



The People of God's Presence

An Introduction to Ecclesiology

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Introduction

A Re-formation of the Church?

It was shocking to hear Josh McDowell say this in 1998, but I knew it was true: “If the church does not change its method and keep in touch with the times, in five years we could be *irrelevant* to an entire generation of young people.”¹ After almost twenty years of massive cultural shifts in North America, as well as the enormous increase of social media during this time, it seems likely that this timetable of the church’s relevancy should move from five *years* to five *days*! Not only is the church’s appeal to youth at stake, but also its relevancy to our entire society. In light of such rapid and far-reaching shifts, what is the church to do? At the very least, it seems that a new re-formation² is in order—one that reshapes our understanding of the nature and mission of the church today. Change of some sort seems necessary, but what should that look like?

Perhaps a first step is an attitude adjustment—one that engagement with young adults over the past twenty years has helped to fine-tune in me. An essential aspect of needed change is for the church to become more authentic.³ Many people today are cynical of churches. While for some people a

1. My paraphrase of his statement made at a conference at Lee University, Cleveland, TN, in January 1998.

2. The word “re-formation” used throughout this work points to a renewal of the structural framework of the church. It attempts a wordplay on the Protestant Reformation that began such reform of the church but in many ways became stalled. Therefore, ecclesiology awaits a renewal in the way the church is set up, based on a theological and biblical foundation.

3. Surveys of young people since 2007 tend to underscore this specific perception—the church is “hypocritical.” Research done by the Barna Group notes that 66% of millennials

relationship with God or some type of general spirituality is perceived as beneficial, for others a connection with the Christian church is seen as unnecessary or even harmful to one's well-being. Unfortunately, on a number of occasions the church has earned its reputation for harming instead of healing. A stance of genuineness seems vital to begin any internal reform in the church so that it operates with integrity both within and without its doors. Yet beyond adjusting our willingness as the church to examine ourselves and begin seeing ourselves as others see us, there remains an even more important task of assessing ourselves from God's perspective. Such a self-assessment requires a theological review of who the church was meant to be and how the church was meant to operate in the world. Re-formation of the church must begin with penetrating theological introspection before it proposes any practical solutions. Therefore, our proposal coincides well with the saying that Karl Barth made famous: *ecclesia semper reformanda est* (The church must always be reforming).⁴

The church has often had an ambiguous and sometimes difficult relationship with the world in which it operates. At times we became so like the world that we lost our prophetic stance; at other times we spoke so harshly to people that we lost our loving posture. While the message of the good

(born between 1984 and 1998) make this claim about churchgoers ("What Millennials Want When They Visit Church," March 4, 2015, <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>). This is also supported by information from Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. In 2016, Pew Research conducted a new survey related to the Religious Landscape survey, attempting to discover more detail for why people are nonaffiliated ("nones"). About 78% of the nones were raised in a religious household but left their faith behind, no longer identifying with a religious group. By allowing for extended answers instead of preset answers to questions, Pew learned that about 49% of the nones were disenchanting with faith and no longer believed. About 20% of the nones disliked organized religion. See Michael Lipka, "Why America's 'Nones' Left Religion Behind," August 24, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/24/why-americas-nones-left-religion-behind/>. Finally, research from the Barna Group also focuses on the question of church in relation to the newer youth group "Gen Z" (born between 1999 and 2015). A study from 2016 of the thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds in this segment revealed some important data. For non-Christians, the second most common (23%) barrier to faith was the perception of Christians as hypocrites. The most common barrier was the problem of evil (29%). Most respondents who said, "Church is not important," felt that "church is not relevant to me personally" (64%) or "I find God elsewhere" (61%). For the latter information, see "Gen-Z: Your Questions Answered," February 6, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-questions-answered/>.

4. For a thorough recent history of this Latin phrase, see Theodor Mahlmann: "'Ecclesia semper reformanda': Eine historische Aufarbeitung; Neue Bearbeitung," in *Hermeneutica sacra: Studien zur Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, ed. Torbjörn Johansson, Robert Kolb, and Johann Anselm Steiger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 381–442.

news of Jesus Christ need not change, the method by which it is disseminated *must* change if it is to remain relevant to the people among whom the church lives. That has been an “old saw” for many years, but there is still some truth to it. However, what I am proposing in this book goes beyond that old remedy of keeping the message and tweaking the method of delivery. What I propose has to do with transformation of our understanding of the church itself—not just its methods or programs—as well as a transformation of our communal lives together. Such transformation requires a major *theological* overhaul of the doctrine of the church as well as a major *existential* overhaul of our expectations of the life of the Spirit together as the people of God. In other words, before we fiddle with our methods, we must return to a theological task that searches out the basis of the church’s being and doing. It is my belief that by turning to such a theological inquiry about the church, we will also turn to a renewal of our own commitment to life together in the presence of God.

Consequently, this book arises out of a desire to contribute to a theological discussion about the direction of the church in the twenty-first century. Other voices have already provided some impetus for this discussion since the last quarter of the previous century, yet a great deal of change has occurred in culture and the way we “do” church since then.⁵ In the past twenty years, we have witnessed new forms of doing church—the “emergent” church as well as the “emerging” church.⁶ We have seen a rise in the theological and practical discussion of churches viewing their own mission as an extension of the mission of God (*missio Dei*).⁷ In the United States, however, we have also seen a rather drastic drop in church attendance and a strong trend toward spirituality but not the institutional church (i.e., the “nones,” as they are called in Pew’s survey, who are not affiliated with institutional religion).⁸ People in Western societies, especially in the United States, seem to continue moving toward being spiritual but not religious.

5. Consider Howard A. Snyder, *The Problems of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1975); also Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

6. See E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Post-modern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); also Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

7. See, e.g., Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

8. Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015. Accessed from www.pewresearch.org. Weekly church attendance dropped by 3.7% in just seven years (from 2007–14), according to this survey. Also, the category of “nones” rose dramatically to 19% in the same period of time. About one out of five adults in the United States do not affiliate with institutional religion or church.

So what is the church to do? Are we to stick our heads in the sand, ignoring what is happening in the culture around us? Do we batten down the hatches and attempt to make sink-proof churches? Some have suggested that a new approach to Christianity is needed.⁹ Others have a refrain that runs something like the following proposals: *If only the church would become less judgmental and more tolerant, then people would return to it. If only the church would be more open to other religions and less focused on Jesus Christ as the way, then society would appreciate the church's role in helping people in the world. If only the church would shed its view of salvation as procured by a violent "bloody sacrifice" through Christ's death in appeasement of the wrath of God the Father and would take up a view of atonement that is peaceable, then the world would be less violent. If only the church would jettison its rhetoric about lifestyles and welcome all styles of living, then we could truly be an inclusive home for lost souls.* These proposals are not crafted from my imagination but have arisen recently.¹⁰ As if to put an exclamation point on his article, the author of these challenges and proposals has offered a prophetic warning: "It is this kind of church that will emerge and thrive. The others will die a slow and agonizingly painful death."¹¹ While I disagree with this assessment and some of the proposals he offers, I do recognize the pressure that the church faces to become something that fits the needs of more people today. But is this the answer—changing our theological bases along with our methods so that people like us more? Is the church supposed to adjust its purpose and function for the sake of wider appeal?

