

SECOND EDITION

BAPTISTS AND THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

Reimagining the Church's Witness in the Modern World

BARRY HARVEY

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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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PREFACE TO THE REVISED EDITION

When Baker Academic approached me about doing a revision of my 2008 book *Can These Bones Live?*, I readily agreed. Though the first edition was read and reviewed thoughtfully by many when it was published, both Protestants and Catholics, several people at Baker were of the opinion that external factors had hindered a wider reception and response. I am grateful for the opportunity to revisit, restate, and revise what I wrote previously, the basic contours of which I still affirm (with some changes and additions).

This revision gives me the chance to clarify what I sought to do in the previous work, which I wrote with my fellow Baptists (and free church sisters and brothers more generally) principally in mind as the first tentative moves in a study of how Baptists might best move toward full communion with the other traditions of the church. I did not, however, make my purpose as explicit as I should have, and so I remedy that oversight here. I am indebted to those of my fellow Baptists who have undertaken the work of ecumenical dialogue, and they are to be commended, but I worry about what I take to be an inordinate concern among many of them to preserve cherished denominational distinctives in their proposals. As a consequence, they seem to enter into these deliberations with a determination to protect what they regard as true and genuine Baptist identity, which they then argue is commensurate with the small-*c* church catholic. I pursue a different tack, which is to acknowledge our part in the evil of schism, examine self-critically our many positions (there is no one Baptist position, regardless of how hard one tries to imagine that

there is), and be ready to be forgiven by and learn from the other strands in the Christian tradition.

As I reviewed the first edition in preparation for this revision, I also realized that I needed to sharpen the connections between ecclesial concerns and what is happening in the wider social world to which God has sent us as the place where we live, move, have our being, and seek its welfare. As I say in more detail in the introduction, as a missional movement the church is sent by God into the world, there to “play away from home,” engaging with other forms of life and language, other political and cultural standpoints. The church is the creation of God’s activity in Christ and the Holy Spirit and also an empirical, historical social entity that shares in the achievements and corruptions of a fallen world. As such, the church needs an adequate ecclesiology in order to hold on to the one without letting go of the other. My treatment of race, for example, was woefully inadequate.

In addition to a variety of modifications and amendments to the text, I have removed two chapters from the first edition. The first of these chapters, “Lovers, Madmen, and Pilgrim Poets,” dealt with the role that imagination and memory play in the type of scriptural reasoning that informs and directs the thinking, feeling, and acting of the church as the body of Christ in a post-Christendom world. The second chapter, “Doctrinally Speaking,” emphasized the central role that sound doctrine, including metaphysical surmises, exercises in the life, witness, and words of the Christian community. My editor, Dave Nelson, persuaded me that we could safely remove these two chapters and retain the integrity of the argument, and at the same time make it more accessible. That said, I stand by what I wrote in those chapters and would commend them to the reader.

Again, I am grateful to Baker for the opportunity to return to the topics in this book and offer this revision to all to read and weigh as we seek to “travel the street of love together as we make our way toward him of whom it is said, “Seek his face always.””¹

1. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 1.3.5, quoted in Wilken, *Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 107.

INTRODUCTION

In an interview prior to his election as Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger stated that in the future the church can no longer expect to be the form of life for a whole society (an aspiration that, as I argue below, Baptists have also nurtured). It must now assume different configurations that identify it less with great civilizations and more with minorities. In these new formats the members of Christ's body will work whenever possible with the status quo, but they should also be spiritually prepared when necessary to stand over against it in solidarity with the poor and the persecuted. "But precisely in this way," he said, believers "will, biblically speaking, become the salt of the earth again. In this upheaval, constancy—keeping what is essential to man from being destroyed—is once again more important, and the powers of preservation that can sustain him in his humanity are even more necessary."¹

These comments are astounding, coming as they do from one who was to become the temporal head of the world's only true transnational community, a social body that had for centuries claimed that it constituted the organizing center of "a single civilization homogeneously and integrally Christian."² It is nothing short of revolutionary for the pope to state that the church should see itself not as the spiritual fulcrum around which the entire human world revolves, nor as one of the well-connected institutions collaborating principally with the rich and powerful, but as "small, seemingly insignificant groups that nonetheless live in an intensive struggle against evil and bring the good into the world—that let God in."³

1. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 164, 222.

2. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 744.

3. Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 16.

The work of reimagining the church for this task is more urgent than it was even a few years ago, as churches in Europe, Australia, and North America are struggling to come to terms with the demise of that complex and variegated social arrangement known as Christendom, a social reality to which those who came before us had become accustomed for over a millennium. Though the details of this cooperative pact with the earthly *res publica* were constantly being reworked down through the centuries, the church as an integral element in an overarching system of social relations was a constant. But changes unlike anything that has occurred since the earliest centuries of Christianity are well underway, and there is no going back. Things that our grandparents took for granted—the need to belong to a church to succeed in a profession or occupation, theological sanctions for what counted as civic morality, the privileged social standing that came with being a Christian—either have already vanished or will soon do so.

