

The Church: Who and Whose Are We?

In the Smalcald Articles written by Martin Luther in 1537 he says that even “a child seven years old knows what the Church is” for they pray “I believe in a holy Christian Church.” 20th century theology has been much less confident: there has been a torrent of literature struggling with the question ‘what is the church?’ Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan sees ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, as *the* theological focus of the 20th century. He writes “the doctrine of the church became, as it had never quite been before, the bearer of the whole Christian message for the twentieth century . . .” Similarly Fuller Theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen speaks of an “ecclesiological renaissance” in contemporary theology.

Perhaps John Stackhouse best helps us to see why this is so important. “When we, the church, are confused about who we are and whose we are, we can become anything and anyone’s.” Ecclesiology is about understanding our identity—who we are. It is about understanding to whom we belong and why—whose we are. And if we are not explicit in developing our self-understanding in terms of our role and place in the biblical drama, we are likely going to be shaped by the idolatrous story of the dominant culture.

How do we address such an important issue in a very short article? I want to unfold three closely related and interlocking observations on the Bible’s teaching on the church made by New Testament scholar Herman Ridderbos.

First, Ridderbos believes that the New Testament offers two fundamental perspectives on the church. *On the one hand*, the church is *the people of God*—there is continuity with God’s people in the Old Testament. That story helps to define who we are. In fact the majority of the 100 or so images of the church in the New Testament are taken from the Old Testament. *On the other hand*, the church is *the body of Christ*—there is discontinuity. The advent of the end-time kingdom in Jesus and by the Spirit brings something fundamentally new. The remaining New Testament images of the church describe in one way or another what is new with the coming of Christ.

To understand the church today one must carefully attend to the Old Testament because of the continuity between the New Testament church and Old Testament Israel. Indeed, the Gospels picture Jesus as an end-time shepherd promised in the prophets whose main task is to gather and renew Israel. This gathered community becomes the nucleus of the new covenant people of God which gathers in all nations. So it is no wonder the New Testament employs so many Old Testament images to define the church's identity. It is essential, therefore, to get hold of the identity and role of God's people in the Old Testament story.

When we look back into the Old Testament we see a number of things that define this community. They are a people who have been *chosen* by God who has made them his own out of the depths of his love. They are a people who are bound to God in *covenant*, an image chosen from the ancient near east to describe the kind of relationship they had with God. They are a people who have been *redeemed* by God, liberated from idols and other lords to serve God alone. They are a distinctive or *holy* people called to live in God's way over against the idolatrous ways of the nations. They are a people in whom God's loving, renewing, and judging *presence* dwells. They are a people who have been chosen, bound in covenant, redeemed to be a holy community, who know God's presence *for the sake of the world*. God's mission is to draw all nations, indeed the whole creation, to himself. And so his work begins in his people to whom he will finally gather all nations and the whole creation.

Israel's failure to live up their identity meant God's judgement. However, the prophets promised Israel would be gathered and renewed so they could carry out their vocation. Jesus comes gathers them, and in his death and resurrection accomplishes the salvation of God's end-time kingdom. With the outpouring of the Spirit the newly gathered people of God now experience that new life of the kingdom. Thus the New Testament church is gathered and renewed Israel. Now in Christ, they are chosen by God, bound in covenant to him, redeemed from idols to serve the living God, a distinctive people in whom God's presence dwells for the sake of the nations.

With this last paragraph we begin to glimpse the discontinuity between the church and the Old Testament people of God. That difference comes because of the decisive events that stand at the center of the biblical story—the work of Christ: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and his

gift of the Spirit. With those events God's end-time kingdom has entered history. There is a new power at work in the world with the presence of the end-time Spirit to renew, heal, liberate, and restore. And church shares in that new life.

