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PEOPLE OF THE PROMISE:  
A MERE PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY

Edited by Joseph Minich  
and Bradford Littlejohn

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*For Peter Escalante*  
*Mentor and Friend*

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## PREFACE

Bradford Littlejohn

THE TASK of the present volume is, at first glance, a simple one: to present the basic core of the Protestant doctrine of the church, shorn of the distractions of the secondary disputes about polity, ministerial offices, sacramental efficacy, liturgy and more that have so often preoccupied discussions of the church. Of course, precisely because such disputes have often elevated these second-order issues to first importance, this task is not so simple. Certainly, it cannot claim to be a mere descriptive task, as if we were pretending to function merely as historians, investigating the history and founding documents of the Protestant churches to find the shared kernel concealed in the variegated husks of the Reformation traditions. No, our endeavor here is in large part a normative one, and unabashedly so. We aim to present in clear outline form what the basic principles of Protestant ecclesiology *should* look like, as an offering to a church today bewildered by the myriad of fashionable models on offer.

Of course, ours is not, we hope, an arbitrary ecclesiological wish list vying for attention amidst these fashionable models. In other words, although it is not merely descriptive, neither is it merely normative. On the contrary, it

## PREFACE

is built on the fruits of three descriptive tasks (as all good Protestant theology should be): an exegetical description of the revealed content of the Scriptures, an historical description of the central claims of the Reformation and post-Reformation dogmatics, and a dogmatic description of what, according to the internal logic of Protestantism's claims, must be its true doctrine of the church. These three tasks correspond loosely to the Parts II through IV of the book, respectively, though to some extent, each is operative in greater and lesser degree at every point.

The kind of exegetically and dogmatically guided historical retrieval, in service of an urgent contemporary need, and thus presented in accessible prose without needless footnoting frills, is what we seek to model in the new series of which this book is the first offering, *Davenant Retrievals*. Readers familiar with our recent publication efforts may recognize some similarity to the objective of our *Davenant Guides*, which “seek to offer short and accessible introductions to key issues of current debate in theology and ethics, drawing on a magisterial Protestant perspective and defending its contemporary relevance today.” The difference is our *Davenant Guides* are intended to be very short, introducing a single neglected key concept or commitment within magisterial Protestantism (though one that may be very broad in its implications), whereas *Davenant Retrievals* aim to present a multi-faceted view of an entire dogmatic locus, drawing on the expertise of a range of contributors. Each volume in this series, we envision, will be the result of a series of essays appearing in the themed quarterly issues of our journal, *Ad Fontes*, subsequently expanded and revised, together with perhaps a couple of new contributions. Most of the essays in this volume, ac-

cordingly, appeared in their original form in the September 2016, December 2016, March 2017, and June 2017 issues of *Ad Fontes*, under the indefatigable supervision of my dear friend Joseph Minich and the longsuffering layout expertise of Rachel Rosales. The essays for next year's volume of Davenant Retrievals, beginning to appear now in *Ad Fontes*, are slated to address the role of philosophy within theology.

As with any multi-contributor volume, the immense gain that comes from sharing the insights and gifts of many writers certainly comes with drawbacks. Although the various contributors are remarkably like-minded when it comes to the principal arguments of this volume, there are certainly differences at least of emphasis amongst us, and we have not tried to smooth these out into an entirely homogeneous whole. The end result, we believe, is consistent and coherent—indeed, rather more so than we had dared hope when we embarked on the project—but reflects some of the creative tensions and paradoxes that are part and parcel of Protestant theology. Readers may perhaps be frustrated by the topics and questions that receive little or no coverage in this volume; part of this is inevitable in any short introduction, but part is also a difficult-to-avoid feature of the multi-contributor format. These represent *essays toward* a systematic exposition of a Protestant ecclesiology, illuminating the subject from many different partial yet complementary angles, but we would certainly not claim that the volume itself contains such a full systematic exposition.

Such apologies once made, it remains to offer a brief outline of the organizational shape of the volume in the form it now appears. The basic logic of the volume is clear

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enough from the four main headings in the Table of Contents. Part I, Introduction to Protestant Ecclesiology, seeks to situate the main claims of the Protestant doctrine of the church in both contemporary and historical context. The first task is undertaken by Joseph Minich's essay, "The Church Question in a Disoriented Age," which seeks to understand why it is that Protestants today find ourselves so desperate to make sense of the doctrine of the church and to restore it to some place of centrality, though often a misplaced centrality. The second task is accomplished in Bradley Belschner's pithy and pungent, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Church and its Rivals," which aims to cut through the fog of history and get to the nub of the matter: there are, and have been, only a handful of internally-consistent options for ecclesiology, and magisterial Protestantism is, not to put too fine a point on it, the best of them.

Part II, Protestant Ecclesiology in Scripture, aims to fortify this claim via what, for Protestants at least, is the strongest evidence of all, the testimony of Scripture. Although certainly not attempting a full or systematic survey of all the biblical teaching on the doctrine of the church, these essays illuminate the basic contours through a consideration of the church in the Old Testament (Steven Wedgworth), the etymology of the word *ekklesia* (E.J. Hutchinson), and the foundations of the New Testament church in the Book of Acts (Alastair Roberts). Collectively, these essays help sustain our basic thesis: that the church is, quite simply, the people of the promise, the gathered assembly of all those who call on the name of the Lord, with institutional trappings playing a supportive rather than constitutive role.