The task is complicated by the fact that the last few centuries have been riddled by divisions between the Catholic church and an ever-expanding list of groups descended from the Protestant Reformation. I need to add a second word of caution here, as a veritable cottage industry has arisen seeking to lay the blame for our present circumstances solely or principally at the feet of the Protestant Reformation. Such assertions are no more justified than are claims that the church lost its soul with the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the fourth century. First, it was never the aim of the Protestant Reformers to break up Christendom. The sixteenth-century Reformation, contends Jaroslav Pelikan, was a tragic necessity of history. Its necessity resided in the Reformers' desire to affirm what they regarded as the highest and the best in the Catholic tradition and in "their obligation to summon Rome back to it." Pelikan goes so far as to say that "the Reformation began because the reformers were too catholic in the midst of a church that had forgotten its catholicity." It was tragic because each side lost something of what they were trying to defend, leading to an outcome that neither wanted.⁴

Catholic historian Joseph Lortz agrees with Pelikan, stating that the events of the sixteenth century were a social and historical necessity. He offers a laundry list of offenses and misdeeds in the Catholicism of the day that gave rise to the "protest," including a series of bad popes, the divided papacy, structural flaws including the intrusion of political and economic interests in the life of the church (indulgences being at the top of the list), simony, and the arbitrariness and hedonism of the clergy, particularly at the highest levels. According to Lortz,

4. Pelikan, *Riddle of Roman Catholicism*, 46.

Whether we recall that Erasmus was able to hear in the Pope's own chapel on Good Friday an ostentatious piece of humanistic oratory in which Our Lord and His Passion were not even mentioned, while the speaker displayed his learning and the glories of pagan antiquity; or whether we note that papal ambassadors were merely diplomats who operated solely in diplomatic, not a religious context even when purely religious matters were involved (as Alexander at the Diet of Worms in 1521), no one was in the least surprised at this way of acting; the picture of profound secularization in the holy places remains the same.⁵

It is also the case that Protestantism as we know it today was not the inevitable result of the Reformation. Other outcomes are both conceivable and plausible, for example, had Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli been able to reach a consensus at Marburg, or had the Catholic church responded more prudently, patiently, and charitably to the concerns of these Reformers. Moreover, the conflicts unfolding within the church during the sixteenth century did not occur in isolation from other momentous shifts in the social landscape of Europe. In its efforts to retain temporal authority in response to the rise of embryonic nation-states, the church responded by redefining its own power in legal and corporate rather than in sacramental terms.⁶ Canon lawyers, at the behest of the pontiff, appropriated the Roman legal concept of the right of property in connection with the late medieval doctrine of the church as Christ's mystical body to posit the theory of "the absolute and universal jurisdiction of the supreme authority, and . . . the doctrine of the *plenitudo potestatis* [the fullness of jurisdictional power] of the Pope."⁷ This claim became the basis for the attempt on the part of the popes to reassert their authority in a world where "secular control was rapidly on the rise and the political unity of Christendom was being fragmented into sovereign nation-states."⁸ Protestant groups only accelerated a movement that was well underway by the time they appeared on the stage of history.

The question before us, therefore, is not where to place the blame or how to specify when the critical misstep took place, but how do we, Protestants and Catholics together, go forward toward the unity that is Christ's mandate? Some have devised detailed plans for moving forward toward full reunion. Peter Leithart, for example, has written what he calls an ecclesiological program to move primarily conservative evangelical Protestant churches down this path in obedience to Christ. My fear is that, regardless of how well thought

5. Lortz, *Reformation*, 75–76, 78.

6. Kantorowicz, *King's Two Bodies*, 200–206.

7. Figgis, *Studies of Political Thought*, 4.

8. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 218.

out and carefully written such proposals are, they will quickly be shelved under the category of interesting thought experiments.

Others have suggested a path that is similar but would allow them to protect certain denominational “distinctives.” For example, a small but growing number of Baptist and other free church clergy, scholars, and laypeople note with considerable concern the divisions in our ranks, the changed social standing of Christianity in the wider society, and the impoverished theological understanding and insight that prevail within our denominations. They have wisely begun to look beyond our provincial borders to reconnect with historic patterns of faith, practice, and order shared by believers down through history and across the globe. Those who have taken up these efforts contend that we Baptists and our free church cousins not only have deep roots in the historic Christian tradition that need to be uncovered and nourished but also have an abiding stake in reconnecting with that heritage, not only for our own sake but also for the worldwide community of Christians.⁹ To this extent I can only applaud these efforts.

The proposals offered by these Baptists differ at various points, but they frequently share a common feature, which is a concern to chart a course to full communion that does not conflict with what they regard as true and genuine Baptist identity, which they take to be commensurate with the small-*c* church catholic. Several problems emerge in this approach that render it suspect, beginning with the fact that there is disagreement as to what qualifies as true and genuine Baptist (or in James McClendon’s version, “baptist”) identity, which then shapes how one construes what can be assigned to the essence of the church catholic. A concern to preserve cherished denominational distinctives should not drive our participation in ecumenical deliberations. This is not to say that the institutions, practices, and convictions that developed since Luther first posted his theses should be discarded wholesale (though I can think of a few that would be better left on the scrap heap of history).

Also standing in the way of expanded ecumenical efforts on the part of Baptists are the ahistorical sensibilities that many of us share with more than a few of our Protestant kin. In his influential work on the development of doctrine, John Henry Newman writes, “To be deep in history is to cease to be a Protestant.” He challenges us to show him where our system of doctrine might be found in the early centuries of the church, and he states that if it ever existed, all evidence of it “has been clean swept away as if by a deluge,

9. See, for example, Bullard, *Re-membering the Body*; Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*; Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*; D. Hatch, *Thinking with the Church*; McClendon, *Doctrine*; McClendon, *Ethics*; McClendon, *Witness*; E. Newman, *Attending the Wounds on Christ’s Body*.

suddenly, silently, and without memorial.”¹⁰ Even if I were to concede that Newman is indulging here in hyperbole, Protestants in general, and Baptists more specifically, often do not see their faith as organically related to and dependent on that of past generations. This dislocation from any connection to the past is a pattern that is not limited to the history of Christianity, but extends to the chosen people of God, both biblical Israel and the ongoing existence of Israel, the Jewish people. We too often have regarded our relationship to the lives, struggles, doubts, failures, and sufferings of past generations as illustrative rather than constitutive of our place within the body of Christ. This is especially true of Baptists who affirm soul competency, congregational autonomy, and the sole sufficiency of Scripture as the foundation of their beliefs, for whom there is no actual social body to which they are necessarily related.

