment against Israel and a sign of the restored kingdom and of the new heavens and the new earth. Certain high-profile Gentile kings like Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, and Cyrus¹² are all presented as believers in Israel’s God.

What this means is that, if we assume a broad concept of “all believing persons” in our definition of the church as “the people of God,” the Old Testament actually presents a “church” that is considerably broader than Israel. There were believers in the true God prior to the formation of Israel as a distinct people who were never subsumed by Israel, and there were Gentiles converted by Israel who remained outside of Israel. If we restrict our definition of the church to a notion of *qahal*, then these Gentiles appear to be outside of the church. However, if we broaden our definition of the church to something like “all believers as such,” then these believing Gentiles would lead us to reconsider our understanding of what makes something a *qahal* (perhaps it is possible to have a *qahal* outside of Israel’s national boundaries as in Psalm 89 mentioned above) or to simply affirm a significant discontinuity between the Old and New Covenant on the relationship between salvation and the church.

ZION AND THE TABERNACLE OF DAVID

Another significant challenge to any institutional definition of the church in the Old Testament is the role of the Davidic tabernacle

12. Darius and Cyrus may well be the same person.

and its counterpart in various prophetic utterances, Mt. Zion (Psalm 48, Is. 2:1-4, Zech. 8:1-5). David already stretches the limits of the priestly system in key places. Jesus highlights David’s eating of the showbread (Matt. 12:3-4), but David, himself not a Levitical priest, engaged in other priestly actions as well. When David brought the ark to Jerusalem, the text says that he was “wearing a linen ephod” (2 Sam. 6:14), a priestly garment. Immediately following the procession into Jerusalem and the erection of the tabernacle, David “offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD” and then “blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts” (2 Sam. 6:17-18).

It is in the tabernacle of David where we see an even more curious challenge to our search for “the church” in the Old Testament, as it plays a unique and provocative role in the development of God’s dwelling place. Peter Leithart, in his excellent *From Silence to Song*, has explored this particular issue in detail, giving an extended study of the tabernacle of David and its role in Israel’s redemptive history. He points out that this tabernacle was actually distinct from the Mosaic tabernacle and that it was the Davidic tabernacle which was “the only place of worship ever set up on Zion.”¹³ He goes on to argue that while “Zion terminology and symbolism was transferred to the temple mount,” the temple mount was not actually mount Zion, and there were important ways in which the Davidic tabernacle still retained precedence throughout the prophetic writings.¹⁴ Indeed, Amos 9:11 states that God will “rebuild the tabernacle of David,” and the New Testament claims that this is fulfilled in the Christian church (Acts 15:16).



Ezra Reading the Law in the Hearing of the People
GUSTAVE DORE

Zion, the actual geographical location of David’s tabernacle, attains an immensely important standing in the prophetic literature,¹⁵ and it is Zion more than any other name which the prophets hold up as an eschatological ideal of the worldwide kingdom of God. One key example appears in two places in the prophets:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days
That the mountain of the Lord’s house
Shall be established on the top of the mountains,
And shall be exalted above the hills;
And peoples shall flow to it.
Many nations shall come and say,
“Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
To the house of the God of Jacob;

13. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 13.

14. *ibid.*, 73.

15. Leithart explores this theme at length, 73-100.

He will teach us His ways,
 And we shall walk in His paths.”
 For out of Zion the law shall go forth,
 And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
 He shall judge between many peoples,
 And rebuke strong nations afar off;
 They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
 And their spears into pruning hooks;
 Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
 Neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:2-4, Micah
 4:1-3)

A few points deserve noting here. The eschatological mountain, full of so much Biblical-theological significance, is identified as the “LORD’s house.” Thus it is a vision of the temple. But, as we have seen, it is also the continuing line of God’s people. This mountain attracts Gentiles, who “flow to it” in order to receive the law. This law comes “out of Zion,” and it then establishes God’s rule across the world. This new worldwide order of blessing is the eschatological Zion.

Zechariah 8 also speaks of Zion. There we see that Zion is “in the midst of Jerusalem” (Zech. 8:3). As it happens, when David conquered Zion, it was the central stronghold or fortress (2 Sam. 5:6-10, 2 Chron. 11:4-7). David “built the city around it” (2 Chron. 11:8). Thus when the prophets speak of “the city of David” and “the city of Zion,” there are literal referents in Israel’s history. The literal Zion was the location of David’s tabernacle, and this Zion will be the New Jerusalem.

As we mentioned a little earlier, Acts 15:16 claims that the tabernacle of David was restored in the Christian church. The incorporation of Gentiles into the assembly of Jesus is a fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy about David’s tabernacle. In addition to this, Mt. Zion is also named in relation to the church in the New Testament. This happens in the famous passage from Hebrews 12:

For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore (For they could not endure what was commanded: “And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.” And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel. (Heb. 12:18-24)

This is a rich passage with several noteworthy terms and ideas, all of which attain fuller significance in light of the Old Testament material. Clearly the concept of the *qahal* is in play. The Sinai assembly is referenced as the Old Covenant counterpart to what the New Covenant people are now coming to. Their new *qahal*, it is worth noting, is also a mountain assembly. It is “Mount Zion,” the heavenly city of eschatological hope. The term *ekklesia* is also included, thus filling out the picture. The new mountain we have come to is a church.

