

The Case for Polity As A Topic In Soteriology

*We acknowledge without any circumlocution that the flesh of Christ is life-giving, not only because once in it our salvation was obtained; but because now we being united to him in sacred union, it breathes life into us... because being by the power of the Spirit engrafted into the body of Christ, we have a common life with him; fore from the hidden fountain of divinity life is, in a wonderful way, infused into the flesh of Christ and thence flows out to us..." Christ is absent from us as to the body; by his Spirit, however dwelling in us, he so lifts us to himself in heaven, that he transfuses the life-giving vigor of his flesh into us, as we grow by vital heat of the sun."*¹

--Jon Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

Jon Calvin's depiction of ecclesial flesh (real time and space) being "united to Christ in sacred union" by the mystery of "engrafting" renders it theologically absurd to relegate ecclesial polity to something less than a topic of soteriological proportions. To be clear, by polity it is meant more than ecclesial government, though it includes this. It is meant *all manner of social order in the life of the church wherein the communion of saints becomes the life giving communion of Christ*. And by soteriology we mean to encompass something vastly more comprehensive than justification alone as pertaining to Christ's incarnation ministry. We reference the soteriology of illumination and power that is being mediated vis-à-vis Christ's mystical presence in the midst of us today with respect to Christ's ascension ministry! Such a ministry of Christ by the Holy Spirit encompasses the soteriologically relevant activities of God acting through effectual calling, saving repentance and faith, sanctification and good works, perseverance, etc.

But of course, Calvin's concept begs the question as to whether or not his depiction of the soteriological import of ecclesial flesh can withstand the weight of biblical and confessional scrutiny? Briefly, if to move on to the issue of polity itself:

What else then was Christ thinking when immediately after declaring the importance of his ascension ministry (John 20:17) he then administered the temple benediction upon them, then breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit declaring "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld"(Jn 20:22-23)? Clearly, Christ speaks here of a soteriological union of the ecclesial body of Christ on earth with the life-giving body of Christ in heaven!

Or post-Pentecost, why reduce to mere symbolism Paul's description of the ecclesial body of Christ on earth as to participate in (partake of) the one bread (in reference to Christ's body that is now in heaven) in 1 Cor 10:16-17? And with implications pertaining to our politic together.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

¹ John Calvin, Quoted in Hodge, DR, Essays, p. 364. Inst. IV 17.8-12, 32 esp 8, 12) also III, xi, 10.

And then in Romans, could it be made more clear that for Paul, the ecclesial “one body... many members” in mystical union with Christ must necessarily imply a sharing in one another’s flesh on flesh services as spiritually infused charismata.

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: If prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (Rom 12:4-8)

This to say that we would do well to rediscover the profound, if even ontologically inspired, admonition in the Westminster Confession of Faith wherein in chapter 26 on the “Communion of Saints,” it is first affirmed that;

All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory

And then by consequence;

We are by virtue of our union with Christ being united to one another in love, [we] have communion in each other's gifts and graces, and are obliged to the performance of such duties, public and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man.

Therefore, and for the sake of the discussion at hand, the question of biblical and confessional orthodoxy has been raised and answered. *By polity we speak of nothing less than that manner of order in the life of the church wherein the life giving flesh of Christ, the hidden fountain of divinity life itself that is wonderfully infused into the flesh of Christ thence flows out to us by means of Christ transfusing the life-giving vigor of his flesh into us by means of our flesh on flesh communion in the gifts and graces of the ecclesial body of Christ one to another.* Polity then pertains to Thomas Torrance’s depiction of the “body of Christ” as Christ vis-à-vis history! :

The spirit operates by creating out of the word what St. Paul calls the Body of Christ.... As such this body becomes matched to Christ vis-à-vis history as the instrument of his saving purpose in the Gospel. It is the sphere where through the presence of the Spirit the salvation-events of the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension are operative here and now in history unto salvation now, the sphere wherever within the old creation the new creation has broken in with power.²

That is to say, as in Augustine’s “Total Christ” spirituality, the heart of mystical union is the mystery of Christ being united to a specific socio-cultural flesh of local member-congregations wherein there is a sacramental convergence between the *manners* of local life and the transformational *power* of God’s divine grace. Such a definition of “polity” gives new meaning to the command “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor 14:40), a command too often demeaned as to become a lame excuse for mere proceduralisms in the courts of Christ rather than a Christocentric and principled way of ordering the ebb and flow of the ecclesial life of Christ per Paul’s original: “Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts”(1Cor. 14:1).

Polity as Liturgy

² Thomas Torrance, Royal Priesthood, p. 23ff.

“An education, then, is a constellation of practices, rituals, and routines that inculcates a particular vision of the good life by inscribing or infusing that vision into the heart (the gut) by means of material, embodied practices.

— James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*

Perhaps then by polity we need to be thinking more in terms of “liturgy” as applied to the manners of *one anothering* in the life of the church—as much to do with the way we socialize as the way we govern, the way we pattern our several activities in relation to our joint activities, the way we relate one congregation to another congregation, how we relate one demographics of the local church to another and the ministries of the church, when and how we construct target ministries or even target congregations and when and how to avoid targeting, the polity of programing and not programing, the polity of gender, of race, of generations and-- on and on it goes! The point? Everything is polity and polity involves liturgy as to involve the intentional “ordering” of social relations after the pattern of sound words contained in the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone.

