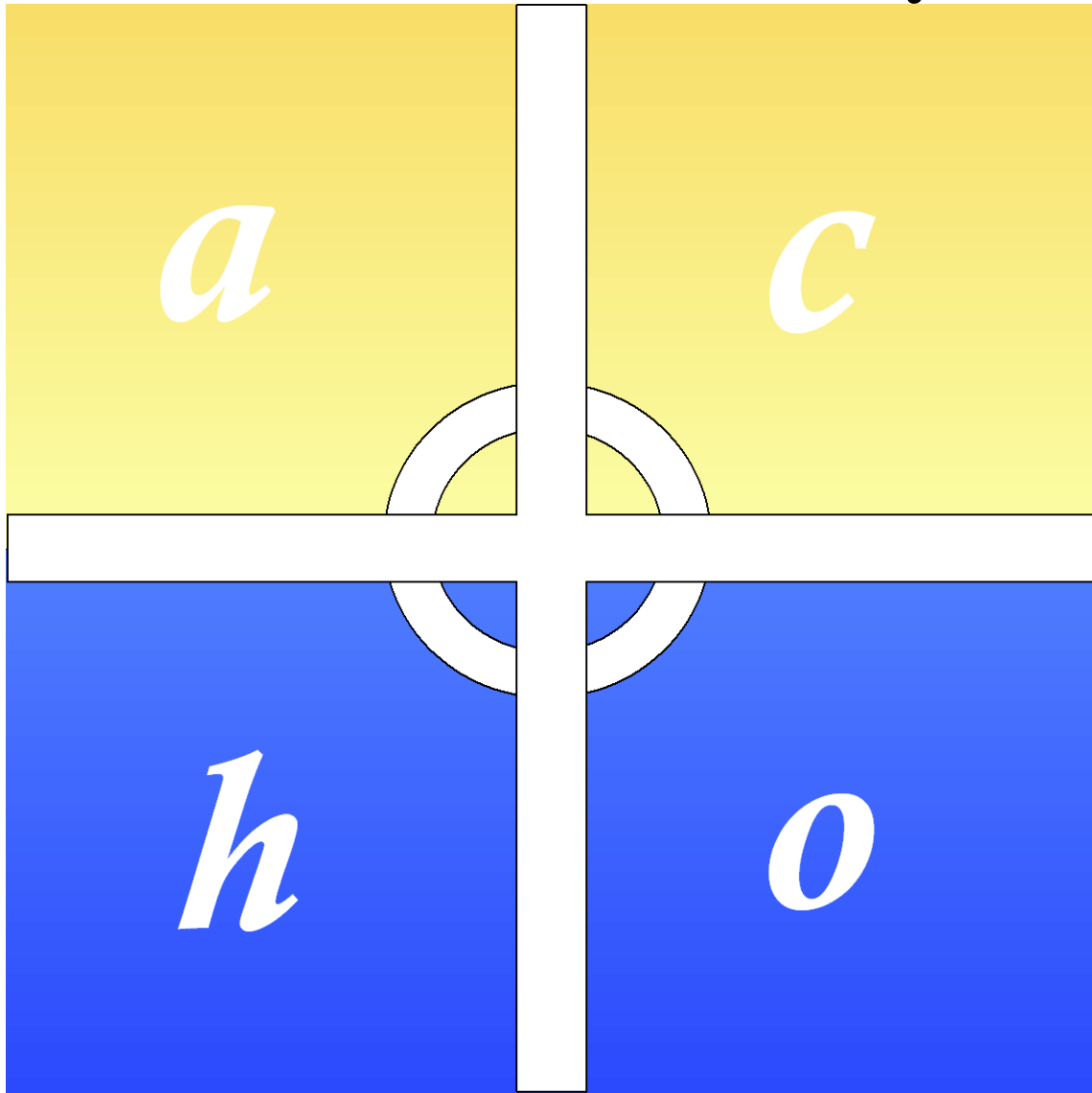


# Community Made in God's Image: The Mark of Community



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(Revised June 2009)



## Introduction

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The first draft of this paper was written for the Faculty Initiative Cluster within the Reforming Ministry Project, a project coordinated through the Office of Theology and Worship of the Presbyterian Church (USA). That cluster was intentionally kept in mind as the audience, making a concerted effort to point us back to what had been offered at that time in our conversation *via* our own papers, the papers from other clusters, and even interesting discussions taking place throughout the denomination. I have revised the paper now at the close of our official four-year commitment of our cluster, and as we gather together this June of 2009 with members from other groups to reflect on the combined work. I am hopeful that the revisions will allow the paper to be more appropriately read by other project participants. Improvements have been attempted, taking into account insights gained through discussion, feedback, and additional study and reflection.

My interest in the third Reformation mark (i.e. church discipline / life together) seems to have been imbedded in me through my formative Christian experience that included a heavy emphasis on the value of *koinōnia* – community or intimate fellowship with God and with God’s people. The Reforming Ministry Project has provided a great stimulus for theological reflection on the doctrine of the church as well as *koinōnia*. From the very first readings given to us as a group within the project, I have been captivated by the usefulness of pondering the third mark of the Reformation. The classical or Nicene notes are obviously crucial for any ecclesiological undertaking, too, and members from across the project have offered up excellent work in examining the life of our denomination in light of what the nature of church should be and the hope that we have.<sup>1</sup> Yet the Reformation marks are of unique interest because we begin encroaching upon the question about the church framed more critically. For instance, if there is a way to answer the question “How can we tell that a church exists in this place?” then we might also be able to reflect upon the question “At what point does a congregation—or even a denomination—become only an empty, institutional shell, ceasing to exist as a church?” It is a crisis-type question and one that may force us further along in serious discernment into making a judgment (*krisis*) about where we go from here in faith.

It was expressed early on within our Faculty Initiative Cluster that there is a need for a “word” in the Presbyterian Church, and our desire was or is to offer back a word to our denomination.<sup>2</sup> If there is not full agreement on such a word from our cluster, or even agreement on whether we are even *able* to speak such a word, then at least we were

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<sup>1</sup> Primary examples include *Bearing the Marks of the Church* in the Occasional Paper Series, No. 1, and Charles Wiley, “We Believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: 4 Theses.” The latter we read for the first meeting of our cluster.

<sup>2</sup> I recall Barry Ensign-George using this type of phrase, that there is a “need for a word.” It also seemed to be picked up in our smaller group discussions.

*embodying* part of the answer by theologizing *together* as pastors, faculty, and middle-governing body officials. But what we seemed able to agree upon early in our first meeting was that there *is* a great need.

To state what might be expected, divergent opinions materialized in our conversations as to the nature and cause of the crisis. For instance, I recall a question posed to us in our first gathering: “What does the historical process of the confessions suggest to us in a time of ecclesial crisis?” Again, as the question suggested, the reality of a crisis and therefore a “need for a word” seemed a given. When discussing in that first meeting the urgency for such a word, some focused on the needs of humanity. In other words, our crisis was the very fact that we seemed unable to get beyond in-fighting to better serve or minister to people’s needs, since there are people starving, being abandoned, and dying while we argue. Certainly we desire a greater witness to the Gospel through our unity; certainly we would like to be good stewards of time and resources; and certainly we would all say that we want to be about mission. And yet the needs of humanity are nothing new, nor is fighting among Christians. How can the presence of either one create a *new* crisis now for the PC(USA) in our day and age? And so we questioned what the real crisis might be, whether something was part of the real crisis or a symptom of it, and whether there are ways to speak about a crisis at all or whether such talk of a looming crisis is an actual abandonment of the hope that we have in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I share all of this because I want to be clear. I, too, think there is a great crisis. But I believe the crisis is better understood by examining the three Reformation marks because I think the crisis involves becoming only an empty shell. I do not believe that stating as much is to give up hope or should be labeled as motivated by fear . . . at least of a certain kind. A mini-conference was coordinated by our cluster group, and as the first part of the chosen title indicates (“Fear Not!”), we want to encourage each other to cling to Christ who is our hope and who calls the church into existence. The content and format of the conference sought to focus on the positive rather than the negative, which was and is a welcomed relief! But the label of fear can too quickly become a straw-man argument used for dismissing certain suggestions about our ecclesial crisis. Even with fear, the referent matters as to *what* is being feared! On the one hand, we are called by our Lord to have faith and fear not, but the fear of the Lord is also the beginning of all wisdom! Thus I want to acknowledge the call to be steadfast in hope, while making room for a certain kind of “fear” that calls us to faithfulness and can allow us to be analytical and discerning in a fashion that some might otherwise consider cynical. The balance is to acknowledge that there is much to despair of in our life together in the PC(USA), but we are not beyond the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

What is *a* church? It is not a question simply of *the* church, so the discussion will move beyond the essence of church as expressed by the Nicene notes to a question of a particular community. How can you tell that a church exists here in this place? Furthermore, what makes a church a church when it is *not gathered together*? What does “life together” entail—not only for congregations—but for a *denomination* of congregations that “meet” occasionally through our connectional system, and then only in

a representative manner through commissioners? I am hopeful that an analysis of the third mark may help us think through such questions.

In the paper that follows, I endeavor on the one hand not to be an innovator of some kind of new theology, while also venturing to think through what I consider at least for me to be new insights. Thus, I just might have the distinct pleasure of that fictional English yachtsman whom G.K. Chesterton fancied to write a romance about, “who slightly miscalculated his course and discovered England under the impression that it was a new island in the South Seas.”<sup>3</sup> I, too, might have all the fascinating terrors of what appears to me to be quite the new theological adventure only to discover that I have actually returned to what is old and known by others all along in the realm of ecclesiology. This would indeed be of some comfort to me since there are aspects of this paper where I am sharing raw thoughts, perhaps even exposing myself to heresy! But in our cluster, we were encouraged to dare to think aloud, even with the possibility of being wrong and needing to be corrected by each other. In this way I can partially take comfort in an admonition attributed to Karl Barth that I would not otherwise appreciate; namely, that we should strive to hear everyone in the church, even heretical voices!<sup>4</sup> With that in mind, I offer my voice—even if some raw thoughts are later deemed in error—so that it might be heard and that I might gain from further feedback and correction.

When I first wrote this paper, I offered a Scriptural image to our cluster. May we pay attention to the work that has already been produced by those involved in the Reforming Ministry Project, and may we strive to listen to each other in conversation all the more, so that we are not just speaking past each other, eager to say our own words. May we acknowledge that the hope of our conversation is discerning the Word of God. So, let us pay attention to each other as well as our burning hearts so that as we “exchange” or even “throw about” our words (Luke 24:17 . . . *hoi logoi houtoi hous antiballete* . . .), the living Word can show up in the midst of our conversation *and* be recognized. May our eyes of faith be opened as the Lord of the banquet opens Scripture for us and invites us to table, enabling us to be sent proclaiming—to our own denomination and to all nations—what the Lord has done.

Now, let us journey together this life of community that the Lord forms.

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<sup>3</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Ignatius Press, 1995, p 13.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002, p 3.

