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The Church: Being and Acting

The essays and responses in this volume reflect a conversation that has reached into the particularities of the church's mission and how to effectively be church in the contemporary world. The conversation brings with it a fundamental underlying question: Indeed, what *is* the church? Moreover, what is the church *doing*? What *ought* it to be doing? And how do these questions relate to one another? Evangelicals in particular, known as people of emphasis, have an additional question: Are they (and their churches) carrying out their mission to the full extent they could be? And are churches actually carrying out the mission they *claim* to be? Under a helpful fourfold rubric, Helen Cameron provides a method of nuancing the various voices at play in any given theology, and she identifies these as theology (or in our case, *mission*) that is “operant,” or what they actually do; “espoused,” or what they *say* they do; “normative,” having to do with sources of authority; and “formal,” which is the professional kind done by, well, professionals.¹ Such a way of nuancing the church's mission might also be helpful for readers of this book as they consider how they and their churches might approach their ongoing mission today.

This leads to another pressing question: Are churches today carrying out the mission they would like to be, and in the ways they wish to? And are these things the very things God would have his people do in this present moment? During the assemblage of this volume, we highlighted a number of strong forces active within the US (and, by extension in some respects, the global) context which require more intense and ongoing conversations than the rich ones already conducted in this book. These views

1. Helen Cameron, et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 49–56.

are a reflection of conversations already happening within households, congregations, and missions organizations as well as academic, civic, even corporate and nonprofit organizations that are working to serve the church in some manner, helping it to advance in what God has called it to be and do.

We recognize that the voices in this volume are not reflective of everything with which the church in its missionary action may be tasked to do in particular settings. The writers of this volume have real limitations, are each Anglophile males, and possess British PhDs. Yet each in one way or another is connected to the church around the globe. Nevertheless, with these limitations, we struggle to reckon with challenges of, for example, the black church in the United States, or the Brown church, the Native Indian, or the Asian ecclesial experience, and how these particular dynamics shape various ways that our evangelical sisters and brothers carry out the task of the church's mission, which one can see from this book looks very different across the evangelical spectrum. We have also major limitations when it comes to understanding those outside our own ecclesial traditions, which echo in the backdrop of this volume's essays and responses. Yet with this, we have tried to articulate ideas that are biblical and transferrable among a range of contexts, and offer for your analysis and engagement the explorations within.

The Ecclesial Backdrop of the Views

While each of the positions in this volume has been clearly and substantially articulated by its particular representative—"Soteriological Mission" by Jonathan Leeman; "Participatory Mission" by Christopher Wright; "Contextual Mission" by John Franke; and "Sacramental Mission" by Peter Leithart—I'm not sure that any of them fully captures the dynamic public and political witness of the church,² nor has the significance of church qua church been established. It's been more or less assumed throughout: a church exists, it has a mission, and we focused most of the time looking at what that mission is or how to carry it out most meaningfully. But certainly the church's activities—things like

2. Aside from the authors' particular and significant single-volume contributions, which have been discussed throughout, on the church's public role, see Jennifer McBride, *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); for the political, see Amy E. Black, ed., *Five Views on the Church and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015).

prayer, preaching, and actual presence (and the fact that the church *is* at all)—bears witness to the church's reality as an alien phenomenon in the world. Its constitution is strange inasmuch as it is supernatural, far beyond Robert Bellah's notion of the lifestyle enclave, and displays a gathering together of people from all walks of life—wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated, skilled and unskilled, black and white and brown and Asian, and everything else—the “new humanity” (Eph. 2:15), bound together in love.

None of the contributors in this volume drew in explicit ways from their ecclesial traditions, or at least it wasn't particularly noticeable. One might of course recognize that Peter Leithart and John Franke are Presbyterians, that Chris Wright is Anglican, and that Jonathan Leeman is a Baptist of a very conservative kind in some ways. But none of these are identifiably and exclusively *Presbyterian*, nor exclusively *Anglican*, nor exclusively *Baptist*. The visions presented could be shared by nearly any tradition that wishes to think through Scripture and what it refers to, and are in this sense ecumenical in their own ways. Yet on the other hand, each author's understanding of the church and its mission is more than theoretical and academic—each view is part of a deeply personal journey and is wrapped up in each contributor's identity as a participant in the life of a real church and its mission. Each contributor has personally followed his understanding of the church's mission into a vocational calling and lifestyle that have not been without their own demands, and in some cases have meant great personal and professional cost for the contributors. Yet each of their efforts has also yielded demonstrable results and genuine fruit as they have discharged their work in service to the Lord and to the mission of the church.

But again, what is *church*?

The English word “church” derives from the German *Kirche* and Dutch *kerk*, coming into English through the Scottish *kirk*, deriving ultimately from the Greek notion, κυριακόν, which means something like “belonging to the Lord,” originally applying to a church building. In Latin, the word *ecclesia* and its derivatives, also referring to a building, comes from the Greek, ἐκκλησία, meaning an assembly, and coming later to refer to the gathered Christians.³ When given special theological

3. F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 346.

import by the apostle Paul, who refers to both the local congregation and the universal church as more specifically ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ or ἐκ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, the idea gave the term its more specifically Christian coloring: the church *of God* or the church *of Christ*.

