

## The “First Things” in Biblical Ecclesiology An Introductory Summary

Introduction:

The first order question concerning ecclesiology must necessarily be “how best is God glorified in the world? More even than “how best can the church reach the world for the worlds sake, the church’s mission is to glorify God in the gospel of Jesus Christ such as to invoke worship! And doesn’t this resonate with the perspective observed throughout redemptive history wherein, such statements as by God are made:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, (Ezek. 36:22)

And by Christ even if to shape his redemptive mission:

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you. (John 17:1)

Wherein:

in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ 1 Peter 4:11

More than the casual cliché, the glory of God is the ultimate purpose of salvation and subsequently the driving objective in any biblical ecclesiology. This ought then to raise the question of how the church must self regulate the extent and limits of her power and mission in submission to Christ as to preserve his exclusive crown-rights as the church’s only head and king! This, as we will see, moves us to discern the forensic-covenantal nature of the church and the so-called “regulative principle” as applied ecclesiology. It is to conceive of the church as the blessed “paradigm” of witness in the world.

The church though is more than a covenantal “contract” with God in paradigmatic witness to the world. The church is also presented in scripture as God’s temple *presence* in the world. In the words of John Calvin about the church:

*No extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ.<sup>1</sup>*

Therefore according to Calvin, the very presence of God insures the churches great *power* unto salvation for the glory of God:

*We expect salvation from him — not because he stands aloof from us, but because engrafting us into his body he not only makes us partakers of all his benefits, but also of himself... you become a member of him, and hence one with him.<sup>2</sup>*

Calvin was working with ideas once espoused by St. Augustine when describing the relationship of Christ’s incarnational ministry (past) to his ongoing ascension ministry (today). For according to John, combining the Christology of John 1:14 with the ecclesiology of Ephesians 1:23:

*The Word was made flesh, and temped among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made total Christ, both head and body.*

The result of this revelation moves Augustine to emote with doxology

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37:4

<sup>2</sup> *Institutes*, III.2.24

*Then let us rejoice and give thanks that we are made not only Christians, but Christ. Do you understand, brothers, and apprehend the grace of God upon us? Marvel, be glad, we are made Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members: the whole man is he and we . . . The fullness of Christ, then, is head and members. Head and members, what is that? Christ and the Church!*

The power of the church in the world by divine presence renders the church more than a mere source of witness, but the very *locus* of witness in her own right. That is, often lost in the question of ecclesiology is the possibility *that just the church being the church is a mission in its own right in relation to glorifying God*, Lesslie Newbigin provokingly makes this point thus:

Just as we insist that a Church which has ceased to be a mission has lost the essential character of a Church, so must we also say that a mission which is not at the same time truly a Church is not a true expression of the divine apostolate. An unchurchly mission is as much a monstrosity as an unmissionary church.”<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the scripture defines the institutional church as BOTH Christ’s salvific presence “mediated, “fleshed out” and “templed” among us (c.f. John 1:14, Eph.2:18ff or *participatione divina* ecclesiology) AND Christ’s covenantal institution explicitly and positively organized by “divine law” (Mt 16:18ff, Eph. 1:22, 2:20 or *jure divino* ecclesiology). Together, this two-fold trajectory of God’s saving activity can be discerned throughout the whole of redemptive history. It has been described by Jonathan Edwards as the saving activity of God in both heat and light. Likewise, Meredith Kline described it as God’s “power (of presence) and paradigm” (of law).

Herein we discover the two driving trajectories—covenant paradigm and temple power-- concerning the first things in ecclesiology such to inform any discussion about church mission in the world.

Exposition:

1) *The church as divine presence*: How would it change the discussion about Christ and culture if the socially organized visible church were the very temple-presence of God? What are the tragic conditions wherein the scene of God leaving his temple in Ezekiel 10:18-22 is invoked?