## Part I – The Third Reformation Mark

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Throughout our four-year conversation within the Faculty Initiative Cluster, the themes of pastoral authority, baptismal vocation, marks and notes of the church, the cruciform of ministry, the communal nature of formation, and eschatological hope, *all* continually resurfaced over and over again. I would imagine that in discussing any one of those, it would not take long to discover their inter-relatedness. For the purposes of this paper, I want to focus on the notes and the marks of the church.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I want to explore the Reformation marks of the church, centering on the third mark, while considering how the Reformation marks relate to the Nicene notes. Because of the limited scope of this paper, the inter-relatedness of the marks and notes to all other themes mentioned above will not be given the attention that it could, but that is where the combined efforts of the entire project are beneficial.

### *Reformation Marks – Making the Church Visible and Discernable*

In our time together, especially earlier on, there was much deliberation about the third mark known traditionally as “church discipline.” The Scots Confession was the primary source used as a basis for discussing this mark or, as it appears in the confession, “note”:

The notes of the true Kirk, therefore, we believe, confess, and avow to be: first, the true preaching of the Word of God, in which God has revealed himself to us, as the writings of the prophets and apostles declare; secondly, the right administration of the sacraments of Christ Jesus, with which must be associated the Word and promise of God to seal and confirm them in our hearts; and lastly, ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, as God’s Word prescribes, whereby vice is repressed and virtue nourished.<sup>6</sup>

From the theological content from many secondary sources, the conclusion can be drawn that the Nicene notes convey who we are as church (i.e. its nature) while the Reformation marks describe what the true church does.<sup>7</sup> Certainly this seems to be the

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<sup>5</sup> Since the terms “notes” and “marks” are sometimes interchangeable, or at least since there does not appear to me to be uniformity of use, I often use “Nicene” or “Classical” to refer to the attributes of the church as one holy catholic and apostolic, and “Reformation” to refer to the marks associated with Word, sacrament, and church discipline. Unless otherwise specified in this paper “notes” refers to the Nicene notes of the church, and “marks” to the Reformation marks of the church.

<sup>6</sup> *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I*, 2004, reference number 3.18 or page 19.

<sup>7</sup> The concept that the Nicene notes express the characteristics, attributes, or even essence of the church, while the Reformation marks make distinguishable this church, can probably be found in many secondary sources, but here are a few: Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: an Introduction to Christian Theology*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1991, pp 200-214; John Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, pp 240-261; Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1997, pp 482-492; Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2002, p 103.

case if we just consider the plain language, for the Reformation marks have verbs associated with them! Reformation marks are sometimes referred to as the *particular* marks or the *practical* marks. They are used to affirm that a *particular* congregation is part of the true church, making the nature of the church *visible* to the world. When visible and invisible are used to refer to God's church, what is visible is also *particular* because the church is witnessed in a certain locale.<sup>8</sup> They are also *practical* because they refer more to the *activity* of the church: the way it lives, demonstrates, bears witness to the world of our faith in God the Father, Son, and Spirit.

This interpretation of the Nicene notes as the church's essence and the Reformation marks as activities of the church, establishes a conceptual framework for me that will be evident throughout this paper. Therefore, if this kind of understanding is not faithful to the theology of the Reformers or in some way contradicts other elements of Reformed theology, I welcome your correction.<sup>9</sup> There are volumes of primary sources and historical insights of which others of you will be more acquainted. Otherwise, restated, my first hypothesis is as follows:

*The nature of the church understood as being one holy catholic and apostolic, is present and made visible—sometimes to a lesser degree and sometimes more<sup>10</sup>—in and through the three Reformation marks of a particular community.*

#### *Church Discipline – Extraordinary, Ordinary, and Our Life Together*

It should be made clear that as a recurring theme for our group, the third mark was understood more broadly than what “church discipline” may naturally impress upon people, especially with our current polity and judicial-wrangling. Of course Charles Wiley has tried to set the record straight by making the crucial distinction between ordinary and extraordinary discipline:

The great achievement of our Reformed forebears was the recovery of ordinary discipline. Ordinary, not extraordinary, discipline was the preoccupation of the Reformers like Calvin. Since I have coined the terms *ordinary discipline* and *extraordinary discipline*, I will expand on what I intend by them. *Ordinary discipline* is the practice of the church to assist Christians to stay true to their deepest desires, desires given to us by God—to live a faithful Christian life, to stay true to the vows we make at baptism. *Extraordinary discipline* involves either holding someone to their vows against their wishes or resolving a dispute between parties where there is no agreement on the good. . . . Preceding the time of the Reformation, discipline was primarily exercised in two ways. The first was extraordinary discipline of heresy trials and the like—people who were accused of opposing the church's teaching or standards. The second was special discipline

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<sup>8</sup> Can it be said that a denomination is *particular* and *visible* because it is witnessed through a certain structure?

<sup>9</sup> It seems to me that John Calvin understood that the “activities” associated with the marks of the church is what make it visible. Regarding the marks, Calvin wrote, “From this the face of the church comes forth and becomes visible to our eyes.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by McNeill and trans. by Battles; IV.i.9

<sup>10</sup> This is in anticipation of other parts of the confessions. “. . . Wherever these notes are seen and continue for *any* time, be the number *complete or not* . . .” (italics mine; 3.18); See also 6.143 and 8.07.

for those in religious vocations (monks, nuns, and those in religious orders) that went well beyond what was expected of the average Christian. In fact, the extraordinary discipline of the late medieval period has significant continuity with that exercised by the Reformers. It was in the second realm that there was a great change. Calvin took the special discipline restricted to those in religious vocations and extended it to every believer. He rejected the notion that only those who had taken vows of celibacy were to live truly disciplined lives. In a real sense, Calvin extended the monastery to the whole church, expecting every Christian to submit his or her own life to Christ in all aspects of life.<sup>11</sup>

Being reminded of and comprehending discipline in this manner allows us to maintain a stronger connection between *church discipline* and the *baptismal vocation* of all believers. Into the community and its life together, we are baptized. If church discipline is an aspect of the community's responsibility for shaping faithful Christian life,<sup>12</sup> we should also note that the Christian life *is* communal. We can think of church discipline more broadly because of its inherent link to the very notion of community and the Christian life.



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**We are made for community because we are made in the image of the Triune God**

John Burgess also points church discipline toward a broader definition in his initial paper to the Core Cluster. First, he reminds us that the term church discipline should be “understood in its fullest sense as mutual promotion of virtue and suppression of vice,”<sup>13</sup> which is another way of reiterating what is in the Scots Confession but what we might skip over or forget too quickly! “Mutual” implies the dynamic of community, and the promotion of virtue and suppression of vice could categorically include just about everything within the life of the community patterned by the One who calls it into existence.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Wiley, *Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline: Mutual Accountability in the Reformed Tradition*, Office of Theology and Worship, Church Issues Series, No. 6, pp 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Small suggests this in the introduction to *Ordinary and Extraordinary Discipline*, p i.

<sup>13</sup> John Burgess, “Thinking Theologically About the Church: A Presentation for the Re-forming Ministry Core Cluster,” June 1, 2004, p 10. See additionally pages 7-11. Also in the Faculty Initiative Cluster, an emphasis on a broader and hopefully more faithful understanding of the third mark is taken up by Paul Hooker in a paper presented to and read by our group, “Provisional Demonstration,” pp 4-5.

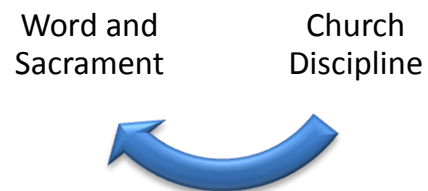
I think it is clear that we should not view church discipline too narrowly. Is it possible to think of it too broadly? This is a very real question that should be kept in mind, and it will become all the more pertinent after exploring potential elements of the third mark, which we will do in Part II of this paper. But since I think in our denominational life presently our greater error is interpreting church discipline too narrowly, I will state the following again in the form of a hypothesis, making clear what can then be challenged or corrected by others:

*Although the term “community” may have wider theological implications, I believe the third mark can be faithfully conceptualized as “life together” or very similar to community.*

### *The Relationship Amongst the Marks*

On the one hand, church discipline can be interpreted as “serving” the purposes of the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments, in that discipline allows Word and sacraments to bear fruit. “While the faithful proclamation of the Word and the right celebration of the sacraments were at the center of church practice for Calvin, he recognized that discipline was necessary for holding these practices together. . . discipline was vital to give space for Word and Sacrament to work in the church . . .”<sup>14</sup> Beyond the Scots Confession, Calvin emphasized not only the pure proclamation, but the *hearing* of the Word.<sup>15</sup> Church discipline is an aid for faithfully hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments. This suggests a movement as depicted this way, where church discipline “affects” the first two marks:

If church discipline is a human activity that allows us to better hear the Word and “receive the grace of God promised in the sacraments,” it is also a human activity “done in obedience to God.”<sup>16</sup> This already suggests that the arrow does not simply flow in one direction, and another illustration will be needed.



However, I think it critical to first make what will surely be a well-known point, but it is offered now because it indicates a relationship *amongst* the Reformation marks. If the context for the Reformation made it impossible to think of the essence of the church—including “one” or “unity”—based solely on participation within the institutional structure of the Roman Catholic Church, then what was the basis for unity? It was to be found in Christ, for where Christ is, there is the church (Ignatius). If Christ is present to us in the proclamation of the Word and the sacraments, then through the first two Reformation marks, Christ is present in a particular community and it can truly be said that a church exists, staying true to the aphorism of Ignatius.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Wiley, p 2. Joseph Small also states this in “Undivided Plural Ministry,” p 2ff (Reprinted from *Ecumenical Trends*, vol 32, no 1, Jan 2003).

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.9. “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard . . .”

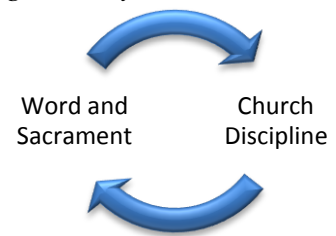
<sup>16</sup> Wiley, p 8.

<sup>17</sup> McGrath, p 475.



Whether as a genuine mark of the church or not, I am unaware of the degree to which church discipline might have been understood amongst some Reformers—or Reformed theologians since—as actually signifying Christ’s presence in the same manner of thinking as the first two marks. In fact, I believe it is more natural to understand the third mark as flowing from the first two.<sup>18</sup> Already noted, church discipline is in response to God. Furthermore, according to the Scots Confession, church discipline was and is to be uprightly ministered *as God’s Word prescribes*. Therefore, it is God’s Word that not only provides the command for it, but should also *form* the church discipline to be exercised. With broader terminology, John Burgess stated that “Word and sacrament call us into life together.”<sup>19</sup> Phrased another way and expanded, we could say that the Living Word—whom we know through the written Word, and who is present in the proclamation and the sacraments—generates and shapes our life together and whatever the third mark entails. Joseph Small also asserts, “Because the church is a community called into being by the incarnate Word and shaped by witness to that Word in the word of Scripture, the church’s faith, worship, and order must obediently proclaim and reflect the Word.”<sup>20</sup> If Word and sacrament are Christ to us, then church discipline—which is to say, the disciplined life of all baptized—is a “life together” lived in *grateful response* to Christ.

