The Unsettled Church: The Search for Identity and Relevance in the Ecclesiologies of Nicholas Healy, Ephraim Radner, and Darrell Guder

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by

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ABSTRACT
THE UNSETTLED CHURCH: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY AND RELEVANCE
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This dissertation examines the efforts of three contemporary theologians whose work is a part of the search for a new methodology for doing ecclesiology located on the continuum between the Church's identity and relevance. They are the Catholic theologian Nicholas Healy, Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner, and Presbyterian theologian Darrell Guder. They come to the subject matter from different ecclesiological backgrounds, and, as such, their work can be taken as representative in as much as it stands for their unique efforts to theologize within their own traditions and contexts. By critiquing and analyzing their proposals I will bring them into dialog which will yield what I hope are the contours of a new way of thinking about ecclesiology.

In my study of their ecclesiological proposals I examine first their approach to the Holy Scriptures relative to their search for the Church's identity. Special attention will be given to Christological and Pneumatological concerns, but also to the role of corporate and individual repentance (or conversion), as a means of re-appropriating one's true identity as Church. Second, I take a critical look at their proposals of how the Church's identity can and should enable its practical embodiment in the context of the 21st Century's marketplace of ideas and be expressed in its God-given mission, i.e., the Church's relevance.

Then, based on a careful examination of the postmodern context, I argue that the aforementioned theologians represent the emergence of a new methodological axis, namely the one defined by "identity and relevance," for doing ecclesiology. I will argue that this methodological axis gives rise to a new model, which I will call, "missional ecclesiology."

My critical evaluation of this new methodology concludes with an evaluation of its potential viability arguing in favor of missional ecclesiology as a viable model.

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First and foremost, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the Marquette University Graduate School and to the Theology Department in particular for affording me the opportunity to pursue doctoral studies as part of a world-class program and under the tutelage of world-class faculty. When I first arrived at Marquette in the autumn of 2000, I was filled with excitement and energy looking forward to tackling deep theological topics such as "election" and "the Trinity," or mastering the works of great theologians such as Karl Barth or Jürgen Moltmann. The last thing I expected was writing a dissertation devoted to the doctrine of the Church. As an ordained minister and someone who comes from a family that has produced a total of 10 ministers in the last four generations, I was pretty convinced that there was no aspect of ecclesiology that I had not mastered either by personal experience or by witnessing the ministry of others in my family. I thought I knew well what was involved in the ministry of the Church, and I did not find it intellectually stimulating to sustain my interest over the course of my studies. But, I did proceed with my original plan and studied "election" and the "Trinity," along with Barth and Moltmann, and I was excited and content.

Gradually, however, a realization begin to emerge: that all of the profound doctrines of the Christian faith I was studying in-depth made full sense only in the context of the life of the Christian community called the Church. This realization was further strengthened by the discovery that the theologians I have come to respect and admire the most such as Congar and deLubac, Küng and Dulles, Nissiotis and Bulgakov,

Barth and Moltmann, dedicated their entire lives' works to the Church, thus becoming, in a very true sense, doctors of the Church. So I had to take notice, and in response, at first somewhat reluctantly but with growing interest later, I signed up for classes in ecclesiology under the teaching of Father Michael Fahey. His soft-spoken style of engaging and encouraging combined with his undying excitement and unwavering commitment to the Church universal were contagious. I must have picked up the "ecclesiological bug" from him, for here I am years later finishing my first humble contribution to the field of ecclesiology. For this, I am in his debt!

Special thanks is due to my Doctoral Adviser and Dissertation Director Dr. Lyle Dabney, who was the first to take a chance on a young and untested applicant from Eastern Europe who was short on tradition but eager to learn. From him, I learned one of the most important lessons a theologian can learn: that theology should always be done "in context." I hope that my dissertation pays him a small tribute for this most valuable insight. I owe him a debt of gratitude for his unlimited patience, his gracious encouragement and wise counsel, and for not giving up on me even in the face of my serious personal challenges, which were not part of the plan but became a part of the process. The completion of my dissertation is a tribute to Dr. Dabney's perseverance as much as it is to mine. I will never forget his kindness toward me and his faith in me!

I am also particularly grateful to my dissertation committee members Dr. Patrick Carey, the late Dr. Ralph Del Colle, Dr. D. Stephen Long and Dr. Deirdre A. Dempsey, all professors of mine whom I deeply respect and admire. To me, they are all shining examples of excellent scholarship, Christian humility and service, and dedication to teaching and their students. I will always strive to emulate what I have learned from all of

them! Special thanks go to Dr. Carey for his gentle and deliberate encouragement. His kind words and encouraging feedback on a Brownson paper made me believe for the first time in my academic career that I just might be capable of scholarly work. I owe an equal debt of gratitude to the late Dr. Del Colle whose encouragement has meant so much to me over the years. Even a week before his untimely passing he sent me an email to inquire about my wife's health, assure me of his prayers for my family, and urge me to persevere in the writing of my dissertation. I cannot think of a more genuine example of a true Christian character than Dr. Del Colle, whose kindness I will not forget.

I am also very grateful to Drs. Long and Dempsey, who, when asked, did not hesitate for a moment to serve on my dissertation committee regardless of the short notice, the myriad other commitments on their schedules, and the fact that I had not had the privilege of submitting myself to their teaching. Their kindness and encouragement throughout this process are most appreciated. I am truly honored to have scholars of their stature on my dissertation committee.

Last, but not least, I owe a debt of profound gratitude to my dear wife Nellie, who stood by me, encouraged and understood me, was infinitely patient, and loved me regardless throughout this long journey. She was first to suggest the idea that I should pursue doctoral studies in theology, and I am so thankful that 20 years later she can see her prophetic words brought to fruition. I dedicate this work to my wife Nellie, and to my children Martin and Christine whose many sacrifices and unfailing love sustained me to the end. A special word of thanks here also goes to my brother Rev. Evgeniy D. Naydenov, a dedicated pastor and a capable theologian in his own right, who was the first

to show me the value of reading Scripture not just as a devotional but as a theological document.

Finally, I am grateful to God for His sustaining grace and loving kindness. I owe Him everything. To Him be the glory!

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INTRODUCTION

Introductory Matters

At the beginning of the 21st century western Christianity is faced with a challenge

that is almost unprecedented in its history. Cultural changes that began to emerge in the

modern age have now produced postmodern and pluralistic attitudes that pervade

contemporary society and that work to call into question the historical identity and

contemporary relevance of the Christian churches. The result is that western Christianity

has become unsettled, unsure of itself and its message.[1]

There was a time when the questions about the Church's identity and societal

relevance were not widely asked, but their answers were commonly assumed within the

framework of what some have termed the "medieval synthesis" – the characteristic

achievement of the Middle Ages.[2] Faith and reason, church and society, balanced

creatively worked together to introduce a superior and distinctively Christian culture, to

the pagan outliers surrounding Christendom. In this environment the spread of the Gospel

was identical to the spread of a brand of culture where church and society were one and

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[1] While there is a lot of discussion and debate on what postmodernism is, or isn't, and what its
future is (see especially Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*.
(New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1991), there exists a general consensus among theologians, sociologists
and philosophers on the fact that postmodernity has mounted an unprecedented challenge to traditional
Christian Churches especially in the West. The European East, which only emerged recently from the
suffocating grip of Communism is quickly following suit and beginning to grapple with similar questions.
These questions are dealing predominantly with the historical legacy of Communism but are also being
orientated, albeit secondary, toward the institutional Orthodox Church which has enjoyed religious
hegemony over the region for centuries. For interesting discussion on postmodern attitudes in Eastern
Europe, see: Bo Stråth and Nina Witoszek, *The Postmodern Challenge: Perspectives East and West*.
(Amsterdam, Netherlands – Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999).
    A plethora of books and articles published recently are attempting to address one or another aspect
of this challenge. The Stone Lectures of 2000, delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary by Friedrich
Schweitzer fittingly symbolize the coming to terms with this challenge at the end of the second millennium
and the beginning of the third. The lectures later turned into a book authored by Friedrich Schweitzer, *The
Postmodern Life Cycle: Challenges for Church and Theology*. (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press 2004).
[2] Christopher Dawson, *Medieval Essays*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2012), 6.

the same and where ecclesiastical authorities shared power with the civil authorities. It was in this environment that most did not question but agreed on the right of the Christian Church to occupy a place of preeminence and enjoy a privileged role of in society.

At the start of the 21st century this is no longer the case. The unity between society and Church is but a distant memory and any suggestions of its potential benefits are foreign and unintelligible to the postmodern mind. The Church's own questions about its identity and role often continue to be influenced by positive assumptions about the unity of church and world no longer shared by contemporary society. Postmodern society at large, on the one hand, asks the question, 'What is the Christian church and what does its identity and agenda have to do with the way we understand the world and the way we live our lives?' In response to these questions the Church has at times sought to define itself and its relevance to the contemporary world in terms of its pre-modern traditions and its reading of the Bible. Society's response to these efforts has been permeated by doubt and suspicion, or outright indifference. In short, there is the Church's way and there is the society's way, and they now seem to have little in common.

In light of the fact that the Church no longer plays a privileged role in a postmodern society and does not play a normative role in culture; and in light of the fact that postmodern culture does not begin with traditional presuppositions about God or Jesus or the need for redemption, how can the Church give a credible account of its existence and relevance?

What is This Dissertation About?

The main concern of this dissertation is the state of contemporary ecclesiology. It takes a close look at the efforts of three contemporary theologians to construct ecclesiologies that seek to enable the Church's faithful witness to a world and culture that view the Church as an outsider. More specifically this dissertation examines the use of two key concepts – identity and relevance[3] – as forming a methodological axis for constructing ecclesiology that is evident in the works of these contemporary theologians.

The question about the Church's identity and relevance is only imaginable in a modern and postmodern age where traditional concepts of identity and relevance have been called into question. This is to say that the question can only become intelligible in a cultural context in which the Church's perspective and society's perspective have clearly differentiated themselves from one another to such an extent that it seems self-evident to the general public that they are neither the same nor are they compatible anymore.

The Church needs to grasp the fact that the question about its identity is asked not only by the Church itself but by society at large. Since the Church now lives in a world that does not recognize Christianity's position of privilege, its language, or foundational tenants this new situation calls for an ecclesiology in which mission once again plays a central part. Mission is the tool that allows ecclesiology to reenter the postmodern

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[3] The combination of the terms "identity-relevance," or "identity-mission," "identity-continuity," or "identity-destiny" will be used interchangeably throughout this work to denote the same basic relationship.

discourse transforming it in the process, and thereby answers the question of its identity and relevance.[4]

This is why I am engaging with missional ecclesiology in this dissertation. Missional ecclesiology is best suited to return the Church to its missional roots, remind the Church of its missional identity and enable it to reengage with culture and society missionally using the culture's language to speak to it about Christ.

Why is This Study Important?

Since the Church is being challenged from within and from without it is important to examine what creates this challenge and how can the Church respond? To answer this question, we first need to address, albeit briefly, the main tenets or characteristics of the turn toward postmodernity.[5]

If we define culture as the collective expression of shared values, that is, a particular form of living together,[6] then even a quick glance at contemporary culture in the West will demonstrate that the phenomenon of postmodernity exerts its influence over all dimensions of contemporary Western society. The West finds itself "in the throes of a cultural shift of immense proportions."[7] As Barry Smart has argued persuasively, postmodernity is a way of looking at reality, a "way of living," which engenders a

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[4] *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 7.

[5] Best and Kellner's title has come to serve as a buzz word for what is now widely perceived as revolution in the fields of art, literature, architecture, philosophy, science, sociology, and last but not least, theology. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*. (New York, NY; Guilford Press, 1997).

[6] For instance, Bates and Fratkin define it as follow, "Culture, broadly defined, is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, and material objects that members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning." In D. G. Bates and E. M. Fratkin, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed, (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 5.

[7] Stanley Grenz, *Primer to Postmodernism*. (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1996), 11. F. R. Leavis argues for a "culture in crisis," or "the desperate plight of culture," in his article "Mass Civilization and Minority Culture," John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture; A Reader*. (Prentice Hall: New York, NY, 1998), 13-14.

reflection and response to the perceived limit and limitations of modernity.[8] Smart's

definition is quite moderate, of course, in light of the determined efforts of certain

schools of thought within the postmodern movement to dethrone and replace modernity

once and for all. While some have argued that the postmodern phase has already passed,

and we are now awaiting what follows next, others have insisted that postmodernity is

both "what is" and at the same time "what is to come"; in the proverbial "already - not

yet," sense of being.

By name and definition, postmodernity clearly situates itself as an intellectual

movement against modernism. As with any other intellectual movement, postmodernism

is defined by its underlying philosophical positions on such important issues as reality,

human nature, knowledge, and reason, to mention just a few.[9]

The perceived stability inherent in modernity is now gone and replaced by the

shared perception that everything is in "constant" flux.[10] Certainty is replaced by constant

doubt; optimism in human progress and a better future – by deeply seeded skepticism and

anxiety; reliance on established institutions – by fundamental distrust for traditional

institutions and conventions; the quest for universal agreement and metanarratives is

resisted in favor of plurality of stories; rigidly structured (oppressive) societies are

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[8] Barry Smart, *Postmodernity*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 12.

[9] Among other things Hicks lists here the postmoderns' distaste for the "abstract, the universal, the fixed, and the precise," along with its rejection of "objectivity, individualism, conventionalism and de-emphasizing the role of reason." Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault.* (Tempe, AZ and New Berlin/Milwaukee, WI: Scholargy Publishing, Inc., 2004), 5-6.

[10] The irony of using an adjective indicative of permanence and repetition to describe the current state of perceived instability is rather telling. This state of flux is what Heelas calls "de-traditionalization," in Jim McGuigan, *Modernity and Postmodern Culture*. (Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 2006), 4.

[11] Following Lyotard, Vanhoozer also defines postmodernity in terms of "condition," rather than a position, theory, or trend. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

shunned in favor of "fully democratic" postmodern ones. This, in short, characterizes for us the prevailing postmodern condition.[11]

All of the above, considered in their appropriate cultural context, indicate a problem to a careful ecclesiologist probing the cultural horizon for signs of imminent change. If the ecclesiologist still has doubts about what the not-so-distant future holds for the Christian Church, sociologists of religion are quick to remove the cloud of lingering doubts by an increasing amount of research both in the United States and also in Europe.[12] Postmodern societies have witnessed increased disintegration where the "cultural becomes more disorganized,"[13] with traditional distinctions diminishing in favor of the process of ever-greater individuation. This, of course has led to a diminished and diminishing role for institutions, especially religious ones, in determining life's choices and the ever-increasing role of individuals in self-determination, based on plurality of lifestyle options.

These observable dynamics and trends have given some reason to begin contemplating the unthinkable, namely the end of organized religion as a whole and the end of the Church in particular.[14] I think that any pronouncement signaling the end of the Church as we know it is highly premature and should not be taken seriously. What should be taken seriously, however, is the extent of the current challenge.

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[12] Heelas, "On Differentiation and Dedifferentiation," in *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity,* ed. Paul Heelas, David Martin, and Paul Morris, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 4-6.

[13] As expressed in the work of Ernst Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), especially in chapters two and three, entitled, "Postmodernism and Relativism," and "Relativismus über Alles."

[14] I am speaking particularly of the recent rise in the number of books and articles theorizing the end or the death of the Church, or the death of faith. Books such as Mike Regele and Mark Schultz's, *Death of the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), or Michael Jinkins's, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-modern Context*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), among others.

But the changed and changing cultural and philosophical contexts, no matter how challenging and unsettling their effects on the Church, call not for panic and retreat; for turning one's back on the world because the world has changed. They call for fresh theological evaluation of both contemporary culture and of current ecclesiological paradigms, in the course of which evaluation the Church can rediscover its own missional nature, identity, and calling to bringing the good news of the Gospel to a changed and ever-changing world.[15]

In the context of the contemporary cultural shift the Church needs to remember its missional roots and the missional impulse that guided its witness from the very beginning. The history of the Church is replete with examples of its entering into different cultures and becoming a participant in their conversations. By learning and adapting to the languages and practices of host cultures the church aimed to transform them with the Gospel. While culture and society may have changed, God's missional nature and His intent to redeem and reconcile the world to Himself have not. The mission we speak of is God's and its content is the good news about Jesus Christ who gave his life for the lost. For the church to remain missionally relevant it also needs to recover or reclaim its missional identity in Christ. As Bevans has rightfully pointed out "At Antioch and thereafter, what began to become clear is that God's mission has a church"[16] For as

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[15] David Clark's insistence on maintaining what he calls, the "contextual pole" and the "kerygmatic pole" in theologizing underscores well the problem and the need for balance the Church faces in needing to be culturally sensitive and astute, while also maintaining a prophetic, counter-cultural stance viz. the world. It addresses the proverbial tension between being firmly "in the world, but not of the world." David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God; Method for Theology*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 42-57.

[16] Stephen Bevans, SVD, "The Mission has a Church; Perspectives of a Roman Catholic Theologian." 10. Paper presented at the Centenary of the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 2010, Scotland. Article published online at: http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/resources/papersdocuments8ad4.pdf?no_cache=1

long as the Church derives its own identity from that of Christ and continues to identify

with God's mission in this world the Church will remain relevant.

How Will This Investigation Proceed?

My project will examine the efforts of three contemporary theologians whose

work is a part of this ongoing search for a new methodology in ecclesiology located on

the continuum between the Church's identity and relevance.[17] They are the Catholic

theologian Nicholas Healy, Anglican Ephraim Radner, and Presbyterian Darrell Guder.[18]

The concepts of identity and relevance or identity and witness are central to the ways in

which these three theologians think about the nature and mission of the Church. They

come to the subject matter from different ecclesiological backgrounds, and, as it happens,

their proposals for how the Church should move forward also differ. By critiquing and

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[17] The concepts of *identity* and *relevance* are explicitly programmatic for Healy and Guder, and implicitly so for Radner. Healy talks about the need for assessing the church's identity in terms of the adequacy of its witness (relevance), in Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic Ecclesiology*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000); 7; and also about maintaining the tensive relationship between discipleship and witness, where one acknowledges the sinfulness of the church while insisting on the truthfulness of its witness, Ibid., 20-21. Guder talks about an identity shaped by the witness to the Gospel, in *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985) 53; and also insists that identity and the action of witness are inseparable, Ibid., 113. Guder speaks of "gradual shift away from ecclesial thinking that centers on the church, especially the Western Church, as an end in itself, and instead toward understanding the identity and purpose of the church within God's mission, subordinate to and focused upon God's purposes" Darrell L. Guder "*Missio Dei*: Integrating Theological Formation for Apostolic Vocation." *Missiology* 37, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 65. Radner, does not have a succinct summary statement to that effect as there is nothing succinct or to the point with him. But the concepts of identity and relevance play an important role all throughout his ecclesiology.

[18] With specific attention given to their work as found in: Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-prophetic Ecclesiology*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Ephraim Radner, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), and *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), and Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), and his editorial contribution to, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

analyzing their proposals, I will bring them into dialog, which will yield what I hope are the contours of new ways of thinking about ecclesiology.

In my study of their ecclesiological proposals, I will examine first their approach to the Holy Scriptures relative to their search for the Church's missional identity. Special attention will be given to Christological and Pneumatological concerns, but also to the role of corporate and individual repentance, or conversion, as a means of re-appropriating one's true identity as Church. Second, I will take a critical look at their proposals of how the Church's identity can and should enable its practical embodiment in the context of the 21st century's marketplace of ideas, and be expressed in its God-given mission, i.e., the Church's relevance.

In this context, the term "relevance" refers to the ability of the Church to give a credible account of itself to society and culture. The Church needs to find ways to demonstrate once again it belongs to the contemporary discourse. Relevance defined in this way points to the Church's task of engaging with and changing culture in ways faithful to its missionary charge using the language and practices of culture to speak of Christ.

Then I will argue that the works of the above-mentioned theologians represent the emergence of a new methodological axis, namely the one defined by "identity and relevance," for doing ecclesiology. I will argue that this methodological axis gives rise to a new model that I refer to as "missional ecclesiology."

What I refer to as missional ecclesiology in this project does not seek to obliterate or render obsolete all previous ecclesiologies, but seeks and promotes a constructive and occasionally conflictual debate concerning the nature and function of the Church as a

missional community. It is for this very reason that I believe that Healy, Radner, and Guder do not engage in a detailed study of the marks or offices of the Church which will by necessity employ an exclusivist stance based upon well-defined and articulated primary theological realities for their respective churches. Such a move would result immediately in denouncing the contemporary pluralistic context and, by virtue of that, render any further engagement or discussion impossible. Rather, I would argue that missional ecclesiology offers the opportunity for flexible and multifaceted discussion of various perspectives in ecclesiology. Such possibility for a variety of perspectives is necessary if one is to adequately address the multifaceted nature of 21st century Christianity.[19]

As is the case with the three theologians I examine in this work, my theological concerns about the subject matter are in similar measure influenced by my own faith tradition and Christian experience. I was brought up in a Protestant home and within an Evangelical community in the hostile context of Communist Eastern Europe, where religious persecutions were common-place in everyday life. One of the most successful strategies of the Communist regime was to isolate churches and pit faith communities representing various Christian traditions against each other in an effort to render the Church irrelevant and obsolete. Ultimately, they did not succeed in destroying the Church, but the distrust and resulting disunity kept the Christian Church behind the Iron Curtain from growing or being effective in its ministry to the Gospel. While many expected that once Communism went away the churches would grow quickly and take their rightful place in society, these expectations proved naïve and too optimistic. Some

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[19] Nicholas Healy, *The Logic of Modern Ecclesiology Four Case Studies and a Suggestion From St. Thomas Aquinas*. (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1993), 206.

26 years later, Christian churches in Eastern Europe still struggle to reconcile with their past and to each other. As if this challenge was not sufficiently large for these churches to overcome, they also faced most of the challenges mounted by postmodernity that their Western counterparts have encountered.

As a theologian, I approach the ecclesiological question from a broadly Evangelical point of view to be sure. But as an ordained minister who has seen the devastating effects of disunity on the Church, I also have deep respect and appreciation for other Christian theological traditions – often much older than mine – from which I have learned and continue to learn so much about what it means to be a genuine follower of Christ, and what it means to be the Church.

All these experiences have come to shape my theological commitments and ongoing concerns. This also contributed in large measure to my selection of the three theologians whose works I am examining. I share many of their questions and concerns about the future of the Church; about the role of Scripture in shaping the identities of the Christian community and of the individual Christian, and the role of the Spirit in bringing this about. What is the Church's true mission, and how can communities of faith reclaim their identities and mission through ecclesial repentance?

I also identify with the struggles of Healy, Radner, and Guder to find answers and test solutions. The fact that they represent different theological traditions yet share similar theological instincts in their approaches to constructing ecclesiology was a bonus, as it seemed to suggest the possibility for agreement, however limited, on what the Church is and what its mission is.

After laying the historical and current scholarly groundwork necessary for understanding its purpose and goals, the dissertation will start by addressing the question about the necessary characteristics of a good ecclesiological method.

Next, the dissertation will proceed to examine the efforts of three contemporary ecclesiologists, namely Healy, Radner, and Guder, thus bringing them into a conversation by applying the concepts of "identity" and "relevance" to their work, and carefully evaluate their proposals for solving the perceived challenge to the contemporary Church.

The dissertation then will advance the argument first, that indeed the concepts of "identity" and "relevance" are capable of supplying the foundation for a new ecclesiological methodology. And second, that the proper balance or dialectical tension between the two defining concepts of "identity" and "relevance" provides a sufficient framework for what will be termed "missional ecclesiology."

The dissertation will close with general conclusions regarding the viability and potential benefits of developing further the "identity-relevance" methodological axis as foundation for missional ecclesiology(ies), and envision areas within ecclesiology for further conversations.

CHAPTER ONE
The "Identity-Relevance" as Methodological Axis for Doing Ecclesiology

Introductory Matters

There is a wide-spread consensus that the organizing principle behind theology in the 20th century has been ecclesiology.[1] There is far less agreement, however, concerning the identification and articulation of an organizing principle behind ecclesiology. This is the question of methodology.

For the longest time, the Christian Church in the West has done ecclesiology from the privileged standpoint of a cultural and social hegemony over Western culture and society. Classical ecclesiology has sought to establish an abstract ideal over against which the true Church can be measured. In the process, the Christian Church in the West has focused attention and energy on the task of finding ways to describe what the Church is by defining what the true Church should be.[2] Assuming the Church's existence and finding no need to justify it further, ecclesiologists in the West have traditionally focused their attention on describing in meticulous detail the offices and structures of the Church, and in the process have managed to provide ample justification for one or another form of ecclesial hierarchy both from Scripture and from tradition. All such efforts in ecclesiology have assumed a culture-wide consensus on the need for the Church's

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[1] Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), p. xiv. Ferguson is referring to statements made by the great Yale historian Jaroslav Pelikan in his magnum opus, *The Christian Tradition; A History of the Development of Doctrine,* and especially volume 5, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700).* (Chicago, IL; University of Chicago Press, 1991), 289 and following. There, Pelikan traces the roots of ecclesiology as an organizing principle behind 20th century theology back to the Romanticism of the 19th century with its rediscovery of the Church and its potential to provide a platform for greater Christian union.

[2] Roger Haight calls this type of ecclesiology, "an ecclesiology from above," which he counters with his own proposal, "An Ecclesiology From Below." Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, *Vol. 1.* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), 6.

existence, and, thus, have focused on building a case for which form of church is best, and, in the process, hoping to bring more cultural converts into its fold.

But the advent of postmodernity has brought about a different challenge to the Western Church.[3] I do say different, but I do not call it new, as the Church universal was born in an environment not unlike the increasingly pluralistic reality of postmodern Western culture today. And just like in its early days, the Christian Church today faces targeted attacks from its cultural detractors who preach religious tolerance in regard to any other religion but Christianity, which is being punished for its longstanding hegemony and its perceived intolerance.

This radical shift in public attitudes towards the Church in the West in recent years, which has resulted in the displacement or dethroning of the Church from its privileged position of prominence - if not outright dominance, has led to the experience of crisis in theology in general and in ecclesiology in particular. The Church has not only lost its fixed position in society and culture, but is quite literally fighting for its survival. Survey after survey and study after study indicate that the postmoderns are losing their religion much faster than anyone expected, and churches are losing their members at alarming rates. It is within this increasingly secular and outright hostile attitude toward

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[3] It has become quite common for theologians to respond to this strong sense of disenfranchisement of the Christian Church by the rest of Western society, by giving their works some striking and, at times, dramatic titles. I am thinking of Donald Bloesch, *Crumbling Foundations: Death and Rebirth in an Age of Upheaval.* (Grand Rapids, MI; Academie Books, 1984); or Michael Jinkins, *The Church Faces Death: Ecclesiology in a Post-modern Context.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999); or John Finney, *Fading Splendor?* (London, UK; Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000) to name just a few. On the opposite site of the spectrum, but still proving the same point, are a ever- increasing number of treatises on ecclesiology, containing terms such as, "emergent," "emerging," "revisioning," "rethinking," "renewal," etc., all applied to the Church. They all signal a growing consensus among ecclesiologists that there exists a need for a change. Implied in it is the belief that if the Church does not indeed change its ways, and the way it relates to God and the world, it is doomed to fail and die. Both groups - the group of those entertaining the very possibility of the Church's demise, and those who contemplate its rebirth - at the end come to the cautious conclusion that the Church will not die, although some appear more optimistic in their assessment of the Church's chances than others.

the Christian context that the Church finds itself in need of a paradigm shift, a new methodology that will allow it not only to rediscover itself, but also to provide a powerful and effective apologetic for its existence, and reintroduce itself to a changed culture and a changed world.[4] Whatever the new paradigm or methodology employed in the reimagining or reconstructing of the Christian Church, it will have to be marked by epistemic humility.[5] As Michael McCarthy has recently observed:

> The Church itself may appear far more complex, ambiguous, and problematic than it did in the 1950s. At least in the United States, the actual trials, the sufferings, the scandals of recent history provoke us to ask (with a certain pain and humility) how it is that the Church may be considered the context of God's revelation.[6]

All this indicates a new starting position for those who consider taking up the challenge of constructing ecclesiologies for the 21st century; a position different from that of dominance and inevitability. If one is to answer satisfactorily the question asked by McCarthy in the context of 21st century society, permeated by the ideas of postmodernity and pluralism, one has to employ a method giving full account of who the Church is with regard to its Lord and the world within which its Lord has called it to exist.

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[4] For an insightful discussion on the need of a paradigm shift in theology in general and its implications for ecclesiology in particular, see Hans Küng, *Theology for the Third Millennium; An Ecumenical View*. Transl. Peter Heinegg. (New York, NY: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1988), especially part B, chapters II, III, and IV, discussing the paradigm change in science and theology and the move towards a new model for theology in the 21st century.

[5] For an interesting discussion on the role of epistemic humility applied to the relationship between science and religious, see Robert John Russell, "God and Contemporary Cosmology," in Robert L. Hermann, ed., *God, Science, and Humility: Ten Scientists Consider Humility Theology*. (Radnor, PA; Templeton Foundation Press, 2000), 26-51.

[6] Michael C. McCarthy. "An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, the Psalms, and the Making of Church." *Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 23-48, accessed February 26, 2011, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost.

The Question of Method in Ecclesiology

In recent years, a great amount of work on the subject of a method for ecclesiology has come from the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network (EI). Among its most prominent members the EI finds renowned ecclesiologists such as Gerard Mannion, Roger Haight, Fr. Michael Fahey, Dennis Doyle, Paul Avis, and theologians such as Paul Collins, Neil Ormerod, and Kenneth Wilson. The stated mission of the EI is to promote a collaborative ecclesiology. The EI has served since 2005 as one of the main forums for scholars and theologians across the spectrum of Christian tradition to engage in discussions and collaboration in the field of ecclesiology. In what follows, I will review the most recent work on ecclesiological method done by scholars who can be viewed as representative of the efforts of the EI, and in doing so attempt to outline the necessary characteristics of a good ecclesiological method.

Roger Haight on ecclesiological method[7]

In his treatment of the question of method in ecclesiology, Roger Haight differentiates between two major approaches: an ecclesiology from above[8] and an ecclesiology from below.[9] Haight follows closely the demarcation lines between a Platonic and an Aristotelian view of philosophy in articulating the constitutive elements of the two approaches.

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[7] Haight's magnum opus on ecclesiology will serve as the main source for my remarks and particularly chapter 1 of volume 1 of his three-volume work on ecclesiology entitled, *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, *Vol. 1*. (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004). The other two volumes include, *Christian Community in History. Comparative Ecclesiology, Vol. 2.* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), and *Christian Community in History. Ecclesial Existence, Vol. 3.* (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008).

[8] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 18.

[9] Ibid., 56.

He begins by analyzing what he sees as an outdated method for doing ecclesiology, namely an "ecclesiology from above."[10] The first element that constitutes an "ecclesiology from above" is its "a-historical context." What is meant by this term is that the method seeks to define the essential Church nature and structure in terms that transcend any time and historical context. What is to be sought is the ideal Church that transcends any local instantiations and accidental differences among the many cultural iterations of the Church.[11] For Haight, the lack of "historical conditioning" makes it easier for this method to pursue its goal of establishing boundaries and setting up limits beyond which one can no longer speak of the Church, or, at best, consider a defective Church.

The second element Haight introduces as constitutive of the "ecclesiology from above" is that every local instance of the Church becomes the object or interpretive principle for understanding the ideal universal Church. This simply refers to the common practice of understanding the whole Church in terms of one's own. What is problematic with this element is the fact that it conceives of only one correct way of doing ecclesiology and implies only one doctrinally correct Church. As a result the Church employing an "ecclesiology from above" as ecclesiological method will imagine the one

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[10] Haight claims this method for doing theology was typically employed prior to the Vatican II council and, thus, in many respects is obsolete, which, in his opinion, makes the use of this model less prone to generate polemics when contrasted with the method he suggests. However, a closer examination of the six different points or elements of thinking constituting the "ecclesiology from above" model demonstrate the author's considerable discomfort with traditional formulations of authority, hierarchy, and ecclesial structures very much in use by the Catholic Church of today. For an example of an ecclesiology from above, see Ludwig Ott, "The Church," in *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma.* (St. Louis, MO; Herder Book, 1964), 270-324.

[11] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 19.

true universal Church "in terms of itself … so that in describing itself, it describes the way the whole church should be."[12]

The third characteristic of an "ecclesiology from above" is its source of authority. In the case of Roman Catholic theology, which is the theological tradition of Haight's work, authority is derived from sources such as Scripture, tradition, and church councils all summed up in the authority of the magisterium.[13] An "ecclesiology from above" would accept and appeal to these sources of authority and ultimately to the magisterium as something never to be challenged, as source having a "normative character." This understanding leads to the setting up of a sharp contrast or division between the Church and the remaining world, where what sets the Church apart is its distinctive, revealed, supernatural language generated by its own doctrinal tradition and used to facilitate the Church's self-understanding.[14]

The fourth element of an "ecclesiology from above" stems from or follows from the third, namely that any historic development of the Church is understood in doctrinal terms. This is to say that a church understands its historical origins only in the context of revealed doctrine. This does not mean that the Church lacks historical consciousness. Rather, it means that whatever historic consciousness exists in the Church is "controlled by doctrinal understanding."[15] Thus, any historical development in the Church is first, a natural outgrowth of elements present at the beginning of the Church in embryonic stage, and, second, historical developments, no matter how radical, can never pose insurmountable challenge to the Church since history is subject to God's providence and

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[12] Ibid., 20

[13] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 20.

[14] Ibid, 21.

[15] Ibid, 22.

all happens according to His plan. Consequently, the Church has no immediate need or incentive to engage the world in any meaningful interaction or consider the challenge of culture significant.

The fifth characteristic of an "ecclesiology from above" is Christocentrism. For Haight, there exists a clear correlation between an "ecclesiology from above" and a "Christology from above." The historicity of Jesus of Nazareth plays an important role insofar as His incarnation led to the founding of the Church. The centrality of Jesus is subsequently reflected in all institutional structures of the Church and present in the ministries of the Church. In this way, while the Church started with His incarnation, death and resurrection, Christ's continuous presence in the world in a "mystical way" is mediated in and through the ministry, and, in fact, by the very existence of the Church.[16] To test this thesis, one only needs to examine the subject of salvation. Even though many mainline denominations have a carefully qualified response to the old axiom, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*,[17] they nevertheless view Christianity as the highest and, therefore, normative religion far superior to all others since it is the only religion with Christ at its center. It is thus in the ecclesiological method that Christocentrism and ecclesiocentrism are inextricably linked.[18]

The sixth, and final, element has to do with the relationship between ecclesial structures and ministries. To put it in blunt terms, an "ecclesiology from above" reflects

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[16] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 23.

[17] Axiom coined originally by St. Cyprian of Carthage and adopted by both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. With the advent of the Protestant reformation, many protestant denominations have adopted the doctrine but reinterpreted its meaning in terms of personal religious conversion experience. It has also served to spur missionary efforts by many protestant denominations in the 18th and 19th centuries.

[18] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 23. For an insightful treatment of the whole question of the role of the Church in salvation, see Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church? Tracing the History of the Catholic Response*. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992). Also helpful, Yves Congar, *The Wide World My Parish; Salvation and Its Problems*. (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961).

the hierarchical grounding of the Church's structures. Just like revelation, authority in the Church also proceeds from Christ, and each institutional level of the Church's structure derives unquestionable authority from its source. From this it follows that any institutional framework for the Church will necessarily employ a pyramidal or hierarchical structure.[19] Because of its origin and source of authority, the ecclesial structure then assumes a supernatural and, therefore, virtually immutable nature that is not subject to development and change. Whatever new ministry may arise during different historical periods in the life of the Church will inevitably be absorbed into the traditional ecclesial structures.[20]

Having established the basic elements of "an ecclesiology from above," Haight proceeds to lay out the ground work for a new, historically aware and socially sensitive "ecclesiology from below." To build a contrasting type of ecclesiological thinking to that of an ecclesiology from above, Haight employs the method of correlation.[21] The method of correlation applied to the task of ecclesiology means that theological understanding arises out of the meeting between theological data or sources and the contemporary cultural context within which one does theology. Theology in general and ecclesiology in particular will operate within "the framework of historical consciousness" and, therefore, require maintaining careful dialectic between the factors binding the Church to its historical past, yet freeing it from its particularity so as to open it to the present and

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[19] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 24.

[20] Ibid., 25.

[21] Ibid., 26. See also Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, John P. Galvin, *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991). The method of correlation was born in the nineteenth century in an effort to reconcile traditional approaches to theology grounding theological efforts in Scripture with Schleiermacher's insistence on theology firmly grounded in religious experience known as the "turn to the believing subject."

future.[22] This dialectic brings in sharp focus the question of balance in ecclesiology, namely, what are the appropriate criteria for measuring the right balance of constancy and change? I will return to this question later.

Having introduced the serious question of the role historical consciousness plays in ecclesiology, Haight proceeds to explore the factors which render an "ecclesiology from above" obsolete. For the sake of brevity and in light of this dissertation's objective I will only mention those most important factors with particular relevance to my work.[23]

In Haight's view, globalization has created a new and different context for theology. Globalization has contributed to shrinking the distances between peoples and cultures, and brought about new consciousness and appreciation for cultural differences that did not exist before. This has inevitably created a constant tension between the universal and the local. Haight believes it is the tension caused by globalization that is responsible to a large degree for the creation of the new intellectual culture of postmodernism that poses serious challenges to traditional ecclesiology.[24] Postmodernism has indeed questioned any and all universal claims, and has made the idea of universal moral values and norms offensive.

We now come to the idea of appreciation and acceptance of "other churches." The preceding century witnessed an explosion of ecumenical activities that inevitably led to mutual recognition and strive for greater visible unity among Christian churches. For Haight, this fact introduces another major question for ecclesiology, namely the question

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[22] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 27.

[23] Haight identifies seven significant factors to consider, which, in his view, make a solid case for an "ecclesiology from below." They are: historical consciousness, globalization and pluralism, other churches, other religions and the world, human suffering on a social scale, the experience and situation of women, and secularization and individualism.

[24] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 28. While in this context, Haight is speaking specifically about an ecclesiology from above, postmodernity, as I argued in the Introduction, presents a challenge to any ecclesiology.

of an objective criterion by which to judge the theological soundness and acceptability of church and para-church institutions alike. The ecumenical movement has signaled that individual churches can no longer use their own traditions as an interpretive principle for orthodox theology and therefore ecclesiological method needs to be modified.

Next Haight moves to the matter of other religions and the world. Two factors have opened the Church universal up to other world religions and the world itself; one is the advent of the ecumenical movement and creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the other is Vatican II. Both brought about a new appreciation for God's salvific work in the world and among other religions. This led to a fundamental change in the way the Church came to understand its mission. The Doctrine and Life movement in WCC elevated to new heights the Church's mission to society. In the same fashion, the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, and in its Decrees on Mission Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, produced a new definition of the Church relative to the ways the Church relates to the world.[25] As Haight points out in light of the enormous strides the Church universal has made in regard to its mission in the last century, it is perplexing that the Church has not been able to undergo a transformation in understanding its nature.

The final element to examine in Haight's proposal is that of secularization and individualism. A plethora of factors combine to contribute to the increased secularization

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[25] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 31. These two documents were produced toward the conclusion of Vatican II. In this regard, another document produced by the Council is also very important; namely the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, indicating the Church's openness to God's gracious salvific activities outside the visible boundaries of the Church. Despite its progress viz. the world and other religions, the Catholic Church insisted on its claim to completeness viz. other Christian churches, particularly the Protestant ones that were seen as incomplete in regard to their acceptance, or lack thereof, of positions adopted by the council on a range of theological and practical issues. For an insightful treatment of the documents of Vatican II, see Dennis M. Doyle, *The Church Emerging from Vatican II: A Popular Approach to Contemporary Catholicism*. (New London, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2006).

of society, not the least of which is the fact that the Church as an institution is no longer

conceived as necessary for one's salvation.[26] The privatization of faith combined with the

decline of social status of the Christian Church has signaled the dramatic decline of the

authority of the Church in society and culture. The implications for ecclesiology are far-

reaching; it is clear that one can no longer do ecclesiology without paying close attention

to historical and socio-cultural context. Such apparent fragmentation in the way different

communities do church will inevitably bring forth the question of the whole-part dialectic

and that of an objective and agreed-upon criteria for evaluating the validity of any

ecclesiological method. While the current discussion opens the door further for a plurality

of legitimate ecclesiologies, it seems to indicate also the need for a quasi-methodological

framework that will allow for many culturally sensitive and historically conscious

ecclesiologies to emerge in different context, yet remain unapologetically Christian.