The manner by which the life of Christ is transfused into the flesh on flesh liturgy of polity is perhaps nowhere more spelled out than in Paul’s description of the church in Ephesian. Picking up with Ephesians 2:18ff, the emphasis is corporate presence. According to Paul, to be separated from the “household of God” (vs. 19) is to NOT participate in the gospel “for through Him (Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. (vs. 18. E.g. No church... no access to God!). The work of the Holy Spirit is attributed to our being “in Him” (Christ) corresponding to being the “holy temple...in the Lord!” Paul uses the language in vs. 22, “union in Christ,” as synonymous with “being built up together spiritually into a dwelling place of God.”

As related to a liturgy of polity specifically, idea of being “built up” is the same word translated “being joined together” (ESV) in Ephesians 4:16 directly linked to the descent of the ascended Christ by the Holy spirit as united to socializing the church. That is, the miracle of transfused power in presence is linked to a liturgy of polity such as to bring order by “joining together” the body of Christ— this almost certainly a reference to their role of “organizing” churches.³ As constructed then upon the apostolic foundation, one can at the very least conclude that the construction ecclesial socialization such as to include a polity of “doctrine, worship and government, more than mere best practices, is related to the descent of Christ by the Holy Spirit acting through the apostolic vision of “building a temple.”

This context from Ephesians gives new meaning to Paul’s instructions to his young protégé concerning the implementation of a “pattern of sound words...in order that” you might know how one ought to conduct oneself in the household of God. Significantly, the church here is described as “the church of the *living* God as the pillar and bulwark of the faith” (1 Timothy 3:14-15). And would it surprise us that Paul’s “instructions” to Timothy covered such topics as instructions on ordination (1 Tim 3), worship (1Tim 2) and doctrine (1Tim 1) as no doubt being worked out in an assembled context? In so are as the practice of these aspects of spirituality are “being joined together” there is a mediated correspondence between the ascended Christ in “session” and his presence on earth as prophet, priest and king

More than mere “policy,” though it is that, a liturgical or “systems” approach elevates polity to choreography in so far as the ebb and flow of ecclesial life is the transaction of the life of Christ into the soul of the temple-church.

³ συναρμολογουμένη, see also Ephesians 4:16. According then to Louw and Nida, this word can be used synonymously with “assemble,” arrange, structure or even “organize.” In 1Cor.12:20 for instance, God is said to “structure” (συγκεράννυμι) the body of Christ as to give some greater honor than others.. And perhaps most significantly, Titus 1:5 applies the verb ἐπιδιορθόω to mean “set in order” or even “organize” as to establish a church by means of the training and appointment of elders. Louw & Nida, #62.3,4,5. C.f. T. David Gordon’s “Equipping” Ministry in Ephesians 4?”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (March, 1994).

If then to illustrate, the intentional, carefully choreographed, “ebb and flow” of socialization in the church should extend therefore to such categories as:

- A Liturgy of Gender
- A Liturgy of Mercy
- A Liturgy of Shepherding
- A Liturgy of Multi-Congregationalism
- A Liturgy of the Church Acting Jointly and the Church Acting Severally (Target Ministries, Small Groups, etc)
- Etc.

Herein I am reminded of what Thomas Oden once asked in his own wrestling with modern facing Christianity as to rediscover true orthodoxy,

Where did we get the twisted notion that orthodoxy is essentially a set of ideas rather than a living tradition of social experience? Our stereotype of orthodoxy is that of frozen dogma, rather than a warm continuity of human experience-- of grandmothers teaching granddaughters, of feasts and stories, of rites and dancing. Orthodoxies are never best judged merely by their doctrinal ideas, but by their social products the quality of their communities... They await being studied sociologically, not just theologically.⁴

The thoughts of James K. A. Smith concerning the meaning of liturgy is worth noting here. He reflects on how psychologist Timothy Wilson believes that about only 5 percent of what we do in a given day is the outcome of conscious, deliberate choices processed by human consciousness. The rest of our actions and behaviors are managed below the surface, by all sorts of learned yet now unconscious ways of intending and navigating the world. And more significantly, such unconscious biases are governed by our affections or “loves.” Smith continues:

Our love is like second nature: it directs and propels us, often under the radar of conscious awareness, like breathing and blinking. It also means that our loves acquire direction and orientation because we are immersed over time in practices and rituals—what we’ve called ‘liturgies’—that affectively and viscerally train our desires.⁵

Consequently, a renewed interest in ecclesial liturgy recognizes that as living souls we are embodied into a narrative of life habits and practice. In a significant way therefore, our socio-ecclesial liturgies are tactile stories that captivate our imagination, that is, what we can envision about life. Our imaginations inform much of how we make our decisions, form our values and order our lives. Liturgy as such informs what “feels right” or has been described as what we know as our “gut” response. As such, we can rightly say that the gospel is as much studied as it is habituated.

A liturgy of polity wants to reformulate the manner of our social ebb and flow in a manner that re-envision life itself under the principles of the gospel.

Our loves and imaginations are conscripted by all sorts of liturgies that are loaded with a vision of the good life. To be immersed in those ‘secular’ liturgies is to be habituated to long for what they promise.⁶

⁴ Thomas Oden, *After Modernity, What?*

⁵ J.K. Smith, *We Are What We Love*, p. 32.

⁶ Smith, p. 38.

We can't just think our way to gospel flourishing. It is something that must be formulated into our communal actions, practices, repetitions and re-training. Clearly then, a discussion on polity wants to resist sequestering Christian formation (liturgy) to Sunday worship or even what type of government is exercised through what form of government a church utilizes—although it clearly involves both! In addition, what are the liturgies of our church life Monday – Saturday? What vision of “Total Christ” is carried out in our “ordinary” church practices and “manners,” perhaps better “systems?” What sorts of people are we making by immersion in the cultural liturgies that our church gets caught up in that needs embracing? Otherwise, how do secular liturgies intrude upon the liturgies of the church in ways that compromise the “good life” concerning the kingdom of God that need repenting?