Part III, Protestant Ecclesiology in History, extends and nuances this picture via a consideration of how the dynamic of the church's invisibility and visibility, and its visibility *qua* organic and *qua* institutional, to use Abraham Kuyper's language, played out in the Reformation and the formulations that emerged from it. Once again, and perhaps even more emphatically so, the essays seek merely to pick out key themes and moments, though my own essay, "*Simul Justus et Peccator*. The Genius and Tensions of Protestant Ecclesiology," is intended to serve as at least something of an "Idiot's Guide to Reformation-era Ecclesiologies." Dr. Andre Gazal complements this narrative with a close reading of how the understanding of ordained ministry was transformed in the early Church of England from a sacerdotal to an evangelical and proclamatory office. In describing the Church of England as emphatically united with the Continental Protestant ecclesiological consensus, both these essays certainly challenge generations of Anglican self-understanding, but not in a way that would raise many eyebrows among professional historians nowadays. Dr. Jordan Ballor's excursus on church discipline singles out a key theme of Reformed Protestantism in particular and offers a Biblical and pastoral defense and clarification of its role in the church.

This sets the stage for Part IV, Protestant Ecclesiology Today. This begins by finally undertaking a more systematic dogmatic statement of Protestant ecclesiology, in the form of Andrew Fulford's essay "Protestant Ecclesiology as Good Theory." Fulford's essay, however, is more than merely a dogmatic statement; it also endeavors to drive home the thesis—an underlying thesis of the whole book—that Protestant ecclesiology simply makes sense of

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the world, our experience, and the central claims of the Christian faith in a way much more plausible and simple than alternative ecclesiologies. Finally, Jake Meador seeks to spell out some of the practical import of the doctrine in his essay, "Protestant Ecclesiology Among Contemporary Political Theologies." In it, he makes the provocative case that magisterial Protestant ecclesiology holds the best answer to contemporary confusion over the role of Christianity in public life, and of how Christians should and should not endorse liberal political order.

Joseph Minich concludes by reminding us that the unity and holiness of the church must always be an already and a not yet, and that "to wish for a less messy ecclesiology is perhaps to unwittingly rob God of His honor." Surrounded as we are today by cries for the church to get its act together and overcome the scandal of its divisions, it is important for us to take a step back and resist the idolatry that can creep into such cries. We have no business being complacent about the church's imperfections, but we have no business being alarmist either; they are a salutary reminder that the church we see is not the church that God sees, or the church that he is, amidst all our sinful stumblings, building up out of living stones.

PART I:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO  
PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY

I.  
THE CHURCH QUESTION IN A DISORIENTED  
AGE

Joseph Minich

NO QUESTION is approached from nowhere. It always begins with questioners. Who are the *we* asking the question of ecclesiology? What concerns make up our world? And, likewise, to what sorts of problems do we imagine the question of ecclesiology to provide a potential solution?

In this particular case, we the questioners are inhabitants of late modernity and its concerns. Chief among these is the liquid nature of modern identity—wherein “all that is solid melts into air.”<sup>1</sup> Most humans in history have navigated their way through this world suspended atop given identities—including identities of time, place, culture, language, religion, nuclear and extended family, local customs, gender, etc. The late modern world, by contrast, while one of comparative technological comfort, is an age of anxiety as it pertains to our sense of the self and our relationship to a larger community. The causes are manifold and need

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<sup>1</sup> The origin of this phrase is Karl Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). It was later appropriated by Marshall Berman in his *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982).

not detain us here. But not a few commentators have identified the modern West (and particularly America) as deeply fractured, a place and a time wherein basic identities cannot be taken for granted.<sup>2</sup> This is the case whether we speak of individuals, groups, or the whole of society. Like a man staring at a mirror in a dark room, we are easily disoriented in relation to the larger space around us—and the identities which have historically helped us navigate this space now reflect back its confusion rather than its illumination.

It is in this situation that *we* ask questions about the church. Consequently, we tend to approach the question concerning ecclesiology as a question related to authority, identity, and community. It is worthy to note, in this regard, how the same concerns show up in apparently different conversations. The debate over what it means to be “Reformed,” for instance, largely parallels the debate over what it means to be American, the relationship between American values and documents, the debate over what America’s “trajectory” and “story” are, etc. And, indeed, there are not even settled and commonly agreed upon reference points. All of us are necessarily left to exercise judgment in piecing these things together. It is not clear whether we are receiving and passing on the original or its distortion, especially since our intellectual exemplars are never without equal among those who inflect our heritage differently than we do. We are left, therefore, with two options. We can either outsource our judgment or we can exercise a significant degree of agency in seeking to be per-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Zygmund Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (New York: Polity, 2000), and Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

## INTRODUCTION

sueded concerning wisdom. In either case, we all find ourselves addressing these questions via an intellectual collage—an attempt to piece together a picture of reality from a massive pile of particulars, an ambiguous sense of the end product, and (what is key) the felt arbitrariness of our particular community’s vision of reality alongside our freedom to abandon it.

### OUR CONCERNS: THE “WHAT” OF OUR CHURCH QUESTION

This is our situation, and in it, our world of concern and our sought-for reference points will tend to revolve around questions of reliable authority and stable community. Given the massive confusion in which we find ourselves, who has the right to define what it means to be American, to be Reformed, to be a Christian? Who has the right to define the implicit content of these terms? And what are the essential truths or essential markers that unite persons in a group and in a project despite their differences? These questions are obviously related. To ask what unites a group of persons is, in our world of freedom and disagreement, also to ask who has the authority to make a judgment call concerning this question. Ironically, however, the problem of skepticism and its inevitable termination in submission to a person or to a community who reasons on your behalf, is a hallmark of *modern* rather than ancient thought. Not the act of outsourcing itself, of course, but rather the contention that such outsourcing is *inevitable* for the finite person. While it is popular to locate the origin of Modern skepticism in Renaissance finitude or in Reformation individualism-cum-Enlightenment, its practical “on the ground” hold was arguably birthed in the Roman counter-

