SERIES PREFACE

Some might call us spoiled. We live in an era of significant and substantial resources for Christians on living the Christian life. We have ready access to books, DVD series, online material, seminars—all in the interest of encouraging us in our daily walk with Christ. The laity, the people in the pew, have access to more information than scholars dreamed of having in previous centuries.

Yet for all our abundance of resources, we also lack something. We tend to lack the perspectives from the past, perspectives from a different time and place than our own. To put the matter differently, we have so many riches in our current horizon that we tend not to look to the horizons of the past.

That is unfortunate, especially when it comes to learning about and practicing discipleship. It's like owning a mansion and choosing to live in only one room. This series invites you to explore the other rooms.

As we go exploring, we will visit places and times different from our own. We will see different models, approaches, and emphases. This series does not intend for these models to be copied uncritically, and it certainly does not intend to put these figures from the past high upon a pedestal like some race of super-Christians. This series intends, however, to help us in the present listen to the past. We believe there is wisdom in the past twenty centuries of the church, wisdom for living the Christian life.

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor
Introduction

What is the church?

Christians around the world have considered this important question for centuries. Theologians in particular have devoted countless volumes to exploring the nature, organization, and practices of the Christian community on earth. However, there is one thing that nearly all Christians have agreed on through the ages: the church is indispensable to the Christian life.

The theologians featured in Crossway's Theologians on the Christian Life series each saw the beauty and significance of the church from a unique perspective. But they all agreed on its central importance for the Christian life and for the spread of the gospel. This compilation of sample chapters provides a glimpse into their thoughts on the role of the church from different, but complementary, angles. For example, while the chapters on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Francis Schaeffer emphasize community-driven life, B.B. Warfield comments on the role of the church in practical piety, and Calvin on matters of church government.

May the chapters included here help you appreciate more the nature, importance, and function of Christ’s church, “which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1: 23).

Stephen J. Nichols and Justin Taylor
CALVIN
on the Christian Life

GLORIFYING AND ENJOYING GOD FOREVER

MICHAEL HORTON
If the public service is God’s “celestial theater” of grace, then the church is not only the place where the drama is performed, but the fruit of its performance. “Although the whole world is ‘the theater of God’s kindness, wisdom, justice and power,’ Calvin mentions that in this theater the church is actually the part which illustrates it best—like an orchestra.”  

“...thus elected by God to be ‘the theater of his fatherly care.’”  

Calvin would not have comprehended the contrast between “getting saved” and “joining a church.” In his understanding, the church is not only the spiritual body of true believers, but also a visible institution—indeed, “the mother of the faithful.” “And the ministry of the Church, and it alone, is undoubtedly the means by which we are born again to a heavenly life.”  

How to Find a Church  

But then the question arises: How do you know where there is a true church, especially given so many deviations, corruptions, and divisions? The answer was easy, according to Rome and the Anabaptists. In different ways, both reduced the marks of the church to one: discipline. According to Rome, the right ministers guarantee the right ministry. Wherever there is a congregation that submits to the discipline of the pope, it is part of the true

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1 Herman J. Selderhuis, Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 228, on Ps. 135:13.  
2 Ibid., on Ps. 68:8.  
visible church. The right doctrine and sacramental ministry will be present wherever the right government is observed. Obviously, radical Protestants did not acknowledge the pope. However, they identified the true church with the visible holiness of the members. There was a clean and obvious separation between the godly and the ungodly.

For the magisterial Reformers, these answers identify the wrong source of the church’s existence. The church cannot give birth to itself. The source of the church’s existence is not the pope or the holiness of its members, but the gospel that comes to the church outside of itself. The marks are to be found not in the majesty of an outward form of organization or in the faith and piety of the members, the Reformers argued, but in the presence of the triune God where he has promised to meet us in saving blessing: “namely, the pure preaching of God’s Word and the lawful administration of the sacraments.”

“Wherever we find the word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there . . . is a Church of God.”

The appeal to “right discipline” as the distinguishing mark of the true church assumes an over-realized eschatology—in other words, expecting perfection before Christ returns. We want to be able to point to the one true church, with no questions, reservations, or uncertainties. We don’t want to wait for Christ’s return to separate the wheat from the weeds, the sheep from the goats. It must all be visible and unambiguous now.

An important Roman Catholic theologian summarized the view some years ago. In criticizing Augustine’s “mixed assembly” view of the church, he wrote, “Certainly, the Church is full of sinners, but inasmuch as they are sinners, they cannot be counted in with the Church. They can only be in her as ‘improper,’ ‘so-called,’ ‘seeming,’ ‘reckoned,’ ‘pretended’ members, but cannot qua sinners, express membership in the one body of love.”

According to Vatican I, “the Church itself, with its marvelous extension, its eminent holiness, and its inexhaustible fruitfulness in every good thing, with its Catholic unity and its invincible stability, is a great and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable witness of its own divine mission.”

Of course, there are many Protestant sects that make such claims,
appealing to charismatic leaders, miracles, obvious piety, and visible impact. Obviously, this movement, that leader, or our particular brand must be the true church: just look at the visible fruit and that is enough to persuade you that it has God’s seal of approval. Many of us were raised hearing mature believers identify the false churches in town by the lack of intensity of their piety. Unlike us, they were not truly born again. They didn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus.

No, Calvin says. You can’t trust your eye, but only your ear on this one. We hear the promise that even though the church is still sinful, it is justified and is being renewed by the powerful energies of the Word and Spirit. We hear and believe in the promise of what the church will one day be. We hear the gospel here and now, ratified in baptism and the Supper. The unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church depend entirely on what it hears and tells. The marks of the church lie not within the church itself, but in the ministry that gives birth to it and continually feeds, grows, and expands it to the ends of the earth. And if you can only handle a perfect garden, then—as Jesus said—you will end up pulling up wheat with the weeds, Calvin warns.  

The right ministry determines the right ministers, not vice versa, in Calvin’s view. As Paul warned, anyone who preaches a different gospel is anathema—condemned—even if he were an apostle or an angel from heaven (Gal. 1:8). The pope is hardly exempt from that threat, Calvin reminds us. “It is by the preaching of the grace of God alone that the Church is kept from perishing,” Calvin is convinced, and the sacraments ratify this gospel to each of us personally. Therefore, the only legitimate reason for breaking fellowship with a church is its abandonment of this message and ministry. “For the Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly,” Calvin warns, “that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.”

Demanding a perfect church ensures that bruised reeds will be broken off and faintly burning candles will be extinguished. Or conceited souls

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8 Calvin, Institutes 4.1.13.  
11 Calvin, Institutes 4.1.10.
will never be able to settle for long in a church that they regard as beneath their own remarkable spiritual attainments.

In bearing with imperfections of life we ought to be far more considerate. For here the descent is very slippery and Satan ambushed us with no ordinary devices. For there have always been those who, imbued with a false conviction of their own perfect sanctity, as if they had already become a sort of airy spirits, spurned association with all men in whom they discern any remnant of human nature.

The Cathari of old were of this sort, as well as the Donatists, who approached them in foolishness. Such today are some of the Anabaptists who wish to appear advanced beyond other men. There are others who sin more out of ill-advised zeal for righteousness than out of that insane pride. When they do not see a quality of life corresponding to the doctrine of the gospel among those to whom it is announced, they immediately judge that no church exists in that place. . . . For where the Lord requires kindness, they neglect it and give themselves over completely to immoderate severity. Indeed, because they think no church exists where there are not perfect purity and integrity of life, they depart out of hatred of wickedness from the lawful church, while they fancy themselves turning aside from the faction of the wicked. . . . But if the Lord declares that the church is to labor under this evil—to be weighed down with the mixture of the wicked—until the Day of Judgment, they are vainly seeking a church besmirched with no blemish.12

Paul, too, warned Timothy that some in the church would teach miserable errors and lead many astray. “But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are his,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity’” (2 Tim. 2:18–19). Commenting on this verse, Calvin reminds us not to take to ourselves the presumption of separating the elect from the nonelect.13

Just as an individual believer is simultaneously justified and sinful, a congregation does not lose its claim to be called a church simply because of a spate of bad sermons or imperfections in doctrine and ceremonies. “The purest churches have their blemishes; and some are marked, not by a few spots, but by general deformity.”14 In Calvin’s appraisal, Rome had indeed

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12 Calvin, Institutes 4.1.13.
13 Calvin on 2 Tim. 2:19, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 21:228.
14 Calvin on Gal. 1:2, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 21:25.
fallen into such a “general deformity.” In fact, it had lost its status as a legitimate church, although “we do not for this reason impugn the existence of [true] churches among them,” subjected to the tyranny of the pope.  

No doubt drawing on personal experience, Calvin acknowledges, “The Church . . . has had no enemies more inveterate than the members of the Church.” Nevertheless, “as long as the doctrine and the liturgy remain pure, the unity of the church may not be broken due to sins committed by members of the church.”

Making Disciples: A Family Affair

The sentiment expressed in Billy Joel’s line “Go ahead with your own life—leave me alone!” was not unfamiliar to Calvin, and he saw this as the nadir of pride. Precisely because the sacrifice for guilt has been offered once and for all, we can offer our lives as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. There is no sacrifice of thanks more pleasing to God, Calvin says, than cultivating “brotherly good-will.”

Bucer held that discipline was a third mark of the church, and this became the standard view in the Reformed confessions. Even Luther included it as a mark in his treatise On Councils and the Church, although the Augsburg Confession includes only the first two. The high esteem in which Calvin held church discipline for the well-being of the church is indisputable, but he did not consider it a mark of the very being of the church itself. Rather than regarding it a third mark, Calvin considered discipline to be part of the proper application of the Word and administration of the sacraments.

We hear a lot about spiritual disciplines, where we are in control of the situation, but especially in our modern Western context, church discipline is viewed widely as a threat to personal autonomy. After all, it is

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my personal relationship with Jesus. We join or don’t join churches, as we please. We also leave as we please, even for trivial reasons and without feeling obliged to meet with the elders to discuss the reasons or transfer membership. It is ironic that we are among the most likely to lament the demise of marital fidelity in our culture when we seem at such liberty to come and go as we please in a covenant with even greater oaths and bonds. Some groups do not even have church membership, even as they decry the popularity of living together outside the formal bonds of marriage. In spite of their differences, all of the sixteenth-century disputants at least took the church more seriously than is usually the case today.

Invoking a dictum from the church father Cyprian, Luther referred to the church as our mother in his Large Catechism: “Outside the Christian Church, that is, where the Gospel is not, there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness. . . . The church is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the word of God.” Calvin, too, described the church as the mother “into whose bosom God is pleased to gather his children, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry so long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach to the goal of faith.”

For what God has joined together, it is not lawful to put asunder, so that, for those to whom he is Father the Church may also be Mother. . . . Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah [37:32] and Joel [2:32] testify. . . .

By these words God’s fatherly favor and the especial witness of spiritual life are limited to his flock, so that it is always disastrous to leave the church.20

In fact, “certainly he who refuses to be a son of the Church in vain desires to have God as his Father; for it is only through the instrumentality of the Church that we are ‘born of God’ [1 John 3:9] and brought up through the various stages.”21 We are always weak and we never outgrow the church, any more than sheep outgrow their Shepherd.

To our ears today, “church discipline” conjures the idea of being called on the carpet. However, in the New Testament it simply means being a “disciple,” someone who is under the yoke of Christ, who teaches and guides

20 Calvin, Institutes 4.1.1, 4.
21 Calvin on Gal. 4.26, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 21:140–41.
his sheep through undershepherds. Regular discipline is precisely what reduces the need for such emergency measures as censures and excommunication. The Greek verb meaning “to discipline” was commonly used to refer to training, like attending regularly to a vine. You attach the vine to a trellis and prune, water, and feed it so that it flourishes and grows in the right direction. Or the term could be used of the soldier who, by submitting to the instruction, example, and drills of superiors, is prepared for battle.

It’s amazing that many things we regard as essential to the Christian life cannot be found in Scripture, even as we ignore or regard as trivial its clear commands. Ironically, many who think that the New Testament provides a blueprint for social, economic, and foreign policy seem to think that it is virtually silent about the church’s government and worship.

Calvin did not imagine that the New Testament gave us a precise liturgy or church order, but he was convinced that it gives us clear guidelines. From his study of the New Testament Calvin suggested that there are four offices: doctor, pastor-teacher, elder, and deacon. However, the emphasis falls on the latter three.

Pastors: Feeding the Flock

Pastors are trained, examined, and ordained to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments. They give their full time to the ministry of the Word and prayer. Over against Rome, the Reformers taught that baptism, not ordination, makes a priest. In their person, officers share with all the saints “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” In their office, though, they are not mere facilitators or team leaders. Rather, they are Christ’s ambassadors through whom he builds and extends his own kingdom. As Calvin reminds us, Christ told the apostles “that the ministers of the Gospel are porters, so to speak, because they carry its keys; and, secondly, he adds that they are invested with a power of binding and losing, which is ratified in heaven.”

Ministers exercise this ministerial authority “by the doctrine of the gospel” in preaching and absolution and the sacraments.

“Among us, should some ministers be found of no great learning, still none is admitted who is not at least tolerably apt to teach.” No pastor

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23 Ibid., 293.
holds an office without actually executing that office in that church, Calvin argues, over against the common practice of buying and selling church positions. It was normal for noblemen to purchase a bishopric for their adolescent children. Not only parish priests but even upper clergy, even archbishops and cardinals, did not have to submit to any formal education and examination for their calling.

Calvin wonders how they can boast of apostolic succession when they do not even follow the explicit prescriptions for the offices and the qualifications for holding them as set forth in the New Testament. The ancient canons require that he who is to be admitted to the office of bishop or presbyter shall previously undergo a strict examination both as to life and doctrine,” he says. Furthermore, the acclamation of the whole congregation was required for ordination. All bishops taught; they did not govern secular affairs. “In the ordination of a presbyter, each bishop admitted a council of his own presbyters.” Are we really to believe that these are successors of the apostles, Calvin asks, regardless of how far they bury the doctrine and government laid down in the apostolic writings?

As Scott Manetsch points out, key to Calvin’s ecclesiology was “a commitment to a plurality of church ministries.” “For Calvin, church governance was never intended to be the prerogative of one person nor even the responsibility of pastors alone.” Hence, Calvin and his colleagues rejected any notion of preeminence or hierarchy of authority within the pastoral company.” Each, including Calvin, would submit to the decision of the majority.

The pastor is not a lord, and the congregation is not his fiefdom. He rules in his office, not in his person, and a good pastor attaches the sheep to the Great Shepherd, not to himself. Calvin took up his regular place in the rotation not only for preaching but also for teaching the catechism to the youth during the week. “Christ does not call his ministers to the teaching office that they may subdue the Church and dominate it,” Calvin declares, “but that he may make use of their faithful labors to unite it to himself.” “It is a great and splendid thing for men to be put in authority over the Church to represent the person of the Son of God,” he continues. “They are like

25 Ibid., 170–71.
26 Ibid., 171.
27 Ibid., 172.
29 Ibid.
the friends attached to the bridegroom to celebrate the wedding with him, though they must observe the difference between themselves and what belongs to the bridegroom.” They “should not stand in the way of Christ alone having the dominion in his Church or ruling it alone by his Word. . . . Those who win the Church over to themselves rather than to Christ faithlessly violate the marriage which they ought to honor.”

Elders: Governing the Flock

Besides preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments, the ministers serve with the elders in caring for the spiritual needs of their flock. Taken from the laity, elders are the spiritual governors. Pastors are not CEOs, but serve with the elders as Christ’s undershepherds. Only as a body do the pastors and elders rule. Not even the church’s officers can determine who is truly elect and regenerate, but they can only approve credible professions of faith that in some cases may in the end prove to be false. We know that some of those who seemed far advanced beyond us in the faith turn aside from the Way, while many who seemed weak and immature in their faith and obedience nevertheless persevered to the end, Calvin observes.

Only as one body do elders bind and loose in church discipline. Properly speaking, their ministry is to loose or open the door. The calling to bind or shut the door “does not belong to the nature of the Gospel, but is accidental,” when manifest unbelievers are excluded from the church. Believers should take great comfort that when they hear themselves absolved from the lips of a fellow sinner ordained to that office, they are dealing with Christ and not merely with men. Conversely, the rebellious should be struck by the fact that the heavenly judgment is being rendered on earth against their impenitence. As with preaching and the sacraments, this action is ministerial; Christ ordinarily speaks through his ambassadors, but only on the basis of his Word; the King reserves to himself the sole right to final clemency.

A good parent not only feeds and bathes his or her children, but also teaches, trains, and disciplines them. However, Calvin discerned in both Roman Catholic and Anabaptist discipline a rigor that was opposed to the
Living in the Body

gospel. Roman Catholic scholar Killian McDonnell notes, “Calvin would rather, however, demand too little than too much in the way of moral disposition, and wants above all to avoid the tortured, harassed, and pitiable conscience he seems to find in Roman Catholicism and also among the Anabaptists.”

Observing that the Anabaptists seek a pure church, Luther once commented, “But I neither can nor may as yet set up such a congregation; for I do not as yet have the people for it. If however the time comes that I must do it, so that I cannot with a good conscience refrain from it, then I am ready to do my part.” Calvin agreed with this and with Luther’s conviction that personal admonitions and correction of vices must take place, but directly with offenders, not in the public service (except in the cases of excommunication and readmission). While Rome lost its title of a true church, Calvin saw the Anabaptists as heirs of the Gnostic and Donatist sects.

Calvin regarded discipline as crucial for the proper administration of the Supper. Yet he was opposed to treating Communion as a reward for the faultless. In his 1536 edition of the Institutes, he warns against placing the emphasis in Communion on eating worthily rather than on the words “given for you.” Certain ones, when they would prepare men to eat worthily, have tortured and harassed pitiable consciences in dire ways,” as if to “eat worthily” meant “to be purged of all sin.” Such a dogma would debar all the men who ever were or are on earth from the use of this Sacrament. For if it is a question of our seeking our worthiness by ourselves, we are undone; only ruin and confusion remain in us.” Anabaptists do not regard the sacrament as God’s objective pledge to weak and sinful believers. According to them, “we either know . . . or do not know that God’s word preceding the sacrament is His true will. If we know it, we learn nothing new from the sacrament, which follows. If we do not know it, the sacrament (whose whole force and energy rests in the word) also will not teach it.”

Whereas Anabaptists were interested in church discipline as a means

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38 Ibid., 128.
39 Calvin, Institutes 4.1.23. Verduin does not deny this connection. “The Donatists were the original Anabaptists” (The Reformers and Their Stepchildren, 192). After quoting numerous sources from various Gnostic groups in the Middle Ages, he adds, “The time is coming, if it is not already here, when people will be proud to acknowledge that they stand in a tradition that leads back to the medieval ‘heretic’” (136).
40 McDonnell, John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist, 151, quoting Calvin’s summary in his 1536 Institutes (ed. Battles).
primarily of creating a pure church, Calvin was more concerned with the honor of God and care of Christ’s sheep. It is not for us to separate the sheep from the goats, and Calvin constantly warned against rushing to judgment. We cannot say that where “excommunication be not in use,” as important as it is, there is no church if nevertheless “she retaineth that doctrine upon which the church is founded.” Anabaptists, he says, make much of “sinning willingly.” “Among ten, hardly shall we find one that after he knew God hath not sinned willingly.”

At the same time, Calvin is convinced that correction and reproof as well as encouragement and instruction belong to the New Testament job description for pastors and elders. The goal of church discipline, Calvin often emphasizes, is restoration of the wayward and good counsel to pilgrims. “The pastor ought to have two voices,” Calvin advises: “one for gathering the sheep and another for warding off and driving away wolves and thieves.” Only when long-suffering admonitions are rebuffed by unrepentant and unbelieving hearts does discipline become exclusionary. Even then, Calvin insists, the door is always left open with pleas for the prodigal’s welcome return.

Elements and Circumstances

Whether in worship or in government and discipline, the unity of the church consists not in circumstances, but in elements. Elements are those things that are commanded by Scripture directly or as a necessary conclusion drawn from various biblical passages. It is clear enough that there must be preaching, prayer, and the sacraments in the public service. Circumstances—that is, precise details concerning how, when, and in what order to do them—are left to the discretion of the elders. When we turn free circumstances into required elements, we are in danger of legalism; when we turn required elements into free circumstances, we are in danger of antinomianism.

For example, Calvin says that in the celebration of the Supper, “as for the outward details of the action,” such as manner of distribution or

42 Selderhuis, *Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms*, 230.
43 Calvin, quoted by Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 225.
44 Calvin, quoted in ibid., 226.
45 Calvin on Titus 1:9, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 21:296.
“whether the bread should be leavened or unleavened, whether red or white wine should be used—all this is of no importance.” On these matters, “we can decide freely.” 46 Indeed, he argues, the circumstances will vary, depending on different times and places. 47 He adds:

It would be extraordinary indeed if in those matters in which the Lord has granted us freedom, in order that we may have greater scope for the edification of the church, we were to strive to attain a slavish uniformity without really caring about the true ordering of church life. For when we appear before the judgment seat of God in order to give account of our deeds we shall not be asked about ceremonies. . . . The right use [of our freedom] will be that one which has contributed most to the edification of the church. 48

Whether by imposing specific forms or by excluding them, too many people make uniformity in such matters part of the essence of the church. However, “the Christian faith does not consist in such matters.” 49

Another important contribution of Calvin and his heirs is an emphasis on particular circumstances in conduct. Care must be taken to examine each situation and to apply general scriptural principles and godly common sense in concrete cases that might admit different solutions in other cases. This requires circumspection—which means, literally, “looking around.” Some of the leading Puritan ministers in England wrote “cases of conscience.” In these often lengthy tomes, they laid out in detail particular pastoral issues and how they resolved them—with no expectation that every other pastor or consistory would have followed exactly the same course. The underlying assumption was that while the elements of God’s commands were to be observed, the circumstances were a matter of godly liberty.