Sacred liturgy, always developed in the contexts of secular liturgies, must necessarily be an exercise of re-habituation and re-formulation! It will involve an intentional and proactive “*word-order-practice*” exercise such as to reunite covenant to temple, confessional to communal to sacramental, practices and habits.

If nothing else is affirmed in this discussion, it is affirmed that we can't take the social liturgy of the church for granted. We must rediscover the first things of our Total Christ soteriology such as to reengage the preliminary principles of our ecclesiology applied to liturgical polity—an exercise that can't begin with a mere “best practices” sort of analysis, but with a biblically informed theological vision. In this way, we are exhorted to “put on” (clothe ourselves) with habits of practices (rituals) that does something to us in terms of gospel spirituality. We will in turn discover how it is that we not just being taught about Christ, but enabled more and more to become

that manner of order in the life of the church wherein the life giving flesh of Christ, the hidden fountain of divinity life itself that is wonderfully infused into the flesh of Christ, thence flows out to us by means of Christ transfusing the life-giving vigor of his flesh into us by means of our flesh on flesh communion in the gifts and graces of the ecclesial body of Christ's one anothering.

Liturgies of Polity Explored

“Liturgies aim our love to different ends precisely by training our hearts through our bodies.”

— James K.A. Smith, Desiring the Kingdom

In each of the above illustrations, a liturgy of ? would want to choreograph into the life of the church various preliminary principals relative to an ontology of the church that is “Total Christ.” As applied to polity, a liturgy of polity must necessarily include a liturgy of governing informed by certain preliminary principals. By way of a summary, some of the preliminary principles that need rediscovering might include:

I. “*On earth as it is in heaven*” – The visibly organized church should be understood as nothing less than the epicenter concerning the mediatorial presence of Christ's Kingdom power.

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Matthew 16:19-19

If the question is raised, how can I experience the “immeasurably great power”r concerning the life of Christ, the answer is given concerning the ascended Christ—“and he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, *the fullness of him who fills all in all.* Eph 1:19-23

Christ the Lord is always himself present with his church... truly and actually... for the Lord is never absent from his church, but is always personally present, personally doing and performing everything in all

things... ruling, leading and feeding it himself. But he effects and carries out this his rule and the feeding of his lambs in such a way as to remain always in his heavenly nature, that is, in his divine and intangible state, because he has left this world. Therefore it has pleased him to exercise his rule, protection and care of us who are still in this world with and through the ministry of his word which he does outwardly and tangibly through his ministers and shepherds.

Martin Bucer, *The True Pastoral Care and the Correct Shepherd-Service*

Subsequently, two historical extremes ought therefore be avoided (taken from by James Bannerman's *Church of God*)

I. Hyper Power Position:

"Church power is undefined and mysterious thing, having no very well marked limits at all,-- a magic charm, a supernatural virtue, within it administers ordinances, or dispenses sacramental grace, or exercises priestly offices to the members,--an absolute and irresponsible spiritual authority, not to be profanely scanned or impiously restricted..."(Bannerman, p. 235)

2. Hypo Power-Position:

"Deny to that (Church) power its proper place and standing as a Divine ordinance,-- in whose eyes it ceases to be a power of God at all, and its exercise is no longer stamped with a Divine warrant, or accompanied with a Divine and special blessing; a nullity when it administers laws in the Christian society, carrying with it no binding obligation except from the consent of the members; and an empty and unblessed form, divorced from any Divine or gracious influence when it dispenses sacraments and ordinances in the Church... reducing it to the level of a mere human appointment, binding no Divine obligation on the conscience, and communicating no Divine blessing to the soul."(Bannerman, p. 235-36)

According to both of these extremes:

- There can be no such thing as real authority in government since the Church itself is a matter of private and human arrangement or institution and power is the mere delegation by members and the extent is determined and limited by what they thus consent to give or withhold.
- There can be no such thing as any real gracious power in sacraments since over and above their meaning and influence **are absent any real regulation and/or definition such as to become the divinely inspired grace and blessing.**
- "Under such systems, there would be laws without authority, ordinances without grace and discipline without judgment." (p.239)

Therefore, a preliminary principal concerning the Gospel Limits of Church Power:

1. *"The power of the Church is limited by a regard to the authority of Christ as the source of it."* All authority is under and derived from the authority of Christ as the "Chief Shepherd."(2 Peter 5)
2. *"The power of the Church is limited by the Word of God as the rule of its exercise.. Beyond that rule, the Church has no right of discipline, and no authority to enforce it."* (BCO, 27-5)
3. *"The power of the Church is limited by the nature of it, as exclusively a spiritual power. (Can only affect our relationship to church, not temporal affairs like taking away property or civil affairs like taking away voting privilege.)"*
4. *"The power of the Church is limited by a regard to the liberties and edification of its members."*
 - It is always considered remedial rather than punitive as dealing with those in the church of Christ.
 - Respects the freedom of conscience in those areas where Scripture is either silent or permissive. Rom.14:13-17

WCF 20.2: God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.

BCO 27-4: *The power which Christ has given the Church is for building up, and not for destruction. It is to be exercised as under a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath. As in the preaching of the Word the wicked are doctrinally separated*

- 2) *A second preliminary principal of church power, especially relevant in the manner in which such power is socialized multi-culturally, is the distinction between directed temple (socio-cultural) “Forms” and regulated Covenantal (eternal Word) “elements” in Christian Spirituality*

Corresponding to Christ the Word (Head) and Christ the Flesh (Body), the “one” and “many” aspect of a multi-congregational church is not only envisioned but enjoined according to scripture.