We begin with the realization that there was never a time in all of redemptive history when salvation was not transacted apart from divine presence as mediated in/with/through the temple-church. In the Old Covenant for instance, salvation history in the Old Testament was accomplished with such words as dwelling place and tabernacle, even as covenants were initiated and sealed through rites whereby God manifested his saving, albeit mediated, *presence* to his people. (Cf. Gen. 15; 26:24; Exod. 29:42; Deut. 12:5; Lev. 22:3; Ps.76.2; Num. 35:34). The description, *God in the midst of us* (Ps 49), was the single most coveted reality, even as “excommunication” was the most feared curse (Gen.3)

Likewise under the New Covenant, the gospel is not a transition from temple presence to “no temple presence,” but rather temple presence fulfilled and then mediated by Christ during his ascension ministry. For instance, Paul described salvation with the promise “I will dwell with them” (2 Cor. 6:16) just as under the Old Covenant. And lest this “dwelling” be confused with a private experience, Paul, in 1Cor 3, dares to assert “Do you not know that *you* (plural) are God’s temple and that Gods Spirit dwells in *you* (plural)? Therefore, throughout the New Covenant, words like “temple” and “tabernacle” and “dwelling place” describe God’s saving presence as pertaining to the “household of God” or “the church of the living God” no less than it did under the Old Covenant context (c.f. Eph. 2:18-22, Rev. 21:3).

As specifically applied to the first things of ecclesiology, the visibly organized church (Eph. 2:21) as built upon the foundation of the apostles (Eph.2:20) becomes the “dwelling place of God by the Holy Spirit” (Eph.2:22). By a

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<sup>3</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God*, p. 147. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 120.

transaction of participation in holy communion in/with/by this church, it is said that we become “partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). The salvific presence must necessarily be qualified as “not necessarily, and not necessarily immediately,” which is to affirm an otherwise fallible church this side of heaven that is always predicated upon the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit (John 3:8). And yet, the scripture speaks of this church with such transactional power as to “bind and loose on earth what is bound and loosed in heaven (Mt 16). Or as Christ’s commission to the church in John 20:21ff

*Just as the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”*

In the words of Cyprian, the church can be compared to a mothers’ womb wherein we are “conceived, nourished and by her spirit animated.”<sup>ii</sup> *More recently*, Thomas Torrance contends that “the Christian Church is what it is because of its indissoluble union with Christ through the Spirit, for in him is concentrated the Church and its ministry... there is only one ministry, that of Christ in his Body.”<sup>4</sup>

Such is the “value” of the church in its own right, in need of careful regulation as to preserve her fundamental charter and efficacious power. And to be sure, can you imagine a scenario wherein the temple was not carefully designed and regulated as to preserve the light and efficacy of God’s mediated presence in the world as witness to his exclusive Lordship? A cursory survey of Israel’s history presents judgment upon judgment oracle against Israel, not so much for worshiping other gods, but worshiping Yahweh in a manner like the nations worshipped their gods (cf. Exodus 3 and Dt. 12:7 with Hos.4:15, Ezekiel 20:27-32). Creativity, at least on the elemental level relative to the extent and limits of the temples activity was *not* a virtue! This then brings us to the second trajectory of ecclesiology in redemptive history—the church by divine institution and the so-called regulative principle.

2) *The church under divine law*: How would it change the discussion about Christian engagement with culture if the visibly organized church (the church acting jointly) was actually defined and regulated by divine law according to the positive institution of Christ? What are the extent and limits of church power? This last question is in order both to preserve the exclusive crown rights of Christ as head and king over everything concerning church teaching and action, but also to preserve Christian liberty of conscience. In so far as a Christian is morally bound to participate in the church of Jesus Christ unto the fullness of Christ who fills all in all, can the church then, acting jointly, just do anything it wants? Think then of the implications of this.