Taken an additional step, the late John Webster notes that in the case of 2 Corinthians 5:18, “an operative notion of ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ will require us to invest a great deal of theological energy in the depiction of the person and work of the reconciling God.”⁴ This sets up what Webster refers to as “the dominating feature of Christian ethical geography, of a theological depiction of the space for the church’s endeavor which is established by the action of the triune God, and which it is the chief task of Christian moral theology to map.”⁵ Furthermore, from this new creative (2 Cor. 5:17), divine activity—ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ—is displayed in a fundamental sense “the determinative divine action which generates the community of reconciliation.”⁶ Consequently, this action by God enables the community of reconciliation (or church), by its very existence, to be the community embodying the message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19).

As such the church is now *creatura verbi divini* (creature of the divine Word), grounded in God’s unique revelation of Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit, which then becomes the ground of the church’s *catholicity* or universality. There is *one* church, rooted in the universal truth of God’s revelation in Christ and by true faith, which constitutes the *communio sanctorum*, the communion of saints. This *holy* communion has its holiness not by its own intrinsic status but because of the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, wherein the church also finds its *apostolic* function by which it witnesses the identity and universality of God’s revelation in Christ.⁷ Therefore the church exists in its constitution *as* church, by grace being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the marks also found listed in the Creed.

4. John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 215.

5. *Ibid.*, 216.

6. *Ibid.*, 220.

7. Christoph Schwöbel, “The Creature of the Word: Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers,” in Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 126–29.

The Dynamic, Living Church

While the church's existence finds its life grounded in the divine Word by the power of the Holy Spirit and thus constituted as a witnessing community, Jesus informed his followers in Acts 1:8 that they would also receive power and, as a community, will be his witnesses. The future tense verb here for "will be" is in the indicative mood (not imperative; i.e., there is no command to *go be witnesses*) and as such indicates that by their very constitution as church, they already are witnesses, and a witnessing community, with marks remaining as real and vital as ever. This dynamic highlights the witnessing nature of the church, but also its ongoing dynamic life.⁸ The dynamic power operates in centrifugal fashion, maintaining the marks—one, holy, catholic, apostolic—and yet turning them outward actively in such a way that it becomes even more fitting to describe the church as a unifying, sanctifying, reconciling, and proclaiming community, as Charles Van Engen and Darrell Guder have suggested. As such, the church is these things by virtue of its constitution by the Holy Spirit, by virtue of its union with Christ, and by virtue of its dynamic life as this witnessing community. Being sent, then, the church in a sense shares, testifies of, and in this way holds out in extended fashion the salvific action of God the Father, who reconciles sinners, bringing people into a safe harbor, granting shelter from the storm, bringing lost sons and daughters home from their sojourn in troubled waters. In that sense, the church is a ship, constantly moving on the ever-changing sea of ebb and flow, storm and calm, living as a beacon of hope on a special journey of rescue and redemption.

Called, Gathered, and Sent

On its special mission of redemption, the church never loses its quality of being the church, over which the gates of hell will never prevail. While some of the contributors had critique of others' use of Scripture, how normative (or not) it might be, this certainly makes up one of the fundamental features of the church. It is not only divinely called as a *creatura verbi* (creature of the Word) but it is also a creature gathered around Scripture. In a sense, the church is gathered by the sacraments,

8. For a robust account of this ecclesial life, see Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and The Church* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

a point acknowledged by all contributors after being made forcefully as the essence of Peter Leithart's argument. Yet Leithart also concedes to Franke at one that his proposal lacks space for the *missio Dei*. The church's constitution is also focused on conversion, proclamation, action, and service. The reality of the theological description here, of course, is that all three of these dynamics of the church's constituted life—called, gathered, sent—occur simultaneously and ongoingly.

Issues throughout this book at times conflated the ideas of church, which by its constitution as a creature of the Word is a worshipping community, and of mission. At least one contributor has suggested that sanctification must take place *before* mission. But again, this betrays the notion of the character of the church: called, gathered, sent . . . simultaneously. To suggest degrees of holiness before worship or mission may indeed invoke a tacit Pelagianism, especially if the logic might be applied to salvation, and especially if testifying to and proclaiming this salvation is one of the church's primary privileges (which I believe it is). At best, this tendency might create second-class citizens within the church, if folks can ever find their way there. But the most dynamic churches, more contextually oriented, majority-world, ethnic, etc., seem to be carrying on with their life and mission in radical ways, with various forms of increased holiness looking markedly different than what, say, some of our churches in North America would ever recognize; where newly-celibate polygamists care for the wives they still cohabit with and provide for, to list just one real-world example in some emerging evangelical situations, which has far-reaching implications that we have been far less quick to explore in our context, whatever our view on the mission of the church might be.

Throughout the spread of the church's mission of proclamation, sanctification, unification, and reconciliation exists a divinely wrought experience of justice, which brings us back to the gospel, the good news about God: that God was in Christ reconciling the world. And how does this message remain front and center of the church's life so that it may most effectively carry out its mission of seeing this hope develop in the world? It is our prayer that this book will assist some of that effort, helping churches within the evangelical movement take a serious moment of pause, critical self-reflection, and then carry on with the mission we've been brought into as the Spirit-and-Word-constituted

church—as the world’s most significant public actor, and as the vessel privileged to bear witness to the most important message of reality there ever was, is, and ever will be: again, God was in Christ reconciling *the world*. And God has given us this ministry, this ongoing mission, of reconciliation. God will one day bring this about ultimately, irrefutably, and in the highest sense, healing through Christ everything that is now broken. God himself will accomplish this mission through Christ our Lord. Amen.