As already noted by Edmund Clowney, “the organic concept of the church that appears in the New Testament... presents a more theological, Christ-centered, view of the church as defined not by one earthly hierarchical center nor by many earthly congregational centers, but by a heavenly center that requires multiform earthly manifestations. Earthly assemblies do not define but manifest the nature and the center of the church.”⁷

What this means is that ecclesial power will want both to adhere to the “regulative “principle” in relation to a fixed heavenly prototype in faith and worship, while also executing this fixed prototype in the many and distinct socio-cultural flesh of the local context. This then raised the issue of what has historically been distinguished as “fixed elements” and “socially fluid forms.”

Therefore, while not compromising Christ or the gospel, Paul could say such things as I am “a Greek to the Greek and a Jew to the Jew” (1 Cor.9:20). The mystery in all of this is that we “partake of the divine nature” (2Peter 1:4) as per the sacramental principle. This “both-and” (elements-fixed/prescribed and forms-directed/not prescribed) stress both the sacred otherness and closeness of God’s presences saving presence. In the mystery of church power (as applied in sacraments), John Calvin as summarized “*no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.*”⁸

This two-fold regulative AND directed principle both preserve the ascension vernacular of “flesh” of a local manifestation of Christ in a particular congregation, even as it preserved the ascension “word” of Christ as Lord of all. Notice then how all of this tension is expressed even in the Westminster Confession of Faith. As noted already, having made the point that all the “elements” of faith and practice are to be regulated by divine institution in scripture according to *good and necessary inference from scripture*, the assembly then makes this remarkable concession as per the use of “forms” in the Confession of Faith (21:1)

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

- 3) *A third preliminary principal relevant to a liturgy of polity concerns the the church acting jointly distinguished from the Church acting severally as related to the regulative principal and directed principal respectively:*

⁷ Edmund Clowney, "Distinctive Emphasis in Presbyterian Church Polity," Pressing Toward The Mark (1986) n.p.

⁸ John Calvin, Corpus Reformatorum, 37: 48.

The distinction between Joint and Several action in the church can be discerned in the apostle Paul when he distinguished between the things that are “lawful” (as per spiritual jurisdiction—applicable to his authority acting jointly) and the “things that are helpful” (as per spiritual influence—applicable to his authority to counsel severally (c.f 1 Cor.6:12, 1 Cor 10:23). Such distinctions could lead him to say things like “I give this charge (not I, but the Lord)” in 1 Cor 7:10 when acting jointly and then again in 1 Cor.7:12 “to the rest I say (I, not the Lord)” when acting severally.

Likewise, the distinction can be discerned in comparing Matt. 18:15-16 and the power of the church acting severally through her individual members when seeking to restore a person in fellowship (the power of influence) as compared to the ‘binding and loosing’ power of jurisdictional (c.f Mt 16) as then attributed to the church acting jointly in Matt. 18:17-20.

The distinction also been historically recognized. For instance, the Scottish Second Book of Discipline (1578) distinguished between *potestas ordinis* and *potestas jurisdictionis*, or the power of order (acting severally) vs. the power of jurisdiction (acting jointly). It further explained that “these two kinds of power have both one authority, one ground, one final cause, but are different in the manner and form of execution.” The one is by “by power of mutual consent” (the church acting severally as not to bind conscience) and the other is by “power ecclesiastical” as pertaining to “jurisdiction” (the church acting jointly as to bind conscience in so far as participating in the visible church of God. The same distinctions can be readily discerning in more recent polities such as the PCA Book of Church Order (c.f. BCO 1:5, 3:2, 8:1).

4) *Empowerment based ministry and mercy vs. Enablement based ministry and mercy*

At the core of the gospel is restoration of the *imago dei* to the glory of God. By *imago dei*, it is meant the identity of humanity in so far as humanity is made unto priests of God. This is to say that when God placed humanity in the Garden of Eden, Eden is depicted NOT merely as a biosphere, but a *theosphere*- as God's heavenly dwelling place. As such Eden was envisioned as a temple. The language that throughout the bible is associated with the role of priest is used in Genesis to describe human identity as invested with the Spirit to a sacred vocation of mediating God's glory on earth as it is in heaven! ... (c.f. Meredith Kline in “Images of the Spirit” and his chapter especially on “the primacy of priesthood” concerning the meaning of being made in the image of God.)

It is the goal of the gospel to empower the restoration of the *imago dei* in so far as humanity rediscovers itself as the *imago dei*. The principle then that would serve an empowerment based mercy ministry are the same as the principles that would serve and empowerment based ecclesiology generally.

A helpful first step in thinking about empowerment in any context is discern whether the situation calls for *relief*, *rehabilitation*, or *development*. In fact, the failure to distinguish among these situations is one of the most common reasons that prevent empowerment efforts and often do harm.

- *Relief* can be defined as the urgent and temporary provision of emergency aid to reduce immediate suffering from a natural or man-made crisis. The key feature of relief is a provider-receiver dynamic in which the provider gives assistance – often material – to the receiver, who is largely incapable of helping himself at that time.
- *Rehabilitation* begins as soon as the bleeding stops; it seeks to restore people and their communities to the positive elements of their pre-crisis conditions. The key feature of rehabilitation is a dynamic of working *with* the tsunami victims as they participate in their own recovery, moving from rehabilitation to “development.”
- *Development* is a process of ongoing change that moves all the people involved – both the ‘helper’ and the ‘helped’ – closer to being in right relationship with God, self, others, and the rest of creation. In particular, they are better able to fulfill their calling of glorifying God by working and supporting themselves and their families with the fruits of that work. Development is not done *to* people or *for* people but *with* people.