What then is new about the New Testament church? What is new is the *eschatological*. And this leads us on to Ridderbos' second observation: the church must be defined in terms of the coming kingdom. He tells us that we must picture kingdom and church in terms of two concentric circles. The outer circle is the kingdom of God and the inner circle is the church. God's rule is over the whole creation but the church is the community where that rule is acknowledged and experienced. God's reign is broader than the church—it is over the whole world and all of human society—but the church is a picture and firstfruit of that reign that will one day extend to all things.

We might define the relationship of the church to the kingdom in the following statements. First, the church is the place where the eschatological kingship of God in Jesus Christ becomes visible. God's people now experience the end-time salvation of the kingdom. Since the Spirit has been given, they have been given a foretaste of the cosmic renewal that will one day fill the earth. As such they are previews of that future salvation in the midst of the world.

Second, the Church serves the kingdom by announcing the good news that Jesus is Lord over all. This time is a time of the gathering all the nations of the earth into a community that shares in the salvation of the kingdom. This gathering through announcing the gospel is an eschatological event (Matt. 24:14). The already-not yet era of the kingdom is a time characterized by the proclamation of the kingdom and the gathering of all nations into the kingdom community.

Thirdly, the Church is engaged in the struggle of Christ's kingdom in this world against the destructive powers of darkness in all areas of life as a witness to Christ's all embracing Lordship. God's people take a new form: they are now a non-geographical and non-ethnic community that lives in the midst of all nations. This creates a much more difficult prospect for the life of God's people than in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, Israel lived as a nation with their own story, their own culture, their own social institutions, all shaped by God's word. However, the

church must live as members and participants of the cultures that are formed by a different story that does not acknowledge Christ as Lord. A missionary encounter in which God's people live in alternative way or counter to the idolatrous ways of their culture is a much more difficult and complex vocation as they engage the struggle of Christ's kingdom against the powers of darkness across the spectrum of human life.

And this brings us to the last observation by Ridderbos: in the New Testament the word 'church' can refer to *both* the people of God across the whole breadth of their lives as the new humanity *and* to a specific institution gathered and organized for so-called 'religious' activities. So far we have primarily viewed the church from the angle of the first: it is the new humanity gathered to be a sign of the God's rule over all of human life. But church can also refer to a gathered community organized to carry out various activities that build up and nourish the life of the kingdom.

The missional engagement of the church with its culture surely demands a people who are deeply nourished in their new life in Christ. Acts 2:42 shows a community devoted to the Word of God, fellowship, prayer, and the Lord's Supper. Each of these function as channels whereby the Spirit strengthens the life of the new creation in church. Likewise to the same purpose Paul shows us the importance of the upbuilding work of the church in various places (e.g., Eph 4). The strengthening of the inner life of the church for its missional engagement is absolutely necessary.

The church, therefore, is like an ellipse with two foci. Around the first it is rooted in the source of its life and mission. This is when the people of God are gathered for the renewal of their life in Christ. Worship, prayer, Scripture, sacraments, and fellowship are the means whereby that happens. The other focus is its engagement with the world. They are built up for the sake of mission to embody the life of the kingdom in the midst of their culture. They go forth to give themselves for the sake of the world. Here service, mercy, justice, faithful obedience in all cultural callings, and evangelism define God's people.

There is a twofold danger—sacralization and secularization. Sacrilization takes place when only the 'gathered' or 'institutional' focus of the ellipse is in view. The people of God remain within

the boundaries of the institutional church. They are turned inward, preoccupied with their rites and institutional practices as an end in itself. Secularization stresses the 'sent' focus. Here the people of God are so immersed in the world that they are assimilated and conformed to the idolatrous currents of the culture. The ministries and activities that nourish new life and a distinct identity are diminished or even eclipsed. Solidarity with culture trumps antithesis. Both are betrayals of what God has called the church to be.

I suppose it is possible that a seven year old child has an instinctive sense of some of this if they live in a healthy church when they confess 'I believe one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.' But it is of utmost importance for the church to continue to reflect deeply on its identity and the role it is called to play in the biblical story so they can know who they are and whose they are.

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