We certainly need to reform more than just the methods and programs we utilize while we *do* church; we need to reassess the very *theological* foundation on which those methods stand. We need to grasp a deeper biblical and theological understanding of the nature of the church—who we *are* as the church—in order to engage the world with God's mission. Therefore, in this book I offer the following two lenses to examine the current state of the church and to provide a proposal for each:

9. Sources as diverse as John Shelby Spong's *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) and Michael L. Brown's *Revolution in the Church: Challenging the Religious System with a Call for Radical Change* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 2002) provide differing criteria for their goal of making the church relevant or effective in this century.

10. See Steve McSwain, "Why Christianity Is Dying While Spirituality Is Thriving," *Huffington Post*, Dec. 10, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-mcswain/christianity-is-dying-spirituality-is-thriving_b_1950804.html. All of these suggestions above stem from this article. McSwain thinks that new churches—like the emerging church movement—hold the best hope for the "nones," those who want spirituality without religion.

11. McSwain, "Why Christianity Is Dying."

1. a reassessment of a theology of the church with regard to the *nature* of the church;
2. a reconsideration of the tasks and worship of the church with regard to its *mission*.¹²

On the one hand, I have no illusions about the apparent impracticality of my overall proposal. On the other hand, I also have no illusions about the result awaiting us if we do not attempt to bring theological and practical change to the church with something like what is proposed here. The church needs a re-formation of ecclesiology today as surely as it needed a re-formation of soteriology five hundred years ago.

From Individual Believers to a Believers' Church?

The basic ecclesial model upon which our discussion in this book stands is located within the larger framework of what is called the believers' church. Founded after the Protestant Reformation by groups of Anabaptists who felt that the main (or so-called magisterial) Reformers did not renew the structure of the church far enough, the believers' church stressed the need for its members to be *believers*—regenerated persons in Christ—who have followed Christ in baptism.¹³ The immediate difficulty with this model for building a doctrine of the Christian *community* is that it leans so heavily toward *individual* decision for Christ that the church becomes more of an afterthought to which individual Christians are somehow tied. Given the rampant individualism of modern Western society and the clear communalism of the people of faith in the Scriptures, this becomes a major concern for building a healthy, more biblically attuned model for the church. Therefore, readers will see that there are features of the believers' church model that need to be tweaked and perhaps even overcome before we can imitate some of the corporate aspects of the church in the New Testament. However, as I will propose, we cannot escape the fact that salvation is *individual*, not corporate.

12. In a companion volume entitled *Serving the People of God's Presence: A Theology of Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming), I sketch out in more detail the practical ramifications of the theology presented in this book.

13. Some sources refer to this as the free-church model in order to contrast it with the state-church model, in which being baptized as infants within a certain geographical region "made" one a Christian. While this last description is an oversimplification, I engage it further in *Serving the People of God's Presence*. For more information on the believers' church model, see Franklin H. Littell, "The Concept of the Believers' Church," in *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1968 Louisville Conference*, ed. James Leo Garrett Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 15–32.

Given this proposition, then, how can we develop an ecclesiology that is not fraught with individualism?¹⁴

I deny any automatic conclusion that such a focus on *individual* decision in salvation requires an *individualistic* ecclesiology. Indeed, the theological features of this book were developed in order to craft an ecclesiology where the church

1. is based on each member/participant of a local church being a Christian who has been directly encountered and birthed anew by the Spirit of God and has chosen to respond to this grace given them by being baptized in water (often called believers' baptism);
2. is constituted by the Spirit drawing and binding together the people of God into a newly empowered community (the body of Christ) to fulfill the mission of God in the world; and
3. is crafted both individually and *especially* communally by the Spirit into the shape and image of Christ (attaining to the full stature of Christ, as Paul says in Eph. 4:13, 15).

It is such growing “up into him . . . , which is the head” (KJV) of the church that is the continual process toward the goal not just of individuals but also of the entire community (Eph. 4:15). When *all of us* in the local congregation “continually reflect the glory of the Lord with an unveiled face,”¹⁵ we begin to demonstrate the reality of God's being and nature in the finite world of our human existence (2 Cor. 3:18). When *all of us* in the congregation “are constantly being transformed into the image of the Lord from one stage of glory to another,” we begin to witness to the unbelieving world with the presence and power of the God who has encountered us through our collective lives and loving relationships. The metamorphosis (μεταμορφούμεθα | *metamorphoumetha*) required for humans in a congregation to reflect accurately and appropriately their Lord's glory can be accomplished only by that Lord, who is the Spirit. Living and dwelling in the presence of God's glory transforms

14. This is also the challenge for developing an evangelical ecclesiology. Stanley Grenz suggests that the focus on personal experience in the new birth influenced this individualistic flavor among evangelicals to the extent that it created a “benign neglect of the church, if not a certain anti-church bias.” See Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 291.

15. The Greek used in this sentence makes it clear that it is the *group together* that is the subject: “We all with a single unveiled face reflect the glory of the Lord.” The word “face” is in the singular, describing how we all together (plural) are to reflect (or contemplate) God's glory. The Greek reads, ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακεκαλυμμένω προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτρίζομενοι. When this passage is used in the next few sentences, it is my translation of 2 Cor. 3:18 from the Greek.

us into the people of God—a people who grow up together to look like their God in terms of nature and action. Hence, the Christian community is not a voluntary association, which individual believers may choose to join or not. It is a gathering of those called out by the Spirit into fellowship, discipleship, and comradeship in the body of Christ in order to reflect God’s nature and to fulfill God’s mission on earth.