The same was true in church government. In fact, on some matters that Calvin considered an element, he was remarkably tolerant of different views—more so than some of his followers, in fact. Though convinced that the New Testament prescribed a Presbyterian model, he did not regard it as a determinative mark of the true church. Reformed churches in

46 Calvin, Institutes 4.17.43.
49 Ibid.
England, Hungary, and Poland had bishops. He told Archbishop Cranmer that he would be willing to “cross ten seas” to assist in the unification of Reformed churches—even those with bishops—although if he had made the trip, we can be relatively sure that he would have made a case for a more Presbyterian polity. Thus, the Reformer could see even among elements a ranking order, prize unity above polity. Here we see a man of principle, to be sure, but among the principles was love. While wanting to obey everything that Christ commanded, he realized that not everything was equally clear or equally important.

**Deacons: Extending God’s Hospitality**

In addition to the offices of minister and elder, the diaconal office was established for the temporal relief of the saints. We have seen that besides a “celestial theater” of God’s grace, the church is compared to the site of a lavish banquet where we are served by a generous Father and a selfless Host, in bonds that only the Spirit can produce. What can salvation be likened to better than such divine hospitality? Yet we are not merely souls, but bodies too, and Christ looks after us in every respect. It is not only the case that the poor need the generosity of the wealthier believers. The hospitality that God showers on us overflows into a cycle of gift giving among the saints. In Strasbourg and Geneva, Calvin and Idelette embraced this calling—even when it was especially difficult in Geneva, given the often fierce inhospitality of the citizens to the sea of foreigners. Calvin oversaw personally the disbursement of funds for children who had sought refuge in Geneva and the establishment of diaconal funds for poor exiles. It is not surprising that he saw the Christian life in terms of pilgrimage, exile, and fleeing to the asylum of forgiveness.

In her book *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Christine E. Pohl draws attention to Calvin’s example. “No duty can be more pleasing or acceptable to God” than hospitality, Calvin said—especially to refugees. In contrast with the example of the ancient church,
especially Chrysostom, Calvin complained that hospitality has “nearly ceased to be properly observed among men; for the ancient hospitality celebrated in histories, is unknown to us, and inns now supply the place of accommodation for strangers.”⁵⁵ He adds, in the Institutes:

Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say, “He is a stranger”; but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you, by virtue of the fact that he forbids you to despise your own flesh (Is. 58.7). Say, “He is contemptible and worthless”; but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in his own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even the least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions.⁵⁶

This generous hospitality is grounded not only in redemption, calling us to fellowship with other believers, but in creation as well, calling us to friendship with all of our neighbors.

[God] has impressed his image in us and has given us a common nature, which should incite us to providing one for the other. The man who wishes to exempt himself from providing for his neighbors should deface himself and declare that he no longer wishes to be a man, for as long as we are human creatures we must contemplate as in a mirror our face in those who are poor, despised, exhausted, who groan under their burdens. . . . If there come some Moor or barbarian, since he is a man, he brings a mirror in which we are able to contemplate that he is our neighbor.⁵⁷

When we encounter less fortunate neighbors, we have no basis for a patronizing or condescending attitude. Rather, we should think:

Now I have been in that condition and certainly wanted to be helped. . . . When we are comfortable, it is not a matter of our remembering our human poverty; rather we imagine that we are exempt from that and that

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⁵⁶ Calvin, Institutes 3.7.6.
⁵⁷ Calvin, Corpus Reformatorum: Johannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia, 51.105.
we are no longer part of the common class. And that is the reason why we forget, and no longer have any compassion for our neighbors or for all that they endure.  

While hospitality is enjoined upon all Christians, Calvin sought to restore the diaconal office that had been moribund through the Middle Ages. The *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* that Calvin drafted provided for two types of deacons: administrators and those who cared for the poor, sick, and elderly. There was a close connection between Communion and the fellowship and care of the saints. The offering was not a perfunctory moment in the church service. As André Biéler comments, “In imitation of the primitive church, Calvin had money re-enter the circuit of spiritual life.” A general hospital was established, along with accommodations for refugees, as deacons and deaconesses (some of them former nuns) assisted in finding long-term housing and work. It was a somewhat complicated cooperative venture. However, nowhere was Calvin’s view of the church and state as “distinct but inseparable” institutions more apparent than in the operation of the diaconate.

Reformed churches in France followed the model. In fact, ex-nuns formed the Order of the Sisters of Charity, though it did not impose any lifelong vow. It is perhaps not surprising that the Red Cross was founded in Geneva as part of a revival of Calvinism. Who could be more remote from most of us than a refugee, an undocumented worker, and a foreigner without proper papers? The Reformer observes that we too shrug off the Lord’s parable of the good Samaritan with the volley, “Who is my neighbor?” “Christ has shown us in the parable of the Samaritan that the term ‘neighbor’ includes even the most remote person (Luke 10.36), [and therefore] we are not expected to limit the precept of love to those in close relationships.” Of course, we must be wise. However, Calvin warns, “let us beware that we seek not cover for our stinginess under the shadow of prudence.” Though it is appropriate to discern honest need, our inquiries should not be “too exacting,” but must be done with a “humane heart, inclined to pity and compassion.”

Once again we see the movement in Calvin’s thinking from public to

61 Calvin, *Institutes* 2.8.54.
private, from the formal to the informal, from being served by God through his ministry, to serving each other in the body and our neighbors in the world. There is an important place for the service of each member in the body. Whereas 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 provide an extended list of spiritual gifts, Ephesians 4 singles out the ministers of the Word because it is through this special office that the general office of the saints can flourish. Richly served by the special offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, the rest of the body is ready to fulfill the general office entrusted to all believers in less official ways each day. One may not be a pastor and yet may be engaged in “speaking the truth in love” to fellow believers and those who don’t yet know Christ. Even if one is not an elder, we all encourage and admonish each other in faith and good works. One need not be a deacon in order to have the gift of hospitality. We should see these formal offices instituted by Christ not as dead ends, but rather as fountains that spill over into the whole body and, through each person’s gifts, flow out into the world.

Our Unity Together

Where is the only place where true redemption is to be found? In Christ alone, revealed in the gospel. Therefore, it is only in the gospel that we find the source of “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” The church is one or catholic not because we share the same political views or cultural affinities, age demographics, or pastimes, but because with all of our diversity we share in “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

The unity of the church is no small matter to Calvin. Nor does he hide behind the idea of an invisible church to justify divisions in the visible church. Calvin counsels, “Even when the church lies in ruins, we still love the heap of ruins.”63 “Unity is something invaluably good,” he exhorts, something more than a means to an end.64 When we look at division, “we not only shed a few tears in our eyes, but a whole river.”65

Whether one views the Reformation as a tragic division or as a glorious healing of Christ’s body depends on how seriously one takes the issues at stake. From the Reformers’ point of view, it was the pope who had corrupted the ancient faith, contradicted the gospel, and torn the body of Christ into competing factions. It was the pope who excommunicated the Reformers

63 Selderhuis, Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms, 235, quoting Calvin on Ps. 102:15.
64 Ibid., quoting Calvin on Ps. 133:1.
65 Ibid., 237, quoting Calvin on Ps. 119:136.
and their followers and set armies in motion to exterminate evangelicals. The Reformation sought to bring greater genuine unity to the visible body, a unity determined not by emperor, pope, or common culture and laws, but by Christ and his gospel—with a government that was spiritual and bound by mutuality rather than tyranny. Many bishops and priests embraced the reform explicitly; others, including archbishops and cardinals, showed sympathy with its teachings, even on justification. Often at the risk of their own lives, the Reformers themselves attended every major conference to which they were invited. Nevertheless, when the final “anathemas” of the Council of Trent came down in the 1560s, all who believed that they were justified by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone were placed under Rome’s condemnation.

By his teaching, warnings, and personal example, Calvin constantly displayed disdain for trivial contentions. In his speech to the emperor, Calvin acknowledged that “the Church always has been and always will be liable to some defects which the pious are indeed bound to disapprove, but which are to be borne rather than be made a cause of fierce contention.” However, the complete corruption of the gospel and pollution of worship are not merely “some defects.” How can the Reformers be saddled with dividing the church, Calvin asks, when Rome has separated the body from its Head?

Your Imperial Majesty is aware how wide a field of discussion here opens upon me. But to conclude this point in a few words: I deny that See to be Apostolic wherein nothing is seen but a shocking apostasy—I deny him to be the vicar of Christ who, in furiously persecuting the gospel, demonstrated by his conduct that he is Antichrist—I deny him to be the successor of Peter who is doing his utmost to demolish every edifice that Peter built—and I deny him to be the head of the Church who by his tyranny lacerates and dismembers the Church, after dismembering her from Christ, her true and only Head. 

How can those who seek to restore the connection between the body and its ascended Head be accused of schism? After all, it was not the Reformers who were employing the civil powers with ferocious hatred against fellow Christians.

Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church,” 186.
Ibid., 213.
Ibid., 219–20.
While he was still living in Strasbourg, Geneva’s senate asked Calvin in 1539 to compose a response to Cardinal Sadoleto’s plea for the city’s return to the papal fold. The Reformer wrote,

We indeed, Sadoleto, deny not that those over which you preside are Churches of Christ, but we maintain that the Roman Pontiff, with his whole herd of pseudo-bishops, who have seized upon the pastoral office, are ravenous wolves whose only study has hitherto been to scatter and trample upon the kingdom of Christ, filling it with ruin and devastation.

“Nor are we the first to make the complaint,” he adds, returning to the historical record—this time the fourteenth-century Cistercian reformer Bernard of Clairvaux: “With what vehemence does Bernard thunder against Eugenius and all the bishops of his own age? Yet how much more tolerable was its condition then than now?”

Sure, there was greater quiet before the Reformers arrived, Calvin acknowledges. Everyone was ignorant of the gospel. “You cannot, therefore, take credit for a tranquil kingdom when there was tranquility for no other reason than because Christ was silent.” Are there many sects now? Yes, as the Christian faith has always been assailed by sects even in its finest days. Having spoken so freely from his heart, Calvin concludes with a gracious and fervent plea:

The Lord grant, Sadoleto, that you and all your party may at length perceive that the only true bond of ecclesiastical unity would exist if Christ the Lord, who hath reconciled us to God the Father, were to gather us out of our present dispersion into the fellowship of his body, that so, through his one Word and Spirit, we might join together with one heart and one soul.

Although the Reformers longed for an ecumenical council to settle the matters, the Council of Trent, called in 1547, “was of a very different description” from earlier councils. It was called an “ecumenical council, . . . as if it were said that all the bishops throughout the habitable globe had

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70 Ibid., 67.
71 Ibid., 68.
72 Ibid.
flocked to Trent. Even if it had been only a Provincial Council they should still have been ashamed of the fewness of its members.”

Of course, there were no representatives from the Eastern church (since the East and the West had excommunicated each other), and no one was allowed who favored the evangelical views of the Reformers. “Perhaps forty Bishops or so are present,” and none of them among the distinguished pastors of the church. The Holy Spirit, speaking in his Word, is the ultimate authority to which popes and councils are subject, yet, Calvin reports, there has thus far been no genuine discussion between both parties on the teaching of Scripture. Only two bishops were sent from France, “both equally dull and unlearned.” None of this matters in any case. “For nothing is determined there save at the nod of the Roman Pontiff.” In short, Calvin charges that it should be obvious to everyone that the Council of Trent is a kangaroo court.

Commenting point by point on each session as the council met, Calvin marshals historical evidence to measure Rome’s departure from apostolic practice. He cites the third-century bishop of Carthage Cyprian, who denied any universal primacy but Christ’s, and Gregory the Great, bishop of Rome, who said that any man who claimed such primacy was “a forerunner of Antichrist.” Calvin appeals to Jerome’s detailed account of equality among bishops until, “at the instigation of the devil,” bishops began to jockey for priority. “But though with one assent the Roman See were raised to the third heaven, how ridiculous is it to make a primate of bishops of one who is no more like a bishop than a wolf is like a lamb!” Lacking any grounding in Scripture or the ancient church, the Roman church simply appeals to power. “Accordingly, we see that they take the usual course of tyrants. When unable any longer to support their domination by moderate measures, they have recourse to truculence and barbarian ferocity.”

When all hopes of reconciliation with Rome seemed futile, Calvin did not give up. In fact, his successor, Theodore Beza, continued to attend such conferences despite personal dangers and diminishing hopes. Turn-

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74 Ibid., 57.
75 Ibid., 33.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 35.
79 Ibid., 36–37.
80 Ibid., 49.
81 Calvin, “Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris, with Antidote (1542),” in Selected Works of John Calvin, 1:120.
living in the body

ing to the Lutherans, Calvin argued for a view of the Supper that he and Melanchthon hoped would reconcile the evangelical churches. However, Melanchthon was losing credibility as Luther’s theologian-in-chief among many Lutherans, such as the polemicist Joachim Westphal, who claimed victories at the cost of completely misrepresenting Calvin’s stated views. On the other side, Zurichers were overly sensitive to any criticism of Zwingli and wondered why Calvin seemed so obsessed with reconciling with the Lutherans, which he indeed attempted especially in his Small Treatise on the Lord’s Supper.

Calvin went directly to Zurich itself and forged a consensus statement with Heinrich Bullinger that brought greater unity to the Swiss churches. In spite of being treated unfairly by Bullinger on some occasions, he was always the initiator of renewed friendship: “What ought we, my dear Bullinger, to correspond about at this time rather than the preserving and confirming, by every means in our power, brotherly kindness among ourselves?” After determined effort, he was able in 1549 to reach a general agreement with Bullinger on a non-Zwinglian understanding of the Supper. By the time Bullinger wrote the Second Helvetic Confession, even he had moved somewhat from his mentor’s view, toward Calvin and the other Reformed leaders.

Even if all parties had possessed the goodwill for it, political circumstances did not allow any greater unity of the visible church than the pope sanctioned and the Protestant state churches, princes, and city councils could negotiate. Especially when Archbishop Cranmer’s plan for an ecumenical synod came to nothing, Calvin lamented that Christ’s body was left “bleeding, its members severed.” Like many of his goals, the visible unity of Christ’s body was something for which the Reformer strove unceasingly, with disappointments often outweighing successes.

Especially when compared to our own age, the Reformed churches in

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82 Calvin, Institutes 4.14.17.
83 T. H. L. Parker, John Calvin (Tring, UK: Lion, 1975), 162. Parker relates: “Luther is reported to have said to a friend as he read it: ‘This is certainly a learned and godly man, and I might well have entrusted this controversy to him from the beginning. If my opponents had done the same we should soon have been reconciled.’ But even before this, Luther had read the Institutes, probably the 1539 edition, and had sent friendly greetings through Bucer: ‘Salute for me respectfully Sturm and Calvin whose books I have read with special delight.’ And Calvin himself reported, ‘Luther and Pomeranus have asked that Calvin should be greeted. Calvin has acquired great favor in their eyes.’”
85 Calvin, quoted in Parker, John Calvin, 164.
87 Calvin, quoted in Parker, John Calvin, 165.
the late sixteenth century represented the closest thing to a united Protestantism. Even after the sometimes bitter polemics from Lutheran quarters, Reformed and Puritan writers continued to cite important Lutheran theologians as “our theologians.” Beza included the Augsburg Confession in his *Harmony of Reformed Confessions* (1581). The Church of England repeatedly sought further reform based on “the example of the best Reformed churches on the continent.”

Tragically, circumstances—especially due to the politics of a state church—led to an unraveling of Reformed unity in England. At the moment when the Church of England saw itself as most Reformed, it was the most ecumenical. It was only with the rise of the Arminian and High Church Archbishop Laud under Charles I that the English Church became distinctly “Anglican” and veered increasingly from its own Articles of Religion. Calvin’s ecumenical passion contrasts sharply with the complacency with which his spiritual heirs seem to accept the proliferation and continued existence of so many separate denominations with a common faith.

**Our Mission Together**

Ecumenism and mission were inseparable in Calvin’s thinking. It is by the same gospel that creates the church that Christ’s kingdom spreads throughout the world. Calvin was deeply impressed by the growth of the new covenant church from the vine of Israel. He speaks repeatedly of the Jews as having “the right of the first begotten,” “always chief in the Church of God.”

Israel is expanded with the arrival of foreigners, as the prophets foretold.

Then the true religion, which had before been shut up within the narrow limits of Judea, was spread abroad through the whole world. Then God, who had been known only by one family, began to be called upon in the different languages of all nations. . . . Then all men, vying with each other, associated themselves in companies to the society of the Jews, whom they had before abhorred.

Calvin adds, “We are considered as children of God in no other way than by being grafted into Abraham and his offspring.” In this way, “the heathen

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89 Calvin on Ps. 87:16, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 5:395.
90 Selderhuis, Calvin’s Theology of the Psalms, 239, quoting Calvin on Pss. 47:10 and 110:2.
are subjected to Israel,” Calvin observes in commenting on Psalm 47:4. “It is the delight of the Jews that they may be the fountain from which God waters the whole earth”—all the more reason they themselves must trust in Christ.  

In a Pentecost Sunday sermon, Calvin observes the remarkable change in the apostles at this history-altering feast. The Spirit descended with flaming tongues, first, “to show that by this means the doctrine of the Gospel was approved and sealed by God,” to make his ambassadors witnesses for that gospel, and to raise hearers from spiritual death to embrace that gospel in their hearts. While the Spirit descended in judgment to scatter the proud nations and divide their languages at Babel, at Pentecost he descended to unite them in one gospel, yet in various languages. Thus, God has turned a judgment into a blessing, with the gospel being proclaimed to the ends of the earth in a multitude of tongues, “that we might together be made partakers of this covenant of salvation which belonged only to the Jews until the wall was torn down.” Calvin adds, “This is also why this Holy Table is now prepared for us.” Although the ascended Lord does not return bodily to earth, “let us know that what cannot be conceived of by men is accomplished nevertheless by the secret and invisible grace of the Holy Spirit; for this is how we are made partakers of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ.” Like that early community, the church today is a small and scattered remnant that is nevertheless gathered by the Spirit through his word, united to its Head, and preserved in spite of persecution in order to proclaim the gospel to the whole world.

In Calvin’s native France, the tiny bands of evangelical Christians who had escaped martyrdom swelled to over three million by 1562, and Calvin was in close and regular correspondence with the pastors and missionary-evangelists leading the efforts. Frank James III remarks, “Far from being disinterested in missions, history shows that Calvin was enraptured by it.” We preach not only to build up the saints but also “to persuade those who are strangers to the faith, and seem to be utterly deprived of the goodness of God, to accept salvation. Jesus Christ is not only a Savior of few,
but he offers Himself to all.” “God has at heart the salvation of all because he invites all to the acknowledgment of his truth. . . . God wishes that the gospel should be proclaimed to all without exception.” The same gospel that we take to the ends of the earth creates and sustains the church at home each week.

The Reformation itself was the most massive missionary movement since the days of the apostles. Millions across Europe considered themselves re-evangelized. As missions historian Ruth Tucker points out, it was extremely difficult for evangelicals to send missionaries. Nations loyal to the pope controlled the ports, while missionary monks attended Europe’s conquerors across the seas. “Calvin himself, however, was at least outwardly the most missionary-minded of all the Reformers,” Tucker notes. “He not only sent dozens of evangelists back into his homeland of France, but also commissioned four missionaries, along with a number of French Huguenots, to establish a colony and evangelize the Indians in Brazil.” In fact, these were the first Protestant missionaries to have set foot in the New World. The renegade leader of the company defected to the Portuguese “and left the few remaining defenseless survivors to be slain at the hands of the Jesuits.”

Calvin believed that missionaries should be as thoroughly prepared and trained as any minister at home. Aspiring missionaries came for training from every part of Europe, as well as Africa, the Middle East, and Ottoman lands. Geneva “was a dynamic centre of missionary concern and activity,” the first major center for the training and sending of evangelical missionaries. These churches provided leadership throughout the whole course of the modern missionary movement to the present day.

Only Christ the Head can unite his members to himself in one body. Only through his gospel does the Spirit create, preserve, and expand this body to the ends of the earth. Getting the gospel right and getting the gospel out form an inextricable bond. Where the good news of God’s saving grace in Christ is continually proclaimed, worldly divisions are overcome and a desert waste blossoms into a lavish field ripening into a glorious harvest.

97 Calvin on 1 Tim. 2:4, in Calvin’s Commentaries, 21:54–55.
99 Tucker, From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya, 67–68.
WESLEY
on the Christian Life

THE HEART RENEWED IN LOVE

FRED SANDERS
Ecumenical used to be a good word, but it has lost some of its luster. A word that used to point to the unity of all Christians now only conjures the image of mainline denominational heads congregating every few years on international junkets. Catholic was a good word, too, pointing to all Christians, as in the ancient formula “I believe in the holy catholic church.” But now it is capitalized and points to one particular branch (Roman), which claims to be the only true one. Inter-denominational might help us think of all Christians, but (unlike ecumenical and catholic, with their Greek roots) it is an un-beautiful word suggesting bureaucratic jurisdictions. Non-denominational doesn’t work at all.