I recognize that what I am proposing may be worrisome to some, leaving them wondering whether the path to full communion requires at the outset a wholesale repudiation of all that they have held dear. My response is no, for it has taken us five hundred years to get to this point, and any suggestion that we simply ignore or jettison what has transpired during that time will never get out of the starting gate. Baptists and other free church traditions need not leave behind our love for Scripture, the fellowship of the local congregation, or our zeal for evangelization. As Ratzinger puts it, Protestants and Catholics must seek “the truth together with the firm intention of imposing nothing which does not come from the Lord on the other party, and of losing nothing entrusted to us by him. In this way our lives advance toward each other because they are directed toward Christ.”¹¹ The person and lordship of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is the *cantus firmus* around which Protestant and Catholic alike add their voices in the polyphony of faith, hope, and love that is moving, slowly and tentatively, toward the advent of *olam haba*, the age to come.

The thorniest problem, however, is that the notion of a small-*c* catholicism is an abstraction without social embodiment or substantial historical precedents. On the one hand, it closely resembles the idea of Judeo-Christianity that some were promoting in the middle of the twentieth century as a more inclusive form of civil religion in the United States.¹² On the other hand, it resembles C. S. Lewis’s “mere Christianity,” a phrase that sounds inviting and generous but for which there is no real agreement. This concept of small-*c* catholicism was a by-product of American-style Protestantism that sought to legitimate the separated status of the various denominations as in some sense

10. J. Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 8.

11. Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, 87.

12. See, for example, Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*.

permanent—not just their separation from Rome and the East but also from other Protestant bodies—while allowing us the comfort of believing that we still participated in a wider, though more vague, entity.¹³ As a vestige of denominationalism, apart from which it loses much of its rationale, the concept of “church catholic” is ultimately unsustainable. In the end, therefore, I agree with Leithart’s conclusion that denominationalism “is the institutionalization of division. It enables us to be complacent about defining ourselves not by union with our brothers [and sisters] but by our divisions.”¹⁴

The reader will not find in what follows a detailed proposal of ecumenical convergence or a blueprint for a future restoration of catholicity between the divided church bodies. Rather, I commend what might be called an ecumenical posture, in hopes of taking a tentative step or two toward a family reconciliation. This posture, as Herbert McCabe says, begins with the recognition that the divisions within the body of Christ, though disastrous in themselves, “have their place in the mysterious plan of God, that perhaps certain Christian insights could never have been achieved without the painful cycle of a separation followed on both sides by a groping towards reconciliation.” The way forward, he adds, is for all concerned to repent of their role in the evil of schism, examine self-critically their respective positions, and be ready to be forgiven by and learn from the others.¹⁵ And as Walter Kasper rightly observes, the proper orientation in both ecumenical dialogues and intradenominational conversations needs to be “the conversion of all to Jesus Christ. As we move nearer to Jesus Christ, in him we move nearer to one another.”¹⁶

If as free church people we are to reflect on what might be involved in moving nearer to Christ, we need some sense of how we all got from where our pilgrimage began with Jesus and the Twelve to where we are, having been diverted over the years, like the prodigal, to a “far country.” In the words of Charles Taylor, “Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from.”¹⁷ Determining where we currently stand thus depends on the story that narrates this journey and how it might be possible for us to make our way back to the crucified and risen Lord.

In chapter 1, we discover from retrospective history, first, that Christendom is a hard habit to break, not just for so-called magisterial Protestant churches but for Baptists and for other free churches as well. In the nascent American republic

13. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 449–50.

14. Leithart, *End of Protestantism*, 4.

15. McCabe, “Comment,” 229.

16. Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology.”

17. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 29.

in particular, our forebears thought they had solved the problem of establishment, persuaded as they were that the principle of the separation of church and state would liberate faith from all political entanglements. They failed to recognize that the formal separation of these institutions took place under the auspices of a social construct that stipulated a *de facto* moral and cultural identity between a certain type of Protestant Christianity and the new nation. The church is institutionally separated from the bureaucratic and coercive powers we typically associate with the state, but for most Baptists their congregations remain firmly bound together with nation. We bought into the notion that the relationship between the church and earthly commonwealths in the past was clearly deficient (seldom pausing to take into consideration the changing social and material conditions that fueled the development of that relationship over the centuries), but that now, with the definitive solution to the problem of past regimes well in hand, “we finally got it right!” Like so many before us, we succumbed to the seductive possibility of a more perfect Christendom through the endorsement of and cooperation with the American experiment.

As Baptists and other like-minded free church folks were busy reinventing the Christendom model, we also mishandled another aspect of faith, which is that matter matters. The crucified and risen Christ comes to us through the work of the Holy Spirit, in and through the material world, beginning with the most basic of elements: water, bread, and wine. Through these sacramental signs we are put in a position to learn something of what is at stake in our relationships with one another and with the earth. To recall McCabe’s assertion about what needs to happen for all of us to move forward, the aspect of our Baptist heritage most in need of self-critical examination is our neglect of the material world, of which human life is inextricably a part. To be sure, there have been exceptions along the way, but for the most part we have not adequately recognized the importance that these signs play in our pilgrimage toward the city of God.