Of course, the Hebrews text cannot simply be applied to the polity of a local congregation. This city is heavenly, after all, and the assembly includes angels as well as saints who have lived before. The author of Hebrews is showing us the invisible and eschatological reality that the Christian church encounters, and it is speaking objectively. This is the reality that Christians “come to” in light of the work of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit. As we understand the relationship between Zion and the Tabernacle of David and combine it with the fact that Acts 15 has identified the Tabernacle of Zion with the incorporation of the Gentiles into the Christian community, then we see that the activity happening within the believers is itself eschatological. When the people gather together, they manifest that the “house of David” has been built. Through their union with Christ and in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they are both the kingdom and his sanctuary. They are the tabernacle of David and the house for his name.

This has momentous significance for the *qahal* in the New Testament, which is to say, for the church. In context, the Hebrews passage is not restricted to a ceremonial liturgical gathering. It is describing the Christian life as such. Hebrews 12 begins with a meditation on suffering and then moves on to commend peacemaking and holy living. Chapter 13 extols hospitality and praises marriage. Thus the eschatological “church” is given as a foundation for the whole of the life of sanctification. Because we have come to God’s holy mountain and heavenly city, we must pursue peace and holiness (Heb. 12:14), we must avoid bitterness which can produce fornication (Heb. 12:15-16), we must not refuse to hear God’s voice (Heb. 12:25-26), and we must serve God acceptably with reverence and fear (Heb. 12:28). This last expression certainly denotes worship, as it uses *latreuomen*, but the larger context of the passage, particularly chapters 11 and 12 taken together, is of the Christian life of faithfulness as a whole with a special emphasis on persevering over a lifetime.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, this study has attempted to complicate the question of the church in the Old Testament. There is no singular Old Testament institution which fully encapsulates the church. The church brings together aspects of various Old Testament concepts, and it breaks the rules of several of those concepts along the way. As such, it is not possible to identify any one of Israel’s social or political structure as being “the church.” Many of those structures were themselves prophesied to be restored in new ways, ways which would thoroughly transform them.

However, having pointed out these challenges, a general consistency also appears. The church in the Old Testament is both the assembling of God’s people together to hear His word, and the formation of His house, creating His family, His dwelling place, and His kingdom. This assembly is truly universal, as it includes all kinds of peoples, Jew and Gentile alike; it even unites heaven and earth. Fully-understood, the church is a meeting with God Himself through the eschatological work of the Messiah which then transforms the totality of the created order.

Steven Wedgeworth (M.Div., Reformed Theological Seminary) is the pastor of Christ Church in Lakeland, FL. He is the founder of The Calvinist International and a directing board member of The Davenant Trust.

PENTECOST AS ECCLESIOLOGY

ALASTAIR ROBERTS

As sources for our ecclesiology, the narrative portions of Scripture may be deemed relatively unpromising, especially when compared to the New Testament epistolary literature. Yet much of the New Testament teaching concerning the Church occurs first in the form of narrative, only later to be articulated in the form of theological exposition. The apostolic doctrine of the Church finds its grounding first in historical events, rather than being primarily a matter of abstract theologizing: the ecclesiology of the epistles is firmly founded upon God's acts in time and space.

Of all of the important passages in this context, the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 is the most foundational. From this and related texts, a rich ecclesiology *in nuce* can be developed. Within this article, I will explore some of this passage's latent possibilities for the doctrine of the Church before demonstrating some ways in which certain questions that attend our ecclesiology can be addressed from the book of Acts.

The Day of Pentecost occurs at the grand confluence of several streams of biblical narrative development, combining their forces into a mighty torrent of spiritual power. Discerning the direction of its course is one of the tasks to which this article is devoted. I will begin by charting some of its principal tributaries, before turning to the question of its movement downstream.