This brings us to Haight's proposal of the constitutive elements of a good

ecclesiological method.[27] Since the object of ecclesiology is a finite reality, one subject to

constant change, an ecclesiological method should not be viewed as a set formula always

producing the same results for those who apply it faithfully. Therefore, a similar method

in Haight's view can yield various understandings of the Church. Thus a good

ecclesiological method needs to be "definite enough to be distinctive and open enough to

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[26] Haight, *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 34. Here, Haight's treatment of the subject is somewhat self-contradictory. On the one hand, he insists that Western society as we experience it in the United States is still very religious compared to that in Western Europe. On the other hand, he is struggling to account for the declining numbers of church participation and membership across the board. He does acknowledge, however, that being a Christian in contemporary society is devoid of social support and has become a matter of personal commitment. This observation signals the need for a radical change in the way we do or are the Church; something akin to the dynamics of the early Church being considered a social pariah, or the persecuted underground church under communism of the recent past.

[27] Ibid., 44.

admit a good deal of variety."[28] A good ecclesiological method has to be: historical,

sociological, theological, apologetic, and hermeneutical at the same time.[29] It needs to be

historical because in order to understand it one must look back to its origins and practice

in history. A keen awareness of the historical and sociological character of the Church

will protect against "a-historical theological reductionism." The tension between

establishing theological ideals for the Church and the real possibilities for a church

grounded firmly in history and culture will produce fruit for as long as the ecclesiological

method creatively accounts for this dialectic.

A method also needs to be sociological.[30] Any responsible ecclesiology should

include a careful analysis of the person as a social individual as it relates to the original

formation of the Church. On one hand, this will deepen one's understanding of the

common sociological patterns exhibited in the development of various churches, while on

the other, these patterns will present the Church as an expression of the fundamental

human need to exist in community.

Furthermore, Haight insists that ecclesiological method needs to be theological.

This is so because the historical and social aspects of the Church are related to God. What

brings people together is not just their social impulse, but first and foremost their faith in

God. It is through this faith that the Church will continue to experience itself as being

constituted and sustained by the presence of the Holy Spirit, and will resist the pitfalls of

socio-historical reductionism. A purely historical and sociological analysis of the

Christian movement will easily ignore the effects of God's redemptive work in the

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[28] Haight, *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 45.
[29] These are five of Haight's own categories, which he later on applies to an ecclesiology from below; that is, the correct method for ecclesiological inquiries in the contemporary context.
[30] On this subject, Haight is dependent on T. Howland Sanks, *Salt, Leaven, & Light: The Community Called Church*. (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997).

Church. Only theology can supply the adequate tools and language for such valuation. This brings in focus the need for an axiom that joins the theological and the socio-historical languages together in the analysis of the Church, thus providing a "criterion for any specific characterization of the Church or an element of it. Theological explanations of the Church cannot bypass human, finite, historical intelligibility. Social explanations of the Church must account for the common faith of its members."[31]

The next important characteristic of the ecclesiological method for Haight is apologetic. Not in the sense that the Church demonstrates or proves its faith claims but in the sense that it deliberately seeks to explain in an intelligible way the beliefs of the Church community. The function of an apologetic in today's ecclesiological method is to utilize public language in appealing to common human experience. In a pluralistic world, the use of theological language by the Church community will no doubt be a hindrance to its mission to society and culture, for it has become a "private" language, in many respects unintelligible to the postmodern and secularized person. Since the initiative for creating an apologetic language in the Church rests with the community, this apologetic serves also to protect the language of faith against interpretations of ecclesial reality hostile to the Church. It enables the Church to provide both an intelligible account of its faith but also a credible one, as it applies the same language of common human experience to the world and to itself.[32]

Lastly, Haight's perfect ecclesiological method is hermeneutical. Similar to theology ecclesiology too does not develop in vacuum based on a straight forward review of the data. Therefore ecclesiology always looks back to its theological and historical

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[31] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 47.
[32] Ibid.

sources for self-understanding based on interpretation and appropriation of the data. This self-understanding is brought about by a certain hermeneutic, which if applied correctly should render the Church's self-understanding relevant to its historical and cultural context and to the world in which it exists in any given time.[33]

Neil Ormerod on ecclesiological method

Neil Ormerod has published a number of articles in recent years, all devoted to ecclesiology in general and to ecclesiological method in particular.[34] In his most systematic treatment of the issue of ecclesiological method, Ormerod argues that systematic ecclesiology should be "empirical/historical, critical, normative, dialectic and practical."[35]

Ormerod begins his discussion by asking the question of which church are we trying to understand when doing or studying ecclesiology? He proposes three possible options one can choose from. The first option is to study the Church of today with its current structures, institutions, and ministries. This approach is not far off the mark, since it deals with the concrete historical realities of the Church today, but to be truly historical,

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[33] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 48.

[34] Ormerod's basic work on ecclesiological method appears in a couple of articles he published on the subject. Neil Ormerod, "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology." *Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (March 1, 2002): 3-30, accessed December 17, 2010, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost; and "A Dialogical Engagement with the Social Sciences in an Ecclesiological Context." *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 815-840, accessed December 17, 2010, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCO*host*. He provided a further overview of the field of ecclesiology searching for method in his article, "Recent Ecclesiology: A Survey." *Pacifica: Journal of the Melbourne College of Divinity* 21, no. 1 (February 1, 2008): 57-67, accessed March 31, 2011, http://0-www.proquest.com.libus.csd.mu.edu/

[35] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology." 3.

ecclesiology cannot exclude the past in favor of the present or vice versa. Ecclesiology

needs to be concerned with the whole history of the Church.[36]

The second approach is that of studying and seeking understanding of the early

Church tracing its origins to the ministry of Jesus and His disciples.[37] This approach

provides ample opportunities for either grounding or criticizing the contemporary Church

based on the experience of the early Christians, where the early Church is considered

normative in its structures and ministries for any subsequent ecclesiological analysis.

This approach also has two different iterations; the first sees the early Church as the

pinnacle of ecclesiology and all subsequent ecclesiologies as falling short of the ideal

early Church. The second iteration views the early Church as the embryonic stage in the

development of ecclesiology, where all subsequent developments in the field of

ecclesiology are seen as direct and fully developed expressions of what was present as

potentiality at the beginning of the Church.[38]

The third and final approach most often used in studying the Church, in

Ormerod's opinion, is to employ highly idealized models of the Church based on

profound notions such as *communio* or *diakonia*, describing a Church to which all want

to belong. But the real Church always carries the dialectic of representing simultaneously

a spiritual reality and a finite human reality always subject to change and in need of

purification. Conceiving of the Church in highly idealized and detached from reality

terms carries with it clear ideological overtones and while useful in regard to its ability to

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[36] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology." 6.

[37] For a classic example of this type of ecclesiology see, Hans Küng, *The Church*. (New York, NY: New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967).

[38] The first approach is often espoused by Evangelical Protestants, who since the Reformation have been seeking to right the wrongs and get the Church back to its original splendor. The second approach is more typical of a traditional Catholic perception of the role of tradition and historical developments in ecclesiology. See Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1984).

project an ideal toward which all members can strive, it, nevertheless, tends to obscure

tradition-specific theological assumptions and so also the very real problem of historical

change.[39] For Ormerod, both methods are highly ideological in nature and, therefore,

suspect in their ability to bring about a balanced and objective method for ecclesiology.

What he never explains is how a critical theological-historical reflection on the Church

can avoid the danger of being or becoming ideological since any critical theologizing

would by definition require certain hermeneutic!

Ormerod insists that a method in ecclesiology should involve narrative structure

and include consideration for the history of the Church and the history of theology of the

Church as the data that needs to be examined in ecclesiology. This narrative cannot be the

simple and naïve retelling of the Church's story lacking the critical historical awareness

of the presence of multiple competing agendas and interests at every turn in the story.

Systematic ecclesiology in contrast will utilize research, interpretation, history, and

dialectics, in order to tell the critical story of the Church.[40]

But again we encounter another problem; which Church's story are we seeking to

tell? What is the object of the discipline of ecclesiology? On this particular point,

Ormerod differs quite significantly from Haight, for whom the proper object of

ecclesiology is the whole or universal Church. Their disagreement is essential, as

Ormerod believes the proper object of ecclesiology is that of a concrete, actual, existing,

historical church and not the universal one. His belief is based on the concern that any

discussion of the universal Church as object of ecclesiology is in danger of idealizing the

object. For Ormerod, the many Christian churches are united in an eschatological sense

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[39] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology." 5-6.
[40] Ibid., 6. On this point, Ormerod is particularly indebted to Lonergan's method. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*. (Toronto, CA: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

but divided to a large degree in the here and now, and it would be methodologically improper to study them as if they are one.[41]

Ormerod correctly points out that systematic ecclesiology is concerned with the history of the Church on the one hand, but so also with the history of theological reflection on the Church. Methodologically speaking, systematic ecclesiology needs to involve a philosophy and a theology of history and a serious dialogue with the social sciences. Why? Because the Church is ultimately a fully human community constituted by the actions and intentions of its members.

But the Church is also divine in origin, and as such, the intentions, decisions, actions, and so forth of the people who comprise the Church have to follow the same pattern of life of obedience to the Father as Jesus lived, and be authenticated by the Spirit of the same Jesus and be oriented toward the same goals that Jesus had expressed in the idea of the Kingdom of God.[42] In other words, the Church finds its identity in Christ and "is missionary by its very nature."[43] It is this precise element of theological orientation of systematic ecclesiology that serves for Ormerod as the norm for evaluating the life of the Church. Everything the Church does in structure, teaching, or ministry has to be brought in line with God's missionary activity in this world bringing about the Kingdom of God. In other words, the Church can achieve its relevance and find true validation only if and when it aligns its purpose and mission with the purpose and mission of Jesus.[44]

In his treatment of systematic ecclesiology, Ormerod develops two distinct poles of importance. The one pole deals primarily with the theological realities of the Kingdom

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[41] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 7.
[42] Ibid., 8.
[43] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*. §5. Cited in, Tim S. Perry, *The Legacy of John Paul II: an Evangelical Assessment.* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 250.
[44] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 9-10.

of God. Ormerod insists that ecclesiology has to be normative, dialectical, and practical. The norms in ecclesiology will establish the standards against which the life of the Church can be evaluated properly. But because in real life and history the established norms are not always achieved, ecclesiology will need to also be dialectical in that it seeks to understand the reasons for the deviations from established norms. Ormerod further discusses this dialectic in his article on "Identity and Mission in Catholic Organizations."[45]

If it has the ability to establish norms and criteria for self-evaluation, and possesses the power of critical analysis for identifying its failures in history, ecclesiology also needs to be practical. Practical in the sense that having discovered the problem ecclesiology should also be able to prescribe the cure or corrective solution.[46]

At the other pole, Ormerod deals with the Church as human institution. He places there the importance of engagement with the social sciences in ecclesiology. For Ormerod, this proposal is not a fad. He is fully cognizant of the potential for sharp criticisms on all sides. To illustrate his point, he proceeds to examine the Church as a normal human society with the tools and stand point of sociology. Typical to any human society, he identifies four basic interrelated elements. They are structure, identity, authority and change. More and more theologians are becoming convinced that there is no escaping the sociological question when it comes to the Church. It is in the nature of human interactions in communities to assume structures and form institutions no matter the size of the group. In secular societies institutional structures serve various purposes.

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[45] Neil Ormerod, "Identity and Mission in Catholic Organizations," *The Australasian Catholic Record* (Oct 2010): 87, 4; 430-439.
[46] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 10.

Within the Church, the nature, origin and purpose of its various structures stem from the

Church's mission.[47]

In addition to forming structures, all human societies are inevitably concerned

with their identity. The Church is no different in that regard. It, too, struggles to find and

define its identity. Within the Church, identity is often related to the Church's structures,

but ecclesial structures should not exhaust the meaning of the Church's identity. Overall,

the Church's identity has to do with the meanings, values, and purpose that define it.[48]

And that leads to the next element proposed by Ormerod, namely authority.

Who determines the structures and the identity of the Church? What authority

legitimates both?[49] As Ormerod argues, authority is a relational category and has to do

with the question of who in the community has the power to determine or change the

identity of that group? Authority is predicated on certain claims to knowledge and power

which then have to be recognized and validated communally or socially. If and when the

expectations generated by the claim to knowledge or power are not fulfilled, the person

or institution loses authority. In ecclesial context, the claim of authority is made in

relation to a divine mandate. But is there a difference between authority claims in the

Church context and those in secular society?[50]

We come to the final element in Ormerod's scheme, that of change. As any other

human community, the Church also is subject to change. What are the implications of this

realization? A careful study of church history demonstrates the scale and scope of

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[47] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 13.

[48] See, Paul Lakeland, *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 72.

[49] For a good, quick overview of the historical development of the notion, see Mark Chapman, "Authority," in Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge, ed., *Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 497-510.

[50] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 14.

changes over the last two millennia, along with the fact that for most of the time period,

changes in the Church paralleled changes in the larger society and vice versa. Unlike

other human societies where the identity of the group is established by the members and,

therefore, always subject to change, the Church claims to derive its identity from God.

Does this mean the Church's identity cannot undergo change, and if it can, could this be a

change in identity and not of identity? Whatever the case may be, Ormerod insists that

any change in the structures or ministries of the Church is never for the sake of change

alone, but has to be devoted immediately to serving the needs of the Christian community

and ultimately to empowering the Church to do the work of the Kingdom of God.[51]

Ormerod's conclusion is that good systematic ecclesiology should ultimately be

about mission and not communion. While he appreciates the Trinitarian nature of

communion ecclesiology, Ormerod also identifies a number of problems with it, ranging

from its tendency to seek an idealized vision of the Church to the candid assertion that in

the world we live in, communion as an expression of unity is more a means to an end.

That end is nothing less than the participation in

> …the divine missions of Word and Spirit …. In this way a mission ecclesiology
> also makes contact with Trinitarian theology, not in terms of *communio* and
> *perichoresis*, but in terms of *missio* and *processio*. Communion may be our
> eschatological end in the vision of God, but in the here and now of a pilgrim
> Church mission captures our ongoing historic responsibility.[52]

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[51] "The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology," 18.
[52] Ibid., 29.

Summary

There are a few important elements of ecclesiological method emerging from the preceding discussion. For one, good ecclesiological method has to be critically aware of the Church's history, for without this awareness and critical analysis, ecclesiology can fall victim to various ideological agendas – not the agenda of the Kingdom of God.[53] Good ecclesiological method also needs to be, theologically speaking, normative, dialectical, and very practical. At the same time, good ecclesiological method will have to engage seriously with sociology and the other social sciences. This is so because the Church is not only divine but also a very human reality, and the dynamics of human interactions in the Church community cannot be explained and understood fully in theological terms alone. The theological and sociological elements of the Church should mutually inform and complement each other within ecclesiology. Furthermore, a good ecclesiological method has to give a satisfactory account to the "part-whole dilemma."[54]

At the heart of the disagreement between Haight and Ormerod on the proper object of ecclesiology lies one of the most significant problems and challenges to any ecclesiological method. Are the differences between individual churches and Christian communities so vast as to preclude the applicability of an ecclesiological method across the board? Or does there exist a methodological (or quasi-methodological) axis that can

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[53] I will return to this question shortly in my discussion of Moltmann's notions of identity and relevance, and the role they have to play in formulating theology relevant to the contemporary world, which is also decidedly Christian in nature.

[54] *Christian Community in History. Historical Ecclesiology*, 41. This is further illustrated by Ormerod's disagreement with Haight over the proper object of ecclesiology; Is it the universal Church or is it only the local expression in its multiple forms? It seems to me, that it is both-and; any local church or denomination that attempts to study its own history and foundations to the exclusion of the careful study of its relation to other churches and, thereby, to the universal Church will inevitably produce a defective and incomplete ecclesiology.

provide normative and practical structure for the evaluation of both individual churches and the universal Church?

I believe the answer lies with the second option. Such axis exists between the notions of identity and relevance as applied to the life and history of the Church. In the next section of this chapter, I will trace the theological development of this methodological and dialectical axis as it emerges from the writings of German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

Moltmann's Notions of "Identity" and "Relevance"; Defining the Terms

The methodological axis formed by the "identity-relevance" dialectic I propose to employ in evaluating different ecclesiologies in this dissertation stems from the work of German protestant theologian of hope Jürgen Moltmann. While the categories of "identity" and "relevance" appear with varying frequency in Moltmann's theology, starting with his *Theology of Hope*, and continuing throughout his works,[55] they receive their first deliberate and extensive treatment in his book *The Crucified God*.[56] There Moltmann spends the first chapter introducing the dialectical dynamics of the "identity-relevance" axis as the "double crisis: the *crisis of relevance* and the *crisis of identity*."[57]

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[55] It deserves a mention here that quite often the two notions, those of "identity" and "relevance," appear in tandem in Moltmann's work and for a reason. To Moltmann's mind, the two are inextricably linked in regard to Christian faith, theology, and the Church. Throughout his works, Moltmann makes this point often in different contexts. He brings this to a theological crescendo in the statement: "There is no Christian identity without public relevance, and no public relevance without Christian identity." Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society; The Public Relevance of Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl. (Minneapolis, MN; Fortress Press, 1999), 1.

[56] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God,* 7-31.

[57] Ibid., 7.

This crisis is also described by Moltmann in terms of the "*identity-involvement dilemma*."[58]

Typically, crises are seen as traumatic events to be avoided if at all possible, as they often threaten to disturb the equilibrium inherent in most societal and institutional structures. For Moltmann, however, the experience of this double crisis of identity and relevance, if responded to properly - that is by understanding both Christian identity and Christian relevance only in relation to the cross - can produce positive results in enabling the Christian faith and by extension, the Church to remain decisively Christian and at the same time relevant to the contemporary world.[59]

The crisis is set in the context of a globalizing, post-World War II world, with its deepening social divides; growing injustices; and massive failures of traditional cultural, social, and religious institutions.[60] Within the context of growing discontent with established institutions and fundamental cultural shifts signaling the inevitability of change, nowhere is the crisis more dramatic than within Christian theology, where the crisis of identity and relevance is the crisis of Christian faith. There was a time when the Church and society shared common ideals, goals, and vision, and mutually contributed to

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[58] Some observations are in order; the" identity-relevance" axis in Moltmann appears to take on a few different forms. Some times Moltmann refers to it as "identity-relevance," or "identity-involvement," while at other times he refers to the same as, "identity-credibility," or "continuity-relevance," to name just a few. The same goes for the notions of "relevance," "involvement," and "credibility. At first glance it may appear that he uses the terms "identity" and "continuity," or "identity" and "memory" as synonyms, but a closer examination shows that for Moltmann these related terms add layers of meaning and depth to his argument. The same observation holds for the notions of "relevance," "involvement" and "credibility."

[59] *The Crucified God,* 7. The statement is clearly programmatic as it becomes apparent later, for in what follows, Moltmann continues his discussion of what I term the methodological axis of "identity-relevance," which pivots on or is centered by the cross of Christ, and not just on the cross but the cross of Christ as an expression of God's self-revelation to the other. The cross is not a magical object or a mystical "passageway" - to use Müller-Fahrenholz's words - to salvation, but the heart of the Gospel, the Good News for a dying world, where Christ demonstrates His true identity by assuming non-identity identifying with the fallen humanity and providing hope for new life through His resurrection. See Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, *The Kingdom and the Power; The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann*, trans., John Bowden. (Minneapolis, MN; Fortress Press, 2001), 70.

[60] *The Crucified God,* 9.

the social integration of human beings into the larger social institutions. As Moltmann asserts:

> As long as the church lived in a 'Christian World,' it could rely upon the presence of corresponding ideas and purposes in culture, society and politics, and by fulfilling a social purpose itself could bring about this identity of aims and activities. The church and society lived as it were in 'concentric circles,' overlapping, complementing and affirming each other.[61]

For some time after the end of World War II, the Church continued to enjoy a privileged standing in society. In Germany at least, this privileged standing enjoyed by the Confessional Church was due in large part to its anti-Nazi stance during the war, a relevant response based on solid Christian identity. But the Church cannot expect to remain relevant in the future based on past involvements. In every consecutive generation, the Church has to face anew the challenge of the "crisis of identity and relevance," rediscover its own Christian identity, and identify its mission/relevance in line with God's purpose expressed in the Kingdom of God.

But this has not always been the case and, in fact, the enormous challenges faced by the Christian Church at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries show without doubt that a church insistent on simply continuing its "previous form and ideology" is in the process of "losing contact with the … world around it and in many respects had already lost it."[62]

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[61] *The Crucified God,* 26. Here Moltmann's dependence on Barth's analysis of culture is obvious. Even though Barth's treatment of the relationship between "Church and Culture" precedes Moltmann's own work on the subject by nearly 70 years, the benefit of hindsight allows Moltmann to affirm Barth yet again and validate his thought. See Karl Barth, *Theology and Church; Shorter Writings, 1920-1928.* (New York, NY; Harper and Row, 1962) and specifically, "Church and Culture" (1926).

[62] *The Crucified God*, 8. This damning indictment points toward another move that Moltmann will make later; that is, a move against a traditional understanding of the Church and theology as carriers of God's presence and His Kingdom. God, Moltmann would insist, is "in his own presence and in his own Kingdom." Therefore, it would be our churches, theologies, and religions that need to bring themselves in

Moltmann observes that the continuous alienation of the Church, which is rapidly

losing its place in traditional culture and society, causes the loss of credibility and the

crisis of relevance. The initial response to the crisis usually is to attempt to resolve it in

one of two ways: either the Church driven by its desire to regain its former position of

prominence and cultural relevance identifies fully with the world, and, in the process,

completely loses its distinctively Christian identity; or the Church withdraws behind its

walls in the comfort of the company of likeminded individuals united around an

understanding of its Christian identity unsoiled by an increasingly secular culture for

which the only antidote is a return to some form of conservatism. The Church, of course,

will not be able to regain any relevance in the context of isolation and lack of

relationships.

> To see one's own point of view as relative to that of others is to think out one's
> own ideas in relationship to the thoughts of others. To have no relationship would
> be death. … To translate something into action and experience, however, is
> possible and meaningful only in living relationships with others. Thus if Christian
> theology is relational, it can find a meaningful way between absolutist theocracy
> and unproductive tolerance …[63]

From this it becomes clear that the successful resolution to the "identity-relevance" crisis

is only possible as long as the Church maintains meaningful relationships. On one hand,

the Church needs to remain in touch, be connected to, and stay involved with the

surrounding world, society, and culture so as to not lose its relevance. But as I will

demonstrate a bit later, the Church also needs to remain connected to and in relationship

with Christ from whom it derives its Christian identity. It will keep looking back to the

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line with His presence and Kingdom purposes with an attitude of epistemic humility. See Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 5.
    [63] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 11

cross of Christ as its decisive salvific event; it will look forward to His eschatological future in hope of new life.[64]

But let us take a moment and examine quickly the concept of relevance and what it means for Moltmann. As I indicated earlier, for Moltmann, the notion of relevance is a relational category requiring connection and engagement with the surrounding world, culture, and society. Relevance requires "involvement."[65] A church that is not involved with the struggles of contemporary society and its people cannot be relevant. Another concept which Moltmann links with relevance is that of "credibility." The notion of "credibility" plays an important role in the public demonstration of the relevance of Christian theology.[66] The Church, of course, will not be able to achieve any lasting or significant relevance in the absence of an understanding of its true Christian identity in light of the cross of Christ.

Now we turn to the category of "identity." What does Moltmann mean by this term? It is the sense of self-understanding where the Church loses itself in identifying with the crucified Christ and, consequently, loses its identity by identifying with the God-forsaken and the suffering.[67] But what does it mean for one to identify with the cross of Christ? It is to commit oneself in total self-abandonment and in faith identify with the experience of Christ. Moltmann states:

> Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the
> Crucified Christ, to the extent to which one has accepted the proclamation that in

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[64] In *Theology of Hope* and other writings Moltmann firmly links the historical and eschatological dimensions of Christ's identity, life, and His Gospel. Even though Moltmann is focused on the eschatological promise of hope, he cannot deny the fact that we can only establish the hope for the future by looking back into the salvific event recorded and kept alive for us in the Gospels. See *Theology of Hope*, especially, "The 'Death of God' and the Resurrection of Christ," 165-172.

[65] *The Crucified God*, 14.

[66] Ibid., 10

[67] Ibid., 16-17.

Him God has identified Himself with the godless and those abandoned by God to whom one belongs oneself.[68]

Clearly we see the process of the double identification that Moltmann is outlining. The giving up of one's identity in the process of identifying with Christ on the cross in faith leads inevitably to the assumption of a second identity, that assumed by Christ on the cross, where He gave up His identity to identify with the godforsaken. Assuming a posture of solidarity with the world without first identifying with Christ will not do, as it leads to replacing one social religion with another, none of which is Christian any longer. On the other hand, the mere identification with Christ in his cross without a corresponding identification with the lost for which He died is indicative of faith that is dying inwardly.

But this experience of the crucified and risen Christ, besides being an event, carries the positive content of God's self-revelation as a result of which a fallen and dying world can find the hope for its salvation, healing and restoration. In other words, the content of the experience of this self-revelation is the Good News of the Gospel. This is why in discussing Christian identity Moltmann also introduces the concepts of "memory" and "continuity."[69] Moltmann writes, "The work of memory creates continuity. There is no identity which is not also continuity stretched over a period of time and held fast through memory."[70] The experience of identifying with the crucified Christ requires remembering the cross of Christ and identifying continually with it. It also requires the

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[68] *The Crucified God*, 19

[69] These two concepts are closely linked with identity. This is demonstrated throughout Moltmann's work in almost every book he wrote. Memory is also linked to the eschatological hope that figures so prominently in Moltmann's theology.

[70] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 281.

constant recalling and, therefore, loyalty to the experience of faith and the decision of

faith once taken in order to assume this new identity. But for Moltmann this new identity

in the history of life is always open to the future.[71] Christian faith and Christian identity

are not merely retrospective; they are also prospective in their outlook.

> If the experiences of the Christian faith are called rebirth of life to a living hope,
> then the natural work of memory stands in the light of this work of hope. The
> power of continuity won through memory is directed towards the rebirth of the
> whole. … Memory will in this light understand all the experiences of faith as
> open experiences pointing beyond themselves and as changing signs which point
> in the same direction – that is, as fragments and prefigurations of the new
> creation.[72]

It is for this reason that Moltmann believes a true Christian faith and true Christian

identity will without fear give up its identity when assuming the non-identity of the

godforsaken. The Christian faith is not faith that believes in itself but in Christ whose

eschatological future gives us hope for new life.

It may be useful at this point to take a moment and provide a brief summary of the

discussion thus far. In attempting to define the terms "identity" and "relevance,"

according to Moltmann, I first addressed the interrelated nature of these terms. In

Moltmann, they are set in the context of what he calls the "double crisis" of identity and

relevance. Any attempt to resolve this crisis by focusing exclusively on acquiring

relevance in the absence of true Christian identity, or, conversely, holding fast to any

understood Christian identity without maintaining serious engagement or involvement

with the contemporary world would be futile and potentially deadly for the Church. The

only way the Church can successfully resolve this crisis and remain the true Church of

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[71] *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology,* 281.
[72] Ibid., 281-282

Christ is by maintaining the dialectic between identity and relevance at every turn. The

context within which such dialectic is to be maintained is a relational one.

I also established that what Moltmann means by "relevance" is nothing other than

continuous and active engagement, involvement, and identification with the godforsaken

world. This continuous engagement is doomed to failure and tragic loss of Christian

identity if the Church gets involved in it without first discovering its true identity in the

cross of Christ. Similarly, for Moltmann, the term, "identity" points back to the cross of

Christ, where the Church as a whole and any individual believer in particular should find

their starting point and their own true Christian identity. This Christian identity requires

memory or remembrance of the crucified and risen Christ and is furthermore solidified in

the continuity of faith and trust in Christ's salvific work in history and his eschatological

future of hope for new life.

> Only by virtue of the one who was crucified can the church live in the presence of
> the one who is risen – that is to say, can live realistically in hope.[73]

This identity, which is retrospective and prospective simultaneously, derived from the

dual Christian faith in the Good News; faith both in Christ's death and resurrection, and

in the coming of His Messianic Kingdom, provides for the fearless losing of one's

identity in non-identity and, thus, achieving true relevance of the Christian faith.

Lastly, a brief comment about the crisis of identity and relevance; this crisis is not

to be feared but embraced wholeheartedly. Moltmann tells us that over time if left

unexamined and not corrected, Christian faith and identity decay, and relevance is lost. It

is precisely the "double crisis" of identity and relevance that affords the Church the

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[73] *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* 26.

opportunity to correct its course in line with the course of the Kingdom of God. In the immediate context of *The Crucified God*, this is what Moltmann calls a "missionary situation."[74] Moltmann characterizes this missionary situation as,

> …the moment of great decision: the world is lapsing into the spiritual death of [75] atheism, atomic catastrophe, the death of the young from drugs or ecological self-destruction. At the same time, it is the hour in which the true church has to rise up as the visible refuge in the disaster: ….[76]

No doubt this missionary situation is calling for a missional Church. As Moltmann insightfully remarks, "it is not that the church 'has' a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church."[77] For Moltmann, mission is also an invitation to life. This invitation to life works on two levels; first, a church in crisis can discover newness and life by involving itself in mission, the mission of the Kingdom of God. Second, the Church of Christ when engaged in the mission of Christ can bring hope and life to a dying world.

The Case for an Emerging Missional Ecclesiology

In the introduction to this dissertation, I paid a considerable amount of attention to the postmodern context for doing ecclesiology at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. With its ever-increasing anti-institutional, and often anti-organized religion sentiment with its strong globalization currents and rampant secularism, postmodernity presents the Christian Church with an immense challenge; the Church should either find a way to change and reform itself against the backdrop of radically

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[74] *The Crucified God*, 21.
[75] *God for a Secular Society,* 69, 242.
[76] *The Crucified God*, 21
[77] *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.

changed culture and world by rediscovering its true identity and mission, or retreat to a repristination of one or another form of Christian "orthodoxy" and drown in the sea of oblivion.

Most recent efforts in the field of ecclesiology indicate that Christian theologians take this task and challenge very seriously. Indeed, as I observed earlier in this chapter, a significant effort has been extended to creating a new ecclesiological method that will allow the Church to develop serious, engaged, socially and historically conscious yet theologically sound ecclesiology to give the Church new life as it faces this new challenge. From the discussion on ecclesiological method above,[78] I drew out some helpful criteria for what constitutes a good ecclesiological method. Any good ecclesiological method, and by extension, any good ecclesiology, has to be historically conscious, normative, dialectical, and very practical, but also aware and very engaged with the social sciences. In addition, good ecclesiological method should be able to transcend the part-whole dilemma that troubles so many ecclesiologists today. The issue at stake here has to do with the question: can we arrive at an ecclesiological method that can explain adequately the Church universal and the plurality of Christian churches, theologies, and traditions?

After exhausting the discussion on the question of method, I then proceeded to discuss the quasi-methodological axis enclosed between "identity" and "relevance," as discussed in Moltmann's theology. Slowly but surely a coherent picture began to emerge. In defining the terms "identity" and "relevance," I observed the parallels between Moltmann's discussion and that of Haight and Ormerod on method. The concepts

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[78] See my discussion on "The Question of Method in Ecclesiology," pages 16-34, and especially the summary.

employed in clarifying the "identity-relevance" axis overlapped quite nicely with the criteria for good ecclesiological method discussed before. In the process, the dialectic between Christian identity and relevance emerged as quite capable of producing a balanced and distinctively Christian ecclesiology at a time of serious crisis. Not only does Moltmann not shy away from the crisis; he sees in it the promise of a "missionary situation" that will allow the Church to advance the mission of the Kingdom.

All of the elements discussed above: the effects of postmodernity on the Church and contemporary society with the ensuing profound crisis of faith, the criteria for solid ecclesiological method, and the quasi-methodological axis of identity and relevance combine perfectly to provide for a new ecclesiology born out of the crisis of faith in the contemporary West. On one hand, this ecclesiology will help explain what Moltmann calls a "missionary church," while on the other, it will help bring about this missionary Church.[79] This will be what I call a missional ecclesiology leading to a missional church. Not a church that has mission, but as Moltmann points out correctly, a mission which creates its own church. And that mission is the *missio Dei*.

Conclusion

In the following chapters I will attempt to test and demonstrate the viability of the methodological axis of "identity and relevance," as applied to three different ecclesiological proposals. I will evaluate the recent ecclesiological efforts of Catholic theologian Nicholas Healy, Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner, and Presbyterian theologian Darrell Guder by applying the "identity-relevance" continuum to their work,

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[79] *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 7-10.

and arguing that while their efforts emerge from different theological traditions they, nevertheless, follow the lines of missional ecclesiology.

The efforts of these three theologians all took place within the last 10 to 12 years. They happened concurrently, although to this point I have not detected any awareness in any of them to the parallel efforts of their counterparts. I consider their works representative of their respective theological traditions not in the sense that they speak *ex cathedra* on all issues ecclesiological, but, rather, that their efforts are informed by clearly observable theological traditions.

The fact that they all deal with the current cultural challenges within the realms of their respective ecclesial traditions, combined with the fact that none of their efforts appear to be informed by the others' work, and, finally, their display of strikingly similar theological intuition evident in their efforts to resolve the challenges by proposing ecclesiologies capable of withstanding the challenge and accomplishing their missions, sends a strong signal as to the potential viability of missional ecclesiology.

CHAPTER TWO
Nicholas Healy and His Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology

Introductory Matters

Healy is the first of three ecclesiologists whose recent efforts in articulating

ecclesiologies I examine in this dissertation. For almost 20 years, Healy has engaged with

scholars in a serious dialog about the various aspects of Christian ecclesiology.

Beginning with his dissertation at Yale University in 1993, and spanning multiple books

and articles, Healy has been searching for answers to the challenges posed by

Postmodernity to the Christian Church.[1]

Healy writes ecclesiology from a Catholic perspective, and for this reason he

engages with Catholic ecclesiologists and their work.[2] But Healy's concerns for the

Church transcend its Catholic expression, as he engages in a continual manner with non-

Catholic theologians in general and non-Catholic ecclesiologists in particular.[3] A careful

read of Healy's work reveals a genuine concern for the Church universal in all of its local

expressions. This concern is driven by factors and conditions both internal to the Church

and also external, which, in turn, have necessitated the development of corresponding

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[1] A brief review of the titles of works authored by Nicholas M. Healy supports my claim above. Among them are *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000); "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3, n. 26 (November 2003), p. 292; "Ecclesiology and Receptive Ecumenism," paper presented at the Joint 2nd International Receptive Ecumenism Conference & 3rd Annual Gathering of the Ecclesiological Investigations Network, The Centre for Catholic Studies, Department of Theology & Religion, Durham University, UK Durham, January 2009; "Some Observations on Ecclesiological Method," *Toronto Journal of Theology 12*, no. 1 (March 1, 1996): 47-63; "Ecclesiology and Communion." *Perspectives in Religious Studies 31,* no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 273-290.

[2] I am referring to influential Catholic theologians such as Avery Dulles, Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, Roger Haight, Karl Rahner, and Henri deLubac to name just a few.

[3] I am referring to theologians such as Swiss Reformed Karl Barth, Anglican Ephraim Radner, Methodist Stanley Hauerwas, or Episcopalian Kathryn Tanner, all of whom Healy engages in robust discussions on the right method for doing ecclesiology and more.

internal and external ecclesiological apologetics.[4] The external factors exerting pressure

on the Church in general and ecclesiology in particular have to do with the perception of

a dramatic shift from modern to postmodern patterns of thinking in society, culture, and

science. Healy believes this fundamental philosophical shift requires new and,

consequently, more useful ways of constructing ecclesiology, which will again allow the

Church to re-engage with culture and with other religions in a robust debate about truth.

On the other hand, and while recognizing the profound contributions of ecclesiology

done in the last 100 years, Healy criticizes modern ecclesiology for presenting over-

idealized accounts of the Church, thus rendering it incapable of addressing its daily

struggle with its own sinfulness. This inability, for Healy, represents the second and

internal pressure on the Church to reform its theology. Healy proposes to address these

external and internal challenges by producing a new ecclesiology, which he terms

"practical prophetic ecclesiology."[5] This ecclesiological proposal eschews the highly

idealized ecclesiologies of years past and focusses attention on the concrete identity of

the Church against a theodramatic horizon, which Healy deems most appropriate for

reconfiguring ecclesiology into one of the practical-prophetic type.

     My own examination of Healy's proposal will explore his critique of modern or

"blueprint" - to use Healy's own term - ecclesiologies and their relations to the Church's

concrete identity. I will also evaluate Healy's attempt on reconfiguring ecclesiology from

the speculative and systematic discipline it has become into a more practical prophetic

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[4] For a detailed discussion on those factors and Healy's understanding of what precipitates this necessity, see Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology and Communion," *Perspectives in Religious Studies, Journal of North American Baptist Preachers* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 273-290.
[5] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology, 21.*

one.[6] In my examination I focus in particular on Healy's most complete ecclesiological treatise to date *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. In this chapter, I intend to argue that the best way to read and understand Healy's ecclesiological proposal is along the axis of ecclesial identity and relevance,[7] where relevance is understood as witness and mission and is used as a criteria of assessing the Church's concrete identity.[8]

Healy's Notion of Blueprint Ecclesiologies and the Crisis of Identity

In his book, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* Healy sets out on a mission to "clear some space within the discipline of theology" for new forms of ecclesiology. His primary interest is not that of discussing issues of ecclesial structures or the offices of the Church. Rather, he is focused on generating a discussion, or, better still, discussions, over issues of methodology, ecclesial identity, and the contemporary context within which we face the challenges of being the Church.[9] Healy contends that while for the last 100 or so years ecclesiology has at times had a profound impact upon the Church, "it has not been as helpful as could be for the Christian community." He charges the traditional ecclesiology/ies of the last century with being:

> … highly systematic and theoretical, focused more on discerning the right
> things to think about the Church rather than orientated to the living, rather
> messy, confused and confusing body that the Church actually is.[10]

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[6] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology, 21.*
[7] See the Introduction above, especially pp. 8-10.
[8] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology, 7.*
[9] Ibid., 1.
[10] Ibid., 3.

It is this preference for speaking about the Church's essential identity in highly theoretical and speculative terms, rather than about the Church's concrete and historical identity which, for Healy, is the culprit behind ecclesiology falling prey to "ever-shifting theological fashions" or becoming quite dull. Healy ascribes the reason for this inability of theologians to engage in a meaningful reflection on the concrete identity of the contemporary Church to their methodological preferences for constructing ecclesiology.[11] It is this perception of inadequacy that drives Healy's own efforts in ecclesiology in this book in particular and in the larger corpus of his work. He is quite adamant that so far modern ecclesiology has been unable to produce an adequate theological reflection on the concrete Church as is and, therefore, has been incapable of conducting a meaningful conversation over its problems.

Armed with the above-mentioned insights, Healy's work seeks to make methodological and constructive suggestions aimed at the Church's "actual" and concrete identity.[12] A cursory look over the contents of his book will betray his preoccupation with the notion of the Church's identity; sometimes referred to as "concrete" or "actual," "tensive" or "historical."[13]

But what is the "concrete Church"? Healy's approach to answering this question of the Church's identity is one that involves a description of what the Church is not. It is

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[11] This particular charge, while well placed, is nevertheless ironic, as it applies in equal measure to the methodological concerns displayed by Healy. If idealized ecclesiologies are influenced by the theological underpinnings of one's methodology, the same truth should apply in equal measure to the theological structures supporting ecclesiology, which focus on the concrete identity of the Church "as is." I will return to this notion in the concluding remarks of this chapter.

[12] In the introduction, Healy is careful to make sure that he is not opposed to any and all reflections upon the "essential or theoretical identity" of the Church. What he opposes, in truth, is the over emphasis on the theoretical and highly synthetic accounts of the Church to the exclusion of any discussion over its concrete identity, which is inextricably tied to its concrete context.