In chapter 2, I contrast the general understanding of nature and history proposed by the patristic and medieval church, according to which all created things are also signs that refer to their beginning and end in God, with new social configurations that arose with the modern world and that stipulate that the intelligibility of nature, the meaningfulness of history, and the purposefulness of human existence no longer require these sorts of references. I then provide an initial sketch of the interpretive art that allows us to follow God’s critical, decisive, and final action and purpose for the world in the apocalypse of the long-awaited reign of God in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 3 develops the apocalyptic motif that initially formed the heart of the church’s interpretive activity. The first group of disciples who followed the way of Jesus found themselves caught up in a set of allegiances, convictions,

dispositions, and loves that put them in the middle of the divine struggle with and triumph over temporal powers and principalities that sought to usurp divine sovereignty over creation. God's intrusion, in the incarnation, into a world enslaved to sin and death marks the continuation of the story of Abraham and Sarah's offspring, but under radically new and distinct circumstances. The body politic of Christ initially took form as an apocalyptic fellowship constituted through the power of the Holy Spirit, its membership taken from every tribe and language, people and nation on earth, to serve as sign, instrument, and foretaste of creation's destiny, forged on a Roman cross, in the age to come. The messianic incursion of God into the world did not, however, appear out of a social or historical vacuum, as the early followers of Jesus understood themselves to be the continuation of God's election of Israel and, in particular, the continuation of the promise to Abraham that in the chosen people God would bless all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

Many in our age have an aversion to apocalyptic imagery, in part for its supposedly "otherworldly" character and for advocating withdrawal from the everyday world where people deal with the necessities of eating, drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, having children, burying parents, acquiring and disposing of property, and exchanging goods. Associations of apocalyptic thought with otherworldliness can be traced to an erroneous assumption, which is that apocalyptically minded Jews in the years leading up to the first century CE expected the imminent collapse of the domain of time and space, and with it all sense of history. This misperception is due, to some degree, to an inherent ambiguity in the English word *end*, which can signify either a termination of some kind or the goal of an act, and often it can refer to both. In apocalyptic thought there is an intrinsic relationship between purpose and finality, between speaking of the aim of life and its limits, between the course that creation is taking in history and the consummation that awaits it. The "eschaton" marks that toward which everything tends, giving shape and direction to history—indeed, marking the passage of time *as* history.

In chapter 4 I discuss in more detail how the church was dismembered as the body politic of Christ. It began when the Christian community exchanged its distinctive way of life as a company of nomads assembled from every tribe and language, every people and nation, to serve the nations as a sign and instrument of God's eternal commonwealth, for a power-sharing arrangement with the rulers and authorities of the earthly city. Folding up its tents, the church got caught up in an unfolding series of disciplinary regimes that effectively domesticated, marginalized, and exploited its life, language, and witness.

In chapters 5 and 6 I turn to the question of how the church might by God's grace be gathered together once again and re-membered by the power

of the Spirit as the body of Christ. I say “might,” for we can never ensure the presence of Christ by means of a formal institution that connects the present with the past, as though it were the working-out of an immanent historical process. We cannot compel the grace of God through some sort of procedural or ritualistic alchemy. God’s messianic reign comes to gather the church *epicletically*, through our invocation of the Holy Spirit to re-remember the presence of the messianic age in our midst, and through us to the rest of the world. Historical continuity as such is no guarantee that Christ is present. We believe that the end of the age rules over creation from beginning to end, but it is our hope that in the lives of the penitent faithful, God promises to enact that end as sign and foretaste in the midst of time.¹⁸

A people cannot set out on a pilgrimage and reasonably expect to survive, much less make progress, without being properly trained and provisioned. We must constantly be kept together so that we will not scatter along the way; we must learn how to take our bearings so that we know where we are, where we are headed, and how to get from the one to the other; we must be disciplined so that we keep our eyes trained on what lies before us and not be tempted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt; and we must learn how to distinguish among the variety of social regimes we shall encounter in the earthly city along the way. For Christians, then, this is a question that brings us to the work of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who binds us to Christ and to one another, sanctifying and sustaining his earthly-historical body in its work and witness, principally through baptism and Eucharist. As I suggest in chapter 5, these sacramental signs constitute the material point of entry of God’s apocalyptic regime into the day-to-day life of this world, creating in the body of Christ an alternative social grammar for creaturely existence. Baptism and Eucharist, by incorporating us into the mystery of God’s redemptive presence and activity in the world, propel us beyond the boundaries within which state and market seek to confine us, gathering us together in a new political body through which the age to come confronts the powers of this age.

With its intrusion into the disordered loves of a fallen world, the apocalypse of God in the midst of history radically restructures our life together. In order for the members of Christ’s body to make this alternative social grammar our own, however, we must undergo a lifelong process of spiritual discipline, in which we give ourselves daily to God as we live “fully in the midst of life’s tasks, questions, successes and failures, experiences, and perplexities.”¹⁹ In chapter 6, then, I examine some of the ways that practices generally associated

18. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*, 270; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 204–8.

19. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 486.

with spiritual formation—prayer, confession, fasting, hospitality, the giving and receiving of counsel, rites of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the works of mercy—incorporate the habits and skills of the church’s interpretive art into our bodies. The telos of these practices is unselfing, being unmade so that we can be remade. Unselfing interrupts the solidifying of our identities as disembodied consumers and faceless producers promoted by the state and the global market, in order to cultivate a new human within the politics of the Spirit, one that is not confined by humankind’s “Adamic” past but liberated for its future in the messianic kingdom.

As a missional movement, the church must also consider how its own life must “play away from home” and engage with other forms of life and language, other political and cultural standpoints, in “a search for what recognizably—however imperfectly—shares in the same project that the Gospel defines.” In the process perhaps we can rediscover the import of our own story in the deeds and aspirations of others.²⁰ In the concluding chapter, therefore, I examine some of the recurring tendencies in the social grammar of the present age that set the context in which the members of Christ’s body must practice the art of pilgrimage. In one way or another these tendencies are linked to what Augustine calls the *libido dominandi*, the lust for mastery that is predicated on the possession, threat, and use of coercive force, and thus on death and the fear of death. The desire to control our world manifests itself most destructively in war, but coercion and violence also find their way into activities overseen by the state and the market that are connected to the needed goods of daily life, and this same tendency appears in the intimate circles of families and churches.