Although one might speak of how Word and sacrament can *generally* affect church discipline (i.e. through personal study of the Word, or remembering one’s own baptism), when considering the common activities of the church that make it visible (i.e. proclaiming and hearing the Word; administering and receiving the sacraments), a third hypothesis can be articulated this way:



*As the assembly (ekklesia) is gathered, the proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments form and shape the third mark—church discipline or life together of the particular church—even as the third mark also affects the hearing of the Word and the participation in the sacraments.*

To summarize so far, first, the church’s nature—understood by the attributes of the Nicene notes—is made visible through the Reformation marks. Second, the third mark can be taken to mean “life together” or the disciplined life of the community of faith. And now thirdly, Word and sacrament form the disciplined life together, even as our participation in Word and sacrament is influenced or affected by the same disciplined life. Putting those three together, questions for exploration may abound and come

<sup>18</sup> Some have argued that the sacraments are subordinate to the Word, exemplified by the emphasis of proclamation in the Second Helvetic Confession, 5.134. In that way sacraments *and* church discipline are marks derived from the Word. But there is also the Barmen Declaration: “. . . Jesus Christ acts presently as the Lord in Word and Sacrament through the Holy Spirit . . .” (8.17)

<sup>19</sup> Burgess, p 10.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Small, “Undivided Plural Ministry”, p 2. Reprinted from Ecumenical Trends, vol 32, no 1, Jan 2003.

immediately to your mind. For instance, if hearing is in fact part of the first mark according to Calvin, to what degree is *how* we hear the Word as important as the content being proclaimed, and what exactly can we say about the relationship between the two? In what way is the nature of the church visible in Word, sacrament, and life together? I personally find as many interesting possibilities to pursue as there are questions.

Because I have had more time to contemplate since the writing of the first draft, I can honestly state that as we move onto Part II, I have not found as many “detailed maps” readily available in circulation for guidance in this area. This “explorer”—Chesterton’s yachtsman, if you will—senses all the thrills and dangers of this said theological adventure, but at least I now know that I am not the first to explore! I have had the “personal discovery” of seeing evidence of others who have gone before me asking the same or similar questions that I have, and this is comforting! Perhaps I may find myself “discovering” London after all, rather than a new island. However, much within the signs from others contain cautionary warnings, so greater navigational skill will be required for Part II and beyond, to which we now turn.

## Part II – Elements of the Third Mark

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In the course of our meetings and during our cluster-sponsored mini-conference, I heard two quite radical ideas. The first came from asking aloud whether there was a need for “new marks” of the church. After all, there were certain contextual needs of the Reformation that gave rise to the marks. Could there be a legitimate need for a new kind of mark for whatever new context we are in today? Secondly, some called us to seek greater awareness of the notes and marks that we supposedly know already. This second suggestion might turn out to be just as radical as the first . . . if not more!

Whoever voiced these ideas, I wish to thank them. The suggestions can serve as reminders for our continued ecclesiological task so that we may stay true to our Reformed identity in these two ways: First, let us be *Reformed*, committing ourselves to be in conversation with our theological heritage in seeking a greater depth of knowledge of the notes and marks, the theological discourse about these through the ages, and the impact they may have for other points of doctrine and for living the faith. Second, let us be *Reforming*, which may at least require speaking the old with a fresh voice, so that we might be faithful witnesses, too, as to what the church is called to be and do. In both ways, may we be confronted anew by the Word of God revealed to us, in the power of the Spirit, as we discern God’s Word on these matters. I proceed with those expressed commitments in mind, confessing that there could always be a deeper knowledge still of these things!<sup>21</sup>

According to our own Reformed heritage, we recognize that the church did not start with the Reformation, nor are we alone the body of Christ (i.e. Scots Confession, 3.05 and 3.10). Therefore, we can listen to various traditions as “conversation partners” alongside our own that might contribute to faithful discernment of the church’s existence in a given place and other related matters. To that end, I am grateful for the work of Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, and Mission*, that first prompted me to bear various traditions in mind.

### *Historical Insights from Multiple Traditions*

The urgency of mission has been deemed by some to be a sign of the true church. John Chrysostom stated it this way in the fifth century: “Nothing is more frigid than a Christian, who cares not for the salvation of others. . . . Say not, ‘It is impossible for me to induce others (to become Christians)’—for if thou art a Christian, it is impossible but that it should be so.”<sup>22</sup> P. T. Forsyth, with roots in both Pietism and Puritanism, said “A

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<sup>21</sup> The more I studied, I only became keenly aware of how much more I would still like to comprehend! As to this commitment to greater understanding, some will surely wish that I manifested more understanding in this paper, especially if any disagree with certain parts of it. I do invite correction.

<sup>22</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles,” homily 20; ed. by Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol 11, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2004, pp 127-128.

church cold to missions is a Church dead to the Cross.”<sup>23</sup> Although the importance of missions is not unique to any single tradition, it seems Pietism and Puritanism elevated missions as an indicator of the true church.<sup>24</sup> Meeting material needs when loving your neighbor is a contribution by spiritual movements of purification after the Reformation, exemplified by General William Booth and the Salvation Army. Liberation theology even more so has stressed solidarity with the poor, sensitivity to oppression, and the search for justice and peace, where the “inbreaking” of the kingdom can be discerned wherever there is a passion for social justice. For example, Bonganjalo Goba of South Africa writes, “Christian commitment and faith in the South African context are rooted in the current struggle for liberation. . . . To have faith in Jesus is to oppose apartheid. One could go on to say that to have faith in Jesus is to participate in struggles for justice and peace wherever they are pursued.”<sup>25</sup>

The marks of peace, separation from sin, and suffering are significant in Anabaptist spirituality,<sup>26</sup> although the theme of suffering or persecution is present in other streams of spiritual life including Roman Catholic and Lutheran. “Part of the experience of true conversion is the willingness to suffer with Christ, the suffering One. I do not believe that true conversion is possible without this.”<sup>27</sup>

Fellowship of love amongst Christians has been cited as the mark of the church, and this seems to be the case with Pietism. Whatever label you put to Schleiermacher, his famous dictum reflects this notion: “The essence of the church is fellowship.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding fellowship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is praised by Donald Bloesch for contributing to an understanding of the church:

Part of the genius of Dietrich Bonhoeffer was his discernment that community belongs to the salient marks of the church. Here we see an affinity to the Pietist emphasis on fellowship . . . He has in mind the readiness to share both goods and time with people in need, especially those who belong to the household of faith. Christianity is evidenced by the willingness to live in solidarity with both our fellow believer and our neighbor and to celebrate this solidarity through living a common life involving mutual confession of sins, intercessory prayer and the sacramental rites of baptism and eucharist.<sup>29</sup>

Medieval Scholasticism originating from monasteries and universities stressed precision of theology, even if scholasticism was preoccupied with abstractions. Our own tradition has emphasized true doctrine or right teaching, which is first partly evidenced by

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<sup>23</sup> As cited by Donald Bloesch in *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, and Mission*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2002, p 105. The source given was P.T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church*, pp 12, 250.

<sup>24</sup> This is what Donald Bloesch argues p 105. We should not forget the rich history of missions before the Reformation, and I also think that the church planting into France from Geneva is often overlooked.

<sup>25</sup> Bonganjalo Goba, “What is Faith? A Black South African Perspective,” *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, Harper San Francisco, 1990, p 21.

<sup>26</sup> Justo González, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1975, p 77. “Peace” would be prevalent in the later developments of the movement, *via* Menno Simons, pp 86-87.

<sup>27</sup> J. Heinrich Arnold, *Discipleship*, Plough Publishing, Farmington, PA, 1994, p 19.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman, Harper and Row, New York, 1958, p 213 (Westminster/John Knox edition, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> Bloesch, p 106.

the confessional nature of our heritage itself,<sup>30</sup> and then by the content of those confessions where the importance of true doctrine is stressed.<sup>31</sup> Although the initial Reformers reacted against the methods of the scholastics, the next generation of Reformers would develop their own Protestant Scholasticism characterized by creedal precision.

To all of these we also add how the ever-growing Pentecostal revolution has brought attention to signs and wonders as indicators demonstrating the reality of the faith of those who follow the Gospel.

*If* these are truly “marks” from the perspective of various traditions, and *if* any might be deemed faithful and useful in our attempt at being Reformed and Reforming, the list of potential marks becomes rather long: missions in various forms, willingness to suffer persecution, separation from sin, fellowship, true doctrine or right teaching, and signs and wonders. One could argue that the list could be expanded still to allow for more nuances. For example, “mission” to some has meant the pursuit of social justice, which even more pointedly was taken to be a “sign” of the faithfulness of a church. To complicate matters even more, should we include everything associated with the “great ends of the church” (i.e. *Book of Order*, G-1.0200), and does this not confuse “marks” with “ends”? In other words, would we be saying basically that the church exists where the purposes of the church are being fulfilled? This will be taken up later because these type of questions need to be asked against a bigger backdrop of Reformed ecclesiology. For now, it is enough to observe strengths and weaknesses of these potential “new marks” in comparison to the traditional ones.

### *Re-thinking the Marks*

Whereas the proclamation of the Word and especially the administration of the sacraments point to the church assembled for worship, the potential marks given above do not necessarily do the same. Moreover, beyond the *hearing* of the Word emphasized by Calvin, Word and sacrament generally designate the role of clergy. Thus, the strength and the potential attractiveness of these other so-called marks are found in these two characteristics: 1) The priesthood of *all* believers has a central role in the validation of the church and its witness, and 2) the church is not only the church when gathered on Sundays.

If we truly want to heighten the baptismal vocation of all believers, and if we desire to affirm that the church is not a building but rather the people and should be the church in between Sundays, then just maybe we should re-conceptualize the traditional marks. A focus on the church gathered on Sundays (or Saturdays) has meant over time, in the context of North America, that the church too easily over-concentrates on how to be more attractive in its gatherings. It is not surprising, therefore, with a valid desire to reach a culture—a culture that adores celebrities—the church would create its own celebrity-like figures.

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<sup>30</sup> *The Book of Confessions*, p xi and following.

<sup>31</sup> Examples will be forthcoming in later parts of the paper.

A reservation could be that if the marks are to consist of the longer list given above, then the focus will be too much on what *we* do rather than about what *God* does. If it is an act of faith to believe that the church exists, then would we not be putting our faith in ourselves rather than God? In response, two things must be said. First, it is an act of faith to believe that the *invisible* church exists, because we believe this no matter the evidence we see to the contrary. It is *discernment* to decide whether a particular church exists as a part of the true church. Secondly, we do not deny that proclaiming the Word and administering the sacraments are done by a *church*, but we also have faith that God is present and at work. The same general truth could be said of these other potential marks.

Additionally, as Christ's presence to us, Word and sacrament would have a *unique quality* in being true marks compared with potential marks like mission and fellowship. But this is also true in respect to comparing Word and sacrament to church discipline. So if we are to accept church discipline to be a mark according to the Scots Confession, then again we cannot dismiss these other potential marks too quickly.