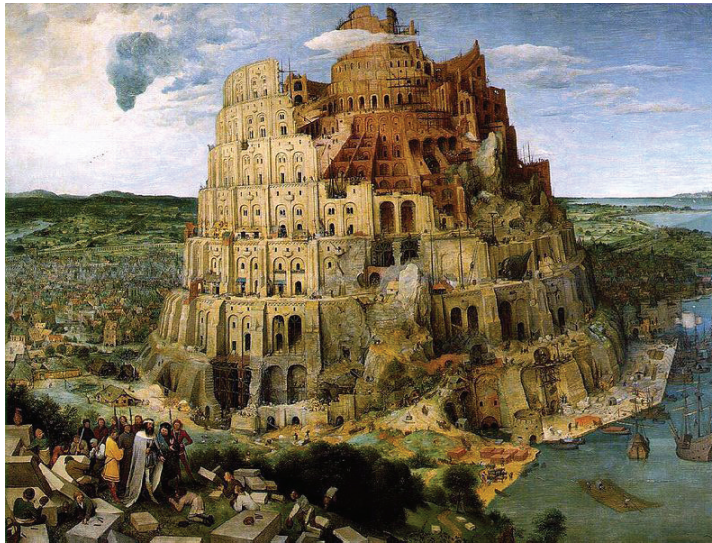
OVERCOMING THE DIVISION OF THE NATIONS

In Genesis 11, humanity is undivided, all speaking a single "lip" (a word that possibly has religious connotations, cf. Isaiah 19:18; Zephaniah 3:9) and a single speech (verse 1). They settle in the plain of Shinar where, forming and firing bricks and using asphalt for mortar, they undertake a vast building project, constructing a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens. Within this megacity, with the immense tower as its religious heart, humanity would be preserved from being spread throughout the earth as God had intended it to be. Frustrating the builders of Babel's hubristic designs to a hegemonic universal world order, God descended from heaven and confused their lip, so that they could no longer understand each other (verses 5-7). Forced to abandon their building project—*Babel*—humanity is scattered abroad across the face of the entire earth.

Reading the account of Pentecost in Acts 2 against the foil of Babel is illuminating. The builders of Babel sought to construct a tower to ascend to the heavens, yet God descended to confuse their lip. The im-

mediate and crucial backdrop to Pentecost is the ascension of Christ into the heavens (Acts 2:32-33), after which God descends in the Spirit at Pentecost to give the disciples the power of prophetic speech in a multitude of "tongues".

Babel was the moment when humanity was divided into many nations under judgment; this event provides the narrative context for the calling of Abraham as the one through whom all of the nations would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). At Pentecost many nations are brought together in the new "building project" of the Church. Although speaking many tongues, those tongues now express a single religious "lip" (cf. Zephaniah 3:9), as divine prophecy is given in many languages and dialects, not only in the religious tongue of Hebrew. The diversity of humanity becomes a vehicle for its religious unity and the era of the exclusivity of Hebrew is ended. By implication, Pentecost is a definitive and seminal moment in the fulfilment of the promise that all of the nations would be blessed in Abraham.



Throughout the rest of the New Testament, the outworking of Pentecost as the unification of the nations is a prominent theme. In Galatians 3:14, Paul makes explicit what the blessing of Abraham was—"the promise of the Spirit"—something that is implicit in the events of Pentecost. Elsewhere, in passages such as Ephesians 2-3, Paul prominently reflects upon God's establishment of a new building within which Gentiles and Jews are united on an equal footing.

THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT

Several weeks after the Passover and the departure from Egypt, Israel arrived at Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19 and the chapters that follow, Israel assembles at Mount Sinai, where they see a theophanic manifestation of the LORD's power and glory. Moses ascends on top of the mountain, where he is given the Law by the LORD; he then brings the Law down to give it to all of the people. Sinai, however, is a site of national apostasy. The people and the newly designated high priest, Aaron, construct and worship the golden calf. Moses summons the Levites to himself, who slay three thousand rebels, after which they are set apart to guard and serve the tabernacle (Exodus 32:25-29).

There are several themes of Sinai to be seen in Acts 2. Explicit associations between the timing of the Feast of Pentecost and the Sinai event can already be found in the *Book of Jubilees*, a century or two before Christ. *Jubilees* connects Pentecost with other great covenant events, such as the covenant with Noah and Abram. More generally,

much as Sinai is the constitutive event for the people following the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, so Pentecost is the constitutive event for the Church, following the “exodus” of Christ’s death and resurrection (cf. Luke 9:31).

At Pentecost, the anointed leader ascends on high, and is given the fundamental reality by which the covenant people’s life will be ordered: Moses is given the Law, Christ is given the Spirit. There are theophanic manifestations reminiscent of Sinai—a heavenly sound as of a rushing mighty wind and divided tongues of flame. Various Second Temple Jewish and early rabbinic writers connected the flames and the voices of the Sinai theophany, regarding the flashes as a “visible” voice, which was in turn related to the inscription of the Law.¹ Some even spoke of the division of the flames in this context, relating it to seventy tongues of the nations or to the distinct words of the Law.²

The tabernacle was established at Sinai and the Church is established as a new Temple at Pentecost as the divine glory presence descends upon it and the Church is “lit” as if a great lampstand (cf. Revelation 1:12-20). Elsewhere in the New Testament, both the Church and its individual members are presented as new temples of the Holy Spirit and a royal priesthood (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5, note the echoes of Exodus 19:6). Whereas three thousand were slain at Sinai by the Levites, three thousand were “cut to the heart” at Pentecost, by those who would be set apart for a new ministry.