To learn something of what it means to play away from home as witnesses to the gospel’s proclamation that life and not death, love and not hate, peace and not strife, will have the final word, those who would practice the art of pilgrimage well must cultivate good habits of reasoning so that we might discern which aspects of the earthly commonwealth are open to God’s irruption into the disordered cosmos in Christ and can therefore be thought of as natural, and which are closed to Christ and must be regarded as unnatural. As artisans of the age to come, Christians must be discriminating connoisseurs of reason, mindful that the intrinsic powers of rationality given to us by God are now typically caught up within the structures of nation-state and neoliberal market and embedded in a cultural ethos that no longer seeks to habituate its citizens in a shared set of customs and habits, trusting instead in the alchemical fantasy that process can transform itself into substance.²¹

20. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 38–39.

21. Beiner, *What’s the Matter with Liberalism?*, 22; Mensch and Freeman, *Politics of Virtue*, 5.

1

WHERE, THEN, DO WE STAND?

The Church as the Presupposition of Theology

Theology is a laborious attempt to explain the joke about this ordinary physical, political world.

Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*

The desire to ask about the beginning, writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the innermost passion of our thinking as creaturely beings, imparting reality to every genuine question we ask. And yet no sooner is the question of the beginning put before us than our thinking is thrown back on itself, spending its strength like huge breakers crashing upon a rocky shore. In its desire to reach back to the beginning, human reasoning cannot help but pound itself to pieces. We are intractably located in the middle, knowing neither the end nor the beginning.¹

In contrast to the delusion that there is a Gnostic “spark of breath” in each of us going back “to before the Creation,”² we always find ourselves somewhere, heirs to patterns of speaking and acting set within a context formed by the time, place, and people of which we are a part. Indeed, if others are to

1. Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 25–28.

2. Bloom, *American Religion*, 22.

take what we say or do seriously, we must take up and consistently maintain some standpoint, and they must do likewise,³ for it is only in and through some particular stance that “the world and ourselves are opened to us.”⁴ The theological task facing the church, then, is not to try to find a universal starting point or method that can lift us out of our time and place so that we might see all the kingdoms of the world as though we were gods. It is instead to help a fallen world take its bearings here in the middle, to understand something of what went before, to learn about the way things developed in the past that led to the way they are now. Instead of asking where sound theology begins, those who would practice the art of pilgrimage would do well to ask, “Where, then, do we stand?”⁵

This question can, of course, be parsed in several different ways. It can be taken in an epistemic sense: What are the warrants for our claims to know something significant about ourselves? It also suggests a historical referent: it has been a commonplace for a time now to say that we live in a “postmodern” era, though increasingly it is far from certain what is meant by that notion. This question can also be addressed by noting that much of the inhabited world, both human and nonhuman, now works, consumes, lives, and dies within a neoliberal⁶ matrix of nation-state, market, and cultural ethos in which every person, thing, product, and activity that we might have once said was good, true, and beautiful is now evaluated as a formal value predicated on its usefulness and exchange potential, thus “flattening all hierarchies to formal equivalences.”⁷

Though these are important considerations that I take up in what follows, for Christians the question of where we now stand is principally set within an eschatological trajectory narrated by the apocalyptic images and motifs of the New Testament. As citizens of another city that is to come (Heb. 13:14), we have no permanent standpoint or proper place in the present time. We are on pilgrimage through history, looking with anticipation for the coming of the commonwealth whose architect and builder is the triune God (Heb. 11:10; cf. Phil. 3:20). When we ask where we now stand, we do so as a people

3. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 172.

4. Grant, *Time as History*, 6–7.

5. Lash, *Believing Three Ways in One God*, 2.

6. In what follows, *neoliberalism* refers to the complex nexus of institutions and practices, rules, habits, and procedures, both formal and informal, that shape and discipline individual bodies so that they will engage in conduct that will effectively support and reproduce the current regime of production, accumulation, and consumption. This regimen seeks to keep women, men, and children in their place as producers and consumers, stripped of the resources of memory and imagination that might allow them to question the legitimacy of this regime.

7. Long, *Divine Economy*, 262.

seeking to go on and go further toward that future that summons all of God's creatures, and especially humankind. In this regard Bonhoeffer rightly states that the visible church is the presupposition for theology.⁸

I need to add a word of caution at this point, one that I presuppose about the church throughout this work. Though I believe that this motley mob of misfits and malcontents is a reality of revelation established and animated by the missions of the triune God, it is never so in a straightforward and unambiguous sense. It is, has always been, and will remain until the final consummation a “sesquiguous” reality,⁹ both (1) a social order set apart by the Spirit to embody concretely the presence and activity of the crucified and risen Christ before a hurting and waiting world and (2) an impure and sinful community constantly in need of the grace and forgiveness it proclaims. In no wise am I arguing that the empirical church possesses the reality of the new humanity in Christ or has decisively left behind humankind's “Adamic” past, but in faith it sesquiguously embodies habits and relations of the new human in tension with that past.¹⁰

I thus contend that the church, by being what in the power of the Holy Spirit it is—the earthly-historical body of Christ—constitutes an interpretive surmise about creaturely life as lived before God and the world, and is that not just for itself but for the whole cosmos. The existence of this people is grounded in a distinctive performance of life and language that is a socially embodied, historically extended interpretation of the world in general and of human life in particular. The answer to the question of what is signified by the word *God* cannot be adequately ascertained by the kind of conceptual clarification practiced by analytic philosophers (though that might be helpful at certain points), but only by observing how this community orders its life together through its worship, teaching, witness, and work.¹¹ This hermeneutical dimension is implicit in the understanding of the church as a sacrament—that is, as “a sign and instrument . . . of communion with God and of unity among men.”¹²

Another way to put this is to say with John Milbank that theology can be practiced only by way of explicating Christian practice: “The Christian God can no longer be thought of as a God first seen, but rather as a God first

8. Bonhoeffer, “Nature of the Church,” 290.

9. A “sesquiguous” sign or utterance, writes Herbert McCabe, is one that “lies between the *ambiguous* and the *plonking* or flat statement.” More specifically, it is “one in which the speaker both commits himself to a position and is simultaneously aware of the inadequacy of what he is saying, and of his own position in saying it.” McCabe, *God Matters*, 176 (emphasis original).