Finally, if we are not alone the body of Christ, and if the marks of the true church are at least the Word proclaimed and heard, and the sacraments administered, then what about Christian communities like the Quakers where sacraments are not practiced? Are we willing to say that a Quaker congregation is not part of the church? The first two Reformation marks that I treasure may have their own limitations in discerning the church's existence.<sup>32</sup> For the purpose of ecumenism, the Word *and* the third mark become all the more important.

Naturally there are shortcomings to the laundry list of potential marks. Namely, not all on the list may normally be apparent under "ordinary" circumstances, if there is such a thing. Suffering and persecution, for instance, cannot be guaranteed to be present, at no fault of the community.<sup>33</sup> Therefore a community's *willingness* to suffer may not always be visible. Furthermore, even though the wider church may benefit from signs and wonders as typically witnessed in Pentecostal/Charismatic communities, I cannot maintain—according to a Reformed biblical interpretation of spiritual gifts—that their absence negates a church's existence.<sup>34</sup>

With those two qualifiers and with further explanation, I believe the list as presented can be narrowed down to missions, fellowship, and right teaching or true doctrine. Or, it might be more accurate and proper to say that the different marks investigated so far have fallen within three broad categories: relationship to God, relationship to the world, and relationship to each other. The first involves a commitment to God especially as confessed through the community's beliefs as to the One to whom they are committing themselves, which is to say it involves "the mark" of true doctrine

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<sup>32</sup> I admit that I am just now examining certain theological implications and nuances of Word and sacrament as marks, such as determining the church in such places as Quaker communities. The best plausible answer is how the Word, especially taken to represent pure or true doctrine of the Gospel, is often cited as being dominant.

<sup>33</sup> We do not suffer for the sake of suffering, but rather we exalt the name of Christ at all costs, and this may involve persecution.

<sup>34</sup> I have only recently come across "Report of the Special Committee on the Work of the Holy Spirit," to the 182<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, 1970.

and perhaps worship and prayer in general. The second entails a commitment to the act and manner of engaging the world, which is to say missions in a wide sense, but potentially includes meeting material needs, standing in solidarity with the poor, striving for peace and justice, and separating from sin. The third implies a commitment to each other where not only is there the practice of love and care for the well-being of one another, but also the enjoyment of warm fellowship along with reconciliation when needed.

When the list is distilled down in that way, the possible “marks” need not be in *addition* to the traditional ones, but can be identified to be necessary *elements* of the third mark. I believe this is definitely so if we consider church discipline to mean the mutual promotion of virtue and the suppression of vice. Keeping the correlation to how these “elements” have been expressed above, the fourth hypothesis is stated as follows:

*The third mark, taken to mean the disciplined Christian life actively lived together, consists of common commitment to beliefs about God, common vision to what we are called to do in partnership because of those beliefs, and common care for and fellowship with one another.*

If it seemed radical to first contemplate new marks like mission and fellowship, and if it also seems radical or even unwise to hold these to be all elements of the third mark, it can be even more radical of a step to allow any aspect of *commonality* to be associated with a Reformation mark. It begs the question as to how much would be sufficient in order to declare that the church exists here! Yet we believe the nature of the church to be one. There must still be something that we hold in common, something *visible* and *discernable* that allows us to claim unity of some kind, something our diversity does not negate.<sup>35</sup> Also, it was noted that extraordinary discipline involves resolving disputes where there is “no agreement on the good” between parties, which assumes that a certain level of agreement is desirable. How much more with ordinary church discipline and in our life together should there be significant agreement or commonality! Without common commitments, how can there be *any* mutual accountability to promote virtues and suppress vices?

Therefore, I believe common commitment to beliefs, common vision to what we are called to do, and common fellowship are so central, that when one or more of these are missing, Christian community flounders in a particular time and place. If these commonalities do not exist at all, then the third mark cannot exist, and the particular church is most likely in danger of becoming an empty institutional shell.

What makes a particular, visible church a church when it is *not* gathered? Yes, we recognize that we are one in Christ, but how do we *discern* this? It may be discerned through the third mark by what we experience as holding in common. Members of the community share a particular bond even while absent from one another and through the

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<sup>35</sup> There might be a tendency for us all to point to different indicators of our unity: our denominational structure, doctrine, missions, liturgical practices, etc.

activities of the other six days. There can be a trust, a conviction, and even excitement about what the disciple must be and do even while alone, strengthened with the *knowledge* that there is a host of witnesses—both from this life and the next—that still surround the disciple. The idea of experiencing community while apart from one another and the test of true community are expressed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*.

We recognize, then, that only as we are within the fellowship can we be alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in the fellowship. It is not as though the one preceded the other; both begin at the same time, namely, with the call of Jesus Christ. . . . Every day brings to the Christian many hours in which he will be alone in an unchristian environment. These are the times of *testing*. This is the test of true meditation and true Christian community. Has the fellowship served to make the individual free, strong, and mature, or has it made him weak and dependent? Has it taken him by the hand for a while in order that he may learn again to walk by himself, or has it made him uneasy and unsure? This is the one of the most searching and critical questions that can be put to any Christian fellowship.<sup>36</sup>

If the third mark is important when considering what makes a congregation a church when it is not gathered, it is even more important when considering a particular denomination because we *cannot* practically gather all as one. If these commonalities are elements of the third mark, then we become dangerously close to addressing the crisis-type question: “Can we tell when we have stopped being a true church?” The invisible church will exist with or without the Presbyterian Church (USA). Accepting that our denomination is a form of a particular church, what can we faithfully say about the marks in our denomination?<sup>37</sup>

### *The Presbyterian Church (USA)*

Word and sacrament, taken strictly to refer to the activities of the gathered, are harder to discuss as marks for the *denomination*. They are experienced in various locations—mostly congregations—so only taken as the sum of these experiences are they marks for the *entire* denomination.<sup>38</sup> This is still very significant, but I believe for binding the denomination together, it is outweighed by the need for mutual trust that what is being proclaimed in local congregations is faithful and that sacraments are rightly administered. As I have defined the third mark, its presence would be needed to

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<sup>36</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Harper and Row, NY, 1954, pp 78, 88.

<sup>37</sup> See Joseph Small, “What Makes a Denomination?” *Presbyterians Today*, September 2007, p 4. “A denomination is formed from the lived reality of shared faith, life, and mission. *Shared* faith, life and mission are not *uniform*, but neither are they merely the sum of disconnected beliefs.” Barry Ensign-George pointed out how the notion of denominations receives such little attention in any systematic theologies addressing the doctrine of the church. For this reason, it is interesting to note how Calvin viewed the entire Roman Church. He believed there were some true churches within Roman Catholicism, but this was insufficient for accepting the Roman Church as a whole. (*Inst.*, IV, ii, 12) I am not advocating departures from the PC(USA), only observing that parallel notions to modern denominations are rare, but they might be there in Calvin’s writings.

<sup>38</sup> I do not want to downplay the importance of being baptized into the community of a connectional denomination, but even being “one in baptism” assumes a common understanding of baptism.



experience the denomination as one church, where the third mark nurtures mutual trust through common commitments. Of the elements or components of the third mark—common commitment to beliefs (true doctrine or right teaching), common vision to what we are called to do (missions), and common care and love for each other (fellowship)—



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**Fighting in the PC(USA): Without an enemy on the outside, we fight with each other.  
This brings new meaning to the church militant.**

are there any that are lacking in the life of the PC(USA)?

God calls the church into existence to join in the *missio Dei*. Theologically we understand that the call of God precedes the church. Mission, it would seem, comes first. And yet our *common* partnership in ministry will flow from our *common* theological understanding of God and God’s mission in the world.<sup>39</sup> Our greatest common partnership in ministry (common mission) will therefore naturally stem from our greatest common commitment of belief (common doctrine). At the very least we *must* acknowledge that our shared beliefs and the resulting shared practices (i.e. *The Book of Confessions* and *Book of Order*) constitute “us” as a particular denomination. But our constant fighting over them demonstrates that perhaps we are not actually “constituted”

<sup>39</sup> Take for example the first two preliminary principles (i.e. concerning Christ and missions) for the Form of Government, G-1.0100.

like we may think, and our experience of community is diminished. “Fellowship” in the narrower sense (i.e. enjoyment of one another) is not easily created across a denomination. In fact, in practice it has been my experience that it can more easily be a by-product of the other two components. Fellowship is advanced by the sense of partnership understood to exist between one another for what we are called to be and do. Beyond the congregation, the experience of fellowship is quite often lacking, even in the life of presbyteries.<sup>40</sup> From all corners of the denomination, many voices have urged us to not be so inwardly focused and to get on with the “business of church,” which is to say that we should be about “missions.” However, I believe there is sharp disagreement as to what that business is, and thus any sense of partnership is lacking. To make matters worse, there is a difference in understanding as to *where* God’s vital work occurs in the church—at the congregational-level or the national-level. Without commitments to common beliefs, missions, and each other, the life of the PC(USA) can not long hold together with such divergent interpretations *about* the church.

But has this been a fair analysis where the third mark is used in this way? The question was raised earlier whether church discipline could be interpreted too broadly to be faithful or to be of any use. If the third mark or church discipline is *everything* involved in the repression of vice and the nurture of virtue, and if church discipline can be defined as our life together with those common commitments described already, has the third mark simply become synonymous with “church”? Is there any distinction between the third mark and *everything* that the community of faith does?

There is yet one very small distinction to make. Acts of commitment to God (such as confessions of faith), of engaging the world (such as missions), and of caring for one another (fellowship), may all be categorized as pertaining to virtuous acts or perhaps abstaining from vices. It is the characteristic of the commitments being held in *common* that enables the *mutual promotion* of virtue and the *mutual suppression* of vice to occur. Perhaps the unique quality of the third mark as “life together,” still making it distinct from “church,” is the way in which the *common commitments* are able to *promote* and *suppress*, making visible the nature of the church. The aspect of “common commitment” establishes a connection with church discipline, especially ordinary discipline, traditionally understood.

The final hypothesis flows from previous statements:

*The third mark or the disciplined-life together, formed by Word and sacraments, should contain the sum of the Nicene notes. And the disciplined-life together that manifests the nature of the church becomes a “hermeneutic” for studying, proclaiming, and hearing the Word as well as receiving the sacraments, which allows for the ordinary means of grace to faithfully transform the community of the covenant into what God intends.*

I am very grateful to have been able to review unpublished lecture notes of John Burgess concerning the doctrine of the church in the confessions. His notes provided

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<sup>40</sup> See Wiley’s second thesis in “We believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: 4 Theses,” p 4.

insights for what I tackle in the rest of this paper. Here I want to present the basic definitions of church to be found throughout the confessions, as synthesized by Burgess. The church is thought of as the *elect* (emphasis on invisible church; 3.16, 4.054, 5.125), as the *place* of Christ's action through the Reformation marks (emphasis on visible church; 8.17), and the *reconciled* and *reconciling community* (visible; 9.31). The church then is also defined by the attributes found in the Nicene Creed, and additionally as the communion of the saints (3.16, 6.146). Burgess perceives that the "attributes of the church (one, holy, catholic, apostolic) *become manifest in the communion of saints.*"<sup>41</sup> For example, the *communion of saints* is *one in fellowship* (4.055), using gifts for the benefit of each other (4.055, 6.146), and maintaining mutual edification and care (6.147).