How can we talk about the kind of Christian unity that spans the divisions between the various churches, the kind that reminds that us we have the central things in common, the kind that draws us together so we can stay close enough to keep arguing meaningfully? There is no single word that captures the attitude we are seeking; we have to keep using and explaining these old, compromised words. And as quickly as we invent a new one, it will suffer abuse and become unusable. The best we can do is look to examples of teachers and movements who have succeeded in negotiating those tensions.

John Wesley was such a leader. He knew that a Christian’s life could not be lived out in isolation from the universal church. Wesley showed that this catholicity is not just a leisure activity, but part of what constitutes a real Christian life.
The Great Tradition of Christian Spirituality

To be a Christian means to live in the one great church founded on the apostles, rather than to follow a sectarian impulse. In a divided Christendom, living a fully and universally Christian experience will mean being open to the best in many sub-traditions, even while being persuaded of the rightness of one’s own particular church. The best index of Wesley’s catholicity is his wide devotional reading. In an impressive lifetime of reading spiritual writings, Wesley surveyed as much of the Christian tradition as was available to him at the time. His breadth was remarkable. Wesley lived by the Bible, of course, and claimed to be a man of one book (homo unius libri). But his single-minded focus on Scripture did not result from failing to read other books. It was something he achieved on the far side of wide reading and much learning. Wesley knew how to learn from Christians of all ages and denominations, and he wanted to pass that privilege along to as many people as he could.

As a result, Wesley devoted a considerable part of his ministry to editing and publishing books that he considered spiritually helpful. As his personal influence grew, he used it to recommend classic books. He wanted his people to be reading widely in the best works available, and when the best works had ceased being available, he brought them back into print himself. From the beginning of his ministry he was distributing reprints and abridgments of devotional literature. Then in 1748 he wrote to a friend that he had long been hoping to print “a little library, perhaps of fourscore or one hundred volumes, for the use of those that fear God.” He gave a thumbnail sketch of his intention: “My purpose was to select whatever I had seen most valuable in the English language and either abridge or take the whole tracts, only a little corrected or explained, as occasion should require.”

He soon set to work on his plan, and by 1755 he had brought out fifty volumes of about three hundred pages each, under the title *A Christian Library*. The subtitle was *Extracts from and Abridgments of the Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity Which Have Been Published in the English Tongue*.

Richard Heitzenrater claims that in Wesley’s *A Christian Library*, “part of his effort is to demonstrate that Christian truth is one from the beginning to his own day.” Wesley carried out this demonstration by the sheer

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scope of his reach, drawing from as far back as the first centuries of the church (the apostolic fathers such as Clement and Ignatius), and coming down to his own day (publishing his contemporary Jonathan Edwards). But he did not gather writers at random or in a mere attempt to be historically representative. He was evidently following some implicit set of principles that helped him trace the course of evangelical Protestant spirituality down through the centuries, even the centuries before there were evangelicals and Protestants. “Behind the diversity of men and movements in this astonishing miscellany there is a unity. With a little topping and tailing, it is true, he made them all speak one language, Scriptural Holiness, Christ, Methodism.”

Wesley did focus on the Protestant centuries, which loom largest in the collection. He drew lightly on the church fathers and skipped over the medievals. Though he bypassed the major Reformers, some figures from the sixteenth century show up, and from that point it becomes the torrent that filled fifty volumes.

The collection is bracingly diverse and surprisingly nonpartisan. The works of Arminius are absent, though Wesley was the Arminian editor of The Arminian Magazine. Wesley rejected the doctrine of limited atonement, but in A Christian Library he included copious writings by the Puritan Thomas Goodwin (certainly in favor of limited atonement), while omitting John Goodwin (famously against limited atonement). Why would Wesley choose the Goodwin with whom he disagreed over the one who held his views? Here are two reasons: (1) John Goodwin wrote polemical, or argumentative and doctrinal, theology, while Thomas Goodwin wrote spiritual and devotional theology, and Wesley was a lover rather than a fighter. (2) Wesley had excellent taste, and it was the great Thomas Goodwin who wrote some of the “choicest practical divinity in the English tongue” (as the Library’s subtitle promised). Wesley could happily republish the writings of members of the Westminster Assembly, if they could write treatises as brilliant as The Heart of Christ in Heaven toward Sinners. There is quite a bit of writing by John Owen in these volumes as well, including his classic Communion with God.

From Wesley’s point of view, only an anti-Calvinist bigot would refuse to recommend books so excellent on grounds that they were by Calvinists or included numerous lines of argument that were obviously Calvinist.

Wesley was not hemmed in by his doctrinal positions on such matters; he knew that fifty volumes was hardly enough space to exhaust the great central core of Christian truth and its outworkings in the human heart. Wesley gathered in the greatest authors wherever he found them.

He did occasionally exercise some line-item veto authority over his authors, and he would especially strike out sentences and phrases that ran afoul of his own convictions. He especially loved the works of his contemporary Jonathan Edwards, eagerly republishing five of Edwards’s books and boosting their circulation considerably. But Wesley was keen to eliminate the Calvinist elements of Edwards’s work. His heavy-handed editing of Edwards’s masterpiece *Religious Affections* is an extreme instance of Wesley’s editorial method. “Wesley’s treatment of *Religious Affections* is the most radical of all his abridgements, inasmuch as he takes the most liberties with this text.”

In this mature work, Edwards explained the difference between true religion and false. During the revivals, many American colonists had professed faith but later abandoned it. It seemed obvious to Edwards that these people had never had true faith, and his book provided marks to confirm this judgment. But it seemed equally obvious to Wesley that these people had indeed had true faith, from which they had fallen away: they professed and then ceased to profess. Wesley asked, “What was the plain inference to be drawn from this? Why, that a true believer may make shipwreck of the Faith. How then could he evade the force of this? Truly by eating his own words, and proving, (as well as the nature of the thing would bear) that they were no believers at all!”

Wesley thought that Edwards could only make the facts fit his faulty theological preconceptions by introducing a series of “curious, subtle, metaphysical distinctions” that turned his otherwise excellent book into something that would “puzzle the brain, and confound the intellects, of all the plain men and women in the universe.” So Wesley as editor excised long sections and snipped many words and expressions from the text, publishing the *Religious Affections* for his readers, but in an altered form. “Out of this dangerous heap,” he wrote, “wherein much wholesome food is mixt with much deadly poison, I have selected many remarks and admonitions, which may be of great use to the children of God.” Wesley was no textual

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5Ibid., 157.
6Ibid.
purist when it came to the distribution of theological and spiritual writings. His goal was pastoral, not bibliographic, so he filtered out what he considered harmful before passing along what he considered helpful.

Not all of Wesley's editing decisions were driven by theological judgments, though. Many were simply attempts to improve the writings. Because Wesley was a popular communicator, he had some justification for thinking that he knew the right way to put words together to reach a large audience. He seemed to enjoy the work of abridging other authors, producing shorter digests of longer works. It was his conviction that “even in the best books there was usually more said than was worth a man's time to read.” You can almost hear the glee with which he boasts in his journal about his day's editorial work: “I abridged Dr. Watts' pretty 'Treatise on the Passions.' His hundred and seventy pages will make a useful tract of four-and-twenty.” Wesley was cramming a large amount of material into a manageable fifty volumes, and much was left on the cutting-room floor.

Compiling the list of best books was a major undertaking, and Wesley asked for help from more seasoned teachers. For a starting point, he wrote to Philip Doddridge, who was only one year older than Wesley, but had long been famous for his labors as a leader of the dissenting party. “Doddridge replied with a carefully selected series. With these and other suggestions to supplement his own ideas, Wesley mapped out his table of contents.” Perhaps the Doddridge connection is what led some people to question whether the whole collection was really suitable for Anglican Christians. “Is not your Christian Library an odd collection of mutilated writings of Dissenters of all sorts?” was one challenge raised against it. Wesley’s response was simply to recite the table of contents, which was overwhelmingly Anglican: “In the first ten volumes there is not a line from any Dissenter of any sort; and the greatest part of the other forty is extracted from Archbishop Leighton, Bishops Patrick, Ken, Reynolds, Sanderson, and other ornaments of the Church of England.”

This is certainly a notable list of Anglican luminaries. But when pressed, he was also happy to admit that “some of the writers he had followed were, indeed, of other denominations.” Wesley stood his ground, though, and appealed to the unity that believers in Christ had, even across

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7 Herbert, John Wesley as Editor and Author, 28.
8 From Wesley’s journal, January 17, 1769, in Works, 4:298.
9 Herbert, John Wesley as Editor and Author, 29.
10 Ibid., 30.
those denominational boundaries. Just as he was an Arminian in the business of promoting the best Calvinist spiritual writers, his *Christian Library* was an Anglican project that maintained openness to the best from non-Anglican sources. “He was delighted with the opportunity of admitting the fact and supplementing his retort with a declaration of intellectual independence and tolerance.” Wesley’s ecumenical scope was part of his vision of the Christian life.

“The books from time to time bowled Wesley over,” and his life story is a sequence of reports on which book had most recently bowled him over. He was also an influencer, so passing along the best books was one of Wesley’s most important ministries. And while his emphasis was consistently on spiritual things, Wesley also knew that the best Christian books could be read only by people whose minds had been exercised in as much literature and philosophy as possible. For this reason, Wesley’s preaching, teaching, and publishing were always closely tied to an extensive educational task. His greatest successes in mass evangelism were among people considerably less educated than this fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford. He brought the simple gospel to simple people. But as soon as his influence was felt, he also tried to help the simple to begin to grow intellectually. “He was one of the few truly successful popularizers in the history of preaching,” said Albert Outler. “His preaching and teaching offered both the gospel and a liberal education, as an integrated experience, to the common people who heard him gladly.” In his sermons, Wesley freely quoted Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and Cicero. He often misquoted them, indicating that he was working from memory. He published an abridgment of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, an act that speaks of astonishing self-assurance (to think he could improve on Milton!). The abridgment sold well, and that among people not likely to buy the whole work or to have read it at all in any form without Mr. Wesley’s stamp of approval.

Bare literacy was not enough for Christians in a complex society; Wesley wanted his Methodists to be able to read critically, to think precisely, and to feel deeply the things they read. People needed their minds broadened and their intellectual powers stimulated if they were to receive biblical truth deeply. He once published an abridgment of a novel that had moved him, but had admittedly negligible spiritual value. One of the Methodist

11 Ibid.
lay preachers, John Easton, criticized Wesley for stooping to publish mere fiction. Wesley “felt nothing but pity for those who could not enjoy a feeling of sympathy with fictional characters. . . . Wesley listened to [Easton’s objections] patiently, then quizzed him about two episodes in the book.”

Wesley: Did you read Vindex, John?
Easton: Yes, sir.
Wesley: Did you laugh, John?
Easton: No, sir.
Wesley: Did you read Damon and Pythias, John?
Easton: Yes, sir.
Wesley: Did you cry, John?
Easton: No, sir.
Wesley, lifting up his eyes, and clasping his hands, exclaimed, “O earth—earth—earth!”

Wesley’s ardent spirit attracted fiery young men to join him in ministry. Some of them, perhaps like John Easton, were in grave danger of growing narrow in their sympathies, their outlook, and their abilities to enter into common life. Not everyone had the advantage of the robust, classical education Wesley had enjoyed. But insofar as it was in his power, he would transmit to them the benefits of a broad and deep study of the best that had been thought and said.

The Catholic Spirit, and a Caution against Bigotry

Especially as Wesley’s movement grew and gained self-confidence, Wesley found that he needed to preach against narrowness and triumphalism. Two of his sermons on the subject were classics, and he included them among the Standard Sermons. The first one, “Catholic Spirit,” describes the attitude Christians ought to have toward those they disagree with. The second, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” explores the way Christians from different churches should cooperate in ministry.

Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” is on the text from 2 Kings 10:15, in which Jehu says to Jehonadab, “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? . . . If it be, give me thine hand.” Wesley abstracted from this line the principle that Christians whose hearts are in one accord, who share the same

14 Quoted in Herbert, John Wesley as Editor and Author, 96.
intention with regard to bringing the message of Jesus to the world, ought to join hands. Not surprisingly, the emphasis for Wesley fell on the heart. The text does not say: “Are you of my church, of my congregation? Do you receive the same form of church government, and allow the same church officers, with me? Do you join in the same form of prayer wherein I worship God?” Nor does it go on to say, “If it be, be of my opinion.” It offers one criterion: heart agreement. And it gives one image of the right attitude: “Give me thy hand.” Joining hands, Wesley explained, symbolizes love. “Give me thy hand” means,

first, love me: and that not only as thou lovest all mankind; not only as thou lovest thine enemies, but as a brother in Christ, a fellow citizen of the New Jerusalem, a fellow soldier engaged in the same warfare, under the same Captain of our salvation. Love me as a companion in the kingdom and patience of Jesus, and a joint heir of his glory.

Just as it means coming alongside each other and joining in the common warfare, it also means praying: “Commend me to God in all thy prayers.” And finally, joining hands symbolizes that Christians from different churches should exhort one another to do good works. Wesley pleaded with his audience:

Provoke me to love and to good works. Second thy prayer, as thou hast opportunity, by speaking to me, in love, whatsoever thou believest to be for my soul’s health. Quicken me in the work which God has given me to do, and instruct me how to do it more perfectly. Yea, “smite me friendly, and reprove me,” whereinsoever I appear to thee to be doing rather my own will, than the will of him that sent me. O speak and spare not, whatever thou believest may conduce, either to the amending my faults, the strengthening my weakness, the building me up in love, or the making me more fit, in any kind, for the Master’s use.

“Join with me,” said Wesley, “in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand.”

In sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” Wesley went even further in arguing for full fellowship with other Christians. This sermon is on Mark

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16 Ibid., 396.
17 Ibid., 397.
9:38–39, in which John tells Jesus, “Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbade him, because he followeth not us.” Jesus gives the striking answer, “Forbid him not.” Wesley preached earnestly from this text, insisting that his listeners open their hearts to the work that God was doing among other Christian groups. In a later description of why he began preaching this message, Wesley said, “The thing which I was greatly afraid of all this time, and which I resolved to use every possible method of preventing, was, a narrowness of spirit, a party zeal . . . that miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves.” Wesley devised a possible cure for this creeping narrowness and sectarianism: “I thought it might be a help against this, frequently to read, to all who were willing to hear, the accounts I received from time to time of the work which God is carrying on in the earth, both in our own and other countries not among us alone, but among those of various opinions and denominations.” He apparently scoured the news reports to find exciting stories of God doing great things among Baptists and Calvinists, and then made it a point to read these reports to his Methodist Anglicans. It was not a weekly event, but it was often enough:

For this I allotted one evening in every month; and I find no cause to repent my labour. It is generally a time of strong consolation to those who love God, and all mankind for his sake; as well as of breaking down the partition-walls which either the craft of the devil or the folly of men has built up; and of encouraging every child of God to say, (O when shall it once be) “Whosoever doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.”

This is an interesting strategy for keeping the heart rightly aligned while living in a divided Christendom. Wesley knew that we are stuck with the problems caused by Christian denominational diversity for the foreseeable future. There are “so many several parties . . . infinite varieties of opinion.” The English in particular “have been continually dividing from each other, upon points of no moment, and many times such as religion had no concern in.” With so many groups, Wesley noted, it was highly likely “that whenever we see any ‘casting out devils,’ he will be one that, in this

19Ibid., 380.
20Ibid.
sense, ‘followeth not us’—that is not of our opinion.” When you see somebody doing great and liberating work in the name of Christ, you should rejoice and encourage him—even, notes Wesley, if he is not Anglican: “He may have many objections to that Liturgy which we approve of beyond all others; many doubts concerning that form of church government which we esteem both apostolical and scriptural.” But the command of Christ is clear: “Forbid him not.” Wesley had an expansive view of all the ways we might be tempted to forbid such a person:

Beware how you attempt to hinder him, either by your authority, or arguments, or persuasions. Do not in any wise strive to prevent his using all the power which God has given him. If you have authority with him, do not use that authority to stop the work of God. Do not furnish him with reasons why he ought not any more to speak in the name of Jesus. Satan will not fail to supply him with these, if you do not second him therein. Persuade him not to depart from the work. If he should give place to the devil and you, many souls might perish in their iniquity, but their blood would God require at your hands.21

Wesley knew that fiery Methodists eager to enforce their doctrines and practices would have a host of objections. Should they not take up the case against Dissenters, Calvinists, and others? If these other doctrines were wrong, why not keep the crowds from going to hear them? Should Methodists not make it a point to argue publicly against them? Wesley’s answer was stark: “If you do any of these things, you are a bigot to this day.” In fact, Wesley wanted his followers to emulate his example in celebrating the work God was pleased to do outside their communion:

But be not content with not forbidding any that casts out devils. It is well to go thus far; but do not stop here. If you will avoid all bigotry, go on. In every instance of this kind, whatever the instrument be, acknowledge the finger of God. And not only acknowledge, but rejoice in his work, and praise his name with thanksgiving. Encourage whomsoever God is pleased to employ, to give himself wholly up thereto.22

Wesley had one last caution, one more safeguard against bigotry. “Think not the bigotry of another is any excuse for your own.” And here

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21 Ibid., 386.
22 Ibid., 388.
he imagined a theological opponent not only casting out devils, but also forbidding Wesleyans from doing so. “But beware of retorting. It is not your part to return evil for evil. Another’s not observing the direction of our Lord, is no reason why you should neglect it. Nay, but let him have all the bigotry to himself. If he forbid you, do not you forbid him.” As a closing coup de grace, Wesley proposed a role model for his Methodist listeners: John Calvin. When Calvin heard that Luther had a low opinion of Calvin’s work, Calvin replied, “Let Luther call me a hundred devils; I will still reverence him as a messenger of God.”

Nevertheless, Wesley did declare some boundaries beyond which the “catholic spirit” of toleration and Christian cooperation could not go. As we will see in the next chapter, any form of anti-Trinitarianism was simply beyond the pale, a non-Christian view of God and salvation. By drawing some boundaries so clearly, Wesley showed that his principle of Christian cooperation is a completely different thing from simply not caring about doctrine. As he said:

> a catholic spirit is not speculative latitudinarianism. It is not an indifference to all opinions: this is the spawn of hell, not the offspring of heaven. This unsettledness of thought, this being “driven to and fro, and tossed about with every wind of doctrine,” is a great curse, not a blessing, an irreconcilable enemy, not a friend, to true catholicism.

While Wesley did not quite describe Roman Catholicism as non-Christian, he did allude to the challenge presented by “such a Church as we account to be in many respects anti-scriptural and anti-Christian,” and he went on to describe it as

> a Church which we believe to be utterly false and erroneous in her doctrines, as well as very dangerously wrong in her practice; guilty of gross superstition as well as idolatry,—a Church that has added many articles to the faith which was once delivered to the saints; that has dropped one whole commandment of God, and made void several of the rest by her traditions; and that, pretending the highest veneration for, and strictest conformity to, the ancient Church, has nevertheless brought in number-

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23 Wesley’s quotation from Calvin is inexact. He was probably citing from memory the line from Calvin’s 1544 letter to Bullinger, “I have frequently said, that, were he to treat me as an incarnate demon, I would still not the less rank him as a great servant of Christ.” Quoted in J. M. V. Audin, History of the Life, Works, and Doctrines of John Calvin (Louisville: Webb, 1850), 405.
less innovations, without any warrant either from antiquity or Scripture. Now, most certainly, “he followeth not us,” who stands at so great a distance from us. What of them?25

These are, of course, simply the standard Anglican critiques of the Roman Catholic Church, stated with Wesley’s characteristic decisiveness. Elsewhere he said of Roman Catholics, “I pity them much, having the same assurance that Jesus is the Christ, and that no Romanist can expect to be saved according to the terms of his covenant.”26 What Wesley certainly opposed and rejected was the system of doctrines that were distinctive to the Roman Catholic Church. He admitted that many “Romanists” would be saved in spite of that system of theology. “Persons may be truly religious, who hold many wrong opinions,” he said. In fact, he took devout Roman Catholics to be evidence of this, and even Calvinists:

Can any one possibly doubt of this, while there are Romanists in the world? For who can deny, not only that many of them formerly have been truly religious, as Thomas a Kempis, Gregory Lopez, and the Marquis de Renty; but that many of them, even at this day, are real inward Christians? And yet what a heap of erroneous opinions do they hold, delivered by tradition from their fathers! Nay, who can doubt of it while there are Calvinists in the world,—assertors of absolute predestination? For who will dare to affirm that none of these are truly religious men? Not only many of them in the last century were burning and shining lights, but many of them are now real Christians, loving God and all mankind.27

It seems that Wesley may have placed Roman Catholics just inside the line of Christians with whom he could cooperate. “What of them?” His answer was the same: having rehearsed his grievances with the Roman system, he said, “If thy heart be as my heart, give me thy hand.” In his “Letter to a Roman Catholic,” Wesley asked, “can nothing be done, even allowing us on both sides to retain our own opinions, for the softening our hearts towards each other, the giving a check to this flood of unkindness, and restoring, at least, some small degree of love among our neighbours and countrymen?”

26 From Wesley’s journal, August 1759, in Works, 3:151.
Do not you wish for this? Are you not fully convinced that malice, hatred, revenge, bitterness, whether in us or in you, in our hearts or yours, are an abomination to the Lord? Be our opinions right or be they wrong, these tempers are undeniably wrong. They are the broad road that leads to destruction, to the nethermost hell.  