[13] A quick count indicates more than 60 instances where Healy uses the term "identity," almost all in relation to the Church. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 196.

obvious that this is done to preempt or address popular misconceptions about the Church's identity on the way to a working definition. For one, we should not think of the concrete Church just as the visible or empirical Church to be distinguished from its spiritual or theological aspects.[14] To pursue such differentiation between the visible and invisible aspects when speaking of the concrete Church threatens to obscure the activity of the Holy Spirit in constituting the Church - on the one hand, while on the other it may come extremely close to conceiving the Church only in terms of human efforts and activities. For these reasons, any analysis of the concrete Church will need to include a sociological component "properly subsumed within the theological discourse."[15]

Furthermore, the concrete Church is not merely the institution that is the keeper of the Christian worldview to be passed on to the next generation. It has to be thought of as the distinctive way of life enabled by the Holy Spirit and orientating the faithful toward the Father through Jesus Christ. The concrete identity of the Church is constituted by dual action: the gracious action of the Spirit on one hand and, on the other, the human action of obedience in discipleship in which and through which the faithful are orientated toward Christ. This leads Healy to contend that the proper way of describing the concrete identity of the Church is not in terms of its being, but in terms of action or agency.[16] Thus any attempt on ecclesiology, while theological in its nature to a great degree, will have to concern itself also with such forms of discourse as sociology, history, and forms of cultural analysis that will allow it to critically and faithfully examine and account for the

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[14] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 4.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 5.

realm of human activity.[17] Healy's concern here is quite clear: to develop ways that will enable ecclesiology to appropriate a range of critical tools in its arsenal. Without such tools any ecclesiology will be in danger of falling prey to either theological or cultural reductionism.

Having introduced his concept of the Church's concrete identity, Healy moves on to establish the criteria by which this concrete identity can be judged. If the Church's concrete identity was construed in terms of the Church's orientation toward Christ, the Church's task, mission, or responsibility is to witness "to its Lord, to make known throughout the world the Good News of salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ."[18] This mission or task has two aspects to it: First, it consists of a communal aspect, which includes the creation of appropriate institutions to enable witness, but also pastoral care and discipleship; second, is the personal aspect of the task for individual believers who are to be disciples of Christ. In Healy's thought, both the concrete identity of the Church and the Church's task or mission are dependent in its entirety on the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. In orientating the Church toward its Savior and aligning it with His mission, the Spirit brings about the Church's true identity and faithful discipleship.[19] At the same time, the corporate Church and all individual Christians have the responsibility and the task of allowing themselves to be reoriented toward Christ in a

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[17] For this insight Healy is dependent upon Stephen Sykes who insists that, "the language of sociology and the language of theology may be separate, but the reality of divine and human power is not. It is not parallel or merely coordinated; it is inevitably and dangerously mixed." *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth.* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 207.

[18] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 6.

[19] On this point Healy depends upon the analysis of Hauerwas in re-appropriating the notion of the Church's function in two of his popular treatises: *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic.* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics.* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), coauthored with Charles Pinches. Some topics are often revisited in Hauerwas's many books on Christian ethics and Christian life in community.

continuous manner and to be faithful disciples in fulfilling the Church's mission in witness. In Healy's view, these two tasks act, "as the criteria for assessing the identity of the concrete Church in terms of the adequacy of its witness and pastoral care."[20]

This two-fold criterion for evaluating the Church's concrete identity Healy sees best explained by the Apostle Paul's words in Galatians 6:14: "far be it from me to glory except in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ." In this simple testimony Healy reads a proscription and a prescription. Without a doubt the prescription has to do with Christian witness and discipleship, while the proscription, in Healy's view, concerns the Church's failure to deal with the corruption of power. Whenever the Church chooses power over its task of witness to Christ, it loses its orientation toward Christ and fails in its mission. The result for the Church's concrete identity is "confusions and stupidities" associated with the sinful state of the Church. The Church cannot escape this state by its own actions but only by the saving work of God, and only after acknowledging its institutional (ecclesial) sinfulness.[21] While this communal - and not just personal - repentance is a requirement for the Church to reclaim its concrete identity anew, such repentance is an integral part of the Gospel and Christian witness to the cross and resurrection of Christ.

This identity-witness axis in Healy's ecclesiological method, the proscriptive-prescriptive dynamic he appropriates from Apostle Paul, informs and influences in a rather profound manner Healy's critique of 20th century idealized ecclesiologies and their inability to deal with the Church in the real world. The ways in which the Church has dealt with institutional sinfulness is to acknowledge the sin of individual Christians

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[20] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 7.
[21] Ibid., 9.

and the same time maintain the sinless nature of the Church itself.[22] This, for Healy, is the main problem with modern ecclesiologies and their methods. As the modern Church has issued various pronouncements and condemnations against the explicit sinfulness of different non-ecclesial bodies and societies, the Church itself has failed to engage in a theological conversation about its own weaknesses and ecclesial sin. This problem stems from traditional understandings of the uniqueness of the Church. From a sociological standpoint, the Church is unique because of its explicit orientation toward the person of Jesus Christ. From a theological standpoint, it is unique because the existence and witness of the Church does not depend on the actions of its members or institution, but on the actions and activity of the Spirit of Christ in its midst. Since reading any imperfection or sin within the Church as a whole - rather than within its individual members - will without a doubt lead one to discover fault with God's actions and plan, perfection and the Church's theological identity have become - at least in modern ecclesiology - "inextricably linked."[23]

Is it theologically necessary for one to make the move from the Spirit's activity within the Church to the perfection of the Church? Healy does not think so. Any insistence upon equating the work of the Spirit within the Church - with the perfection of individual believers or the entire Church - will go against both Scripture and theological tradition in that it fails to account for the eschatological "not yet" aspect of Church's existence and work. While the Church is called "the bride of Christ," and individual believers are referred to as saints, until the glorious return of its Lord the Church will

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[22] A good example is found in one of the most recent iterations of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing, 2006), put forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which has no problem discussing the sinfulness of individual believers, but is quite explicit in its belief that the Church is holy and cannot sin. See pp. 50, 113, 127.

[23] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*,10.

remain imperfect and at times sinful, needing God's grace for its every day existence, and

in need of constant reform and purification.[24] From reading both Scripture and theology,

it is quite apparent that the Church as a whole, along with the individuals who are

members of it, is constantly prone to error and sin. This grim reality is just as much a part

of the Church's concrete theological identity as is its orientation toward Jesus Christ. In

the eschaton, Jesus Christ will appear as both the Lord and Judge over His Church, and

the only determining factor in whether the Church will experience her Christ as one or

the other is the Church's willingness to repent.[25]

Healy's insistence on the sinfulness of individual believers and the Church in

total, and their common need of repentance, serves a greater role in his theological

grounding for ecclesiology. If the Church is to maintain in its preaching of the Gospel

that God is the answer to this world's problems, not the Church, it also has to

acknowledge that God is the answer to the Church's problems, as well. A brief

comparison of the Church to Israel is rather fitting. Healy writes:

> …there are few social practices which embody and make public the Church's
> belief in its corporate sinfulness, whereby it could witness to its dependence
> solely on the Cross of Jesus Christ. There is nothing for example corresponding to
> the social practice of Yom Kippur. In acknowledging its sin, Israel proclaims to
> itself and to the world its reliance upon God's forgiveness and reconciliation.
> What may be the closest analogy to Yom Kippur, Ash Wednesday, is oriented
> toward the individual, as for the most part, are General Confessions.[26]

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[24] On this issue, even though he never cites him, Healy echoes Luther's dictum from his *Commentary on Galatians* that a Christian is, *simul justus et pecator*. Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians. Crossway Classic Commentaries.* Ed. Alister McGrath, and J. I. Packer; (Crossway, 1998), 134. Healy does, however, invoke the Second Vatican Council and especially Lumen Gentium, which refers to the Church as, *semper reformanda, semper purificanda*.

[25] It is refreshing to see a Catholic theologian dependent on his Protestant counterpart in discussing the question of ecclesial dependence. Healy is citing Bonhoeffer's, *The Communion of Saints: A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church*. (New York, NY: Harper &Row, 1960), 83; and *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, newest ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 119.

[26] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*,12.

The implications of this criticism are clear: The Church has little problem admitting the

sinfulness of individual believers but has a difficult time coming to terms with its

institutional sin. Healy is trying hard to open a theological space that allows for

constructive criticism of the Church without which the Church will never be effective in

its responsibility for discipleship and proclamation or in engaging the world in a debate

about the truth.[27] What accredits the Church in this debate with the world and other

religions is not the Church's perfection or its sinless nature; it is the work of the Spirit in

it through which the Church is able to demonstrate to the world that Jesus can be

followed, and not by perfect people or institutions but by the very opposite. The Church's

uniqueness is not based on the fact that the Church alone possesses the truth and the

whole truth, but rather in its "Spirit-empowered orientation toward Jesus Christ and

through him, to the triune God."[28]

     The relational and Trinitarian nature of ecclesiology is being brought to the fore

in Healy's discussion here. He makes it very clear that any claim of superiority the

Church may want to advance is only legitimate when it relates to its identity, which is

defined as the Church's orientation toward Christ. This Spirit-empowered orientation to

Christ and through him to God is none other than the Church's relationship to the one

who established it. But this relationship is not a given and a constant; it has to be

maintained and appropriated anew in light of the Church's sinfulness. It is here that

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[27] It is interesting to notice the nuance here between the general need for dialogue with the world and Healy's insistence on the Church engaging in a "debate" with the world. As Hinze rightfully points out in his review of Healy's work, the fact that to Healy's mind the term "dialogue" carries on pluralistic overtones while the term "debate" is associated with preserving Christian identity is unfortunate. Using the communication modality of "debate" to discover the truth of God's work among other religions would be at best, counterproductive, where "dialogue," on the other hand will allow for genuine listening. For full remarks see, Bradford Hinze, "Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology." *Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (April 1, 2003): 299-301.

[28] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 16.

repentance serves an important role. The open and loud proclamation of the Church's own sinfulness helps the Church rediscover its own identity in reorienting itself to Christ always. At the same time, this public proclamation bears witness to the Gospel and fulfills the Church's mission. But even the uninitiated can see the potential problems presenting themselves to the Church's effectiveness in proclamation; if the Church does not acknowledge its own sinfulness and instead prefers to talk about itself in "perfect" terms, it runs the risk of developing ecclesial pride. If, on the other hand, the Church is open to admitting its own sinfulness, how can it then proclaim the Gospel in a bold manner and not fall victim to timidity?[29] Healy's response to this dilemma is to maintain a dialectic tension between the two:

> The indispensable feature of such an ecclesiological approach, I will argue, is that it maintain the tension between claims for the Church's orientation to the ultimate truth on the one hand and, on the other, acknowledgement of ecclesial sin and of the Church's dependence upon the challenges and insights of those religious and non-religious bodies that are orientated primarily to other truths. By means of this tension, we can avoid falling into rationalism, foundationalism, and sundry other philosophical errors, as well as avoiding ecclesial pride and timidity.[30]

It is this dialectical principle that provides Healy the foundation for building a new theory of truth and religion capable of counteracting the challenges to the Church's claims to the superiority of its witness and discipleship. The new ecclesiology Healy is working to produce faces a serious challenge: It has to find a way to talk openly of its own short comings and failures without giving up the truthfulness of its witness to the Gospel. Anything short of this would harm the missional task of the Church and adversely impact its effectiveness.

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[29] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 21.
[30] Ibid., 20-21.

All this discussion leads Healy to his new ecclesiological proposal; he would like us to consider his vision for reconfiguring the entire discipline of ecclesiology from what he terms a "speculative and systematic one" to "more practical and prophetic."[31] The best way to respond to the ever-shifting philosophical trends and increased challenges to the Church's relevance in today's context is to develop an ecclesiology not based alone on theoretical constructs or moral and theological systems, but rooted in its concrete context and capable of reconstructing its concrete identity "so as to embody its witness in truthful discipleship."[32] The main goal of ecclesiology, as Healy sees it, is to help the Church respond to its context by engaging in critical and theological discussion of its concrete identity. Armed with this criterion, Healy is now ready to move on to his critical assessment of most modern ecclesiologies, their methods, and models as we saw them develop over the course of the 20th century.

Having discussed the issue of the Church's concrete identity in some length and its relation to the larger topic of ecclesiology, Healy moves on to offer his critical appraisal of ecclesiologies generated over the course of the 20th century. For him, the current challenges to the Church's most foundational task of witnessing to its Lord and fostering discipleship among the faithful stem from the Church's inability to account for its concrete identity and its failure to engage in a decisive manner with the pervasive

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[31] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 21.

[32] Ibid., 22. In two of his more recent articles, Healy discusses his proposal vis what he terms the "new ecclesiology." He sees this new ecclesiology as postmodern in that it moves away from the modernist turn to the believing subject, and focuses instead on the Church's practices. I will try to avoid the term "new ecclesiology" in my work because of the above reasons. Nicholas Healy, "Ecclesiology and communion," *Perspectives in Religious Studies, Journal of North American Baptist Preachers* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2004): 275; "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3 (November 2003), 288.

relativism of contemporary society.[33] The main culprit behind this failure is what Healy

terms "blueprint ecclesiologies," a term encompassing most of modern ecclesiology

developed in the 20th century.[34]

In attaching the term "modern" to the discipline of ecclesiology, Healy is careful

not to exaggerate the negative effects of modernity on the study of the Church. He is

willing to concede that not all elements of modern thought are bad for ecclesiology and,

therefore, to be avoided. At the same time, he agrees with Placher that, for the most part,

modern theologians tend to exhibit a rather high degree of confidence in the intellectual

abilities of humans. They prefer more linear and systematic argumentation, and shy away

from acknowledging the inherent mystery at the center of any theological inquiry.[35]

In his appraisal of 20th century "ecclesiological styles," Healy identifies five

distinct methodological elements that are often linked and work in tandem. The first

element is to be found in the efforts of many ecclesiologists to capture all of the

important characteristics of the Church in a "single word or phrase."[36] The second

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[33] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 25. While it is true that many theologians before Healy have spoken in sharp terms about the Church's failure to effectively engage with contemporary society, and thus rendering itself irrelevant, in particular I refer to Congar, or de Chardin, or even Hans Küng. I believe Healy is among the first to tie recognition of the Church's sinfulness to its successful witness to the Gospel. See notes 15-18 in the introduction.

[34] It deserves mention that while the term "blueprint ecclesiologies" has been cited quite often in various books and articles on ecclesiology, and has enjoyed a lot of publicity as a label of consensus for all that is wrong with former ecclesiological proposals, very few theologians have engaged with the basic concepts behind the term and with Healy's argument. Those who have engaged with him thus far, including Gerard Mannion and Gary Badcock, have been rather unsympathetic to Healy's proposal. Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our* Time. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), chap. 3 deals with it in detail under the heading "Problematic Ecclesiological Responses to Postmodernity";. Gary D. Badcock,. *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*. (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2009), predominantly chap.1, but also chaps. 2-3.

[35] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 26. William Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking About God Went Wrong*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996).

[36] In this case Healy's understanding of a "single word" model fits perfectly within Avery Dulles' ecclesiological treatise *Models of the Church (New York, NY: Doubleday, Image Books, 2002),* or Paul Minear's *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960), on which Hans Küng depends when developing his own idea of the "Image of the Church."

element is to present the Church as having some sort of bipartite structure. The third

element he proposes is the combination of elements one and two, leading to the

development of a systematic approach to normative ecclesiology. The fourth and fifth

elements are also connected in Healy's critique; one being the tendency to think about the

Church outside the context of its concrete identity and, therefore, ending up with an

idealized account of the Church.

The above-mentioned five elements Healy detects in the development of most of

20th century ecclesiology. The most common element, the "single word or phrase"

model, has been used as an approach to talk about the nature and activity of the Church.

The multiplicity of key concepts or phrases has been as insightful as it has been wide-

ranging; from Rahner's "sacrament"[37] to Küng's "herald" to Brunner's "mystical

community,"[38] which in recent years has evolved into a "communion ecclesiology"[39]

popular among theologians who are active in ecumenical discussions and dialogue,

through Bonhoffer's "servant" model[40] to Dulles' "community of disciples."[41] Working

with a "single word or phrase" model is useful, as attested to by many treatises in

ecclesiology over the last century. The model is utilized in a two-pronged approach; on

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[37] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, Image Books, 2002), 56-67. Rahner engages in a detailed discussion on theologians using "sacrament" as organizing principle to their ecclesiologies. Among them is also de Lubac from whom Rahner borrows the idea, along with Semmelroth, Congar and Schillebeeckx.

[38] Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*. (Cambridge, England; The Lutterworth Press, 2002).

[39] Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).

[40] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. vol. 8 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works. ed. John W. De Gruchy. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010).

[41] Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe in: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom*. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1982). This model, or a variation of it, has been picked up in the recent past by two Protestant theologians working within a Baptistic theological tradition. Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

the one hand, it describes something already known about the Church, and on the other, it

opens up space for discovering new insights about the Church's life.

The second model often used in ecclesiology with which Healy engages in detail

is the model postulating a twofold ontological structure for the Church.[42] This approach

views the Church as consisting of a primary and a secondary aspect. The primary aspect

of the Church is its invisible, spiritual, or often times considered "true essence" and "real

nature." The other or "secondary" aspect of the Church deals with the empirical reality of

the Church, its visible unity - or lack thereof – in institutions, and activities in everyday

life. In this way, the secondary aspect of the Church is where its primary reality or true

nature is manifested, and realized to a greater and lesser degree. Anyone proposing to

study the Church utilizing this method is aware that what one observes about the Church

serves only as a vehicle or expression of the Church's true and invisible nature.

This model has been used to a great extent over the course of the 20th century.

The reasons for its popularity are quite obvious; the model is flexible enough to

accommodate diverse theological schools and agendas. As Healy points out, the method

has been utilized by both Catholic and Protestant theologians alike.[43] Its appeal appears

to transcend theological and denominational boundaries for a reason:

> The notion that the Church has a hidden primary reality manifested in diverse
> ways can conceivably contribute to ecumenical efforts, since it suggests that
> underneath concrete denominational differences there lies a shared substratum of
> what is most essentially ecclesial.[44]

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[42] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 28-30.

[43] Ibid.*,* 28. Among the theologians Healy mentions are Catholic theologians such as Hans Küng, and Karl Rahner, along with their Protestant colleagues and counterparts Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

[44] Ibid. The theological potential of this construal extends to at least two areas of ecclesiological difficulties: the one implied here by Healy and dealt with in detail by Radner, which I will address in the next chapter - that of the problematic divisions within Christendom; and the other, which is at the heart of Healy's own ecclesiological efforts – the problem of ecclesial sin.

The method further implies the need for a principle governing the activity of the secondary or visible aspect of the Church. As Healy points out, not every gathering of Christians stands for the full manifestation of the Church's primary and invisible reality. Karl Barth argued there is a difference between the true continuing essence of the Church and the visible Church which, for him, is only "the semblance of a Church."[45] The Church is truly the Church only when it "is gathered and lets itself be gathered and gathers itself by the living Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit."[46] Only then it represents in full the "Body of Christ."

In a similar fashion, Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard believes that, "the Church is most itself when it celebrates the Eucharist communally gathered around its bishop."[47] In both instances, theologians differentiate between the two aspects of the Church, suggesting that often times the visible aspect of the Church does not correspond in full to its invisible reality. This, for Healy, leads to an idealized understanding of the Church, where the primary and invisible aspect, or true nature, of the Church remains perfect, and the appearance of sin and imperfection only pertains to the secondary or visible aspect of the Church.

Healy's problem with the models mentioned above is not occasioned by the overall usefulness of the models themselves. Rather, it stems from the sometime implicit, and more often explicit, claims that this or that model is the singular "right" one.

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[45] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation.* vol. IV/2. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 618; *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 29.

[46] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation.* vol. IV/1. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 650.

[47] J. M-R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).

Following Avery Dulles, Healy concedes the impossibility of a "supermodel," the adequacy of which can render all other models obsolete. In-depth analysis of any model will reveal its inadequacy in one or another area of the life of the Church.[48] Furthermore, he brings to the fore yet another problem plaguing ecclesiologists and their works: conflating descriptions of the Church with its definition. Healy recalls Herwi Rikhof who insists a "real definition" of the Church is one "that establishes the essence of the Church in words that are denotative rather than just metaphorical or figurative."[49]

The reality is even more complicated than the apparent confusion between ecclesial descriptions and definitions. Healy presents two reasons why no single model has or can gain dominance and become doctrinally definitive for describing the essence and reality of the Church. For one, from its very inception in New Testament times, there existed an "irreducible plurality" of ways of talking about or being the Church.[50] The ecclesiologies emerging in the pages of the New Testament reflect the immediate context and theological and practical concerns of particular Christian communities. Even though models such as the "Body of Christ," or the "People of God" gained some prominence, it is impossible to argue based on the scriptural and historical evidence for just one supermodel. The other reason Healy points out for the lack of one basic and definitive doctrine of the Church is to be found in the link between ecclesiology and the doctrine of the Trinity. When studying the Trinity, one soon discovers the need to keep shifting the

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[48] Healy follows Dulles who acknowledged this fact, which also explains his comparative approach to the study of ecclesiology. In every case, as in the cases of Dulles and Healy, the decision of which model, metaphor or definition a theologian uses to describe and study the Church depends to a large extent on the central or focal point of their theological focus or agenda.

[49] Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of the Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology*. (London, UK: Sheed and Ward, 1981), 231; as cited in Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 33.

[50] Healy is dependent on Raymond Brown's *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*. (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1984).

perspective of observation from one to another person of the Trinity. In the same way, any systematic reflection on the Church in its relation to Christ will be insufficient if it does not also include a reflection on the Church's relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit. The whole intention of this argument, of course, is not to discourage from diligent and systematic study of ecclesiology. Rather, it is to point out the limitations inherent in the exercise and seek ways to incorporate them into the system. But where does this leave the efforts of an ecclesiologist?

> To the extent that theologians imply, … that the model they select is the supermodel, their claims are untenable and unfitting …. To suggest that we abandon such efforts, though, is not to say that we should abandon any and all use of models. We are likely to find that there are certain things that must be said about the Church that are best said by means of a certain image or concept, so that some models may be necessary ones.[51]

The conclusion is simple. Healy is not suggesting one eliminate any and all models when studying the Church. Instead, one must use various models to discover and explore the multifaceted nature of the Church's life and experience, and not pursue a supermodel capable of providing one definitive explanation of the Church's nature and purpose.

Having discussed the issue of a "right" or "definitive" supermodel for ecclesiology at some length, Healy turns his attention back to the remaining two elements characteristic of contemporary ecclesiologies.[52] In his view modern ecclesiologies exhibit strong tendencies toward rather abstract and theoretical reflection on the Church in terms of its perfection. In one way or another, most ecclesiologies try to establish a standard for what the perfect Church should look like and work down from such construal in the

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[51] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 35-36.
[52] See my discussion on pp. 61 and following.

direction of what the actual Church should become.[53] The implied purpose behind this

move is that once we gets our reasoning about the Church "right," then the practical

applications will naturally follow.[54] This, for Healy, is a perfect example of the

disjunction exemplified by modern ecclesiology, between doctrinal and moral reflection,

as Stanley Hauerwas himself has argued as of late.[55] The problems with these so-called

blueprint ecclesiologies are serious. For one, by depending on the normative force of just

one fundamental starting point, perspective or model blueprint ecclesiologies and their

proposals are vulnerable to being easily dismissed if the perspective or starting point

shifts from one element of Scripture or tradition to another. Furthermore, blueprint

ecclesiologies do not distinguish to an adequate extent, Healy argues, between the Church

triumphant and the Church militant. The issue at stake for him is the ever-present

sinfulness of the Church. Idealized accounts of the Church, such as those produced by

blueprint ecclesiologies, can, at best, consider the sinfulness of the Church as an

infrequent and insignificant distortion of the idealized vision set forth by the blueprint.

For Healy, sin is a part of the fundamental reality of the Church; part of its concrete

identity and not a superficial imperfection that occludes the perfect reality that lies

beneath the superficial flaws.[56] The tendency here is to privilege the eschatological form

of the Church over the pilgrim Church *in via*, which is far from any perfection. As a

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[53] It is this type of an ecclesiology that Healy terms "blueprint ecclesiology."

[54] Almost a century ago Reinhold Niebuhr described the effects of such thinking to the ministry of the Church in his *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990): 191, where he wrote: "One of the most fruitful sources of self-deception in the ministry is the proclamation of great ideals and principles without any clue to their relation to the controversial issues of the day. The minister feels very heroic in uttering the ideals because he knows that some rather dangerous immediate consequences are involved in their application. But he doesn't make the application clear, and those who hear his words are either unable to see the immediate issue involved or they are unconsciously grateful to the preacher for not belaboring a contemporaneous issue which they know to be involved but would rather not face."

[55] Healy cites Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 19-36.

[56] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 37.

result, the significance of the genuine struggles of the Church and its faithfulness to live

as disciples in a real world is undervalued, as blueprint ecclesiologies show a strange

inability to perceive the complexities of Church life in its immediate context.

Overall, blueprint ecclesiologies induce "reductively abstract and *highly* [57]

theoretical views" of the Church, leading Healy to postulate the need for a healthier

alternative:

> Ecclesiology is not about the business of finding a single right way to think about
> the Church, of developing a blueprint suitable for all times and places. Rather I
> propose that its function is to aid the concrete Church in performing the task of
> witness and pastoral care within what I will call its 'ecclesiological context.'[58]

The question of context is very important in Healy's ecclesiology. The way he conceives

of it, the ecclesiological context is always linked to the Church to the extent that the

Church and its context cannot be described separate of each other and then discussed in

relation to each other. Furthermore, the ecclesiological context is not studied by as it

should be by sociology or psychology, but belongs within the scope of theological

inquiry.[59] In short, the ecclesiological context for Healy is, "… all that bears upon or

contributes to the shape of Christian witness and discipleship and its ecclesial

embodiment."[60] With such a working definition of ecclesial context, Healy's proposal

seeks to encompass diverse factors such as history, economics, politics and theology,

philosophy, and ethnography making all of them proper subjects to theological inquiry

concerning the Church. The cumulative effect of his assertion that the ecclesial context is

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[57] Emphasis here is mine, not that of Healy.
[58] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 38.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid., 39.

complex is the conclusion that no one discipline alone can adequately account for it, and, therefore, no single model can be applied across the board.

There is yet another realization Healy brings forth: namely the realization that one's experience of the concrete Church does not always agree with one's idealized understanding of Christianity nor does it align to the full extent with the ecclesiological context. This apparent discord occasions the beginning of an agenda. It seeks to either affect Christian identity in a way that will align it with one's understanding of what Christianity or the Church should look like, or it seeks more "adequate" responses to one's present ecclesial context, or both. Indeed, the judgments about what constitutes "adequate" identity or response to one's present context cannot be made separate from a specific interpretive framework, or not against a specific interpretive horizon, or as part of an overarching scheme or metanarrative.[61] It is this framework or interpretive horizon that allows theologians to make judgments about the mode of God's presence in the world and the Church, about Church history, the ways in which we interpret Scripture,[62] or decide on our models of the Church. Blueprint ecclesiologies often present themselves as following the logic of all their normative deductions about ecclesiology stemming from a single model. The reality, Healy insists, is that any ecclesiological proposal depends on the rather complex relationships between a multitude of factors. Among some of the factors influencing each other and also influencing one's theological decisions are Scripture and tradition understood as part of a particular metanarrative or horizon, but

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[61] On the need of an overarching framework or metanarrative to provide meaning for human life and experience Healy follows Charles Taylor, *Source of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

[62] See Stephen Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998); for an in-depth discussion of Fowl's proposal see, Daniel Trier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008),

also an understanding and interpretation of Church history, an understanding or

interpretation of Christianity and God's presence to the Church, and, last but not least, an

understanding of the current ecclesiological context.[63]

All this leads Healy to assert that unlike the structure and method of blueprint

ecclesiologies, which tend to remain theoretical, an ecclesiology needs to be and remain

practical. Ecclesiology should not be concerned with discovering a supermodel but be

concerned with "everything else."[64]

> Putting it boldly, ecclesiologists have something rather like a prophetic function
> in the Church. They reflect theologically and therefore critically upon the
> Church's concrete identity in order to help it boast in its Lord, and boast only in
> its Lord. They attempt to assess the Church's witness and pastoral care in light of
> Scripture and in relation to theological analysis of the contemporary
> ecclesiological context.[65]

It is without doubt that the prophetic work of ecclesiology closely links to not just the

Church's concrete identity and its ecclesiological context, but, moreover, its ministry

practices and mission. Upon critical analysis, ecclesiology proposes changes or

corrections to the Church's concrete identity that will enable it to truthfully and more

effectively witness. Thus the Church's praxis in context informs ecclesiology, which in

turn informs, acts upon, and modifies Church praxis.[66] This leads Healy to conclude that

ecclesiology should be explicitly practical and prophetic in nature. This conclusion

implies the need for some expansion in the scope of ecclesiology. For Healy, this

includes engaging with the appropriate social sciences and integrating both theological

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[63] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 43.

[64] What Healy has in mind here is first and foremost the Church's concrete identity, and its ecclesiological context.

[65] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 46.

[66] Healy cites Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982), chap. 2. For a great discussion on the practical hermeneutical circle see, Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

and non-theological analyses without hindering the primary function of ecclesiology, which, "is to aid the Church in performing the task of truthful witness within a particular ecclesiological context."[67] In as much as blueprint ecclesiologies have tended to remain theoretical in nature, and have neglected or ignored the ecclesiological context of the Church they study, they have failed the Church. The practical-prophetic ecclesiology proposed by Healy counteracts this dangerous tendency by seeking to serve the Church - *in medias res* - by producing practical prophetic proposals, which are also sound as regards their context and applicable. They are aimed at the Church's concrete identity and its continuous relevance within its ecclesiological context.

Locating the Church on the Theodramatic Horizon - Ecclesiology in Context

Having discussed in some length the pitfalls of blueprint ecclesiologies' highly idealized accounts of the Church and their inadequate contribution to the Church's main task, Healy turns attention to one of the most important element in ecclesiology – its horizon or metanarrative.[68] This element is important because it provides the overarching framework within which an ecclesiologist makes decisions about how to interpret Scripture and Christian tradition, how to conceive of the God-world relationship, and the Church's concrete identity and its ecclesiological context. Making this horizon explicit enables the introduction of even more analytical tools to the ecclesiological reflection. The one horizon Healy finds best suited for the task of doing practical-prophetic ecclesiology is the theodramatic horizon he derives from von Balthasar's theology.[69] The

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[67] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 50.

[68] Ibid., 52.

[69] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. vol. I-V*, trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988-1998). For a most recent discussion on the relationship

reason for employing the theodramatic horizon in ecclesiology is two-fold. First, Healy

believes it fosters active dialogue between theological and non-theological disciplines,

and, second, it provides the resources for clear differentiation between the methodologies

employed by both blueprint ecclesiologies and the practical-prophetic ones of the type

proposed by him.

The theodramatic approach to ecclesiology describes the relationship between

God and the world in terms of a dramatic play. This dramatic play can take on one of two

forms; it can either be epic or dramatic. The clear difference between the two resides in

the vantage point; theology done against a dramatic horizon takes on the role of an active

participant, while theology done from an epic stance puts itself outside of the unfolding

drama and takes on a spectator role.[70] It is this epic stance that, for Healy, carries on

many parallels with modern blueprint ecclesiologies. By stepping outside of the ongoing

"drama," an epic stance is able to create highly organized accounts of Christian doctrine

and produce large-scale systematic theologies, thus leaving the impression that outside of

these accounts there is nothing else left to be said. Such accounts are not without use in

the Church and in theology, but they do carry the danger of stagnation, as they are prone

to downplaying the complex nature of Christian life and can furthermore stifle

theological inquiry in that they tend to create the impression of being the final and

definitive accounts of ecclesiology.[71]

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between ecclesiology and the theodramatic horizon see, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama Of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach To Christian Theology*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2005): especially chap. 5.

[70] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 53-54.

[71] Ibid.

To counteract the effects of modern and, therefore, epic ecclesiologies, Healy seeks help from three pre-modern theologians - Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin - for more dramatic styles for constructing ecclesiology.

For Healy, it is clear that Augustine rejects the assertion of the merger between Rome and Christianity. In his "City of God,"[72] Augustine argues that the City of God and the Church are linked but not identical. The City of God is present in the Church as those predestined to eventual glory, but the City of God cannot function as a model for the Church because the concrete identity of the Church is so very different from that of the City.[73] The Church is a mixed body, living a life of a "dramatic struggle" on its way to the eschatological City of God. The task and responsibility of the Church to its members then is to "raise them from the temporal and visible to an apprehension of the eternal and invisible."[74] Augustine's treatment of the pilgrim Church in contradistinction to the Church triumphant leaves no doubt in the ongoing struggles of the pilgrim Church. It grounds and joins both of them together in Christ thus maintaining the tension in the "already-not yet" character of ecclesial life.

After Augustine, Healy examines Thomas Aquinas. On the surface Aquinas's approach could not be more different from Augustine's narrative style. Yet recent studies in Aquinas's theology have brought to light the dialectic and narrative nature of his theology.[75] For Healy, Aquinas is not an epic theologian. Since his entire *Summa* is

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[72] St. Augustine (Bishop of Hippo), *City of God*, trans., Henry Bettenson, Gillian Rosemary Evans. (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003).

[73] *City of God*, 20.9; as cited in Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 55.

[74] *City of God*, 10.14; Ibid.

[75] Healy is dependent on the work of Thomas S. Hibbs, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas: An Interpretation of the Summa Contra Gentiles*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

organized around the idea of *exitus et reditus*,[76] Aquinas develops his theology within the

context of salvific narrative of creation and redemption as revealed in Scripture and

"explicated in the authoritative tradition of its interpretation."[77] In a similar manner,

Aquinas develops his ecclesiology within the same narrative context, arguing not only in

favor of nothing but speculative interests but also of practical considerations in the

process. For Healy, the second and third parts of the *Summa* constitute a "kind of

practical ecclesiology," for in the second part Aquinas discusses the shape of true

discipleship, and in the third he develops the notion of the *reditus* in explicit terms as the

"way of Jesus Christ."[78] All of his efforts were intended to help the Church develop the

best beliefs and practices that are to be incorporated into Church life and ministry, and

enable the faithful to be truthful disciples.

The last premodern theologian Healy examines is Calvin. Following William

Bouwsma, Healy contends that Calvin's ecclesiology as developed in his *Institutes of the

Christian Religion*[79] is "thoroughly practical,"[80] seeking to "edify, uplift, and defend the

particular community of faith to whom he speaks."[81] This, in Healy's view, aids the

Church's pedagogical function in enabling its members to be more truthful disciples.

Following Augustine, Calvin also views the Church as a mixed body. In his approach to

ecclesiology, Calvin also uses the two-fold construal to distinguish between the pre-

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[76] Healy discusses this idea in detail in his *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life.* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 82. Chap. 4, dedicated to the Economy of Salvation addresses this dynamic.

[77] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 57.

[78] *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa prologue; Ia. 2 proem. As cited in Healy *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 58.

[79] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* trans. Henry Beveridge. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959).

[80] William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 214.

[81] Serene Jones, *Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), 36.

eschatological existence of the Church and its hope for the one to come. Thus, Calvin's focus is on the "visible" Church, which he sees as the means God uses to bring us into "the society of Christ."[82]

In all three instances, doctrine is formulated to address practical concerns. As a result, ecclesiology is often indistinguishable from Christian social ethics. The primary focus is on the Scriptures and the ways in which they affect discipleship and witness in that particular time and context. All three of them, Healy contends, are fully aware of the struggle and conflict accompanying the life of the Church and, therefore, careful to avoid any idealized accounts of the Church's concrete identity.[83]

But what is the point behind exploring the dramatic aspects of the ecclesiologies of these three pre-modern theologians? For Healy, the answer to this question is a straightforward one: Re-appropriating the dramatic horizon exhibited by their ecclesiologies along the lines of von Balthasar's theodrama is better in terms of function and truth than its modern alternatives. Doctrine and practical concerns are closely linked in the theologies of the aforementioned premoderns and therefore much more capable of preventing ecclesiology from becoming theoretical and divorced from its ecclesial context.

Last, Healy undertakes this somewhat unexpected move back to premodern understandings of the relationship between Church and world to counteract what he considers a modern impulse to see the Church and the world as integrated.[84] In what

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[82] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 59.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 60. On this point, Healy agrees with von Balthasar that rather than being more integrated, the Church and the world see an ever-increasing rift between the two. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: II: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 99.

follows Healy explores von Balthasar's theodramatic theory and its suitability for constructing appropriate Christian metanarrative.

Healy begins his exploration of the theodramatic theory by setting up its parameters. In the post-Christian world, the Church and world stand in opposition to each other and that accounts for the "dramatic" nature of Christian existence. Like Christian existence, Scripture, too is dramatic and should be interpreted as part of the drama of salvation.[85] Under the Spirit's direction, Scripture reveals history as a play, in which the Father writes the script, the Spirit directs the play, while the Son is the main actor. In this way, the "dramatic character of Christian existence 'here'" is grounded in the life of the Trinity. It is Christ's salvific work that draws creation into this drama, accepting or rejecting it both as a Church and as individuals. One's existence, therefore, is the role one plays within the overarching divine play. In this context, to understand one's role means to come to terms with one's true identity and this can take place only by "situating them within the primary drama,"[86] for "one cannot construct a primary drama from below."[87]

Within the next few pages I will examine Healy's understanding of the theodrama as it relates to Christian identity, to mission and discipleship, and to the relation between the world and Church, thus forming the metanarrative framework for his practical-prophetic ecclesiological proposal.

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[85] Ibid., 61; *Theo Drama: II*, 112.
[86] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology,* 61.
[87] *Theo Drama: II*, 53.

Theodrama and Christian identity

Following von Balthasar, Healy points out that any account of the theodrama should properly be grounded in the Trinity. Since God is totally free in His self-possession, He freely chooses to share His Godhead with the Son, and the Father and Son with the Spirit. In this way God is truly Himself in "giving Himself in absolute love."[88] This explains the creation of the world and God's self-giving to the world in stark contrast to panentheism.

By extension, the mission of the Son *pro nobis* is a continuation of the Son's procession into the economy of salvation. But there is a significant contrast in relationships between the reciprocity and acceptance characterizing the divine Trinity, and the animosity and outright rejection accompanying the move of the Son toward the world. As von Balthasar puts it, "in his processio he moves toward the Father in receptivity and gratitude, in his missio… he moves away from him and toward the world, into the latter's ultimate darkness."[89] In his work for us, Christ experiences "absolute suffering - utter Godforsakenness - for our sake" so as to subsume the sinner's alienation from God into the economic distance between the Father and Son.[90] If Christians are to find their real identity and role within the context of the "divine play," Christ's free self-giving in "obedient suffering" in the incarnation "embodies the absolute drama in his

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[88] Ibid., *Theo Drama: II*, 256.

[89] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory. IV: The Action*. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1994), 356; as cited in Healy's *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 61.

[90] The language employed by Healy, along with its dependence on von Balthasar, bears strong resemblance to Moltmann's, especially in his *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ As the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson, John Bowden. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

own person."[91] It makes possible our communion with God and creates the stage where individuals and the Church can play their part in freedom.

For Healy, this freedom forms one of the most important points of his argument for the theodrama as the most suited metanarrative for ecclesiology. If human existence in general and Christian existence in particular is to be truly dramatic and not what Healy calls a "puppet-play," our decision to participate and our response must be truly free, whether we decide to play our roles well, badly, or refuse to participate altogether. As happens in the Trinity the Father makes room for the Son, He also creates a place on the stage where we can freely respond to Him. But our acting space must not be conceived of as somehow being outside of God. Our incorporation into the play is made possible by Christ's incarnation and mission and, therefore, we find our true identity and play our parts *en Christou*.[92] Thus our involvement in the drama takes on the marks of "progressive self-realization of finite freedom within the context of infinite freedom."[93] Contrary to epic accounts of theology, Christ's victory, though bringing ultimate liberation, has nevertheless ushered in the "most dramatic" period in history, which makes all Christians be participants in the struggle between God and the powers hostile to Him.

It is within this context that we have been called by God to respond to a unique mission of our own. We have been given a battle role to play in this struggle and have

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[91] Ibid., 62; *Theo Drama, II*, 62.

[92] The language Healy uses here echoes Karl Barth, as expected, as Healy has been a careful student of Barth's theology in general and his ecclesiology in particular. See also, "The Logic of Karl Barth's Ecclesiology: Analysis, Assessment and Proposed Modifications." *Modern Theology*, 10:3 (July 1994), 253-270.

[93] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 62; *Theo Drama: II*, 291.

been set "on the personal path toward identity with the exemplary prototype."[94] It is this

mission that individuates and personalizes us, but only to the extent to which we respond

with obedience to our call. Christ is the model after which we have to pattern our identity.

By freely accepting His mission, it became His identity, and, therefore, it carries on a

"universal significance."

For us as imitators of Him, however, there exists a "tragic" division between our

identity and our calling. Throughout our lives we continue to struggle with this polarity.