A Pneumatic Ecclesiology

The dimension whereby I propose to overcome some of the challenges to a believers’ church model, or evangelical ecclesiology, is what I call a *pneumatic* approach to the church. While this will be developed more fully throughout the pages of this book, the essential idea highlights the role of the Spirit in creating believers who are new creatures in Christ; in grafting us into the body of Christ, his church; in shaping this new community into the likeness of Christ; and in constituting this new community with such love, unity, and power that the *missio Dei* (mission of God) is being fulfilled in this world by its actions. The reason this is *pneumatic* is because it relies heavily on the Spirit’s work in individuals and in the community; it is the Spirit of God who creates both Christians *and* Christian communities. It is the Spirit of God who brings into our finite, sinful world a direct encounter with God’s presence and power so that the new community formed by God’s hand continues the ministry of Christ here and now. To say that this ecclesiology is pneumatic is *not* to imply that the church is merely an invisible fellowship. Just as encounters with the Spirit happen within our human bodies in time and space so that we are being transformed in our earthly, historical existence day by day (2 Cor. 4:7), so too the Spirit’s operation in knitting together human lives into the body of Christ occurs within visible communities in human history.¹⁶

Hopefully, my proposal will provide some new insight to help resolve some of the difficulties for a believers’ church model, while at the same time offering more than just a believers’ church ecclesiology. Moreover, it will be evident that

16. To make the church entirely into an invisible communion of believers is to offer an ecclesial form of docetism, in which the true essence of the church lies in its invisible, spiritual nature. The trappings of human institutions or structure or order are something less than or other than the true body of Christ. Swiss theologian Emil Brunner comes very close to this idea, emphasizing the spiritual, invisible nature of the true church as a fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ. See Emil Brunner, *Das Mißverständnis der Kirche* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951), 12, where the church is identified as a “community of Christ,” or a “pure fellowship of persons,” not an “institution, a Something [*ein Etwas*].” While I think Brunner offers a powerful concept regarding the spiritual dimension of the church’s existence, I also believe he is mistaken since the church in his mind seems to hover over the reality of existence in time and space without any concrete order for its existence.

Pentecostal concepts flood my proposal, yet this project is designed to be more than a Pentecostal ecclesiology. It is my conviction that the situation of the church today is so dire that a new way of conceiving the local body of Christ in theological and practical dimensions is necessary for the future well-being of the gospel of Christ in the Western world (and perhaps even more broadly than that). For any relevant and effective church bearing the name “Christian” in the twenty-first century, at least some of the features proposed here will need to be incorporated. Essentially, I propose the following major points:

1. *If the church is the people of God, then we should reflect the nature of the God we serve in all aspects of our lives.* From our understanding of God should come our understanding of the church; insight from trinitarian relations should offer some insight into and paradigms for human relations within the body of Christ. It only makes sense that the people of God should reflect the character of their God. But *how* can God's people act and think like God? This discussion is engaged in chapters 1–2 of this book.
2. *If the people of God are to reflect God's nature, then we must be transformed by the presence and power of God.* The presence of God is the necessary requisite for accomplishing God's will as a community of believers. As I will show, the Spirit of God brings God's presence to believers both in their individual lives and in their corporate life. Along with this presence comes a power to accomplish what God calls us to do. This material is explained further in chapter 3 of this book.
3. *If the people of God are to do the work of God, then they must be gathered for worship to glorify God and be trained to reach out to others in the body of Christ and the world.* As we, the people of God, dwell together in God's presence, we align our hearts with God's heart, which shapes us with proper motivation for loving others. We practice this love first in the community of fellow believers, and then we move out together to witness and serve the people of the world. We proclaim and hear proclaimed the Word of God, and through the Spirit's help, we share this Word with others. This is the focus of chapters 4–6.
4. *If the people of God are to be equipped to do the work of ministry, then they must be led by servants who reflect Jesus's own reversal of worldly power and tend the flock of God entrusted to their care with love and respect, thereby opening space for God's presence and power both within and without the congregation.* Church leaders are given by Christ to local congregations and the church as a whole for the purpose

of equipping disciples to serve. The entire body of Christ is meant to be ministers—servants of their Lord and of people. The leaders are not meant to perform all the work to be done but to train disciples of Christ to live and work in the world by the power of the Spirit. Successful business models of leadership and secular CEOs may provide some insight into managing people, but they cannot be the basis for leadership training in the church. It is this material that the book *Serving the People of God's Presence* develops, along with a proposal for restructuring the church based on the pneumatic empowerment of the Spirit.

God's Presence and Power

A further word needs to be said about the title of the book: *The People of God's Presence*. While there are other important New Testament images of the church that carry significant messages about our nature—*who* the church is to be—I have chosen the phrase “people of God” as a primary image since it is one that readily brings continuity to both the old and new covenants, speaking directly to a major point of this book.¹⁷ God desired to have a people with whom he could share fellowship and face-to-face communication; as we will see, this intent was delayed in the old covenant (Exod. 19–24) but revisited in the new covenant, where it was fulfilled in Christ (1 Pet. 2:9–10). Due to the Spirit's mediatorial role between the risen Christ and believers today, we no longer need any human go-between office since that has been filled by our high priest, Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who is the bridge between heaven and earth, between the spiritual realm and the terrestrial realm. When he ascended to heaven, Christ sent the promised Counselor, the Holy Spirit, to reside with us and in us, being called alongside us to help (John 14–16).

Here two key concepts come into play: the presence and power of God. From how I read the New Testament *and* how I have experienced the risen Lord in my life and the life of the church, the *presence of God* is necessary for us to experience transformation (being “born again” by the Spirit; John 3), to understand who Christ is and what he has taught (being led by the Spirit, who “will guide” us “into all truth”; John 16:13; Rom. 8:14, 16), and to follow the guidance of the Scripture as genuine children of God—true disciples of

17. An older but definitive study of the various images for church used in the New Testament remains Paul S. Minear's *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, New Testament Library, ed. C. Clifton Black, John T. Carroll, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004; orig. ed., 1960). Minear's chapter on “minor images” of the church is especially intriguing. I have also benefited from Everett Ferguson's discussion of this topic: *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 73–91 on the people of God.

Jesus Christ (being adopted into the family of God by the Spirit and crying, “Abba, Father,” as did Jesus himself; Rom. 8:14–15). In what may be the most magisterial study of Paul and the Spirit in recent times, New Testament scholar Gordon Fee has concluded that when Paul uses the motif of “presence” in his writings, it is essentially synonymous with the Spirit of God. He states that central to Paul’s theology of the Spirit is the idea

that the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promises found in Jeremiah and Ezekiel: that God himself would breathe on us and we would live; that he would write his law in our hearts; and especially that he would give his Spirit “unto us,” so that we are indwelt by him. What is crucial for Paul is that we are thus indwelt by the eternal God. The gathered church and the individual believer are the new locus of God’s own presence with his people; and the Spirit is the way God is now present.¹⁸

Fee notes that the Spirit is God—a person, a presence, and a power. While I have no conscious memory of how I arrived at understanding the important role that “presence” and “power” play in this book, I believe it was somewhat influenced by Fee’s depiction of Paul’s ideas.