Reformation and its attempt to render the Reformation vulnerable on precisely the question of epistemic chaos.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, *our* question concerning ecclesiology is a question of community and of authority. Movements as diverse as Reformed confessionalism, the recent version of “two kingdoms” theology, the Federal Vision, the New Perspectives on Paul, Radical Orthodoxy, neo-Anabaptism, The Emerging Church movement, the Acts 29 movement, the shepherding movement among charismatics, the popularity of 9Marks ministries among Baptists—all have the doctrine of the church at their forefront. Each is interested in how the church is the “family and house of God” and how we can know its content and members. Their emphases differ in terms of high and low ecclesiologies, in their relative emphasis on the church as an organism or as an institution, on the church as visible or as invisible, as local institution or as a family of the baptized across geographic or political boundaries, on the church as a people or as a place, as the new humanity and solution to human strife or as the antithesis to the world, as a voluntary society or as a unique polis with its own distinctive government, weapons, and charter, etc. But all are united in addressing *our* questions of community and of authority in thinking about the doctrine of the church.

## OUR SOLUTIONS: A FEW CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO THE CHURCH QUESTION

There is, of course, nothing innately problematic about this state of affairs. We cannot escape ourselves or our

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<sup>3</sup> See Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

II:  
THE PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF THE  
CHURCH AND ITS RIVALS

Bradley Belschner

DESPITE the multitude of ecclesiologies practiced and defended throughout Christian history, they can all be boiled down to four consistent options:

- Papal sacerdotalism (Roman Catholicism)
- Magisterial sacerdotalism (e.g., Eastern Orthodoxy)
- Magisterial evangelicalism (e.g., historic Protestants)
- Anarchic evangelicalism (e.g., Anabaptists like the Amish and Mennonites)

The most important distinction above is sacerdotal vs. evangelical. Sacerdotalism refers to the role of the “priest” as a spiritual mediator between God and man, and also the notion that bishops represent the apostles by virtue of apostolic succession. In this view the clergy do not exist merely to promote good order in the church; rather, their offices are imbued with unique spiritual power that lay Christians do not possess. The church is conceived of



as an institution, and the boundary of that institution is defined by the clergy. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox affirm different versions of sacerdotalism, since the former insists on a supreme Roman bishop within the clergy, but either way both churches share the same fundamental belief in the mediatorial role of the clergy.<sup>1</sup>

Evangelicalism, on the other hand, affirms the universal priesthood of all believers. Christ is the only true mediator between God and man, and consequently we should not believe our church leaders are imbued with any magical power by virtue of their status; rather, their role is to promote good order in the human society that we call the visible church community. Evangelicals believe that wherever two or three believers are gathered, there you will find the church. This core belief is shared by both Magisterial Protestants and Anabaptist Protestants. (For the purposes of this essay “protestant” and “evangelical” are used synonymously.)

The second distinction is Papal vs. Magisterial vs. Anarchic. This distinction concerns the relationship of the church to temporal society, especially civil government.

Papal ecclesiology, strictly speaking, teaches that *all civil and spiritual power* on earth is invested in the Roman Pontiff. Dogmatically the Pope has been given authority

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<sup>1</sup> Many historic Protestants have maintained some attenuated version of this theory, unwilling to let go of the idea that a special spiritual power is conferred at ordination. If by this they mean something over and beyond the spiritual importance of temporal order and leadership in the church, and distinct from the recognition that the Spirit uniquely equips ministers to carry out their appointed tasks (as indeed He equips all Christians to carry out their callings), we must demur. This would be a remnant of sacerdotalism and an inconsistency within Protestant ecclesiology; cf. Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker House Company, 2008), 1:381-83.

## PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

over all kings and civil magistrates. By divine right the two swords of spiritual and civil power both belong to the Pope, and he merely delegates the usage of one sword to the civil magistrate. Crazy as this may sound to us today, the doctrine is actually enshrined in *Unam Sanctam*, the papal bull issued by Boniface VIII in 1302 AD:

Certainly the one who denies that the temporal sword is in the power of Peter has not listened well to the word of the Lord commanding: 'Put up thy sword into thy scabbard' [Mt 26:52]. Both, therefore, are in the power of the Church, that is to say, the spiritual and the material sword, but the former is to be administered for the Church but the latter by the Church; the former in the hands of the priest; the latter by the hands of kings and soldiers, but at the will and sufferance of the priest. However, one sword ought to be subordinated to the other and temporal authority subjected to spiritual power.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the Pope has authority to coerce the faith. In Rome, spiritual authority has temporal teeth. It is no accident that Roman Catholics historically set up systematic inquisitions and burned heretics; the Pope is explicitly and theologically granted the authority to perform

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<sup>2</sup> "Unam Sanctam: One God, One Faith, One Spiritual Authority," *Papal Encyclicals Online*, accessed on August 15, 2016, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Bon08/B8unam.htm>.

such coercion, though of course he may also exercise gentler measures as he sees fit.<sup>3</sup>

But let's not forget about that first sword in *Unam Sanctam*, the spiritual one. He owns that one too. As Boniface says,

We believe in [the Church] firmly and we confess with simplicity that outside of her there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins. [...] we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.