The single way to overcoming this struggle resides in our ongoing and positive response

to our calling. The more we identify with Christ, that is the more we respond in the

positive to our calling, the closer we get to our unique selves, the better we are able to

fulfill our mission or role in the divine play. In the same way, the more we participate in

the mission and faithfully play our roles, the closer we get to our true identity. The

Theodrama postulates that, "each conscious subject is created for the sake of his mission,

a mission that makes him a person."[95] The more we continue to commit ourselves to

discipleship, the more we become who we were created to be in Christ.[96]

From all of this, it is quite clear that, for Healy, Christian identity and mission, or

relevance, are interdependent and affecting each other in an ongoing manner. The more

Christians seek to identify with their model – Christ – the more fervent and effective their

participation into his mission (their mission!), becomes. Conversely, less obedience to

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[94] Ibid., 63.

[95] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: III. The Dramatis Personae/Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), 208.

[96] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 63.

one's calling and mission will bring about negative effects on one's personal identity and on the identity of the Church as a whole.[97]

Theodrama as Context to Mission and Discipleship

If the forging of true Christian identity takes place in the course of faithful discipleship, which is obedience to one's calling to identify with Christ and His mission, this identity formation does not happen in isolation. It takes place in the context of the Church.[98] It enables Christians to become more like their Lord, to adopt His point of view, and be empowered for "his work in the world."[99] The theodrama then provides the all-enveloping context for the formation of the Church's concrete identity, as well as the formation of the individual Christian's identity.

The implications of this realization, for Healy, are far reaching. For one, since our Christian experience unfolds within the context of the theodrama, it will without a doubt mirror or reflect the characteristics of the theodrama internal to the Trinity. God's free self-giving, which defines His existence in "absolute love," compelled the Son to move away from the reciprocal relationship with the Father, and propelled Him to move toward the world with its darkness and led him to the cross.[100] This move away from the comfort of the intra-Trinitarian relationships and toward the world in mission entails suffering on an unprecedented scale. Following Balthasar, Healy is rather sober-minded about the role suffering plays in the life of a Christian as one commits to Christ's mission in this world and to discipleship. To join in the Son's missions means surrendering to Him in full

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[97] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 70.
[98] Ibid., 64.
[99] *Theo Drama: III*, 279.
[100] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 61.

anticipation of sharing in His suffering. It means moving away from the comfort of triumphant existence, and toward sacrificial self-giving and suffering.

It is true that not all accounts of Christian existence within the context of the Church take the reality of the theodrama, and therefore the reality of suffering, and of genuine freedom seriously and, therefore, have the ability to deal with the role of suffering in an adequate manner.[101] It is in contrast to such accounts that the theodramatic horizon provides for the most responsible and genuine explanation of the reality of suffering in the course of discipleship and mission.

> If Christian existence is to be genuinely dramatic and not merely a puppet-play, our response must be really our own. We must be genuinely free to choose to play our parts well or badly, or even to refuse to play them at all…We are actively and freely involved in Christ's work, though not in the way that blurs 'the distinction between Christ' preeminence and his followers and collaborators'… Our response takes the form of following Jesus Christ in gratitude.[102]

Since Christians are called to follow the Jesus of history and also the risen Christ, their discipleship involves suffering. Unlike Jesus, for whom His personal identity corresponded to His mission to perfection, we do suffer the tragic division between our identity and our calling. There exists a dialectic struggle between our personhood and our true identity. The single way this tension can be resolved is in giving ourselves more and more to discipleship, where in the course of self-giving we become more and more the persons we were created to be.

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[101] I am referring to hyper-Calvinistic theological stances, where God has already foreordained and, therefore, predetermined the outcome of any event and, thus, the experience of suffering at best is controlled and serves a predetermined purpose. In the same way, any appearance of freedom in responding to God's call is only apparent, as any "free" response for or against God has already been predetermined and is, therefore, not truly free.

[102] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 62.

But this is not always a matter of straightforward movement in a linear fashion. Because human persons are genuinely free, they do sometimes submit to God's call on their lives, and sometimes disobey on purpose and go against God. Consequently, the suffering experienced by Christians in their ecclesial context is not always the direct result of their faithful discipleship. Suffering in ecclesial context is often-times occasioned by individual and corporate sin and disobedience to the call to discipleship.[103] Since our actions of obedience or disobedience to our call to discipleship and mission take place within the context - interior to and not exterior - of God's play His divine activity remains constitutive of the Church's concrete identity, as God uses our obedience or disobedience to shape individual Christians and the Church as a whole. God is in control of the play; yet He makes room on the stage for us to play a vital and dramatic role. The Church is constituted by "Christ's self-dedication" alone, but it must continue to say, "Yes" to this constitution, always exercising and ratifying it. It is the mission of the Church and its role in the theodrama to do Christ's work as He allows the Church to do it.[104] This "divine-human *concursus*" according to Healy has profound implications for ecclesiology and these implications will be examined in brief on the following pages.[105]

Theodrama and the Relation Between the World and Church

For Healy, one of the main contributions of the theodrama as a metanarrative for ecclesiology is the realization that God is active everywhere in the world and not just in

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[103] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 68. Healy expands on this issue further in his, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3 (November 2003), 301-303; 307.
[104] Ibid., 66.
[105] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 67.

the Church.[106] Following Balthasar, he accepts the premise that the relationship between

Church and the world is bidirectional.[107] The Church and the world influence each other

for better or worse. By taking this move away from any insistence on the exclusivity of

the Church, Healy is intent on counteracting any notion of the Church's privileged

position in the theodrama. The Church, just as individual Christians, can play its role in

the drama well, not so well, or even refuse to play it at all, and this possibility prevents

the Church from boasting in itself.[108] This, however, begs the question: what then is the

relevance, function, or role of the Church in the theodrama? But before one can answer

this question one must address the other and just as important question, that of the

relationship of the individual Christian to the Church.

> For those whose vocation it is to play an explicitly Christian role in God's play,
> the call is always also a summons to membership and activity within the
> Church.[109]

Following Balthasar, Healy espouses a point of view that considers the relationship

between Church and the Christian a rather complex one. Responding in the positive to

one's personal call accomplishes two major goals that have a dialectic relationship.

Accepting our mission "individuates us" on the one hand, but at the same time it also

"socializes us" into the community of believers called the Church.[110] The goal of Church

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[106] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 64; *Theo Drama: III*, 534.

[107] Balthasar calls this form of the relationship between the Church and the world - "fluid"; *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: I: Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1998), 647.

[108] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 7; for a recap on this point see my discussion above, pp. 69-70.

[109] Ibid., 64.

[110] Here we see another example of the genius of the interplay between identity and relevance in regard to individual Christian existence in the context of the Church. The Church is not a conglomerate of

membership is not to build community for its own sake but to participate in the communion with the Trinity, which the Church facilitates.[111]

At the same time, participation in the community called "the Church" means contributing to others as we receive from them in equal measure. When a Christian responds to God's call, this response, though individual in nature, is nevertheless mediated by the Church. Furthermore, the response is progressive in nature; that is to say one must "discover, learn and grow" into one's role, and this happens best in the context of the Christian community.[112] Thus, one of the components of the Church's work is to help its members discover their unique role in the divine play and help them learn how to play their roles better. In the process of learning continuous obedience, that is - discipleship, individual Christians grow into their true identity, which enables them to participate in their mission to the full extent.

It is here that we must circle back to the original question about the relationship between the Church and the world. One of the consequences of true discipleship is the solitude and alienation of the Church from the world. This entails that the Church leads a "solitary" existence in "an environment that hates her."[113] The Church and the world are not moving closer together (at the present time!), in a relationship which improves over time.[114]

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marionettes fulfilling a mission or role they know nothing about. The Church consists of individuals who have accepted a personal call and out of obedience have joined the community of believers.

[111] *Theo Drama, III*: 452.

[112] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 65.

[113] Ibid.

[114] If one is to use Niebuhr's taxonomy of the relationship between Christ and culture to understand Healy's treatment of the relationship, it would be necessary to transpose one of the categories to describe the current condition in certain parts of the developed Western world; that is, "culture against Christ" instead of the suggested by Niebuhr, "Christ against Culture." H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*. (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001): chap 2. D. A. Carson in his recent *Christ and Culture Revisited*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007): 70-72 makes the case

> The Church *in via* lives a tensive existence, caught between the 'already' and the 'not yet,' between time and eternity, between its traditions and the need for constant newness, between authority and inspiration.[115]

This ongoing tension, for Healy, is not a condition to be overcome but a gift to be celebrated. For one, this tension forces the Church to consider at all times its fidelity to its Lord, thus seeking to identify with His mission in this world. For another, the Church cannot faithfully play its part in the theodrama – Christ's mission – without finding its concrete identity in Him. The dramatic nature of the Church's existence and experience is visible in the Church's concrete identity existing in tension and forever oscillating between identity and relevance in its efforts to remain faithful.[116] This perpetual internal tension is seen as rather helpful to the Church's identity and mission. This tension informs the Church that it is constituted by Christ rather than the other way around, and this reduces significantly the risk of the Church boasting in its own achievements.

On the other hand, Healy's understanding of the world as dependent on God's activity and playing a role in the theodrama opens the door wide for the activity of the Holy Spirit outside the Church within what he calls "the non-Church."[117] In this instance, again, there is no room for the Church triumphant, as the Church could not boast in itself since the non-Church is not only the place where the Church is to engage in mission - i.e., finds its relevance by identifying with Christ's missions - but also a place where the Church can "learn about the Lord and about true discipleship."[118] In sum, the relationship

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that culture is seldom experienced the same way across the board and, therefore, our "theoretical understanding of the relationship between Christ and culture … is going to be complex, subtle and flexible enough to embrace the specificity of culture."

[115] *Theo-Drama: IV*, 453; as cited in Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 65.

[116] Ibid., 66.

[117] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 69.

[118] Ibid.

between the Church and the world - in the sense of non-Church and not in the sense of anti-Church - needs to remain tensive yet symbiotic, as they are both seen by Healy to be playing a vital God-assigned role in the theodrama. In maintaining this tensive relationship, the Church is to exercise epistemic humility [my term, not Healy's], and continue to listen in a careful manner to the non-Church in order to discern the Spirit's work in it.

At the same time, the Church should never disengage from the world if it is to remain relevant. Because the Church is not relying on itself to make a difference in its engagement with the world, but rather it relies on the divine activity within itself, it experiences ecclesial life as a "never-ending experiment."[119] In order to continue playing its important and "evolving" role in the theodrama within its ecclesiological context, the Church needs to remain engaged in a continuous "self-critical" evaluation of its theology and practice, thus keeping itself grounded in its immediate context and, therefore, practical to the full extend, yet never losing sight of its higher calling to be different, and, therefore, prophetic.

Healy's Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology - Toward Greater Relevance

All of Healy's insistence on a theodramatic horizon versus the epic one for constructing ecclesiology is intended to result in what he terms a "practical-prophetic ecclesiology."[120] The Church's self-understanding against this theodramatic horizon, that is the understanding of its concrete identity in light of its role in the theodrama - God's

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[119] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 75.

[120] Ibid., 154. In the more recent past, Healy has used the nomenclature of "Practical-Prophetic ecclesiology" as a tool for critiquing ecclesiological proposals focusing on church practices as normative for ecclesiology rather than on dogmatic accounts; see Healy "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3 (November 2003): 288-308.

mission - stimulates the Church to engage with the non-Church, the world, or other traditions. This engagement cannot be executed to the degree of success that is necessary until and unless the Church develops the capacity for sober self-criticism expressed in the self-critical responses to various challenges and opportunities stemming from the Church's immediate context. Only then can the Church's witness for Christ be credible and its discipleship true.[121]

This concern for contending with the Church's concrete identity and faithful witness to Christ, Healy believes, calls for a practical-prophetic ecclesiology, which is theologically capable of addressing its own ongoing sinfulness, and ready to engage with other religious and non-religious traditions of inquiry. But instead of suggesting a developed systematic account of this new ecclesiology, Healy is content to limit his input to a few suggestions, which he describes as "tentative and open ended."

Healy has already rejected the idea of a purely theoretical method for ecclesiology capable of producing concrete practical results. In fact, Healy does not believe that there exists only one correct approach to constructing successful contextual ecclesiology. In truth, the immediate ecclesial context will determine the most "appropriate," to use Healy's term, approach or method. Healy's reluctance to name one definitive method for ecclesiology however is contrasted to his firm conviction that any appropriate method for constructing ecclesiology should engage with or use as sources the social sciences.[122]

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[121] Healy's account of the relationship between witness and discipleship resembles that of Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*: The Gifford Lectures delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2001), which Healy has critiqued extensively in his work "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness." pp. 299-303.

[122] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 155. Healy has addressed the issue of the use of social sciences as sources for theology in his "What is Systematic Theology?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 2009): 24-39. He is in particular calling for deliberate engagement with history, sociology, and ethnography.

> All forms of social science are useful, perhaps even necessary, for ecclesiology, including those thoroughly antagonistic to the Church or to religious bodies generally. However, since they examine religious bodies in a variety of ways, they cannot be useful in quite the same way, and none of them is ever normative.[123]

He insists that disciplines such as history, sociology, and ethnography, among others, have direct bearing upon the Church's concrete identity. Historical analysis, for Healy, is quite important for constructing ecclesiology. For one, the Church's concrete identity is historical.[124] In ecclesiology, the Church relies on history to a great extent for the construction of its concrete identity based on its past, present, and future challenges and opportunities.[125] The real problem stems from the type of stance the historian is to assume when dealing with the history of the Church.

For Healy, there exist few possibilities; where most Church historians claim to assume an agnostic stance with regard to Church history, many have warned about the inadequacy of such a stance to deal with the reality of God in relation to His Church.[126] The alternative is to assume a firm theological stance in developing a theological-historical narrative in making judgments about the Church's concrete identity in history. But there are problems with this proposal, as well. For one, quite often there is more than a single possible narrative in interpreting historic events. In the cases of competing narratives, the faction that wins the day often puts forth its narrative and seeks to suppress

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[123] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 155.

[124] Ibid., 158.

[125] One most recent example of the importance of history as a source for ecclesiology belongs to Roger Haight's trilogy *Christian Community in History*, vol. 1-3. (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005-2008): chap. 1, especially 18-28.

[126] Healy points to Pannenberg and Wolterstorff in support of this notion. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994); Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

the alternatives.[127] For another, theologians have argued, "histories that treat the time of

the Church…cannot produce normative accounts." This has led to the distinction between

"salvation history"[128] and "profane history." But the theological history Healy is

proposing is different from other systematic and normative histories. His theological

history operating within the realm of practical prophetic ecclesiology studies and

evaluates the Church's beliefs and practices; that is, it studies the concrete historical

identity of the Church and its ability to pursue its mission of truthful discipleship and

witness to Christ.

For Healy this history is not a triumphant one:

> Theological history neither celebrates the Church (or a particular group within it)
> as an exemplary body or as a divinely given solution to the world's social
> problems; nor does it take a neutral stance, … (it) must be continuously
> reassessed in light of scripture, tradition and developments in the ecclesiological
> context.[129]

In this instance, God's explicit goal or mission for his Church provides the theological

stance. By centering any analysis on Scripture, the ecclesiologist recognizes that the

script of the theodrama has already been written. Thus, all attention will be focused not

on competing accounts of Church history but on the Church's concrete identity, and,

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[127] An excellent example of awareness of competing narratives and their implications in the history of the Church is to be found in the manner that Pelikan constructed his magnum opus, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vols. 1-5 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973 - 1990). The body of the text more or less follows the narrative line historians agree on, while in the margins he details alternative narratives or provides background to the political machinations involved in the organizing of Church councils and/or arriving at an "agreed upon" dogma by successfully discrediting any voices of opposition. These dynamics are best observed in Pelikan's treatment of the first 600 years of church history in, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[128] Sometime also referred to as "history of redemption," centered on the person of Christ. For examples see, Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1996); or Jean Danielou, *The Lord of History; Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, trans. Nigel Abercrombie. (Chicago, IL: H. Regnery, 1958).

[129] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 161.

moreover, on its faithful obedience to the leading of the Spirit or active disobedience to Him. This type of theological history will judge the Church based on how well the Church has adhered to its concrete identity in Christ and how faithful it has been to His mission. Because it contains the very possibility of lack of adherence and faithfulness, this type of theological history, Healy proposes, will be "necessarily penitential," and concerned with the development of a confessional practice aimed at reorienting the individual's and the Church's concrete identities toward faithful witness and discipleship.

In a manner similar to that of Israel in the Old Testament, the Church needs to view repentance as the key to appropriating its own concrete identity and assigned role – mission - in the theodrama.[130] It is this practice of repentance that links the individual Christian's identity and the corporate Church's identity to the concrete identity of the Church in the past, and provides the needed continuity in terms of personal and communal responsibility. As Healy states:

> Such practice joins us to the Church, for we adopt its past as constitutive of our present concrete identity and also witness in however slight a way to our Lord who freely bears the sins of others. However, the difference between confessing one's own guilt and acknowledging the sinfulness of one's community, past or present, needs to be maintained as part of our witness to a just God and to the seriousness of sin.[131]

Theological history can take on many different forms in studying the Church's history. It may focus on particular tradition or particular period of time; on a specific Christian community, and its handling of Scripture or tradition. Whatever form theological history takes, for Healy, this history needs to seek out and engage with alternative accounts, even

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[130] On this issue there exists an agreement in the approaches of Healy, Guder and Radner to ecclesiology and the link between Israel and the Church

[131] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 163.

non-Christian ones, if it is to be effective in discerning its true concrete identity and mission.[132]

The second discipline from within the social sciences, which Healy insists on utilizing in practical-prophetic ecclesiology, is that of sociology.[133] Though at first glance it may appear that the link between ecclesiology and sociology is a straightforward one, just as with history above, there exist multiple stances relative to sociology, as well. In recent past, sociological analysis for the most part has taken agnostic and atheistic stances regarding theology in particular and religious bodies in general.[134] But Healy, while finding both stances in sociology inadequate for ecclesiology, nevertheless, considers them necessary for the task of theological reflection on the Church.

The experience of communal ecclesial life is too complex and influenced by a number of cultural, sociological, political, ideological, and theological factors for it to easily lend itself to a secular agnostic or atheistic sociology. Healy argues that the task itself requires a form of theological sociology akin to the one Milbank terms "Christian sociology," providing an analysis focused on the concerns and agenda of the Church.[135] Such sociology will be very useful to the task of ecclesiology for as long as it remains

[132] Ibid., 164.

[133] As I will discuss later when examining the ecclesiology of Darrell Guder, it would appear that on this point both Healy and Guder agree that there is no escaping the sociological question in ecclesiology. Any serious study of the Church needs to show awareness of the interpersonal and inter-communal relationships that constitute the Christian community. For an outstanding discussion on the communal aspects of Christian life, see Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy, *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*. (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999).

[134] In the more recent past, Furseth and Repstad have revisited Milbank's treatment of most of sociology of religion in his *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. (Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1990), and criticized his stance. They are, however, more sympathetic to Flanagan's proposal that suggests a much closer and complementary relationship between sociology and theology especially when it comes to issues of "reflection, identity, and understanding." In, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, 204.

[135] *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 380; Healy's agreement with Milbank on this point is limited, as he thinks Milbank's insistence on the Church as a distinct society is too strong and in need of being moderated by the realization that Christians spend the majority of their lives immersed in a society and culture that are not Christian, or in the case of Western societies, post-Christian.

aware of and continues to engage with other non-Christian or non-theological forms of inquiry.

> It may therefore be more useful for ecclesiology to describe and assess the Church using the tools of a discipline that attends rather more to the details of the Church's concrete identity, and is less concerned to generalize, compare or (contrast).[136]

For Healy, the Church's concrete identity is constituted by the interplay of many and diverging elements, all of which are always "on the move." In this context, it is easy to see how and why the Church can often lose its way by allowing itself to be pulled in one or another direction and off balance by the multiple factors influencing it at any given time. For this reason, ecclesiology needs the help of theological sociology to continue rediscovering its concrete identity and mission in the context of the various forms of the Church's distinct way of life and experience.

Upon considering the roles history and sociology play, or better yet the roles they should play, in ecclesiology, Healy then turns his attention to ethnography - cultural analysis - to provide an all-encompassing context for his practical-prophetic ecclesiology.

Taking his starting point from Lindbeck's work outlined in his book *The Nature of Doctrine*,[137] Healy argues that not unlike culture, which is characterized by cognitive and behavioral dimensions, the Church, too, can be assessed on the basis of these same

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[136] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 167.
[137] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in Postliberal Age*. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984); as cited in Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 168.

dimensions. On this basis, practical-prophetic ecclesiology can reflect on the Church's concrete identity by using the metaphor of culture.[138]

Healy is quick to point out that ecclesiology cannot be reduced to cultural terms in the modern sense of the term, and just some aspects of the Church's identity and life can be described in "cultural-theological terms." Culture itself cannot be used as a model in ecclesiology in the same way that "the Body of Christ" can, nor can "culture" serve as a basic principle for explaining the Church's primary reality – identity.[139] Healy proposes to treat the Church's concrete identity *in via* as a culture - or something akin to culture - that engages with other religious and non-religious "cultures." Since the primary goal of the Church's engagement with religious and non-religious bodies or cultures, that is to say with the non-Christian world, is to remain relevant or dedicated to its mission, the Church needs these other communities in order to construct its concrete identity through ecclesial bricolage.[140]

This understanding brings to the fore another interesting dynamic in the relationship between Church and world: The distinction between those two may be overstated, as it is never clear. Within the theodramatic horizon, the Church can be sinful, as it refuses to "play its part" in the drama. At the same time, the Spirit is active in the world, bringing forth His truth, which seems to undermine the prophetic nature and mission of the Church.

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[138] David H. Kelsey, "Church Discourse and Public Realm," *Theology and Dialogue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990): 7-33.

[139] Emphasis here is mine, not that of Healy.

[140] Healy argues that any distinct Christian practice has the tendency to absorb cultural patterns from its immediate surroundings into its formation whereby the practice itself is shaped by the larger culture, but then in turn the practice acts upon the larger culture and changes it. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 170.

Ecclesiological ethnography presents certain challenges to the study of the Church as culture. For one, Healy asks the question of whether the Church can be viewed as pure culture. If yes, then this will require viewing the Church as a "closed, internally consistent system."[141] This would place ecclesiology back on the epic horizon, not accounting at all for the ever-shifting contexts. Such an approach also assumes that a theologian can reflect on the Church without any ideological or theological pre-understanding, and still arrive at a normative account of the Church. It is clear that such an approach will fail to account for the real struggle of the pilgrim Church in its immediate context. Moreover, such approach will hurt the Church's credibility and, therefore, relevance in undermining the Church's ability to make viable truth claims in its engagement with other traditions. To do so, the Church needs to remain vulnerable and open to outside criticism.

In contrast, the ecclesiological ethnography Healy proposes must always remain critical of other traditions, as it is always self-critical. Furthermore, the cultural concept employed by such ethnography in particular should be the postmodern and not the modern kind, which views culture as a timeless and self-sufficient entity. [142] The cultural identity defined in postmodern terms, on the other hand is "a hybrid, a relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures."[143] Under this concept, the Church's identity is constructed in engagement with other religious and non-religious entities.

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[141]Ibid., 171.
[142] Healy is dependent on, Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993).
[143] After Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997).

> Ecclesial cultural identity is constructed as a struggle, not to preserve some essential identity, but to construct and reconstruct the identity in light of an orientation to what it alone seeks, the truth revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. That identity is constructed by experimentation, by bricolage, and by retrieval of earlier forms. Conflict, error and sin are inherent aspects of the concrete Church … The prophetic and practical function of a theodramatic ecclesiological ethnography is thus … to open our constructed identity to ongoing reassessment.[144]

The idea that there exist normative accounts of the Church's concrete identity is eschewed. Healy recognizes that some accounts are far better than others but does not proceed to a discussion of the criteria that decide the effectiveness of any accounts. Rather, he suggests that the work of ecclesiology should not be the work of few authoritative theologians but the collaborative effort of the Church as a whole. Thus, ecclesiological ethnography is believed to be a congregational undertaking where structured reflection on the Church's concrete identity is undertaken as a congregational practice.[145]

Over the history of Christianity and indeed over the history of the Church, systematic reflection on the Church's identity has been undertaken when things are bad, witness is weak or non-existent, and drastic reforms are needed.

In contrast, Healy argues, a practical-prophetic ecclesiology in its ethnographic form will seek to anticipate and preempt the need for drastic reforms by exposing ecclesial sin as early as possible, and seeking new opportunities to overcome it and reorient itself back to Christ, thus renewing faithful discipleship. This "ongoing self-critical practice" or continuous effort, to find and maintain the Church's identity in relation to Jesus Christ, and therefore, to fulfill its faithful mission is the proper function

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[144] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 175.
[145] Ibid., 182.

of ecclesiology – the penitent key to the search for identity and relevance in ecclesial

life.[146]

> Practical prophetic ecclesiology acknowledges that Christian existence is never
> stable or resolvable in terms of purely theoretical constructions… that the Church
> must engage with others not only for their sake, but for its own, in order that it
> may hear the Spirit of the Lord in their midst. It acknowledges the Church's
> sinfulness and errors … It responds to ever shifting ecclesiological contexts… so
> that it may help the Church pursue its quest of glorying in Jesus Christ in
> everything it does.[147]

Healy on Ethnography As Ecclesiological Method

The years following Healy's first systematic effort to describe the Church in terms

of a "practical-prophetic ecclesiology" can best be characterized by his ongoing search

for method. After examining the possibilities afforded by "narrative ecclesiologies,"[148]

followed by a short and rather critical encounter with the new emphasis on practices in

ecclesiology[149] and a review of "communion ecclesiologies,"[150] Healy returns to explore

ethnography as the most appropriate method for constructing responsible and, engaged

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[146] *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, 185. Guder calls this same element "the continuing conversion of the Church," which in a very similar way allows the Church to always reorient itself toward Jesus Christ, and in the process of this reorientation looks away from itself and toward the mission of God in this world. Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*.(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

[147] Ibid.

[148] Healy had explored the viability of narrative ecclesiologies at an earlier time in his article "Communion Ecclesiology: A Cautionary Note." *Pro Ecclesia* 4, no. 4 (September 1, 1995): 442-453. Nine years later, when revisiting the issue in the context of examining communion ecclesiologies, Healy admits his realization that the concept of narrative "does little or nothing to resolve the problem…" "Ecclesiology and Communion," *Perspectives in Religious Studies, Journal of North American Baptist Preachers* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2004), 274, footnote 6.

[149] Healy "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3 (November 2003).

[150] Healy, "Ecclesiology and Communion." *Perspectives in Religious Studies, Journal of North American Baptist Preachers* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2004).

with culture, ecclesiology. This return is exemplified by Healy's contribution of a chapter

to a book on the matter of ecclesiology and ethnography.[151]

In his essay, Healy examines the applicability of ethnography as a viable

ecclesiological method compared to ecclesial practice as determinative of Christian

doctrine and to the greatest degree of God's self-revelation to us.[152] This "turn to the

believing subject," if you will, or better yet to the believing community, where the

"common life and language" of that community points to God, is what Healy suggests is

best countered by the use of ethnography in ecclesiology.[153] Healy has two specific goals

in applying ethnography to ecclesiology. First, he believes that ethnography will help

undermine dominant idealized models in ecclesiology, along with those that focus on

communal life and practice; in other words, all methods whose starting point is the

Church. Second, Healy offers the application of ethnography to the study of ecclesiology

as a way to "prompt revisions of traditional claims the Church makes about itself,

theological claims as well as empirical."[154] His effort stems out of a movement calling

for the "chastening of the Church's doctrinal self-understanding.[155] This, in turn,

anticipates the preservation of a prophetic voice of the Church.

But to get there one must make decisions about two important questions: The first

is in regard to "what" it is that one is observing, while the second question concerns the

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[151] Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," appearing as chap. 10 in Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). It is apparent that this topic as a subject for theological exploration is still in its infancy, but few can deny that interest is building, as attested to by an upcoming symposium on ecclesiology and ethnography at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, May 2014.

[152] Ibid., 182-183.

[153] Healy is in particular taking issue here not with Schleiermacher per se but with Williams's methodological claim. Rowen Williams, *On Christian Theology*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[154] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 183.

[155] Healy follows John Webster and Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God*. (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1990), xix.

"how" of this theological observation. For Roger Haight, for example, the "what," of the

Church is answered by adopting the broadest possible view of the Church. By watching

the history of the Church, Haight draws conclusions about the "commonalities and

principles" that form the foundations of contemporary ecclesiology.[156] In a similar way

Stanley Hauerwas also focuses on practices and selects to observe the Church as a

"nonviolent community."[157]

The point of these two examples is that in practice nobody "watches" the

community of faith without having preconceived notions or making prior choices as to

what would be significant and how it should be observed. To counter this theological

bias, Healy proposes engaging in ethnography when constructing ecclesiology because to

him ethnography allows us to, "watch the Church without theological or institutional

agendas and, possibly, with less theoretical baggage than with other methods."[158] There

are three main elements to what he terms, "the ethnographic view" he offers to his

readers' attention. First, "congregations differ, often quite intensely and extensively in

their 'life and language' and in what they do and thus in their understanding of "the

meanings of the word 'God.'"[159] Congregations, even when they are in the same

denomination and even in close geographic proximity, present substantial differences

from one another. Second, congregational studies indicate, Healy argues, that the

commonalities relative to faith and practice among individual members of the same

congregation are far less than one may expect. And third, the diversity of beliefs between

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[156] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 184.

[157] See Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, (London: SCM Press, 2003); or his *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004).

[158] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 185.

[159] Ibid.

congregations and within a congregation is not over the meaning of the word "God," but, rather about the meaning and practices of Christianity. These same congregational studies, Healy contends, demonstrate that the issues congregations and individual members agree or disagree about are "as much a product of non-Christian influence."[160] This renders the conclusion that the culture expressed in the life, language, and practices of a particular congregation can be understood in a proper manner only when examined in the context of its host culture.

This leads to at least two immediate observations. First, according to Healy, ethnography takes host culture and its influence on the Church seriously. And second, the surrounding host culture has just as much, if not more, influence over the congregation than those characteristics making a congregation "distinctly Christian." From these two observations, Healy draws some conclusions about theological method in ecclesiology. For one, he argues that the use of ethnography in ecclesiology makes the methodological turn to making "this community" the subject of ecclesiology rather problematic. While Healy allows for the existence of almost universal common elements of communal life - such as a focus on Scripture, seeking to understand our lives in relation to God, and worship - he insists that ethnography undermines the importance of these elements as constitutive of the Christian "community."[161] At minimum, Healy agrees to a definition of the Church as having at least some type of mediating role in bringing its members in closer relationship with God, but he is determined to redefine the nature of this mediation. Countering traditional views that conceive of the Church as depository of divine truth, which is then mediated to the members, Healy proposes a far more modest

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[160] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 187.
[161] Ibid., 189.

view of the Church's mediating role. The Church as a whole and its members do not receive, but have to discern, and, to an extent, construct the meaning of the Gospel under the guidance of the Spirit.[162] In this way, "the success or failure of the Church's *poesis* is contingent upon the active presence of the Holy Spirit, and thereby, what constitutes success or failure is also determined by the Spirit, and may often be hidden from us."[163] This appears to be a very dynamic rather than static understanding of the function of revelation within a church congregation. It moves the Church away from any ecclesial structure having an absolute authority and more toward a dependence on the Spirit. In this way, the validity of a theological proposal is not judged on the basis of who makes it, or on the basis of its compliance with a set of authoritative statements. What makes it authoritative is its reception among the faithful.[164]

If congregational studies are to be believed - and there is little reason not to - large parts of the Church membership reject certain parts of established Church teaching on a variety of subjects. The reasons for such rejection, as we learn from ethnography, may not be theological, and quite often may be the result of strong influence from the surrounding culture on an individual or an entire congregation. This without a doubt opens up ethnography to criticism about the arbitrary and haphazard nature of making theological decisions based on criteria derived from the surrounding non-Christian culture. But such criticism, argues Healy, presents a distorted picture of culture – culture

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[162] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 194.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid., 195.

should be evaluated, per Taylor, on the basis of what is good and what is to be avoided, and not be viewed in negative light.[165]

All this leads Healy to envision a different kind of Church; a Church whose members seek to live authentic lives by utilizing the Church's resources, while keeping these resources alive in the process. In doing so, Christians participate in a kind of a "Christian tradition," by participating in a plethora of varying traditions specific to their own cultures and societies.[166] For Healy, this kind of "Christian tradition" does not signify itself but rather embodies the surrounding world. The Church manages to remain somehow distinct, but its distinctiveness from the world is hidden. In this fact, Healy does not see the blurring of the lines between the Church and the world, but sees a proof that the triune God is active everywhere and not just in the Church. It logically follows then that the Spirit works in a variety of ways toward the same saving end and these ways are not limited to the Church. This leads Healy to conclude that, "Theologically, as well as empirically, the Church is in the world and of the world."[167]

This statement indeed begs the question: If, as ethnography demonstrates, the empirical distinctives of the Church are determined by the surrounding culture of the world, then are the Church's theological distinctives responsible for the Church's ultimate identity? Healy believes that neither can be determinative since God's salvation of the world is not "contingent upon the Church's displaying or embodying the Gospel successfully." [168] It is the empowerment of the Spirit, Healy claims, which enables the Church to point away from itself and to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The one theological

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[165] Healy follows Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 120.
[166] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 197.
[167] Ibid., 198.
[168] Ibid.

distinctive the Church can claim resides in God's call of it and not in the Church's

response to this call. At the same time, and in an almost Barthian dialectic, Healy asserts

that the Church is an expression of the world's response to the Gospel of Christ.

> The world and God are the Church; the Church isn't the Church apart from both the world and God working in it.[169]

Admittedly this is a rather startling way to make a point. First, that ethnography has a

direct bearing on systematic theology and ecclesiology and, second, that theology proper

carries on a much larger significance for ecclesiology than the notion of "communion."[170]

On a positive note one has to grant, to an extent, that Healy's ethnographically conceived

notion of the Church does carry applicability across a wide range of ecclesiologies. Such

applicability may go a long way toward strengthening the witness of churches to their

surrounding cultures and societies. In that respect, Healy has managed, at least at first

glance, to provide for a very practical ecclesiology that promises to make a difference in

the world. Unfortunately, however, in the process of pushing so hard to eliminate the

empirical - and to a significant extent the theological - distinctives of the Church, thus

equating it with the world, Healy has lost one important part of his original proposal,

namely the prophetic voice and nature of the Church. If, as Healy claims, the Church

takes its moral and ethical cues from the surrounding society and culture and not from

God, it cannot point anybody to the Gospel of Christ who called His Church to be in the

world but not of the world.[171]

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[169] Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," 199.
[170] Ibid.
[171] John 17:14-16; Romans 12:2.

Conclusion

In the last 12 years since Healy published *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, one of his concepts, that of "blueprint ecclesiologies," used to describe and critique most of modern ecclesiology, has enjoyed rather wide acceptance. Theologians from varied theological traditions and persuasions have adopted and employed the term as a summation of all that is wrong with modern ecclesiology.[172] However, and despite the wide popularity of his term "blueprint ecclesiologies," very few have seriously engaged with Healy on his new ecclesiological proposal.[173] Healy himself has continued his search for an optimal ecclesiological method. After his original proposal for doing ecclesiological ethnography, he did consider narrative ecclesiology for a period of time, just to concede later on that narrative ecclesiology is not the way to go.[174] In a similar fashion, when critics began lumping Healy with those theologians using praxis as a starting point for ecclesiological reflection, Healy responded by distancing himself from them,[175] coining the term "new ecclesiologies."[176]

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[172] A cursory count reveals that more than 2,000 books, articles, reviews, or book chapters have employed the term "blueprint ecclesiologies," in the last 12 years. It is curious to note that the exact definition of what the term entails is not consistent among the resources. It appears that whatever agreement exists between those using the term is that modern ecclesiology has become too static and sure of itself, and such notion cannot be sustained in the prevailing postmodern and post-Christian attitudes toward organized religion in particular and toward certainty in epistemology in general.

[173] I surmise that there have been only two theologians who have engaged with Healy's proposal for Practical-Prophetic ecclesiology: Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology And Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); and Gary D. Badcock, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 2009). Healy was unhappy with both of their assessments of his work.

[174] Healy addresses this issue in the article, "Ecclesiology and Communion." *Perspectives in Religious Studies, Journal of North American Baptist Preachers* 31, no. 3 (September 1, 2004), 274.

[175] Healy in particular critiqued Reinhard Hütter and Stanley Hauerwas and their concept of what constitutes "practice," as related to their ecclesiologies.

[176] For Healy the term denotes the turn to practices and away from dogmatic accounts in ecclesiology. Nicholas Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5:3 (November 2003): 288.

In his recent book on ecclesiology entitled, *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, Anglican theologian Gary Badcock has taken issue with Healy's assertion that highly systematic, or dogmatic, and theoretical constructs of ecclesiology that develop an understanding of the Church on the basis of first principles should be avoided in favor of critical accounts of the current ecclesial life in context.[177] Though Badcock agrees with Healy on his premise that the central task of ecclesiology, along with studying the current shape and activity of the Church, is also to study the ever-shifting contexts within which the Church exists, he disagrees to a great extent with Healy's argument that leads to the above conclusion. Healy's claim that highly systematic and theoretical accounts of ecclesiology are somehow defective, when compared to highly practical and based on current context accounts, is countered by Badcock's quick overview of the last 100 or so years of ecclesial developments, including but not limited to Vatican II, the emergence of the ecumenical movement, and the explosion in Church growth in the global south. While Badcock has serious concern over Healy's criticism that adequate attention should be given to the concrete Church, he finds it ironic that Healy appears to be oblivious to the significant achievements of some of the same blueprint ecclesiologies in and on behalf of the concrete Church.[178] Where Healy gains some favor in Badcock's analysis is his insistence on putting praxis front and center in ecclesiology, "at least to this extent: that an ecclesiology that cannot show its relevance to the actual life of the Church is of questionable value."[179]

Gerard Mannion's engagement with Healy has been a bit milder in tone and suspending more serious judgment until Healy has had the chance to further develop his

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[177] *The House Where God Lives: Renewing the Doctrine of the Church for Today*, 3.
[178] Ibid., 6.
[179] Ibid., 7.

proposal for a theological ethnography as an example of practical prophetic ecclesiology.[180] While Mannion agrees with Healy's analysis of the many challenges facing ecclesiology today, chief among which is the lack of work or emphasis on the Church's concrete identity, he is quick to point out that in the absence of a fully developed model of theological ethnography of the practical-prophetic type, Healy has inadvertently produced yet another blueprint. Mannion, among others, was waiting with some anticipation for the publication of a volume edited by Pete Ward entitled *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, to which Healy contributed a chapter on ecclesiology and ethnography.[181]

Healy's most recent work takes yet another small step in the direction of developing ecclesiological ethnography by reinterpreting the Christian tradition not as the preservation and embodiment of revelation, but as an embodiment of the world within which God is active.[182] While very interesting in its own way, and, without a doubt consistent with his previous efforts to open up ecclesiology to the world and protect against epic and triumphalist accounts, Healy's recent work is still a long way from providing the structured treatment of what ecclesiological ethnography is and how a theologian can employ it in his or her reflection on the Church.

Even though I understand Badcock's criticism that Healy is overstating his case on the difference between highly systematic and practical prophetic accounts of ecclesiology, I do not fault Healy on this point. It is understandable if he overstates his case somewhat to open space within which he can advance his own argument. The

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[180] *Ecclesiology And Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time,* 38.

[181] Nicholas M. Healy, "Ecclesiology, Ethnography and God, An Interplay of Reality Descriptions," appearing as chap. 10 in Pete Ward, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

[182] Ibid., 197.

greatest value of Healy's proposal is to be found in his insistence that the ecclesiology

that is necessary in the current postmodern and post-Christian environment should be

located between the Church's concrete identity and its relevance or mission of faithful

discipleship. It is this dynamic axis between identity and relevance that allows Healy to

address theologically such serious issues as the sinfulness of the Church, or the loss of the

Church's position of power and dominance - at least in the West – and, therefore, the

Church's need to gain a hearing in a new marketplace of religious and non-religious

ideas.

Furthermore, Healy deserves credit for granting such a key role to the practice of

personal and ecclesial repentance in his scheme. The practice of repentance rejects any

possibility for boasting in the Church itself, but only in the One in whom the Church

finds its forgiveness, and identity, and glory – the person of Jesus Christ.

The very notion of ecclesiology being penitential in nature not only provides for a

great theological parallel between the Church and Israel but in a very real sense helps link

the narratives of both God's peoples in the theodramatic metanarrative. As I intend to

demonstrate in later chapters of this work this link between Israel and the Church appears

in the work of all three of the ecclesiologists I examine. I will then develop it a bit more

in chapter five when addressing the question of viability for a missional ecclesiology.