My proposal will attempt to demonstrate the necessity of God’s *direct presence* for individual believers and for the gathering of believers locally in a community of faith. Just as Moses understood the disaster awaiting the people of Israel if God’s presence would not go with them, we, too, grasp the significance of God being with us: “If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?” (Exod. 33:15–16). While it is true that God’s presence is actually everywhere (Ps. 139), it is not this omnipresent reality of God’s life that we are noting here with the word “presence.” Instead, it is more akin to the glory of God filling the temple of Solomon so that the priests could not minister in the temple (1 Kings 8:11).¹⁹ It is the presence of God indwelling believers individually *and* corporately that distinguishes us from all other peoples on the earth.

18. Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 6–7. I call this work magisterial for three reasons: (1) its scope—the entire corpus of Paul’s Letters in search of how the Spirit is understood in them; (2) its length—915 pages of intense, non-repetitive study; and (3) its evidence marshaled to substantiate its thesis—an overwhelming argument sustained throughout the text, bringing a powerful conclusion to the unity on this theme of God’s presence in Paul’s writings.

19. The layout of these Scriptures follows what Fee has written in *God’s Empowering Presence*, 7–9.

We belong to God because we have been encountered by God's presence and have responded positively to his gracious overtures. If the church is to remain relevant and a vital part of the life of any society, it must stop searching for programs that appeal to those who either are or are not attending church and instead start engaging in a search for the presence of God in their lives within the corporate life of the local body of Christ.²⁰

This brings us to the word "power" itself. Fee's use of the word "empowering" to describe God's presence is quite ingenious, since it seems to characterize Paul's own understanding of the Spirit's power in our lives. As Fee summarizes Paul's thoughts on power, he states, "We are not left on our own as far as our relationship with God is concerned; neither are we left on our own to 'slug it out in the trenches,' as it were, with regard to the Christian life. Life in the present is empowered by the God who dwells among us and in us."²¹ These words reflect Paul's own optimism about life in the Spirit, both individually and corporately. Humans who are believers in Jesus Christ have been indwelt with God's presence through the work of the Spirit and should find that they have the power to live the life of a disciple of Christ, assisted in this endeavor by the family of God in the community of faith. This is the power necessary to transform us from self-centered sinners to other-centered givers. However, just as we humans cannot live the Christian life without the Spirit's presence and power, so too the church cannot reflect the nature of God without the Spirit's presence and power.

One recurring issue that I have experienced in ministry is the challenge of leadership. In many cases, the way we have structured congregations affects the way we experience the church. Here I am referring not to styles of *governance* (such as episcopal, congregational, or presbyterian) but to the structure of leadership in the overall internal operations of a local church gathering. Rather than ignore the issue of leadership in this book on ecclesiology, I have set aside an entire companion volume (*Serving the People of God's Presence*) to deal with it in the context of power. In the companion volume,

20. As an example of one group that is definitely not heeding the revamping of church through programs, bells, or whistles, see Jonathan Aigner's blog *Ponder Anew* (also located at patheos.com). Speaking to the church today, he states, "In modeling worship after commercial entertainment, you've compromised your identity, and we're still not coming back. And even if we did, would there be any church left? Would there be anything beyond the frills, the lights, the performance, the affected vocals? Would we still see a cross? Would we still find our place among the saints who have come before? Would we find reminders of our life-long need of grace?" "Dear Church: An Open Letter from One of Those Millennials You Can't Figure Out," May 13, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/ponderanew/2015/05/13/dear-church-an-open-letter-from-one-of-those-millennials-you-cant-figure-out/>.

21. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 8.

I ask questions about theory and praxis in relation to leadership as well as questions about the New Testament and church leadership. Yet perhaps the most important thing in this companion volume will be a call for a different approach to understanding “power” and “authority” among God’s people. As Daniel Migliore has noted with regard to issues of power, “To be moved by the Spirit of resurrection and new life is to undergo a *metanoia*, a conversion, a complete turnaround in one’s understanding of power and in one’s exercise of power. Nothing in one’s daily life and practice is left undisturbed.”²² It is that “conversion” and how it can be implemented in the church that I consider in *Serving the People of God’s Presence*.

Therefore, I will propose some radical changes in the way we consider leaders (clergy) and even in the way we consider followers (laity).²³ One thing is clear to me: the way we have done things in the structuring of the church frequently has led to power struggles in local congregations and to some of God’s people being seriously harmed. While these things may never be completely overcome in this life, shouldn’t the church work toward imitating the Lord so that such a worldly view of “power” could be diminished and the true, authentic understanding of power as servanthood be realized?

The result of this *theological and practical* reorientation of the church could be no less impactful than the Reformation of the 1500s on the doctrines of salvation and justification. It is time for the church to be reformed, because if it is not, it may find itself preaching to a disinterested, deafened world.

Sitting On Our Past?

Several times during seminary training in Ohio, I was asked to fill in for a pastor about thirty miles away. The pastor was a fellow seminarian. This particular church refused to get a permanent pastor, so they would come down to the seminary and pluck one of us for a plush job for the two or three years we were there. While I was never chosen for the more permanent

22. Daniel L. Migliore, *The Power of God and the gods of Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 56.

23. My choice of the biblical image “people of God” for the primary image to describe the church in this book is due in part to a desire to rethink the concept of λαός | *laos* (Greek for “people”) for today’s church, especially over against the troublesome divide of God’s people into “clergy” and “laity.” As we shall see, even the English word “clergy” derives from the Greek word κλήρος | *klēros*, which refers to “a lot, a portion, a possession, or something assigned,” as in 1 Pet. 5:3. The people of God are the *klēroi*, the flock allotted to the care of shepherds. So the people (the *laos*) of God are also the “clergy” (*klēroi*) in the more biblical sense of that term. See Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 75. These concepts are clarified and supported further in *Serving the People of God’s Presence*.

assignment, I was asked several times to fill in while my friend was away or on vacation.

The church was one of a kind. It had eight members—the same eight members for dozens of years. They met every Sunday morning to perform their liturgy precisely as they had for decades. (It was made clear to me that changing or adding one syllable would place my honorarium at risk!) Each member filed in on Sunday until all eight found their pew spots in this 125-year-old building. The architecture and grounds were exquisite. The place, however, was lifeless. All of the members were over seventy years old, and it was clear that newcomers were not welcomed. Once, it had been the largest church in the town; now it was the smallest. It lived off the past—quite literally. In its heyday, an endowment fund was established; by the time I preached there, it had accumulated almost three million dollars! And eight people sat on it every Sunday, keeping up the appearance of a church. There was no evangelism, no outreach, no benevolence for the poor in town, no hands outstretched to the community. Only eight souls were keeping the status quo. I wondered, Could the church as a whole—the body of Christ—become like this church?