Today, most people have lost any real conviction that the actions and mission of the institutionalized church are presented and regulated in the apostolic tradition. In fact, most argue today that the problem with the church is that it is too “organized.” I would suggest the opposite! The real problem is the church not organized enough. In so far as an explicit ascension Christology applied to ecclesiology has been either assumed or denied, the extent and limits of church power and authority is then *unregulated* and arguably one of the great reasons so many have felt abused/manipulated leading to a low view of the church today.

Biblically therefore, and like our previous affirmation concerning the temple, *we can say that there was never a time in all of Redemption history when salvation was transacted apart from a covenant such as to satisfy God’s Divine Law in preserving both his Lordship, the efficacy of the temple-churches power, and the freedom of conscience for God’s people.* In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for “covenant” (berith) is used at least 289 times. It is explicitly used to summarize the whole of the Genesis history in Exodus 2:24 and the Old Covenant “Bible” itself was called the “book of the covenant” in Exodus 24:7. And to our point, it would be hard to miss that

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Torrance, “Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life,” Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 151. Quoted in Purves, p. 134. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.1.4. Again, Calvin would no doubt qualified—not necessarily and not necessarily immediately per the mediated nature of this salvific transaction.

the temple, acting corporately, was carefully designed and regulated by the covenant as defined by its distinctively prophetic and priestly role (c.f. Leviticus)

In the New Covenant, the covenant figures prominently as well: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” (Matthew 5:17-18) Christ is later described as the “mediator of the new covenant” (Heb 9:15, 12:15) by his own atoning “blood of the new covenant” that is specifically related to the meaning and practice of the Eucharistic meal in the church (Luke 22:20, 1Cor.11:25).

We discern this explicitly in Matthew 16:18-19, and it is further explained by Paul who describes Christ as covenant “head over all things regarding the church” in Eph 1:22. Paul further elaborates how the institutional elements themselves are carefully regulated upon the “foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone” in Eph 2:20. The very efficacy of Christ, in the mediatorial sense, is tied to the church BEING nothing more, nothing less, than the church of Christ as such as for Christ to be her exclusive head and king in determining the extent and limits of church teaching and activity.

Often described as the “regulative principle in ecclesiology, it has throughout the history of the church been the consensus across most self-consciously confessional traditions including the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 section 6:

*The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.*

The regulative principle is important both for the sake of preserving the exclusivity of Christ’s authority over the church and for the sake of Christian charity and Christian liberty of conscience. For instance, the regulative principle as articulated in WCF 1: 6 is specifically applied to the freedom of Christian conscience in chapter 20, “On Christian Liberty,” section 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. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.*

AS applied then to the “joint” and “several” distinction, wouldn’t it be true, that in so far as Christians acting severally wouldn’t necessary bind conscience (in that a person is not morally and efficaciously bound to participate in another Christian’s personal activities) that there would be corresponding freedom to do things that while not contrary to scripture or beside it (such as the things involved in remedial and common grace)? But as well, wouldn’t it be equally true that when the church acts jointly both in her worship and mission, and given the biblical obligation of Christians to support and participate in the church to the best of their ability, the church acting jointly must further regulate the extent and limits of her teaching and activities such as to not only do nothing contrary to scripture, but also beside it. Such distinction are characteristic of the confession church for the duration of her two thousand year history beyond even the redemptive history to that effect in scripture.<sup>5</sup> James Bannerman in his classic Church of God makes this point well:

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<sup>5</sup> C.f. WCF 1.6, 20.1, WCF 31.3

*Like the state, the Church is an ordinance of God; and is vested by God with a certain measure of authority of its own kind, which entitles it to claim and receive a certain measure of obedience from its members. The Church, for example, has power in matters of faith, not indeed arbitrarily to dictate a new truth or new doctrine of its own, but to declare the doctrine and truth of Christ; and in doing so, to determine and decide for its own purposes upon the faith and profession of its members. Such decisions in regard to controversies of faith, and such declarations of the truth of Christ, if consonant with the Word of God, are to be received and submitted to by its members, not only or merely because they are consonant with His Word, but because of the authority by which they are made being an ordinance of God for that end... In other words, there is a certain obligation which Church power carries with it, because its acts and decisions are agreeable to the Word of God; there is a second and additional obligation which Church power carries with it, because it is itself an ordinance of God, appointed expressly for such ends.<sup>6</sup>*