My findings thus far can be summarized in the statements that follow. First, and

as it appears, independent of the particular method used, the axis comprised of the

categories of "identity" and "relevance" factors prominently in Healy's ecclesiology. [183]

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[183] The term "relevance is mine; Healy's equivalents are those of "discipleship," or "witness," or "mission." As I will continue to demonstrate in the remaining chapters the concepts of "relevance" and "mission," are so close in nature and overlapping in meaning that they can and will be used in an interchangeable manner throughout this work.

The Holy Spirit is the major influencer or the driving force behind the Church's reacquiring a true identity by reorienting itself toward the person of Jesus Christ and re-appropriating its rightful role in the theodrama by joining in Christ' mission. Second, and as Healy's efforts with different methods for ecclesiology demonstrate, the usefulness of the concepts of "identity" and "relevance" in forming an active "quasi-methodological" axis for constructing ecclesiology show without a doubt an ability to transcend methodological and theological divides while retaining their power to explain the Church and aid its theological reflection. Third, this "identity-relevance" axis in Healy's theology, along with his analysis of the postmodern culture and the current ecclesial context, provides for an interpretation of the contemporary Church as a societal outsider and not the dominant cultural force controlling meaning for the larger community. This new-found position allows the Church to come to terms with its own sinfulness for one, and open itself up to an active engagement with other religious and non-religious communities. In this engagement, the Church practices "epistemic humility" in listening for God's truth outside of its own boundaries and converting the truth found in these engagements into "more faithful discipleship."[184]

As Healy appears to be returning to pre-modern patterns for constructing ecclesiology,[185] the whole turn to an authentic Christian identity is not a mere attempt to repristination or a return to a purer state of being. It is, instead, a continuous pursuit of Christ and His will within the concrete cultural context in which the Church finds itself. The oft-repeated sentiment that for the Church to overcome its struggles to be faithful and regain its effective witness it needs to revert to forms of being the Church akin to those of

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[184] See note 8, p. 48 above.

[185] Healy's attempt of re-appropriation of Augustine's, Aquinas's, and Calvin's ecclesiologies to counteract the effects of epic modern ecclesiological proposals is a good example. See pp. 70-72 above.

apostolic times is to be rejected. The postmodern understanding of culture, Healy argues, works well in the particular task of deconstructing totalistic and triumphalist accounts of the Church as culture. There are many instances in which the Church is not only vulnerable to but is well deserving of criticism for its behavior and actions or inactions. It is less clear, however, how ecclesiological ethnography can help shape and improve the existing Church by constructing a functional ecclesiology which is not content with a mere analysis from the side-lines.

The intent here is to attempt a construct of the Church's concrete identity against the backdrop of a dramatic rather than an epic horizon. Healy sees this as the only way of avoiding the pitfalls of triumphalism and the rather problematic stance of speaking from the position of authority to culture, while at the same time acknowledging the sinfulness of both individual Christians and the Church as a whole, and using this admission of weakness as a powerful tool for witness to the non-Church. Anything less is going to fall short of the goal. The call to mission that individuals and the Church as a whole are to respond to is not a call to comfort but rather one to alienation and suffering. It is a call that, takes its identity cues from Christ as it aligns with and seeks to emulate His mission in faithful discipleship.

CHAPTER THREE
Ephraim Radner and His Form Ecclesiology

Introductory Matters

Ephraim Radner is the second of three theologians whose recent work on

constructing ecclesiology I examine in this dissertation. As a pastor, missionary,

seminary professor and theologian Radner understands better than most the practical

implications of theological constructs for the ministry of the concrete Church.[1]

Radner approaches the systematic study of ecclesiology from an Anglican, and to

an extent, an ecumenical perspective; in addition to his own efforts in ecclesiology, he, to

a large degree, has been involved in inter-church dialogue.[2] Radner's main interest in

ecclesiology stems from his larger concern for the ways in which Christian unity impacts

its witness to and welfare of the human community at large.[3] His inclusion in this

dissertation is due to his unique perspective on the current plight of the Church in the

West. If Healy and Guder see the Church's loss of effectiveness in its mission and calling

as a result of the multi-pronged challenge that Postmodernity has leveled against the

Church, Radner assumes an introspective stance in which he assigns blame for the current

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[1] Radner has served as a missionary to Burundi in East Africa, and to Haiti; he pastored Anglican congregations in Cleveland, OH, and Pueblo, CO, and taught at Yale and Illiff School of Theology. He is a professor of Historical Theology at Wycliffe College in Toronto, CA. (http://events.nashotah.edu/blog/2011/11/17/ephraim-radner/; http://www.wycliffecollege.ca/faculty.php?aid=8 accessed 1-28-13)

[2] Many recent articles and books have focused on the relationship between the Anglican Communion and Rome, or the Anglican Church and Lutherans. Among them are: *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), *The Fate of Communion: the Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), and the book he coauthored with Russell Reno*, Inhabiting Unity: Theological Perspectives on the Proposed Lutheran-Episcopal Concordat.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

[3] This concern shines through all of Radner's writings. He also addressed it in a recent interview with Kathleen Mulhern for the Patheos Book Club from Dec. 1, 2012. http://www.patheos.com/Books/Book-Club/Ephraim-Radner-A-Brutal-Unity/Shadows-of-the-Deeper-Realities-12-01-2012.html accessed on 1-28-13.

loss of relevance of the Christian Church in the West on its inherent disunity.[4] This

disunity, or division, which began with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, is

not a mere matter of different preferences for worship styles. It is quite extensive,

affecting every aspect of church life, beginning with the way the divided churches read

the Scriptures, and extending to their understanding of personal holiness and martyrdom,

ministry, or the true meaning of the Eucharist. All of these point to only one conclusion:

The Spirit has left the divided Church.[5] For Radner this pneumatic abandonment is the

reason why the Gospel is obscured in the testimony of the contemporary Western Church

and why Christ is veiled in the Church's life of witness.

Using figural exegesis in reading the Scriptures, Radner establishes the link

between the Church and Israel in their relationship to Christ. The key to understanding

this relationship is that they both derive their true identities from the identity of Christ.

Their true identity can only be discovered within the contexts of both the Church's and

Israel's penitential histories, in which the withdrawing of the Spirit is intended to produce

a realization, and induce repentance that signals a return to unity around God's word and

plan for His people.

My own examination of Radner's proposal will be limited to exploring the

dynamic relationship between the pneumatic abandonment resulting from the loss of

unity in the Western Church, which leads to the loss of relevance,[6] and the renewed

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[4] The three most extensive works of Radner in which he makes the case of Christian disunity as the culprit behind its loss of relevance and effectiveness in the world are: *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), and Radner's most recent effort on the subject: *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

[5] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West,* 27.

[6] Ibid. Thus the title "The End of the Church" is so appropriate to indicate the contemporary loss of relevance, or loss of mission both of which stem from the loss of identity.

search for the Church's identity in its reengagement with the Scriptures as a sign of hope for its future.[7]

It is worth noting that Radner's ecclesiological proposal, which he has been laboring on for the last 15 years over the span of multiple articles and three extensive books, is quite complex and ambitious in its engagement with systematic theology, Church history, philosophy, and spiritual politics. My own efforts will not address all major questions or critique every aspect of Radner's various arguments to an exhaustive degree. It is my intention in this chapter to argue the viability of reading and understanding Radner's ecclesiological proposal along the axis of ecclesial identity and relevance, where relevance signifies the Church's "witness to the Gospel,"[8] and the Church's concrete identity is discovered in the Scriptures in appropriating a figural exegesis by virtue of which the Church becomes linked in an inextricable manner to the divided Israel in the person of Christ. The only hope for the dying Church, as was the case with exiled Israel, was the discovery and return to its penitential histories; repentance brought about by the fresh reading of Scripture.

"Where Has the Spirit Gone?" – Radner's Idea of Pneumatic Abandonment
and the Scriptures in the Divided Church – Has the Church Lost Its Relevance?

As many theologians would agree that the second part of the 20th century produced multiple challenges to traditional Christianity in the West, the general

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[7] As evidenced in Radner's, *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*.

[8] On this subject, I will predominantly focus on Radner's argument as revealed in his book *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* and spend most of my time interacting with the bulk of his argument as it unfolds in chapter one. I will provide only cursory overview of the remaining four chapters as they apply the gist of the same basic arguments to various areas of ecclesial ministry and existence.

consensus has been that the challenges have to be perceived as external to the Church.[9] In

his book, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West,*

Radner sets out to describe and examine the nature of division in the Christian Church

and how this historical reality continues to act upon the true nature of the Church today.

In doing so, Radner is in no way oblivious to the challenges Postmodernity has presented

to Christianity, but he is committed to bring awareness to "the origins and evolution of

Western ecclesial partitions"[10] - a topic that, in his view, has received little attention.

If the Church is dying and is no longer capable of carrying out its mission of

proclaiming the Gospel of Christ; if, in fact, the Church obscures the person of Christ

from its witness, it is not because of its inability to respond to the external challenges of

changing culture but because of its divided state in which the Church in the West has

persisted without repentance for centuries.[11] In short, the Church is dying; that is to say

the Church has lost its relevance but not because it has failed to address the multiple

external challenges to its place in society and culture. The Church is dying, according to

Radner, due to its inability, or worse yet, lack of willingness, to address its internal

dividedness and restore the unity of the Body of Christ. To Radner's mind, the great

schism in the Western Church occasioned by the Protestant Reformation is the main

culprit behind the Church's diminishing vitality and relevance.

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[9] I discussed this consensus in the introduction. It has managed to produce a remarkable body of literature exploring dimensions and aspects of this challenge, and how the Church can or should respond to them in ways that will mitigate the challenges to its existence. The titles in this new corpus of works are also quite telling; e.g., James Smith's, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006.) or Scott Smith's, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church.* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2005.)

[10] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West,* 1.

[11] Ibid., 53-54. Instead of the Gospel convicting people to look to Christ and His Church for salvation, the Scriptures testify against the Church, for it has divided the Body of Christ. Radner draws this notion from Bruce Marshall's work, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel." *Theology Today* 50, no. 1: 78-89.

This understanding leads Radner to postulate his unexpected and rather

astonishing thesis: The Church, divided due in great part to its lack of "ecclesial love,"

expressed in the Church's apologetics of division, suffers the withdrawal of the Holy

Spirit in response to its willful disobedience and sin.

> We must confess in short, that in the 'absence of the Paraclete' from within the
> Church ought to be constitutive of historical pneumatology (our understanding of
> the Holy Spirit's life in time) and that Christian division and scriptural obscurity
> are themselves pneumatic realities of the historical present.[12]

As a result of the Church's sin and a divine judgment for disobedience, the Spirit is

withdrawn from it, thus rendering the Church lifeless and left to its own devices.[13] But

there are further consequences for the Church stemming from its state of pneumatic

abandonment; if the life-giving Spirit is withdrawn from the Church it inevitably faces

death.

> …the 'real' history of the Church in division is a history of 'death;' a death first
> that is required as the outcome of the conscious dismemberment of the Church,
> and a death that is already assumed by the redeeming form of God's love taken
> flesh in Christ.[14]

It is true that the appropriate response to the sin of division, which condemns the Church

to death, is repentance. But in the absence of the Spirit that convicts the Church of sin all

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[12] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 27.

[13] Radner's notion of pneumatic abandonment is akin to St. Paul's notion of God giving sinners over to the consequences of their rebellion, Rom. 1:18 -28.

[14] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 6. On this point Radner draws upon the work of Reformed theologian Jean-Jacques von Allmen's work entitled, "On the Restoration of Christian Unity." in *Verbum Caro* 4:13-16 (1950): 49-73.

the Church can do is persist in observing its "penitential reality"[15] within the larger

context of a penitential history.

Such a bold, if not scandalous, opening salvo requires a detailed explanation,

which Radner is ready and willing to provide. For him, the discussion pivots on three

main elements: (1) divisions within the Church (the Catholic-Protestant split at the time

of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century), (2) the mission of the Holy Spirit; and

(3) repentance. Within the following pages, I will detail Radner's understanding of the

divisions in the Western Church as it relates to how the divided parties read Scripture, the

role of the Spirit in the history of these divisions, and the place of ecclesial and personal

repentance for re-appropriating the Church's true identity.

The theological consequences of a thorough examination of the penitential history

of the Church, as it intersects with God's providential dealings with it, cannot be

overstated. For any "historical" examination of a matter has as one of its goals to acquire

"the knowledge of self as the self emerges from the past."[16] In Christian theology, the

role of reading Scripture is to mediate the Church's identity within the larger context of

unfolding history, in which God is "ordering and molding"… "judgment"…and

"redemption" for his people. As a Church we look to the past for gaining clarification and

a better understanding of our relation of dependence to a powerful and benevolent God.

> … the knowledge of the self that emerges from such 'history' is one that humbles
> the proud and displays the glory of God, an outcome epitomized in the Psalms as
> a genre and demonstrative of the vast insinuations of such articulations of
> repentance they provide: we are who we are because of what we have done as it
> stands in relation to what God has done and who he is in such doing. And so the
> truth of who God is, is captured clearly in this place wherein our penitence comes

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[15] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 2.
[16] Ibid., 3.

into being as a life accepted, and where the moments of the individual grow out of the times of the nation (cf. Psalm 106).[17]

Two important observations follow from this type of articulation of what penitential history is, and how it functions in the creation and maintenance of Christian Church identity. First, it is in the return to Scripture as the revelation of God that both the individual Christian and the Church as community discover their appropriate identity *vis-à-vis* God.[18] Second, if and when one gains renewed understanding of who God indeed is in His relation to the individual, and to the corporate body the Church, the progressive growth in self-understanding, e.g., identity, is predicated upon one's appropriate response of repentance from which "the character of penitential knowing, the marks and notes of God's own Spirit in the Church of his Son, might assume its form."[19]

But what is this grievous sin of which the Church and individual Christians should repent, and continue to repent as they grow into a deeper understanding and appropriation of their identity? For Radner, this sin is reflected in the enduring and far-reaching divisions of the Western Church.[20] These perpetual and deep-rooted divisions give rise to a set of troubling questions about the nature of ecclesiastical existence, which Radner pursues in his relentless efforts to construct a historical pneumatology.[21]

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[17] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 3.

[18] This same point is greatly emphasized by David Cunningham is his critique of Radner's thesis, "A response to Ephraim Radner's, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*." *Anglican Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (December 1, 2001): 90.

[19] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 3.

[20] It is curious why Radner decides this particular schism occasioned by the Protestant Reformation is the one causing the Church its current problems and not the schism between the Orthodox East and the Catholic West in the 11th century. If he were to follow the logical implications of his theological thesis, the Holy Spirit left the Church some four centuries prior to his leaving as result of the Reformation.

[21] Bruce Marshall leveled a very strong critique against Radner's "exceptional demands" on his readers with his "ambitious" argument. "A review Essay. The Divided Church and its Theology." *Modern Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2000): 379. While I certainly understand Marshall's criticism, I am convinced of

Radner is not the first or the last theologian in the West who is bothered by the current state of affairs in the divided Christendom. Most theologians involved in the early and not-so-early stages of the ecumenical movement have been motivated by and confronted with the lack of unity among Christian churches and the theological difficulties coming from these divisions. The ensuing attempts to overcome these theological conundrums have resulted, to Radner's thinking, in three common temptations. The first temptation is to view "ecclesial unity" only as representative of the original idyllic state of the Church at its inception but abandoned soon thereafter as the Church encountered the challenges of the real world.[22] This first temptation leads to a second common one, which is to view Christian unity as a goal to be attained to the fullest degree only in the eschaton.[23] The last temptation stems from the first two and leads to a disposition of fatalism, wherein churches and individuals resign themselves to the current divided state of affairs, giving up the struggle for unity and leaving it up to God to sort through the divisions.[24]

For Radner these three temptations often obscure the true reality of Church divisions that provide for a history of death:

> … a death first, that is required as the outcome for the conscious dismemberment of the Church, and a death that is already assumed by the redeeming form of God's love taken flesh in Christ… the real 'history' of the church – its '*opus proprium*' – as it takes form within the providence of God, is the history of 'repentance,' by which churches, 'confessions,' and denominations 'die' to the 'death of disunity' by 'dying' to themselves, thereby living into the life-giving, uniting death of their Lord and his apostolic missionaries.[25]

the necessity for making an exceptionally strong argument that then is carried all the way through all aspects of ecclesiology and ecclesial life to support Radner's extraordinary claims.

[22] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West,* 5.

[23] Ibid., 6.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 5. Radner citing von Allmen, "On the Restoration of Christian Unity." 72. Radner seems to be following in a close manner von Allmen's premise that appears to equate the death of Christ and the

Radner leaves little doubt that the kind of penitential history he is discussing here is indeed different from the normative Church history that has come to dominate ecclesiological discourse in the 20th century. This kind of history has excised notions of ecclesial sin or death, and replaced them with the accepted sociological concept of ecclesial diversity. Analyses that discern the providential nature of the 16th century divisions and ascribing pneumatological implications to them have been commonplace for denominational apologists, as most "confessional" histories tend to be self-justifying.[26] It is the ubiquity of such analyses that provides Radner with a launching point for his own meticulous examination of Church history and theology, and supplies the ammunition for the opening salvo – his critique of the reading of Scripture in the divided Church.

Reading the Scriptures in the Divided Church

One of Radner's main concerns is to address the Reformation's claim of recovering the centrality of Scripture. The burden of proof falls on the claimant now, that is on the plethora of Protestant denominations or "the Church" that has now become "many churches," to demonstrate how this new state stemming from the recovery of Scripture is better than the state being replaced. How does the Church think, act, relate to,

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martyrdom of His apostles to the "death" of the Church experienced in the present. Such a move is peculiar as Radner already argued for ecclesial sin being the cause of divisions and death; in other words, the Church is experiencing the consequences of its willful disobedience. In contrast, Christ's death was redemptive precisely because of His willful obedience. Further discussion will follow in the concluding remarks to this chapter.

[26] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 6. Here, Radner is quick to implicate many leading Protestant thinkers from John Owen and Charles Hodge to Oberman and McGrath.

and hear the Scriptures?[27] It is the search for and implications of the honest answers to these questions that Radner invites his readers to examine with him.

The relentless debates between Catholics and Protestants over the interpretation of Scripture have led to wide-spread skepticism, Radner alleges, regarding epistemology and the sources and context for knowledge acquisition. Using the Erasmus-Luther debate over the subject of free will, Radner illustrates how contradictory claims about authority and interpretation challenge the very perspicuity of scripture.[28] But what is at stake here? Clearly the problem is not that of introducing skepticism to modernity; it is the pneumatological implications of the varied and quite contradictory readings of Scripture by the Church, or, rather churches.

The arguments developed by Erasmus and Luther were further solidified during the famous confrontation between Bishop Sadoleto and Calvin, where the former called the citizenry of Geneva to return to unity with Rome.[29] In it, Sadoleto reiterated the credo of St. Vincent, according to which the authority to decide right belief resides in the Church, while Calvin insisted on the Scriptures being the final authority for faith and practice.

Since the 16th century, there have been manifold iterations of the aforementioned debates increasing in intensity, contributing to the divisions started by the Reformation

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[27] Ibid., 10-11.

[28] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 12. Radner follows closely Richard H. Popkin's analysis in his *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1979), especially chapter 1, entitled, "The Intellectual Crisis of the Reformation." Popkin is convinced that by undermining the authority of the Church in determining the correct interpretation of Scripture Luther "spawned" a new problem – that of criterion of truth and by implication, recovering the arguments of the Greek Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus resulting in the introduction of skepticism into theological inquiries.

[29] Ibid., 13.

and still persisting in our contemporary context.[30] It is the perception of this persisting

crisis that has induced multiple ecumenical initiatives and proposals over the last century

intended to overcome the lack of unity, mend old divisions, and, in the process, return the

Christian Church to relevance again.

       One such proposal for Radner is the one developed by Karl Rahner and Heinrich

Fries in 1983, intended to unite the divided churches into a federation of independent

church bodies.[31] Rahner argues for unity on the basis of epistemological tolerance

grounded in acceptance of agreed-upon fundamentals such as creeds and common

structures of practice, allowing for all other issues to be resolved in the end times.[32] To

Radner, this unity proposal is a clear indication of how the divisions and disunity of the

Church render it irrelevant. If Christians cannot understand each other, let alone the

world, how can they carry on the successful mission of spreading the Gospel? Is it

possible for the world to hear the truth of the Gospel within the context of a divided

Church?[33] These questions directly relate to both the nature of the Church and the nature

of the Gospel it preaches. Can any segment of the divided Church lay claim on scriptural

truth yet remain separated? Radner argues that the post-Reformation debate over the

meaning of Scriptures contains an explicit pneumatological contradiction that churches

have ignored for too long.

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[30] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 17.

[31] Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner. *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility.* Transl. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985).

[32] Clearly Radner's analysis of Rahner's proposal is not a sympathetic one. A closer look at the actual proposal for new unity, while minimalist in some sense, is nevertheless firmly rooted in the imperative to love God and love neighbor. For an insightful discussion on Rahner's position on Christian unity, see John N. Sheveland, *Piety and Responsibility: Patterns of Unity in Karl Rahner, Karl Barth, and Vedanta Deshika.* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2011), especially chapters 2 and 5.

[33] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 18.

There is no escaping the pneumatological question here; any discussion about the nature of Scripture and its interpretation, or its relationship to a divided Church will no doubt involve a controversy over the work of the Holy Spirit.[34] It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Radner focuses so much attention on the ways in which Protestants and Catholics alike used Scripture to bolster their own arguments and weaken the arguments of their theological opponents. Protestants insisted that the Holy Spirit works "individually" with Christians without the mediation of the Church; Catholics envisioned the work of the Spirit not primarily on individuals but on the "community" as a whole, resulting in a *sensus fidelium* that incorporates the entire Church.[35] Because of their emphasis on the Spirit's work within the individual when reading the Scriptures, Protestants began to place more emphasis on the subjective and experiential, or invisible, aspects of inspiration and illumination. Post-Reformation Catholics were quite deliberate in emphasizing the communal nature of the Spirit's work with great weight placed on concepts such as "perpetuity," "continuity," "unity," and "apostolicity," all visible signs identifying the Church not only as a continuous historical community but as a discernible social phenomenon.[36]

For Radner, the question then becomes how deep are the differences between the two sides and what are their implications for Christian unity? If unity in Protestant terms is understood as the invisible, active work of the Spirit on the hearing horizon of Scripture, this allows diverse Protestant communities to share common ways of

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[34] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West.*

[35] Ibid., 19-20. Radner is recalling the great debate between William Whitaker and Robert Bellarmine as an example, helping him set the stage for his elaborate discussion on Biblical interpretation in the divided Church. See, William Whitaker, *A Disputation on the Holy Scriptures: Against the Papist, Especially Bellarmine and Stapleton.* Transl. William Fitzgerald. (Cambridge University Press, 1849).

[36] Ibid., We see this difference very sharply on the level of ecclesial definitions where Bellarmine defines the Church as the "visible and palpable…" assembly of persons.

understanding that Scripture. For Catholics, the work of the Spirit to bring unity to the

Body of Christ is traceable in history and results in the visible embodiment of the

"ecclesial communion."[37] In the first instance, the truth is guaranteed by the perspicuity

of Scripture revealed to individual believers by the Holy Spirit; in the second, the

guarantor is the visible living community united by the Spirit.

This then becomes the starting point of the pneumatological contradiction that

Radner will take pains to examine. The entrenched positions assumed by Protestants and

Catholics indicate exclusive pneumatologies, which prevent both sides from recognizing

the true Church in the other. In fact, the only way each side can sustain its own

pneumatological and ecclesial claims is by ruling the opponent's pneumatology

defective.[38] One could claim that there is no solution to this theological problem, as

Marshall has argued,[39] or that both pneumatological stances are inadequate and in need of

reformulation?[40]

Radner is convinced that the latter stands behind the pressure on contemporary

theology to reshape traditional Catholic and Protestant pneumatological stances. Efforts

in this area are best exemplified by multiple documents produced by the World Council

of Churches that attempt to navigate with significant care the multiple dialectic tensions

created by contrasting notions - such as community and individual, visible and invisible,

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[37] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 21.

[38] Ibid., 22

[39] Bruce Marshall, "The Disunity of the Church and the Credibility of the Gospel." *Theology Today* 50, no. 1: 78-89. In his article Marshall argues that the observable divisions between Eucharistic communities are a case of "aporia," which can never be solved. Radner is convinced it can be both explained and solved.

[40] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 23.

the here and now, and the eschaton - arguing for the Spirit's diverse work within different communities as if, Radner states, "no tension between the two properly ever existed."[41]

Radner takes issue with such notion of the Spirit's work within the divided Church because it assumes the continuous pneumatic presence in it without leaving any room for a proper theological critique or apology one way or the other. Following the lead of his Eastern Orthodox colleagues, Radner is asking the provocative question of whether the Church has existed in unity since its inception or not.[42]

Within the context of enduring divisions codified in denominational identities, the work of denominational theologians and their ecumenical colleagues has become one aimed at redefining pneumatology in terms capable of translating the "visible disunity into an invisible unity."[43] These efforts have led to movement away from both the demands for visible unity in one regard and for holding firm to the perspicuity of Scripture in another. The unintended consequence of such accommodation is the implicit claim that there was not a problem from the beginning, and the fundamental importance of the Gospel call for unity is either overstated or not important at all. It is this confusion regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, or the doctrine of Scripture and even ecclesiology dressed in the clothes of "pneumatic virtue," that renders the Church

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[41] Ibid. Radner is taking issue here in particular with the Uppsala Report 1968, entitled, "The Holy Spirit and the Catholicity of the Church." The document also appears in, Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, editors, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices*. (Geneva, SUI: WCC Publications, Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 93-97. One of the important elements that Radner is not accounting for in his discussion of it is the acute sense of context and engagement with contemporary culture, and the world displayed by the document. Radner treats the document as if its only purpose was to address the old theological disagreements over pneumatology in vacuum and in total separation from the Church's engagement with the world.

[42] The very drive of the document is towards justifying diversity among Christian churches, which explains the Eastern Orthodox question. In many respects, this very question undermines Radner's own thesis here that the Spirit left the Church at the time of the Reformation when it would appear that historically the Spirit must have left at the time of the schism between East and West in the 11th century. In his defense, the fact that all divided churches survived the pneumatic abandonment suggests divine providence and to a point strengthens Radner's argument.

[43] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 25.

irrelevant. Instead of uniting to do the work of the Gospel in the world, the Church has been focused on "managing divisions."[44]

It is this lack of coherence, and accordingly, of relevance, of the Church exemplified by the concerted efforts to manage rather than mend Christian divisions that leads Radner to postulate the notion that the Holy Spirit is indeed absent from the Church.[45] Such pronouncement brings about critical questions of the efficacy of the Gospel preached to and by a divided Church: How can the absence of the Paraclete be conceived of as constitutive of historical pneumatology; and, how is it that one can speak in any positive terms of the Spirit's life and mission within a divided Church?

With these questions as a proper starting point, Radner proceeds to lay the foundation for a coherent articulation of the Church's condition of pneumatic abandonment. His discussion begins with the way the Church reads Scripture. But Radner is not satisfied with mere straight forward reading of the text. Taking his cues from Ratzinger as well as from a long line of figuralist interpreters of Scripture, Radner proposes the adoption of a figural reading of the Scripture, which he sees as capable of yielding the best results.[46] Applied to the divided Church this figuralist approach is intended to parallel the Church with the divided Israel and, in the process, shed some

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[44] Ibid. This appears to be an imprecise or approximate quote from Tillard's, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion.* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 37. Tillard argues there that our fidelity to the Spirit demands that "we not be content to 'accommodate divisions,' to "learn to live with them."

[45] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 26.

[46] Ibid., 28. The reference here is to Ratzinger's negative assessment of the progress of the Anglican-Catholic dialogue in which he compares the current divided and antagonistic state of relations between Anglicans and Catholics to the antagonism the Apostle Paul wrote about in Romans 9-11, and how God pitted one against the other in order to bring both sides closer to Himself. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XIV, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics: New Endeavors in Ecclesiology.* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2008), 88.

theological light on the disturbing and bewildering matter of the "disintegrating Christian church."[47]

The figural reading of Scripture is by no means a novelty. It was appropriated by some of the early Reformers and counter-reformers in defense of their individual theological stances.[48] The Reformers and their opponents, Radner argues, appropriated it from the early Fathers for many of whom one or another form of figural interpretation of the Scriptures were the norm.[49] But while many subsequent iterations of the figural approach to interpreting Scripture tended to be supersessionist regarding the post-resurrection role of Israel in God's plan, Radner is only concerned with the hermeneutical presuppositions of the early Fathers in their figural identification of Israel with the Church.[50] Following Lindbeck's lead, Radner locates Christ as the central figure, or rather the "figurating reality," that gives meaning to the Israel-Church typology by drawing the two into a single narrative that informs ecclesiology and manifests the Gospel.[51]

Under this scheme, Radner insists upon the consistency of pneumatological engagement with Old Testament Israel and with the New Testament Church wherein the presence or absence of the Holy Spirit from either is dependent on their faithfulness or

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[47] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 29.

[48] Ibid., 30. Radner recalls Calvin's use of the "faithful remnant" of Israel standing up to the corrupt rulers, in Calvin's debate with Sadoleto; or the Catholics' use of "assaulted Israel," lamenting over the rebellion of her children.

[49] I believe Radner wants to steer clear of the old debates over Origen's spiritual or allegorical interpretation of Scripture. He is interested in the typological insights shared by both the Alexandrian and Antiochene schools at the time. For great insights on this topic see, Jean Danielou S J, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*. Transl. Wulstan Hibberd. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960).

[50] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 32. Radner is following Lindbeck closely on this point, treating Christ as the antitype for both Israel and the Church. And Israel is prototypical for the Church. See, George Lindbeck, "The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation" in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 165-170.

[51] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 33.

faithlessness, rendering the pneumatic fullness in or of the Church not an inherent but a relational property. Simply stated if one sets out to examine the pattern of how the Holy Spirit relates to the Church one need only examine the way the Spirit related to Israel. This, for Radner, is the key to clarifying the problem with the divided Church.[52]

With Christ as the main referent, and the relational rather than inherent nature of the Holy Spirit's role in the histories of divided Israel and the divided Church, Radner is now ready and able to locate the divided Church within the narrative of divine judgment. In this way Radner is able to account for the marked decline of the Christian Church since the Reformation.[53] The theological agenda appears to be quite clear: Just like the sin and divisions in Israel at the time of Jeroboam lead to apostasy and enslavement, so also the sin of divisions in the Church lead to its demise. The conclusion that follows is logical: A divided Israel is an "abandoned" Israel. The same applies to a divided Church. The pneumatic abandonment is God's punishment for the sin of disunity, and all members together suffer its consequences. The ultimate goal of this punishment is to induce repentance in God's people who would then seek forgiveness.

If one is to continue with the figural reading of Scripture applied to the history of Israel, one will no doubt discover that when the people seek forgiveness for their sins God uses a "remnant" of those who went through punishment and suffering to restore the rest to Himself. This "remnant," or the survivors of the punishment, should not be seen as

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[52] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 34.

[53] Once again this begs the question of whether the Spirit was still residing in and with the Catholic Church in the early 16th century at the time of the Reformation or had He departed back in the mid-11th century when Patriarch Michael Cerularius and Cardinal Humbert excommunicated each other after a theological brawl initiated by Bishop Leo of Ohrid, who used Photius' treatise on the filioque to incite the papal legates? See, Yves Congar, *After Nine Hundred Years: The Background of the Schism Between the Eastern and Western Churches*. (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 1998). Or did the Spirit leave even earlier than that; and if so, how is one to account for the survival and perseverance of Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic churches to this day?

somehow the only "true Israel" or the "true Church." God's use of them to bring

restoration to all is an act of God's grace alone and not attributable to any of the qualities

or actions of the "remnant."[54] It is this particular understanding of God's dealings with a

divided Church that will lead Radner to advocate for "staying put" instead of abandoning

the dying Church.[55]

To summarize Radner's argument, the sin of division occasions pneumatic

abandonment, which, in turn results in further alienation, and spiritual deafness and

blindness. This pneumatic deprivation, however, serves a providential purpose whereby

God's mercy will allow what needs to die to die in order to bring new life and

demonstrate the true character of redemption. In Radner's argument:

> Taken together these two points underscore how the particular aspects of
> Christian division and pneumatic deprivation – deafness, blindness, visionary
> failure, and deadness of the letter – all these stand as figural realities that
> themselves, in their conjunction and historical context, indicate the grace of
> Christ's own Cross and Resurrection.[56]

When the divided Church suffers the pneumatic deprivation of its spiritual senses, it does

so in the form of pneumatic judgment, but it also paradoxically receives the spiritual

means by which it expresses its conformity with Christ.[57] In a strange way, argues

Radner, Christian divisions become constitutive of Christian existence, and, contrary to

expectations, these divisions then do not negate the Gospel but affirm it.

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[54] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 36-37.

[55] Ibid., 45. Radner speaks here of the Church fulfilling its calling to the Gospel by remaining patient in its brokenness.

[56] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 39.

[57] It would appear that the Church can be or remain unaware of this dual function of the pneumatic deprivation, and, in a sense, continue to benefit from the work of the Spirit even in His absence.

Here, however, Radner's argument takes an unexpected and difficult to defend turn. He equates the suffering of the divided Church, occasioned by the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit due to the Church's sin, with the old tradition of ascetic practices of punishing one's senses to the point of achieving "mystical death" with Christ as a means of achieving and experiencing spiritual resurrection and new life.[58] The point is simple: in the dulling of the senses there is the promise of grace and restoration.

What then are the implications for the Church stemming from its pneumatic deprivation? Any answers to this question will inevitably face another serious question, namely "What is the True Church in which the Gospel is truly preached?"[59] Furthermore, how can one speak of the one True Church if all churches are constituted by the same Spirit and part of that constitution takes on such negative visage? If the purpose of the ecclesial constitution is the manifestation of Christ's death and resurrection, then, argues Radner, the work of the Spirit in convincing the world of sin should include, and, in fact,

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[58] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 39-41. This would have been an ingenious move, if not for the fact that Radner does not discuss repentance in this context. In fact, in the preceding discussion, he is quite explicit that the pneumatic abandonment of the Church leads to further dulling of its senses and to "spiritual stupor," not self-realization leading to repentance. Radner concludes that in this state of pneumatic abandonment the Church is unaware even of its need of salvation. The parallel drawn here cannot work to the intended extend, as the mystics were driven by a profound sense of repentance, and their denying the physical senses was their way of demonstrating their turning away from sin and seeking God's face. In the process, the ascetics were granted the "gift of tears" and the gift of seeing the "divine light." If, as Radner claims, the pneumatic presence is not an inherent but a relational characteristic of the Church, how can a Church not seeking a relationship attain it nevertheless? See the writings of John of the Ladder or Evagrius among others. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent.* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982); Julia Konstantinovsky, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Making of a Gnostic.* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2009), especially chapter 4; John Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, Inc, 2008), especially chapter 7.

[59] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 43. This question keeps taking center stage over and over in the conversation. There aren't many ways in which it can be answered; one can either argue for the ultimate reunification between Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox, Coptic, and like churches into one truly Catholic Church, or make provisions under which each of these Christian churches embodies the marks of the true Church, legitimating its existence. It would appear that Radner is unaware of the consequences of his own arguments. In effect, he has provided an even stronger apology for the divided churches by arguing that their spiritual blindness and deafness is now a part of the Spirit's constitutive work. This seems to place a serious shadow over the Church's possible reunification.

start with, convincing the Church of its sin. Just as Jesus suffered a pneumatic

abandonment on the cross to save the world, so also the Church now suffers pneumatic

abandonment through which it fulfills its calling to the Gospel and therefore, Christians

should remain in and suffer with patience the brokenness of their churches.[60]

This notion of "staying put" presents two additional questions to be addressed:

How do we reconcile the continued presence and, consequently, continued guidance and

instruction of the Holy Spirit with the obvious pneumatic absence? And a second

question of equal importance, asked by Radner: Once aware of the Spirit's absence, how

should we respond? Following the work of New England Congregationalist pastor

Nehemiah Hobart, Radner points out how the absence of the Comforter who uses the

Word of God to guide the Church is intended to do the work of "instruction," by leading

the Church to repentance.[61]

> … in a situation of the Spirit's deprivation, Scripture works, even in and because of its pneumatically rendered obscurity, for the manifestation of a promised condition of spiritual poverty. In a particularized manner parallel to the Spirit's own mission within such a situation, the silence of Scripture in the churches somehow testifies, in a negative fashion, to the reality of Christ, *sub contrario*, in the form of his Passion.[62]

The point here is that Scripture speaks even when it remains silent, and the Spirit is

working in an active manner even in His absence from the Church, fulfilling God's

divine purpose. Even when divided, the Church in its individual parts manifests the

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[60] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 45. Radner takes a theological cue from the Jansenists in the 17th century who though persecuted for their beliefs and disagreeing with the leadership of the Catholic Church, did not follow in the footsteps of the Protestant and remained in the Church.

[61] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 49-51. Radner cites, Nehemiah Hobart, *The Absence of the Comforter, Described and Lamented*. (New London, CT; Timothy Green, 1717).

[62] Ibid., 51.

"death of Christ," paralleling the Gospel's power demonstrated in the pneumatically abandoned Jesus. Since, ironically, the Church is at this time sharing in the temporary disbelief of Israel, it also shares an organic connection with Israel fulfilled in Christ. The Church now is called to reappropriate its identity as Israel attested by Scripture, and, in the process, to humbly accept the way in which God is dealing with it, revealing the form of Christ in the process.

No theological or philosophical consensus would save the Church, but the practice of repentance in humility will become the means of grace by virtue of whose power the fragmented and broken Church will be restored.[63]

Is restoration of visible unity among the churches required for God's purpose in his Gospel to be fulfilled? Perhaps not, suggests Radner. If the current divisions are viewed as a divine instrument of God's redemptive work on human sin, the divided churches should not be seen as a broken structure in need of restoration but a "dead body" expecting a new creation; a dead body whose limited awareness points to repentance as the answer.[64]

Ministry in the Divided Church - In Search of Mission and Relevance

Having made the argument that the Church or, rather, the churches divided are incapable of reading the Scriptures the correct way and, therefore, incapable of hearing the Gospel, Radner proceeds to fortify it by examining the effects of Christian divisions

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[63] Radner seems to anticipate that the ultimate union will be accomplished somehow by the brave acts of humility and repentance of "unexpected individuals of grace." This concept sounds very similar to the notion of "providential men" through which God accomplishes His purpose in history.

[64] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 56.

on ecclesial ministry. Many of Radner's critics[65] have complained about his expansive

argument making unnecessary demands on his readers.[66]

The point remains that any efforts to recover the Church's mission and, thus, its

relevance, by engaging in various ecclesial practices, which themselves are rendered

impotent by the deep divisions of the Church, would only deepen and entrench these

divisions further. Nothing short of ecclesial repentance leading the churches to seek anew

for their identities in Scripture will suffice in this process. It is to this end that I will

provide a brief overview of Radner's arguments as they unfold in chapters two through

five and make the case that there exists no ecclesiastical practice that can claim

"pneumatic clarity" or the Spirit's "explicitness" and can transcend the current divisions

by pointing to the work of the Spirit, and, therefore his presence in and with individual

believers.[67] Radner undertakes this move to dispel any illusion one may harbor that

Church unity can be achieved if one only follows the lead of Christian saints whose

sanctity is taken as proof that the Spirit is still present and active, albeit in some

extraordinary form.

After addressing in chapter one the dulling of the spiritual senses stemming from

the pneumatic abandonment of the divided Church resulting in its inability to correctly

read Scripture, in chapter two Radner turns to the issue of miracles and personal holiness

as a way for the "saints" among us to read and interpret the Scriptures and as a sign of the

presence of the Spirit. Such effort intends to expose the futility of seeking the "visible"

miracles and holiness especially expressed in martyrdom as an adjudication of the Spirit's

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[65] Chief among them are Bruce Marshall, Joseph Mangina, and David Cunningham. They have all been vocal in conveying their opinions that Radner's arguments are more astonishing than persuasive.

[66] Bruce D. Marshall, "A review Essay. The Divided Church and its Theology." *Modern Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2000): 380.

[67] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 60.

work and, for that reason as a historical instantiation of the truth.[68] If holiness expressed

in martyrdom is interpreted outside the context of divided Christendom, it becomes part

of the external deception operative in the Church and, as a result, it cannot be relied upon

to adjudicate the work and presence of the Spirit in it.[69] Radner reminds that St. John

warned us about the importance of testing the spirits as an antidote to such deceptions.