One of the biggest mistakes that North American churches make – by far- is in applying relief in situations in which rehabilitation or development is the appropriate intervention. Avoid the poison of paternalism/maternalism. *Do not do things for people that they can do for themselves.* Paternalism comes in a variety of forms: resource paternalism, spiritual paternalism, knowledge paternalism, labor paternalism, managerial paternalism.

Four Crucial Steps:

1. Identify and mobilize the capabilities, skills, and resources of the individual or community. See communities as full of possibilities, given to them by God.
2. As much as possible, look for resources and solutions to come from within community, not from the outside.
3. Seek to build and rebuild the relationships among local associations etc. God intended for the various individuals and institutions in communities to be interconnected and complementary.

Only bring in outside resources when local resources are insufficient to solve pressing needs. Be careful about bringing in resources that are too much or too early. Do this in a manner that does not undermine local capacity or initiative.

AS applied to Church planting:

Christ's divine word is at once mono-elemental in theological consensus, Christ's flesh is multi-cultural across social difference. To do otherwise risks one cultural form inadvertently oppressing the cultural form of another to the demise of sacramental efficacy. While all cultures are equal, not all are the same. There is a necessary limit to how far one culture can accommodate another without reducing the local element of culture necessary to sacramental presence.

As the temple-presence is formed into churches, God's temple-body is therefore local facing, the more local the better in so far as intimacy with divine presence is concerned, and the basis of the churches rich diversity.

Therefore, the temple flesh is at its best when it is most local and culture specific. It is a celebration of the salvation of flesh in its rich and created diversity of gender, race and culture. It is significant that the many nations/cultures in heaven are not neutered or even "blended" in heaven, but gloriously distinguished, if also never separate, as united in one faith and spirit and one liturgical vocation of worship.

(You may want to skim starting here)

Preliminary Principals Illustrated:
Thoughts on A Liturgy of Multi-Congregationalism

In a relatively short period of time, there has been a steep proliferation of the so called "multi-site" or "multi-congregational" church movement across denominations. And yet, there seems not to be a clear theological vision such as to produce a liturgy of multi-congregationalism. Some are quite skeptical that the movement is biblically warranted. I suspect mostly due to the infusion of secular liturgies of congregationalism that are inherently counter Christian in some instances. Others discern the movement as mere missional pragmatism and so lack any real theological vision by which a liturgy of polity can be choreographed.

Very briefly, the following attempt at a liturgy of polity applied to multi-congregationalism is proposed. To be clear, I mean by multi-congregationalism the manner in which we assemble and form cohesive communities—many members, one body politic. This could range from the manner in which multiple small groups relate to a local church congregation, but for the present purpose, we will focus primarily on the manner in which one body politic (a single local church) may consist of multiple "sites" and/or "congregations." For the sake of discussion, I will treat "sites" and "congregations" as mere semantic, although I realize that they are often distinguished between a single church that *meets* in multiple locations as under the direct preaching ministry of a single pastor (site) vs. a single church that is *organized* in multiple locations as organically united in all five marks (c.f. Total

Christ) or the “multi-form” church. The former, as it will be shown, is not consistent with the preliminary principals of a Total Christ ecclesiology, the latter is can be the best way to fully express a Total Christ ecclesiology.

It is here assumed an awareness concerning the secular liturgies of congregationalisms that could be readily habituated except for biblically principled re-habituating. That is, the discussion would want to consider the impact of enlightenment driven democratization unto populism unto consumerism unto individual expressivism unto experientialism—all then embodied in the populace “pop” equipped as it were to appease a sovereign audience. Such liturgies will tend to emphasize polity through relationships, even if vicariously between an individual and populace facing “liturgist” (Think “Band Leader That Is A Pastor/Evangelist” vs. “Pastor/Evangelist that is a Band Leader”). That is, whether in a big church or small church, the key is forming a connection to the populace pop. Relationships in turn determine access, even if access is systematized into a “formalized” or *uniform* template-congregation that can be duplicated into any local context. Subscription to the template becomes the new liturgical “element” even if locally determined forms are minimized.

In contrast, an exercise in re-habituating would want to rediscover a biblically informed counter-liturgy of congregationalism that is informed by the Christocentric ontology of the church and the biblically verifiable preliminary principals that pertain to it.

At the heart of the discussion is the question as to whether or not a multi-congregational church ought even to exist from the standpoint of scripture. For those of us who are Presbyterian, our theological vision pertaining to congregational connectionalism more or less settles the question.

To begin, the biblical basis for multi-congregationalism, together with several conceptual principles, has been nicely summarized by Edmund Clowney:

The organic concept of the church that appears in the New Testament... presents a more theological, Christ-centered, spiritual view of the church as defined not by one earthly hierarchical center nor by many earthly congregational centers, but by a heavenly center that requires multiform earthly manifestations. Earthly assemblies do not define but manifest the nature and the center of the church.⁹

In short:

- There is at once a meaningful and comprehensive *Organic Union* that is manifest in subscription to a transcendent nature and confessional center of the church.
- There is likewise meaningful and comprehensive *Multi-Form* manifestations (vs. uniform template) such as to direct the habituation of the confessional patterns of sound doctrine into the cultural habitations of a local context.