Along the lines of Rom. 14, T. David Gordon summarizes, Charity requires the church not to do anything which *induces another believer to act contrary to conscience*. [the church acting jointly] These two passages do not teach that we must *agree* with the scruples of another's conscience, nor even that we must *act* consistently with the scruples of another's conscience. [the church acting severally] Rather, the texts teach that we must not say or do anything which we know will *induce another to act inconsistently with conscience*." As related then to how freedom of conscience works out relative to a Christian's moral obligations:

- . 1) A person ought not be obligated to participate in or support the church beyond that which Christ has instituted by good and necessary inference from Scripture (positive institution by divine law).
- . 2) A person ought not be prevented from participating in or supporting other Christian causes for the sake of cultural engagement unless contrary to the scripture only.

The church acting jointly is "regulated" by positive command of scripture such as to assume the double burden of "not contrary to our beside." However, the church acting severally is assumes only the burden of "not contrary to scripture" and can rely upon general revelation as a source to inform cultural engagement as well.

So far we have assumed for the sake of argument a "joint" versus "several" distinction relative to the manner in which the church is manifest in the world. By way of argument, one can discern in scripture this distinction between the Christian citizen of the organized church in her exclusively spiritual mission acting jointly on behalf of Christ and the Christian citizen of the civil state in her church acting severally through her members and their related subsidiary and para-church organizations wherein they function as Christian informed citizens of the civil state.

Paul 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). One discerns the distinction in Matt. 18:15-16 and the power of the church acting severally through her individual members when seeking to restore a person in fellowship, compared to the "binding and loosing" jurisdictional power (c.f Mt 16) attributed to the church acting jointly in Matt. 18:17-20.

The distinction between the church acting jointly and the church acting severally has been historically recognized

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<sup>6</sup> James Bannerman, *The Church of God*, Vol. 1. p. 237) <sup>16</sup> John Murray, "The Weak and the Strong," found in the fourth volume of his collected writings, and also in the twelfth volume of the *Westminster Theological Journal* (1950)

throughout church history. 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).

The crucial distinction was once described by Stuart Robinson in the context of the American Civil War with special relevance to his own congregational situation in the border state city of Louisville KY.

*Individual members of the Church have their responsibilities as citizens and as politicians and their duties are of a totally different sort from those of the church collectively. Their religion should indeed make them better citizens; but their citizenship in this world is one thing, and their citizenship of the great church is another thing. The church owes no allegiance to any earthly power since there is no divided loyalty in it, and no part of the church, in Jerusalem or Antioch, in England or America, on earth or in heaven owes any allegiance which all the other parts do not equally owe. The mistake of confounding the duty of the individual citizen and church-member, with the duties of the church, has led to the most fatal errors in this country.<sup>v</sup>*

Notice that this was NOT a position of Christian pacifism in so far as cultural engagement or politics was concerned. Nor was it a position describing the church acting jointly as necessarily “non-political” since the church was free to preach and act as enjoined by scripture, however political, or not, it might be. Rather it was a position that was both “high church” and “high state” in so far as their mutual jurisdictions were both by “divine institution yet distinguished”. Individual Christians properly functioned under both God-ordained jurisdictions. It then concerns the proper jurisdictional authority of the church and state as ordained by positive institution by God that determines the way Christ engages or disengages culture.

Conclusion:

How can a house succeed if it is divided among itself, Christ the head and Christ the temple respectively? And how can the house be unified unless it's temple power (presence) is limit by its covenantal paradigm (law)? And again, this is not to be confused with the extent and limits applied to Christians acting individually in the world, which then sets up a whole new realm of admissible activity. Such is the questions driving any study in church polity and by application, shepherd leadership in the church.