It is my belief that a renewed theological dialogue is needed to ensure that such an outcome does not happen to the church. Not until our *theology of the church* begins to affect the *life of the church* will we engage the world around us in a manner that is both relevant and effective. This book heads toward that goal of engaging a theological conversation, especially by providing theological and practical proposals for a renewed doctrine of the church.

This book begins by examining the traditional model of the church as the mediator of God's presence and moves forward to lay a theological foundation for the church as the people of God's direct presence and power. *Serving the People of God's Presence* continues in this direction by asking how the church could be structured and led as a people of God's presence and power. It is my hope that the radical nature of the overall proposal will generate discussion among God's people so that we can be light and salt to a world that desperately needs the message of Christ—the good news.



The Church as *the* Means of Connecting with God?

Direct Encounters with God and Secondary Mediation in the Church

Encounters between God and Humans: Direct or Indirect?

The people of God have experienced the presence of the risen Christ *directly* through the presence of the Holy Spirit and the instrumentality of the Word of God; they have been (and are being) transformed by this encounter. Moreover, the people of God continue to experience the presence of God *directly* through the presence of the Spirit and within the gathering of God's people for worship, instruction, ministry, and sending. Overall, this is the proposal of this book. The initial encounters with God's Spirit in order to bring about salvation may come all at once or over many years through many means. Within such experiences, as God uses various means to connect with a human, the Spirit makes *direct* connection with the unbeliever's spirit and therefore reveals the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ. While God may have used a person sharing their experience with God, a worship service in a local church, a sunset over the Rocky Mountains, the preaching of the Scriptures on the radio, "a flute concerto, the blossoming shrub, or a dead dog"¹ to initiate

1. *CD I/1:55* (2nd ed.). Here we find Barth stressing the sovereignty of God to speak to humans outside of the Word of God as proclaimed by the church; he suggests that we would do well to listen if it really is God. Yet we cannot build our theology based on these experiences. In the context of arguing for the proclamation of the Word of God, then, Barth raises several

these encounters with us, these were *secondary means* to the *primary or direct* encounter with God. By using the words “primary” and “secondary,” I do not mean to denigrate the latter, since both are ways in which God operates in our midst. However, what I am suggesting is that within such indirect, secondary means, God confronts us in a direct, primal encounter of an “I” and a “Thou.” The Holy Spirit connects with our spirits *directly*. Jürgen Moltmann offers a clear description of what he calls experiences of the Holy Spirit: “We are saying that these experiences [of the Spirit] are of unfathomable depth, because in them God himself is present in us [*weil in ihnen Gott selbst in uns anwesend ist*], so that in the immanence of our hearts we discover a transcendent depth.”² This heads toward what I mean by experiencing the direct presence of God. While it is true that God accommodates to us by stooping to our level with signs and symbols to mediate his presence to us, it is also true that we may experience God directly even within that mediation. Thus, while utilizing indirect means of physical, tangible signs, God still encounters us directly through his Spirit. The difficulty with this proposal is that many understandings of the church have focused on the church itself as *the only* means of connecting with God; the church somehow becomes the *primary* way by which humans can connect with God and God with them. I find this conclusion to be problematic.

It seems true to say that physical signs (media) may indeed participate in some way with the thing they are signifying, thereby *opening up space for God to enter and truly encounter us*. However, if the focus of our attention is on the sign and not on the presence of God within, behind, or beyond the symbol, then we have somehow missed the occasion for God's presence to confront us *directly*. To be sure, missing the direct presence of God by focusing on the secondary means may not have been the intent of the authors we will survey in this chapter, but it certainly is the result of their ecclesiological proposals. The origin and continuance of the Christian life are not found in the secondary accoutrements of the church's rituals or activities; the origin and continuance of the Christian life are found in a direct encounter of the Spirit of God with a human being, such that a transformation occurs—a passing from death to life, created anew in Christ Jesus by the power of the Spirit. “The experience of the Spirit makes Christ—the risen Christ—

quotes from the Gallic Confession (1559) that deal with the need for pastors to instruct the faithful in the gospel of Christ.

2. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 155. The original German work is *Der Geist des Lebens: Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie*, Werke 7 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2016; orig. ed., 1991), 169.

present, and with him makes the eschatological future present too.”³ It is my contention that this initial, salvific encounter with God—rebirth or regeneration, if you will—is the basis for calling ourselves Christians and the foundation for being engrafted into the body of Christ. “In the moment of ‘rebirth,’ eternity touches time.”⁴ Without such an experience in God, we are left circulating around things that look and sound churchy, but without a truly life-changing movement from death to life. Only the Spirit of God can birth us a second time and engraft us into the body of Christ (John 3:3–8). *To become a Christian* can take a moment when the presence of Christ encounters us and we respond positively to God’s gracious Spirit; *to become Christlike*, however, takes a lifetime of continual divine encounters and a life-response of obedience within the context of a community of believers where we learn together how to spend our lives for God and others, where we share life together while following Christ, and where we continue to experience together the empowering presence of the Spirit leading us away from our self-centeredness and into a life that is other-centered, just like the Triune God. To accomplish this *becoming*, we need the body of Christ—the church.

So then, is the church only good for making us better followers of Christ? It is certainly more than that. Through the secondary mediation of signs and symbols, I contend that God’s Spirit may encounter us directly. These are instruments through which God himself⁵ has chosen to meet with us. This encounter does not, however, make the instruments themselves holy—just useful. The church, then, has a role to play in spreading the gospel of Christ so that people who are encountered by the Spirit may be able to discern who this One is who confronted them.

As already noted, this proposal for a direct encounter with God does not mean there is no indirect or mediated avenue through which God engages humankind. God continues to speak and encounter us through these secondary means, but at the same time believers have something more. God has also given us his own Spirit—the same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead and now works with power in us to raise us from the death of sin to the life of God (Rom. 8:9–11). The Spirit of God lives within us, assuring us that we

3. Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 147.