Any internal pneumatic phenomenon is also subject to veiling and deception, as the

Church, in the course of its history, has favored doctrine over the expressions of spiritual

gifts. Radner also opposes any recent calls to assign pneumatic significance to Christian

martyrdoms on both sides of the Christian divide akin to Pope John Paul II's appeal to the

unifying witness of "spilling one's blood for the faith," across denominational

boundaries.[70]

> Doubtless Protestant and Catholic Christians have "died for the faith," for the pure Gospel at the hands of the pure Gospel's enemies. Doubtless too, the lives of these and other Christian saints embody some real holiness. But to *see* this purity, to *see* this holiness, as the Spirit's life unveiled… is no longer something anyone of us could dare affirm before the eyes of the church, let alone the world. Such affirmations are defined today by their demand to be brushed aside.[71]

If there exists such thing as a pneumatic visibility today, Radner claims, it will manifest

itself in a place protected from the assaults against Christian charity exemplified by the

divided Church and, consequently, invisible or almost unintelligible; a hidden witness, if

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[68] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 64.

[69] Ibid., 73.

[70] Ibid., 122. Sawatsky has explored this same issue from the standpoint of the relationship between Russian Orthodox and Russian Mennonite Christians who have suffered martyrdom in their own rights, in his article, "Dying for What Faith: Martyrologies to Inspire and Heal or to Foster Christian Division?" *Conrad Grebel Review* 18, no. 2 (March 1, 2000). For argument critical of Radner's proposal and supportive of Pope John Paul II's view see, Timothy J. Furry, "Bind Us Together: Repentance, Ugandan Martyrs, and Christian Unity." *New Blackfriars* 89, no. 1019 (January 2008): 39-59.

[71] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 133.

you will. This makes miracles and holiness unfit for use as marks for adjudicating the pneumatic presence in a divided Church.[72]

In chapter three, Radner continues his discussion on holiness as he shifts the focus of his examination away from the martyrs and toward the leaders of the Church. Within *The Veiling of Vocation: Ministry in the Divided Church*, Radner explores the notion of holiness as a requirement for apostolicity and sign of pneumatic empowerment.[73] In the absence of charismatic visibility and supernatural confirmations, the pneumatic burden of proof now falls all the more on the ordained ministry. Recent ecumenical efforts have called for the "mutual recognition of ministry," but such moves presuppose the acceptance of apostolicity of each other's ministry.[74] The main thrust of Radner's argument here is that in the pre-Reformation days any discussion about ecclesial ministry would focus the expression of pneumatic presence in and through the qualities of personal holiness and apostolicity. In this context and following Aquinas, Radner defines holiness as the embodiment of "perfect love – love for God and neighbor," and ministry in terms of the "particular and deliberately taken path to this goal of loving perfectly."[75]

But the current state of ongoing and deliberate divisions in the Church contradicts this embodiment of perfect love, where the bishops are less concerned with demonstrating love and upholding Christian unity, and engaging in "vilifying the ministers of the other side."[76] Following the Reformation, the role of ministry was no

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[72] This affirmation runs contrary to Radner's own insistence for "staying put" and not seeking formal reunification, or just abandoning Church in which the Spirit is not present.

[73] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 135.

[74] Ibid., 137.

[75] Ibid., 141.

[76] For an insightful discussion on the roles of ordained ministry in the Church today see, Ephraim Radner, "Bad Bishops: A Key to Anglican Ecclesiology." *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 321-341. Also, David S. Cunningham, "A Response to Ephraim Radner's *The End of the Church: A*

longer associated with the perfective character of love. Rather, the criterion shifted away from the visible expression of holiness in perfect love to the concern over one's upholding of correct doctrine. In this development, Radner sees the erosion of apostolicity on both sides of the divide.[77] Catholics replaced love as a criterion for ministry with the concept of "structural jurisdiction," while Protestants focused on using doctrinal "jurisdiction" as their criterion for ministry.[78] Both approaches suffer serious deficiency in their effort to secure validity for either respective ministry.

The inability of both sides to overcome their claims to exclusivity and accept the validity of the ministry of the other side renders the ministry of the divided churches inefficacious. Ecclesial divisions, argues Radner, cause vocational obscurement.[79] Christian ministry, while valid, has diminished effects because it takes place in the context of continuous and deliberate divisions and in the absence of love. Radner states with vigor:

> There can be no true holiness in the separated church, for such holiness derives from and instances the presence of pneumatic love, which is embodied in communion.[80]

If pneumatic love of Christ is expressed in the mutual submission of Christians to one another in unity, there can be no efficacy of ministry until unity is reestablished. Otherwise ministry inadvertently serves as an instrument of further "defilement and alienation."

Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West." Anglican Theological Review 83, no. 1 (December 1, 2001): 91.

[77] In all fairness to Radner he remains even-handed in his criticism as he addresses faults on both the Catholic and the Protestant sides throughout his entire treatise.

[78] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 154-168.

[79] Ibid., 187.

[80] Ibid., 189.

In chapter four, Radner supplies an example of one visible aspect of ecclesial ministry, the Eucharist, and how it has become an instrument of sacramental defilement in the divided Church. His main goal is to demonstrate how the focal point of Christian service intended to bring the Christian together with the rest of the Body of Christ, the Church in communion with and participation in the love of Christ[81] - is at the same time "mocked" and undermined by the divided churches separately practicing the Eucharist. Since the Reformation considerable time and theological energy has been exerted over the issue of "real presence" regarding the Eucharist yet, ironically, very few have been scandalized by the continuous practice of communion by various parts of the Church not in communion with each other. Both sides continued to regard the Eucharist as a constitutive element of the Church, while completely disregarding the fact that the Eucharist loses any meaning if practiced by the divided churches it is supposed to unite, and practiced in mutual exclusion.[82]

Curiously, both sides appealed to St. Augustine's views on the Eucharist but interpreted his views in an opposing manner. Protestants interpreted Augustine as differentiating between visible and symbolic significance of participating in the Eucharist; while Catholics took him to indicate the real presence of Christ in the elements.[83] The true significance of the Eucharist remains grounded in Christ's incarnate self-sacrifice, and all who partake stand in relation to and experience the sweetness of Christ's love. Within the context of a divided Church where love is not present the

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[81] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 200-201. Radner heavily depends on the analysis of Bruce Marshall. Marshall's article was previously cited in n. 39, above.

[82] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 210.

[83] Ibid*.,* 220.

Eucharist "retreats into a 'visible' symbology whose failure to touch the spiritual plate

provides the harsh taste of a repudiated savor."[84]

Tracing multiple examples and theological arguments in the centuries after the

Reformation, Radner continues to amass evidence of how the Eucharist gradually lost its

significance as constitutive and authorizing for the Church in a divided Christendom. In

the process, the underlying questions of "Who is the True Church?" and "Where is

Christ?" in the Eucharist could be answered no longer as the Church was broken, and

Christ was absent once the Eucharist had become a tool of self-maintaining ecclesial

separatists.[85] Since the divided Church has managed to decouple the "Eucharistic Body

of Christ" from "the body of the Church," it can no longer taste the wine that has turned

into vinegar and the bread that has now turned into gall. The sacrament itself is dissolving

alongside the ecclesial body that it joined to the person of Christ.[86]

In chapter five, Radner brings his arguments to their culminating point in

discussing ecclesial repentance. What shape should ecclesial repentance take in the

context of continuous divisions? Indeed, is repentance even possible in the context of the

Church's dulled spiritual senses?[87] Following the figure of Israel as a predictor to the

future of the Church, Radner argues that repentance follows the division as a

consequence of the Spirit's departure and should not be treated as condition for but rather

as an outcome of God's mercy. The Church, just as the divided Israel, cannot repent; it

can only wait for its repentance in ignorance.[88] Thus, this loss of repentance continues to

this day as the persistent divisions preclude the Church's repair. The Church can truly

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[84] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 222.
[85] Ibid., 257.
[86] Ibid., 270.
[87] Ibid*.,* 277.
[88] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 282

repent only after it is made aware of its brokenness: that is to say, made aware and is sensitized anew to the unity of the Body of Christ.

But what kind of repentance is called for? Radner brings forth two elements of Christian repentance.[89] The first has to do with repentance having a prolonged nature in history. Repentance is tied to the life long process of renewal and reformation. The second element has a close connection to the first in that it also necessitates a life-long process, requiring the forming of a new identity conforming to the image of Christ among His people the Church.[90] The two elements form the foundation of continuous self-giving as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1-2), which in itself presupposes the Church as a single identity conforming itself to the image of Christ over time. It is the figural understanding of history, Radner declares, that gives rise to repentance. In losing the figural understanding of history, churches have lost their identification with Israel and, therefore, the reminder of their continuous need of repentance.

Instead, the divisions have given rise to a different understanding of history wherein each side tells the story in ways that justify one's separate existence.[91] Repentance is thus pushed aside and replaced with either an emphasis on correct doctrine or a preoccupation with juridical boundaries.[92] What then of the Church in the absence of unity and, subsequently, the promise of repentance?

> Divided Israel actually dies. Here is the assertion of the Gospel emblazoned with light. Though Israel will live, it will live only by seeing the literal death of its people born in division and the children born of its death. And only this figure supports a 'future and a hope,'…[93]

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[89] Ibid., 284. Radner is following Gerhard B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

[90] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 285.

[91] Ibid.*,* 301.

[92] Ibid., 324.

[93] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 332.

The Church must face death to live again. The Church's only hope is to be found in the divine grace that follows the Church's pneumatic abandonment. The Church, with all of its members, must continue to suffer its abandoned life because the pneumatic withdrawal forms the "temporal sphere of transformation" for those who are saved for such is the true nature of repentance.[94]

This line of argument leads Radner to ask the three most important questions: First, can an abandoned Church be the Church of Christ? Second, how can we know that such abandoned Church is His? And third, what can help give shape to our trust in the Lord of our Church? The systematic pneumatology of ecclesial division for Radner derives its form from the historic character of Christ where the pneumatic abandonment demonstrated the love of God in redeeming His creation. Furthermore, we can know that this Church is His by the presence of the penitential impulse in its midst as divisions give rise to repentance, for the body cannot escape even in its sin the controlling love of God. Last, but not least, what will give our trust in Christ new shape is the rediscovery of our true identity in Scripture.

> If in the condition of obstructed hearing, the Church is thrown back upon the primordial practice of 'searching the Scriptures' even to come to know the love and righteousness of Christ – how much more so to perceive the Church's own form in relation to such righteousness and love![95]

The divided Church remaining in a state of diminished spiritual capacity must "tease out" the will of God for itself. A Church "dimly aware" of its own "pneumatic aimlessness"

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[94] Ibid., 338.
[95] Ibid., 346.

must now somehow tie its identity to the Scriptures and in them discover its rootedness in

Christ, and, as an extension, its mission and renewed sense of its relevance.

Radner's "Hope among the Fragments" for Ecclesial Repentance: The Key to Reclaiming True Identity and Mission

In the first part of this chapter, I examined Radner's appraisal of the Church's

current state of affairs as it pertains to its diminished ability to proclaim the Gospel and

serve as witness to its Lord before a godless world. Unlike many other ecclesiologists

whose analysis tends to focus first and foremost on the external factors leading to

Christianity's steady decline and inability to influence societies for good,[96] Radner

squarely places the blame on internal ecclesial divisions and ecclesial sin, representing a

unique contribution to the broader discussion.[97] In his treatment of the issues plaguing the

Church, Radner has sounded the alarm drawing attention to the seriousness of these

problems, which also require serious solutions. In the remaining part of this chapter, I

will examine Radner's proposal for a solution to the current crisis as I concentrate my

analysis on Radner's book, *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and its

Engagement of Scripture*.[98]

One of the major consequences of committing the ecclesial sin of division, due to

the lack or absence of love, is the Church's loss of relevance. By breaking its own unity,

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[96] I have discussed in detail Healy's analysis of the Church's identity-relevance axis and the formation of ecclesial self-understanding in post-Christian and post-modern contexts. The next chapter will be dedicated to Darrel Guder's analysis which in certain ways parallels Healy's.

[97] Along with the arguments Radner advanced in his book, *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, he has signaled his displeasure with the state of affairs in the Church in other works, such as his article, "Bad Bishops: A Key to Anglican Ecclesiology." *Anglican Theological Review* 82, no. 2 (March 1, 2000): 321-341; a variation of which also appears as chapter 10, in Radner's, *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

[98] Ephraim Radner, *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

the Church occasions the departure of the Spirit leading to the Church's inability to properly read Scripture and advance the mission of the Gospel in this world. This, in and of itself, is a significant problem for the Church to deal with, but not the only one. In his book, *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, Radner sets out to confront the second significant problem the Church faces: that of its identity.[99]

Radner is quick to point out that ever since the Reformation the Protestant and Catholic sides of the divided Church have struggled with their own definitions of the Church. For Catholics, the struggle has been to demonstrate their linkage to the visible temporal and historic Church, while Protestants, for their part, have grappled with the linkage between the visible temporal aspects of the Church so often subject to corruption and the pristine invisible Church giving full and perfect witness to the Gospel.[100]

The search for ecclesial definitions on the one hand and for ecclesial identity on the other has not managed to escape the strong cultural influences of modernity. Where theological formulations failed the Church, sociology came to its aid.[101] In Radner's analysis, the only way we can speak about the Church's identity today is by using ecclesial "denotation," whereby various churches are identified by a plethora of signs,

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[99] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 7.

[100] Radner takes his starting point from Robert Bellarmine's definition where, "The Church is indeed a community (coetus) of men, as visible and palpable as the community of the Roman people, or the kingdom of France, or the republic of Venice." For a detailed discussion on the subject see, Michael J. Himes, "The Development of Ecclesiology: Modernity to the Twentieth Century." In Peter Phan, *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), chap. 3.

[101] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 8. Radner has tried to be consistent in his negative assessment of the role sociology has come to play in theology in general and ecclesiology in particular. While one needs to be careful not to reduce ecclesiology to mere cultural analysis, there is no escaping the sociological question, since ecclesiology, ultimately, is about our common life together as a Church. Radner's assessment seems to imply the possibility of theologizing and even practicing spiritual disciplines in vacuum, and remain unaffected by both culture and communal dynamics.

practices, and ministerial and organizational patterns almost completely detached from

the Scriptures. Radner openly discusses the spiritual pitfalls of this shift in ecclesial

thinking, where the Church's overall health is no longer measured by its faithfulness to

Scripture and abiding presence of the Spirit. Rather, it is analyzed and measured by

external signs of size, longevity, and growth that are taken to "denote" ecclesial

vitality.[102] Such approach is bound to produce disappointment and despair over the

Church's current condition and anxiety over its future.

But for Radner, a Church "successful" according to the terms mentioned above is

not the true Church:

> …often those most set upon the reform of the Church, those most driven by the
> press for Church's self-assertion in the world of eyes and ears, are those caught up
> in a sense of dismay and anxiety at the Church's desperate clinging to the edges
> of objective success. There are others, of course, whose discontent and worry
> have simply given them over to weariness itself, and despair is now but an open
> image of their unforgiving passage through the Church's years.[103]

The anger and angst associated with the misguided efforts of Christians to reform their

churches along the lines of secular success are the results of "aimlessness and

fragmentation," which themselves flow from the Church's loss of identity. It is in the

bottomless pit of ecclesial despair, Radner reminds us, that we remember ever so dimly,

if there is any hope for the Church, it is located in Christ Jesus. The only thing left in the

life of the Church that represents a stark contrast to the pessimism of ecclesial

"denotation" is Scripture. Thus, the return to Scripture for Radner is the only solution to

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[102] *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and its Engagement of Scripture*, 9. I agree that measuring success in ecclesiology based on social or business models is to be avoided. But the driving force behind Radner's argument hinges on the lack of life, growth and vitality as true signs of the Church's real identity, which directly contradicts the Gospel's account of John 10:10; where those who belong to Christ are to exhibit the abundant life He came to give them!

[103] Ibid., 9-10.

the Church's being a subject to "the laws of physical entropy" and recovering its identity in Christ.[104]

But how can the Church even begin to read, let alone understand, and appropriate its identity from reading the Scriptures and recover any inkling of hope if "the Church in its many churches" has atrophied in its ability to hear its Lord? Radner's proposal is modest and involves a simple[105] and timid attempt to move the Church from a denotated reality to a reality measured by the forms of Scripture, where the Church can begin to find hope, to apprehend, though dimly, the contours of its true identity.

Radner develops his argument in four major sections spanning some 12 chapters and dealing with issues ranging from the Church's present situation to its future. For the sake of space, and in light of my own particular interest here, I would focus my analysis of Radner's proposal as it unfolds in section two (chapters four and five), for how the Church can and should sift through the Scriptures in an effort to recover Christ in them and by apprehending Him in "some form" to also apprehend its own identity in the midst of its fragmented existence.[106]

The Form-figural Reading of Scripture

When one speaks about the Church, there is nothing to examine or explore outside the "contours of Scripture." The hope of the Church depends on the ways in which Scripture presents the reality and form of this hope, "a reality and form that is the Christ,

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[104] *Hope Among the Fragments: The Broken Church and its Engagement of Scripture*, 10.

[105] At least to Radner's mind what he proposes appears "simple" although he never cares to explain in detail how a pneumatically abandoned Church, a dying in its sin Church, will discover Christ and, thereby, its own identity in Scripture, especially in light of Paul's sober words in 2 Corinthians 2:15-16. It is obvious that on those occasions when the argument begs the question, Radner is happy to default to Divine Providence for answers.

[106] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 11.

Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God – casting down stones one by one and building up again in life."[107] The question now becomes, how does one approach and read the Scriptures in a way that becomes formative for the individual's identity and for the identity of the entire Church? For Radner, the answer to this question is straightforward but not simple by any means – only figural interpretation of the Scriptures can reveal the figural "core of providence," and give the Church hope.[108]

Radner's own excitement about figural exegesis is further stimulated by what he sees as a resurgence of interest in patristic exegetical practice of the early Church. This renewed interest in patristic exegesis is far from producing any uniform standards for approaching the subject matter and aiding the reader of Scripture in her quest. To remedy this apparent lack of methodology, Radner suggests using the approach of John Keble, a romanticist theologian, whose work dating back to the late 19th century he finds illuminating.[109] Though aware of the work's fate and unflattering reviews, Radner insists on the pertinence of Keble's examination of patristic figural exegesis, as it represents a possible corrective to the way the Church reads Scripture.[110] He is not interested in Keble's work because of its attempted defense of antiquity[111] but rather because of Keble's suggestion that Protestants in the post-Reformation period have deviated from traditional Christian Orthodoxy by abandoning the figural reading of Scripture.

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[107] Ibid., 11. Clearly Radner is favoring the providential character, or the experience at the expense of the dialectical dynamic of God beckoning and man responding to God's call in repentance. Under Radner's scheme, God appears to be doing both, the calling and the repenting to a spiritually "tone-deaf" Church.

[108] Ibid., 79.

[109] John Keble, "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church." *In Tracts for the Times, LXXXIX.* (Oxford: James Parker and Co., 1868). Keble was one of the leaders of the Oxford Movement, who, unlike Newman, however, did not convert to Catholicism and remained firmly in the Anglican fold.

[110] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 81.

[111] It is true that shortly after Keble wrote his essay "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church," his work was labeled "antiquarian" and the work of a "second-rate mind."

In the development of his argument in defense of figural exegesis, Keble proposes, and Radner agrees with him to a large degree, four essential principles the Fathers employed in their reading of Scripture:

> (1) they shared a basic conviction about the divinely generative breath of Scripture; (2) they assumed a providential ordering of human life 'national and individual' by God; (3) the saints and theologians of the early Church included the whole natural world within such providential reach; (4) underlying all these assumptions was the perfective or ascetical character of interpretive practice, which formed both the context and the goal of Scripture's reading in general.[112]

The explication of the above principles is straightforward. While Protestant interpreters were not opposed to figural allegorical interpretations of Scripture, as the allegories used by the Apostle Paul in Galatians, for example, they limited their use of allegories only to those employed by the biblical authors themselves.[113] For Keble, such approach to Scripture constitutes a capitulation to common sense and practical utility as "the idols of the age."[114] This self-imposed limitation amounts to a "constricted sensibility" that comes close to a denial of the divinely inspired character of Scripture. Following Origen's multilayered approach to the meaning of Scripture, Keble argues that any reading of Scripture that does not deliver a range of figural meanings applicable to history and nature, or spirit undermines God's authorship of both the Scriptures and the world.

The second principle also gets a detailed explanation. Out of the generative breath of Scripture follows the patristic belief in the providence of God being instrumental in ordering individual and national human history.[115] The purpose of this divine ordering is none other than to prepare the stage for the coming of the Christ. In this

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[112] Keble, "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church."
[113] Ibid., 6.
[114] Keble, "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church," § i. 3, 4., p. 4.
[115] Ibid., § ii. 9., p. 22.

respect, human history comprises a chain of ordered events intended to bring about all divine purposes revealed in Scripture. All events and people recorded in the Scriptures are connected to and find their meaning only in the forms of the act and person of Christ.[116] This understanding of the meaning of Scripture does not entail the ability of various Biblical characters to see and be aware of the figural meaning of their existence, nor does it call for all Scripture interpreters of all times to grasp the entire depth and breadth of figural meaning. Ultimately, God in His providence is the one disclosing His self-revelation at various times and with the use of providentially directed interpreters.[117] This subsequently provides further incentive to the continuous reading and searching through the Scriptures as they never give up all of their figural treasures of meaning all at once. It is for this reason that Keble, and Radner as well, does not take offense to the wide range of meanings and interpretations as evidenced throughout the works of different Fathers.[118] For as long as the interpretive key to any interpretation of Scripture remains centered on the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ as forming His redemptive work, one is not in danger of deviating from the "real" meaning of the Scripture text. God's providence revealed in the Scriptures is shaped by a Trinitarian - and Christologically oriented rule of faith that is exemplified in the Apostolic Creed, which is professed by all of the Fathers.[119] Specifically, the reason behind any scriptural description is grounded in the truths about Christ.

Third, God's providential ordering is not limited to the Scriptures only but extends to the whole of His creation. Under this principle, the Church Fathers had no

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[116] The question to ask here is whether or not a figural reading of these figures and events is the only way to recover and understand the meaning and form of the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.

[117] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 83.

[118] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 83-84.

[119] Keble, "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church" 66, § iii. 22.

problem figurally interpreting nature so as to discover allegories of Christ and of God's providential activities in the natural world that surrounded them. For some, such return to figural interpretation, not only of Scripture but of nature, is medieval and, associated with the negative attitudes towards mediaeval Catholicism. For Keble and some of his contemporaries this move represented a longing to recover the nearness of God in a predominantly deistic and scientific empirical environment.[120] After all the romantic notions of returning to an older and better state of being, thinking and comprehending God, and the surrounding world are exhibited by Keble's arguments.

Last, we turn our attention to the fourth principle, "the perfective or ascetical character of interpretive practice." There is an advantage, Keble believed, to the Fathers' way of reading Scripture, as it tended to merge the Scripture with history and creation under the providence of God in a seamless manner. To his mind, this was not the result of differing "cultural habits of perception" but of something more profound.[121] This "something" was the pronounced spiritual fitness and acuity of the Fathers relative to those of their successors. The reason why the Fathers were able to find profound spiritual meanings in Scripture and all around them in creation was the condition of spiritual asceticism or perfection that preceded their exegetical practices and anchored their experience of figural apprehension. If both the Scriptures and creation proclaim the story of redemption, then one has to prepare oneself to see and hear this revelation.[122]

The point Keble makes here is clear: One has to regain a healthy sense of respect and awe for the Word of God. Opening the Scriptures should be treated with the same

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[120] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 85.
[121] Keble, "On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church" 148, § vi. 6.
[122] A reference to Matt. 13:13-17, where Jesus draws a sharp contrast between the unbelievers to whom he speaks in parables and they do not see and hear and those who are pure in spirit and can comprehend his revelation.

respect as walking into God's presence. Nothing unclean can survive the awesome presence of God. The Holy God of the Scriptures requires, even demands, a responsive holiness as precondition to receiving and discerning the power of His truth. This argument, advanced by the explication of the four principles discussed above, does beg the question:

> Can one hold to the breadth of Scripture's revelatory reach, bow to the creative sovereignty of God within our temporal lives, embrace the coherent character of nature's divinely transparent sheaths, and run after the transforming allure of the purified soul – can one inhabit this vision of the world without traversing Scripture's figurated terrain?[123]

To Radner's mind, the answer to this question is not so apparent. What is clear, however, is that despite all rationalistic rejections of any providential frameworks or egocentric articulations of the relationship between humanity and God, the Christian Church is still upholding, with various degrees of vigor, that the ordering of the world's forms is coherent with both the forms of the Torah and the Gospel. It is true that under Radner's scheme the Church's eyes are veiled so it cannot see the way the Fathers were able to in the age of undivided Christendom.[124] How can it recover from the current condition of scriptural blindness? If the figural interpretation of Scripture holds true, then the Church of Scripture has to be the one from which the Scripture is veiled. If figural interpretation holds, Radner insists, the Church should pray for the lifting of the veil, for the providential character of Scriptures makes it not only the "object for our understanding, but a form that overwhelms us."[125]

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[123] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 88.
[124] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 90.
[125] Ibid.

Figural Reading as a Spiritual Discipline

Having made the case for a figural reading of Scripture as the legitimate

interpretive principle through which the Church can begin to recover its identity in the

form of Christ, Radner shifts focus to explore the virtue of reading the Scriptures as an

act of spiritual discipline.[126] His inquiries are driven by the expression coined by Jacques-

Joseph Duguet, "The sweetest thing for a theologian is to search for Jesus Christ amid the

sacred books [of Scripture]."[127]

The spiritual reading of Scripture is not a foreign idea in contemporary culture.

This is due in part to the resurgence of ancient spiritual disciplines and the result of the

postmoderns' quest for everything spiritual. But Radner's quest is not guided by any

attempt to overcome cultural distances; rather, it is driven by the profound idea, "that the

health and shape of our spirits depends absolutely upon seeking and finding Christ in the

Scriptures." Such formative reading of the Scriptures is rooted in seeing Christ as the

interpretive key to unlocking the true meaning of both the New and the Old Testaments.

Thus, the formative reading of Scripture is synonymous with the search for Christ. This is

what Duguet calls a task both "sweet and most sublime." But is this a task reserved for

theologians only? To Radner's thinking, the answer is no, in the sense of the reading of

Scriptures being reserved for the chosen few professional theologians; and yes, in the

sense of following Wesley's maxim that every Christian is a theologian.

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[126] Chapter 5 entitled, "Sublimity and Providence: Figural Reading as a Spiritual Discipline" is dedicated to this matter. *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture, 91.*

[127] Ibid., 93; citing, "*Rules for Understanding the Sacred Scriptures,*" 1716.

Scripture has the power to change us, to order our lives in ways that make the human souls most receptive and open to God and His character.[128] But what Radner means here is not the reading of the Bible in a general way but a specific way of reading the Bible that brings about this change. Following Duguet, Radner perceives a direct link between the adjective "sublime" and God's grace. The Trinitarian nature of this function is not lost on Radner; following Augustine, he understands the grace of Christ to be the embodiment of the Holy Spirit's love and, therefore, grace that is capable of overcoming the human will. In God's divine providence, this overcoming of the human will is not an act of violence but an expression of God's sweet grace that acts as an irresistible force with the potential for regenerating the fallen human heart.[129] This "sweet and sublime" occupation, though clearly experiential in nature, has little to do with the pursuit of pleasurable excitement. It has everything to do with the power of the ordered text of Scripture to offer direct access and exposure to God's presence.

Thus according to Duguet, to which Radner fully agrees, the search for Christ in all the Scriptures becomes:

> … a discipline in which…. the character of the author – God the poet, if you will - becomes the transformative subject or substance communicated - the grace embodied in Christ.[130]

The only way one's heart and soul gets transformed into likeness to Christ is through the disciplined and ordered reading of the Scriptures as a figurated text. This claim can only be valid when the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit are joined together in their redemptive

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[128] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture,* 95.

[129] Ibid., 96*.*

[130] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*.

action – and they are. Since there is an order and coherence to the character and work of God, these qualities are exhibited by Scripture and informed by the Holy Spirit.

The true nature and design of the Scriptures is to change and shape us into the *imago Dei* in Christ by the process of learning how to read and search the Scriptures in a particular way so as to allow our spiritual minds and eyes to be transformed.[131] When entering the Scriptures, one enters a divinely ordered reality in which change is induced by the encountering of this divine grace. But what are the characteristics of a figural reading of the Bible that can bring about this sweet and sublime formative experience? Following Duguet, Radner enumerates some 12 different characteristics. While it is not my intention here to cover every minor detail of Duguet's proposal, I would instead focus on the bigger picture of what Radner is trying to accomplish by employing Duguet's thinking on the subject.

The reading of Scripture as a spiritual discipline requires certain conditions to be in place for an actual transformation to occur. For one, there needs to be a clear recognition of the "disturbing mystery and astonishing coherence" of the Scriptures. For any transformation to occur, one must submit on a continual basis one's will in humility before the power of God. Because the Bible reflects the character and nature of an infinite God and because the person being transformed by their reading of Scripture is only finite, any apprehension of the divine can and will only be partial and gradual over time. The key to this transformation is the ongoing and continuous repentance through the process of submitting oneself to the "humbling and exalting movements of divine providence …within Scripture."[132] It is only when one learns to read the Bible figurally that one truly

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[131] Ibid., 97.
[132] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*, 99.

learns to live in God's world. The ascetic power of this discipline is not intended only for the personal transformation and edification of the one practicing the figural reading of the Scriptures. This way of experiencing God's Word and His world has a pronounced missional drive.[133] The discipline of reading Scripture figurally and living it out with integrity in the world is mission of the kind practiced by St. Francis. The search in Scripture and in the world for the "hidden God" of Pascal serves the purpose of humbling and condemning fallen human beings so they can experience God's grace – and that is mission.[134]

All these aspects of the spiritual disciplines are clearly intended to renew and recreate affection for God and His Word. The Christian in particular and the Church as a whole can rediscover its first love if they remain tethered to the cross and God's redemptive purpose. This "conversion as conformance" is what God expects from us and what He calls us to. For Radner, this type of repentance is a challenge to undergo and even harder to desire.[135] But what awaits the Christian on the other side of this process is nothing short of the gift of God's grace.

> Who shall enter this realm of discipleship but the one who is ready to follow? And in the labors of this grace, wherein faithfulness in walking with Christ the Master is figured in the exertions of scrutinizing the Scriptures in their figural depth, one discovers, Gregory says (foreshadowing Duguet!), sweetness in proportion to the obstacles and a vision of sublimity in proportion to the majesty of God's providence. What occupation is this, but that of saying yes, in the mystery of our election, to the voice who calls besides the sea?[136]

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[133] Ibid., 100.

[134] Ibid., 101.

[135] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engaguet of Scripture*, 107.

[136] Ibid., 108.

Radner on the Politics of Unity

Like Healy and Guder, Radner has continued his efforts in the field of ecclesiology, commenced with his "ground-breaking" work published in 1998 under the title *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*. His most recent work entitled, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*[137] is the latest installment in a sequence of three-books exploring the future of the Church.

In *The End of the Church*, Radner argued that the reason why the Church has lost its mission and, consequently, its relevance in the world is due not to some external factors but to the profound divisions in the West occasioned by the Protestant Reformation.[138] There, Radner made a persuasive case for the role of intra-ecclesial divisions and their consequences for the successful mission of the Gospel in this world. His astute historical and theological analysis lent great logical force to Radner's call to ecclesial repentance as a result. What followed, however, did not fit any traditional definition of repentance and drew sharp criticisms from many theologians.[139] If the great sin of Western Christianity was disunity the remedy, for it sought by genuine repentance is to be the restoration of that unity. Curiously, though, Radner stopped short of calling for it. Instead, he recommended the remedy of "staying put,"[140] where each Church undergoes repentance by way of suffering its death and deadness in the absence of the Spirit.

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[137] Ephraim Radner, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).
[138] For more details, see my discussion above, pp. 110-114.
[139] I am thinking of Jeremy Bergen, Joe Mangina, and David Cunningham.
[140] *The end of the Church: a pneumatology of Christian division in the West*, 45.

Realizing, perhaps, that his call to "staying put" in a Church that is pneumatically abandoned is a partial remedy at best, Radner turned his attention to examining in a systematic manner the figural reading of Scripture as formative of ecclesial identity.[141] While it would be difficult to find a Christian theologian who would begrudge Radner's argument, the broad notion of identity formation through figural reading of Scripture still falls short of solving the original problem – that of Christian disunity.

This leads us to Radner's most recent attempt on addressing the question of Christian unity, or lack thereof, in which he is proposing new ways of moving forward.[142] Rader's newest book entitled, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church* attempts to explore the question of ecclesial unity in its concrete, historic expression. As to be expected from Radner, once again he delivers a fascinating, learned, and historically sophisticated study, the argument of which is quite difficult to follow. After examining, and, consequently, rejecting terms such as "heresiology" and "schismatology" in the study of ecclesial divisions, Radner coins a new term, namely "eristology" to assist him in his efforts.[143]

Radner's main thesis in this work is again tied to the question of the importance of ecclesial identity. He states, "To live is to give parts of ourselves, and to live fully is to give ourselves away fully."[144] This argument applied to the question of ecclesial unity and, therefore, ecclesial identity then means that,

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[141] *Hope among the Fragments: The Broken Church and Its Engagement of Scripture*.

[142] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*.

[143] Ibid., 4-5. The term Radner introduces is itself a neologism that he derives from the Greek term *eris* – "strife."

[144] Ibid., 1.

> To be 'one Church' is to be joined to the unity of the Son to the Father, who, in the Spirit, gives himself away (Heb. 9:14), not in some general flourishing of self-denial, but to and for the sake of his enemies, the 'godless,' for their life.[145]

This signals Radner's intention to develop a form of what Long has called a "kenotic ecclesiology,"[146] which, if practiced on all sides, will lead to the "cultivation of self-transcendence and self-sacrificing love."[147] The uniqueness of Radner's argument does not lie in his call for "self-sacrifice" as a way of overcoming ecclesial sin of strife and disunity, but in embracing the Church as a social organism in which divisions are part of its natural dynamics, and using this reality to "reveal the truths of God's own being and acts."[148] It is in this way that the oneness of God in his sacrificial self-giving to the Church, orders the Church's life and creates the Church's identity connecting the mission of God in Christ to the mission of the Church.

But getting to that point is not as straightforward as it may appear at first. In the initial chapters of his latest book, Radner ties ecclesial disunity to the sinful state of the Church, alleging that the Church is indeed a "killer," the disunity of which is responsible for the atrocities in Rwanda. Radner develops his notion of the Church's political responsibility in society against Cavanaugh's insistence that all forms of religious violence are the responsibility of the liberal state that uses religious institutions as scapegoats for its own failures.[149] For Radner, "the habits of disunity within the divided

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[145] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*, 1-2.

[146] Stephen. Long, D. "A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church" by Ephraim Radner (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), v + 482 pp. *Modern Theology*, 30 (2014): 166.

[147] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*, 438.

[148] Ibid., 7

[149] Ibid., 22; citing William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Church facilitated the atrocities of the Rwandan genocide."[150] Due to its defective view

of ecclesial unity, the Church was incapable of promoting concrete practices, leading to

agreement and unity. In turn, and contrary to Cavanaugh, Radner argues in favor of what

can best be described as a political ecclesiology that insists on the Church's serious and

responsible involvement with the liberal state in the political process.[151]

Upon securing a place for the Church within the political space provided by the

liberal state, Radner examines and critiques multiple ecclesiologies and finds them

wanting. His analysis again demonstrates Radner's incredible theological and intellectual

acumen. But this quality makes his work in general and his specific argument in

particular rather difficult to follow. The point behind examining the various

ecclesiologies and finding them wanting is to demonstrate that the Church as we know it

is a failing Church. The only way it can hope to continue its existence is by

acknowledging its sinful nature, persist in being "continually *penitent*"[152] for only in this

way does the Church have a chance to experience unity.

> The redeemed Church is the Church who has learned to live wholly with this self-giving Lord and thus to give herself over *with* him… to those who sin and who divide. The question, then, of where the redeemed Church will be found can be answered only by looking to where Christ Jesus places himself, and the single 'history' of this placement will be given over to that gift made to sinners and dividers. If there is a 'perfect unity' in 'the church as such,' rather than the Church taken up by Jesus as such, it is made manifest in this gift, and only there, which is to say that it is not possible to identify the one Church except as she is given over to those who would divide.[153]

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[150] Dustin Resch, "A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church." *Anglican Theological Review* 95, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 566.

[151] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*, 54-55.

[152] Ibid., 154.

[153] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*.

This sentiment, of course, requires some practical proposals in determining what it means to pursue this type of kenotic ecclesiology of sacrificial self-giving. It leads Radner to examine the conciliar idea as a tool for cultivating agreement and unity. Radner begins to develop the contours of a theology of synodal unity. The practical implications of such theology for individual Christians and corporate Christian bodies is that a life of practicing sacrificial self-giving love is essential if the Church is to ever experience a "way together."[154]

The discussion over the role and limits of procedure that can bring about greater unity is succeeded by Radner's discussion about the role of individual conscience in this process. There, Radner explores the need of the individual to submit certain aspects of their consciences to the common good of protecting the peace. Here again the trial of Jesus before his crucifixion is the example Radner sets before us.

> Jesus leaves behind his conscience as he moves toward those who would take it from him. So that his truth becomes a way into a life for others.[155]

In his final chapter, Radner elaborates on the ethics of a moral theology "oriented by the other." He summarizes these ethics in what he terms "The Unilateral Asymmetry of Self-Giving."[156] As to be expected here, Radner draws together his discussions on conciliarism and conscience into a theology of living grounded in the self-giving of God in Christ. This radical call to sacrificial self-giving must precede, in some way, self-consciousness, self-distinction, and self-understanding. This response of "utter self-

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[154] Ibid., 219.
[155] Ibid., 351.
[156] *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*, 412.

giving" is logically "prior to and independent from any 'understanding' whatsoever, which in itself banishes violence …"[157]

Such calls sound rather profound yet remain vague, as they provide little to no practical guidance on what it means to practice sacrificial self-giving after the model of Christ. Radner's claim is that this self-giving is the root of Christian solidarity, but what does that mean? While, on the surface, the concept of sacrificial self-giving appeals to us in its radical humility and call for submission to one another for the sake of the peace of the body, it is hard to discern how these particular ethics can provide for conciliar unity. Who will be "in the driver's seat" and presenting what foundation to which others would ascend in self-giving submission? Even Christ's giving of himself was intended to bring about salvation and unity to his followers, and was not a self-giving just for the sake of practicing self-giving!

All criticisms aside, Radner has managed to yet again advance the field and further the discussion about ecclesiology and the future of the Church. He has managed once more to jolt our Christian consciences by putting ecclesial divisions and their devastating consequences for the Gospel front and center. If we are to move, be it at a slow pace, in the direction of greater ecclesial unity in the context of increasing ecclesial fragmentation, rampant consumerism, and neo-tribalism, Radner calls us to commit to a kenotic ecclesiology – to the unilateral giving of oneself to the other in the way of God.

Conclusion

What can we say about Radner's original, unexpected, and difficult-to digest arguments? Radner's theology of the Church and the Spirit defies definition. It is no

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[157] Ibid., 413.

wonder then that Mangina compares it to Karl Barth's revolution-making *Epistle to the Romans*.[158] At first reading, at least, Radner seems to address all pertinent concerns. The Church has lost its relevance due to the ecclesial sin of division, and, as result, has also lost the Gospel both proclaimed and appropriated by the Church.[159] This acute crisis announced in alarm by Radner logically calls for urgent repentance from all sides in an attempt to restore ecclesial unity. It is a cry for repentance over the "dismembered Body of Christ" and the lifting of mutual condemnations inflicted upon the Church for nearly five centuries.[160]

Radner deserves credit for bringing this festering problem of ecclesial division to attention. A closer look, however, reveals something more peculiar. There is indeed a theological perspective to be gained from Radner's penetrating analysis of the role of intra-ecclesial divisions and their consequences for the mission of the Gospel in this world. If one is unconvinced, one must only look at the ways in which churches still maintain their divisions to this day. Curiously, however, Radner's acute historical analysis focuses only on the instances of divisions, mutual excommunications, and the lack of ecclesial love, while completely avoiding any mention of the robust ecumenical efforts by all sides aimed at mending the broken unity in the last 100 years. The violence committed by Christians on other Christians, while true, for the most part, is a part of the

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[158] Joseph L. Mangina, "Review essay. The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West." *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 4 (September 1, 2000): 490.

[159] Bruce D. Marshall, "A review Essay. The Divided Church and its theology." *Modern Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2000): 378.