In other words, the Pope is a *sine qua non* for salvation. It's not hard to find statements like this in Roman Catholicism. They are not anomalies. In 1516 the Fifth Lateran Council—to Catholics the infallible 18th ecumenical council—reasserted the authority of *Unam Sanctam* and reiterated its claims:

since subjection to the Roman pontiff is necessary for salvation for all Christ's faithful, as we are taught by the testimony of both sacred scripture and the holy fathers, and as is declared by the constitution of pope Boniface VIII of happy memory, also our predecessor, which begins *Unam sanctam*, we therefore, with the approval of the present sacred council, for the salvation of the souls of the same faithful, for the supreme authority of the Ro-

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent treatment of this by a Roman Catholic philosopher, see Professor Thomas Pink's paper, "What is the Catholic doctrine of religious liberty?" available online at several locations, but available at [https://www.academia.edu/639061/What\\_is\\_the\\_Catholic\\_doctrine\\_of\\_religious\\_liberty](https://www.academia.edu/639061/What_is_the_Catholic_doctrine_of_religious_liberty) (accessed September 8, 2016).

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man pontiff and of this holy see, and for the unity and power of the church, his spouse, renew and give our approval to that constitution.<sup>4</sup>

Inevitably, therefore, the Roman Catholic version of sacerdotalism overlaps with their doctrine of temporal government: in both cases the Pope reigns as the supreme figure on earth.

Magisterialism denies this vehemently. For magisterials of both sacerdotal and evangelical persuasion—both Eastern Orthodox and historic Protestants—the *civil magistrate* is the guardian of the church. The Second Helvetic Confession describes his role as such:

THE MAGISTRACY IS FROM GOD. Magistracy of every kind is instituted by God himself for the peace and tranquillity of the human race, and thus it should have the chief place in the world. If the magistrate is opposed to the Church, he can hinder and disturb it very much; but if he is a friend and even a member of the Church, he is a most useful and excellent member of it, who is able to benefit it greatly, and to assist it best of all.

THE DUTY OF THE MAGISTRATE. The chief duty of the magistrate is to secure and preserve peace and public tranquillity. Doubtless he will never do this more successfully than when he is truly God-fearing and religious; that is to say, when, according to the

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<sup>4</sup> Note also that they call the church the “spouse” of the Roman pontiff! See “Fifth Lateran Council,” *Legion of Mary - Tidewater, Virginia*, accessed on August 15, 2016, <http://www.legionofmarytidewater.com/faith/ECUM18.HTM>.

example of the most holy kings and princes of the people of the Lord, he promotes the preaching of the truth and sincere faith, roots out lies and all superstition, together with all impiety and idolatry, and defends the Church of God. We certainly teach that the care of religion belongs especially to the holy magistrate.<sup>5</sup>

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) elaborates and provides a more detailed job description:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Second Helvetic Confession*, chapter XXX, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, accessed August 15, 2016, <https://www.ccel.org/creeds/helvetic.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XXIII, *Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics*, accessed August 15, 2016, [http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster\\_conf\\_of\\_faith.html](http://www.reformed.org/documents/westminster_conf_of_faith.html). The 1788 American revision of the Westminster Confession wisely modifies this section, instead describing a much more hands-off role for the civil magistrate in ecclesiastical affairs.

## PROTESTANT DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

This is not a uniquely Protestant position. An historically minded Eastern Orthodox Christian would cheerfully agree here. However, there are tensions in Eastern Orthodoxy between their sacerdotalism and magisterialism—what is their institutional church, a holy thing or a civil temporal thing? In Magisterial Protestantism the principles are much clearer. For us the visible church is, by definition, a temporal human society. And of course, the civil magistrate is the man charged with promoting peace and order within temporal human society.

As the old trope goes, all laws legislate morality; the only question is which morality. In other words, all government promotes a particular vision of the common good, of religion, of justice. This is how we answer questions like: *What is marriage? Do prayers belong in school? Should scientologists receive 501c3 tax exempt status?* etc. Like it or not, our government currently makes decisions regarding all these questions. Magisterial Protestantism simply teaches that they should form such judgments in a Christian manner. For example, we could argue that a member of ISIS should be deported from the USA *because of his religion*. Not all false religions are created equal. Some are fine to passively tolerate, like a grumpy atheism. Other religious sects pose dangerous threats to the peace and common good, and on that basis the civil magistrate should weed them out.

It may sound strange to speak about the civil magistrate in such explicitly Christian terms, but frankly, what is the alternative? An officially agnostic and functionally atheist secular government? Perhaps no civil government at all? That last option is basically the anabaptist position. Anabaptists like the Amish and Mennonites are anarchists,

strictly speaking, insofar as they believe civil government should be eliminated entirely and the peaceful church should reign in its place. They believe promoting justice and peace via the sword, coercively, is counterproductive and contrary to Jesus' commands. Consequently, the anabaptists are pacifists and refrain from most participation in government.

Putting this all together then, we get the four main ecclesiologies listed above.<sup>7</sup> In theory each group is clean and theologically distinct, but in practice it gets a lot messier. Not all individuals are aware of their group's guiding principles, and those who are aware do not necessarily stay faithful to them.

Roman Catholics today have tried to backpedal away from the sort of extreme statements made in their 18th ecumenical council. But of course they aren't allowed to backpedal, because their dogma is infallible, so they're stuck between a rock and a hard place. The result was the second Vatican council in the 1960s, the hard place crushing them. This famously ambiguous synod introduced an ecclesiological fog that still enshrouds Roman Catholicism. Regardless of such doctrinal obfuscations, it must be granted that Popes today certainly act a lot less papal than in previous centuries. There's no risk of Pope Francis I burning anybody at the stake, or damning Christians who don't have faith in him. So although the Pope technically

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<sup>7</sup> Technically we might add a fifth ecclesiology, *anarchic sacerdotalism*. If any church matches this description it would be Coptic Orthodoxy. They've been living under disapproving civil magistrates for 15 centuries, ever since they rejected the Imperially-approved Council of Chalcedon in 451. Historically their church has been somewhat associated with pacifism and extreme monastics. However, their overall ecclesiology is ambiguous, and it would be unfair to straightforwardly characterize them as 'anarchic' in the same way that modern Mennonites are.

has not renounced any of these ecclesiological errors, he at least has the good character to live in denial that the worst of these errors ever existed.