10. See Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 126–32.

11. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xii, 135.

12. *Lumen Gentium*, 68–69.

prayed to, first imagined, first inspiring certain actions, first put into words, and always already thought about, objectified, even if this objectification is recognised as inevitably inadequate.”¹³ This interdependence of theory with practice is not unique to theology, for any attempt at interpretation or explanation is an unpacking of already existing activities.

This book is therefore an exercise in theological hermeneutics, though not in the narrow sense of formulating a general theory of meaning that establishes normative rules, procedures, and standards for the interpretation of written texts. It has to do instead with the possibilities of human action, fulfillment, and happiness made possible by what God accomplishes in our midst, encompassing ethics, politics, poetics, rhetoric, cosmology, and metaphysics. Theology has a vested interest in all these areas of investigation, but it attends to them in the course of asking how to carry on with a specified message at that point in life “where past hearing turns to new speaking.”¹⁴

Theological hermeneutics asks, What do the life, death, and resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth and the sending of the Holy Spirit have to do with this life that we now live? If we are to grasp the significance of Christ and his earthly-historical body for our lives, living as we do in a different time and place, in circumstances that are marked by their own particularity and contingency, it is necessary that we learn how to narrate our lives both as distinct from his story and, at the same time, as a continuation of it. To this end theologians engage in three interpretive tasks, involving, first, the Scriptures as the book of the church; second, the practices of the church; and third, the political and economic regime, cultural ethos, and forms of knowledge that distinguish our particular time and place in history.

Theology’s “venture of an overall view”¹⁵ subsists in the doctrinal, liturgical, and spiritual convictions and in moral dispositions and activities that have been handed on to us within the Christian community by our mothers and fathers in the faith. We take up and develop this heritage so that we might learn how to speak truthfully and live faithfully in our own circumstances and then hand it on in good working order to our spiritual offspring. This book is therefore also a work in ecclesiology, with emphases, first, on the originating mission and character of the church and its subsequent history, and second, on three of the constitutive practices of the church: baptism and Eucharist and spiritual formation. These practices cultivate the mission and sustain the distinctive form of life that characterizes the body of Christ in the world, which is the topic of the last chapter.

13. Milbank, “Postmodern Critical Augustinianism,” 226–27.

14. Jenson, *Triune God*, 14.

15. Ritschl, *Logic of Theology*, 202.

Any attempt at theological hermeneutics grounded in the life and language of the church immediately encounters a serious problem in the fact of the dismembered body of Christ. Given that the visible church is the presupposition of this hermeneutics, these divisions may make theology as a public endeavor virtually impossible, since the proper agent of such hermeneutics does not exist, unless one simply declares that one particular branch totally comprehends that reality. The assumption that theology can flourish apart from some degree of unity in the church in actuality threatens to reduce theology's teachings on matters of faith and practice to "the nonbinding character of a general moral exhortation." When theology is deprived of its unified public character, we are left with little more than the private concerns of individual professors.¹⁶

If we are to go on and go further as the nomadic people of God in the context of a divided church (assuming it can happen at all), writes Robert Jenson, then we must confess that "we live in radical self-contradiction and that by every churchly act we contradict that contradiction. Also theology must make this double contradiction at and by every step of its way."¹⁷ This need not be a pessimistic assessment, since the members of Christ's body live by hope in the coming kingdom of God. And so we wait in the knowledge that it is a blessing to theology that we need not wait for the church to be completely re-membered to do our work.

Some may object that proceeding from the standpoint of the church community and its intellectual tradition entails suppressing the critical and speculative side of our rational nature, but these fears are unfounded. When inquiring after knowledge generally, writes John Henry Newman, "we must assume something to prove anything, and can gain nothing without a venture."¹⁸ Human beings must make an interpretive surmise of one sort or another to know or do anything at all, from the most mundane tasks to the most elaborate research programs in science, and such ventures are always subject to subtle reworking, substantive revision, or outright rejection. The church is not exempt from this principle, and it is the work of theology to test the convictions of its interpretive venture, to criticize and transform them when warranted, and to take account of the differences and disputes that exist between the church and other human associations.¹⁹

Theologians must therefore refuse as illusory the notion that there is an unsullied beginning point, a "mid-air" position that we can occupy through

16. Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, 17, 25.

17. Jenson, *Triune God*, vii.

18. J. Newman, "Nature of Faith in Relation to Reason," 215.

19. McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, 9.

the application of some sort of critical method, allowing us—without our feet touching the ground, so to speak—to judge which claims are true and which are not. We should not confuse what William of St. Thierry refers to as the hesitations of thought (*haesitationes cogitationum*) that invariably accompany the thoughts of faith (*fidei cogitationes*) with the sort of dishonest rationality (*rationalitas improba*) that adopts an antagonistic attitude to faith.²⁰ The skepticism that arises from this kind of antagonism necessarily leads to either despair or cynicism, or to both in alternation.²¹

Dismembering the Body of Christ

So then, where *do* we in the body of Christ currently stand? Obviously, not where our mothers and fathers in the faith once stood. They saw the world in which they lived as followable, as a “book” authored by God, with the events of history unfolding in the manner of a dramatic narrative. The complex plot and many subplots of this story were detailed for the faithful in God’s other work, the Bible, according to which all things ultimately find their significance in their being either receptive to or closed off from the work of God in Christ’s life, passion, and resurrection.