Accordingly, it may not be as unusual as I had previously presumed to consider how the Nicene notes are present in the *communal life* of the church.<sup>42</sup> What I still assume to be more fragile is the attempt to position the Nicene notes within the third mark itself. However, I am hopeful that it can be accepted that there is enough correlation between "life together" as the third mark and "communion of saints" that lends credibility to the last hypothesis because of what Burgess sees within the confessions and Reformed ecclesiology.

The three "elements" of the third mark presented in this paper harmonize with the four Nicene notes, which I will demonstrate below. Because the church's very existence is dependent upon the call of God, I am encouraged by Darrell Guder's challenge to reverse the order of the Nicene notes, emphasizing the very reason for the community being called into existence at all! "The community formed by the Holy Spirit through the initial apostolic witness is called to be sent. It is apostolically initiated in order to continue the apostolic ministry."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, I start with *apostolic*!

The element of the third mark described as common vision or partnership in what we are called to do (missions) upholds the nature of the church as *apostolic*. The community is sent, and if a particular congregation is sent, then it will strive to be *catholic*, as Guder also argues.<sup>44</sup> The community is *catholic* in that the church looks outward, following our God in and through the entire world, believing that the entire world needs to experience the full redemption that God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit offers. The catholicity of the community will foster appreciation for the diversity of ways that the proclamation of the Gospel and the provisional demonstration of God's kingdom are advanced throughout the world. What is held in common in our catholicity is our concern for all to be saved. Cyril of Jerusalem states:

[The Church] is called Catholic then because it extends over all the world, from one end of the earth to the other; and because it teaches universally and

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<sup>41</sup> Since these are notes, I admit I could easily be misunderstanding Burgess' intention and meaning.

<sup>42</sup> Even though I stated in this paper that the marks make the church visible, and the nature of the church being made visible should be one holy catholic and apostolic, I have not yet found these ideas clearly and succinctly stated in that way in an authoritative place. Rather, it appears that these points can only be drawn from "antecedent terminology and statements" found in Reformed theology.

<sup>43</sup> Darrel Guder, "The Nicene Marks in a Post-Christendom Church," *Bearing the Marks of the Church*, p 28.

<sup>44</sup> Guder, p 29.

completely one and all the doctrines which ought to come to men’s knowledge, concerning things both visible and invisible, heavenly and earthly; and because it brings into subjection to godliness the whole race of mankind, governors and governed, learned and unlearned; and because it universally treats and heals the whole class of sins, which are committed by soul or body, and possesses in itself every form of virtue which is named, both in deeds and words, and in every kind of spiritual gifts.<sup>45</sup>

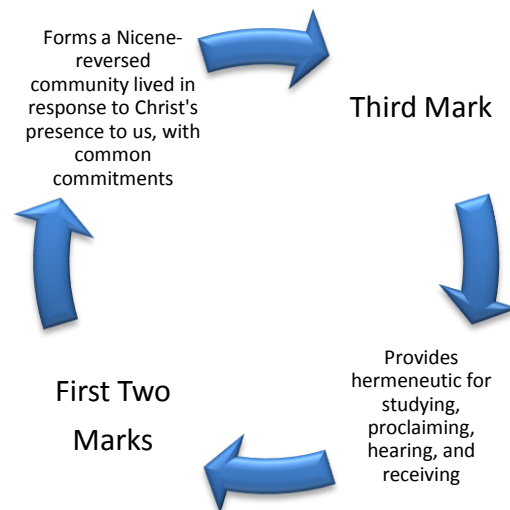
Hence, John Leith argues that the catholic or universal church is not the sum of many local congregations. “Catholicity is a quality which belongs to every congregation.”<sup>46</sup>

Apostolic and catholic also establish one aspect of *holiness*, being set aside for God’s purposes in the world. The other aspect of holiness is living out those purposes in a *holy manner*. The latter was also included in the element of the third mark described as common commitment to the act *and* manner of engaging the world, such as separation from sin.

The element of the third mark described as common commitment to beliefs allows for the church to be *one*, with a shared understanding of the God who sends us and how He sends us. The *oneness* of the church is derived from being apostolic together, having the same catholic outlook, and pursuing these purposes in a holy fashion. We will share a common commitment to each other (fellowship) as fellow sojourners and partners in the Gospel. Thus that element of the third mark also coincides with the attribute *one*. Only in losing ourselves in our apostolic calling do we find the fellowship we long for, trusting first in God’s fellowship with us as we are sent.

Even if not spelled out completely, hopefully it is not too difficult to see that the apostolic catholic holy and one church should be made visible and lived out in practical ways through a sent community that holds itself accountable to its faith and calling, experiencing true fellowship and partnership. This is the kind of community that strengthens a disciple for the test when he or she is alone. This is our life together or the third mark of the church. While the whole community would clearly be involved in making the church visible, the vision of living out the reverse-ordered Nicene notes becomes an important hermeneutic for the one who would dare be an ordained servant to the Word!

In concluding Part II, I believe in our denomination there is a lack of common commitments or common understanding in *all* of the “elements” I defined as part of the



<sup>45</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, “Catechetical Lectures,” XVIII, 23; *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2004, pp 141-142.

<sup>46</sup> John Leith, *The Church: Believing Fellowship*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA, 1981, p 25.

third mark. But this is largely derived specifically, in my opinion, from the lack of common commitments to beliefs or “true doctrine.” This does not mean, for example, that the purpose of preaching should simply be to recite orthodox doctrine or to obsess over points of doctrine held in contrast to other preachers and Christians. It also does not mean that I believe we should lift up something like the Westminster Confession of Faith as *the* system of doctrine taught in Scripture. To do so endangers our very identity where we cling to being Reformed but not Reforming. But my concession about our denominational life acknowledges that we have focused on diversity for so long, we have a harder time knowing what holds us together or coming to a shared understanding of what we believe. Our identity has been jeopardized by not being Reformed while seeking to be Reforming, and there is disagreement as to whether the agency for our Reforming efforts are truly the Word and the power of the Spirit.

So that you may hear correctly what follows in Part III, and in order to remain faithfully Reformed, I offer the following encounters with Jesus in the Gospel of John, which seem to demonstrate the need for something like a dialectical method. On the one hand, passages like John 14:9 and 15:15 stress that God has been fully revealed in Jesus Christ. If we have seen Jesus, we have seen the Father, and Jesus has made known everything He has received from the Father. On the other hand, John 16:12 and 20:17 imply that we are unable to understand that revelation fully. The disciples were not able to bear all that Jesus could have shared with them in the upper room, and the Spirit would need to guide them into all truth. Jesus told Mary not to hold on to Him, for He needed to ascend to the Father. To the latter, Augustine makes this comment:

For touch, as it were, puts limit to their conception, and He therefore would not have the thought of the heart, directed towards Himself, to be so limited as that He should be held to be only that which He seemed to be. But the “ascension to the Father” meant, so to appear as He is equal to the Father, that the limit of the sight which sufficeth us might be attained there.<sup>47</sup>

There is full revelation, and Jesus certainly can be known and is known to us through the witness of Scripture. Yet our tendency is to fail to fully grasp Jesus or exalt Him to the extent that we should, therefore to Him we must continually turn.

I am very much aware that Part III focuses on only one side, but I only want to make a case for a perspective that is less often cited: the case for being of one mind regarding “true doctrine,” which involves both believing the right things and sharing in those beliefs. Is there a risk in suggesting that the *existence* of a practical mark of the church may be determined by whether there is a commonality of beliefs? I am sure there probably is. Would everything need to become an essential tenet of faith? Probably not.

I will proceed by first looking at our theological heritage and then at the Apostle Paul for discussing the oneness of belief, true doctrine, and right teaching.

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<sup>47</sup> Augustine, “On the Trinity,” book I, ch. 9, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, p 27.

### **Part III – The Case for Oneness of Belief, True Doctrine, & Right Teaching**

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#### *Theological Heritage*

We first take into account *The Book of Confessions*. In the Heidelberg Catechism, it is asked “What, then, must a Christian believe?” The answer is *all* that is promised in the gospel, but the Apostles’ Creed is an acceptable summary (4.022). The section of the catechism where the question and answer fall (“Part II – Of Man’s Redemption”) is more interesting still, for it shows that the content of what one believes is significant *for redemption*. Moving from the individual to the church, the Westminster Confession states that particular churches are “more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” (6.143) In the Barmen Declaration a connection is made between theological beliefs and the existence of church in a given place (all italics are mine):

We publicly declare before all evangelical Churches in Germany that what they *hold in common* in this Confession is grievously imperiled, and with it the *unity* of the German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the ruling Church party of the “German Christians” and of the Church administration carried on by them. . . . This threat consists in the fact that the *theological basis, in which the German Evangelical Church is united*, has been continually and systematically thwarted and rendered ineffective by alien principles . . . When these principles are held to be valid, then, according to all the Confessions in force among us, the *Church ceases to be the Church* and the German Evangelical Church, as a federation of Confessional Churches, becomes intrinsically impossible. (8.07)

True doctrine or faith is not only crucial for the church both particular and visible, but for the universal church and even the invisible church where *election* is prominent:

From the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus . . . This Kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen, and includes both the chosen who are departed, the Kirk triumphant, those who yet live and fight against sin and Satan, and those who shall live hereafter. (3.16)

The importance of true doctrine constantly appears in recognizing the visible or particular church as part of the true church. Sermon, sacraments, and even church discipline are based on true or right doctrine, with priority placed on the Word (i.e. 5.134). This can also be perceived by turning to the Reformers. Zwingli declared that “There is only one holy, catholic, that is, universal Church, and . . . this Church is either visible or invisible. . . . The visible Church is . . . all who make profession of faith in

Christ the whole world over.”<sup>48</sup> I would argue that according to Zwingli, profession of faith in Christ is *the* sign of the church, and this might be an underlying assumption when the signs of Word and sacraments are articulated by Calvin, although differences of sacramental theology would certainly be pertinent. But in the *Institutes*, Calvin cannot imagine the church to exist apart from the Word, and in this way the first mark is brought forward as absolutely crucial (IV.ii.4). Certainly Calvin stressed true doctrine and—it should be pointed out clearly—*agreement upon doctrine*. “The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations; it is divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and *is bound by the bond of the same religion.*” (italics mine; IV.i.9) Additionally, Calvin combated heretical and schismatic impulses while defending the Reformation:

This communion is held together by two bonds, agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. . . . Heretics corrupt the sincerity of the faith with false dogmas; but schismatics, while sometimes even of the same faith, break the bond of fellowship. . . . *But it must also be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule.* (italics mine; IV.ii.5)