The catholic spirit and the warning against bigotry were John Wesley’s attempt to stay rightly oriented toward all that God was doing in the world. The key, predictably for Wesley, was the attitude of the heart. Equally predictably, Charles Wesley captured the main idea in a hymn:

Weary of all this wordy strife,
These notions, forms, and modes, and names,
To Thee, the way, the Truth, the Life,
Whose love my simple heart inflames,
Divinely taught, at last I fly,
With Thee and Thine to live and die.

Forth from the midst of Babel brought,
Parties and sects I cast behind;
Enlarge my heart, and free my thought,
Where’er the latent truth I find
The latent truth with joy to own,
And bow to Jesus’ name alone.

Redeem’d by Thine almighty grace,
I taste my glorious liberty,
With open arms the world embrace,
But cleave to those who cleave to Thee;
But only in Thy saints delight,
Who walk with God in purest white.

Grounded in the great tradition, and with the right attitude in his heart, Wesley carried out his ministry with his eye on Christian unity. But he was born into a fractious time, and had to do the best he could with the situa-

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tion he found. Sometimes the most ecumenical thing you can do is dig in your heels and stay in your own church, and that is what Wesley did. He remained Anglican even when the easier thing to do would have been to spin off a new denomination. But remaining Anglican was no easy matter, because Wesley had to make it clear what kind of Anglican he was remaining.

There Are Anglicans, and Then There Are Anglicans

Wesley’s grandparents had been Dissenters and Puritans, but both of his parents had converted as adults to Anglicanism. Wesley endorsed their decision and clung tenaciously to the established church. But the revival movement was constantly exerting centrifugal force on the established church. Wesley’s most ardent admirers were constantly pushing him to start a new church. And to make matters much worse, the Anglican churches themselves began opposing various aspects of Wesley’s ministry and shutting him out of ministry there. This rejection came early and was the very thing that launched Whitefield and Wesley on their new methods of preaching outdoors. For several crucial years, everything the established church did seemed like an invitation for John Wesley to leave it and start a new religious community. Gordon Rupp sketches the dangerous situation into which Anglicanism put itself during these years:

More important than 1784 is 1739, when the London churches closed their doors on John Wesley, and when, following Whitfield, he did in Bristol what he had already done in Georgia and preached in the open air. The real manifesto is indeed the phrase in the letter to Hervey that the world was his parish, when he set out on his tremendous itinerary like a human sputnik, a Don Quixote for Christ’s sake. The troubles of those years, the antagonism of magistrates, of the mobs, of the local clergy, arose because for such men the parish was their world, and at that time each new parish boundary required another Act of Parliament and the Church machine, rigid and inflexible, was unable to undertake either the evangelism or the pastoral care of the unchurched multitudes.10

Without ever leaving the church, Wesley and his people set up a complete alternative system within the church, meeting the spiritual needs of the people directly:

Through John Wesley and his little band of helpers there came into existence companies of men and women living by rule, singing their hymns and praying together with a simple fervour the like of which England had perhaps not seen since the first coming of the friars. They were at first wholly encompassed by the Church of England. They still went to the parish church for baptisms, weddings, funerals, Holy Communion and, when Bishops did their duty, confirmation. And yet in an amazingly short time they had their own framework of edification, intended not to supersede but to supplement the ordinances of the Church of England, their fasts, vigils, watch-nights, love feasts, and their band, class and society meetings.\footnote{Ibid.}

And all this time, Wesley was learning how to articulate the spiritual transformation that had reoriented his own life. He had been confused by Roman Catholic mystics, and then had learned much from the Moravians, and finally heard the voice of Luther explaining biblical salvation to him. These were exotic voices. Once again, all roads seemed to lead anywhere but to Anglicanism. But in 1738, Wesley set himself “more narrowly to inquire what the doctrine of the Church of England is concerning the much controverted point of justification by faith,” and he found his answer in the Thirty-Nine Articles and the Elizabethan Homilies of the Church of England. It turned out that the revolutionary theology of salvation that had gripped him had been right there in his Anglican formularioes all along. He found justification and regeneration right under his nose, “and the sum of what I found in the Homilies I extracted and printed for the use of others.” The result was a twelve-page pamphlet called *The Doctrine of Salvation, Faith, and Good Works*.

To his shock, Wesley was told by his establishment enemies that this was not properly Anglican and that he was at odds with the Church of England. He appealed to a bishop and received a very strange answer:

When your adversaries tax you with differing from the Church, they cannot be supposed to charge you with differing from the Church as it was a little after the Reformation, but as it is at this day. And when you profess great deference and veneration for the Church of England, you cannot be supposed to profess it for the Church and its Pastors in the year 1545, and not rather in the year 1745. If, then, by the “the Church of England” be meant
All at once Wesley found that his greatest weapon, his appeal to true Anglicanism, had been taken from him. But he immediately realized that the Bishop had inadvertently shifted the burden of proof. If Wesley was in fact being true to the Church of England circa 1545, then he was in the right, and it was the Church of England circa 1745 that was wrong for opposing him. “Well, how blind was I!” he responded.

I always supposed, till the very hour I read these words, that when I was charged with differing from the Church, I was charged with differing from the Articles or Homilies. And for the compilers of these, I can sincerely profess great deference and veneration. But I cannot honestly profess any veneration at all for those Pastors of the present age, who solemnly subscribe to those Articles and Homilies which they do not believe in their hearts. Nay, I think, unless I differ from these men (be they Bishops, Priests, or Deacons) just as widely as they do from those Articles and Homilies, I am no true Church-of-England man.

In his struggle against narrowness, Wesley had encountered an unexpected variety: the liberal narrowness that will not tolerate tradition. Undeterred, Wesley continued digging deeper and deeper into his Anglican heritage, and found there more and more grounds for the robust evangelicalism of the revival.

According to Wesley’s contemporary William Grimshaw (1708–1763), the rise of Methodism should be understood as nothing but the revival of real Anglicanism. “The disuse, I say, of the Homilies and Thirty-Nine Articles of our Religion is certainly the chief occasion of all this mischief in our Church.” From his perspective, it was the neglect of true Anglican spiritual theology for several generations that had been the disaster. As the people of England began to experience the awakening, many of them looked around for better churches; in places where the Dissenters had strong presences, the Methodist revival was in danger of emptying out the Church of England and turning the people into Baptists. Grimshaw again pointed to the Anglican documents that had been underused for so long:

Rupp, Religion in England 1688–1791, 63–64.
Ibid., 64.
Had they been constantly read, ’tis very probable that all these evils had not only been effectually prevented, but Methodism also, which is nothing else but the revival of the doctrines contained therein, had never appeared, those books and what the Methodists preach being all one. This, let me add, some few of our clergy are so well advised of, that they purposely evade the reading of them to the people for fear of increasing Methodism, a term very likely made use of by the art of the Devil to prevent the true end of their ministry, I mean, the making of good Christians.\(^{14}\)

Grimshaw told the same story from another perspective: “A certain old clergyman of my acquaintance, lately deceased, being asked by his curate if he might read the Homilies in the church, answered, No; for if he should do so, all the congregation would turn Methodists.”\(^{35}\) Wesley wanted Anglicans to remain Anglican. But he also intended to deliver the theology of the Anglican Homilies, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Thirty-Nine Articles to his generation. When he did so, he created Methodism. On his watch, however, it was not a breakaway denomination. It was his attempt to be the best Anglican he could be, a 1545-style Anglican. Wesley wanted an ecumenism that reached back across time, through the great tradition.

**Cooperating across the Calvinist-Arminian Divide**

For anybody outside the Anglican communion, it may seem unimportant that John Wesley chose to stay inside it. Besides, as his brother Charles would point out, John did take some steps, like appointing lay preachers and ordaining American bishops, that eventually made possible “the Methodist schism” away from the Church of England. John Wesley is hardly the icon of Christian unity! But the point is not to present him as more than he was; it is to show how an instinct for maximal Christian unity was integral to his view of the Christian life. His commitment to the unity of the church caused him to hold things together at any point that happened to come within his sphere of influence. For Wesley, that meant staying put when the easiest thing to do would have been to start a new church.

Similarly, when it comes to Calvinism, Wesley is hardly an advertisement for evangelical unity. He is the figurehead of one side of the two-party

\(^{14}\)William Grimshaw writing in 1749 on Wesley, quoted in Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 274.

\(^{35}\)Ibid.
system that split the great awakening down the middle. From Whitefield’s point of view, Wesley broke the unity of the movement when he began making an issue of promoting Christian perfection and rejecting Reformed theology. That is to tell the story from only one side, of course; from Wesley’s perspective, it was Whitefield who disrupted unity by beginning to preach predestination aggressively. But whoever pushed whom first, it became obvious that there were two wings of the evangelical revival with very different commitments on these issues. If we take the theological chasm between Calvinism and Arminianism as a given, what we can learn from Wesley’s conduct is that he knew how to stay centered on the gospel and found ways to cooperate with evangelicals whose theology differed on some important points.

Wesley was Arminian and therefore necessarily a non-Calvinist. But he was not quite an anti-Calvinist. In describing his doctrine of justification by faith, he did “not differ from [Calvin] an hair’s breadth.” He did see five-point Calvinism as a problem, and he indulged in some contemptuous talk about it. But in his public preaching and teaching, he emphasized the evangelical doctrines that Calvinism and Arminianism hold in common. And even when he said nasty things in private about Calvinism (“Satan threw it in our path”), he was usually focusing on the antinomianism with which Calvinism too often kept company in the eighteenth century. Antinomianism is of course not properly part of Calvinism, any more than legalism is properly part of Methodism.

Wesley was able to cooperate across the Calvinist-Arminian divide because he had perspective. He knew the great tradition of Christian theology, and he had a large view of the gospel. With these massive realities in place, he could turn to the dispute with Calvinism and see it as a relatively small matter. However important the issues involved may be in their own right, they are relativized by the greatness of the gospel. One of the most beautiful expressions of this understanding was voiced by Charles Simeon (1759–1836), who, as a young clergyman, met the elderly John Wesley. He recorded the following exchange:

Simeon: Sir, I understand that you are called an Arminian; and I have been sometimes called a Calvinist; and therefore I suppose we are to draw daggers. But before I consent to begin the combat, with your permission I will ask you a few questions. Pray, Sir, do you feel yourself a depraved creature, so depraved that you
would never have thought of turning to God, if God had not first put it into your heart?

Wesley: Yes, I do indeed.

Simeon: And do you utterly despair of recommending yourself to God by anything you can do; and look for salvation solely through the blood and righteousness of Christ?

Wesley: Yes, solely through Christ.

Simeon: But, Sir, supposing you were at first saved by Christ, are you not somehow or other to save yourself afterwards by your own works?

Wesley: No, I must be saved by Christ from first to last.

Simeon: Allowing, then, that you were first turned by the grace of God, are you not in some way or other to keep yourself by your own power?

Wesley: No.

Simeon: What then, are you to be upheld every hour and every moment by God, as much as an infant in its mother’s arms?

Wesley: Yes, altogether.

Simeon: And is all your hope in the grace and mercy of God to preserve you unto His heavenly kingdom?

Wesley: Yes, I have no hope but in Him.

Simeon: Then, Sir, with your leave I will put up my dagger again; for this is all my Calvinism; this is my election, my justification by faith, my final perseverance: it is in substance all that I hold, and as I hold it; and therefore, if you please, instead of searching out terms and phrases to be a ground of contention between us, we will cordially unite in those things where in we agree.  

Wesley and Simeon could put up their daggers because they genuinely had so much in common, but also because they made a habit out of dwelling on those truly central realities of the gospel. Today, some Calvinists routinely think of Calvinism as the opposite of Arminianism. They would be on better historical ground if they defined it as the opposite of Roman Catholicism.

C. H. Spurgeon, whom we quoted above as recommending Wesley and Whitefield as the best candidates to fill up the ranks of missing apostles, gave a lecture entitled “The Two Wesleys,” at the Metropolitan Tabernacle
on December 6, 1861. In that message, he used the exact same trick recommended by Wesley in his remarks about “Catholic Spirit”: he praised the work that God had done through someone who did not belong to Spurgeon’s own camp, and then warned his Calvinist supporters not to indulge in bigotry:

To ultra-Calvinists his name is as abhorrent as the name of the Pope to a Protestant: you have only to speak of Wesley, and every imaginable evil is conjured up before their eyes, and no doom is thought to be sufficiently horrible for such an arch-heretic as he was. I verily believe that there are some who would be glad to rake up his bones from the tomb and burn them, as they did the bones of Wycliffe of old—men who go so high in doctrine, and withal add so much bitterness and uncharitableness to it, that they cannot imagine that a man can fear God at all unless he believes precisely as they do.

Spurgeon went on to say, on the other hand, that Wesley fans can be annoying: “Unless you can give him constant adulation, unless you are prepared to affirm that he had no faults, and that he had every virtue, even impossible virtues, you cannot possibly satisfy his admirers.” Nobody said living together would be easy.

Bishop J. C. Ryle, in his book on evangelical leaders of the eighteenth century, gets the warnings out of the way right up front: “He was an Arminian in doctrine. I fully admit the seriousness of the objection. I do not pretend either to explain the charge away, or to defend his objectionable opinions.” But he goes on to his main point, saying, “We must beware that we do not condemn men too strongly for not seeing all things in our point of view, or excommunicate and anathematize them because they do not pronounce our shibboleth.”

What is to be found in Wesley, according to Ryle? For all Wesley’s deviations from the Calvinist line, Ryle says:

But if the same man strongly and boldly exposes and denounces sin, clearly and fully lifts up Christ, distinctly and openly invites men to believe and repent, shall we dare to say that the man does not preach the gospel at all? Shall we dare to say that he will do no good? I, for one, can-

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38 Ibid.
not say so, at any rate. If I am asked whether I prefer Whitefield’s gospel or Wesley’s, I answer at once that I prefer Whitefield’s: I am a Calvinist, and not an Arminian. That Wesley would have done better if he could have thrown off his Arminianism, I have not the least doubt; but that he preached the gospel, honored Christ, and did extensive good, I no more doubt than I doubt my own existence.  

And like so many other Calvinistic Wesley fans, Ryle goes on to caution against bigotry:

Finally, has any one been accustomed to regard Wesley with dislike on account of his Arminian opinions? Is any one in the habit of turning away from his name with prejudice, and refusing to believe that such an imperfect preacher of the gospel could do any good? I ask such a one to remould his opinion, to take a more kindly view of the old soldier of the cross, and to give him the honour he deserves. . . . Whether we like it or not, John Wesley was a mighty instrument in God’s hand for good; and, next to George Whitefield, was the first and foremost evangelist of England a hundred years ago.  

There is a famous story about one of Whitefield’s followers, who, after a discussion about how un-Calvinist Wesley was, asked Whitefield what he took to be a hard question: Will we see John Wesley in heaven? Whitefield’s answer was that the Calvinists of his generation were unlikely to see John Wesley in heaven. “I fear not,” said Whitefield. But then he delivered the punch line: “He will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, that we shall hardly get a sight of him.” Spurgeon reports this Whitefield story, and comments, “In studying the life of Wesley, I believe Whitefield’s opinion is abundantly confirmed—that Wesley is near the eternal throne, having served his Master, albeit with many mistakes and errors, yet from a pure heart, fervently desiring to glorify God upon the earth.”  

An earlier generation of Reformed thinkers and ministers were revived and awakened by Wesley’s teaching. Spurgeon knew that an awakener was not someone to take lightly, that God didn’t often send people with that ability to revive and stir up the church. We always have to keep an eye on the main danger, and Spurgeon was quite sure that Wesleyanism wasn’t the main danger of his, or any, age. The main danger is Christians failing to be

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19 Ibid., 86.  
40 Ibid., 104–5.
wide awake, failing to be fully Christian. Wesley was a strong stimulant, and Spurgeon wanted more, not less, of that from Wesley:

I am afraid that most of us are half asleep, and those that are a little awake have not begun to feel. It will be time for us to find fault with John and Charles Wesley, not when we discover their mistakes, but when we have cured our own. When we shall have more piety than they, more fire, more grace, more burning love, more intense unselfishness, then, and not till then, may we begin to find fault and criticize.

Taking a moment to compare his own ministry to that of Wesley’s, Spurgeon thought the comparison was like a little candle held up in the sun: “For my part, I am as one who can see the spots in the sun, but know it to be the sun still, and only weep for my farthing candle by the side of such a luminary.”

We began with Wesley cautioning against bigotry and requiring his people to listen at least once a month to good reports of God’s work among other kinds of Christians. We have closed with good reports of Calvinists behaving without bigotry toward their Wesleyan brethren.

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To Allan Fisher
in honor of his decades of service in Christian publishing
and in gratitude for his friendship
CHAPTER 3

IN COMMUNITY:
LIFE IN THE CHURCH

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this . . . We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, LIFE TOGETHER, 1938

The church is the church only when it exists for others.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER,
FROM TEGEL PRISON, 1944

While in prison at Tegel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a novel. He also wrote a play, a short story, poems, batches of letters, lectures, and sermons for various occasions. These sermons—for weddings and funerals of relatives and former students and friends—were smuggled out of prison and read for him in absentia. Bonhoeffer was, as Eric Metaxas dubbed him in the subtitle to his biography, a “pastor, martyr, prophet, spy.” But Bonhoeffer was also a writer. Much of what he wrote was nonfiction, some of which has already taken its rightful place in the history of Christian thought as classic texts, but he also wrote fiction. The volume comprising his fiction in the sixteen-volume set of his collected works is admittedly slim. But the
volume is there, and in it is his novel. Bonhoeffer, pastor and theologian, martyr and some-time spy, wrote a novel.

Magazine editor Shirley Abbott once quipped that “all fiction may be autobiography.” Such is not far off the mark for Bonhoeffer’s novel. The opening scene introduces us to the main character, Frau Karoline Brake, with parasol in hand, walking home from church. She stops at a park bench and recalls a conversation she had with her grandson as they once walked home from church, having heard what she could only call “another miserable sermon.”¹ Her grandson, it turns out, had little patience for church and for such sermons. In fact, her whole family felt the same way. One by one, her husband—who also happened to be the mayor—her sons and daughters, and her grandchildren all slipped away. And so she found herself alone on Sundays. Walking alone to church, sitting alone in church, and returning home alone from church—that was Frau Brake.

Eventually she would have given up on church, too. As Bonhoeffer reveals an aspect of his main character, however, “she was not the kind who gave up easily.”² Frau Karoline Brake was of durable stock, straightforward, one who told it like it is. Church was bad because the sermons were bad, and the sermons were bad because “hot air had taken the place of God’s Word.”³ She knew her church had left behind its charge and calling. But she wouldn’t give up without a fight.

So, while seated on that park bench and recalling the conversation she had with her grandson, Frau Brake thinks of something she wishes she had said to him at the time. In the conversation he told her, in effect, that he had outgrown church, no longer needing those “miserable sermons.” She wishes she had reached down, grasped his hand, looked him straight in the eye, and declared, “You mustn’t confuse Christianity with its pathetic representative.”⁴ She wishes she had said it to him, but she hadn’t.

Frau Brake no doubt represents Bonhoeffer’s own grandmother, Julie [Tafel] Bonhoeffer. The grandson is Bonhoeffer, who as the novel unfolds will progress beyond his youthful smugness. And the church all too well represents the German church Bonhoeffer was a part of and then broke

¹Bonhoeffer, Sunday, unpublished novel, DBWE 7:73. Bonhoeffer wrote similar estimations of the sermons he heard from Harry Emerson Fosdick and others during his second visit to America in 1939. Those actual sermons were preached in June and, like this fictional one, in July. See Bonhoeffer, “American Diary,” DBWE 15:217–45. Of Fosdick’s sermon in particular, he remarked, “Simply unbearable,” DBWE 15:224. We’ll return to the American sermons he heard in chap. 6 below.
²DBWE 7:75.
³DBWE 7:74.
⁴DBWE 7:74.
from. One editor at a German publishing house that was considering the novel called it “meditations on family history.” So the saying rings true about fiction being autobiographical.

Bonhoeffer’s fiction is not only autobiographical but also theological, which should come as no surprise by now. Only a theologian would choose as the opening scene a walk home from church and a discussion of the sermon. He has Frau Brake dismissing the church as a pathetic representation of the real thing because that’s what his decade and a half of Kirchenkampf (church struggles) were all about. In many ways, that’s what his vocation was all about: calling the church out, calling the church to be the real thing. For Bonhoeffer, that meant preaching the Word and being true to its confession and doctrine. As the novel unfolds, Bonhoeffer adds one more criterion to the list of the genuine church. The church is the real thing when it is not consumed with the assertion of power in culture, but it is driven by service to others. The word ministry translates the Greek word diakonia, which means service. The church must be about serving others. When a church can lay claim to all three criteria, namely, preaching of the Word, being true to its confession, and focusing on serving, then it’s a church worth going to. And then it’s a church full of sermons worth listening to.

Bonhoeffer clearly had an agenda in writing his novel. That’s not to say, however, one should overlook the literary merit of the novel. Bonhoeffer had a rare combination of gifts in being both a good theologian and a good writer.

From Novels to Dissertations
His novel, which he called Sunday, was one of his last writings. It speaks of the same topic and has the same perspective as his first published writing, Sanctorum Communio (The Communion of Saints). The topic is the nature of the church. And that first book, published in 1930, came out as Bonhoeffer turned twenty-four years old. It was a revision of his dissertation. Interestingly, from the span of his writing from 1927 right on through 1944, and from dissertations and seminar papers right on through to poems and a novel, Bonhoeffer kept circling back to the topic of the church. It was his first love.