The verbal ambivalence of the term *glossa* (“tongue”) in Acts 2 is noteworthy, referring to both speech and flame, exploring the same conjunction of imagery that is encountered elsewhere in writings of the period. The divine “word” descends in distributed flame upon the disciples, who proceed to deliver it in distributed languages.

Reflecting upon these images, we see a Church that is formed by the descent of the divine word upon it in the power of the Spirit, in an event redolent of Sinai. Whereas the tablets of the Law were the site where the divine word was once inscribed, now the fire of divine speech descends upon the disciples.³ The constitution of the new covenant people through the inscription of the Law upon their hearts and the contrast between the economy of the Law and the economy of the Spirit are themes that pervade the New Testament, in fulfilment of Old Testament promise (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

PROPHETIC SUCCESSION

I have already drawn attention to the importance of the event of Christ’s Ascension as the narrative backdrop for the events of the Day of Pentecost. The relationship between the two events may be more apparent when we read Acts in conversation with 2 Kings 2. In that chapter, Elijah ascends into heaven. However, the ascension of Elijah is the “pentecost” of Elisha, as Elisha receives the firstborn portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9-15), a fact immediately demonstrated

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1. Cf. Exodus 20:18, they ‘saw’ the voices and the flashes. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, edited and translated by Gordon Tucker (London: Continuum, 2006), 294-295. Sejin Park, *Pentecost and Sinai: The Festival of Weeks as a Celebration of the Sinai Event* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 213-214.

2. *Pentecost and Sinai*, 213-214

3. The prophet is occasionally presented as the bearer of the fire of the divine word: Isaiah 6:6-7; Jeremiah 5:14; Revelation 11:5.

as Elisha repeats the miraculous division of the waters of the Jordan that Elijah had just performed with his mantle. This event is, in turn, reminiscent of Moses’ passing of his leadership of Israel to Joshua on the far side of the Jordan, after which Joshua also entered the land through a miraculous parting of the River Jordan. It foreshadows in various ways the passing of John the Baptist’s ministry to Christ at Christ’s baptism in the Jordan.

Joshua, Elisha, and the disciples had all formerly served as apprentices, until they were charged and equipped to take up and continue the prophetic ministry of their masters. In 1 Kings 19:15-16, Elijah had been commissioned with a task, which he didn’t finish before his ascension. Rather, Elisha completed Elijah’s ministry in Elijah’s spirit. The ascension of Christ would have brought Elijah’s ascension to mind, as it was the only other closely comparable prior event. The wording of Luke 24:49, which charges the disciples to wait until they are “clothed” (*endusesthe*) with power from on high, may well have recalled this: the Spirit is the descending mantle of Jesus, the great Prophet.

Pentecost is spoken of as the “baptism” of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:5). In its placement within the wider structure of the book of Acts and also in the details of the narrative, it is closely congruent with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist as recorded in Luke. In Luke 3:21-22, as Jesus prays, the Spirit descends with physical phenomena and a sound from heaven, anointing and filling him for his prophetic ministry. In the chapter that follows, Jesus speaks of himself as anointed for the preaching of the gospel (Luke 4:18-19). The baptism of the Church at Pentecost is homologous with Christ’s baptism at the Jordan: both are set apart for and thrust out upon their mission. The reception of the Spirit is also a token of sonship (cf. Luke 3:22): as the Church receives the Spirit its members are marked out as the sons of God.⁴

Once again, these are fundamental themes of New Testament ecclesiology. In the ministry of the Church, the ascended Christ continues to work, albeit in a transformed manner: the Church’s activity is in the power of his Spirit. Through the Spirit, the Church participates in Christ’s status, as we are identified as beloved sons and daughters, and charged to act in his name.

THE DISTRIBUTION OF CHRIST’S SPIRIT

A further passage that can help us to unlock the riches of Acts 2 is found in Numbers 11. In that chapter, Moses appealed to the Lord to reduce the burden of leadership that was upon his shoulders. In an event redolent of the Sinai theophany in some key details, God took of the Spirit that was upon Moses and put it on the seventy elders.⁵ This donation of the Spirit to the elders was mediated by Moses: the gift of the Spirit was a “membering” of, or apportioning of shares within, Moses’ own gift. The elders do not receive the Spirit

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4. There are also kingdom themes, which I lack space to develop here. Just as the Spirit descends upon Saul as he is first marked out for the throne, making him a new man and causing him to prophesy (1 Samuel 10:5-6, 10-13), so the Spirit’s descent upon the Church at Pentecost should be related to Christ’s gift of a kingdom (cf. Luke 22:29-30). See Alastair Roberts, “The Politics of the King’s Donkey,” accessed September 27, 2016, <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/the-politics-of-the-kings-donkey-luke-1928-40/>.