[160] David S. Cunningham, "A response to Ephraim Radner's The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West." *Anglican Theological Review* 83, no. 1 (December 1, 2001): 94.

past. This is not what happens today when Protestants and Catholics engage in conversation.[161]

This leads to another important point of critique: There is almost no mention or reflection of the social and cultural milieu within which Radner is developing his proposal. It is as if society and culture have no bearing or exert no influence on the Church in any age. This treatment of the Church - as if its divisions were frozen in time, as if the Church has limited interaction with the outside world in the present time - is rather peculiar. Is this done so as to not diminish the emotional appeal of his historic argument? If anything, a sober look at the Church's present reality, not just as a consequence of old divisions but as the direct result of decisions and choices made in the present, may have lent greater strength to Radner's argument and call to ecclesial repentance.

But what in Radner's view constitutes repentance? In Biblical terms, repentance is constituted by the realization that one is in the wrong; the turning away from sinful and rebellious practices and turning towards or returning to the right way of living and being. In Radner's thinking, at times repentance is equated with suffering one's own predicament in ignorance and waiting on divine providence and grace to do its redemptive work. But if the Church is to repent for its breaking of ecclesial unity scriptural logic dictates that this repentance should lead in the direction of restoring that which has been torn asunder. In fact, this is precisely the point that many of Radner's colleagues and commentators have pressed on, discussing his radical, yet quite vague and abstract, call to repentance. As Jeremy Bergen points out:

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[161] Cunningham, "A response to Ephraim Radner's The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West." 93. Cunningham is quite adamant on this point.

> Radner does not seriously contemplate the actual repentance of churches. Thus while he claims to write a penitential history that traces the travails of the actual church, and argues that the divided church fails to be a unified body capable of repentance, it is unclear how he might account for the concrete history of repentance. Does not the fact that the divided churches are repenting prove that it is possible for them to do so, and necessitate some reorientation for theology?[162]

Bergen's analysis throws a shadow of doubt over two elements of Radner's scheme that appear inextricably linked in traditional theology: lack of repentance and the absence of the Spirit. Many, if not most, Christian churches have come a long way in repenting for their outright anti-Semitism and indifference in the face of the Holocaust. Mutual excommunications have been lifted, and various theological agreements have been reached on previously dividing issues.[163] Do any of these actions point to a true repentance, and what, if any, was the role of the Holy Spirit in them?

Furthermore, Radner never gets around to defining ecclesial unity as the goal of ecclesial repentance. If divisions are what the Church must repent about or from, then it follows that it must seek to restore unity in its repentance. For true repentance is about change.[164] When some of those like Reno, who read Radner and followed his call to repentance to its natural conclusion, that is, to restoring ecclesial unity, or, better yet, allowing themselves to be restored to unity by converting to Catholicism, Radner was not pleased in particular, as such decision went against his call for "staying put."[165] One can

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[162] Jeremy M. Bergen. *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Past*. (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2011), 239-240.

[163] *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Past*, 240; also see, Marshall's, "A review Essay. The Divided Church and its Theology." *Modern Theology* 16, no. 3 (July 2000): 338 and following.

[164] Russell R. Reno, *In the Ruins of the Church: Sustaining Faith in an Age of Diminished Christianity*. (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press 2002), 49, chapter 6 at al.

[165] Information obtained from personal correspondence with Radner.

only ask, how can 'staying put' ever restore the broken Church to its divinely ordained unity?

It becomes clear from the way Radner develops his arguments that he is against the use of the term "diversity" as applied to the Church. This signals his low view of current ecumenical efforts of any kind. But as Cunningham has pointed out, "Radner's own distaste for diversity is not, in the end, sufficient justification for his claim that the Spirit has abandoned the Church."[166]

I now turn attention to the figural reading of Scripture as formative to ecclesial identity. Most would agree that it is in the reading of the Scriptures that we are both individually and corporately formed and transformed into the image of God in Christ. Radner's argument that the only reading of Scripture that is formative is the one following the figural exegesis of the Church Fathers is interesting yet not entirely convincing.[167]

Radner does seem to show propensity for resurrecting obscure personalities and proposals from the past. On numerous occasions he does demonstrate rather strong romanticist impulse in his work.

On this matter, it is interesting to take a closer look at Keble from whom Radner borrows not only the notion of figural exegesis of the Scriptures but also the idea of "staying put" as a way of dealing with divisions. Like Radner, Keble had a strong sense of God's providence in history, as a result of which he believed that God's providence has placed him in the Church of England, and, despite its short-comings, he should not

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[166] Cunningham, "A response to Ephraim Radner's The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West," 98.

[167] Helen Cepero, "Response to Radner." *Ex Auditu* 18, (January 1, 2002): 172.

depart from it.[168] Radner's proposal for "staying put" amidst disunity parallels Keble's

sentiment. It is worth noting that Radner appears attracted to people who responded to

division and adversity by staying put like the Jansenists or Keble. In the Jansenists

controversy, as in the case of Keble, the Jansenist Appellants decided against leaving the

Church, electing instead to suffer "Jesus' suffering for the church."[169] Ironically, as

Marshall has noted, the Jansenist movement has disappeared with little trace, while the

Lutherans and other Protestant churches are still with us to this day.[170]

All in all, Radner's contributions to the contemporary ecclesiological discussion

should not be underestimated. They involve three major elements that comprise the core

of his theological proposal. First and foremost, the Church has lost its mission to the

Gospel and, therefore, its relevance, due to ecclesial sin. Ecclesial sin itself is occasioned

by the rebellion against or loss of true ecclesial identity. Second, the only way to

recapture and restore true ecclesial identity is by returning to Scripture, and allowing it to

shape and form individuals and ecclesiastical communities into the true form and identity

of Christ. Last, but not least, is the dynamic element of the work of the Holy Spirit, either

through His presence or, as in the case Radner makes, His absence, which induces

repentance, individual or corporate. And while repentance itself does not obligate the

Spirit to respond in any favorable way, in as much as it demonstrates the openness to and

reorienting toward the Spirit's transformative power, repentance is the partial yet

continuous process of moving the Church and individual believers along the axis formed

by ecclesial identity and relevance.

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[168] For an insightful analysis of Keble's life and work see, *John Keble in Context*. Edited by Kristi Blair. (London, UK: Anthem Publishing, 2004).

[169] *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West*, 317.

[170] Marshall, "A review Essay. The Divided Church and its theology." 390.

CHAPTER FOUR
Darrell Guder and His "Continuous Conversion" Ecclesiology

Introductory Matters

Guder is the last of the three theologians whose recent work on constructing

ecclesiology I examine in this dissertation. A missionary, a college and seminary

professor, and a missiologist, Guder seeks to bridge the divide between the ministry of

the concrete Church and contemporary culture.[1]

A Presbyterian, Guder develops his ecclesiology within a broad Protestant

context, drawing on the work of theologians such as Karl Barth, Lesslie Newbigin,

Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder to name just a few. His own efforts in the area of

ecclesiology are dominated by concerns for the ways in which the contemporary Church

in the West relates to the wider culture in terms of the Church's effectiveness in

advancing the mission of God in this world.[2] Guder's main interest in ecclesiology stems

from his deep rooted concern for the Church's ongoing loss of relevance and, therefore,

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[1] Darrell L. Guder served for some 10 years on the staff of Young Life, before accepting teaching positions with Withworth College where he also served as a dean, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Columbia Theological Seminary. He is currently the Henry Winters Luce Professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, accessed august 19, 2013, http://www.ptsem.edu/index.aspx?id=1908&menu_id=72. Guder considers himself a missiologist and not a systematician. However, I argue later in this chapter that the way he constructs his arguments and correlates the data carries the clear marks of a treatise in systematic theology - or in this case - of systematic ecclesiology.

[2] This fact is evidenced throughout Guder's recent research and writings, especially those that came as the result of his participation in the "Gospel and Our Culture Network," where he worked alongside theologians such as George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder. Among these works I will mention a few: Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and significant contributions to Craig Van Gelder, ed., *The Missional Church in Context: Helping Congregations Develop Contextual Ministry.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), and George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

an ever-diminishing impact on contemporary society and culture.[3] His inclusion in this

dissertation is reflective of his unique emphasis on the Church's mission defined in terms

of "evangelization," not just as an antidote to secular culture but as forming the authentic

heart of ecclesiology.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, Healy's main purpose for engaging in

ecclesiology is to offer a viable proposal for dealing with the challenges to the Church's

existence brought up by postmodern culture. Radner, on the other hand, sees the Church's

loss of relevance and mission as the result of internal disunity in Christendom.[4] Guder's

own analysis presents an interesting combination of the concerns of both Healy and

Radner in that he is sensitive to both the Church's interaction with culture and the

Church's internal sinfulness as they relate to its mission and identity in the world. Yet

Guder's analysis also transcends or exceeds the one offered by Healy, for example, in

that Guder views the Church's interaction with culture as problematic in general and not

just a temporal phenomenon specific to the present postmodern and post-Christian milieu.

In similar fashion, Guder's careful look at the Church's inner struggles agrees to a

point with Radner's own assertion that the sinful behavior of the Church is to blame for

the loss of relevance and missionary vigor. Unlike Radner, however, Guder does not limit

the Church's fault to a breakdown of unity and fellowship commencing with the

Reformation. He blames the loss of mission and identity on the ongoing and ever-present

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[3] This concern can be traced easily through all of Guder's work. Among them are a multiple articles on the theme, such as: "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church." *Journal For Preachers* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 3-11; "Worthy Living: Work and Witness from the Perspective of Missional Church Theology." *Word & World* 25, no. 4 (September 1, 2005): 424-432; "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission." *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (July 1, 1994): 417-428; to mention just a few, along with his more extensive treatment of the subject matter, first in *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985) and more recently *The Continuing Conversion of the Church.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

[4] See chap. 3 above, and Radner's *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

propensity of the institutional Church to "domesticate" the Gospel in order to make it more palatable to recipient cultures.[5]

My own examination of Guder's proposal will focus on exploring the interplay between ecclesial identity discovered in Scripture, and the Church's mission defined in terms of "evangelization," or "witness."[6]

In Guder's thought, the concepts of ecclesial identity and mission, or witness, represent two poles of the same reality called the Church. The mission, or witness, of the Church stems from the Church's self-identity and calling, but this mission is not merely an outwardly form of proclamation as it is often asserted. The mission of the Church is outward and inward simultaneously; it is both a proclamation of the Gospel to the world and its being lived out in and by the missional community that is the Church.[7] And while the Gospel is intended to challenge the world in relation to Christ, it also and always continues to challenge the Church in its relation to Christ, demanding the "continuous conversion" of the Church, wherein the Church continues to be formed by the Holy Spirit into its Christ-likeness, or realigns its identity with Christ's and thus becomes fit again to carry on His mission in the world.[8]

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[5] The term "domestication" as applied to the Gospel message has far reaching implications for Guder. It affects not only the way in which the Church adjusts its message to make it more "acceptable" to particular cultures, but also the ways in which the Christian Church has portrayed its relationship to biblical Israel throughout its history. For further discussion, see Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 105; or, "Global Mission and the Challenge of Theological Catholicity." *Theology Today* 62, no. 1 (April 1, 2005).

[6] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* chap. 3 especially.

[7] The first time Guder introduces the idea of mission as evangelization, that is not simply as proclamation but as missional, incarnational living is in his, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), especially chaps. 8 and 9. He further develops the theme in his *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* and also in his more recent brief but insightful work, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

[8] The theme of the m*issio Dei* has been central to Guder's theologizing. One of the most elegant and insightful treatments of the matter appears in Guder's presidential address to the American Society of Missiology, "Missio Dei: Integrating Theological Formation for Apostolic Vocation." *Missiology* 37, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 63-74.

My own efforts will not address all major questions or strive to critique every aspect of Guder's proposal. It is my intention in this chapter to argue the viability of reading and understanding Guder's ecclesiological proposal in terms of the powerful dialectic interplay between ecclesial identity and mission, where mission signifies the Church's "incarnational witness" to the Gospel[9] and the Church's concrete identity is defined in terms of its continuous conversion brought about by the Spirit of Christ to a Gospel freed from the chains of reductionism, and to the person of Christ as the embodiment of God's mission.[10]

The Challenge to the Church's Mission Through Guder's Eyes – Christendom in Question

The optimism pervading the beginning of the 20th century in Western society appeared well justified in light of the cultural, political, technological and social accomplishments of humanity. These achievements were the accumulation of two centuries of uninterrupted progress in intellectual and societal developments. In Guder's analysis, the "outcome was certain to be a modern human society that was truly enlightened, truly civilized, probably democratic certainly European or Europeanized."[11] Such evaluation, coupled with the understanding that this form of modernity was a stand in for "the highest and most desirable form of human civilization," will not generate in

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[9] This "incarnational witness" is not an arbitrary demand placed upon the Church by God; it represents the continuation or natural outworking of Christ's own incarnational ministry and sacrifice as part of them *missio Dei*. See Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness,* and especially, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church." *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 3-11; or "Incarnation and the Church's evangelistic mission." *International Review of Mission*, 83 (1994): 417–428.

[10] "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission." *International Review of Mission*, 83 (1994), where Guder discusses the concept of "mission in Christ's way."

[11] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 4. This characterization contains a veiled indictment of "domination and cultural control," which Guder explores more fully later in the book and in other works, such as in his, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission." *International Review of Mission 83*, no. 330 (July 1, 1994): 419.

the least any controversy or even debate. Christianity was in some ways the dominant cultural force behind this process - or perhaps even at its forefront - influencing both Western culture and thought, and adopting the presuppositions of modern philosophy. This resulted in equating Western cultural, political, and scientific superiority with Christianity. For Guder, the resulting drive to "evangelize" the world by way of spreading cultural and scientific advancements along with the Gospel was the stated purpose for the formation of various missionary agencies, societies and other organizations dedicated to this cause.[12]

In North America, as was the case in Western Europe, Christian Churches paralleled the organizational patterns of corporations to organize themselves as institutions. They courted the political powers, and rulers courted the Church, thus creating a *de facto* partnership intended to ensure Christianity continues to dominate culture.[13] But beneath the surface of this fortuitous partnership lurked the signs of ever increasing "disestablishment."[14] The process of diminishing the power and influence of the institutional Churches over society, which started shortly after the Protestant Reformation was further helped by the growing cultural affinity for secularism and individualism. These trends ran contrary to Christian emphasis on corporality and continued to weaken the ecclesial hegemony of organized Christianity. Advances in science heaped challenge after challenge on religious dogmas, questioning the validity and veracity of the Bible, thus undermining any and all claims to authority of the Church.

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[12] Guder follows closely John Mott's analysis of the period in *The Evangelization of the World in This Generation*. (New York, NY: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1900; repr., New York, NY: Arno Press, 1972).

[13] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 6. For an insightful discussion on the matter of understanding contemporary Western culture and its roots in 18th, 19th and 20th century developments see, Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); especially chaps. 3 and 4.

[14] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 7.

In the recalling of all of these factors Guder sees the beginning of the end of the cultural

relevance of Western Christianity.[15]

What follows is a learned exposé of the various attempts of Christian leaders,

pastors, theologians, and thinkers to respond to the mounting challenges by "adapting the

faith to these new circumstances."[16] It is these efforts to accommodate to modern culture,

Guder observes, that produced the further fragmentation of what, at least on the surface,

appeared to be a monolith Christianity.

> Descriptive terms such as 'liberal,' 'conservative,' 'radical,' and 'moderate'
> appeared. Religious pluralism emerged, composed of divided strands of
> Christianity as well as secular ideologies that now competed quite openly with
> Christianity. Religious toleration, now a political necessity became also a supreme
> ethical value of what had once been a monolithically Christian culture.[17]

This radically new situation challenging Christianity to its core is responsible, in Guder's

opinion, for bringing to the surface the always present but less visible in the past

divisions within Christendom. In the "new situation," these divisions take the shape of

known labels indicating the polarities of "liberal" and "conservative," "modern" and

"fundamentalist" Christianity. These polarities were indicative of the fact that the

changing context within which Western Christianity found itself confronted the Church

and its theology with questions for which Christianity had no answer. In fact, Guder takes

this critique a step further by insisting that Christian theology lacked the framework, the

language, and even the way to think about its predicament in other than reactionary

terms.

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[15] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 8.

[16] Ibid. Among the various questions to be explored under this broad category is the question of globalization with which the Church continues to struggle to this day. See Guder, "Global Mission and the Challenge of Theological Catholicity." *Theology Today* 62, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 1-7.

[17] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 8.

After centuries of equating Western culture with Christianity and Christian values, after using European colonialism as the primary vehicle of spreading the Gospel, Christendom - at least in its Western iteration - found itself surrounded by increasing secularization. The old assumption that all truly cultured and civilized people are Christian no longer held.[18] Faced with an increasing number of people from European descent leaving the traditional Churches or declaring themselves atheists, many in Christendom came to the realization that Christianity is both diminishing in influence and becoming the minority in haste. Christendom was now in question – if not in outright peril!

It is within this context that a new realization began to emerge: that the Gospel is no longer spread by virtue of its overlap with Western culture and that if Christianity was to survive it had to rediscover missions again.[19] In Guder's view, Christianity has lost the original sense of the term *mission* as part of its calling around the 4th century C.E., or ever since emperor Constantine elevated Christianity to the status of an official religion of his empire. For the succeeding 16 centuries, the scriptural term "evangelize" was understood almost exclusively in terms of preaching or proclamation.[20] The main instrument for growing Christianity within the boundaries of an expanding political empire was cultural diffusion.

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[18] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 10.

[19] Guder is summarizing the convergence of the various movements that came together at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th culminating in the Edinburgh conference of 1910. For an in-depth discussion on the factors leading to Edinburgh see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission.* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1991); and Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement; An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices.* (Geneva, SUI: WCC Publications; Grand Rapids, MI: William E. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997).

[20] A detailed study provided by David Barrett, *Evangelize: A Historical Survey of the Concept.* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope, 1987).

At the beginning of the 20th century, however, increasing secularization and the new forms of domestic paganism challenged the Church in ways that it has not been challenged since its beginning. The response to this new challenge, Guder proposes, was for the Church to start looking at missions in a new way as the antidote for its being rendered obsolete.

But this is where his analysis takes a different turn. As a norm, various Church crises tend to trigger a romantic notion of return to the early Church and its ministry as a way of recovering a perfect state of being the Church.[21] It is not hard to see how a Church in crisis, a Church in the minority, will want to look back to the primitive Church for inspiration and tools by virtue of which it can again begin to grow and eventually reclaim its dominant place in society, thus moving from being "pilgrim people" to becoming the "City of God." Guder insists that the turn of Christianity to missions is not just a temporary tool for the Church to counteract the many challenges it faced especially during the 20th century. Mission is, in fact, the very core of the calling of the Church and of being sent into the world.

> The sense of the Church as commissioned by Christ, as 'sent into the world,' had been replaced by the imagery of the Church as God's city built upon the foundation of Christ, the institution which represents Christ's rule and administered God's grace. If any biblical image defined mission from Constantine onward, it was the Lukan injunction, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house can be filled' (14:23). As Westerners began to move across the cultural boundaries of Europe to non-Western, and thus non-Christian territories, they began to recover (however imperfectly) the New Testament emphasis upon the Church's mission. Only then did the concluding

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[21] For a discussion on ascribing the primitive Church a highly idealized status or state, see my Chapter One, especially my interaction with Neil Ormerod's treatment on method in ecclesiology, pp. 28-34.

verses of Matthew's gospel begin to be used as the 'biblical mandate' to mission.[22]

The mission Guder is talking about is based on the Latin term for sending, i.e., *missio*. But his understanding of the nature of the activity described as missions, at least since the 17th century onward, is very different from the process of sending Christian missionaries to evangelize[23] non-Christian peoples in the course of which they will also become cultural Europeans. But I will return to Guder's notion of what the mission of the Church is in detail in due course.

If the progressing secularization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, coupled with the realization that Christianity has lost its privileged place in Western society and culture, occasioned the Church's renewed interest in missions in the early 1900s, the philosophical developments in mid-to-late 20th century in the developed West brought about yet another and far more profound crisis for the Church – that of its core identity.[24] Guder observes:

> Clearly a major crisis in Western civilization began to unfold; this culture of modernity, 'the large intellectual environment of the Enlightenment in which we have all been nurtured,'[25] began a profound process of self-questioning. Indeed, by the end of this century, some analysts of Western culture describe this culture as 'postmodern,'[26] and virtually all appear to agree that the crisis has deepened and widened without any resolution in sight.[27]

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[22] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 13. See also Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 339-41. Guder begins to make the connection that notions such as "calling," or "sending," are always associated closely with the notion of "mission," or service, and therefore, essential to the nature of the Church and to its identity.

[23] Here the term means to proclaim the Gospel and bring one to faith and obedience to Christ; or bring one to make a decision for Christ.

[24] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 15.

[25] Walter Brueggeman, *Biblical Perspective on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 90.

[26] Stanley Grenz, *Primer to Postmodernism*. (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1996).

[27] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 15.

To the extent to which the churches in Western Christianity are an integral part of their host cultures, the churches have also struggled with their identity. The external challenges to the ecclesial establishment that commenced during the Enlightenment were intent on generating strong skepticism toward the validity of basic Christian doctrines. The Bible itself and its veracity became an object of intense debate as the explosion in scientific exploration provided new tools for historical and textual criticism.[28] Having enjoyed centuries of an unquestioned position of privilege, Christianity now, with its most sacred doctrines and Scriptures, found itself challenged and its veracity questioned from outside. Inevitably, Guder argues, this led to serious internal struggles and challenges, which he places under the all-encompassing category of "self-questioning."

These external and internal challenges caused unavoidable tensions within Christendom, producing "multiple" centers of Christian or ecclesial identity, and the ensuing attempts to resolve them resulted in myriad schisms and controversies.[29] The struggle for, or the process of, reclaiming the Church's true identity encompassed all spheres of religious life and practice, and did not leave missions unaffected. Guder points to the Hocking Report of 1930 as a culmination of the efforts of those inside Christendom who advocated the radical rethinking of the missiological task.[30] It is this intersection between ecclesial identity and missions that Guder considers most important, not just for

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[28] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 16.

[29] Most notable among these controversies is the fundamentalist-modernist controversy over the reliability of Scripture, Christian tradition, and Christian faith. At its core this controversy was spearheaded by those who demanded the radical redefinition of Christian dogma to align it with what was sometimes referred to as the "new knowledge," in Harry Emerson Fosdick, "New Knowledge and Christian Faith." *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors (1915-1955)* , Vol. 8, No. 7 (November, 1922), 55-59.

[30] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 17. Guder is quick to point out Lesslie Newbigin's devastating critique of the report and its proposals for eliminating Christ as the center of the Gospel and relegating Him to an example of a moral life-style but nothing more. In Lesslie Newbigin, "A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Council." *International Review of Mission* 77, no. 307 (July 1988): 326-27.

understanding where the Church has been but for determining the direction the Church should be moving. From this point on, it becomes impossible for one to separate the discussion on ecclesial identity from that on missions. The ongoing struggle for identity and missions has given rise to a growing sense that the churches are compromising too much with their cultural surroundings in their attempts to remain relevant. This compromise Guder labels "the cultural captivity of the gospel."[31]

If mission was seen by some as the way out of the unpleasant predicament in which Christendom found itself at the beginning of the 20th century, defining what mission meant to various Christian groups proved to be of significant importance. In Guder's analysis there existed a number of different definitions of "mission" and understandings of how the term itself related to "evangelism."[32] Guder's own assessment of the various meanings of the term "mission" is quite revealing.

In the West, as a matter of course, the term "mission" has denoted the expansion of "culturally conformed Christianity" via its complex relationship to colonialism. In its Roman Catholic iteration, "mission" has implied the formation of institutional Churches in new territories, for the *plantatio ecclesiae* supplied the means of grace in a local context needed for the new converts.[33] On the Protestant side, the term and, therefore, the activity associated with that term "missions," took on the various forms dependent on the theology and institutional polity of the sending Protestant denomination. "Evangelism" emphasized personal conversion and individual salvation of a person "who is distinguished from others by the address, reception, possession, use and enjoyment of the

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[31] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 17.
[32] Guder is considering the impact of the Edinburgh Conference on World Missions (1910), as the event precipitating broad criticism of Western Christianity's notions of mission and evangelism. See Gerald A. Anderson, *The Theology of the Christian Mission*. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1961), introduction.
[33] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 18.

salvation of God given and revealed to the world by God in Jesus Christ."[34] Guder

considers both Roman Catholic and Protestant notions of mission and evangelism as the

two extremes, where one focuses on creating institutions while the other focuses on

individuals, which bracket off multiple visions and ideas about mission and evangelism

in between. Eventually this multiplicity of Western ideas about mission came under sharp

criticism for their cultural and institutional implications. Guder reflects:

> Rather than seeing mission as merely a strategic expression of a self-expanding
> Church, mission began to be viewed as an essential theological characteristic of
> God. Biblical scholars began to interpret the scriptural witness as a record of
> God's mission, God's sending.[35]

Here Guder points to Barth as the first theological proponent of the idea that Christian

mission is simply an extension of God's mission.[36] This notion is often encapsulated in

the term *missio Dei.*

For Guder, the rediscovered and, thus, redefined, idea of missions as related to the

nature of God and, therefore, originating in the Trinity rather than in ecclesiology or

soteriology, necessitates a change in our understanding of the nature of the Church, as

well. Mission is not primarily an activity of the Church. As an attribute of God mission is

the movement from God to the world through the instrumentality of the Church. In the

simple words of David Bosch, "There is Church because there is mission, not vice

versa."[37] Such understanding of mission, Guder argues, by nature relativizes Western

Christianity's understanding of mission. God's work in the world transcends the cultural

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[34] Guder utilizes a definition of evangelism that Karl Barth uses in order to criticize it in favor of ecclesial corporality and corporate election. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation.* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), Vol. IV/3-2: 189 [562].

[35] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 19.

[36] For a good summary of Barth's treatment of the whole of theology as an aspect of missions see, P. J. Robinson, "Mission as Ethos/Ethos as Mission." *Missionalia* 18, no. 1 (April 1, 1990): 156-167.

[37] Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 390.

confines of Western Christendom and leaves the Church in the West to grapple with the

theological implications of God's universal mission. At the same time, this necessary

rethinking of the Church's mission continues to force the issue of rethinking the Church's

identity as well.

Slowly but surely a consensus began to form around the understanding of the

Church's nature as being missionary in its nature.[38] This has led many theologians

involved in ecumenical dialogues to start talking about "missionary theology" and

"missionary Church."[39] This consensus, though affirmed by many ecumenical documents

and papal encyclicals, is by no means universal. Guder is in full agreement with Gerald

Anderson that when it comes to missional ecclesiology or theology, "there is surprisingly

little creative theological endeavor available for guidance… to rethink the motives,

message, methods, and goals of [Christian] mission."[40]

In all fairness to ongoing efforts, Guder acknowledges the fact that the end of the

20th century and the beginning of the 21st century have seen efforts representative of all

theological disciplines exploring the question of ecclesial mission.[41]

But at the time when mission is getting a significant theological re-evaluation, an

aspect of missions, namely "evangelism" or "evangelization," continues to be viewed

first and foremost through methodological rather than theological lenses. Ongoing

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[38] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 20.

[39] *Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission,* 492; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 7-18. Moltmann, too, makes the linkage between ecclesial identity and mission by equating the Church of Christ and the missionary Church.

[40] Gerald Anderson, *Theology of Mission*, pp. 3-4; citing Wilhelm Pauck, "Theology and the Life of contemporary American Protestantism." In *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich.* ed. Walter Leibrecht (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 278.

[41] Among them, Old Testament scholars Walter Brueggeman and Christopher Wright; New Testament scholars Eckhart Schnabel and N. T. Wright; systematicians such as the scholars I am examining in this dissertation, to name a few.

discussions still tend to focus on methods, strategies, and programs, and not enough

attention is given to the theological underpinnings of evangelism.[42] For Guder, this

alleged ambiguity brings up the question of the formal relationship between missions and

evangelism. Some view the terms as synonymous, where both denote the process of

"winning souls for eternity."[43] The definitions of "soul winning" are wide-ranging,

running from spiritual to social understandings. Others attempt an explanation of the

relationship by regarding one of the terms as an overarching category and the other being

just a part of it. Typically, "mission" is perceived as the larger category describing the

calling of the Church - the *missio Dei* - and "evangelism" describing the process of

proclamation and witnessing, but also the inviting of response to the Gospel.[44] Both

definitions are unacceptable to Guder, as they both leave out an important aspect of

ecclesial life, that is, its social and political action and involvement. One possible way of

resolving the matter is to define mission as "evangelism plus social action,"[45] but this is

again unacceptable for Guder.[46] Instead he proposes the following:

> This book will seek to develop an understanding of evangelism that is rooted in the *missio Dei*, shaped by God's action in history, faithful to the Gospel, and at the heart of ministry. I will suggest that such an understanding can be symbolized by redefining what we have meant by "evangelism" with the term "evangelization." …It is closer to the New Testament usage, with its emphasis upon the Church's commission to evangelize (*evangelizein*), that is, to communicate the Gospel. It stresses the ongoing, dynamic, process character of the Church's witness. It moves away from the reductionism of evangelism as method and program. And it confirms a common usage among Protestants and

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[42] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 23.

[43] For this basic discussion on the meaning of the terms Guder depends on David Bosch "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11, no. 3 (July 1987): 99-103.

[44] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 24.

[45] Ibid., 25.

[46] Guder also criticizes other proposals including the distinction between "ecumenical" and "evangelical," along with the distinction between "evangelism" and "justice."

Roman Catholics, since it is already the preferred terminology of the Catholic world.[47]

Few observations follow from this programmatic statement. First, Guder places evangelism at the heart of missions. For him, evangelism consists of the proclamation of salvation in Christ; the calling to repentance, forgiveness of sin, and life in the Spirit as part of the Christian community. Second, it signals the connection between mission and the need for Christian unity; or the ecumenical nature of evangelization. Both of these observations lead Guder to the heart of his argument: that evangelization is not simply proclamation; it is incarnational in nature, penetrating every aspect of ecclesial life of the Christian community.[48]

This radical rethinking of evangelization entails that the "mission of the Gospel witness" should be directed within and without in equal measure. It will aim to convert the nonbelievers in equal measure as the believers. The evangelizing Churches should be the Churches that are also being evangelized.[49]

However, thinking systematically through the issue of evangelization is not an easy task. In the words of Wesleyan theologian William Abraham:

> Evangelism falls between the rock and the hard place. The rock is the extraordinary silence on the part of systematic theologians on the subject of evangelism. The hard place is the inability of practical theology to reach any sustained measure of internal self-criticism.[50]

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[47] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 25.

[48] Ibid., 26.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Guder cites William Abraham, "A Theology of Evangelism: The Heart of the Matter." *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1994), 117. Being stuck between "the rock and the hard place" is one of Abraham's favorite expressions that appears throughout his works describing the Church's ongoing struggle with evangelism and missions.

It is this desire to deepen the conversation about the theology of evangelization that is the impetus behind Guder's efforts in ecclesiology. If evangelization is represented not simply by the Church's proclamation of the Gospel but instead embodied in an incarnational witness representative of the heart of ministry, this can only be the case if the Church is not just converted by and to the Gospel but if it is undergoing a continuous conversion.[51] The continuous conversion of the Church is where Guder sees the nexus of Church's identity and mission; the inner transformation of the Church, which then allows it to faithfully carry out the *missio Dei*.

Defining "Missions"

Upon the introduction of the programmatic statement about his work Guder proceeds to define his terms and develop the theological framework within which his "continuous conversation" ecclesiology will unfold.

The first aspect of missions Guder expounds upon is the proclamation of the Gospel or good news of God.[52] The good news, of course, is not that God exists but rather that God's goodness and love have compelled Him to get involved in human history. God's goodness defines His involvement with humanity and His purpose that He reveals in His relation to humanity. God's self-disclosure takes place in a particular historical context, which, for Guder, is part of the goodness of this news. The fact that God's self-revelation is historical establishes the Biblical foundation of missions.[53]

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[51] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 27.
[52] Ibid*.,* 29.
[53] John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical.* ed. Michael G. Cartwright. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 113.

Along with the particular time in history in which God has decided to reveal His goodness to the world He has also chosen a specific people – Israel, to whom and through whom this goodness will be revealed. From that moment on, the Gospel became Israel's good news, and starting with God's encounter with Israel the good news is now revealed and knowable by people.

But what is the good news? For Guder, the good news is anything but a set of universal ideas that are the product of human imagination. Rather, the good news is the continuation of the event of God's self-disclosure in history. "We encounter God within that history as God makes us part of salvation history for the sake of the world he loves."[54] Starting with Israel, all who become a part of this salvation history and share in the mission community are called to witness to the goodness of God and His creation. God desires that all people experience His blessings and in order to bring this reality about He blesses Israel and all who would believe.

The motivating power behind the mission of God is His compassion.[55] The reason behind God creating the world, and His desire to redeem and restore His creation is to be found in the salvation history that begins with the election and calling of Abraham, and in him the election and calling of Israel.

> Congruent with the compassionate character of God, the act of Israel's election was itself rooted in God's gracious love. God chose Israel not for the people's merit but as an act of mercy (Deut. 7:7-8). That calling, however, was not for Israel's benefit alone. God's missional intention was that all the world should be blessed: … Israel's lack of faithfulness and tendency to reduce its call to the status of religious privilege were the reasons for constant prophetic admonition and divine punishment.[56]

[54] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 30.
[55] Ibid., 32.
[56] Ibid., 33. See also James M. Phillips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the Twenty-first Century in Christian Mission*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 175-92.

As it becomes clear from the above paragraph, for Guder the mission of God is conjoined with the history and election of Israel. He would later link the election and mission of the Church to the mission of God and the election of Israel, whereby the former continues the latter and, therefore, argues for a much stronger linkage between the Church and Israel than many are comfortable to allow.

According to Guder, Jesus continues the mission of God; that is to say, the ministry of Jesus is characterized by the same compassion and love that Israel has come to experience in its history with God. Those who would follow Jesus are thus invited to show the same love and compassion to others as the God who originated His mission.[57]

This invitation in itself was not without controversy back then and is not without controversy still. The mission demands the radicalization of the "ethical demands of the *tôrâh*," by emphasizing the command to love even one's enemy. Jesus identified the mission of God as the "year of the Lord's favor," decoupling it from the divine vengeance promised by Isaiah, and, therefore, making it the truly good news.[58] For Guder, Jesus not only took a bold step in reinterpreting the Messianic promise of Isaiah 6:1-2 by eschewing God's vengeance from it, but He demonstrated with His life - and especially with His own death - the fact that God's mission is indeed about salvation.[59]

In the ministry of Jesus these two concepts of the mission of God and of the good news are summed up in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, which is already present and yet coming. Jesus both brought and embodied in His life and ministry "the

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[57] Guder's analysis is dependent on Peter Stuhlmacher, *Jesus of Nazareth – Christ of Faith*. trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

[58] Here Guder is dependent on David Bosch's analysis in *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1980), 54-56.

[59] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 35.

good news of the kingdom of God."[60] The reign of God, signaled by the proclamation of

the good news and the inauguration of His kingdom, which is now near, is defined by

God's character and His action. God's self-revelation in Christ is what opens the

possibility for a new relationship with God and, therefore, the good news for a new

future. But the proclamation of this good news in itself does not bring about the kingdom

or allow those hearing it to enter. The reign of God and the possibility for a new relation

to God require that the good news be appropriated. The gracious and loving offer of God

when accepted results in the submission to God's rule by virtue of which one enters into

the kingdom of God and, thus, experiences liberation and forgiveness of sins along with

the gift of new life.

> The message of the kingdom come and coming implies response, decision, on the
> part of those who hear its witness. That there is an option of entering the kingdom
> means, of course, that humans can choose to reject God's goodness and thus
> remain outside the kingdom.[61]

So far two aspects of Guder's thought become clear. First, the good news consists not

only in the proclamation of the coming kingdom but in the incarnational living and

witness it invites. And second, the good news is precisely the good news because it

introduces the possibility for a new life and a future without forcing itself on people.

Without a doubt, it presents a choice and an invitation to which one needs to respond.

The good news is always made manifest in the context of the bad news of human reality.

The nearing of the kingdom causes all sorts of conflicts as it opposes all manifestations of

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[60] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 36; Luke 4:43.
[61] Ibid., 37.

evil.[62] These conflicts can take on many forms as illustrated by the ministry of Jesus on

earth. He opposed personal and institutional evils alike, and by doing so revealed that the

true character of the coming kingdom always entails suffering.

> The kingdom is in-breaking – forcing its way in through persons, institutions, and societies, attracting and repelling, being seized by faith, and being rejected by unfaith. The presence of the kingdom in Jesus Christ is opening its way among the people, forgiving sins, restoring life, creating community, but at the same time exacerbating the forces of the antikingdom that will take him finally to the cross. The presence of the in-braking kingdom provokes a confrontation and demands an option.[63]

For Guder, this ongoing conflict and the choice it provokes illustrate the radical nature of

the Gospel. Insofar as the Gospel keeps talking about forgiveness and new beginnings,

the mending of relationships, and grace, many would give it a hearing. But the Gospel

speaks of Christ's death and calls for a radical commitment as well, and just as it did in

the days of Jesus so also the good news continues to scandalize its modern and

postmodern hearers today. There cannot be good news in the absence of bad news; there

cannot be new life and beginning without death and an end to the old life.

It is here that Guder begins to lay the foundation for the theology of evangelistic

ministry. For him, the proclamation of the Gospel has to be "understood and practiced as"

the form of the kingdom of God.[64] It signals the coming together of kingdom and King,

mission and message, with profound theological implications. If the Gospel is the good

news of the salvation event in the person and work of Jesus toward which the mission of

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[62] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 38. Throughout his analysis, Guder is rather sympathetic to David Bosch's analysis and, in fact, he tends to follow it rather closely at times.

[63] Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus*. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 15, cited by Guder in, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 39.

[64] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 46.

God was moving and from which event the mission of the Church ensues toward the

entire world, the mission of the Church then has to be defined by this same salvific event

in its entirety, that is the life, teaching, and suffering of Jesus.[65]

This point is important because it makes God the subject of His mission. The

Gospel is the good news precisely because lost humanity can find hope in it; not because

of what they can do to earn salvation but because of what God Himself has accomplished

for them in Jesus. It is all too clear from Guder's discussion that one must first

understand the radical nature of the Gospel in order to develop a comprehensive theology

of missions.

> Such a theology is obviously Christocentric, if indeed Jesus Christ is both the
> message and the messenger, the good news himself.[66] Therefore, when we seek to
> work through the implications of Christian mission, or sentness, for evangelistic
> ministry, we can never move far from the One who is sent and who sends, the
> risen Lord. "Mission is… a predicate of Christology. Jesus himself is the 'primal
> missionary.'[67]

As Guder would proceed to explain in greater detail later, indeed this is why the

missional community, that is the Church in its local iterations, can only do the *missio Dei*

when it finds its own identity in Christ, and allows its identity to be formed and shaped

by Him.

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[65] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 46. Guder follows closely the argument of Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. F. V. Filson (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1964), 121-176.

[66] Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva, SUI: WCC Publications, 1991), 31-53. See also Lesslie Newbigin, "Ecumenical Amnesia." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 2-5. In the strong Christocentric character of Guder's missional ecclesiology, one can hear clearly the echoes of Newbigin's and Barth's theologies.

[67] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 48.

The Forming of the Mission Community or Mission as Witness

Having described in some detail the nature of the "mission," Guder turns his attention to formation of the mission community, which is intended to continue the work of the apostolic community as a consequence of God's work of redemption. In the same way that Jesus selected, called, trained, and sent His disciples to carry on His Father's mission, Jesus continues to call, form, and send disciples today in the context of His mission community - the Church. For Guder, the Church is not an institution tasked with maintaining the living legacy of Jesus. The Church is a community with a mission.

> Pentecost has often been called 'the birthday of the Church.' It may also be celebrated as the divine event which turned the people of God into missionary people, opening their ranks to receive men and women of all nations, races and classes; forming them into a new community; and empowering them to move out into the world. In Pentecost there is the continuing formation of God's people that was initiated with Abraham, as he received the blessing in order to bless the nations.[68]

With his ongoing emphasis on Israel's distinctive calling and the essentially Jewish distinctiveness of Jesus, Guder continues to argue that Israel and the Church are not mutually exclusive under the rubric of the "people of God." The resurrection of Christ signals the fulfillment of God's redemptive work of saving His people, which formed the messianic expectation throughout the history of Israel. At the same time, the death and resurrection of the Messiah presented a point of radical discontinuity with traditional Jewish messianic expectations, which caused the newly formed mission community to

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[68] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 50.

first spread the good news to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and only then to the rest of

the world.[69]

But before the day of Pentecost when the disciples became apostles, Jesus's own

ministry was focused on spending time with them, equipping and forming them for their

future mission. At Pentecost, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to accomplish

what they were called and prepared to do: that is, the mission of God.