Eastern Orthodoxy has historically been magisterial, and in some places like Russia this emphasis is on the rise again. However the Eastern Orthodox church in America is much less magisterial, and in some quarters is leaning towards pacifism and a vaguely anabaptist view of government<sup>8</sup>, though usually not in a consistent or wholesale way.

Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches are just as sacerdotal as ever, though in America this is downplayed a bit and they also emphasize personal Bible reading and other stereotypically evangelical practices.

Traditional Protestants in America—Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, etc.—are today largely unaware of their historical tradition and its corresponding philosophical and biblical exegesis, particularly as it relates to the civil magistrate, and consequently they tend to default to a semi-anabaptist ecclesiology. Even tenets of outright anabaptism are becoming easier to find, with advocates for pacifism and political withdrawal growing louder each year. Overall in our Western and increasingly post-Christian society, anabaptist flavors of ecclesiology seem to be strengthening in every Christian group. Nevertheless, on the whole American Protestants retain vaguely magisterial instincts, as seen in petitions to publicly display

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., F. Alexander Weber, *The Moral Argument Against War in Eastern Orthodox Theology* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998).



the Ten Commandments at courthouses, a desire for our political candidates to be overtly Christian, etc.

## WHERE DID THESE ECCLESIOLOGIES COME FROM? A BRIEF HISTORICAL SKETCH

Tracing the historical development of each of these four ecclesiologicalies is a complex task, but the following sketch should help to orient us historically.

### **Apostolic Church (1<sup>st</sup> Century)**

The Eucharist was initially coterminous with the agape feast. Practical order necessitated that one man should act as formal leader during the Eucharistic celebration, i.e., somebody had to say the prayer of thanksgiving (the literal meaning of “eucharist”), break the bread, and generally oversee the meal. To quote Walter Lowrie,

The Eucharistic feast requires a president—that was one of the first suggestions which prompted the development of formal office in the Church. All could not preside at the Eucharist at once, neither was it appropriate that each should preside in turn, from the greatest to the least. Who then shall preside at the Eucharist? The answer presented no theoretical difficulty ... substantially it was equivalent to the question, Who, among those present at the particular time and place, is most worthy to sit in the seat of Christ? ... it is obvious that in the same community and under the same conditions there would be a certain permanence in the presidency—it was ever the most highly revered disciple that must

PART II:  
PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY IN  
SCRIPTURE

PART IV:  
PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY  
TODAY

IX:  
PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY AS GOOD  
THEORY

Andrew Fulford

INTRODUCTION

WHAT makes a good theory? Though it's certain that philosophers could debate this endlessly (and what can't they?), for our purposes we can limit the criteria to three. First, it fits with the clearly evident facts of the matter. Second, it resolves puzzlement over unclear issues, and adds none through incoherence. Third, it does not offer multiple explanations for data where one is sufficient.

Protestant ecclesiology isn't merely an interesting historical artifact; it's a good theory. In fact, this essay will argue that it's the best theory we have. Resting on the cardinal insight of justification by faith alone, magisterial Protestant soteriology is transparent to the clear biblical and real-world evidence about the *ecclesia*, and elegantly dissolves the tensions about it. In order to make this case, this essay will first present the scriptural data, and then show how Protestantism makes sense of some common, real, and difficult pastoral cases.

FAITH

**Faith Justifies Us**

At the opening of Romans 5, Paul concludes from his argument thus far: “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Comparing this text with 3:25-26 and 4:16-18, Luther’s insight into the concept of justification is undeniable: it is a judicial declaration contrary to condemnation. But the inquisitive mind naturally wants to know why the instrument of faith is sufficient to justify us. Thankfully, Paul illuminates the reader on that question just before this verse. As NT Wright points out in his commentary on Romans,<sup>2</sup> in 4:17-21, the apostle describes the attitude of the patriarch in striking contrast with his image of the human soul in Romans 1:20-21. There, human beings knew God but did not glorify him, and as a result their minds were darkened and their hearts hardened. Abraham, however, recognized God’s omnipotence and trustworthiness, and believed the Lord’s promise. In the former case, human beings were condemned, and in the latter, one man was justified. According to the apostle, the beginning of the world’s problems arrived when human beings stopped thinking of God as the evidence directed them to, and in God’s plan to make all things new, salvation begins with the human mind and heart turning back to God in self-forgetful trust based on knowledge of him. The site of the fundamental problem in the universe is also the place where redemption is first applied.

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bible are from the *New American Standard Bible* (La Habra: Foundation Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> N. T. Wright, *Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 500.

## The Object of Faith

But trust in what, exactly? In Romans 4:1-12 Paul argues that righteousness is counted to both Jewish and Gentile believers. Later in 11:17-21, he argues that unbelieving Israelite branches were cut off from faithful patriarchal tree because of their unbelief, and that Gentile branches are now part of the tree because of their faith. The implication is that all living branches on this tree share a common faith. Yet in 10:9, it seems clear that part of saving faith for Paul is belief in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This poses a *prima facie* difficulty, as Abraham and his pre-Christian descendants could not have had the exact same propositional content for their faith.