4. Moltmann, *Spirit of Life*, 147.

5. Throughout the book, I vary the reflexive pronoun for God from “Godself” to “himself.” The former term is a recent neologism meant to overcome the difficulty in English of not having a genderless reflexive pronoun to refer to God. I acknowledge that God is neither male nor female but is above these designations, because God is Spirit. Whenever possible, I have used “Godself.” But in those instances where the use of “Godself” leads to awkward syntax and cadence, I use “himself” as the reflexive pronoun for God.

belong to Christ (8:9). Therefore, those who are led by this indwelling Spirit of God are truly God's children (8:14). The Spirit within us does not bring fear, but instead the certainty of our adoption into God's family, whereby we cry "Abba, Father," as did Jesus (8:15). This same indwelling Spirit "testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (8:16). Finally, the indwelling Spirit also "intercedes for us through wordless groans" (8:26b). Through the power of the *indwelling Spirit of God*, then, believers have the direct, immediate presence of the living God in Jesus Christ, assuring them of their salvation and adoption into God's family as well as attesting to the Spirit's own presence within them by praying through them with groans from their inner beings. We have the privilege of experiencing God face-to-face in this new covenant—and not solely through mediation; such encounters continue throughout the Christian life because the Spirit lives within us, leading, guiding, and assuring us of God's very presence. This is what it means to live *in Christ* and have Christ live *in us*. I can think of no clearer biblical expression than this to describe the *direct encounter* with God.

Two Challenges to a Direct Encounter with God

In speaking of a *direct encounter* with God, I face two major challenges. First, there seem to be only *indirect encounters* with God, since the infinite God uses (or must use) media in order to connect with finite humans. At best, then, humans have an encounter with God that is not really with God but with the media used by God.⁶ This becomes problematic because humans seem to have an interpretive network centered in our brains and coordinated by means of our social network to give meaning to these media and to any experience we might have of them. Therefore, the thorny issue of subjectivism raises its head: how can we know that our interpretation of the God whom we experienced is genuine or merely a warped interpretation of the medium through which God has chosen to operate? How can we even say we have experienced a *direct* encounter with God when such an experience would undoubtedly be impossible in this life (rendering us dead; to use a biblical concept: "No one may see [God] and live!" Exod. 33:20)? Yet if we only have *indirect* encounters with God, how can we know that what we experienced was truly God and not some undigested piece of cheese (to quote Ebenezer Scrooge upon seeing one of the spirits that visited him on Christmas Eve)?

The second challenge to a direct encounter relates to the instrumentality itself, especially in terms of the way the Christian church has tended to view

6. A thorough examination of what I mean by "direct encounter with God" will be offered in chap. 3.

itself as a mediator of God’s presence to humans. When the church sets itself up as *the* medium through which God connects to humans in this world, the danger of making the instrument itself into something sacred becomes apparent. When the church is seen as *the* mediator of God’s presence, then humans tend to look for God *in the church*—that is, in the medium—rather than *within the instrument*. I have no desire to nullify the church’s important role in assisting people in coming to salvation—preaching the gospel, spreading the good news everywhere, engaging in love of neighbor, publishing the text of the Bible, and so forth. Without these things, an encounter with the living Christ might be strangely unrecognizable. However, by using these media in the community of believers, the Spirit is able to encounter humans *directly* by bringing to their hearts the certitude that what they have heard in a sermon, testimony, or Scripture itself is truly the God who loves them and wants to deliver them. Such truth does not make the medium into something sacred, however, or even sacramental. It merely points beyond itself to the presence of God *within* the medium. This is what creates a *direct awareness* or *perception* of God in people, thereby forging a *direct encounter* that opens the possibility for transformation of life. Thus, I am not denying that God uses media, but I refuse to allow these media to take the place of the Holy Spirit, who directly encounters our whole beings.

While this entire book works toward sharpening our thesis and dealing with challenges to it, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the role of the church as a mediator between God and humans (the second challenge). After dealing with the nature of God and God’s people in chapter 2, I turn in chapter 3 to explicate direct experiences further and respond to the question of whether there can be only indirect encounters with God (the first challenge). By engaging these challenges to the thesis, I will also be laying out a doctrine of the church along the way.

Is the Church a Mediator between God and Humans?

“The one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation: he is present to us in his body which is the Church.”⁷ It has been a long-held tradition in Christianity to view the church as the mediating presence of Christ to the world. The invisible, risen Christ is made visible through the physical reality of the church. “The one mediator, Christ, established and ever sustains here on earth his holy Church . . . as a visible organization through which he communicates

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 244, ¶846.

truth and grace to all men.”⁸ According to this tradition, if humans desire to connect with God or if God wants to speak to humans, it will always be done *through* the church, which is itself a means of distributing grace.

This view was succinctly described by Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (ca. 200–258 CE). He suggested that apart from the church, there is no salvation, because “those who do not have the church as Mother cannot have God as Father.”⁹ For him, the church is our mother, because we are born to eternal life through her ministry. The church is not Christ, but rather his body—his representation on earth. Through the church, then, “faith comes from God’s grace.”¹⁰ The souls of humans are saved by entrance into this institution.¹¹

A variation of this institutional view—although still a model of mediation—emphasizes the sacramental nature of the church itself. Jesus Christ himself ministers through the liturgy, sacraments, and the rites of the church.¹² The church, then, is the mediator of God’s presence to the world as a means of grace. The Second Vatican Council taught, “The Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument [*veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum*] both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.”¹³ Later in the same document, Vatican II

8. *Lumen gentium* 1.8 (*Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, Nov. 21, 1964), in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, trans. Colman O’Neill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1980), 357; hereafter cited as *Vatican Council II* (Flannery). Also see Heinrich Denzinger, *Lumen gentium*, in *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum / Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 866, §4118; hereafter cited as *Lumen gentium*, in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*. This is a bilingual edition of the approved Latin and English translations for the major documents of the Catholic Church.

9. Cyprian, *De catholicae ecclesiae unitate* 6, in *S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani: Opera Omnia*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 3, part 1, ed. Guilelmus Hartel (Vindobonae: Apud C. Geroldi Filium Bibliopolam Academiae, 1867), 214, lines 23–24. The Latin for this translation reads, “*Habere non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem.*” See also Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), 100.

10. Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 57.

11. Avery Cardinal Dulles describes this model of the church as “institutional.” See Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 41–42.

12. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 1.7 (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, Dec. 4, 1963), trans. Joseph Rodgers, Clifford Howell, and Austin Flannery, in *Vatican Council II* (Flannery), 4–5. Vatican II states that Christ is “always present in his Church, especially in her [the Church’s] liturgical celebrations” (4). The liturgy is even called the “exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ” (5). Also, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, 849, §4007.