Herein we discern the covenantal and temple, distinct but never separate, manner of being in Union with Christ as to inform our vision for congregationalism. In the familiar words of St. Augustine, *The Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made the whole Christ, head and body.*¹⁰ *That is to say that a case for multi-congregationalism is missional in the most theologically robust way of describing missional after the pattern of Christ incarnate. Herein the Just as- so of John 20:21 such as to require both united in word if also distinct in flesh which then drives multi-congregationalism. Or stated differently, the prayer of Christ in John 17 seems to beg for some manner of multi-congregationalism such as to preserve both the localized presence of Christ (temple) and the universalized presence of Christ (covenant).*

⁹ Edmund Clowney, Distinctives of the Presbyterian Polity

¹⁰ St. Augustine, On the Epistle of John 1.2.

In fact, we do see a biblical connectionism envisioned between multiples of congregations that will distinguish congregations acting jointly from congregations acting severally such as to result in subscription to be at once distinct but never separate from forms. Such a concept will then be socialized in ways to habituate the joint-several relation.

As to the biblical development of multi-congregationalism:

Deut. 1:11-18: *May the LORD, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many (1) as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! 12 How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? 13 Choose for your tribes (2) wise, understanding, and experienced men (3 and I will appoint (4) them as your heads (5). 14 And you answered me, 'The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.'* (6). **15** *So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes. (7)*

The distinguishing principles:

- The concept of multi-congregationalism within a single congregation.
- The Concept of a gradation congregations, the number of which is not prescribed but discerned circumstantially. Multiple groupings of elders were organized together and appointed over various spheres of the church that were allotted to their charge (“thousands, hundreds... tens”) Each of these groups of elders were then constituted as a “presbytery.”
- The Concept of Congregation being less of an event and more of a family-system focused on community wherein access is determined less by relationships (by this I mean rights/privileges/access being relationally determined, albeit if even vicariously) and more determined by a jurisdiction of covenant.
- The Concept of “original jurisdiction” being placed in the most local of congregations. (and set them as heads over you, commanders of.... As a theological concept a presbytery is any number of shepherding elders assigned to a specific sphere of the visible church “allotted to their charge” (2 Peter 5).

Compare to Acts 15:

Acts 15:2 *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed (1) to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders(2) about this question... When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church(4) and the apostles and the elders,.. The apostles and the elders were gathered together(5) to consider this matter.*

- “The church” --consisting of multiple congregations as represented by their elders (Pastor-Elders and Heads of Household- Elders)
- “Where appointed”—same language as related to delegated jurisdiction in a gradation of congregations
- “elders” or “Presbyteries...”

As a concept, the theological consensus that is expressed in the PCA BCO concerning the various jurisdictions related to multi-congregationalism says it well:

The Church is governed by various courts, in regular gradation, which are all, nevertheless, Presbyteries, as being composed exclusively of presbyters (BCO 10:1)

It should be noted that even in BCO, “presbytery” is a theological concept as distinguished from “presbytery” a particular historical expression. For instance, the current PCA expression of presbytery assigns the term to one particular middle gradation of presbytery as distinguished by other lower and higher gradations of presbyteries-- “session” (what Samuel Miller described as a “parochial Presbytery” c.f. *The Ruling Elder*). and “general assembly” respectively. In 19th century American Presbyterianism, there would have been yet another gradation of presbytery called “Synod” located among the spectrum of presbyteries between city “presbyteries” and “general assembly.”

This historical case in American history illustrates that the number of historical gradations of presbytery is not prescribed in scripture and is therefore left to sanctified wisdom as best contextualized in a particular socio-cultural context in service to the interest of the Christ’s mission in a particular era and context. It could be argued that to the degree that a context is multi-cultural and/or geographically accessible (physically or psychologically) is the degree to which the gradation of presbyteries would need to be expressed as to get “right” for missional purposes the global and local aspects (see below). This would be a decision based on the general principles of the “Word” (theological principle) as applied to the light of nature particular to a given social context.

Herein we discern a very important first principle. That whatever else a multi-congregational church is, it ought to adhere to whatever Biblical principals that apply to the concept of “presbyteries.” We would want to keep in mind that any multi-congregational set up is but a set up of multiple presbyteries, more or less, organically united. As to “flesh” this out according to the aforementioned “preliminary principal,” a multi-congregational church out then to work out a liturgy of socialization with the following considerations:

Elements of a Multi-Congregational Commitment:

With respect to the way then multi-congregationalism should be “Habituated,” the following are intended as principled suggestions, albeit if not exhaustive, as related to the above preliminary principals.

Note Terms:

- *“CHURCH”—the one church consisting of multiple congregation, each with their own Lead Pastor and RE’s (additional pastors as needed)*
- *Church Session: The Session as consisting of elders from all congregations or a “multi-congregational” Session consisting of all Lead Pastors of a particular congregation (associate pastors) and RE’s.*
- *Session Commission: Defined by that work given to the elders of a specific congregation acting as a Commission of Session with the power to conclude all business under its jurisdiction consisting of the Lead Pastor and RE’s of a particular congregation*
- *Committee of Session: Defined by that work given to the elders of a specific congregation with the power to recommend, but not conclude, this being reserved to the church session, consisting of the Lead Pastor and RE’s of a particular congregation*

Mutual Commitments

Each congregation of “CHURCH” subscribes to the theological consensus of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the overall theological Vision for mission and ministry known as The Total Christ or “Five Mark” Vision including the strategic metrics determined by Church session (c.f. What Kind of Churches on MA website) Beyond this, ministry strategy and tactics are defined locally within each congregation. All pastors and congregations share a mutual commitment to church planting, primarily expressed as the addition of new distinct congregations within the church under the executive leadership of Mission Anabaino as accountable to the

Church session.