Therefore, the Barmen Declaration simply applied what can be found in Calvin’s *Institutes*. Again, “But, as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows.” (IV.ii.1) How I have treated the third mark offers another avenue to connect the Barmen Declaration with the Reformation’s concern for discerning the existence of a true church. As already evidenced, true doctrine is associated closely with the Word and therefore with the mark of proclaiming that Word. But I think the characteristic of agreement or commonality permits a strong connection with the third mark, especially as we have seen how a “bond” exists beyond when the church is assembled, beyond when hearing the proclamation. Regarding church discipline, Calvin relates it to doctrine and speaks of its necessity:

All who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration . . . are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church. For what will happen if each is allowed to do what he pleases? Yet that would happen, if to the preaching of doctrine there were not added private admonitions, corrections, and other aids of the sort that sustain doctrine and do not let it remain idle. Therefore, discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ. . . . Those who trust that without this bond of discipline the church can long stand are, I say, mistaken. (IV.xii.1 and 4)

Since Satan cannot altogether extinguish pure doctrine . . . he is struggling to overthrow the church of Christ by this crafty stratagem: when discipline has been broken and loosened he cuts through the sinews of the body, so that the limbs become dislocated and a sad dismemberment follows. I wish that those who want

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<sup>48</sup> Gonzalez, p 72. The quote is cited as coming from *Reply to Emser*.

to cast off the yoke and allow everyone unbridled license would realize that they are seeking the ruin and devastation of the church.<sup>49</sup>

Since the Reformed faith—or at least the essential tenets thereof, as expressed in the confessions—is to be an authentic and reliable exposition of Scripture for what we are to believe and do, and since we should be guided in our exegesis by the Reformed faith and confessions, we turn to Scripture with our theological heritage in mind. In so doing, we do not interpret Scripture simply on our own. But we also want to have a faith open to being Reformed by the Word, so we ask if we have been faithful *to* the Word.

### *The Apostle Paul*

In multiple ways, the Apostle Paul is a champion of diversity. There are many spiritual gifts but the same Spirit who gives them (Eph 4; 1 Cor 12). Each member, whether hand or foot, is a part of the same body (Rom 12, 1 Cor 12). Differences are okay and uniformity is not required! In Christ we have been made one where there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28). This truth confirms the catholicity of God’s church. In the plurality of social classifications that may exist in the world, the new society that God has created has the ultimate citizenship in only one kingdom, that of God (Phil 3:20). Our ability to see others in a new way rather than as the world sees, and to take part in the reconciling work of God that is able to make us one with God and each other, results in our being ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:16-20)

What is important about the diversity mentioned so far is that it in no way threatens—or should threaten—the unity of the community that has been created in Christ. There is oneness in the midst of diversity. There is unity in the midst of catholicity. But even Paul’s affinity for diversity has limits. Namely, Paul urges oneness when it comes to the faith, the faith that he received and which he passed on:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures . . . (NRSV 1 Cor. 15:1-4)

Note that Paul says that they are *being* saved, and this is true *if* they hold firmly to the message.

Not only does Paul urge acceptance of the one, basic message, he warns of people who would distort the gospel, such as those “dogs” or mutilators of the flesh (Phil. 3:2-4). I interpret them to be the circumcision party or “Judaizers,” who are most likely believers in Christ who insisted that a Christian Gentile must become like a Jew.<sup>50</sup> If so, the

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<sup>49</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Ecclesiastical Advice*, trans. by Beaty and Farly, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p 1991, p 111.

<sup>50</sup> I think one of the most succinct and straightforward treatments about this and surrounding issues can be found in Bo Reicke’s *Re-examining Paul’s Letters*, Continuum International, 2001.



situation is all the more pertinent because apparently the “opposition” was Christian and reflects in-fighting. “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” (Gal. 1:6-7) Those who have believed in the false gospel *have deserted God*.<sup>51</sup> There are, therefore, limits to diversity in reference to the Gospel or the faith. Without boundaries, distortions occur.

The unity that Paul urges is often phrased as “same mind” or “same purpose,” while urging agreement. Being “in agreement” can simply mean being reconciled in a specific squabble, but clearly some element of the unity pertains to beliefs and then how one acts accordingly. “Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that *all* of you be *in agreement* and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the *same mind* and the *same purpose*.” (1 Cor 1:10; see also 2 Cor 13:11 and Gal 5:6-10)

This lack of oneness and the existence of opposition are themes in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul gives them an exhortation in Philippians 1:27-28, which I lay out as follows, with observations and giving emphasis:

**Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, (Behavior follows belief.)**  
**so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you,**

(Trust in each other’s commitment to behavior and faith is important for the relationship when absent from one another.)

**I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit,**  
**striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,**  
**and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.**

(Two modifying participles in how they are to stand: striving/contending and not being intimidated.)

**For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing.** (Standing firm in this way is something of a sign, or shall we say “mark”?)

In the face of opposition, Paul is commanding them to defend the faith of the gospel, and to do so with one mind. Paul knows there are those who stir up trouble (1:17) and he will later warn the Philippians to watch out for the “dogs” (3:2) and anyone else who might be an enemy of the cross (3:18). In fact, contending for the faith might be viewed as part of the *manner* of living that is deemed worthy of the gospel. Paul presses on in his exhortations and arguments in Philippians 2:1-5 as I again lay out:

**If then there is any encouragement in Christ,**

**(if) any consolation from love,**

**(if) any sharing in the Spirit,**

**(if) any compassion and sympathy,**

(The compound conditional statements heavily lean towards an affirmation of them.)

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<sup>51</sup> I am interpreting that the “one who called” in verse 6 (part of a substantive attributive participle) is none other than “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v3). It seems that the only other option is Paul himself as the one deserted, which seems unlikely given the tone of the letter after the blessing.

**make my joy complete** (This is the command, and what follows is how they will make Paul joyful so that the modifying participles become the agency for his fulfilled joy.)

**by being of the same *mind*,**

**having the same love,**

**being in full accord and of one *mind*.**

**Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.**

**Let the same *mind* be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .**

How might this unity or “same mind” be established? It will come by the examples that Paul gives, and you could say that his authority stems from the cruciform of ministry. Paul, who addresses them not as an apostle but a fellow servant (1:1), is a drink offering that is poured out (2:17) just as Jesus emptied or poured out Himself taking the nature of a servant (2:7). Paul notes that some have been encouraged by his example (1:12-14), and he commands that they follow his example and of others who live according to the pattern or image that has been given to them (3:17). Specifically the “others” include Timothy and Epaphroditus (2:19-30). What Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus have in common is that quality of not looking to their own interests but the interest of others, which is the very thing that the opposition lacks according to Paul (1:15-17; 2:21; 3:19). But *the* prime example, of course, comes in the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:5-11. The “mind” that they are to have is the mind of Christ who is *the* image or pattern. Christ emptied Himself and thus was exalted, just as Paul emptied himself and aims to exalt Christ (1:20) while expecting to be exalted in the form of “vindication” (1:19 *sōtārian*), and just as Epaphroditus risked his life for the work of Christ (2:30) and Paul exalts him as an example. The possibility of unity for the Philippians and for us comes from being confronted by Christ, a function that the Christ hymn seems to have in Paul’s letter.<sup>52</sup>

The consequence of the “same mind” that they are to have is that they will in no way accept the distorted gospel put forth by the circumcision party, which places confidence in the flesh. This is the road that Paul has been down (3:4-10) but leaves behind. He knows that he cannot reach completion or maturity through his own efforts (3:12-13) but only by being taken hold of by Christ. “Let those of us then who are mature (complete/fulfilled) be of the *same mind*; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.” (3:15)

I read Philippians 3:15 to stress the importance of agreement, but Calvin puts forth an interesting mixture of concerns. First, when discussing doctrines that are necessary, Calvin gives these examples: “God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.” (IV.i.12) Then Calvin acknowledges that there can be differences on other points of doctrine that in no way break the unity of faith. In that spirit, Calvin quotes Philippians 3:15 and then writes in the same section, “Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters

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<sup>52</sup> Paul’s encounter with the risen Lord on the Damascus road is a backdrop to all of this. It is not about imitating the sufferings of Christ, but “dying and rising” in baptism to new life, as Paul describes and as Paul fell and rose again in his encounter with Jesus.

should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? First and foremost, we should agree on all points. But since all men are somewhat beclouded with ignorance, either we must leave no church remaining, or we must condone delusion in those matters which can go unknown without harm to the sum of religion and without loss of salvation.” Moreover, in his commentary on that same verse, Calvin believes that everyone should undoubtedly be able to see “that everything that is taught in the Papacy, as to the attainment of righteousness and salvation, is nauseous dung,” but Calvin maintains that “Paul felt assured as to his doctrine, and yet he allows those who could not as yet receive it time to make progress, and he does not cease on that account to regard them as brethren, only he cautions them against flattering themselves in their ignorance.”<sup>53</sup>

In short, Calvin says that we should be of one mind, at least on what is essential. It would be better if we were of one mind on everything, but being who we are, that is not likely and patience will be required. Yet this is not an excuse to say that we cannot know what is essential or that agreement is not possible, for I believe that would be to “flatter our ignorance.”

Concluding Part III, Paul holds to a unity that relates to the faith or to what one believes about the content of the gospel. Certainly that is not all, for he also urges unity in purpose and encourages agreement so that the fellowship would not go without reconciliation. So there is a faith to defend; defending the faith is part of living a life worthy of the gospel; there are distortions that are not welcome; and there needs to be sufficient agreement. In the PC(USA), our problem is in determining the boundaries—or rather our inability to do so, where diversity of *beliefs* can eventually distort what is essential and no agreement on the good can be found. However, no matter one’s theological perspective, there is a greater challenge presented by Paul in Philippians. If there is to be more “same-mindedness” in the PC(USA), that mind should be of Jesus. While there is a contending for the faith, the mindset is of absolute humility and of complete submission to one another. We err if we deny that there can be no distortions to the gospel or claim that there is no need to set boundaries. But we also err, if in our attempt to establish true doctrine or right thinking, we point to ourselves rather than God.

According to Paul, if the gospel or the faith becomes distorted, there is a turning away from God if you accept the distortion as the gospel. According to our theological heritage, it is argued that accepting distorted or alien principles threatens the unity of the church and the church ceases to exist. The significance of true doctrine is found in the first mark of the church, but agreement upon sound doctrine and common profession of faith is what unites the church. There is a bond of agreement in doctrine and brotherly love, which keeps the communion together. I have claimed that this kind of bond—common doctrine, brotherly love or fellowship, and to those I add common missions—can be associated with the third mark. With a lack of true doctrine, faithful proclamation of the Word is endangered. But the lack of true doctrine and common agreement about

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<sup>53</sup> Calvin, “Epistle to the Philippians,” *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, trans. by Pringle, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, pp 104-105.

what is true and good threaten all that can be associated with the third mark. On both counts, the church cannot long survive.