Like most doctoral students, Bonhoeffer needed to write in the area of

5 From the introduction, DBWE 7:8.
6 See DBWE 1.
his advisor and of the faculty of his program. This put young Dietrich—who started his doctoral work as a nineteen-year-old—in a bit of a bind. One side of the faculty stressed theology and divine revelation; the other side stressed sociology and what is sometimes called historicism. The differences were sharp and defined, the line in the sand made clear.

The difference could be put this way. Is the church and what it believes a product of the divine, from above? Or is the church and what it believes a more horizontal product, one that grows out of human experience and is necessarily culturally conditioned and proscribed? Historicism and the sociological model go with the latter, even placing the Bible itself firmly on the plane of the horizontal. Historicists claim that all matters pertaining to the Bible and theology are necessarily culturally conditioned and created. Religion and Christianity, they say, are nothing more than sociology. The opposing view stresses God’s revelation, the Bible, as a top-down product. God revealed his will—certainly to a people in culture, in a time and place—but God is the author. He is the actor, the initiator, the sovereign overseer. In this view Christianity and religion are theology, not sociology. The Christian religion is divine in origin, not human.

As a student at Berlin in the 1920s, Bonhoeffer found himself squarely in the middle of the liberal-conservative battle. The conservative side was in the minority. Had he been more calculating, Bonhoeffer would have gone the sociological/historicist route. His mother, Paula, advised that he pursue a topic of church history, that he write on Luther and consequently not get entangled in the fray. There would be time enough later to write on theology, she told him. “Rethink this,” she wrote with all the earnestness of a caring mother. But like his character Frau Brake, he had a little fight in him. Bonhoeffer not only chose to write on the church, but also produced a theological study of the church. Yet he was nobody’s fool, so he entitled his work *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Bonhoeffer completed his seminars, passed his exams, and submitted his dissertation—all by July 1927, and all at the age of twenty-one. He entered the fray and he came out standing.

What is the church? This is the question that dogged him as a young theological student, that became the subject of his dissertation, that would stare him in the face in his early career as minister and theologian, that would drag him into the ring during church struggles through the 1930s

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and on into the war years, and that would be the ever-present subject in the pages of his one and only novel. Ecclesiology is at the center of Bonhoeffer’s thought.

His ecclesiology, though, is never an independent topic. It always flows from and back to Christ and his christology. Neither is Bonhoeffer content with mere academic work on ecclesiology. For his ecclesiology is never independent of practice or action. Christ always and necessarily stands before and above and over Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology; and ethics, which for him can be summed up in love, always and necessarily pours out from and surrounds his ecclesiology.

What Is the Church?

It’s worth exploring Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question he takes up in his dissertation, what is the church? He begins his answer by asking, what is a person? since the church as community is made up of persons, and he points out a few things about the Christian notion of person. First, “the human person originates only in relation to the divine.”8 We are created by God. Second, we are social beings. In fact, “the individual belongs essentially and absolutely with the other.”9 Community with God and social community define personhood, Bonhoeffer argues in chapter 2 of his dissertation. But “a rupture has come into the unbroken community.”10 He explains, “A third power, sin, has stepped between human beings and God, as between human beings themselves.”11 Sin sets askew the vertical divine-human relationship and the horizontal human-human relationship. As Bonhoeffer states later in the dissertation, “The fall replaced love with selfishness.”12

We have stumbled here upon the problem of the human condition, the sense that something is not right with us and not right with the world. Various philosophies, religions, even the state step in at this point to offer solutions to the human condition. Bonhoeffer saw such attempts in his native Germany. But none of those suffice. To set everything right, we need Christ.

8 DBWE 1:49.
9 DBWE 1:56.
10 DBWE 1:63.
11 DBWE 1:63.
12 DBWE 1:107.
Christ remakes us. In Christ, we are again reconciled to God and again reconciled to each other. In Christ, we are truly persons. Christ overcomes the human condition. The crucified and risen Christ becomes “God’s incarnate love for us—as God’s will to renew the covenant, to establish God’s rule and thus to create community.”13 It is Christ’s action as “vicarious representative” that makes the crucial difference.14 The community between God and humanity is restored, and “the community of human beings with each other has also become a reality in love once again.”15

In Bonhoeffer’s view, Christ not only has made the church possible; he also has “realized” the church, bringing it into reality and remaining at the center of it. The New Testament metaphors for the church bear this out. We are Christ’s bride, Christ is the Head of the body, the chief cornerstone of the building—all of which indicate that the church is “in and through Christ.”16 So we start with Christ. First, the community finds its beginnings, ending, and center in and through Christ. Second, the Holy Spirit, working through the Word, brings us into this community. Third, faith, enabled by God through the Spirit drawing us to him, grants us entry into this community. Finally, love is the hallmark of this community. Leaning on Augustine’s insight, Bonhoeffer sees the sanctorum communio as “the community of loving persons who, touched by God’s Spirit, radiate love and grace.”17

These four—Christ, the Holy Spirit, faith, and love—constitute Bonhoeffer’s sense of the church. This sets the church apart from every vain attempt of philosophers or kings or gurus or any other person to establish community. In all of those other paradigms, the divine-human community is missing. The church, the communion of the saints, is the only true community.

Loving Jesus, Not the Church?

The word community has played a significant role in our own time. There’s a new joke making the rounds. In previous generations, the answer to every Sunday school question was “Jesus.” Today, the answer is always “community”! Good ideas, like that of recovering community, can sometimes run away with themselves.

13 DBWE 1:154.
14 DBWE 1:155.
16 DBWE 1:157, emphasis added.
17 DBWE 1:175.
Moving from Bonhoeffer’s time to ours, there is a tendency to diminish if not dismiss the organized church and to opt instead for this abstract idea of community. At some places along the continuum of the emergent church such a sentiment can be found. The book title *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* expresses this sentiment well. The church looks too institutional, too much like modernity and its values. Sometimes those who think this way look to Bonhoeffer for support. They use his notion of community in opposition to the church. Community replaces church. This stems from not reading Bonhoeffer aright. It also stems from not quite picking up what he means by “religionless Christianity.” This phrase, which causes some consternation among interpreters of Bonhoeffer’s thought, will be explored in chapter 7 below.

A sociological look at this phenomenon proves revealing. In a typical new spiritual community, everyone looks pretty much like the next person. Such communities tend not to be multigenerational, but instead end up being monolithic gatherings of progressive twenty- or thirty-somethings united by disaffection for their evangelical or fundamentalist upbringing.

Reflecting on Bonhoeffer’s experiences at Bethel, explored in chapter 2 above, we see that the diversity of the congregation in its worship services there impressed him deeply. Even at Finkenwalde, at the underground seminary, Bonhoeffer made sure that the worship services welcomed families from the surrounding villages. He did not want worship services consisting of only the students. They, of course, held chapel at Finkenwalde among themselves. But Bonhoeffer wanted the old to worship alongside of the young, the robust to sing with the weak. Monolithic congregations miss this, and in missing it they miss a great deal. Paul’s metaphor of the body drives this point home. A body composed of all elbows would be rather grotesque, not to mention rather useless. So, too, monolithic bodies—peer groups—are not churches in the Pauline sense. The true body of Christ has many, diverse members, some strong, some weak, all different (see 1 Cor. 12:17–19).

And while Bonhoeffer stressed community at Finkenwalde—we could say that at Finkenwalde he literally wrote the book on community—he never saw the community he worked so hard to establish there as supplanting the church. He had long harbored suspicions that the typical training of ministers in the German seminaries and universities fell short of preparing ministers for service in the church. Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s student
at Finkenwalde who later became his close prison correspondent, recalls that Bonhoeffer “was convinced that prayer could be taught and learned, yet neither the university faculties nor seminaries included prayer in their curricula.”\(^{18}\) Even more fundamentally, Bonhoeffer sought to correct the absence of concern for one’s own spirituality in the course of seminary study. Bethge further speaks of the classes as “a breathtaking surprise,” as students “suddenly realized they were not there simply to learn new techniques” and be mere recipients of instruction.\(^{19}\) Bonhoeffer made sure they would learn. In fact, when he realized they were deficient in their reading and writing skills, he immediately drew up a list of books that he required them to read in their “off time.”

In addition to emphasizing a rigorous ministerial education and preparation, Bonhoeffer stressed the person who was being instructed. He cared deeply about the interior spiritual lives of his students. Knowing human nature as well as he did, Bonhoeffer also realized that he could not leave such work to chance. It had to be intentional, and it had to be programmed. Bonhoeffer scheduled it right into the day’s activities. He set up Finkenwalde as a corrective to what he had seen gone awry at places like Berlin and the other universities and seminaries. He saw Finkenwalde as a community that would pray together, sing together, suffer together, eat together, work together, and play together. If it was a particularly fine day, Bonhoeffer would cancel classes and off to the woods they would go for a hike, or to the fields with a fussball, or as Americans call it, a soccer ball.

So Bonhoeffer indeed stressed community at Finkenwalde, but he also stressed the church. He held church services with preaching and the sacraments and order and liturgy. When he first scouted out the property at Finkenwalde, his priority was to find a room suitable for the Sunday worship service. All of this is to say that when Bonhoeffer speaks of community, he means primarily the church. Those who look back to Bonhoeffer on the topic of community—and he well repays the look—must always be careful not to neglect the church when they return to the present day and speak of and seek to develop communities. For Bonhoeffer, the church is always community, but it’s pretty close to the truth to say the opposite: \textit{The community}—the true community Bonhoeffer extols—is nearly always the church.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 450. Bethge says this particularly of the seminary at Zingst, the temporary home for the underground seminary prior to Finkenwalde.
Please note the word “nearly.” When Bonhoeffer writes about community, he *primarily* means the church. We need to be careful that in all of our present-day stressing of community we don’t do so at the expense or neglect of the church. But Bonhoeffer does say “nearly always.” So while we need caution, we also realize that the church is not *exclusively* what Bonhoeffer meant when he spoke of community. Bonhoeffer stressed the community of peer groups, like the community at Finkenwalde and in earlier such communities as the “Thursday Circle.” These, like the church, are genuine communities.

Bonhoeffer began the Thursday Circle in 1927 while in Berlin. This was a group of young men, late teenagers, personally selected by Bonhoeffer. They would meet from 5:25 p.m. until 7:00—one must appreciate Bonhoeffer’s sense of precision. They had a prescribed list of topics and Bonhoeffer led, but never commandeered, the conversation. Metaxas explains that Bonhoeffer set up the Thursday Circle because “he felt it vitally important to train up the next generation of young men.”

One of the Thursday Circle members, Goetz Grosch, would later be Bonhoeffer’s student at Finkenwalde. Metaxas records the sad note, however, “Tragically Grosch and most of the young men from the Thursday Circle died during the war, either on the field of battle or” as many of them came from Jewish families, “in concentration camps.”

We should not overlook the small circle of community, that of friendship. Probably no friendship of Bonhoeffer’s speaks to this more poignantly than that he shared with Eberhard Bethge. The kind of friendship Bonhoeffer and Bethge shared is sadly all too rare. This was the kind of friendship everyone wants, even needs. Bonhoeffer, the elder of the two, was more mentor at first. But as the seasons rolled on and the bond forged, he looked to his friendship with Bethge as refuge. In 1944, Bonhoeffer memorialized their friendship in a poem he simply titled “The Friend.” It speaks of the levels of friendship we develop, recalling the days of youth and the playmates who share our childhood adventures “into wondrous, faraway realms.” But as we get older and life settles in, our soul “longs for friendship’s understanding spirit.” And when God graciously grants such a friendship, we treasure it. We treasure it because we need it:

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21 Ibid., 65.
23 Ibid., 529.
Like a fortress, where the spirit returns
after confusion and danger,
finding refuge, comfort, and strength
which is the friend to the friend.  

These kinds of community also play a role in our spiritual life. They do not, for Bonhoeffer, replace the church or even take priority over the church. They are a poor substitute for the church. The church is the institution God promises to bless in the pages of the New Testament. And it is our personal connection to the local church that is paramount in our living the Christian life. These communities—part of the church universal—support the church local. When they supplant the church, something crucial is amiss.

The Ghost of Community Past

Bonhoeffer has a large enough view of the church to recognize that it extends far beyond the contemporary horizon. The church that we belong to also encompasses the past. In a lecture outline “Theology and the Congregation,” likely written around 1940, Bonhoeffer asks about the value of the theological disciplines for the congregation. He’s really asking about the significance, for a congregation, of the seminary curriculum and the courses ministerial students take in seminary. For example, what is the significance of church history for the congregation? Bonhoeffer answers this with a chain of propositions. The congregation must have the Bible and biblical teaching. But, he argues, “One cannot overlook that between us and the Bible there stands a church that has a history.”

Bonhoeffer reminds us here that we are a people with a past. The neglect of the past is conspicuous in some places on the current evangelical horizon, the places where biblicism rules the day. This attitude of biblicism, when it comes to spirituality, leads devout and sincere people to think they are better off going it alone. They have the Holy Spirit, they have the Bible, therefore they have all they need for life and godliness—even though the Holy Spirit speaking through the Bible has already revealed that we were made to be in community. Biblicism means more than simply taking the Bible as one’s authority.

24 Ibid., 529.
25 DBWE 16:495.
26 DBWE 16:495.
Even Luther, who spoke so forcefully and loudly of *sola Scriptura*, reminds us of the need for church history and for meaningful connections to our past. In his essay “On the Councils and the Church,” Luther indeed argues that the church of previous generations is not a source of authority, since the Bible alone is the church’s authority. He clearly finds the Roman Catholic understanding of tradition as authoritative to be patently wrong. Nevertheless, Luther holds the church of previous generations in high regard. In fact, one may rather see him as a reluctant Reformer. Luther’s first desire was to reform his church from within. It was only after they kicked him out that he set about forming the church anew in Germany. Tradition may not be the ultimate or final authority. That role belongs exclusively to the Word of God. But tradition does have a degree of authority, and it is certainly useful and instructive. We set tradition aside, Luther argues, at our peril.

This is especially true when it comes to living the Christian life. The Christian community of the past is both useful and instructive for our understanding of the Bible and what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Consider alone what we can learn from Bonhoeffer, a figure from our past. History matters. There is no gap between us and the Bible. Instead, there is a church.

*Life Together*

Though we briefly sketched out Bonhoeffer’s answer to the question of what the church is, we need to further explore his thought on church life. Bonhoeffer provides a vivid, compelling picture of church life in *Life Together*. This book offers the world what Bonhoeffer and his small band of seminarians experienced at Finkenwalde. The Gestapo shut down the seminary in late September 1937. The next summer some of the students met at Zingst. Many from the original group were missing, having been arrested and imprisoned. And after that meeting, Bonhoeffer sat down to write his book, essentially composing it in the month of September 1938.

Bonhoeffer hoped *Life Together* would accomplish a new way of thinking about the church, a way of thinking centered in Christ and resulting in service to others. As Bonhoeffer surveyed the church in his day, he saw both of these lacking, resulting in an emaciated church. With his emphasis on Christ, we are back to Bonhoeffer’s starting point of christology, the topic

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27 This shorter work by Luther may be found in Timothy Lull and William L. Russell, eds., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 363–85.
of the previous chapter. Geffrey Kelly, the editor of the volume containing *Life Together* in the collected writings of Bonhoeffer, draws attention to how the themes of Bonhoeffer’s earlier dissertations and thought permeate this work: “*Life Together* never strays from this form of Christocentrism.”

Kelly continues,

> One has only to notice coursing through *Sanctorum Communio* the dynamic reality of Jesus Christ, whose vicarious action in the Christian church is the life-giving principle of the visible communion of saints, to appreciate the way Bonhoeffer later depicts Jesus’ presence inspiring the Christian community in *Life Together*.  

To put the matter succinctly, Christ makes community possible. Christ makes life together possible. Or as Bonhoeffer puts it himself: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.” This is exactly what he already said back in his dissertation. But here he also has much more new to say. And here, in *Life Together*, he’s fresh from the experiences of Finkenwalde. Those experiences taught him a great deal about what he already knew to be true.

One of the things experience taught him had to do with our idealistic notions of church life. We can think glowingly of Christian community, as if it were some utopian commune. Such notions, Bonhoeffer argues, should be dismissed as soon as possible. The utopian story goes something like this. The church is made up of Christians, who have the indwelling Spirit, have been raised to new life in Christ, have been given new hearts, and have been given grace upon grace. Consequently, everyone loves everyone else to the fullest degree. But all too quickly we realize this is not the case. And so enters disillusionment, confusion, even resentment. In such times people even go AWOL.

Bonhoeffer calls this a “wish dream,” and because of this wish dream “innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down.” He then surprises us. Writing of how “God’s grace speedily shatters such dreams,” Bonhoeffer adds, “By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world.”

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28 Introduction, DBWE 5:8.  
29 Ibid.  
31 *LT*, 26.  
32 *LT*, 26–27.
illusions and dreams of peace and harmony. The church is not a hippy commune or a hipster club. The sooner we come face-to-face with the disillusionment with others and the disillusionment with ourselves, Bonhoeffer adds, the better off we and the church are. There is a realism here that we should appreciate, and a realism that, once grasped, goes a long way in sustaining true and genuine community in the church.

We come to grips with all of our own limitations and weaknesses and besetting sins. And we come to grips with the same in others—even in our leaders and heroes. Then we live in real and not ideal communities. Church is not a wish dream. We also need to jettison our misplaced zeal to see the Christian life as a wish-dream life. The Christian life, like the church, is lived in the real world.

Bonhoeffer offers two means by which we can live in real and not ideal communities: forgiveness and gratitude. We ourselves personally live “in the forgiving love of Jesus.” We need to extend the same to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Cultivating thankfulness also helps us look past the difficulties, the petty wrongs, the things that go awry in church life. Now we see why the church is the church through Jesus Christ.

Forgiveness is underrated and under-practiced. We do not always get it right. And when we get it wrong, we sometimes desire to save face or to justify our actions. We revert to the classic mechanisms of fight or flight. We possess extraordinary ability to do both. It takes humility to recognize a wrong or a fault, to be repentant, to seek forgiveness, and to make restitution. It also takes work and time.

Gratitude is equally underrated and under-practiced. It too requires humility to say “thank you.” Saying “thank you” means one is dependent on the other, that one needs the other. Humility also plays a role in graciously and appropriately accepting the thanks and the gratitude. Bonhoeffer could not be more right in stressing forgiveness—both seeking it and giving it—and stressing gratitude—both offering it and welcoming it—as the two means for authentic community.

Further, forgiveness and gratitude both arc back to the gospel, the center upon which and around which the church community is built. Because the church is in Jesus Christ, Bonhoeffer sees the goal of the church to be the same as the goal of the incarnate Christ. Jesus lived and proclaimed the message of salvation. He came to declare reconciliation with God. Then he

13 LT, 28.
died on the cross to accomplish it. So Bonhoeffer sees our goal as proclaim-
ing the message of peace with God. In the Christian community we are “bringers of the message of salvation.”

Listening

In addition to speaking, which is something we all tend to like to do, we also have other ministries in the church. In Life Together, Bonhoeffer titles one of the five chapters “Ministry.” Since the book grows out of the Finkenwalde experience and the context of his work with ministerial students, one would expect that Bonhoeffer would be thinking of ministry. He has, however, far more than the clergy in view as his audience. In Bonhoeffer’s thinking, every child of God is a minister; all Christians are called to ministry. Bonhoeffer addresses our task of ministry by looking at seven particular ministries in the church.

For Bonhoeffer, ministry is not about power and authority, but service. The word itself, diakonia, means service, a word held in high esteem by Bonhoeffer. His list of ministries, then, reflects this fundamental starting point of what ministry is about.

I find his list intriguing both because of the actions that appear on it and because of the order in which the actions appear. The “platform” actions of ministry—the ones that get all of the attention, the ones that supply us with our celebrities (yes, we evangelicals do have them)—come last. He puts proclaiming (which is broader than but certainly includes preaching and the pulpit ministry) and authority (as in the exercise of pastoral authority) sixth and seventh. Next to last and last are not respectable showings. Consider what he puts in the first five slots:

- the ministry of holding one’s tongue
- the ministry of meekness
- the ministry of listening
- the ministry of helpfulness
- the ministry of bearing

Bonhoeffer pegs silence as a self-discipline worthy of highest virtue. He gives the first place to the ministry of holding one’s tongue. He writes, “Where the discipline of the tongue is practiced right from the beginning,

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11LT, 23.
each individual will make a matchless discovery. He will be able to cease from constantly scrutinizing the other person, judging him, condemning him, putting him in his particular place where he can gain ascendency over him.”

The discovery is even richer: “God did not make this person as I would have made him. . . . Now the other person in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction.”

Second on Bonhoeffer’s list comes the ministry of meekness. Bonhoeffer sees this as key to the whole enterprise of ministry, which is service. “He who would learn to serve must first learn to think little of himself.” For this, as with the rest of Bonhoeffer’s ecclesiology, he takes us to Christ and the cross. Bonhoeffer continues, “Only he who lives by the forgiveness of his sin in Jesus Christ will rightly think little of himself. He will know that his own wisdom reached the end of its tether when Jesus forgave him.”