This difficulty increases when we turn to the epistle to the Hebrews. At the end of chapter 10 (vv. 36-39), the writer discusses saving faith and then turns to write his famous “hall of faith” chapter. Through the course of chapter 11, we learn that to please God one must believe he exists and rewards those who seek him (v. 6), that all those in this roll were commended through their faith (v. 39), and that they were yet not made perfect apart from New Covenant believers (v. 40). These individuals are thus part of one group that has saving faith in common, like Paul says in Romans. At the same time, what they believed was not propositionally identical: Abel (v. 4), Abraham (vv. 10, 13-16), and Moses (vv. 26-27) could not have faith, e.g., in a descendent of David, since they didn’t know of a David. Moving beyond Hebrews, we can see that in Adam’s day the content of saving faith was Genesis 3:15, and in Abraham’s it was Genesis 12:5. During Jesus’ ministry it was “the kingdom of God is at hand” (in him) (Mark 2:15). After his ascension, the content of saving faith, sometimes

called “the Gospel,” could vary in size from the books whose titles possess that term, to the idea that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (Rom. 10:9), or Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), or a combination of the two (1 Cor. 15:3-4), or simply Christ (Col. 1:27, cf. 2:3-4).

At this point it is useful to keep Hebrews 11:6’s basic point in mind as we consider some other texts. Isaiah 66:2 and Psalm 51:17 similarly state that what God ultimately commends is a humble and contrite heart towards God. And on the contrary side, James 2:19 tells us: “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.” Demons, lacking saving belief, do not lack orthodox content. In the traditional definition of the parts of faith, consisting of the content believed, the assent to it, and personal trust, the demons lack only the last part, and it makes the difference between salvation and condemnation. What they crucially lack is not an intellect in contact with reality, but a rightly ordered will. As Richard Muller says about John Calvin’s view of the matter: “It is the intellect that knows and recognizes its knowledge to be true and assents to that truth; only when the heart—that is, the will and its affections—grasps that truth in trust can the truth be appropriated savingly by the individual.”<sup>3</sup>

We can perhaps now see the hinge point that holds all these cases in common. First, all saving faith is aimed toward God as he promises salvation to those who believe. That is, simply believing that God condemns us in our sinfulness is not sufficient for saving faith. At the same time, that God’s special revelation consistently includes a

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<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University, 2000), 170.

promise of grace is evident from Genesis 3:15 to John 3:16. And second, while the believing saints have differing propositional content in their saving faith, it nevertheless has in common a will that humbly trusts in God and his promises as good for us; the demons, on the other hand, have accurate propositional content, but a will that opposes rather than trusts him. The demonic beings are of course not alone; this is precisely the attitude of heart that we have already seen in Romans 1, where humans suppressed their accurate knowledge of God and in turn were spiritually lost. And in sum, saving faith is such because it is the turning of the will back towards God in love and trust. This direction of will can entail different belief content depending on what God has revealed and promised to a person, but whatever he has shown, a person with this kind of volition will believe it, because they trust the Revealer. Herman Bavinck sums up the larger point we've been making so far:

In studying the relation between faith and theology, we need to frame the question properly. It should not be: what is the minimum of truths a person must know and hold as true to be saved? Leave that question to Rome, and let Catholic theology decide whether to that end two or four articles are needed. Admittedly, Protestant theology, in the theory of "fundamental articles," has given the impression of wanting to take that road. But it ended with the acknowledgement that it did not know the magnitude of God's mercy and therefore could not measure the amount of knowledge that is necessarily inherent in a sincere faith. ... Faith on the side of the Reformation ... is special (*fides specialis*)



with a particular central object: the grace of God in Christ. Here an arithmetic addition of articles, the knowledge of which and the assent to which is necessary for salvation, was no longer an option. Faith is a personal relation to Christ; it is organic and has put aside quantitative addition. ... On the side of the Reformation, faith is trust in the grace of God and hence no longer calculable.<sup>4</sup>

### **Faith Unites Us to Jesus**

As many in recent years have noted, for Calvin at least, justification by faith is of a piece with union with Christ. In this regard, Calvin is a faithful interpreter of scripture. While earlier in the letter Paul speaks of believers receiving no condemnation, in Romans 8:1 he awards that blessing to those “in Christ Jesus”. In Ephesians 2:5-9, the apostle explains that God saved believers through faith, making them alive in Christ. In Ephesians 3:4-7, he further writes:

By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. John Vriend, and ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 1:614.

Through the gospel, i.e., faith in it, Gentiles are made fellow heirs, fellow members of the body (cf. Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 1:2, 6:15), fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. Similarly, Paul reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:15) that he became their father in Christ through their believing reception of his proclamation of the gospel. In short, believers are in Christ by their faith, just as much as they are justified by it. And insofar as they are in Christ, as they are His body, then they are *ipso facto* members of the church, for the apostle also regards the body of Christ and the church as coterminous (Eph. 1:22-23, emphasis added): “And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to *the church, which is His body*, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.” This church or body is also, as such, one (2:15), holy (1:1; 2:19), built on the apostles or apostolic (2:20), and catholic in the sense that it is not confined to one place or people group (2:17-18).

### **Implication: Invisible**

As a disposition of intellect and will, faith is intrinsically as invisible as those faculties. This point is confirmed by the apostle, if biblical proof were needed for it (1 Cor. 2:11a): “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” It is for this reason that the Protestant tradition has affirmed the concept of the invisible church. Not, to be clear, because believers as human beings are invisible, but because membership in the church is accomplished by faith, which is invisible *per se*, though as we will see, its effects are not. And because faith itself is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29), Protestants have affirmed that only God ultimately con-

trols who is a part of the invisible church, though humans can perform sacraments and other outwardly good actions.