The church’s venture of an overall view of things was not confined to the privatized realm of “religion,” sequestered from the everyday world of politics, economics, and the like. It was interwoven with a complex (and admittedly messy) social space that was composed of intersecting associations—church institutions, civil authorities of all sorts, clans, monasteries and other religious groups, guilds, and towns. The obligations, immunities, and entitlements that men and women owed to one another within these *societates* were not conferred by an omniscient, centralized nation-state, but subsisted within these overlapping associations of which they were members. Each person and association was regarded as an integral whole that also constituted a part of a larger whole, generating a complex conception of space that was conceived on the Pauline theology of the body of Christ.

Over the last several centuries, however, reconfigurations of world and self trained women and men to think, feel, and act quite differently in every sphere of life. A vast technological apparatus—the emergence of the state as the normative form of political community; the commodification of property, goods, and labor; the development of complex monetary systems; the rise to social

20. William of St. Thierry, *Mirror of Faith*, 38, 65; cf. de Lubac, *Mystery of the Supernatural*, 170.

21. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 19.

prominence of managerial expertise; and radical changes in political and moral discourse—uprooted the social relationships and personal identities previously embedded in local associations. In place of these encumbrances, modern institutions sought to establish a direct and unmediated relationship between the sovereign power of the state and the unencumbered individual whose only necessary identity was as a unit of production and consumption, and for whom other individuals were only variables in the calculation of self-interest.

The peoples of Christendom were thus gradually divested of the practices, dispositions, and institutions that had bound them to one another and enabled them to follow the world as an ensemble of signs uttered and intended by God. The accumulated social capital—the moral habits, customs, and beliefs about what made for human flourishing—was reinvested in a series of political, economic, and cultural projects that stipulated that the social mediation of transcendence was no longer needed to ascend to truth, goodness, and beauty. Set free from the constraints of a shared past and the claim of others on their lives to fashion their own stories (except not, of course, free from the authority of the state, which promised to ensure that freedom in exchange for unquestioned sovereignty over every aspect of their lives), progress would be measured solely by the degree to which individuals realized independence from any relationship or authority outside themselves.

Of all the relationships that needed to be dismantled for the modern project to go forward, none was more crucial than those once located within the church. The political and economic regime that separated the day-to-day lives of women and men from the social ligatures of family, clan, guild, estate, and village also severed the ecclesial sinews that bound them to the risen Christ and to each other. Working gradually and methodically, the new order of things dismembered the body of Christ by abating its common life and vitiating its witness to the triune God. The substance of Christian faith was separated from the constitutive practices that made it possible for women and men, in the power of the Spirit, to participate in the economy of God's redemptive work in the world, with the capacity to imagine, reason, desire, feel, and act as members of Christ's true body.

Apart from these practices and the habits they cultivated, Christians were increasingly subject to the political whims and machinations of the state, with little sense of the difference between the obligations they owed to God and those owed to the state. We also became caught up in habits of consumption that no longer served any higher purpose but became ends in themselves, to be desired for their own sake. Ensnared by stunted imaginations and unfettered appetites, we still routinely confuse having a plethora

of choices with being free. These desires and habits not only are out of proportion to what men and women need to flourish as creatures made in the image of God but substantially transform the character of their relations with others, not only within the body of Christ but also with those outside the fellowship of the church.

The dismembering of the body of Christ had a significant impact on the earthly commonwealth as well, for the institutions that for centuries constituted the social fabric of Western Europe, Australia, and North America were fostered by the church. Though we might finally judge this arrangement to be theologically deficient, it provided a measure of moral coherence and direction to a succession of temporal regimes that helped, to one degree or another, preserve a fallen world for the gathering-together of all things in Christ at the end of the age. People can only go about their business on the tacit assumption that error, deception, self-deception, irony, and ambiguity, though everywhere present in these interactions, will not finally render reliable reasoning and coherent action impossible.²² These assumptions are formed and sustained by the stock of activities, stories, habits, and institutions that foster a common life and language within a society. These practices and habits enable the members of a community to engage one another in meaningful transactions by allowing them to make inferences about future behavior and present intentions from premises about past behavior.

When these shared customs and habits no longer bind men and women together into a community of shared interest, and mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around them multiply exponentially, but with none achieving a critical mass, the result is the kind of social fragmentation that we see with the demise of Christendom in Europe, Australia, and North America. An ever-widening gap or wound has opened up in the secular body politic, “which neither conventional right nor conventional left are currently doing much to recognise or repair.” In lieu of shared patterns of life that allow people to determine what they can reasonably do and say together to foster a just and equitable common life and language, the dominant regime of nation-states and global markets offers political discourse dominated by the marketing of slogans and sound bites and by the calculation of short-term advantages.²³ These tendencies are not only incapable of sustained deliberations about the basic conditions of our humanity; they also create the breeding ground for the nationalist and authoritarian movements that have emerged at many places across the globe in recent history.

22. MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science,” 139.

23. Williams, *Lost Icons*, 2–3, 9.

Christians cannot assign the blame for this state of affairs solely to the advent of modernity. The *corpus Christianum* had been sagging under its own accumulated weight for several centuries, and the final supports are now giving way to the stress of a rapidly secularizing world. With its collapse, its patterns of relating to the world are rapidly deteriorating as well. Nations in Europe, Australia, and North America delayed for a time the dehumanizing effects of this process by selectively drawing on a residual stock of practices, convictions, and dispositions held over from the traditions of medieval Christendom. But as the contents of this reserve were disconnected from the practices and institutions that had nurtured them over the centuries, their intelligibility and credibility began to unravel, somewhat slowly at first, and then more rapidly as the era of “enlightenment” and “progress” unfolded.

The compliment typically paid to this situation, cobbled together from the debris left by the *ancien régime*, is that it is pluralistic and multicultural, but this is hollow praise indeed, for these are but names for the reduction of all values to those that can be marketed as commodities in the global market. In place of a stock of images and ideas, inscribed in a shared body of texts, that foster a rich common life, the ruling consortium seeks merely to secure a pragmatic minimum of coexistence between unencumbered individuals and their mutually tangential projects by means of a combination of managerial skills and economic policies.²⁴ The euphemisms of *pluralism* and *multiculturalism* serve as a façade to hide the incoherence and antagonism that afflict all. Many now wonder whether there is anything at all genuinely and intrinsically human beyond their momentary appetites and desires, and any identity they might share in common resides not in a positive good that commands their assent but in suspicion of and hatred for their enemies, both real and imagined.