Meekness also requires that we associate with the undesirable and lowly. We naturally resist this, Bonhoeffer concedes. Our natural inclination and our cultural context look to the social stratifications we so often use to esteem or dismiss people. We are all equally sinners, Bonhoeffer reminds us. Elsewhere in his writings he stresses that we are all equally created in the image of God. Meekness leads to “true brotherly service.”

The fourth and fifth ministries continue this theme of brotherly service. The fourth is helpfulness, which entails even “simple assistance in trifling, external matters.” Bonhoeffer challenges us here to “be interrupted by God,” to put our plans on hold and to help those who come across our path and need help. Not only are we called to help, but we are also called to bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). Again, Christ serves as our model here. He bore our burden, the burden of our sin and rebellion against God. So we bear one another’s burdens. Bonhoeffer speaks of it as our duty; in fact, he says, “It is the fellowship of the cross to bear the burden of the other. If one does not experience it, the fellowship he belongs to is not Christian. If any member refuses to bear that burden he denies the law of Christ.”

We skipped over the third ministry, the ministry of listening. In writing, one rule of thumb is to avoid like the plague the use of clichés, like the

35 LT, 92.
36 LT, 93.
37 LT, 94.
38 LT, 95.
39 LT, 99.
40 LT, 101.
two in this sentence. Editors give no reason for their prohibition. It’s just
the law of the Medes and the Persians (which is usually an acceptable say-
ing). But editors have a point: clichés should be avoided when they are cloy-
ing, merely common banalities of homespun wisdom that contribute little
substance. But here’s a saying that, while admittedly a cliché, has some
substance to it: God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Listen-
ing—attentive, sympathetic listening—comes far too hard for us. Compara-
atively, talking comes far too easy. It’s the reason James the brother of Jesus
had to warn us to be “quick to hear” and “slow to speak” (James 1:19) and
not the other way around. Consider what Bonhoeffer has to say about the
ministry of listening.

He begins his discussion of the ministry of listening by claiming, “The
first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listen-
ing to them.” Bonhoeffer continues with a convicting observation: “Many
people are looking for an ear that will listen. They do not find it among
Christians, because these Christians are talking where they should be
listening.” Not only are opportunities to minister lost, but those who fail
to listen to others run an even greater risk. As Bonhoeffer points out, “He
who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening
to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God
too.” And as if that weren’t enough, Bonhoeffer adds the chilling com-
ment: “This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life, and in the end
there is nothing but spiritual chatter and clerical condescension arrayed in
pious words.” We have an obligation to listen. Not the “impatient, inatten-
tive listening” we so often offer to people. Instead, “we should listen with
the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.”

We do well to pause here and consider for a moment this ministry of
listening. It requires no special skills other than the self-discipline of keep-
ing ourselves from talking and keeping ourselves from being distracted.
As Bonhoeffer points out, many people simply are looking for someone to
hear them, people within the church and people without. To claim to be too
busy to listen to them means we have put ourselves over them, regarding
ourselves higher than them. It means we have failed to love our neighbor.

Bethge summarized Bonhoeffer’s sermons as “startling in their direct-

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41 LT, 97.
42 LT, 97–98.
43 LT, 98.
44 LT, 98.
45 LT, 99.
ness: they made things clear and they made demands.” The same rings true of his discussion of ministry. He makes things related to church life clear, and each of the ministries he identifies makes demands that entail obligations.

Once these first five ministries and their respective obligations are in place, then Bonhoeffer turns to the “platform” ministries. In fact, Bonhoeffer makes the case that without these five ministries the platform ministries, just like the preaching in the opening scenes of his novel, become little more than the bellowing of hot air. In Life Together Bonhoeffer prefers the expression “empty words.” “Then where the ministry of listening, active helpfulness, and bearing with others is faithfully performed, the ultimate and highest service can also be rendered, namely, the ministry of the Word of God.” This statement deserves a little unpacking. First, Bonhoeffer stresses the need for authentic Christian living before the action of proclamation. To put this colloquially, one needs to walk the walk. Second, Bonhoeffer stresses the primacy of proclamation. Again, putting it colloquially, one must talk the talk.

The church is not the church, and Christian community is not genuinely Christian, without the clear, consistent, and conspicuous proclamation of the Word of God. Some currents of evangelicalism today, in their efforts to stress the service ministries, undercut the proclamation of the Word. That’s a dangerous trajectory which leads the church away from her moorings and from her unique task in the world. Conversely, some currents in evangelicalism, while faithfully proclaiming the Word of God, undercut the service ministries. The gospel they proclaim falls on deaf or absent ears because they lack the credibility that comes from genuine and active caring. That too is a dangerous trajectory. Bonhoeffer’s list of seven ministries, his ordering of the list, and his admonitions regarding the seven ministries on the list could go a long way in correcting these two faulty approaches.

The church, as we continue to learn from Bonhoeffer, is a complex organism. To use another metaphor, the church is like an engine that fires on many pistons. When all pistons fire, it runs like a charm. When they don’t, it coughs and spurts its way along and is in desperate need of a mechanic.

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46 Bethge, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 444.
47 For more on Bonhoeffer’s sermons, see The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ed. Isabel Best (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), a collection of sermons drawn from the volumes in the DBWE. Best offers an introductory chapter exploring Bonhoeffer as pastor and the importance of his sermons. Each sermon has a brief discussion of the setting. This reader is the best collection available, offering sermons from throughout Bonhoeffer’s lifetime.
48 LT, 103.
The connection between this discussion of multi-orbed ministry and the Christian life comes down to this: as the church goes, so go I. There is no isolated Christian life. All of the seven ministries have one thing in common: each requires other people. We cannot conceive of the Christian life, of biblical spirituality, apart from our life together in the church. Further, what leads to a healthy church also leads to a healthy spirituality.

People Are Exhausting

It is comforting to know that the same person who wrote *Life Together* also once said, “I find people extremely exhausting.” This is a reality check in the challenging discussion of the demands upon us as we live together. Christ himself set the model by withdrawing from time to time from the crowds, from the disciples, from people—extremely exhausting people.

Bonhoeffer speaks of this in the chapter “The Day Alone.” There is a place for solitude and silence. Our contemporary world is not one for solitude and silence. We are a people known, above all, for our distractions. French philosopher, mathematician, and rather wise Christian Blaise Pascal observed, “I have often said that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”

We are the culture of the iPod, with buds in our ears. We have little tolerance and fortitude for silence. But silence is necessary for us, and it’s even necessary for community.

By silence, Bonhoeffer does not mean mindless meditation. Instead, “Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God.” Bonhoeffer actually dismisses the mystical desires of “getting beyond the word.” We honor and receive the Word when we are silent before it, truly listening to it. In addition to this private and silent meditation on the Word of God, we also spend the day alone in “private prayer and intercession.” We’ll return to each of these spiritual disciplines (reading the Word, prayer, and intercession) in chapters 4 and 5 below. For now, we should hear the words of Bonhoeffer, “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community,” which he follows up with, “Let him who is not in community beware of being alone.”

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49 Bonhoeffer to Maria von Wedemeyer, December 1, 1943, *LPP*, 417.
51 *LT*, 79.
52 *LT*, 81.
53 *LT*, 77.
Conclusion: Lord, What Would You Have Me to Do?

At one point or another, all of us wrestle with the question of what to do with our lives. Because we know as Christians that what we do now has eternal consequences, this question becomes all the more pressing. The question sometimes takes the form, what’s God’s will for my life? Sometimes we ask whether we should pursue full-time Christian ministry. Sometimes lay people wrestle with the significance of their work. Sometimes high school and college students and twenty-somethings (twenty-seven is the new eighteen, right?) wrestle with the myriad choices before them. Sometimes, perhaps more often than not, such questions stymie us. They hold us back rather than spur us on.

If Bonhoeffer were to meet a person with such questions he would say: Do something. Serve somebody. That is ministry. That is God’s will. Certainly there is legitimacy to taking stock and being strategic and asking soul-searching questions. There’s also a place for waiting on God, for times of withdrawal and personal meditation. But sometimes we overthink it, and sometimes we overindulge the self. Bonhoeffer lists seven ministries in Life Together. All of us can do at least one of them well, many can do a few of them well, and even a few gifted individuals in the church can do them all well. In other words, we can all do something. We are all called to ministry.

This question of God’s will also extends, at times, to our church connections. It’s easy to see faults and find fault. Our consumer culture has conditioned us to view everything in our lives like, well, consumers. We can even think of our church connections like consumers, shopping for the most convenient option that brings the most self-fulfillment. Bonhoeffer reminds us that since the church is made of people, who happen to be sinners, it can be messy and inconvenient and feel unfulfilling. Thinking like a consumer when it comes to the church robs us of genuine Christian community. Community—which at its foundational and essential nature is composed of other people—consists of burdens and suffering, challenges and difficulties. None of these makes for good advertising. But you bond the deepest with those you suffer with.

Community that is genuine allows the Word of God to rule freely. Like the plane in the hands of a skilled carpenter, that Word cuts across us, knocks off our hard edges, and conforms and shapes us for use. This fails to make for good advertising, too. We like our personal freedom and our personal sovereignty over our lives. But in community we are called to
submit—to the Word and to others. Ultimately we submit to the one who is Lord of all (see Rom. 6:17–22 and the freedom that Paul celebrates as a slave to righteousness).

When we are robbed of genuine Christian community, we are robbed of genuine Christian living. To put the matter positively, when we experience genuine Christian community (our life together) we experience genuine Christian living (our life alone). That is why ecclesiology is at the center of Bonhoeffer’s theology, and at the center of his theology of the Christian life. The Christian life is lived in community, the community of the church that exists “in and through Jesus Christ.”
CHAPTER 9

LIFE IN THE CHURCH

In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in the chain. Only when even the smallest link is securely interlocked is the chain unbreakable.

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

Observable Love

Francis Schaeffer had an interesting relationship with the church. We have seen how in the Schaeffers’ journey their work was sometimes squarely within the classic denominational church, and sometimes quite independent from it. At L’Abri, while it was never said in so many words, there was a subtext noticeably critical of the church. We are not referring to the liberal church, which regularly received the strongest condemnation. The evangelical church was often the target of opprobrium as well, though in a different way. If one listened carefully, one could discern a critique, not of the idea of the church—for basically, the Schaeffers worked within a Reformed tradition with a covenant theology of the people of God, including its Presbyterian expression—but of the contemporary evangelical face of the church. Still, many left L’Abri, if not with a chip on their shoulder about the established church, evangelical or not, yet with a wariness about it. Accordingly, the church, its problems and opportunities, is the subject of several of Schaeffer’s most important volumes.

It is important to say that Francis Schaeffer was a churchman. He tirelessly referred to the church as the bride of Christ. Jerram Barrs
has helpfully communicated to me that working alongside Schaeffer for many years proved to him that Fran was very much a churchman, and that it was clear that for Schaeffer the church is the only institution established by Jesus Christ for the whole of this age. Compared with this, a ministry such as L’Abri was structured such that it should go out of existence once its ministry was no longer needed, as should any parachurch ministry.¹

Some of that sense of wariness came from the L’Abri teaching on reality. Early in his sermon “The Lord’s Work in the Lord’s Way,” Fran makes the following rather scathing statement:

The central problem of our age is not liberalism or modernism, nor the old Roman Catholicism or the new Roman Catholicism, nor the threat of communism, nor even the threat of rationalism and the monolithic consensus which surrounds us. All these are dangerous but not the primary threat. The real problem is this: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, individually or corporately, tending to do the Lord’s work in the power of the flesh rather than of the Spirit. The central problem is always in the midst of the people of God, not in the circumstances surrounding them.²

Schaeffer regularly faulted parts of the evangelical church for their “bourgeois” lifestyle. I am not sure when he latched on to this term, but it came up often. Perhaps it was from his work on the Theater of the Absurd, whose purpose was, first, to wake up the bourgeois, second, to tell him he is dead, and third, to invite him to become a mystic.³ Waking up the bourgeois is a good thing in itself, according to Fran, whereas neither death nor mysticism (the second and third steps) is at all desirable. Continuing his diagnosis of bourgeoisie, Schaeffer sounded the alarm against some of the idols of the church. For example, when describing the “silent majority” of the 1970s, he divides it into two groups: the minority of true Christians, and those who live only upon the memory of a Christian culture, but are more invested in “personal peace and affluence” than in following Christ, come what may.⁴ Furthermore, whereas the “old bourgeois” was idealis-

¹Jerram Barrs, e-mail message to author, October 30, 2011. Jerram suggests that I and others go beyond the written texts of Schaeffer’s published writings and heed the sermons and lecture series, such as the Westminster Confession tapes, more than some of us have. I have attempted to do that diligently, and still think Schaeffer is sharply critical of the contemporary evangelical church. The reasons will become apparent below.
²CW, 3:43–44. Schaeffer was here following the work of playwright and drama critic Martin Esslin.
³CW, 1:251.
⁴CW, 4:28–29.
tic and romantic, in the style of Rousseau and Thoreau, the “new bourgeois” just wants a job, a home, and the security of money. Both are ugly, he asserts, but especially ugly is the newer bourgeois to which some of the church has accommodated.5

Another feature of the bourgeois church is its lack of concern for beauty. Fran explains that many young people came to L’Abri from doctrinally solid churches that were nevertheless “Platonic,” lacking in any sensitivity about culture and the arts. L’Abri was their last hope.6 By this reference to Plato Schaeffer means living in the ideal, not the real world.7 Characteristic of this bourgeois evangelical church is that it takes no risks. Its families will not open their homes to offbeat people who might ruin their furniture. Such unreality is a “cancer in the evangelical church.”8

L’Abri encouraged nonconformity. While the intention was not to make people suspicious of the church, sometimes, though, that was the result. On the verge of one trip to the United States, Fran urged Os Guinness to grow his hair long.9 He never did, and indeed the contrast between Os’s classic good looks, his double-breasted odd jacket, and Fran’s long hair and hiking outfit was striking, even droll. Yet both were after a fashion nonconformists, traveling to speak to the bourgeois church. They meant to preach revolution—not, of course, the chaotic revolution of pure rebellion, but the statement of authenticity amid a compromised church.

It could be argued that people who returned home from L’Abri critical of the local church were principally disturbed because they found such a chasm between those communities and the life of prayer, authentic brotherhood, true spirituality, and all the other marvelous emphases at L’Abri. To be sure, Francis Schaeffer greatly valued the history of worship and the use of treasures from the past. This explains the practice of singing from Bach’s chorales that I experienced on my first visit. Again, Jerram Barrs explains that regular meetings were held to encourage L’Abri Christians to return home and, rather than be critical, engage

6 CW, 5:388.
7 Plato (c. 424–348 BC) was one of the defining philosophers of the West. He argued that the ideals, the invisible realm, were more real than the world available to the senses. For Schaeffer this amounts to escapism.
8 CW, 4:95.
9 Fran told me this story himself. He did so with a twinkle in his eye, but one could sense his passion to reach out to the present generation.
TRUSTING GOD FOR ALL OF LIFE

in constructive steps toward the kind of spirituality found in the church in Huémez.¹⁰

My own background was not in the Platonic evangelical church. I was already enough of a nonconformist that I did not need any prodding in that direction. But at L’Abri I did meet a number of people who had suffered from this so-called Platonic, bourgeois syndrome, and who felt truly liberated when they saw that things could be different. I have come to think that here is one of Francis Schaeffer’s major appeals. You can be solidly orthodox and at the same time enjoy a creative and more humane lifestyle. Besides leading people like me from agnosticism to belief, Fran and Edith rescued numerous evangelicals who were ready to jettison their faith because it was not lived out with beauty and reality.

The charismatic movement appeared to propose another way out of this lifelessness. But Schaeffer was profoundly chary on its type of spirituality. One of his most polemical texts is The New Super-Spirituality, a scathing critique of the charismatic movement, along with other similar groups, because of their exclusive emphasis on experience over and against doctrine. They were clearly unlike the historic Pentecostal movement, which, though teaching the second blessing, had a high regard for doctrine, which Schaeffer much appreciated. While it is possible to be too strict, proper doctrine and church discipline are necessary. So is cultural awareness, which Fran found utterly lacking in the charismatic movement. Instead, the charismatics are dangerous. It’s a strong accusation. Why was Schaeffer so adamant in his critique of these groups? Because, for one thing, they shared a similar concern with him for spiritual reality as Christians. They were so close, yet so far. And for another, they were not especially different from secular people who had “lept [sic] upstairs.”

The True Church

So, then, what is the church according to Francis Schaeffer? Always with an apologetic intent—no doubt because Scripture always is, and also because the surrounding culture requires it—he identified the church as a “brotherhood of believers.” When we take Christ as our Savior, right away we are in fellowship with every brother and sister who has done the same. This, he says, is “the communion of the saints.”¹¹ Three practical

¹⁰Jerram Barrs, e-mail message to author, October 30, 2011.
aspects of this brotherhood follow from this: (1) Each member should be of spiritual help to the others, regardless of nationality, race, language, culture, and so on. (2) Members should be of material help to one another. Hospitality, material goods, money—all of these are to be shared, although voluntarily. (3) Fellowship and companionship should be practiced in the brotherhood.\(^{12}\)

In a word, the defining quality of the relationship of these brothers is love. On the one hand, since all people are God’s image bearers, we must love them as our neighbors. On the other hand, there is a special kind of love that unites true Christians. Schaeffer sometimes calls this “orthodoxy of community,” which must go hand in hand with orthodoxy in doctrine.\(^{13}\) His powerful book *The Mark of the Christian* argues for such a love.\(^{14}\) Following John 13, where Jesus washes the disciples’ feet, Fran stresses the Lord’s declaration that “by this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). He concludes from this saying that the present world has a right to judge whether our Christian faith is authentic. It may so judge on the basis of our love for one another.\(^{15}\)

Quick to nuance this approach, Schaeffer does insist that “honest answers” must be given to “honest questions.” Wherever we can, we must engage in apologetics. Still, “unless true Christians show observable love to each other, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers.”\(^ {16}\) Not just any love, but “down-to-earth practical love” should evidence Jesus’s authenticity as the one sent by the Father.\(^ {17}\) A further nuance is that true love, true oneness, is always conditioned on the holiness of God.\(^ {18}\) Furthermore, if I have offended my brother, I need to tell him I am sorry and move on. This is a very difficult move. It may mean the arduous task of reestablishing contact with

\(^{12}\) CW, 2:356–58.  
\(^{13}\) CW, 4:33.  
\(^{14}\) Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970.  
\(^{15}\) Cornelius Van Til takes him to task for this kind of statement. Unbelievers, who do not share believers’ presuppositions, should not be granted the right to judge Christians and conclude whether they exhibit this love and are believers (see *The Apologetic Methodology of Francis A. Schaeffer* [Westminster Theological Seminary, 1974], 48). Van Til admits that the purpose of love between Christians should include drawing unbelievers to faith. But the apostate man is not a judge over the spiritual claims of believers (p. 49). I think he rather misses the point here. Schaeffer is not making a philosophical argument about whether unbelievers have epistemological authority over the Christian religion. He is simply making the informal point that Christian love is part of commending the gospel to outsiders.  
\(^{16}\) CW, 4:190.  
\(^{17}\) CW, 4:191.  
\(^{18}\) CW, 4:194.
people or groups we have offended and seeking reconciliation. This is the more difficult in that doctrine is not the only thing or even the actual thing involved.\(^{19}\)

There is no better observable love, Fran says, than “saying we are sorry.” And there is one thing even harder than saying it, and that is to forgive.\(^{20}\) As a matter of historical record, Fran wrote to many people he believed he had offended to ask forgiveness, people who were victims of his unkindness before he came to his crisis, when he realized there had been lack of love in his earlier affiliations. Forgiveness is a very deep matter. Schaeffer reflects on the Lord’s Prayer, and, commenting on the petition about forgiving our trespasses, he says, “We are asking the Lord to open to us the experiential realities of fellowship with Himself as we forgive others.”\(^{21}\) Schaeffer tells us we do not need to wait for the other person to take the first step. We must have a forgiving spirit anyway, and not only toward Christians.\(^{22}\) True forgiveness is an attitude, and it is observable. The world is looking on, and thus it can make the judgment about whether or not Christians exhibit substantial love.\(^{23}\)

**Disagreement**

Observable love in a fallen world will inevitably need to succeed in the context of facing conflicts. Schaeffer makes many statements about handling disagreements. He had his share of them during his life. As he lived through various conflicts and often regretted the way he handled some of them, he developed considerable wisdom and insight into facing conflicts biblically. Edith makes the point several times in *The Tapestry* that in the past they were overzealous and harsh. Particularly in *The Mark of the Christian*, Fran focuses on how to handle differences between Christians.

One question is, how can we continue to exhibit proper unity in Christ without succumbing to what we consider to be the other person’s mistakes? He outlines five principles.\(^{24}\)

1. When we have significant diff-

\(^{19}\)CW, 4:194–95.


\(^{21}\)CW, 4:196.

\(^{22}\)Such a view is not accepted by every Reformed theologian. For example, Jay Adams, in *From Forgiven to Forgiving* (Amityville, NY: Calvary, 1994), 26, argues that we should not forgive another until he or she asks for it sincerely. I disagree. Jesus, for example, asked his Father to forgive his tormentors, “for they know not what they do,” and yet they were not about to ask him for it (Luke 23:34). A more recent book advancing this thesis is Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

\(^{23}\)CW, 4:197.