5. For the parallels with Sinai, note that both events involve: (1) the granting of a new vocation to a group of people (Exodus 19:5-6; Numbers 11:16-17); (2) a command for them to sanctify themselves in preparation for the coming day when the LORD will act (Exodus 19:10; Numbers 11:18); (3) the assembling of the people around a particular location—Mount Sinai in Exodus and the tent of meeting in Numbers; (4) a theophany event where God descends in a cloud to speak with Moses.

in the form of an immediate bestowal of God, but as a participation in Moses' ministry. Thereafter they can represent Moses to the people without displacing him. When the Spirit descends upon the elders, they prophesy as a sign of their new gift, a phenomenon that will not be repeated again (11:25).

Within this passage Moses declares his wish that "all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put His Spirit upon them" (11:29). This desire is later rearticulated in the form of promise in Joel 2:28-29:

And it shall come to pass afterward
That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
Your old men shall dream dreams,
Your young men shall see visions;
And also on My menservants and on My maidservants
I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

It is this passage that Peter references in his Pentecost sermon, declaring that the events of that day are in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:16-21). Lurking behind Joel's prophecy is Numbers 11 and the membering of the Spirit upon Moses to the seventy elders. At Pentecost, the promise of the Spirit received by Christ from the Father (2:33) is "membered", given to the disciples, who now bear his authority and act in his name and as his representatives.

THE RUDIMENTS OF AN ECCLESIOLOGY

Within the discussion above, the rudiments of an ecclesiology have started to emerge. The Church is a body of people formed of many different nations and language groups. It is a fulfillment of the promised blessing of Abraham, as people formerly divided and alienated from God by judgment are brought together in a single body.

It is a people constituted by the gift of the Spirit, who writes the Law of God on our hearts and sets us apart for ministry. The Church is a new temple, a habitation for God in the Spirit. The gift of the Spirit—understood against the background of the theophany of Exodus 19 and 20—is fundamentally the inscription of the Word upon us and the empowering and authorizing of us by the Word placed within us. This gift is manifested in the powerful preaching of the gospel to all.

The ministry and authority of the Church flows from the ministry and authority of Christ. As Christ gives us his Spirit, the Church's ministry is conformed to Christ's own ministry, exhibiting a similar shape. However, the Spirit is never detached from Christ, nor does the Church ever replace Christ. Rather, we receive the Spirit as a membering of Christ's own Spirit. We act in his name, are empowered by his strength, participate in his sonship, and labour as those completing his mission. Christ continues his mission through us.

Pentecost displays the truth at the heart of Reformed ecclesiology: the Church is a body formed by the power of the Word and manifested in the preaching of that Word. The Church finds the sole source of its identity and spiritual power in its dependence upon its head, Jesus Christ, whose place no other can usurp. The Spirit that we receive is a membering of his Spirit: the flames upon us are always already divided, their tongues only united in their source. The gift of the unmembered Spirit without measure is only the possession of the Church in the person of its head and he is the only one who ever mediates its gift.

LESSONS FROM THE AFTERSHOCKS

Following the earthquake that was the Day of Pentecost, there is a small succession of "aftershock" events, as the Spirit is received by a number of other parties or as the disciples experience a renewed encounter with the Spirit's power (Acts 4:31; 8:14-17; 10:44-45; 11:15; 19:1-6). These events present us with a more complicated picture, while bringing certain dynamics into clearer expression. They help us address the question I raised at the outset concerning the downstream movement of the Spirit in relation to the Church.

The first key event occurred as the Samaritans responded in faith to the preaching of Philip in Acts 8:4-8 and were baptized. The Jerusalem apostles sent Peter and John to them, who prayed that the Samaritans should receive the Holy Spirit. After laying hands on them, the Spirit came upon the Samaritans. The second event occurred as Peter declared the gospel to Cornelius' house and, while he was still speaking, the Spirit fell upon those hearing his word (10:44; 11:15). The third event involved about twelve disciples of John the Baptist who had only been baptized by John's baptism. After Paul instructed them concerning the meaning of John's baptism and declared the gospel to them, they were baptized in Jesus' name. Then Paul laid hands on them and they spoke with tongues and prophesied.

A striking feature of these accounts is the contrasting order within them. In the case of the Samaritans, the order of events is (1) hearing the gospel, (2) faith, (3) baptism, (4) apostles' prayer for them to receive the Spirit, (5) laying on of the apostles' hands, (6) reception of the Spirit. In the case of Cornelius and his household there is (1) an anticipatory form of faith, (2) hearing of the gospel, (3) Christian faith, (4) reception of the Spirit, and then (5) baptism. Finally, in the case of the Ephesian disciples of John, there is (1) an anticipatory form of faith, (2) hearing of the gospel, (3) Christian faith, (4) baptism, (5) laying on of hands, and (6) reception of the Spirit.

Through the disruptions and inconsistencies of the patterns, in addition to certain elements within the sequences, the divine prerogative in giving the Spirit is emphasized. The occurrence of prayer preceding the apostles' laying on of their hands upon the Samaritans makes clear that it wasn't an autonomous power they possessed (as Simon the sorcerer seems to have supposed—8:14-25). The unexpected descent of the Spirit upon Cornelius and his household, before Peter had baptized or laid hands on them, served as a divine testimony to God's welcome of the Gentiles: Peter's performance of baptism was purely responsive in this situation. The gift of the Spirit is not tied to the action of the Church and its ministers, but can occur independent of it.