## WORKS

### **Faith Working Through Love**

The idea that faith generates effects is mentioned in numerous places. Faith works through love (Gal. 5:6), it issues in love (1 Tim. 1:5), it has works (2 Thess. 1:11), it is completed by works (James 2:22), and anything that does not issue from it is sin (Rom. 14:23). Similar things are said of repentance. As the negative turning away that correlates with the positive turning toward faith in God (Mark 1:15; Acts 26:20), it is an attitude of the heart which issues in action: John the Baptist calls for fruit (Luke 3:8), and Paul for deeds (Acts 26:20), in keeping with repentance. And given that faith is a disposition held by people, it is not surprising to also find texts that link fruit to the nature of people. John the Baptist calls for his hearers to be trees that bring forth good fruit (equivalent with the fruit of repentance, Luke 3:9), and Jesus continues the charge (cf. Matthew 3, 7, 12; John 15).

As a negative corollary, various texts indicate that people who lack these works lack the faith that produces them. James 2:14, 17 arguably contains the clearest of them: “What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ... So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” The opening rhetorical question anticipates a negative answer, and the metaphors of faith as dead that follow remind us of the analogy we have already seen between faith and a living tree that produces fruit. Other texts make this point: 2 Pet. 2:22 describes the sin of apostates as

rooted in what was their nature all along, Jesus' parables of the soil (Matt. 13/Mark 4/Luke 8) explain failure to bear fruit through the pre-existing nature of the soil when it received the seed, and 1 John 3:6 is probably starkly repeating this judgment.

At this point we run into another tension. The texts so far paint a simple picture: faith produces good works, and if they are absent, so is the faith. Yet the NT is also realistic about the ongoing presence of sin in the lives of believers. For example, after describing the experience of "the body of death" in Rom. 7:17-24, Paul affirms in 8:10 that believers still possess it. In 1 John 1:8-2:2 we see clear indications that believers can at least possibly sin, and that if they say they have no sin, that they are lying. Matt. 6:9, 12-15 has Jesus instructing his disciples to regularly pray for forgiveness, assuming that they will need to. Innumerable exhortations to believers to flee from sin throughout scripture confirm this doctrine: the writers anticipate the possibility of believers sinning, and exhort them not to do so. Most vividly, in 2 Cor. 2:5-8 Paul pleads with the Corinthians to restore a repentant man who was under the discipline of the community. Given that Jesus taught his church to only do this after contumacy was evident (Matt. 18:15-20), we can assume that this is a person who was clearly in persisting sin. Yet all the same, Paul calls on the believers of that church to restore him to fellowship as a believer along with them.

But the tension is not irresolvable. We have already encountered a hint towards its dissolution, in the form of the metaphor of faith as a tree that produces fruit. Natural living substances by definition have characteristic ways of being and action that correspond to their natures, yet ob-

ervation shows us that these ways of being can be interrupted and damaged, such that defective effects are produced instead of good ones. In a sermon aimed at comforting those lacking assurance of salvation, Richard Hooker applies this metaphysical insight to one fruit of the Spirit, joy:

Hence an error groweth, when men in heaviness of spirit suppose they lack faith, because they find not the sugared joy and delight which indeed doth accompanie faith, but so as a separable accident, as a thing that may be removed from it... .<sup>5</sup>

A tree may still be a good tree even if it sometimes produces defective fruit, and faith will generate joy, and good works, though it may sometimes be mixed with sadness and sin.

Yet, in coming to know the natural world, we proceed by way of observing a thing's operations to knowing what kind of thing it is. That is, the kind of thing that characteristically is and acts in such a way. Characteristic action can allow for exceptions, but when something we might have originally thought to be exceptional turns out to be the rule, we have an indication that we are observing a different thing, with a different nature, than we thought at first. The Bible assumes this natural process of coming to know natures. Occasions of sin, even occasions of habitual sin eventually ended with repentance, are different than regular pattern of sin without any sign of good fruit in keeping with repentance. They are different precisely in

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Hooker, *A learned and comfortable sermon of the certaintie and perpetuities of faith in the elect especially of the prophet Habakkuks faith*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1612), 8.

how they point to a different nature, a different internal state, a different kind of faith: one with the humble will that makes it saving faith, and the other without.

This is compatible with a great deal of complexity in the life of the believer. Because of indwelling sin, because of the partial darkness of intellect that results from it, and because grace begins with saving faith and not a complete renovation of all habits, there are many causes of sin inside the true believer. God may and does in some times and places immediately remove certain habits from believers; but in other cases he does not, and requires a more cooperative process of rooting out sinful dispositions. In that category, sins of ignorance may persist for a while; yet when God illumines the believer to recognize them, the changed volition will oppose it. This does not mean it will do so with absolute constancy or that this will result in an immediate elimination of the disposition; that will depend on the force of will, mental health, wisdom in strategy, and ultimately the sanctifying grace of God. But it will at least resolve not to simply give up the fight to want to obey.

And so we find the answer to our question. When a soul can say truthfully that it “joyfully concur[s] with the law of God in the inner man” (Rom. 7:21), even if it sins (cf. Rom. 8:10), if at minimum it can say it has not willed to give up the fight against sin, it possesses a saving faith; if on the other hand it is set on the flesh, hostile toward and unable to submit to God’s law (Rom. 8:7), then even if it affirms orthodox ideas or produces outwardly good works, it does not possess saving faith.

### **Implication: Visible**

If the invisibility of the disposition of faith entails the “invisible church”, the outward operations that properly follow from it entail the reality of the “visible church.” As before, the idea here is not that there are non-overlapping churches; the point is instead that only God can see with certainty who has saving faith, while outwardly some can falsely appear to possess it, and others can at times appear not to have it when they actually do. Nevertheless, as we will see, Scripture teaches that certain actions will reliably follow from saving faith, and these serve as marks of the church. Given that faith is a gift of God only, and that it alone makes one a member of Christ’s body, the church, none of these marks are constitutive of the church as such. Rather, they are descriptive of those properties that naturally (and so, for the most part) follow from faith.