\(^{24}\)CW, 4:198–202.
ferences we should never come to them without tears and regret. There is a kind of person who rejoices in uncovering other people’s mistakes: this person loves the smell of blood. Instead, if we have tears, there can be beauty in the midst of differences. (2) We must measure the seriousness of the difference and act accordingly. If the difference is very great, then we must at the same time exhibit a concern for the holiness of God, refusing to back down, but also seeking the way to show the greatest love in the situation. We can think of the occasions in Fran’s life where he was compelled to disagree on basic doctrine with people he nevertheless felt close to. But we can also think of times when he disagreed with people he really did not like; there, the call to love was truly compelling. (3) Real, concrete love may require great sacrifice. Schaeffer often calls it “costly love.” We must be willing to suffer loss for the sake of keeping our relationships viable. (4) There should be a desire to solve the problem rather than a desire to win. He says, cryptically, “there is nobody who loves to win more than the theologian.” But in life are we here to play one-upmanship or to find resolutions? (5) Finally, our call is to hold up both the holiness of God and the requirements of love. Are we convinced that it is equally wrong to compromise about what is right and to neglect our oneness in Christ? Schaeffer insists that without this balance the world will not know that the Father has sent the Son.

Schaeffer presents two moving examples of these principles in action.25 The first occurred in the setting of World War II among the Plymouth Brethren. When Hitler required all religious groups to register with the state, half of the Brethren complied and the other half did not. Those who agreed to register had a much easier time of it, of course; however, they found themselves brought closer to liberal Protestants and experienced some doctrinal tainting. Many of those who refused suffered great losses in the Nazi concentration camps. After the war, reconciliation was badly needed. So both groups came together for several days, bared their souls, and searched their hearts. At the end, according to one witness, “We were just one.”

The second example involves a church in a large American city where two groups clashed, the countercultural “far-out ones” and the middle-class folks from the surrounding neighborhood. The pastor was unable to minister to both. Finally, they agreed to disagree and formed two different

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congregations. However, the elders of the one church worked very hard to maintain representation in the second group. According to Schaeffer, though they had two churches, they were consciously practicing love toward one another. The problem was solved not organizationally but with visible love.

These examples come from contexts where the Christians are fairly unified in their confessions. But what of fellowship with believers who come from very different theological horizons? The issue of cooperation raised its head throughout Schaeffer's earlier days. As we saw previously, early on Fran belonged to groups within Presbyterianism that deemed even other conservatives weak on matters such as the Christian liberties. Throughout his life, he was reluctant to cooperate with Christians who equivocated on various doctrines. Even for the purposes of doing evangelism, it may have to be that Christians cannot always work together. The overall reason is that in an age of relativism we need the opportunity to exhibit truth and antithesis.

I can visualize times when the only way to make plain the seriousness of what is involved in regard to a service or to an activity where the gospel is going to be preached is not to accept an official part if men whose doctrine is known to be an enemy are going to be invited to participate officially.26

Avoiding confusion, for Schaeffer, included refusing to engage in certain visible platforms, such as praying together, lending one's name to an organization, holding joint worship services, and the like, when there were significant doctrinal differences.

At the same time, Schaeffer developed a concept, mentioned previously, that enabled him to work alongside people he disagreed with: cobelligerence. A cobelligerent is not an ally. Rather, a cobelligerent is someone who says the same things we are saying on a certain issue, without sharing our foundations. Thus, if a social injustice requires a response, and we find ourselves using arguments similar to those used by people who do not share our Christian philosophy, then we may get alongside them and fight the battle together.27 A counterexample is when the older evangelical, with his middle-class orientation, allies himself with an “establishment elite.” This might be an opaque reference to con-

26 CW, 1:197.
27 CW, 4:30.
servative politics. An opposite misguided alliance is when the child of such an evangelical joins a leftist elite. Yet, the cry we hear, “Stop the meaningless bombings” (in Vietnam), is really a kind of cobelligerence, not an alliance.28

The Message

If the church is a brotherhood of believers who know how to practice visible love, then what is that church to proclaim? Simply put, the church must preach the truth. Schaeffer says this hundreds of times throughout his writing, his preaching, and his correspondence. Of course the concept of truth is prominent in his apologetic works. Truth is often paired with “absolutes” in general, and moral standards in particular. To be true is to be rational (though not rationalist). Schaeffer was so insistent on this that he coined the expression “true truth.”29 Indeed, a cottage industry of books using the title truth was spawned by Schaeffer’s emphasis, from a number of his own books (and some of mine!), to Nancy Pearcey’s Total Truth, Charles Colson’s Burden of Truth, Os Guinness’s Time for Truth, and many others.30 Charles Colson was particularly effective in applying Schaeffer’s worldview approach to difficult areas of cultural engagement, such as prison conditions. Guinness has tirelessly applied this approach to public policy.

What Schaeffer and his followers tell us is that truth has largely been abandoned in our times, even in the church, and we need to recover it. Regarding liberal theology, things are clear. Liberalism is simply the jetisoning of truth.31 For Schaeffer, liberal theology resulted from following the trends in secular culture, only using religious language to express them. In his earlier work, he held Kierkegaard responsible for opening the door to liberal theology. Though he acknowledged the differences between liberalism and neoorthodoxy, together they qualify as “the new theology.”32 Later, he added Kant and even Schleiermacher to the list of hinge figures in the development of modern theology.33 For Schaeffer,
modern theology is parasitical on shifts in the general culture, including philosophy and the arts.

So, where and when did things begin to drift away from truth? Generally, as we have seen, these shifts occurred at the “line of despair.” In Western history, again, this line represents the shift from a rational, unified field to irrationalism. This sea-change occurred in the nineteenth century. Several key persons were hinge figures in this shift, particularly G. W. F. Hegel. Other players mattered, but Hegel was central because he moved from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Synthesis in Schaeffer’s understanding is tantamount to relativism, in which truth as a statement of absolutes is banished.

Classifying Schaeffer’s view of truth in terms of traditional philosophy is not simple. It seems he held to a combination of the coherence view of truth and the correspondence theory. For example, Schaeffer describes a twofold test for whether a theory is true: “A. The theory must be noncontradictory and must give an answer to the phenomenon in question. B. We must be able to live consistently with our theory.” So, he pleads for coherency, both intellectually and in one’s life. At the same time, he argues that there needs to be as selfishness. His theology and that of his progeny were disputed by Karl Barth and the neoorthodox, although some would assert that they had more in common than either side thought.

34 CW, 1:57–65.
35 Like Colin Duriez, I have been unable to locate the exact source for Schaeffer’s distinctive views on Hegel and the line of despair (Colin Duriez, Francis Schaeffer: An Authentic Life [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 41–42). In How Should We Then Live? (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), 162, Schaeffer draws on historian of philosophy Frederick Copleston, cited in James Sire, The Universe Next Door (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1976), but it is not clear whether Copleston himself saw Hegel as a relativist. Thesis-antithesis-synthesis is a fair summary of Hegel’s historiography, even though he may never have stated it in these terms. But for Hegel’s philosophy, the key term is Aufheben (to cancel and transcend). Schaeffer was taken to task by theonomist Greg L. Bahnsen, in whose judgment Schaeffer confuses Hegel’s synthesis with the irrational (see http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/index.html?mainframe=/webfiles/antithesis/v1n3/ant_v1n3_schaeffer.html). A more balanced assessment is by Ronald Ruegsegger, who separates two issues: (1) Schaeffer’s focus on Hegel’s claim that thought is synthetical rather than analytical, and (2) Schaeffer’s view that synthetical thought leads to relativism. He argues that Schaeffer is quite right about (1), but that (2) can be questioned, because the final synthesis for Hegel is full rationality and not so much the abandonment of contraries. If such be the case, then Kant might be a better candidate as the originator of modern relativism, since human experience shapes knowledge for him, although Kant argued adamantly against relativism (see Ronald Ruegsegger, “Francis Schaeffer on Philosophy,” in Reflections on Francis Schaeffer, ed. Ronald Ruegsegger [Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, 1986], 115–17). What might have led to Schaeffer’s charge of relativism in Hegel is the philosopher’s uniquely dialectical understanding of truth as becoming. Although Hegel did believe in truth and disavowed relativism, absolute truth occurs only in the “eschaton,” when time is removed. Thus every statement of truth along the way is necessarily inadequate, even relativistic. The best study of Hegel and relativism to my knowledge is Daniel Berthold-Bond, Hegel’s Grand Synthesis (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1989), chap. 7.

36 CW, 1:121.
conformity to the objective state of affairs, which is more in line with the correspondence theory of truth. Schaeffer states over and over that there is an objective reality. We must live in the real world, “acting on a correlation of ourselves and the thing that is there.” Even when we exercise imagination, we can do that because of the objective reality of the Creator God, whose image we bear. We may presuppose Christianity because it “fits the facts of what is.” God is “behind” truth, or the “final screen,” as he liked to put it.

Schaeffer goes so far as to say that truth must stand before conversion. While this priority might sound strange to evangelical ears, he basically means that conversion is meaningless without the larger framework of truth. Similarly, he sometimes refers to practicing “pre-evangelism” with people. The goal is to be sure certain truths are clear before there can be an appeal to conversion.

It is easy to misunderstand Schaeffer here. His critics tried to point out that pre-evangelism sets down conditions or preliminaries, almost a kind of works-based righteousness, before the gospel could be preached. Actually, what he was trying to do is avoid false consciousness. As Peter Berger once stated, today people are “conversion-prone.” We are easily “converted” to this or that idea. Some, such as former yippie Jerry Rubin, have experienced serial conversions. Schaeffer wants to be sure there is enough understanding of the objective basis for the claims of the Christian faith so that a decision to believe is informed and not merely emotional. The ancients expressed the same wisdom when they described three components to true faith: knowledge, assent, and trust.

At any rate, Francis Schaeffer held passionately to the importance of preaching truth. The Word of God contains propositional truth, as he insisted over and over. Speaking the truth loud and clear is the most fundamental call of the church. Preaching truth can be costly. Schaeffer was the farthest thing from an armchair theologian when it came to proclaiming the message. He was truly saddened by compromise of the truth. In the series *Death in the City*, he concludes the chapter “An Echo of the World” in this manner:

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17 CW, 1:342.
18 CW, 1:326.
20 CW, 1:155–60.
I would say to you who call yourselves Bible-believing Christians, if you see the Word of God diminished as it is in our day and are not moved to tears and indignation, I wonder if you have any comprehension of the day in which we live. If we as Bible-believing Christians can see God’s Word, God’s verbalized, propositional communication, treated as it so often is treated and are not filled with sorrow and do not cry out, “But don’t you realize the end thereof?”—I wonder: do we love His Word?41

If Jeremiah was a weeping prophet, then so was Francis Schaeffer. It is no coincidence that one of his most poignant books, Death in the City, is based on Jeremiah’s prophecies. All the while he decries the decadence of the surrounding culture, he weeps and agonizes over the people of Israel. Indeed, his entire approach to theology was deeply personal, and not abstract. In one section of The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century, he discusses the way God knows our name: “Christ’s death does not leave us with an impersonal relationship to God. Salvation is not merely a magnificent theological or intellectual formula; it is this, but it is much more. The Good Shepherd knows the sheep by name.”42

Form and Freedom
Schaeffer was always ardent about the need for both community and freedom. This emphasis involves many levels. Money is part of it. He worries that evangelicals have mechanically limited the sharing of resources to missions or benevolence without seeing the greater need of the community. If love does not deal with the “tough stuff,” then it is an empty word.43 Another part of it is marriage. He chides couples who are merely faithful but don’t exhibit beauty in their marriages.44 The church ought to provide humanity for a dying culture. Still, none of these expressions of life is meant to happen outside of given structures.

Schaeffer taught the general principle of form within freedom, and freedom within form—especially in the church. Several spheres of life should exhibit form and freedom. One realm in which form and freedom are crucial is the arts. Schaeffer often commented on the parallel of art to the place of rationality in approaching God. “The artist, to be an artist,
needs to be free. On the other hand, if there is no form to his painting, the artist loses all communication with the viewers. The form makes it possible for the artist to have freedom plus communication. In the same way, rationality is needed to open the door to a vital relationship to God.” Rationality is not all there is, nor is it an end in itself, but without it there can be no real communication with God.\(^45\) This same rule applies to social structures.

A society without form, as Allen Ginsberg apparently advocated, will degenerate into anarchy.\(^46\) Instead, society needs institutions with basic formal structures. There can be no freedom without them. Marriage is one such institution. Well before the days of feminism’s legitimate concerns about abuse of power, Schaeffer made clear statements about how a marriage could go wrong because of neglect of the Bible’s clear teaching about a woman’s need for freedom as a human being in the face of a man’s craving for raw power. The corrective is not to “smash” the underlying structure established at creation. If this structure is undermined, then the entire structure of society will crumble. The answer, rather, is to practice freedom and communication within the form.\(^47\)

What about in the body politic? Schaeffer was not a theonomist.\(^48\) However, he believed that the principles found in the Old Testament civil law could provide “a pattern and a base” for modern countries.\(^49\) While Schaeffer may not have interacted directly with Kuyper, as we have seen, yet implicit in much of his thinking was the need to distinguish the different spheres of society, particularly church and state.\(^50\) He also believed in a rule of law. And he insisted over and over that in matters of government the Bible’s realism about human corruption requires a system of checks and balances. “Unlimited freedom will not work in a lost world;

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\(^{45}\) CW, 1:123.

\(^{46}\) CW, 3:28.

\(^{47}\) CW, 2:66.

\(^{48}\) Theonomy is the term for the movement of Christian reconstruction spearheaded by Rousas J. Rushdoony. In a nutshell, it holds to a greater continuity between the Old Testament law and the new covenant, which in many cases means applying the law of Moses to modern society rather directly.

\(^{49}\) CW, 2:298. The Westminster Confession of Faith sees the judicial law of the Old Testament as expiring with the state of Israel and now providing no obligation other than a “general equity” for our own times (19.4). Schaeffer is less supersessionist than the confession, likely because of his conservatism rather than theological convictions.

\(^{50}\) Abraham Kuyper, followed by Herman Dooyeweerd and the neo-Calvinists, developed the theory of sphere sovereignty, whereby each unit of society, the school, the church, the family, the state, etc., becomes differentiated since the original creation, and should be governed by the appropriate biblical norms under the sovereignty of God. For a layperson’s introduction to sphere sovereignty, see L. Kalsbeek, Contours of a Christian Philosophy (Toronto: Wedge, 1975), chap. 10.
some structure and form are necessary."
Perhaps his favorite illustration was the one mentioned earlier, the work of artist Paul Robert, particularly his mural on the courthouse in Lausanne. It depicts all the cases coming before the magistrate to be judged on the basis of the law of God. Another allusion Schaeffer made quite regularly was to Samuel Rutherford’s book *Lex Rex* (the law is king). The basic concept involves giving a reason for the authority of government: it sits beneath the law, whereas God stands above it. Things go wrong when government attempts to sit above the law. One possible stance for Christians is civil disobedience, although only when magistrates have become tyrannical to the point of violating the conscience of the people.

Form and freedom should specially characterize the church. The institutional church is a visible expression of the invisible church, which includes all believers, past and present. This invisible, or universal, church is what Jesus meant when he said he would build his church (Matt. 16:18), and what the author of Hebrews meant when he spoke of going to the heavenly Mount Zion (Heb. 12:22–23). They point to “the unity of the entire body of believers of all times and all places.” But Jesus also addresses the visible church. For example, when he discusses the procedure for proper church discipline, he must be referring to the visible church (Matt. 18:17). When the Lord says about a recalcitrant brother, “tell it to the church,” that would be meaningless if he were indicating some sort of invisible entity. Schaeffer points to the church at Antioch as a kind of ideal local church, in part because every social group is represented. That church was the only place Herod’s brother (an aristocrat) and a slave (considered very low) could have been drawn together. Antioch was also a strategic church because its members were all “tellers” who felt they needed to send some out on mission trips, as was the case with Barnabas and Saul.

Schaeffer does not interact with the extensive literature on the invisible-visible distinction. Although he generally arrives at the same place, he

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51 CW, 3:28.
52 CW, 1:262.
53 A full examination of Francis Schaeffer’s appropriation of Samuel Rutherford would plunge us into a considerable labyrinth. It is generally true that Rutherford was a conservative who justified resistance only as a last resort. It is not entirely certain that he wielded the influence Schaeffer attributes to him. Parts of Rutherford’s view resemble John Locke’s approach, derived from natural law, but other parts of it are close to the type of “theonomy” found in some of the early Pilgrims. It seems Schaeffer comes closer to embracing the second strand in Rutherford, even though his conclusions about exactly when civil disobedience is legitimate lack precision. See Stephen Clark, ed., *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2005), 83–131.
54 CW, 4:52.
55 CW, 4:53.
Life in the Church

Life in the Church does not refer back to John Calvin’s famous *Reply to Sadoleto* (1539), which contains the classic Protestant response to the Roman Catholic view of the church. Calvin argues that there are only three marks of the true, visible church: “doctrine, discipline, and sacraments.” Following his argument, Protestants thus recognize, first, the preaching of the Word; then, the rightful exercise of discipline in order to ensure good order; and finally, the faithful administration of the sacraments (of which there are only two, baptism and the Lord’s Supper). The Roman Catholic view was restated by Cardinal Roberto Bellarmino (1542–1621), who claimed that the true church is as visible as the city of Venice. Schaeffer would have strongly objected to such a view. Even the contemporary Roman Catholic Hans Küng chides Bellarmino because such a formulation makes no allowance for faith whose object is spiritual. After all, we believe in the *holy* catholic church. The Westminster Confession of Faith identifies both entities, the invisible church and the visible, as crucial for our understanding (25.1; 25.2).

This is not simply a nice theological distinction. It has important implications. Edmund Clowney suggests that respecting the visible-invisible distinction helps us avoid two pitfalls as we regulate life in the body of Christ. First, a belief in the invisible church can mean refusing to require a dramatic conversion or some other kind of visible testimony, rather than simply a credible profession of faith, as a condition of membership. Second, because the visible church is important, we can take seriously its structure and our responsibilities. We could add that if Christ is truly building his church, then there should be some visible results. The church is not a secret society. Surely Francis Schaeffer accepted these principles, but, as usual, he had his own particular take on the use of this distinction.

So then, what are the structural norms that govern the visible church? Schaeffer describes eight places where God requires norms, leaving the rest to freedom. (1) The first of these is that the local church should be made up of Christians. Schaeffer’s simple point is that the church is not a building, but a people, with their strengths and weaknesses. (2) The New

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58 Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 110. It is doubtful that Matt. 16:18 is referring to the invisible church, as Schaeffer claims (ibid., 40).
59 *CW*, 4:51–60.
Testament local church met, and should still meet, on the Lord’s Day for worship. The day is set; the time is not. Always opposed to legalism, Fran provocatively suggests a church should be shaken up by trying to meet at 3:00 p.m., or 10:00 p.m., or even 2:00 a.m. Once the church was established, officers were needed in order to guide the group, and so it is today. In typical Presbyterian fashion, Schaeffer identifies elders as the principal officers charged with inculcating both doctrine and life. Next, deacons were given charge over the resources of the church (he cites Acts 6:1–6). Such a task would not be small, given the challenge of identifying people with great needs and helping them along.

Church discipline needs to be taken seriously. Schaeffer constantly pleads for the purity of the visible church. Without discipline, the group cannot qualify as a New Testament church. One of the themes he spoke about and wrote about most often was the mistakes made during the years when separation occurred from the mainline denominations. One finds echoes of these concerns throughout most of his books in one form or another. In 1980 he gave an address before a group of Presbyterian Church in America leaders in Pittsburgh, entitled “We Don’t Have Forever.” This is as good a summary of his views as any. Though the separation in the 1930s was right, he deeply regretted the hurts on all sides. Those who left felt judged. Those who stayed felt betrayed. Many of those who left became hardened and lacked love. Those who stayed often became lax doctrinally. Although the hour is late, it is not too late to learn from those days and practice the love of Christ in the present.

Church officers must meet certain qualifications. Schaeffer alludes to the lists in the Pastoral Letters (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9) and argues that the church has no right to diminish them. There is a level of unity and discipline beyond the local church, what Presbyterians call Synod or General Assembly. This is based on Acts 15, where the new churches sent delegates to Jerusalem in order to convene and resolve a major problem in requirements for the lifestyle of new converts. The pattern was set: there was a meeting, a moderator, an appeal to Scripture, and a resolution.

Finally, he mentions the sacraments. To my knowledge he does not elaborate on them. Occasionally he makes a passing comment about

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60 CW, 4:94.
61 A reprint of part of the speech is available from the PCA Messenger, Christian Education Committee, PCA, PO Box 39, Decatur, GA 30031. See http://www.pcahistory.org/findingaids/schaeffer/#2.
them, as he does, for example, when critiquing a work of art, such as Salvador Dali’s *Sacrament of the Last Supper*. There is one exception to this minimal attention to the sacraments: his little booklet *Baptism* (1976). The booklet defends the traditional Reformed view of infant baptism, albeit in a fairly polemical fashion. He argues strongly against baptismal regeneration. He is apparently indifferent about the mode of baptism (sprinkling vs. immersion). His principal argument highlights the spiritual and permanent nature of the covenant and, in keeping with covenantal hermeneutics, draws a parallel between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New. He is cognizant of the church-historical issues, including the antiquity of the practice of infant baptism. He anticipates a few of the baptistic arguments against infant baptism and refutes them rather concisely. I am not sure what occasioned this booklet, but it covers a good deal of ground in a short space.