Yet there are congruences, which highlight the fact that God ordinarily works through the ministration of the Church. Especially in the case of the gift of the Spirit to the Samaritans we see God acting in a way that establishes the importance of the apostles within his Church. The structure and institution is thus upheld by the manner of divine action, but it remains clear that God can and does act beyond and apart from this. The pouring out of the Spirit on Cornelius' household illustrates this. Once again, the fact that Peter, the pre-eminent apostle, is divinely chosen to pioneer the ministry to the Gentiles reinforces the institution of the Church, yet the fact that God pours out the Spirit apart from Peter's laying on of hands makes clear that, while the Church and its ministers may ordinarily be the means of God's action, he is by no means tied to them.

An illustrative parallel to this can be found in a dimension of the account of Numbers 11. The seventy elders are assembled around the tabernacle and the Spirit of Moses is placed upon them. However, two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp, and yet the Spirit came upon them too, causing them to prophesy in the midst of the camp (Numbers 11:26-30). Upon hearing a report of this, Joshua called Moses to forbid them, but Moses refused to do so, questioning whether Joshua was jealous for his sake and expressing his desire that all of God's people would prophesy.

This event is strongly reminiscent of the gospel account of Luke 9:49-50, where John declared that they had forbidden someone from casting out demons in Jesus' name, because he wasn't a member of the apostolic band. Jesus responds much like Moses, charging his disciples not to forbid such a person "for he who is not against us is for us." Both Moses and Jesus resist attempts to restrict the Spirit's ministry and prerogative to the ordered institution, which, although it is the ordinary form of the Spirit's action, is not the only form. Eldad and Medad may not have been among the elders around the tabernacle and the exorcist of Luke 9:49 may not have been a member of the apostolic band, but each of these people has a part in the ministry and the Spirit. The Church exceeds the institution. Like Joshua, there is no need for us to be jealous on Christ's account, for all with the Spirit, whether or not they are within the institution, are members of him.

Within the book of Acts, we find a number of encounters with believing persons and teachers outside of the official apostolic group. Faced with people who manifested the work and gifting of the Spirit, the Church's task was one of recognition of and celebration of God's work. Characters such as Ananias (Acts 9:10-19), Barnabas (9:26-27), Peter (11:27), and Aquila and Priscilla (18:24-28) are all set forth in the book of Acts as persons prepared to welcome and support the work of God in unexpected and seemingly unauthorized places and persons. Aquila and Priscilla's reception and support of the ministry of Apollos is exemplary here, illustrating the way in which more "official" ministers of the church could practice a posture of openness to God's ministers beyond the official channels of the institutional church.

How then should we understand baptism, which seems to be naturally connected with the ministry and membership of the institutional church? Within Acts there is an intimate connection between faith, reception of the Spirit, belonging to the Church, and baptism, something apparent in places such as Acts 2:38. Baptism, then, does not seem to be at the root of what is required for inclusion in Christ. Must we then evacuate it of any meaning, reducing it to an empty sign? The answer, I believe, is found in the Reformed tradition's recognition of baptism as a promissory and confirmatory seal. Baptism is a

divinely instituted rite, by which we are marked out by a promise.⁶ This rite publicly confirms our standing to us and to others in a manner that strengthens faith. It is a means by which we are granted to receive and grasp onto the reality that it signifies. The relationship between baptism and membership of Christ is akin to the relationship between accession to the throne and coronation: the two are intimately and inseparably connected in the ordinary manner of things, yet it is possible for one to occur without the other. The ruling status of the monarch is not directly dependent upon their coronation, but the coronation confirms and publicly manifests that status. Likewise, baptism is the ordinary means of our reception into the Church, yet is not the basis or cause of our membership, nor so necessarily tied to it that we could not be members of the visible Church apart from it.



Baptism is also a sign to the church itself. It is the continual practice of our recognition and reception of the work of God, our posture of openness to the Lord who is adding to us. In baptizing someone we are recognizing and declaring their membership in Christ, rather than creating it. In each baptism, we perform the fundamental Christian act of welcoming our brothers and sisters (Romans 15:7), expressing the same submissive posture before the act of God as that expressed by the Apostle Peter in Acts 11:17: "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?"

CONCLUSION

The events of Pentecost come at the fulfilment and culmination of a long history that precedes them. With the sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, the Church is set aflame by the power of the Word of God and equipped to declare this Word to all of the nations. The countless expectant whispers of an Old Testament choir of witnesses, their disparate voices drawn from throughout the canon, now combine and swell by the Spirit into a glorious and triumphant declaration of the fulfilment of divine pledge and purpose. Against the backdrop of this history we see more clearly who we are as God's people, and are driven on a wave of redoubled promise towards the future furnished for us.