Mission Anabaino

Mission Anabaino (MA) is a vital ministry of “church” under the authority of its Session. MA functions as a collaborating network of church planters, affiliate church planters and pastors, mission sites and staff who are committed to an exploration of a [Total Christ](#) missional ecclesiology. MA is the primary body for defining and executing church planting strategy; encouraging, coaching and supporting planters; recruiting, assessing and developing interns; fostering a church planting culture; and cultivating and allocating financial and other resources toward church planting.

The General Organization of “Church”:

“CHURCH” is a multi-congregational church governed by the “CHURCH” Session. The session consists of all TE’s and RE’s of all “CHURCH” congregations. The work of the session consists of the session acting jointly (corresponding to all congregations working together in a cooperative fashion relative to the interest of the regional church). and the session acting severally (corresponding to each separate congregation working individually according to what is to the best interest of the local church)

Distinguishing Joint and Several Jurisdictions:

- 1) The Jurisdiction of the “CHURCH” acting through a congregation specific commission
It is the very strong conviction of “CHURCH” that each local congregation ought to be served by church planters/pastors and elders who regularly participate in the worship and work of their own congregation. The church as a whole, and particularly within its congregations is entitled to the spiritual care and shepherding of its members by elders that participate in its own ministry and worship.

Specific congregation’s pastors and elders assume primary shepherding oversight of its members. The church pastors/elders that are part of a specific congregation are expected to provide spiritual oversight and service among the members of that congregation acting both severally and jointly, albeit as a *commission* “CHURCH” session except for the following actions:

- 2) The Jurisdiction of “CHURCH” Session acting jointly
In so far as there is a shared interest for the sake of Christian witness and genuine bearing one another’s burdens for the sake of authentic Christian *one anothering* across various socio-cultural lines, the church is best accountable one to another in a way as to involve our theological vision, strategy and resources including both money and power. Therefore,
 - All Joint Services of Worship (Ascension Service for example) are under the direct jurisdiction of “CHURCH” Session
 - All church planting is under the direct jurisdiction of “CHURCH” Session (c.f MA)
 - All Joint Mission Projects, both locally (“Impact weeks) and Globally (short and long terms missions) Note: Any congregation can choose to petition “CHURCH” session to opt out wherein the burden of proof weighs on the side of the local considerations.
 - The “CHURCH” Joint Mercy Fund is under the direct jurisdiction of “CHURCH” as executed through a committee consisting of representatives of each congregation.
 - The budget of MA is under the direct jurisdiction of “CHURCH” as executed by a MA committee consisting of members from each congregation
 - The overall budget of each congregation (e.g. not line items, but an up or down approval) is

under the direct jurisdiction of the “CHURCH” Session (note: this allows organic accountability without micro-managing line item priorities in order to practice the principles set forth in 2 Cor 8-9)

- The Oversight and Execution of ???.

Corresponding to this, the work of the session is three-fold:

- 1) Some work is accomplished by congregation specific commissions of session with the power to conclude business as reported to session. Under a commission's jurisdiction are the following responsibilities:
 - a. All pastoral care, admission to the Lord's Supper, visitation and discipline relevant to shepherding the flock of God in the local congregation
 - b. The Line Items of each congregational budget
 - c. The Line items of each congregation ministry plan within a Total Christ, Five Mark Informed Theological Vision and Strategy
- 2) Some work of the session is accomplished by congregation specific committees of session with the power to recommend to session's approval. Items included in this are:
 - a. The overall approval of budget and ministry plan
 - b. Recommendations for Use of the Joint Mercy Fund
- 3) Provisional primary oversight in church plants without elders is assumed by the “CHURCH” session as a whole albeit acting through a Session MA Commission wherein the church planter is a non-voting member (As an assistant pastor). Once the local congregation is able to ordain its own elders, the church planter becomes an associate pastor and is a member, together with his locally appointed elders to join the CPC S. CT. Session.

Each local commission/committee of elders will meet regularly (ordinarily monthly except on months of the “CHURCH” session meetings that will meet quarterly.

Pastoral and Elder Relations

Initially, the Lead Pastor of “MOTHER CHURCH” (the only congregation with RE's) is the moderator of “CHURCH” Session and serves both as lead pastor of a particular congregation and Moderator of “CHURCH” Once other churches “organize” under “CHURCH” Session, the Session as petitioned by any participating congregation session committee. .

More than a moderator of session meetings, the moderator serves in the role of S. Pastor of “CHURCH” with the responsibilities of a regional “Bishop” in the Episcopalian model absent any jurisdictional authority, which is reserved for the session acting jointly. Subsequently, the Moderator/Sr. Pastor of “CHURCH” is concerned for the pastoral care and support of “CHURCH” TE's together with the development and coordination of a Total Christ vision targeting the “CHURCH” as a whole.

The pastors and elders of a particular congregation in order to promote the purity, peace, unity and edification of the church and the advancement of the gospel, endeavor to love one another, build one another up, trust each other and seek each other's best. We also aim to pray for one another, for our various congregations, for our city and for the Kingdom.

We earnestly pray for the Lord to raise up elders within each of our congregations to shepherd the flock, support the work of the ministry and pray. Elders should also maintain a love for and interest in the well being of the whole church through its government and spiritual oversight. The “CHURCH” session annually approves a “Duties and Qualifications Of A “CHURCH” Elder” in compliance with BCO 9 applicable to “CHURCH” and adapted to a

specific congregation. Elders are nominated by a specific congregation to the “CHURCH” church at large and voted upon and installed per BCO.