Schaeffer readily admits there could be more items, or fewer, than the eight he notes. His main interest, though, is minimalism, that is, finding a few rules so as not to bind the Holy Spirit’s work in giving us freedom. In part this stems from his apologetics and from the need in our tumultuous age not to put unnecessary stumbling blocks before people. In part, also, it stems from his concern to defend liberty wherever possible. Here, freedom is defined as the liberty to innovate wherever the Scripture does not speak. Again, though, he does not interact with the considerable material on the “regulative principle” in worship. According to the Lutheran tradition, as long as the Scripture does not forbid something, it is allowed. In the Reformed tradition, only what Scripture affirms must be practiced in worship. Of course, there are strong debates on what exactly is set down, and what is left to liberty.

The International Presbyterian Church (IPC) began in Champéry, as mentioned above. The church was founded November 25, 1954 (Thanksgiving Day). At present there are several congregations around the world, and a few others in the making. While the IPC has practiced Schaeffer’s eight distinctives, it has also exercised considerable freedom. Only rarely, for example, are things brought to a vote. The ideal is rather to achieve consensus, which means lots of discussion and then a sense of

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62 CW, 5:188.
63 CW, 4:59–60.
64 CW, 4:65.
Worship services do feature the nonnegotiable elements, such as public prayer, Bible-reading, singing, the sermon, and, when appropriate, the sacraments. However, worship varies considerably from congregation to congregation. And at least in the beginning, there were marked contrasts with the typical white, middle-class evangelical church. The ultimate hope of the church, as Francis Schaeffer saw it, is that God would be given glory. And in the end, its worship should affect not only the community, but the world around. If worship is real, then community will be real. And this reality will make a deep impression before the watching world.

Schaeffer’s critics, even friendly ones such as Ken Myers or Gregory Reynolds, fault him for being weak on his doctrine of the church. They believe, for example, that he was more a populist, stressing the place of the individual, than historically Reformed in his approach. That could be right. Schaeffer’s main vocation was certainly in the para-church work of L’Abri Fellowship. Not that he was unconcerned for the church as such. But even when he does describe the church, he does not utilize some of the major traditional Protestant attributes, such as its unity, its holiness, its catholicity, and its apostolicity; nor does he seem particularly concerned with them. There is no question that he was strongly influenced by separatism, albeit in its Presbyterian expression, and did not seem especially motivated by ecumenical endeavors. Indeed, Schaeffer warned the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) against merging with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) when that appeared to be a real possibility. Jerram Barrs suggests that Schaeffer longed for more informal unity and rather feared a union might lead the stricter members to start judicial procedures that would stymie real cooperation.

In the end, though, I am not sure evaluating Schaeffer’s work in relation to his doctrine of the church is the best way to grasp its essence. Perhaps the best way to think of Francis Schaeffer is as a revivalist, rather than a churchman. Like his mentor J. Gresham Machen, he judged much of the institutional church to have compromised with the world and its methods. Like Machen, he was one of the rare religious conservatives of
his time with a strong intellectual ability. Schaeffer, like Machen, was often quoted in support of antimodernist platforms. In Schaeffer’s case, leaders such as Chuck Colson and Jerry Falwell were fond of citing him in support of their conservative American causes. Unlike Machen, of course, he was not a professional academic. Nor did he invest the same kind of energy in the life of the church. Nor was Schaeffer as consistent a libertarian as Machen. For example, Machen opposed Prohibition and school prayer, positions that put him at odds with many conservative Presbyterians in his day. He also was uncomfortable with the label fundamentalist, which Schaeffer was not.69

Although Schaeffer cared in his own way about the church and addressed various church bodies, his main influence was as an evangelist, at first mostly based in Switzerland, and then traveling all over the world. The community life of L’Abri was fundamentally important to the entire project of speaking the historic Christian position into the twentieth century and beyond. One can note the development of any number of community-based apologetics enterprises today. It is hard to imagine they are not in some way inspired by the L’Abri model. Take, for example, the Damaris Trust, in Great Britain. While its community is global more than local, nevertheless it combines engagement with culture with resources that put people in touch with one another. Their mission statement is clear: “To build a global community of people who have a firm grasp of the Bible, a clear understanding of contemporary popular culture, and the ability to connect one to the other.”70

70 http://www.damaris.org/cm/damaris/vision.
WARFIELD
on the Christian Life
LIVING IN LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL

FRED G. ZASPEL

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN

CROSSWAY
WHEATON, ILLINOIS
Learning and Living

Speaking to the students at Princeton Seminary Warfield labored to emphasize that the religious life was the very most important subject to which they could give attention, and by “religious life” he meant communion with God and the improvement of practical piety. He acknowledged that the purpose of the seminary was for learning, education. He emphasized at length that learning is indispensable to all whose calling is “to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) and that there is no possibility of Christian ministry, rightly understood, apart from learning. But even so, he insisted that the cultivation of the religious life was of greatest importance—for ministerial students as for every Christian. “Before and above being learned, a minister must be godly.” And not ministers only, of course, but for every Christian the cultivation of godliness must be the highest priority.

But Warfield is very careful to discount the false disjunction that is prevalent in much of Christian thinking. Learning is not godliness, to be sure. But as a means to godliness, learning plays a major role.

Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books.

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1SSW, 1:412.
THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

“What!” is the appropriate response, “than ten hours over your books on your knees?” Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology.²

There is no “either—or” here, Warfield insists. Godliness comes in large part by means of learning—learning God’s Word.

Do we wish to grow in grace? It is the knowledge of God’s truth that sanctifies the heart. . . . There is no way so potent for awakening a craving for personal holiness or for arousing a love of souls in our hearts, as to fill the mind with a knowledge of God’s love to man as revealed in his Holy Book.

Our learning itself, therefore, ought to be both a means to and therefore an exercise of godliness.

Religious knowledge and religious living go hand in hand. “It might be instructive to inquire,” writes good Dr. A. Bonar, “why it is that whenever godliness is healthy and progressive we almost invariably find learning in the Church attendant on it: while, on the other hand, an illiterate state is attended sooner or later by decay of vital godliness.” We deceive ourselves if we think we can give a portion of our being only to God. If we withhold the effort requisite to learn to know the truth, we cannot hope to succeed in any effort to do his will. Unknown truth cannot sanctify the soul; and it is by the truth that we are to be sanctified.³

There doubtless have been men who are great in learning and yet useless in Christian ministry, and such men have lent credulity to the notion that much learning can be detrimental to the religious life. Warfield acknowledges this. But he will not allow learning to be blamed. “There is not a too muchness in the case at all, but a too littleness somewhere else.” The problem is “not that their head has received too much attention, but that their heart has received too little.”⁴ So Warfield counsels that we must be careful not to misunderstand. Certainly, we are deficient until and unless we are learning God’s Word. But it does not quite follow that the religious life is all it must be simply because we are learning God’s Word. “It is possible to study—even

²SSW, 1:412.
³SSW, 2:472, 494.
⁴SSW, 2:470.
Cultivating Practical Piety

to study theology—in an entirely secular spirit.”5 Every branch of biblical and theological studies has as its end the knowledge of God, but of what value is our study apart from worship? What does it say of a man who studies daily the things of God with a cold and impassive heart? If our learning of Scripture is merely academic and secular and not a specifically religious exercise, we will not only cease to grow—we will harden. Our study and learning of God’s Word are indeed a means of godliness. But if it is to be so, it must be an exercise of godliness also, our heart’s pursuit of God.

That is to say, as Warfield exhorted his students, there must be both learning and devotion. It is not enough to study the Word of God—we must study it as the Word of God, approaching each line of it with utmost reverence.

Keep in mind whose word it is we are dealing with, even when we are merely analyzing its grammatical expression. And when, done with grammar, we begin to weigh the meaning, O let us remember what meaning it has to us! Apply every word to your own souls as you go on, and never rest satisfied until you feel as well as understand.”6

Corporate Worship

Still there is more. It is not only the pursuit of God in his Word, individually, that is necessary to the cultivation of godliness. Corporate or community life is essential also. Warfield speaks to this point emphatically: “No man can withdraw himself from the stated religious services of the community of which he is a member, without serious injury to his personal religious life.” It is surely significant, Warfield says, that the apostolic writer links closely the two exhortations, to “hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering” (Heb. 10:23) and “not neglecting to meet together” (v. 25). When he commands us not to neglect the common meetings, he plainly has in mind the formal, stated meetings of the church community of which his readers were a part. The intention of the inspired writer, Warfield argues, is to urge upon the conscience of his readers their duty both to the church and to themselves. Moreover, the writer adds a kind of lash to his words when he says, “as is the habit of some”: “We can see his lip curl as he says it. Who are these people, who are so vastly strong, so supremely holy, that they do not need the assistance of the common worship for themselves;

5SSW, 1:415.
6SSW, 2:479, emphasis original.
7SSW, 1:418.
THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

and who, being so strong and holy, will not give their assistance to the common worship?"

Warfield’s observation is telling. In the mind of the inspired biblical writer, godliness simply cannot be realistically pursued alone. “Nothing can take the place of this common organic worship of the community as a community, at its stated seasons, and as a regular function of the corporate life of the community.”

Warfield belabor this point emphatically. There can be no religious life in isolation. Neither is Warfield content with “going to church,” merely.

You will observe that I am not merely exhorting you “to go to church.” “Going to church” is in any case good. But what I am exhorting you to do is go to your own church—to give your presence and active religious participation to every stated meeting for worship of the institution as an institution. Thus you will do your part to give to the institution an organic religious life, and you will draw out from the organic religious life of the institution a support and inspiration for your own personal religious life which you can get nowhere else, and which you cannot afford to miss—if, that is, you have a care to your religious quickening and growth. To be an active member of a living religious body is the condition of healthy religious functioning.

Corporate worship, Warfield insists, is not optional, nor is involvement in the fellowship of the church. It is “the condition” of godliness.

But still Warfield is not done. It is not mere attendance at stated meetings that is necessary. Just as individual study of God’s Word must be accompanied by faith and a heart pursuit of God himself in his Word, so also our attendance to the stated meetings of the church. To attend the meetings is one thing. To attend the meetings seeking God is quite another.

Here Warfield addresses himself to those who find the church meetings boring and of little interest. He acknowledges that the church leaders ought to take such comments to heart, but he is not at all willing to leave the blame with them. “No man can fail to meet with God in the sanctuary if he takes God there with him.”

And let me tell you straightout that the preaching you find dull will no more seem dull to you if you faithfully obey the Master’s precept: “Take heed how ye hear”; that if you do not find Christ in the [preaching hall] it is because you

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8SSW, 1:418.
9SSW, 1:419.
10SSW, 1:419.
do not take him there with you. . . . If there is no fire in the pulpit it falls to you to kindle it in the pews. No man can fail to meet with God in the sanctuary if he takes God there with him.\textsuperscript{11}

Doubtless Warfield assumes that the church in question is one in which the truths of Scripture are upheld. And he assumes also the responsibility of the minister to learn God's Word and proclaim it faithfully, as we have already noted. But he will not leave the Christian to be spoon-fed forever. We are responsible to attend and hear God's Word eagerly and prayerfully. And Warfield assures us that as we do, we will not fail to find profit for our souls that is found nowhere else.

Finally, to drive his point with greatest force, Warfield points us to the example left for us by our Lord.

Have we not the example of our Lord Jesus Christ? Are we better than he? Surely, if ever there was one who might justly plead that the common worship of the community had nothing to offer him it was the Lord Jesus Christ. But every Sabbath found him seated in his place among the worshiping people, and there was no act of stated worship which he felt himself entitled to discard. Even in his most exalted moods, and after his most elevating experiences, he quietly took his place with the rest of God's people, sharing with them in the common worship of the community. Returning from that great baptismal scene, when the heavens themselves were rent to bear him witness that he was well pleasing to God; from the searching trials of the wilderness, and from that first great tour in Galilee, prosecuted, as we are expressly told, “in the power of the Spirit”; he came back, as the record tells, “to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and”—so proceeds the amazing narrative—“he entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue, on the Sabbath day.” “As his custom was!” Jesus Christ made it his habitual practice to be found in his place on the Sabbath day at the stated place of worship to which he belonged. “It is a reminder,” as Sir William Robertson Nicoll well insists, “of the truth which, in our fancied spirituality, we are apt to forget—that the holiest personal life can scarcely afford to dispense with stated forms of devotion, and that the regular public worship of the church, for all its local imperfections and dullness, is a divine provision for sustaining the individual soul.” “We cannot afford to be wiser than our Lord in this matter. If anyone could have pled that his spiritual experience was so lofty that it did not require public worship, if any one might have felt that the consecration and communion of his personal life exempted him from what ordinary mortals needed, it was Jesus. But he made no such

\textsuperscript{11}SSW', 1:420.
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plea. Sabbath by Sabbath even he was found in the place of worship, side by side with God’s people, not for the mere sake of setting a good example, but for deeper reasons. Is it reasonable, then, that any of us should think we can safely afford to dispense with the pious custom of regular participation with the common worship of our locality?” Is it necessary for me to exhort those who would fain be like Christ, to see to it that they are imitators of him in this?12

Prayer

Vitally important as all this is, Warfield contends, it is not enough. The greatest source of “growth in religious power” is found elsewhere.

Not even with the most assiduous use of the corporate expressions of the religious life of the community have you reached the foundation-stone of your piety. That is to be found, of course, in your closets, or rather in your hearts, in your private religious exercises, and in your intimate religious aspirations.13

As no one can give you intellectual training except at the cost of your own strenuous effort, so no one can communicate to you spiritual advancement apart from the activities of your own eager souls. True devoutness is a plant that grows best in seclusion and the darkness of the closet; and we cannot reach the springs of our devout life until we penetrate into the sanctuary where the soul meets habitually with God. If association with God’s children powerfully quickens our spiritual life, how much more intimate communion with God himself. . . . Above all else that you strive after, cultivate the grace of private prayer.14

For Warfield it is in prayer that we come to the very center of the religious life. All the stated means of grace are essential, and we cannot neglect any. But here the soul of man finds immediate communion with God, and for this there simply can be no substitute. “There is no mistake more terrible than to suppose that activity in Christian work can take the place of depth of Christian affections.”15 And so he exhorts his students:

Above all else that you strive after, cultivate the grace of private prayer. It is a grace that is capable of cultivation and that responds kindly to cultivation; as it can be, on the other hand, atrophied by neglect. Be not of those that

12SSW, 1:421–22.
13SSW, 1:422.
14SSW, 2:481–82.
15SSW, 1:424.
Cultivating Practical Piety

neglect it, but in constant prayer be a follower of Paul, or rather of our Lord himself, for, God as he was, our blessed Lord was a man of prayer, and found prayer his ceaseless joy and his constant need. Of course the spirit of prayer is the main thing here, and the habit of “praying without ceasing,” of living in a prayerful frame, is above all what is to be striven for. But let us not fall into the grave error of supposing this prayerful habit of mind enough, or that we can safely intermit the custom of setting apart seasons for formal prayer.16

Because of the supreme importance and value of prayer, Warfield warns against the lightheartedness and busyness of modern life, characteristics that tend to its neglect.

This is the reason why many good men are shaking their heads a little today over a tendency which they fancy they see increasing among our younger Christian workers to restless activity at the apparent expense of depth of spiritual culture. Activity, of course, is good: surely in the cause of the Lord we should run and not be weary. But not when it is substituted for inner religious strength. We cannot get along without our Marthas. But what shall we do when, through all the length and breadth of the land, we shall search in vain for a Mary? Of course the Marys will be as little admired by the Marthas today as of yore. “Lord,” cried Martha, “dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone?” And from that time to this the cry has continually gone up against the Marys that they waste the precious ointment which might have been given to the poor, when they pour it out to God, and are idle when they sit at the Master’s feet. A minister, high in the esteem of the churches, is even quoted as declaring—not confessing, mind you, but publishing abroad as something in which he gloried—that he has long since ceased to pray: he works. “Work and pray” is no longer, it seems, to be the motto of at least ministerial life. It is to be all work and no praying; the only prayer that is prevailing, we are told, with the same cynicism with which we are told that God is on the side of the largest battalions—is just work. You will say this is an extreme case. Thank God, it is. But in the tendencies of our modern life, which all make for ceaseless—I had almost said thoughtless, meaningless—activity, have a care that it does not become your case; or that your case—even now—may not have at least some resemblance to it. Do you pray? How much do you pray? How much do you love to pray? What place in your life does the “still hour,” alone with God, take?17

16SSW, 2:482.
17SSW, 1:424–25.
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Private prayer—the prayerful spirit and regular seasons of prayer—is first and most basic to the cultivation of godliness.

Meditation

Next, Warfield says, is “the habit of reverent meditation on God’s truth.” As many others have also, Warfield complains that in the contemporary hurried life this practice seems to have become extinct. In our “nervous fussy times,” as he calls them, if we must read, we would rather read while running, and we certainly have little time for meditation.

But again, what substitute can there be for this? How else will the truths of God’s Word sink deep into our minds and hearts? If we do not think at length on the teachings of Scripture, how will its truths have their intended influence on our lives? If we do not meditate on God’s self-revelation, how shall we know him? “Life close to God’s Word is life close to God.”

Warfield defines meditation as “an exercise which stands somewhere between thought and prayer.” It is not mere reasoning, nor must it degenerate into mere daydreaming. “It is reasoning transfigured by devout feeling.”

It involves not merely analysis but a “brooding dissolving” of truth in the mind and heart. And in order to prevent mere daydreaming, we meditate with our Bible in our hands—perhaps not actually, always, but always with its truths in direct focus. It entails prayer on the one hand and devotional Bible reading on the other.

To strengthen his exhortation Warfield enlists C. H. Spurgeon, quoting from his famous devotional book, Morning by Morning.

We ought to muse upon the things of God, because we thus get the real nutriment out of them. Truth is something like the cluster of the vine: if we would have wine from it, we must bruise it; we must press and squeeze it many times. The bruiser’s feet must come down joyfully upon the bunches, or else the juice will not flow; and they must well tread the grapes, or else much of the precious liquid will be wasted. So we must, by meditation, tread the clusters of truth, if we would get the wine of consolation therefrom. Our bodies are not supported by merely taking food into the mouth, but the process which really supplies the muscle, and the nerve, and the sinew, and the bone, is the process of digestion. It is by digestion that the outward food becomes assimilated with the inner life. Our souls are not nourished merely

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18SSW, 2:483.
19SSW, 2:485.
20SSW, 2:484.
Cultivating Practical Piety

by listening awhile to this, and then to that, and then to the other part of
divine truth. Hearing, reading, marking, and learning, all require inwardly
digesting to complete their usefulness, and the inward digesting of the truth
lies for the most part in meditating upon it. Why is it that some Christians,
although they hear many sermons, make but slow advances in the divine
life? Because they neglect their closets, and do not thoughtfully meditate on
God’s Word. They love the wheat, but they do not grind it; they would have
the corn, but they will not go forth into the fields to gather it; the fruit hangs
upon the tree, but they will not pluck it; the water flows at their feet, but they
will not stoop to drink it. From such folly deliver us, O Lord, and be this our
resolve this day, “I will meditate in Thy precepts.”

Devotional Reading

Warfield emphasizes that there can be no substitute for reading Scripture
itself. God inspired one book only, and we must give our prayerful medita-
tion to it directly. But he acknowledges that God’s people have produced
other helps that are of use and value also, and he urges his students to take
advantage of them. He recommends books of devotional reading, comen-
taries, and books that are intended to help us interpret the Bible ourselves.
Spurgeon, Matthew Henry, the Puritans, Archibald Alexander’s *Thoughts on
Doddridge’s *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Thomas à Kempis’s
*Imitations*, Augustine’s *Confessions*, Jonathan Edwards’s *Treatise Concerning
Religious Affections*, Faber’s *Hymns*, *The Olney Hymns*, and Philip Schaff’s
*Christ in Song*—all these and more receive Warfield’s mention. But once again
he urges us never to use them as a substitute for our own reading of Scripture.

Warfield gives special recommendation of the reading of Christian biogra-
phies, underlining the value of learning from the challenges and faithfulness
of those who have gone before us. Here he mentions Augustine’s *Confessions*
(again), Blaikie’s *Life of David Livingstone*, Brown’s *Life of Rabbi Duncan*,
Bonar’s *Memoirs of McCheyne*, J. G. Paton’s *Autobiography*, Bunyan’s *Grace
Abounding*, Edwards’s *Life of David Brainerd*, and others. Warfield repeatedly
emphasizes that it is by the truth that we are sanctified, but his focus here is
on the benefit derived from the understanding and experience of truth in
the lives of other believers.

Warfield also recommends the reading of published sermons, hymn books,
and the creeds of the church. He mentions the creeds at some length: “First,

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21SSW, 2:484.
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because it is ever true that it is by the truth that sanctification is wrought. And next, because the truth is set forth in these Creeds with a clearness and richness with which it is set forth nowhere else.” And here he specifically recommends Schaff’s three-volume Creeds of Christendom, especially the second and third volumes, which are “‘more directly, richly, and evangelically devotional’—than any other book, apart from the Bible, in existence.”

Summary

These are the means of grace that Warfield recommends, and he urges us to be diligent in their use: God’s Word, corporate worship, prayer, meditation, and devotional reading. And he reminds us again that “Religious knowledge and religious living go hand in hand. . . . Unknown truth cannot sanctify the soul; and it is by the truth that we are to be sanctified.” We cannot strive to be like God unless we first strive to know what he is like. And so we must make the effort to learn and, by this learning, cultivate holiness of heart and life.

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22SSW, 2:493.
23SSW, 2:484.