### **Marks of the Church: The Word and Profession of Faith**

Protestants have traditionally enumerated two or three “marks” of the church. The first of these marks is the true “word,” which referred to the true doctrine that a church was teaching. We will return to the teaching of the word below; for now, we will dwell on the profession of it. As noted above, Romans 10:10 makes profession of faith an instrument of salvation, and in Matt. 12:36-37, Jesus warns that people will be condemned or justified based on the words they speak. This raises yet another tension to consider: in the language of Romans, if believing in the heart makes one justified, how can confessing with the mouth make one saved? Isn’t one already saved at that point? One could raise a similar question about the petition of the

Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:12) that instructs followers of Jesus to regularly ask God for forgiveness.

Here it is useful to recall that the NT speaks of faith saving people in an ongoing way. For example, 1 Peter 1:5 says that Christians "by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time," and Gal. 2:20 along with Hebrews 11 speak of them living by faith in an ongoing way. Faith does not merely save at the outset, but all along the Christian life serves to keep the pilgrim church on the path to final salvation, and in that sense saves them progressively through life. Understanding this function of faith, we can then see how scripture could teach that certain speech acts save those who make them: because, as is clear in a profession of faith, such acts express saving faith, God commends them accordingly. He grants continuing salvation to continuing faith, considered as enduring disposition and considered in discrete moments. And thus scripture speaks of moments of profession as resulting in salvation.

### **Marks of the Church: Baptism**

The second Protestant mark of the church is the true sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Scripture itself does not call these ritual actions "sacraments," but longstanding tradition has labelled them as such. In Matt. 28:19 and Acts 2:38 we see baptism commanded (indirectly and directly) for followers of Jesus. Given that humble faith naturally produces obedience to God, those who have faith will in general also seek to be baptized, and thus baptism will be a mark that picks out Christians from among the human race.



In 1 Peter 3:21 the apostle Peter says: “baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” The NASB translation has the word “appeal” where others have argued “pledge” would be more accurate.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes either could be true. Baptism is thus both a command and either an appeal or a pledge, and it saves those who receive it. Along with John 3:5, 1 Peter 3:21 is probably the most cited verse to support the idea of baptismal regeneration, and thus raises a problem similar to the previous two we have addressed: if faith justifies and saves, what can be left for baptism to do? But the solution for the previous problem applies just as much in the present case. As obedience to a command of the Lord, and as either an appeal or a pledge to God, the ritual assumes the presence of faith on the part of the recipient. (We will set aside the case of infant baptism, to be discussed briefly below.) And as an act of faith, God responds to it with saving grace, though not for the first time. Moreover, as the ritual which visibly initiates a person into the visible church, a body of people that professes to be saved, it is especially fitting to speak of the act as saving the person who undertakes it. Nevertheless, Protestants need not say that a person is damned prior to baptism, since saving faith precedes it (at least in the case of adult converts).

### **Marks of the Church: The Lord’s Supper**

As with baptism, the Lord commanded his followers to participate in the Lord’s Supper in remembrance to, or as a

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 192.

memorial of, him (1 Cor. 11:23-25). And so as with profession of faith and baptism, this is yet another obedient action that saving faith will naturally perform, making it a practice that marks out the church from human race. In addition to being a command, Paul also says that participation functions as a proclamation of the death of the Lord until he returns again. The judgment that follows upon those who take the Supper unworthily also reveals it to be a covenant ratifying meal (1 Cor. 11:25-31), as covenants include oaths, and oaths call down curses on those who break them.<sup>7</sup> Many interpreters have also argued that Jesus' discourse in John 6 on eating his flesh and blood are also allusive of the Supper. If we accept this reading for the sake of argument, we have another example of scripture speaking of certain actions being causes of salvation, as Jesus says in 6:53-54: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

We can explain the soteriological function of the Supper as we did with profession of faith and baptism. The Supper is a case of obedience to a command, an oath of allegiance, a memorial or remembrance, and a proclamation. It is not difficult to see that all of these are done as an expression, or on the supposition of saving faith. This is

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 474. Also see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Passover: Agape Feast or Ritual Abuse?* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 2012) for an extended discussion of what the rite as handed down by Jesus ought to actually look like, and how it would affect our church practice if we did as he directed.

especially evident in the symbolism of the Supper, which represents the death of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, offered freely to all who will receive. And once again, we know the Lord responds to such faith with salvific favor, initially and continuously.

## Discipline

Anabaptists and some Reformed thinkers added a third mark of the church, variously described as “holiness” or “discipline” or “love”, based on texts such as Hebrews 12:14 or John 13:34-35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Lutherans and other Reformed thinkers have tended not to include this as a mark, largely because of the logic of *sola fide*.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless we need not reject the third mark, if we continue with our understanding of the marks of the church as descriptive and not constitutive of the church, following always or for the most part from saving faith, but not being coordinate independent instruments of salvation, nor necessarily present in every moment of a saved soul’s life. Since faith naturally works through love (Gal. 5:6; 2 Thess. 1:11), good works and love will be a regular sign of saving faith, and membership in the church, in the life of believers.

The whole life of the corporate church flows from what we have seen thus far, and can be viewed as an aspect

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<sup>8</sup> See Jordan Ballor and W. Bradford Littlejohn, “European Calvinism: Church Discipline,” *European History Online (EGO)*, March 25, 2013, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/ballorj-littlejohnw-2013-en>. for further discussion on the varieties of conceptions of church discipline in the Reformed tradition (accessed on May 25, 2017).

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