Alastair Roberts (PhD, Durham University) is a participant in the weekly Mere Fidelity podcast, blogs at Alastair's Adversaria, and is a contributing editor of the Political Theology Today blog. He is currently writing a couple of books for Crossway.

6. See the discussion of this in Alastair Roberts, "Infant Baptism and the Promise of Grace," accessed September 27, 2016, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/infant-baptism-and-the-when-of-baptismal-grace.php>.

WHAT IS THE “CHURCH”? ETYMOLOGY AND CONCEPT IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY, THE LXX, AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

E. J. HUTCHINSON

The English and Greek words for “church” are etymologically unrelated, a fact that can go some way toward obscuring the force of the “church” concept in the New Testament. The English term is derived from the Greek *kuriakon* (“belonging to the Lord”), probably a shortening of the phrase *kuriakon doma*, “the Lord’s house.” Already, if we are not careful, we will begin to think of such things as buildings, and this will get us off on entirely the wrong foot.

The word for “church” in the Greek New Testament, on the other hand, is *ekklesia*, which is derived from the verb *ekkalein*, “to call out.” Thus the primary accent in the New Testament, already in the term itself, rests on God’s action in calling a people to himself. At the same time, the term has a social aspect as well: its meaning in classical Greek is “assembly.” The New Testament use of the term, moreover, evokes resonances not only of the New Testament’s cultural *milieu*, but also of Old Testament contexts in which the term is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. When thinking about what the “church” is, therefore, Christians would do well to have a general sense of the use of the term in these three contexts in mind—that is, the classical, LXX, and New Testament contexts.

We begin with the classical world and the use of *ekklesia* to mean “assembly.” For instance, Aristotle, speaking of the heroes at Troy, writes: “The kingly office is in truth a kind of generalship, sovereign and perpetual. The king has not the power of life and death, except in certain cases, as for instance, in ancient times, he had it when upon a campaign, by right of force. This custom is described in Homer. For Agamemnon puts up with it when he is attacked in the assembly [*ekklesia*], but when the army goes out to battle he has the power even

of life and death” (*Politics* 1285a7–12, tr. B. Jowett, rev. by S. Everson). In the New Testament, too, the word is employed to refer to different types of public assemblies in general (see Acts 19.32, 39, 41). But already in this passage of Aristotle we get a sense that in classical Greek the term most frequently means, not just any assembly, but a *political*

assembly, or, as Liddell-Scott-Jones (*LSJ*, the standard classical Greek lexicon) puts it, an “assembly duly called”—one recalls the role of Achilles in *summoning* the people to assembly (*agorein... kalessato*) in *Iliad* 1 as Apollo’s plague raged. Thus Thucydides differentiates the *ekklesia* from the more general *sullogos* (“assembly, meeting”) in *Peloponnesian War* 2.22, as *LSJ* points out: “But [Pericles], seeing that they were overcome by the irritation of the moment and inclined to evil counsels, and confident that he was right in refusing to go out, would not summon an assembly [*ekklesia*] or meeting [*sullogon*] of any kind, lest, coming together more in anger than in prudence, they might take some false step” (tr. B. Jowett). Because of this more precise meaning of the word, it is not surprising that the political body of assembled citizens in ancient Athens was called simply the *Ekklesia* (see Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens* 43).



MEDIEVAL ILLUSTRATION OF THE ECCLESIA FROM THE HORTUS DELICIARUM OF HERRAD OF LANDSBERG (12TH CENTURY)

This general sense of the word carries over into the Greek Old Testament, where *ekklesia*, rendering the Hebrew word *qahal*, is frequently used for the politico-religious Israelite congregation. It should be noted, however, that *qahal* is not always translated as *ekklesia*: for instance, it is translated as *synagoge* in Lev. 4.13–14. It should be further noted that *qahal* is not the only word for the “assembly” or “congregation,” for which the term *edah*—never translated as *ekklesia*, but rather as *synagoge*—was also used. So, for instance, in Deut. 9.10 it refers to God’s people as constituted

and gathered by and around God's Word to them: "And the LORD gave me the two tablets of stone written with the finger of God, and on them were all the words that the LORD had spoken with you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire on the day of the assembly [*ekklesia*]." Again, in 1 Sam. 17.46-7 the *ekklesia* is the assembly of the special people of the Lord, not as gathered on a particular occasion for worship: "This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly [*ekklesia*] may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand."

On the other hand, the term *can* be used precisely for such a gathering, as it is in Psalm 22.22: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation [*ekklesia*] I will praise you." Or, again, with reference to Solomon's blessing at the dedication of the temple: "Then the king turned around and blessed all the assembly [*ekklesia*] of Israel, while all the assembly [*ekklesia*] of Israel stood" (2 Chron. 6.3). And shortly thereafter: "Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of the assembly [*ekklesia*] of Israel and spread out his hands" (2 Chron. 6.12).