Not only are we to have faith in God, as in *trust* in God's sovereignty, but we are to have faith where the *content* of that faith matters. "As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk . . ." (italics mine; 3.16) In referring to that part of the Scots Confession, Burgess connects the theological truths of the nature of the church to God as "they tell us something about the very nature of God."<sup>54</sup> The nature of God is connected to the nature of the church. I further argue that the nature of *the* church is somehow connected to the *particular* church by grace through *faith*. Because of this, the content of that faith again certainly matters, because *as* we do *not* believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we also lose the essence of the church and the particular church ceases to exist. If there are some unnecessary doctrines on which there can be disagreement without a loss of salvation, as observed earlier from Calvin, then there are necessary doctrines to be agreed upon or there will be a loss of salvation.

Because of this strong connection between faith in the Triune God and the nature of the church in a particular place, I now turn to a thought-experiment concerning the use of "ontological" and "economic" in reference to the church.



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**Although "visible church" in a polemical fashion has meant for some to be the imperfect church compared to the invisible church, the existence of the invisible church is a matter of faith because of what we often see to the contrary. The visible has wheat and tares . . . and "Moe's."**

<sup>54</sup> Burgess, p 3.

## Part IV – Community Made in God’s Image: The use of “Ontological” and “Economic”

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The thought experiment I offer flows from this question: Is there a benefit to using the terms “ontological and economic” in reference to the church? I will explain those terms as they relate to Trinitarian theology.<sup>55</sup> The categories of economic/ontological would be in addition to visible/invisible and militant/triumphant, for they each have their purposes. While undertaking this experiment, we should keep in mind certain warnings given by Joseph Small in an online article, “Ministry in a Postmodern World.”

The distinction between the ideal church and the real church is couched in a variety of dyads: visible/invisible; empirical/essential; external/internal; real/ideal; etc. There are several strategies for dealing with the distinction. Perhaps the most common is to imagine that the church has a dual nature, or even two natures, that must be reconciled conceptually. The form of reconciliation—whether expressed in historical, spiritual, phenomenological, or eschatological terms—is to propose that the true, ideal church is a reality to which the actual church is called to conform. The actual church’s beliefs and practices are examined, found wanting, and then contrasted with the way the church ought to be. This “ought” is postulated on the basis [of] an image of what the true, essential, pure church “is.” The strong version of the two natures strategy often leads to the collapse of the actual church into the ideal church. The theological construct becomes what really matters. In this way, language about the church becomes descriptive even when its intention is normative.<sup>56</sup>

I am at once *encouraged* by what Small presents, because it at least means that others have gone down this path, but I am also *tentative* because it would seem that this journey still falls short in certain ways. Small observes that going down this path, you inevitably fall into ecclesial docetism or ecclesial ebionitism. These are the “unfortunate results” of a two-natured understanding of the church and the attempts to reconcile the two natures. Small’s exhortation is to “not become captive to theological abstraction or sociological determinism,” but “to discover the appropriate intersections between theology and sociology so that we can discover and develop faithful ecclesiology.”

In reading his article, perhaps the greatest potential errors in this experiment would be in theological abstractions and for spinning “lovely yarns” of theology, namely “the church as perichoretic Trinitarian community.” I do believe that if there are shortcomings, the exercise will still be fruitful for thinking about the importance of faith, true doctrine, and “salvation” in all its fullness for the church.

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<sup>55</sup> I am more familiar with economic and ontological, where others may speak of immanent and transcendent.

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/worship/postmodern.htm> (accessed June 26, 2009)

### *A Thought Experiment*

In Trinitarian theology, “economic” refers to the activity and revelation of God in the world and “ontological” refers to the very being or essence of God. To say that the economic Trinity is the same as the ontological Trinity is to uphold that who God is in God’s being has been fully revealed. For instance, in the introductory note to the Nicene Creed in *The Book of Confessions*, it says, “They affirmed that the divinity of Christ, the Son, is of the same substance as the divinity of God, the Father. To hold otherwise, they said, was to open the possibility of polytheism, and to imply that knowledge of God in Christ was not final knowledge of God.”<sup>57</sup> T.F. Torrance also argues that “the church is once again engaged in a theological struggle to conserve evangelical faith in the oneness between what God is toward us in Jesus Christ and what he is in his own Being as God. If that relation in being and agency is cut, then the whole Gospel of saving mediation between God and man collapses.”<sup>58</sup>

God *is* the actions and revelation of Jesus. “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:7-10) It is not simply an *example* of a loving act, but a *definition* because God is the only being who is the same in action and essence.

It is *not* the same in reference to God’s church, for the church’s *activity*—including the marks of the church—does not always reflect the *intended nature* of the church as one holy catholic and apostolic. What is visible is not always the ideal, even if still “real!” However, since we are made in the image of God and since the nature of the church is inherently connected to the nature of God, it might prove useful to use this terminology so as to connect ecclesiology with Trinitarian theology.

The possible usefulness of economic and ontological is the strong suggestion that the experience of the essence of church in a *particular* community *is a gift from God*. For unlike the Trinity, the economic church would always fall short of this so-called ontological church (defined by the intended nature of the Nicene notes). So if the economic church can be the same as the ontological church, it is solely by grace. For example, it is by grace that we are *one* in Christ, meaning that when we are in Christ we are in union with the One who *sends* us out into the *whole world* for a *set-aside purpose*.<sup>59</sup>

This terminology of ontological and economic can also encourage us to focus on what God has made real now in a way distinct from a promise of what will be consummated in the future coming of God’s kingdom. In other words, there is an ontological essence of the church made real now by the grace of God in and through the economic church. They do not need to be ultimately and forever separate. After all, *the*

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<sup>57</sup> *Book of Confessions*, 1994, p 2. I believe it was Luther who said that when you look upon Jesus on the cross, you see God.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, p 12

<sup>59</sup> This is not new. If I remember correctly, the PUP Task Force emphasized that our unity is a gift from God found in Christ, based on a study of Ephesians. About the attribute “holy,” Burgess points out that the church is holy only by virtue of its union with Christ (i.e. 5.125).

church is sometimes visible and sometimes not, but it is the same church. The ontological essence is not something that we only look forward to in the *eschaton*. The ontological church exists in the economic church by grace, and specifically grace through *faith*.

It is not a faith that the essence of the church exists out there somewhere where we can never experience it, but it is a faith in a God who is able to make it real in God's church as the church is connected to Christ in faith. And it is a faith that if lost, removes a particular community from the true essence of church that *had* been made real by grace. In this way, it is very distinct from viewing the ecclesiological notes eschatologically, even if the eschatological perspective is that of *realized* eschatology. It is distinct because it focuses on what is real *now* (differing from any notion of unrealized eschatology) and suggests that what is real now can be collectively lost (which does not seem possible with realized eschatology). In other words, even with a realized-eschatological ecclesiology, the nature of the church may be "realized" in the universal church that crosses time and space, but it need not necessarily be realized in a particular and visible congregation.

If the terms are to be used, the potential problems or possible heresies seem numerous, even beyond the warnings from Small. How can we avoid a "works-righteousness" of having enough faith or the "work" of believing correctly the right content of that faith? How can such a consideration harmonize with the notion of election and the perseverance of the saints? And why not stick with visible/invisible and militant/triumphant?

I think a possible solution involves 1) keeping in mind that God's universal church will always exist—even if invisible to our eyes—but particular churches will come and go, 2) affirming that a particular church is *constantly* dependent for its existence on the call of God, 3) distinguishing between the state of salvation for an individual and any "state of salvation" in reference to a church, and 4) distinguishing between various aspects of "salvation." I believe we are able to accept numbers one and two above as true, even if we have a harder time staying true to what is described there. But the last two need greater clarity.

Paul urged the Philippians to continue to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). Unless "salvation" (*sōtārian*)<sup>60</sup> refers to being freed or delivered from opposition or even to be vindicated—and I do not think it does<sup>61</sup>—then it raises the question: What kind of salvation is "worked out"? Distinguishable within salvation is being freed from the punishment of sin where one is declared righteous (justification), freed from the power of sin where one is becoming righteous (sanctification), and freed from even the presence of sin and suffering in a complete state of right-relations with God (glorification). "Working out *justification*" does not make sense, given Paul's emphasis on being justified by grace, not by works. Also, we cannot work out what is not able to be consummated yet (glorification). However, if in Phil 2:12 salvation is in

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<sup>60</sup> μετὰ φόβου καὶ τρόμου τὴν ἑαυτῶν σωτηρίαν κατεργάζεσθε

<sup>61</sup> Those are possible interpretations of its use in 1:19 given the context, but I think it less likely that we can interpret 2:12 in either one of those ways.

reference to sanctification, it would fit with Paul's description of God and the reason for working out their salvation: "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." (Phil 2:13)

In these three aspects of salvation,<sup>62</sup> we are constantly still reliant upon God's grace. During the process of sanctification, we still stand in need of being justified in the eyes of God. We are also reliant upon grace in what is actually being transformed in us through sanctification. We may not be able to lose our state of being justified, and we may look with certain hope to a glorification that is promised. However, it is possible to lose "salvation," meaning the state of being sanctified and transformed, as we move away from God's grace by moving away from faith in Jesus. If this is not so, I do not know what to make of Calvin when he writes, "Still, our redemption would be imperfect if he did not lead us ever onward to the final goal of salvation. Accordingly the moment we turn away even slightly from him, our salvation, which rests firmly in him, gradually vanishes away." (II.xvi.1) Recall Paul's words again from 1 Corinthians 15:2: ". . . the good news . . . through which also you are *being saved*, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain."

The loss of sanctification is a potential reality for both the individual and a church. However, a particular church could *also* reach a point where it no longer becomes an ordinary means of grace. As a result, not only are individuals deprived of an ordinary aid to *sanctification*, but a church's ability to be an "ark of salvation"—and salvation in every way—for anyone else who encounters that church, seems basically impossible. The elect may still exist and the church may be located in other places, but certainly a church when it "ceases to exist" (Barmen) cannot be the ordinary means by which Christ is present with us.

Why not stick with visible/invisible and militant/triumphant? The visible/invisible has an emphasis on election and God's sovereignty so that what connects the visible church with the invisible church are those who are elect that are members of both! Where God only knows the invisible church, we are called to discern whether a church we see is part of the church universal. There needs to be a way to acknowledge the imperfections in a particular church, even while maintaining that it *is* a part of *the* church. There is a tendency to argue that if we can at least say that the visible church we see is part of the one, true church, then we do not have much to worry about and concerns can be downplayed. Within the visible church that is part of *the* church, there are still both wheat and tares; there are still practices, no matter whether by a wheat or a tare, that are imperfect; and there are imperfections amongst the church's beliefs. It may not be for us to know the wheat from the tares, but we can do something about the practices and beliefs. Thus, the economic/ontological distinction, by admitting what we do and who we are fall short of the intended nature, provides space for healthy criticism without necessarily denying membership of the particular community in the one church! Economic/ontological also holds out hope for how we can experience the intended nature

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<sup>62</sup> It could be argued that salvation could include other aspects of being redeemed fully, such as finding wholeness in this life as well as the next, experienced in restored relationships, etc. Also, not only are we saved *from* something, but saved *towards* something or *for* something!



of the church by the grace of God. And if nothing else, it may help the conversation along for explaining how it is that a particular church reaches a point of ceasing to exist altogether!