Congregation Specific Woman Elder Assistants (WLB)

Likewise, we pray the Lord would raise up women elder assistants (WLB) to assist the elders in shepherding the flock of God as Christ’s under-shepherds (2 Peter 5:1ff), with special attention to the women, in such a way that the family of God at CHURCH can more and more experience the Total Christ (Five Mark) presence of Christ and for his glory in the world (Col.1:18). *The WLB will serve as an advisory sub-committee of the CPC session such as to regularly advise and report to the Session concerning:*

- *A sense as to the general “state of church,”*
- *A sense as to the general “state of women in the church,”*
- *An annual plan to session concerning ministry to women at CPC.*
- *Assistance in all planning.*

The “CHURCH” session annually approves a “Duties and Qualifications Of WLB” as adapted to a specific congregations needs.

Ministry Planning and Budget:

Each congregation utilizes the “CHURCH” macro template for ministry planning and budgeting, but maintains its own local strategy and budget that is contextualized into their congregation specific context. The church budget is the aggregate of the church’s central operating budget and each congregation-defined budget, and is approved annually by the Session. Each congregation will

The pastors within the church are in collegial relationship with one another, although one functions as Senior Pastor for the purposes of polity and “CHURCH” moderation. New church planters will generally be hired by the Session as assistant pastors, and may be recommended by the Session to the congregation for promotion to associate pastor, ordinarily at the time of elder installation from his particular congregation context.

Church planters are supervised by MA Executive Director (and/or Sr. Pastor) under the authority of “CHURCH” session. Church planters report directly to the Session at least one time annually. Additionally, church planters meet regularly for theological and strategic collaboration, prayer, encouragement and coaching in a manner determined by MA under session authority.

\Congregational Meetings

As the church grows larger and broader, the challenge of scheduling and obtaining quorum for congregational meetings becomes greater. The Session should strive to schedule congregational meetings on a regular basis at a mutually agreeable time and place among the congregations. It is required for there to be at least one “CHURCH” congregational meetings, annually, and highly recommend that there be at least 2 local congregational meetings annually.

Church Membership

In order to receive new members into the church, elders from a local congregation are commissioned by session to review and approve applicants for admission as reported to the session as it regular meetings.

Joint Worship and Events

The whole of “CHURCH” church will convene for at least 2 worship events each year, one celebrating Ascension Sunday (and the other Unity Sunday (typically on Martin Luther King Jr. weekend).

As deemed mutually beneficial for purposes of mercy and missional outreach to the greater j...community, each congregation of the CPC multi-congregational church will participate in various planned events and services such as....

Conclusion: Why a gradation of Presbyteries?

Both the global and local aspects of Christ’s mediatorial presence are expressed unto the “fullness of Christ.” The global aspect preserves ecumenical unity under covenant lordship of shared “elementals of faith” applicable across all socio-cultural-family distinctions—the more global the better albeit expressed in ever expanding gradations of presbytery governance. The local aspect preserves the nearness of Christ’s presence (contextualization) “re-incarnated” mediatorially in/with/through the socio-cultural-family “flesh” that is in the mystery of sacramental union in various “forms” of the “body of Christ. Therefore,

- **Multi-Congregationalism As A Means Toward Greater Missional Power:**
Christ’s human flesh (infallible), is sacramentally united to the flesh of member churches (fallible). The two are distinct if never separate in the fullness of Christ’s ascension ministry—thus “head.. body.. It is the mystery of the “greater things” (Jn 14) promised by Christ at the coming of the Holy Spirit wherein Christ incarnated (in sacramental union by the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis the church) in all places over all times in the “flesh” of the visible church.

What this means is that when the elemental aspects of Christian faith and practice are formed into the socio-cultural and corporal (or “bodily”) aspects of Christian faith and practice, the nearness of Christ is most potent. The very presence of God is mediated into the experience of God’s people. Christ by the sacramental mystery of union with member churches is incarnate into the flesh of a particular people and enable humanity by faith to “partake of the divine nature.” (2 Peter 1:4)

- **Missional Ecumenism is accomplished in the unity of faith and practice consistent with the covenantal elements (“The Word... Jn.1:17)) expressing the universality of Christ as mediator and Lord of all “ethnos” (vs. a sectarian Lord and spiritual leader). How will the world believe this until real congregations of different socio-political-demographic identities are joined together in a united witness for universality of Christ and the power of the gospel unto all ethnos? Multi-congregationalism wherein there is real and accountable organic unity together across the cultural “divides” is the best way to accomplish this power witness of diversity within unity IN CHRIST.**

Rom. 10:12For there is **no distinction** between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.

- **Missional Impowerment is accomplished in the diversity of expressions of faith and practice consistent with socio-cultural forms (“...became flesh and tabernacled among us.” Jn 1:17) expressing the nearness of Christ as mediator and Lord of each and every “ethnos” as persons (vs. an abstract and platonic “spirituality” ...**

Rom. 10:8But what does it say? “The word is **near** you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)

Eph. 2:13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought **near** by the blood of Christ.

Therefore, the temple flesh is at its best when it is most local and culture specific. It is a celebration of the salvation of flesh in its rich and created diversity of gender, race and culture. It is significant that the many

nations/cultures in heaven are not neutered or even “blended” in heaven, but gloriously distinguished, if also never separate, as united in one faith and spirit and one liturgical vocation of worship.