13. *Lumen gentium* 1.1, in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, 860, §4101; also cf. *Vatican Council II* (Flannery), 350. See also Robert W. Jenson, “The Church and the Sacraments,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207. Jenson translates this phrase as follows: “a sacrament, as it were,” or “a sort

says that Christ sent the Spirit to the disciples, and through the Spirit, he “has established his Body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation.”¹⁴ Henri de Lubac, a twentieth-century Catholic theologian, had held the same view fifteen years prior: “If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present.”¹⁵ It is clear that both Vatican II and Henri de Lubac saw the church as a mediator of Christ or even as a sacramental means of grace. Many others in the twentieth century took this view. Perhaps the most influential theologian of this ilk has been the Austrian Catholic Karl Rahner, who viewed the church as a “primal sacrament.”¹⁶ Christ is the “primordial sacrament,” because he is precisely “what is signified (God in God’s self-communication to human beings).”¹⁷ What is the church, then, in terms of a sacrament? Rahner explains: “God is so present in the church that the church can be called a sacrament of God’s self-communication; or to distinguish it from the seven sacraments, we can say that the church is the most important, the primal sacrament.”¹⁸ To paraphrase Rahner’s interpretation, “As Christ was the sacrament of the Father, so the Church was the sacrament of Christ himself.”¹⁹ Christ is a sacrament of God because he represents God’s love and grace to humanity. Christ, in his visible flesh, reveals this love. “Only in exteriorizing itself does grace achieve the highest intensity of its realization.”²⁰ Christ contains the grace he represents in exterior and visible form. In this way, the church is a sacrament, a sign of God’s grace in Christ. It, too, contains the grace it represents, although as Rahner concedes, not in exactly the same way that Christ does.

of sacrament.” He also suggests that this sacramental view of the church has become central to Catholic ecclesiology and even ecumenical ecclesiology.

14. *Lumen gentium* 7.48, in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, 900, §4168; also, *Vatican II Council* (Flannery), 407. The Latin phrase of interest is “*per eum Corpus suum quod est Ecclesia ut universale salutis sacramentum constituit.*”

15. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sr. Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988; orig. French ed., 1947), 76. Cf. also Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 63.

16. Karl Rahner, “The Church: Basis of Pastoral Action,” in *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly, *The Making of Modern Theology: Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 265. This reading comes from Rahner’s 1964 text, *Theology of Pastoral Action*.

17. Rahner, “The Church,” 265.

18. Rahner, “The Church,” 265.

19. See Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 24. Rahner broadens the concept of sacrament to mean a deep symbol of a thing signified. There is reality in the symbol itself, and therefore Christ can be seen as the symbol of the Father. Now, however, Christ’s presence is symbolized (or sacramentalized) in the church.

20. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 67.

One upshot of these sacramental views is that since the cross-resurrection event, God does not deal *directly* with people, but only *indirectly* through the institutional, visible church. Obviously, this is primarily a position of Roman Catholicism, but not exclusively so. The Protestant Reformation did not dramatically alter this view. For all of his talk of the priesthood of individual believers and of focus on the human self before God, Luther never really solidified a place for a re-formation of the doctrine of the church. While he viewed the church as a *Gemeinde*—a community of believers with little need for outward forms to give it identity—he neither developed this fully nor established it in Wittenberg or anywhere else in Germany.²¹

Luther did, however, provide a brief description of what a group of earnest Christians who gather together might look like. *Ecclesiola*, or “little church,” was Luther’s way of expressing this smaller covenantal community. Hilbert argues that Luther held this *ecclesiola* to be a realistic option yet did not put it into an embodied reality.²² In the twentieth century, several theologians, such as Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, emphasized the church as community, attempting to place more emphasis on the *invisible* union of the body of Christ. Brunner even “rejected all law, sacrament, and priestly office as incompatible with the true being of the Church.”²³ In Lutheran ecclesiology today, there seems to exist a tension between the church as a ritualistic institution and as a “brotherhood.” The fact that Luther suggested the priesthood of all believers but never fleshed out its practical implications in the real, concrete ecclesial life of churches in Germany feeds this tension, though it is interesting to note in this regard that George H. Williams has described the believers’ church as having “some of the characteristics of an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*.”²⁴

Due to the ramifications of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, not only did the change of soteriology open the door to an emphasis on individual

21. Martin Luther, *Liturgy and Hymns*, ed. Ulrich S. Leupold, in *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 53:53–55.

22. Although it is almost one hundred years old, the definitive work on this subject is that of Gerhard Hilbert, *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia: Luthers Anschauungen von Volkskirche und Freiwilligkeitskirche in ihrer Bedeutung für die Gegenwart* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1920), see esp. 1–3. See also Howard A. Snyder, *Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 37; and J. S. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 163.

23. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 48. Also see Emil Brunner, *Das Mißverständnis der Kirche* (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951); ET, Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953).

24. See Williams, “A People in Community: Historical Background,” in *The Concept of a Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1968 Louisville Conference*, ed. James Leo Garrett Jr. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 100.

belief, but it also lessened the role the church played in one's salvation. Radical Reformers (Anabaptists, Mennonites, Brethren, and the like) transformed their understanding of the church and its structure completely. Indeed, emphasis was placed on an individual's ability to interpret Scripture for oneself and to pray *directly* to God without the necessity of "Mother Church."²⁵ The resulting ecclesiology is frequently referred to as "free church" or even "low church." As George Williams suggests, these Radicals felt that the doctrines of justification, original sin, and predestination that spawned the Protestant Reformation seemed "to undercut the significance of their personal religious experience and their continuous exercise of those personal and corporate disciplines by which they strove to imitate in their midst what they construed from the New Testament texts to have been the life of the original apostolic community."²⁶ This became the basis of their ecclesiological endeavors.

In contrast to the muted ecclesiology of Luther and the radical ecclesiology of the Anabaptists, John Calvin provided a very high view of the church. Echoing the sentiment of Cyprian, Calvin says that the church is our mother.²⁷ As John Hesselink appropriately comments, "Here Calvin sounds more like a Roman Catholic than a Protestant!"²⁸ When Jesus ministers today, Calvin argues, it is through the human institution of the church. God did not usher in an age of the Spirit whereby we are "allowed to enjoy an immediate and so-called spiritual relation with God."²⁹ The fanatics and ecstasies of all ages have presumed this spiritual and direct connection with God, but Calvin argues that God does not work this way. God chooses to use humans as instruments to deliver his Word.³⁰ If God chose to take the form of human flesh and not reveal himself directly, then it is logical to conclude that God would operate analogously by using earthly vessels to communicate a heavenly gospel. Wilhelm Niesel summarizes Calvin's thought in this regard: "No pure reality of the Spirit has been promised us apart from the work of the Incarnate Son of God nor in independence of the message, which, obediently to His command, His witnesses spread abroad, or apart from the earthly sacraments which He

25. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), xxv. Other Reformers held similar views with regard to the individual's ability to interpret Scripture, but these had varying arbiters added as a type of "safety net" to deal with those who were handling Scripture too strangely.

26. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, xxv.

27. *Inst.* 4.1.4 (1016).

28. John I. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 155.

29. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 184.

30. *Inst.* 4.1.5 (1016–18).

has instituted.”³¹ In other words, God only communicates to us through the mediation of the church—more specifically, through the Word and sacraments. To make this even clearer, Calvin sees the church as a mother who births and nurtures us until we die. “Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.”³² And this pronouncement caused J. S. Whale to call Calvin the “Cyprian of the Reformation era.”³³

Fanatics who have overstepped their bounds have no use for the church, Calvin thinks. They focus on experience, private reading, and inner meditation.³⁴ But God has condescended to human need; instead of terrifying us with his thunderous presence, he speaks to us through the mouths of human servants. The church becomes the “mirror” of God’s presence, an indirect reflection. Again, Niesel describes Calvin’s thought succinctly: “The church is the sphere of the self-revelation of God and of the encounter between Christ and ourselves.”³⁵ Thus, there is no direct experience of Christ by believers; only through the church can we encounter Christ. Only where the Word of God is preached and heard and the sacraments administered rightly does a church exist.³⁶

Is the Church Our Mother?

Henri de Lubac rightly noted that the notion of the church as “our mother” is held by Protestants “even after their secession.”³⁷ In terms of the doctrine

31. Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, 184.

32. *Inst.* 4.1.4 (1016).

33. Whale, *The Protestant Tradition*, 161.

34. *Inst.* 4.1.5 (1018).

35. Niesel, *Theology of Calvin*, 185.

36. *Inst.* 4.1.9 (1023).

37. Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982), 75. This quote begins the chapter titled “The Motherhood of the Entire Church” and is followed by a chapter on “The Fatherhood of the Clergy,” in which de Lubac extends the metaphor of family to the clergy being the “father,” who (in this case) represent God as Father to the people. Elsewhere, de Lubac makes the dimension of the motherhood of the church even clearer:

The Church is a community, but in order to be that community she is first a hierarchy. The Church we call our Mother is not some ideal and unreal Church but this hierarchical Church herself; not the Church as we might dream her but the Church as she exists in fact, here and now. Thus the obedience which we pledge her in the persons of those who rule her cannot be anything else but a filial obedience. She has not brought us to birth only so as to abandon us and let us take our chance on our own; rather she guards us and keeps us together in a maternal heart. (Henri de Lubac, “Ecclesia Mater,” in *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason [San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006; orig. ed., 1956], 264–65)

of the church since the Protestant Reformation, Christian thinkers have apparently fallen into two camps: (1) those who view the church as a mediator of God's presence as well as the "mother" (instrument) of our salvation, and (2) those who view the church as people who *directly* experience God's presence with or without churchly or even sacramental mediation.³⁸

This second view is the presupposition on which the proposal of this book rests. In other words, I am proposing a believers' church model in which the church consists of those people who have been regenerated by God's Spirit and adopted into God's family by the same Spirit. While the kingdom of God may appear as a mixture of tares and wheat, the body of Christ has no such mixture. However, this view holds some difficulties. Are we saying that everyone who is a part of *our* local church is "saved" or "regenerated," and therefore those who are part of other churches where mixture is allowed (even expected) are not regenerated? This could be the implication and probably has been the way the believers' church has sensed its distinctiveness in the past. However, this need not be the implication or explication. Of course, there will be people who are not really disciples of Christ but have come to be part of a local church—even a believers' church—for whatever reasons. My intent is not to emphasize that type of person but rather to suggest (along with Friedrich Schleiermacher!) that regeneration is a prerequisite for being a true part of the body of Christ.³⁹ Here *regeneration* is my term for transformation of a human being who is encountered by the Spirit of God directly, being confronted by the truth of Jesus Christ in the Spirit's *re*-presentation of Christ to him/her, and who thereby believes on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, producing a new birth of resurrection life into that human's existence here and now as wrought by the Spirit. Is the church our mother? In terms of nurturing and nourishing our growth in the Christian life, yes; in terms of birthing us into God's kingdom, no. The "mothering"

38. While this may be a broad-stroke depiction of Protestant ecclesiology since the 1500s, it depicts the various views within the movement well enough.

39. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith: A New Translation and Critical Edition*, ed. Catherine L. Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 2:761, § 115. Schleiermacher states, "The Christian church is formed by the joining together of individual regenerate persons to affect one another and to cooperate, both in an orderly fashion." To be "regenerate" for Schleiermacher is to partake "of the Holy Spirit, so that there is no vital community with Christ without an indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and vice versa." Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 2:813, §124. Also, cf. §125, in Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, 2:818. Perhaps the Moravian influence in Schleiermacher's youth continued with him on this point. I am grateful to Gregor Eitzmüller for pointing out this passage in Schleiermacher when I offered a lecture at Heidelberg University in April 2008.

described in this second aspect is the work of the Holy Spirit, who brings about the new birth (John 3).

How does this relate to our proposal for ecclesiology? Most believers' church ecclesiologies have been crafted—if crafted at all—from the Radical Reformers (chiefly Anabaptists) through very different cultural and historical lenses.⁴⁰ Numerous evangelical churches in North America today come from this church movement, emphasizing regeneration followed by believer's baptism (credobaptism). However, the challenge for these churches has been to develop a believers' church ecclesiology that does not wallow in individualism, on the one hand, or puff up into a holier-than-thou triumphalism, on the other. Our proposal submits that not only is such an ecclesiology possible, but it also is essential for overcoming the negative image that the church currently possesses in increasingly post-Christian societies.

The Church—a Voluntary Society of Individual Christians?

In order to tease out the direction our proposal heads, it will be helpful to interact with a theologian who has ties to the evangelical movement yet may not consider himself entirely at home within segments of it. Miroslav Volf has engaged aspects of ecclesiology with a proposal that provides fitting insight for and appropriate contrast to our own proposal here. Volf attempts to craft what he calls a “nonindividualistic Protestant ecclesiology.”⁴¹

Miroslav Volf's Nonhierarchical Ecclesiology

Having presented and analyzed the doctrine of the Trinity from the perspectives of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (later, Pope Benedict XVI) and John Zizioulas (Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of Pergamum) in relation to their doctrines of the church, Miroslav Volf presents his own proposal in contrast to them. His goal is to “develop a nonhierarchical but truly communal ecclesiology based on a nonhierarchical doctrine of the Trinity.”⁴² His proposal points in the direction of providing the free-church tradition an ecclesiology that does not result in individualism.

40. For a history of the movement, see Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985; orig. ed., 1968).

41. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age, gen. ed. Alan G. Padgett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 191.

42. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 4.