If the use of economic/ontological proves impractical—if for no other reason than they are not catchy terms!—then I am hopeful that the exercise of this “thought experiment” will at least further the cause of examining the faithfulness of our denominational life together.

## Part V – Conclusions

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### *The Critical Question*

Is the PC(USA) in danger of becoming only an empty, institutional shell? If our denomination can be taken as a form of a particular church, then yes, I believe that it is in danger. Recalling again Calvin’s words, “This communion is held together by two bonds, agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. . . . But it must also be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule.” (IV.ii.5) Even though there can be diversity, “any community must share certain meanings, values, and practices if it is to be a community at all.”<sup>63</sup> The difficult task of defining boundaries and placing limits to diversity of beliefs is nothing new, as Joseph Small is able to demonstrate in *Who’s In? Who’s Out? – Pharisees, Presbyterians, and the Discernment of Faithfulness*. There has to be a certain level of agreement, and especially there has to be agreement on sound doctrine. We have plenty of disagreement, to be sure. But do we disagree on what is essential?

I believe our level of disagreement threatens the life of the denomination. “Our division appears deepest now in how we understand the nature of the church.”<sup>64</sup> In my opinion, our divergent understandings of the church are in fact derived from disagreements in what we understand the essentials to be and how we interpret them. Differences in the denomination seemed evident within our group when discussing the first draft of this paper in how we should understand Paul’s exhortation to not place “confidence in the flesh.” Some took this to mean that we should not worry too much over right doctrine because we cannot place too much confidence in our ability to get it right. To evangelicals/conservatives, it is argued that if we have confidence in God alone, we would not worry about encouraging agreement on doctrinal matters. On the flipside, as evidenced by an article in *Theology Matters*—“Nein! A Response to Progressives”<sup>65</sup>—evangelicals believe liberals/progressives are placing confidence in the flesh as—so the charge goes—they rely upon natural theology.

At the very least, we must question our own worldviews that affect the hermeneutical stance(s) which we carry to our study of Scripture, to proclamation, and to our common hearing of the Word. In parts of the world where the global church is growing, the dominant worldview is clearly not that of the “Western World” with a foundation on Enlightenment principles. Instead of having a mindset of cultural elitism or chronological snobbery where we assume that other parts of the world are not as advanced and therefore they just need more time, we need to be self-critical. You might say that we need to be critical of the principles that *taught us to be* critical of the faith.

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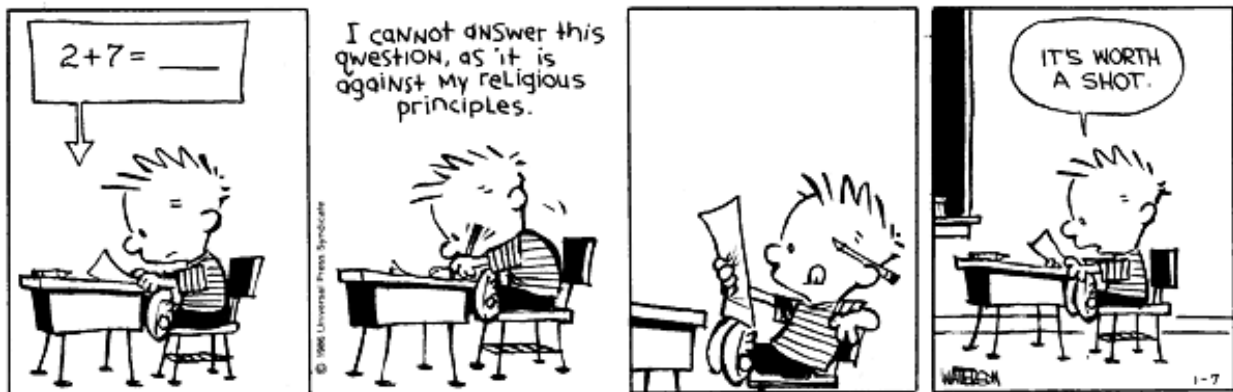
<sup>63</sup> Small, *Who’s In? Who’s Out?: Pharisees, Presbyterians, the Discernment of the Faithfulness*, Geneva Press, Louisville, KY, 2001, p 1.

<sup>64</sup> Walter Jay Wilkins, “The Oneness We Have Not: Ecclesiology and Presbyterianism,” *The Register of the Company of Pastors*, vol. 8, no. 2, Fall 2007, p 49.

<sup>65</sup> *Theology Matters*, vol 13, no 2, Mar/Apr 2007, p 1.

The church in other parts of the world manifests the ability to live the church as a reversed-Nicene-notes community. Agreeing with Amy Pauw on this matter, we need to listen to the global church.<sup>66</sup>

From the fragmentation of evangelicalism, focusing on theological statements and truths may seem a foolish way to proceed.<sup>67</sup> However, there have been other substitutes for unity in truth that in the end are proving to be no substitutes. For instance, defining our visible unity *structurally* has been one impulse of the ecumenical movement. But organizations like WCC seem less and less to be one with the growing global church. In an attempt, perhaps, to emphasize unity, doctrinal beliefs fade to the background in favor of the common good that might be sought. My impression is that the structural unity ends up depending upon common interpretations of political problems and proposed solutions. Yet, if there is anything that is nonessential, it is the differences of opinion concerning political solutions to the world’s problems. But it is true that God who has a mission in the world has still placed a calling upon God’s church, no matter our political theories about problems and no matter what we think governments should do. Biblical mandates remain even if we cannot agree on their applications. In my own experience of a ministry culture that is “post-denominational,” partnership for ministry criss-crosses denominational identities and para-church organizations at a dizzying pace, all with a common concern to seek the welfare of the city in which we dwell by the actions of the church, out of an outgrowth of a unity of truth that is recognized. Common commitment to beliefs that foster common commitments to missions can actually be a new kind of ecumenism.



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**As much as we like to not define the essentials, we should also recognize that there are truths to declare and we should seek agreement on sound doctrine.**

<sup>66</sup> We read Amy Pauw’s response to John Burgess in our first meeting. On page two of the hardcopy of her presentation, she lifts up the need for respectful dialog with the church throughout the world.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Oden and J.I. Packer make the case that this is not really so, by looking at the statements from a variety of “evangelical” sources: *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*, InterVarsity Press, Downer’s Grove, IL, 2004.

But since agreement on sound doctrine should be less about precision in a rigid set of statements,<sup>68</sup> and more about a shared understanding of the One who confronts us and is able to transform us, we should speak of God's Word. After all, communion with each other will only come as we have communion with God.<sup>69</sup> "The Word of God does not effect only the founding of the Church, but also its continual preservation. . . . Without Scripture it would inevitably dissolve at once into nothingness. . . . From a human standpoint the preservation of the Church depends, therefore, on the fact that Scripture is read, assimilated, expounded, and applied in the Church, that this happens tirelessly and repeatedly, that the whole way of the Church consists in its striving to hear this concrete witness."<sup>70</sup>

### *Any Answers?*

We need to pay attention to the "hermeneutical circle," fostering a community together that is apostolic catholic holy and one, and is able to interpret Scripture with the mindset of their lived-community. Paying attention to hermeneutics is nothing new. There is the historic rule of love, which is mentioned in the Scots Confession.<sup>71</sup> The Heidelberg and Westminster Larger Catechisms were designed to guide preaching, after all. Calvin believed that with the *Institutes* he had laid down a foundation for guiding students of theology in their study of Scripture. I believe a "hermeneutic" for theological interpretation of Scripture is implied by Barth's use of the title "Church Dogmatics." You cannot rightly interpret Scripture apart from the experience of God working in and through the community that God forms.

T.F. Torrance addresses the issue of dealing with differing interpretations, and in a historical treatment of Calvin, Torrance says, "To commit ourselves to God in faith in this way means that we let ourselves be called so radically in question that we are stripped of all our presuppositions and prejudgments."<sup>72</sup> Richard Hayes states powerfully that "theological interpretation is not a 'method' of studying texts, but a practice or way of approaching Scripture with *eyes of faith*, seeking to understand it within the community of faith."<sup>73</sup> This leads me back to a couple of encounters with Jesus.

Jesus declares that the Sadducees knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (i.e. Mark 12:24). This seems a bit unfair since the Sadducees referred to Scripture in their question to Jesus, and yet the implication is that since they did not know or experience God's power, they had not really known the Scriptures at all . . . at least correctly. Illiteracy of Scripture—the sheer lack of knowledge about Scripture—is one

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<sup>68</sup> I am grateful for the challenges presented in *Beyond Foundationalism*, co-authored by John Franke, a member of the Faculty-Initiative Cluster.

<sup>69</sup> Small, "What is Communion and When is it Full?" p 6.

<sup>70</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1963, I/2:688, 691.

<sup>71</sup> "We dare not receive or admit any interpretation which is contrary to any principal point of our faith, or to any other plain text of Scripture, or to the rule of love." (3.18)

<sup>72</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: a Fresh and Challenging Approach to Christian Revelation*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1982, p 122.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Hayes, "Biblical Scholarship and the Practice of Theological Interpretation," *Response*, Spring 2007, p 24.

thing, but the lack of knowledge about the power of God is completely different and more challenging still! We, too, like the Sadducees can be “quite wrong,” and to remain in error would be to misunderstand the One who comes to us. Jesus also asked the expert in the law who knew the Scriptures, “How do you read it?” (NIV Luke 10:26) Again, knowledge of content is one thing, but how you read it is important.<sup>74</sup> Are members of congregations reading Scripture together, putting what they find in practice so that they live by faith, only to return to Scripture again with the questions raised by their daily lives? Are we as presbyters reading Scripture together in this way? We can learn something from the rest of the global church in how they read Scripture.

Small changes can be made, such as providing training and experience to seminarians in leading small group Bible studies, a suggestion made by Dr. Sunquist.<sup>75</sup> The dynamic of studying Scripture in the context of community, as well as seeing the importance of small groups, will influence the task of preaching.

But other necessary changes are quite massive. Efforts such as the Reforming Ministry Project and the Company of Pastors are honorable and fruitful, but what we need is a complete turn-around of the life experienced in presbyteries. They need to function more as the venerable company of pastors and elders if we are to have sustained study and conversation over God’s Word. The size of presbyteries, both in numbers and geographic expanse make this quite impossible. Technology can surely be an aid, but present presbyteries may not be conducive to necessary changes unless they were radically resized. As controversial as a revision of the Form of Government may be, can you imagine the politicization of a “re-districting” of presbyteries?

The work ahead, no matter big or small, will not be easy. I suppose that is why the church walking this earth is called the militant church, struggling still to live out the faith. May Emmanuel, God with us, be forever present by grace as we are sent in faith. Amen.



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**The militant church will one day be the church triumphant, joining all the elect in . . . Pittsburgh?  
Maybe that is for the reprobate.**

<sup>74</sup> Eugene Peterson expands on this theme in *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2006.

<sup>75</sup> Sunquist, “The Dangers of the Unconverted Seminary,” (in two parts) *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Sept. 14 and 21, 2008.