The dismembering of Christ’s body must therefore be conceived diachronically as well as synchronically. The logic of separation that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and gained momentum in the modern era has its origins much earlier, when the church joined forces with the rulers and authorities of the present age to govern the *saeculum*, the temporal period between fall and *eschaton*, and after the coming of Christ the overlap of the two ages in the here and now. The division of the church must be examined in conjunction with the emergence, development, and demise of the social project of Christendom. In addition to being a work in hermeneutics and ecclesiology, then, this book also engages the much-contested domain of social theory.

24. Williams, “Between Politics and Metaphysics,” 4; Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 34.

Re-embarking on Pilgrimage

As we prepare to take our bearings for the future from what went before us, what lessons should we learn from our present circumstances? First, we need to be careful, lest we romanticize the past and find ourselves caught up in nostalgic longing for what has been. Though nostalgia can be a potent form of social criticism, the church cannot simply rebel against the modern in an effort to return to the simplicity and pristine faithfulness supposedly proffered by the premodern era. We cannot return, moreover, because modernity was shaped by the deliberate rejection of the past, and modernity is part of our past.²⁵ Rebellion against rebellion imprisons us within an insidious antithetical bondage. Indeed, part of the modern world's genius was its ability to conscript its adversaries into its modes of regulating behavior, which rely not so much on explicit coercion as on widely diffused modes of regulation that train us how to think, feel, and act in ways appropriate to its basic modes of governance and accumulation.

Nostalgia also clouds the fact that the social arrangements of Christendom failed to a significant degree because the church for most of its history “endeavored to be not what it is but what it is not.” These arrangements failed not only the church, in that it set aside the art of pilgrimage and thus lost sight of itself as “the sacrament of the Kingdom, a holy community, God’s eschatological vehicle of passage for this world through time into the world to come,” but also the world to which the church was sent as sign and instrument. The failure was twofold. First, in its efforts to redeem and sanctify the existing social order, the church forgot its earlier understanding of the world as both (1) created and therefore good and (2) fallen and therefore a mortally sick order. Second, when the church accepted its status as a juridical and hierarchical institution within the established order, it forfeited its calling as a free community of faith whose presence in the world is both a judgment on and a boundary to the claims of every worldly authority and power.²⁶

The passing of Christendom presents a timely opportunity for the church to recover its missional status as another city making its way toward the age to come. The laments and prophetic rebukes in Scripture remind us that among the remnants of the failed kingdoms of Israel and Judah, there was a struggle to understand what had happened, and out of their humiliation they revised their own history, seeing it as “a story of unceasing resistance to and rebellion against God.” They nonetheless concluded that God had not utterly abandoned them, but in his faithfulness had instead folded the destruction

25. Bottum, “Christians and Postmoderns,” 28–29.

26. Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 146–47; cf. Harvey, *Another City*, 64–69.

of the Northern Kingdom, the fall of Jerusalem, the exile to Babylon, and the dispersion of the chosen people among the nations back into the saving history of Israel. In their affliction they learned to “recognize their guilt and turn back to God, thus correcting the direction they [were] going. The very crisis of the people of God would then be one of the reasons why God’s cause does not fail, but instead goes forward as a history of salvation.” The end of the monarchy in Israel did not spell Israel’s end but led instead “to a rebirth of the people of God,” thus making the event of the exile part of “a *saving* history and a step into the future.”²⁷

Unfortunately, the church, particularly in North America, seems more oblivious to its precarious situation than were the exiles in Babylon. One must look long and hard for similar retrospectives on the part of the church with respect to its own history. On the contrary, writes Gerhard Lohfink, “the faith for which Israel still struggled and over which it wrangled is dissolving in the current decades . . . almost without resistance, and unnoticed by a great many, into religion: a religion that permits everything, that surrenders to everything, that has countless gods but no longer a history with the biblical God.”²⁸ In our feeble efforts to hold on to the remnants of the *ancien régime*, too many accommodate the substance of the faith to the demands of a world that no longer is interested in what the church has to say.

Nevertheless, we have the opportunity to rediscover our history with the God of Israel, to acknowledge our failures and guilt, and to return to our first love, so that we too might learn to see what has happened over the past few centuries as part of God’s redemptive history and thus as a way forward. The turn of fortune that has thrust the church back outside the city gate (Heb. 13:12), so that it no longer has a portfolio in the ruling regime, is an occasion once again to take our cues from the story of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and to reclaim our identity as an eschatological commonwealth whose allegiance is vested not in institutions that are condemned to pass away but in the world to come.

Before we can reflect on what might be involved in moving nearer to Christ, we need a better sense of how we got from where our pilgrimage began with the people of Israel and with Jesus and the Twelve to where we find ourselves, having journeyed, like the prodigal, to a “far country.” Determining where we stand depends on the story that narrates this journey and how it might be possible for us to make our way back to the crucified and risen Lord. Only by tracing how we made our way to where we are, the many contingent steps

27. Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, 96, 105 (emphasis original).

28. Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, 96–97.

involved in bringing us to this place, do we realize that there is no inexorable historical process that led us to our present situation. In virtually every facet of life—ecclesial, political, economic, cultural—matters could have turned out much differently.

In what follows in the next chapter, then, I say something about why this calling of the church to be a sign, instrument, and witness of God’s invasion of the world, which is challenging under the best of conditions, is now much more difficult because we have been separated from each other and from the interpretive art that allows us to be attentive to the ways of Christ in a world that is fallen but nonetheless still cherished by its Creator.