Nevertheless, because the blessing just mentioned is given by the king, we are reminded that the "worshiping" aspect of the people is not divorced from the "political" aspect of the people, even if at times one or the other element is foregrounded. In contrast, Nehemiah 5.7 emphasizes the "political" or judicial aspect of God's people: "I took counsel with myself, and I brought charges against the nobles and the officials. I said to them, 'You are exacting interest, each from his brother.' And I held a great assembly [*ekklesia*] against them..."

It is both curious and significant that when the writers of the New Testament sought a term for the assembly of believers in the resurrection of Jesus, they fixed not upon *synagoge* but instead on *ekklesia*. Why was this? Did it come to them directly from heathen political practice, or as mediated through the usage of the LXX? Given the background and concerns of the Apostles, there can be no doubt that the latter is correct. One might suggest, then, that the reason for their preference for one term over the other had a good deal to do with the particular resonances of that term, that is, with the idea that the assembly of God's people is the result of God's prior action; it is only convened as God himself "calls out" a people by his Word.

Already we find evidence of this in the title given to the assembly in the Pentateuch: "No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the Lord [*ekklesia kuriou*]. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the Lord [*ekklesia*]"

1. For convenience, I use the *ESV* as the base-text for English translations herein and modify where necessary to reflect the usage of the LXX.

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kuriou)" (Deut. 23.2). Compare also Judges 20.2: "And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God [*ekklesia tou laou tou theou*], 400,000 men on foot that drew the sword." Why is the assembly the "assembly of the Lord" or the "assembly of the people of God"? Because it ultimately rests on God's summoning. This relation of the creature to the creator, of being summoned from non-being to being and to life, is already evident in the opening chapter of Genesis: "And God called [*ekalesen*] the light day and he called [*ekalesen*] the darkness night. And evening came into existence [*egeneto*] and morning came into

existence [*egeneto*], the first day" (Gen. 1.5). This pattern is continued in the life of Abraham, the man of promise and of faith. As he is about to sacrifice his only son, seemingly invalidated the promise of God with respect to his offspring, the angel of the Lord calls to him: "But the angel of the Lord called [*ekalesen*] to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him'" (Gen. 22.11-12). Almost immediately there follows a confirmation of the promises of God: "And the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld

your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore" (Gen. 22.15-16). This pattern is continued in the life of Israel: "Wherefore Israel was an infant, and I loved him, and out of Egypt I called back [*metekalesa*] his children" (Hosea 11.1).

This last passage is familiar from the Gospel of Matthew, but it is quoted in a different form: "Out of Egypt I called [*ekalesa*] my son" (Matt. 2.15). Here, of course, it refers to Christ, and thus we have found the key. The promises of the Lord to Abraham and his offspring are all "Yes" and "Amen" in the heir of the promise, the Lord Jesus Christ. As God fulfills his promises in Christ, he continues to call a people to himself: "I have not come to call [*kalesai*] the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5.32). This calling of a people through faith and repentance, and its concomitant promise of salvation, is taken up and continued by the Apostles, for "Peter said to them, 'Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls [*proskalesetai*] to himself" (Acts 2.38-9). Thus do sinners become the children of God.

And what is this new people? It is the "church," the *ekklesia*, the assembly of the redeemed. This is given summary form perhaps nowhere better than in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians:

Paul, called [*kletos*] by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God [*ekklesia tou theou*] that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called [*kletois*] to be saints together with all those who in ev-

ery place call upon [*epikaloumenois*] the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 1.1-3)

Ekklesia tou theou is precisely the title often used for God’s people in the Old Testament, here clarified as those who have been called by God in Christ and who call upon him in return. This—and not organizational structure, institutional authority, or anything else—is, most fundamentally, what the “church” is. This fact explains why Paul needs to add to “the church of God” the specification “that is in Corinth”: the “church” is not in the first instance a particular local group—like a polis or city-state—nor is it a bureaucratically-systematized denominational federation. It transcends all such trappings that belong to common earthly life, for the “church” in its most basic sense—the called and the calling—is radically related by grace through faith to the ascended Christ, who has gone up on high, leading captivity captive and giving to his people the gift of his heavenly Spirit.

Are there implications in this concept for the organizational structure institutional authority of the local and regional church? Of course. But none of these constitute what the church is. At its most basic, the concept “church” is so simple that it can almost be missed as we

hasten along to talk about what we sometimes consider to be more sophisticated, meaningful aspects of the doctrine, with polysyllabic words such as “ecclesiology.” In the end, it is nothing more—and, much more significantly, nothing less—than the people constituted by God’s summoning before the throne of Jesus Christ through his Word and Spirit, and their humble response to that call in repentance and faith.



David Dances in the Presence of the Ark
ANONYMOUS

E.J. Hutchinson is Associate Prof. of Classics and Director of the Collegiate Scholars Program at Hillsdale College. His research focuses on the Latin literature of late antiquity and early modernity, and he is a regular contributor at The Calvinist International.

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