In Guder's analysis, the early Christian communities understood their purpose in

terms of providing a credible witness to God's actions in history. The understanding of

the Church's mission as witness dominates the pages of the New Testament.[70] While

careful to avoid oversimplification inherent in the equating of mission and witness, Guder

is quite adamant that the purpose of bearing witness in the New Testament is to "induce

faith" and, therefore, is a missionary activity.

But what does it mean to understand mission as witness and witness as missional

vocation? And how does the concept of "witness" help in the development of "an

understanding of evangelism which is rooted in the *missio Dei*, shaped by God's actions

in history, faithful to the Gospel and at the heart of ministry?"[71] Guder answers these

questions in a brief but rather insightful discussion in which he ties the comprehensive

character of Christian witness to the formation of Christian ecclesial identity. By

examining the family of Greek words used to define one as a witness, define a message

or testimony as witness, and above all the process of living out that testimony as a

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[69] Martin Hengel, "Origins of Christian Mission," *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983), 48-64.

[70] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 53. See also Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 192-194.

[71] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 55. There are multiple theological voices heard in the questions Guder is posing. Among them and most notably are Barth and Newbigin.

witness, Guder declares there exists "an ample reason to understand witness in a much

more comprehensive way as defining the entire Christian life both corporately and

individually."[72] From this, Guder extrapolates that it is incorrect to think of evangelism

or evangelization only or even primarily in terms of proclamation. Rather, one needs to

consider evangelism in terms of living witness. Indeed, not doing so will lead to the

dangerous "practice of disconnecting evangelism from the life of the local Church."[73]

If witness always starts with the gracious act of God, the ones called to be witnesses first

experience God's grace in being restored to a right relationship with God. Such

experience of God's grace, His blessing, renewal, and endowment is central to the

witness, for without such tangible evidence in the lives of the witnesses any proclamation

of what God can do or has done becomes meaningless. At the same time, the witnesses

should fight the temptation to reduce their calling to their own personal salvation.

> Rather this experience of grace is to be understood as 'something secondary and accessory, which certainly will not pass them by, but which remains linked with the primary and proper element in their status and [has] its own power and constancy [only] in this relationship.' Their 'status' is of course, their calling to be Christ's witnesses.[74]

Guder draws two important conclusions from this line of argumentation. First, that the

calling to be witnesses is something initiated entirely by God and His mission. There is

nothing in one's natural abilities or gifting that convinces God that that person will need

to be called to this task. God makes one a witness; and quite often to the constant surprise

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[72] Ibid.. The concept of the "Christian as witness" has been introduced by Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV/3-2: 554-614. Newbigin also develops this idea of "witness" in his, "Witness in a biblical perspective." *Mission Studies* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 1986): 80-84, where he extends his analysis of witness to Christ to the Old Testament, as well.

[73] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 56. Guder is citing William Abraham's, "A Theology of Evangelism : The Heart of the Matter." *Interpretation* 48, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 125.

[74] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 60. Guder is offering his own translation of Barth's *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV/3-2, p. 575.

of that witness. And second, the comprehensive nature of the call to witness requires the acquisition of a particular identity by the witness or witnesses themselves. For Guder, the calling to the task of witness entails a "complete transformation of the lives" of those called to witness, "individually and corporately."[75] In this way, the mission community is to become an "alternative colony, or resident aliens"[76] who no longer belong to themselves. Their personal and corporate identities have been changed as a result of their personal encounter with God in Christ. From this point on, God, "Himself legitimates, authorizes, instructs and nourishes them."[77]

So far, Guder makes it clear that for him witness is not just an activity involved in the task of evangelism. He is making the case for the all-encompassing nature of witness, which, if it is to be understood in genuine Biblical terms, must be defined by the following seven characteristics.

First, *witness is theocentric*. What he means by theocentric is that any witness is only secondary and only in response to what God has done in Christ for the salvation of humanity.[78] Clearly, in the scheme of the *missio Dei*, the existence of the witness is predicated upon the reality of the salvific event and the person of Christ behind it. The witness is always secondary and dependent upon the event, its content, and message. The true author and originator of what is being witnessed to, is God, who makes Himself and His gracious nature known in human history in the coming of Jesus. And this gracious act becomes the good news to be proclaimed to all.

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[75] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 61.

[76] These terms are a native to and popularized by Stanley Hauerwas' theological dictionary, Stanley Martin Hauerwas, William H. Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

[77] Again Guder is indebted to Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV/3-2, 574.

[78] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 63.

Second, *witness is Christocentric*. The good news is not just the proclamation that God is good. It is the proclamation of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.[79] God's work of salvation was carried out in and through the death and resurrection of Christ, and anyone who is called to witness testifies to the truth of His resurrection. In the true sense, Guder argues, witness emerges from the encounter with the risen Lord. Christ is central to all Scripture, which bears witness to Him. The Gospel as witness to Christ has a formative function to Christian faith and life. All throughout the history of the Church, the Gospel has been preached not as a "speculative system" but as witness to Christ in whom God demonstrated His love to humanity.

Third, *witness is Pneumatological*. Because the Holy Spirit is the action of God behind faith, enabling people to respond in faith, and empowering them for the mission of witness, there is a Pneumatological dimension to it.[80] Ever since Pentecost when the Spirit of God came down on the missionary community to enable and guide them in their mission, this Pneumatological aspect of witness emphasizes the witnesses' dependence on God for their mission. They do not choose their vocation nor do they qualify for it on the basis of their abilities. It is the Spirit who makes one a witness.[81] He is the One who initiates and sustains one in the mission of witness.

Fourth, *witness is historical*. The Gospel is not an abstraction but points to actual historical events. Christian witness has always claimed that the "particular" historical

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[79] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 64.

[80] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 65. Guder picks up and expands on this theme further in his "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church." *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 3, 7. His indebtedness to Bosch is quite apparent there, too.

[81] For a great discussion on the role of the Spirit in theological formation for mission see Guder's, "*Missio Dei*: Integrating Theological Formation for Apostolic Vocation." *Missiology* 37, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 63-74; especially sec. entitled "Missional Theology and Vocational Formation."

events witnessed to by the Gospel carry on a "universal significance."[82] God's act of breaking into time and history in the man Jesus Christ has universal intentionality and implications. These cannot be proven in any other way except to be demonstrated by the witnesses. Jesus did not leave behind a corpus of writings; He left witnesses to serve as evidence to the veracity of His claims.[83] The historical nature of witness elevates Christian ethics to the highest levels of evangelistic concern.[84]

Fifth, *witness is Eschatological*. For Guder, this particular conclusion follows from the previous four assertions. If the mission of a Christocentric witness is to announce the coming kingdom, this firmly places witness in the tension-filled realm of the "already-not yet" of Christian hope.[85] There Christian hope thrives on the basis of what God has already done and is filled with confidence in what He is about to do, that is complete the work of salvation. It is crucial for the mission community to display both the presence of Christ in its communal life but also the nearness of the coming kingdom. In the ethics and praxis of the mission community lays the witness that demonstrates Christ as true Lord.[86]

Sixth, *witness is Ecclesiological*. Individuals are called to the task and mission of witness in the context of mission community. It is within the context of that community that they experience their calling and are equipped for that purpose.[87] The primary role of the Church is to serve as the means of witness to Jesus Christ. For Guder, "mission is not

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[82] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics As Gospel*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, January 1, 1984), 46-62.

[83] Guder also argues this point that the Church is the "continuation of the historical Christ and his work of redemption," in his, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission," *International Review of Mission*, 83: 423.

[84] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 66.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Guder is quite open about his indebtedness to theologians such as Lohfink, Hauerwas, and Yoder for their treatment of the ethics of the Christian community.

[87] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 67.

primarily the activity of the Church, but an attribute of God."[88] The Church's own

existence is not its primary purpose and goal. The Church exists in the power of God's

Spirit to serve, as a means by virtue of which God accomplishes His goal. In Moltmann's

words, "It is not the Church that has the mission of salvation to fulfill to the world; it is

the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the Church,

creating a Church as it goes on its way."[89] A positive response to the invitation requires

incorporation into the mission community.[90] Since, without a doubt, the New Testament

points to the Spirit of God forming the community for the purpose of mission, the calling

and incorporation of anyone into that community is to service and mission. For Guder,

the individual existence of Christians is only possible and meaningful in the context of

that community. It is then the communal life of those called that becomes the public and

primary form of witness to Christ in the world.

     Here again Guder is careful not to create an idealized account of who or what the

Church is by setting front and center the problem presented by the institutional Church.

He would later address the bigger issue – that occasioned by the sociological question

and its implications for the Church. But for now, he is determined to make this point:

"there can be no biblically based theology of mission and witness which does not

emphasize the centrality of the 'called out people' for that mission."[91]

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[88] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 67. See also Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

[89] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 67. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, 64. The words in cursive complete the sentence in Moltmann's original but are not cited by Guder.

[90] Guder uses the terms "mission community" and "community of witness," interchangeably, which he develops on the basis of Lohfink's work. See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985). Lohfink also calls it "community of disciples" or "salvific community," 5, 10.

[91] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 68.

Seventh, *witness is multicultural and ecumenical*. God's mission concerns the entire world. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost enabled all those who were present to hear the Gospel in their own language. For Guder, this signals the universality of the mission and the message of the Gospel. In every culture, the Spirit of God shapes and empowers the people of God in the witness community for the mission at hand.[92] This community of witness is only possible through the transforming work of God. To that end no particular culture or ethnos can play a normative role in the formation of the community of witness. People from every culture and ethnic background are invited to participate in the witness to the Gospel, and, therefore, in the witness community, but at the same time each and every culture and ethnos is also challenged and confronted by this same Gospel.

> Mission is to be a continuing process of translation and witness, whereby the evangelist and the mission community will be confronted again and again by the gospel as it is being translated, heard, and responded to, and will thus experience ongoing conversion while serving as witness.[93]

It is this understanding of mission that informs not only Guder's argument in regard to the Church's mission - or *relevance* - but his particular understanding of the process of constituting the ecclesial *identity*[94] of each community of witness. These communities of witness, these Churches all have diverse multicultural Christian experiences. But for Guder this prevailing multiculturalism should not be absolutized. Multiculturalism demonstrates the universal nature of the Gospel going out to all and then uniting them in Christ.

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[92] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 68.

[93] Ibid., 69.

[94] Emphasis here is mine not Guder's, although it is clear from the way he frames his argument that both the ecclesial relevance, or mission, and its identity are central to his thought.

Lastly, Guder touches upon the subject of ecumenical calling of the witness community. Anyone studying the question will be hard pressed to acknowledge the close relationship between "Christian unity" and "missionary calling." To that end, he concludes that, "evangelization is the test of our ecumenical vocation."[95]

In summary, it is important to underscore the centrality of mission as witness for Guder. Admittedly, an important aspect of the original Greek term $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\epsilon\omega$ is lost in its translation into the English term "witness," where often emphasis falls on the *speaking* aspect of the term to the almost complete exclusion of the *living out* aspect of witness. Guder is quite adamant about insisting that Christian witness needs to maintain both the proclamation and, indeed, the living out the Gospel as equal parts of the mission. To that end he states:

> In other words, there is a profoundly ethical dimension to the biblical understanding of witness, as it describes the Church's whole sense of being, doing, and saying: 'the most important social task of Christians is to be nothing less than a community capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God's truth in the world.'[96]

The Church's Need of Conversion - Guder's Key to Recovering Ecclesial Identity

Having addressed the first important component to his ecclesiological proposal - mission as witness and witness as both proclamation and ethics - Guder is now ready to turn his attention to the second crucial component: the question of ecclesial identity. As I indicated prior, it is at this stage that Guder makes it clear that for him the identity-

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[95] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 70. Following the World Council of Churches, *Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation.* (Geneva, SUI: 1982).

[96] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 70. Guder is citing Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic.* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 105-106.

relevance or identity-mission, axis is central to his understanding of the nature and

purpose of the Church, and crucial to any responsible theologizing in ecclesiology. If

God has formed the Church for the purpose of being a witness to the coming kingdom of

God, at the heart of ecclesial ministry should be evangelization as its core mission.[97] The

good news is to be shared, which requires an ongoing process of turning disciples into

apostles who not only proclaim the good news of God's kingdom but bear witness with

their lives, as well. Guder sums up the relationship this way:

> Witness to the gospel defines the identity, the activity, and the communication
> which are the calling of the Church since Pentecost.[98]

It soon becomes apparent, however, that one cannot move directly from this

programmatic statement to extrapolating implications for today's ecclesial ministry. The

problem rests within the historical experience of the Church since Pentecost. Guder

identifies this problem as the "reductionism of the gospel." The very process of

translation[99] required for the spread of the Gospel to all the world contains an opportunity

but also a great risk. The opportunity resides in the idea of God's self-revelation in

human history that allows the Gospel to transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries. It does

not require one to change one's ethnic or cultural background in order to become a

Christian. The Gospel can and is translatable and translated into all cultures. In fact, the

purpose behind the encapsulation of the Gospel in Scripture was intended to ensure the

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[97] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 71.
[98] Ibid.
[99] See citation on p. 179, note 93.

continuous transmission and translation of the good news to people in places and at times when God opened doors for it.[100]

The risk associated with translation and transmission, on the other hand, stems from the one constant that defines human reality, and that is sin in the form of our rebellion against God. This fallen condition, which necessitates God's radical breaking into human history to redeem, and, therefore, belies the *missio Dei*, is also the condition presenting the greatest risk to the success of the mission. As Guder puts it, "It has been always possible for human beings to encounter God's word in history and to ignore it, to reject it, to distort it, or to manipulate it for selfish ends."[101] He describes human sin in terms of the constant attempts to bring under human control that which we are not qualified to control. It is this understanding of sin as control that presents an ongoing challenge to the integrity of Christian witness and mission. Following Barth's distinction between faith and religion, where religion is defined in terms of the human desire to be in control, Guder confronts institutionalized religion as an expression of "man's mastery of God for human purposes."[102]

Closely related to the condition described above is a second danger associated with the ongoing transmission and translation of the Gospel. The incarnation as an expression of God's self-revelation takes place in history where God encounters each and every one in their cultural and linguistic context. "The witness," in Guder's understanding, "does not create an arcane language or cultus that must be appropriated

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[100] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 80.
[101] Ibid., 74. Guder spends significant amount of time discussing the interaction between the gospel and its recipient culture in his, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church." *Journal for Preachers* 22, no. 1 (January 1, 1998): 6-10.
[102] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 77.

and practiced in order to know God."[103] Rather, the Gospel can be translated into every human culture and is applicable to any human setting. This ongoing challenge is witnessed on the pages of Scripture exemplified by the council of Jerusalem, where for a first time the good news was understood as transcending its original cultural context of Judaism and spreading to the Gentiles apart from the requirement that they become cultural Jews.[104] It is this subtle yet always present impulse to associate the good news with a particular culture or language that presents an ongoing challenge to the spread of the Gospel. Guder sees this as the first example after Pentecost of the need for and positive implications of the continuous conversion of the Church for its mission of witness.[105] This ongoing conversion is always related to the Church's identity and the comprehensive character of its calling. While preaching the good news to the entire world, the Church always also preaches to itself, and continues to be converted and transformed into the image and identity of its Lord.

Translation, Culture, and Community Formation

If one grants Guder's insistence that the spreading of the Gospel is more than just translating a system of ideas from one language to another, then we have to take a serious look at the interaction between the Spirit-empowered witness and the cultural appropriation of the message of which the recipient language is a primary symbol and the practices of faith that lead to the formation of a faith community.[106]

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[103] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 80.

[104] Acts 15.

[105] Guder's analysis carries on echoes of John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, 46-62.

[106] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 84. See also, "Global mission and the challenge of theological catholicity," 4-5; along with Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith,* 44-50.

In every culture there exists the possibility for the people of God to form a mission community. Representatives of every culture have the potential to be evangelizers because they are all subject to conversion. When God confronts a culture with the Gospel it has the effect of destigmatizing and relativizing this culture. No culture is "immuned" to the Gospel or unworthy to receive it, but because all cultures are also sinful, the confrontation with the Gospel is both liberating and critical at the same time.[107] The transformational impact of this inevitable confrontation is then visible in the formation of the missionary people of God in that particular culture.

Two immediate observations are in order. First, for Guder, the confrontation ensuing from the missionary witness needs to be maintained and not allowed to result in seamless assimilation. The Gospel, in his scheme, is intended to continue functioning as a "two-edged sword" even after the formation of a witness community. Neither the receiving culture can exert normative influence over the Gospel nor can the "culture of the evangelizing witness."[108] The natural tendency of any culture to bring the Gospel under its control, and refashion the person and work of Christ into a culturally acceptable image has to be resisted at all costs.

Second, and due to the strong tendencies of cultures mentioned above, after the initial confrontation of the Gospel with a specific culture via the process of translation, the Gospel needs to continue exerting its transforming influence over that culture and the mission community formed therein in what Guder calls a *continuous conversion*.

> The first stage of translation must be succeeded in any culture by successive re-translations, corrections and expansions, as the converting power of the gospel

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[107] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 85.
[108] Ibid..

reviews human reductions and challenges the Christian community to greater faithfulness and a more obedient response to God's love.[109]

The problem Guder is seeking to address began at the time when Christianity became the established religion of European culture in particular and Western culture in general. The cultural hegemony exercised by European Christianity took on various forms over the centuries as it continued to spread either by voluntary adoption of the Christian religion or by the forced assimilation of conquered cultures into the dominant one. At its apogee, the Christian Church dominated and determined every dogmatic and cultural norm and aspect of medieval Western society.

In Guder's thought, the hegemony of cultural Christianity over secular culture has to be corrected and counterbalanced by the missional purpose of the Church as witness to Christ. Whenever this is not the case in the formation of the Christian community and the *missio Dei* is not in the center of the Church's priorities, the Gospel undergoes reductionism.[110] Following James Brownson, Guder argues that, "the mode in which God is present among the faithful is irreducibly multicultural."[111] For this reason, every time a translation of the Gospel takes place, the Church runs the risk of ambiguous and unfaithful witness when it loses sight of its core priority that is its mission, and, therefore, the Church is in need of conversion.[112]

But what are the main elements of Gospel translation, and how do they relate to the Church's identity and its continuous conversion? The translation process always starts with the acknowledgement that God's self-revelation was first extended to Israel. Guder

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[109] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 85.
[110] Ibid., 86.
[111] James Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic." *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (July 1994): 485.
[112] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 87.

is quick to point out the significance of God's relationship to Israel using His chosen

people as the historical vessel of His message to humanity.[113] The intention behind this

special relationship with Israel is not the granting of a privileged position to one people

group but the use of that group as instrument in the blessing of all people. This

understanding of God's calling and His relationship to Israel has profound implications

for the missional self-understanding of the Church, as well. Christian communities

everywhere, that are given the privilege to be "grafted" on the root of Israel and to share

in her election, receive the translation of God's self-revelation from the particular cultural

vantage point of Jewish culture and are able to continue this witness in their own cultures

by the power of God's Spirit. It is for this reason, Guder insists, that Christians cannot be

anti-Semites. This cultural translation is an ongoing process and not a singular event, as

both Jews and Christians continue to share the same mission and hope that God will

accomplish it.[114]

The translation from the Biblical community to the receiving culture is not a

process the Church is expected to accomplish by its own power. Missionary translation is

always preceded by the preparatory work of the Spirit in the receiving culture. Christ,

through His Spirit, is the one who does the preparation for the witness to His Gospel and

the actual converting of the receiving culture to His good news. He does use Christian

witnesses as instruments of proclamation and as models of godly living to demonstrate

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[113] It is interesting to note that all three theologians whose ecclesiologies I examine in this dissertation are rather vocal and quite deliberate in underscoring the historical and theological importance of the connection between Israel and the Church. For Radner (Chapter Three), both Israel and the Church find their fulfillment, identity, and reason for being, or mission in the person of Christ. See Chapter Three, pp. 107-108 above. For Healy, the Church and Israel paralleled closely each other in their journeys as the "people of God," and thus their narratives become linked theologically in what Healy calls a "theodramatic metanarrative." What links both the Church and Israel to God in terms of their self-understanding and identity as the people of God is the concept of repentance; see, Chapter Two, pp. 87, 103 above.

[114] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 88-89.

the meaning of His love. It is precisely this aspect of the process of translation that demonstrates the need for and the reality of the continuous conversion of the missionary translators, as well.[115] With each new translation and retelling of the good news of Christ's love, the translator is confronted with the changing power of the message as is the person in the receiving culture since they both experience new aspects of the good news.[116]

While true that the translation of the Gospel is always initiated by God's loving act of self-revelation, and is always prepared for and empowered by God's Spirit, as I observed earlier, Guder never wants to lose sight of the fact that this translation always occurs within the context of human sinfulness and "cultural limitations." The inherent ambiguity of this context is a testimony to the risk God takes with His creation. For Guder, on one hand, there is a valid reason why Scripture is full of statements and examples of God's faithfulness, and on the other, constant reminders of human unfaithfulness in response.[117] It is this dialectic that occasions what he calls "Gospel reductionism." The witness to the Gospel is intended to take place in a variety of cultural contexts and take on plurality of cultural forms, where all cultures are confronted with the Gospel and no single culture has monopoly over the message. One is confronted with the good news within one's own cultural setting and is invited to pursue the implications of the good news of Christ within one's own particular cultural setting.

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[115] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 89.

[116] A great example of this "continuous conversion" affecting both the "translator-evangelist" and the person being evangelized comes to us from the pages of Scripture in the encounter of the apostle Peter with Cornelius in Acts 10, at Caesarea. There, Peter experienced in new ways the meaning of the gospel and the inclusive nature of God's forgiveness. The fact that even one of the original 12 disciples who was an eyewitness to the Gospel itself was in need of ongoing conversion makes a solid case for Guder's argument.

[117] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 92.

> No particular cultural rendering of the gospel may claim greater validity than any other, and all cultural formulations of the faith are subject to continuing conversion as the gospel challenges them… In other words, all cultural formations of Christian discipleship are both authentic and sinful. They are shaped by God's grace and deformed by our desire to control that grace. They are imperfect but subject to God's continuing work of perfecting. God's grace continues to be the source and force of salvation; human work never saves.[118]

What follows in a logical fashion from this understanding of the process is that any and all forms of ethnic Christianity and nationalism tied to the Christian religion are relativized by the work of Christ. No branch of the Christian tradition can claim ownership of absolute truth or perpetual validity for its form of worship or witness. In every instance where the Gospel and Christianity have come to be identified closely with one or another dominant culture, they both have lost its prophetic character and the ability to produce authentic conversion. When Christianity identifies itself with a particular culture, the Gospel to which the Church is called to witness loses its ability to challenge and confront that culture. It assumes that the host culture now has reached the status of Christianity, and under this schema cultural imperialism is conflated with Gospel translation.[119] For Guder, the litmus test to safeguard against cultural imperialism in evangelism is to be found in the Gospel's ability to freely penetrate and confront all cultures by putting them in question. He insists that the Gospel is,

> … translatable as the witness and message of Jesus who may be known, confessed and followed in every human setting… The call to discipleship may be shaped in every culture and it will always be both a blessing and a scandal in that culture – if it is faithful to Christ. The risk of translatability is that sinful humans are its agents.[120]

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[118] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 92.

[119] Ibid., 93. For a great discussion on the relationship between gospel translation and the dangers of cultural imperialism, see Guder, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission." *International Review of Mission*, 83: 418–422.

[120] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 93.

It now becomes clear that the Gospel by its nature is capable of penetrating any culture without cultural assimilation or diffusion, but it is the witnesses to the Gospel with their inherent ambiguity and sinfulness who are forever tempted to subjugate the power of the Gospel to their own strife for control, thus jeopardizing the Church's mission.

This analysis supplies a rather keen insight when applied to contemporary settings in what used to be the Christian West at the start of the 21st century. Having warned against the danger of cultural diffusion and the too-close-for-comfort association of Western culture with traditional Christianity, Guder turns his attention to the new challenges to Gospel translation presented to the Church by the rapidly growing secularization of Western societies expressed in the acknowledgement that we now live in a post-Christian world. This realization, if taken seriously, requires of missional communities to become "culturally bilingual."[121] Following Newbigin, Guder also asserts that the formation of missionary communities requires that Christians become fluent in the language of Scripture and faith without ever leaving their host culture or society behind. What Christian communities all have in common is this language of faith and allegiance to Christ whose calling on their lives converts them into His witnesses. But it is precisely for the sake of this missionary calling, to translate the Gospel to the culture within which they live and to which they are sent as witnesses, that they should become and remain "culturally bilingual" and engaged with their host cultures so their presence and witness can be a blessing and a force for good "quietly shaping God's presence" within a particular cultural context.

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[121] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 55 and following.

The direction of Guder's argument is clear: No individual culture can claim normativity in the process of forming the missionary communities, as all cultures are relativized by the Gospel. Not even a decisively "Christian"[122] culture can claim normativity under Guder's scheme, as it, too, is confronted continuously with the Gospel and converted to its proper identity, which the missionary community finds in Christ alone. This is the only way the Gospel can maintain its prophetic nature, always confronting and comforting, and the Christian community can maintain its missionary calling by seeking to faithfully translate the Gospel to its surrounding culture, while allowing itself to be continuously formed, shaped and converted to its missional identity in Christ.

> This means, among other things, that the culturally bilingual Church must expect to change and be changed, must expect its own continuing conversion, as it encounters Christ the Lord in the cultures into which it is now sent as his witness.[123]

The necessity for the continuous conversion of the Church in the process of Gospel translation and missionary witness, stems from the inevitability of Gospel reduction to which the Church is always predisposed. Guder's criticism of the Church should not be understood in terms of the arrogant pointing of the finger towards Christian communities in other places and at other times. It stems from a quite sober understanding of the

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[122] Guder has already discussed in length the issue of overusing the label "Christian" to describe any one culture or ethnos equating this label with the process of cultural imperialism where Christian culture has been spread by cultural diffusion rather than by faithful pursuit of mission as evangelization. Guder has also engaged with the issues of Christian expansion by "diffusion" versus "translation" in his, "Global Mission and the Challenge of Theological Catholicity" 1-4, where diffusion is defined as the expansion of Christian culture on its periphery by cannibalizing - my term, not Guder's - new cultures and forcing them into a specific mold. Translation, on the other hand, is defined as the process of genuine cultural interaction with host cultures during which the gospel is "contextualized" to its new surroundings: 3.

[123] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 96.

humanness of the Church, which is called to practice its missionary task. It is for this reason that he calls on Christians to view and relate to their own Christian traditions as "both grateful and critical heirs."[124]

But the sober awareness of the human limitations of the witnesses, which are risky to the missionary undertaking, should not detract Christians from pursuing the task to which they have been called. These risks associated with the tendency of Churches to reduce the Gospel are counterbalanced and outweighed by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit who works on both the proclamation and on the hearing horizons to enable a response of faith and a continuing conversion.[125] The context within which the Spirit enables this response of faith and the ongoing process of conversion is that of the missionary community, where both the individual members and the community as a whole undergo formation and transformation, that is, the process of being shaped into a new missionary identity and into the likeness of Christ.

The dialectic nature of the missionary witness with its acute awareness of human frailty and sinfulness, and its equally powerful understanding of the role of God's empowering Spirit, could not be made clearer. The witnesses are not to be discouraged by their shortcomings, for the Spirit empowers their message, but they are not to become careless, for the worst form of "reductionism" is exemplified by Christian witness no longer aware of its own drive to control the Gospel or of its own reductions of it.[126] Guder rightly observes:

> The person and work of Jesus, as history with a future (eschatology), defies the control mechanisms with which we seek to reduce them to manageable

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[124] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 98
[125] Ibid., 99.
[126] Ibid., 101.

proportions. The favored way to accomplish this over the centuries has been to diminish the historical particularity of Jesus by reducing him and his message to a set of ideas, an intellectual system, often connected with codified ethic, and managed thematically within the Church's rites and celebrations. John Howard Yoder has argued that this 'thrust against particularity' is the 'much older and more natural concern to shun the risk of particular allegiance itself, especially to avoid the specified risk of having the allegiance bound to the crucified Jesus and the cost of following his way.'[127],[128]

We do not need to seek far and wide to discover what, in his opinion, is the main problem with Christianity in the West. Instead of allowing the Gospel of Christ to relativize human cultures and subject them to its transforming power, Christians have developed arguments against the particularity of Jesus, thereby relativizing the Gospel and bringing it under their control. In Guder's understanding, the main problem the Church faces today is the problem of its own reductionism of the Gospel that affects both the Church's mission and its identity in a negative manner.[129] The history of the Church then represents a chain of "absolutized" reductions prompting ongoing conversions, as these reductions are recognized and repented from or rejected. In fact, this understanding provides Guder with a new way of interpreting the many renewal movements in the history of the Church as reacting against the many different forms of reductionism in search for greater faithfulness to the Gospel and conformity to the person of Christ. As I have insisted throughout this chapter, the former represents mission or relevance and the latter identity in the ecclesiology Guder has developed.

For the sake of brevity and of staying with my main objective of examining the dynamic "identity-relevance" axis in Guder's ecclesiology, I will refrain from tracing in

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[127] John Howard Yoder, "Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 111.
[128] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church*, 101.
[129] Ibid., 102-103.

depth Guder's examination of reductionism in its various forms. I will, however, examine a specific part of his discussion, which has profound sociological implications for the formation of missionary communities both in the past and present day.

As Guder points out, many scholars have spoken in favor of some forms of reductionism in the history of the Church as a way of gaining social acceptance in a largely antagonistic culture.[130] Ernst Troeltsch was one of those theologians who differentiated between the term "sect," which he used to describe primitive Christian communities with their emphasis on the "teachings and life of Jesus," and the term "Church" he applied to the later institution emphasizing "the Exalted Christ and Redeemer."

> He contrasted the 'sect' with its emphasis upon 'the lordship of Christ and discipleship and therefore also the life and message of Jesus,' with the institutional Church which became 'an established type of an organization that is conservative, accepts secular order, dominates the masses, has universal claims and therefore uses … the state and the ruling classes to sustain and expand its domination and to stabilize and determine the social order.[131]

Following David Bosch, Guder identifies at least three significant reasons as to why early Christian communities employed reductionism as a means of preserving their existence. First, the early Church engaged in reductionism of its own missionary calling when it thought it more important to find a rightful place among other religions. In the words of Bosch,

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[130] Guder's analysis is indebted to Ernst Troeltsch *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, 2 vols*. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931); reprinted, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), especially chap. II, sec. 9, 328-343.

[131] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 103. Citing Arne Rasmusson, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas.* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1995), 234.

> The twelve were to be the vanguard of all Israel and, beyond Israel, by implication, of the whole ecumene. The community around Jesus was to function as a kind of *pars pro toto*, a community for the sake of all others, a model to emulate and be challenged by. Never, however, was this community to sever itself from the others.[132]

Shortly after the death of Jesus, the early Church found itself in a situation where it had to distinguish itself constantly from other religious groups such as Judaism or Gnosticism in order to preserve its identity.

The second reason for employing reductionism early on in Christianity was associated with the transition from a movement to an institution. As Guder observes, "the process was sociologically necessary if the Church were not to be an imaginary, non-incarnational, docetic spirituality."[133] Lastly, the growing rift between Christian and Jewish communities resulted not only in the eventual separation of the two, but more importantly it occasioned a widespread reductionism of the Gospel resulting in the radical dissociation of Christianity from its rootedness in Israel, and its history and the Jewishness of Christ.

It is not hard to follow the logical progression of these important developments to their logical conclusions affecting both the mission and the identity of Christian communities in history and in our times. The implications for Christian practice, mission, and community self-understanding are far reaching. Slowly but surely the Gospel was reduced to a concern about the individual relative to their life after death.[134] Influenced by the philosophy of its Hellenistic context, Christian teaching shifted from an emphasis

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[132] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 50. See also Lohfink, *Jesus and the Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith.*

[133] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 105.

[134] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 105.

on the Gospel as an event to the codification of a well-defined faith system.[135] Both

major Christian traditions - The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox - developed

theologies and theological vocabularies reflective of this shift.

> God's self-revelation was no longer understood as God's self-communication in events, but as the communication of truths about the being of God in three *hypostases* and the one *person* of Christ in two *natures* … The message became doctrine, the doctrine dogma, and this dogma was expounded in precepts which were expertly strung together.[136]

What led to this shift was the passing of time, which challenged the eschatological

character of the New Testament witness and the early Christian communities. The

nearness of the kingdom of God made manifest in the life and teachings of Jesus came to

be understood over time as located in the future awaiting the believer after one's death.

Later developments in the West did not fare better. While the Reformers succeeded in the

altering of traditional understandings of salvation from one where each human being is

co-responsible for one's salvation to a complete dependence on God's grace, the

"individualization" and "ecclesiasticization" of salvation as products of Catholic thought

were not challenged.[137] This reductionist focus on individual salvation and overall

dependence on what Guder calls "Christendom patterns," with their implied

interdependence between Church and state, have continued to affect evangelistic patterns

to this day and, in truth, have little to offer a mostly post-Christian context without

radical rethinking.

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[135] The works of Jaroslav Pelikan and J. N. D. Kelly on the emergence and formation of early Christian thought is particularly insightful. Specifically, Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), vol. 1, The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973–1990); and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*. 5th rev. ed., (London : Continuum, 1958; San Francisco, CA : Harper & Row, 1978).

[136] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 107.

[137] Ibid., 114.

At present, reductionism of the Gospel remains the ultimate expression of the human drive for control. The resulting message is ineffective and often times irrelevant, as it tends to trivialize God and turn Him into a manageable deity.[138] It also follows that the theology resulting from a diminished Gospel will inevitably leave its mark on the Church's understanding of its mission and relationship to its broader cultural context that is its relevance. It is the sober view of the dire consequences of such prevailing reductionism that demands the continuous conversion of the Church only as a result of which the Church will be able to recover its true identity in Christ and recover evangelization as the heart of ministry. If there is an evidence of such continuous conversion to be found, it is in the incarnational witness to the Gospel involving the proclamation of the Gospel along with living it out, exemplifying the love of God in Christ.

This incarnational witness should not be mistaken for a call to ethical living for its own sake. The proclamation and the living out of the good news about God in Christ enables the prophetic voice of the Church and within it, ever summoning and calling it to conversion and, thereby, to greater faithfulness to Christ and Church's missional calling. Guder is quite clear in his assertion that reductionism as an expression of the sinful desire to control God impedes God's work in us and through us. But since the Gospel represents the power of God to save and not the power of His messengers, "the Gospel is heard even when uttered by the most dubious of evangelists."[139] Guder believes that even the most reductionist version of the Gospel contains in itself the possibility for a continuing

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[138] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 131

[139] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 132. On this particular subject Guder echoes St. Augustine's understanding of the sacraments, where the power resides in the sacrament itself and not in the person officiating or administering the rite.

conversion and transformation into the identity to which we have been called. Thus,

when we seek to develop a faithful witness to the Gospel and a theology of evangelistic

ministry, we cannot help but grapple with the true nature of the identity and mission of

this faithful witness. This is where we come face to face with our sinful desire for control

over and reduction of the Gospel. But we are not left to our own devices in this struggle,

argues Guder, as our shortcomings should not diminish our confidence in God's grace

which has been and will continue to be sufficient.[140]

The prophetic voice inside the Church is not intended to split the Church but to

continue the ministry of exposing the Church's reductionisms, which weaken the

Church's faithful witness.[141] But what in the contemporary Church needs to be exposed

to this prophetic critique? As Guder observes:

> As the goal of the gospel has become 'the pursuit of happiness,' evangelistic
> preaching has often conceded to the context and presented the gospel as the way
> to attain happiness, self-fulfillment, self-realization, and even prosperity. Both
> worship and preaching in much of modern Church practice are designed to meet
> individual needs for the assurance of salvation, even though the language may be
> that of modern psychology.[142]

Immediately, one can see that the Church reduced to function in this way fits well within

postmodern society. It fulfills the social functions desired from religious institutions and

serves as, what Yoder calls, a "chaplain to the world around it."[143]

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[140] Ibid., 133.

[141] Clearly, Guder is as concerned as Radner about divisions in the Church. Unlike Radner who advocated the virtues of "staying put" in its brokenness as a way to fulfill its calling to the Gospel (see Chapter Three, pp. 123, 125, 149-158), Guder is advocating for prophetic calling to continuous conversion as a way to overcome human sin and brokenness, and recover true identity and mission.

[142] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 135.

[143] John Howard Yoder, "Let the Church be the Church," *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, 173-174.

On the other hand, the fact that most Christian churches are derelict in the administration of their missionary witness is exemplified by their *outsourcing* - term and emphasis is mine - of evangelistic ministry to para-Church organizations. This, for Guder, is a rather problematic development exposing the ongoing reduction of the Gospel in our day. Churches have successfully managed to separate their primary calling and mission from their institutional life and structures. The Gospel being proclaimed by the efforts of such organizations is reduced to the individual, private and personal, where souls are welcomed into the Christian family - that is, they are being saved - but this message of salvation is decoupled from the necessary call to faithful witness.[144] Along with Barth, Guder also argues that the gift of salvation is linked to the call to witness. The call to Christ is a call to mission. The sole purpose behind the formation of the missionary community is to be used by God as witnesses to Christ. Any Church congregation has the choice of either being a missional community or being a caricature of God's people.[145]

Guder does not shy away from the sociological question in regard to the Church. It is inevitable in the experience of any community that sooner or later some of its aspects become institutionalized. Sociology governs any form of human interaction, and missional communities are no exception. But the problems stem not from the creation and utilization of an institution to witness to the Gospel. They stem from the use of institutional tools to subjugate the Gospel of God's love under human control. To Guder's thinking, this is the most fundamental form of reductionism, where the "mission-

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[144] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 136.
[145] On this subject, see Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 222.

benefits" dichotomy[146] is employed in the formation of theology and ecclesiastical

practices to govern Christian witness.[147] The Church is now effectively administering

salvation - whatever one might mean by "salvation" - in the form of proclamation of

truths to which one is invited to give mental consent.[148] The main message of the Gospel

is not that Christ's Church now possesses all the power; rather, that all power has been

given to Christ and His people are now empowered to witness to that fact. They are to

form a new and different type of community, where Christ reigns, and where the Spirit

shapes the lives and relationships of the members. The formation of this community's

radical new identity is to make it different from its surrounding culture especially in the

matters of discrimination, social or otherwise, and privilege, or in terms of attitudes

toward power and domination.[149] Not that the question of authority is illegitimate for this

new type of community, but authority should always be subject to the mission at hand; to

be a servant of others and eschew coercion and force.[150]

> The model for the practice of authority for the Church is Jesus himself, whose authority was 'a *paradoxical authority* to the very last, an authority which in its unprotectedness and vulnerability turns any other type of authority upside down.'[151]

It is this type of formation into the identity of Jesus that Guder envisions and stipulates

for the formation of the entire missionary community. Out of this understanding stems

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[146] The notion of the "mission-benefits" dichotomy is addressed extensively by Guder in his, *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers*, where he is highly critical of Christians who want to hold on to the benefits of salvation but are reluctant to live up to the responsibility of their calling, namely witness and mission.

[147] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 137.

[148] Ironically, this kind of understanding of the nature and function of the Church is not too far off from the "medieval synthesis" against which Luther and other Reformers rebelled.

[149] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 138.

[150] Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 115-122.

[151] Ibid., 117.

the importance of the radically different ethics of the community as incarnational witness

which has been and continues to this day to be subject to ongoing reductions. Guder's

response to these ongoing challenges could not be clearer:

> The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the event that brings about the salvation of the
> world and establishes the mission of the Church. This event defines how that
> mission is to be carried out. The reductionism of the gospel in Western
> Christendom is confronted by the person and work of Jesus as both the content
> and criterion of the Church's witness. For the Church to be and become Christ'
> faithful witness will require repentance and conversion.[152]

Implications for a Continuously Converting Church

The Church as the people of God and a mission community is called to an

incarnational life of witness to its Lord Jesus Christ. When using the term "mission

community" as a favorite to explain the basic unit of Christian witness, Guder is not

referring to the abstract notion of the universal Church but to the local congregation,

fellowship, or community called to fulfill the missionary vocation of the Church.[153] This

simple term entails that all discussions about the identity and mission of the Christian

community unfold in, and apply first and foremost to the context of the local

congregation as mission community. The requirement that the people of God must have

"a visible, tangible, experiencable shape"[154] is not simply a sociological necessity; it is

essential to the *missio Dei*. The Holy Spirit forms mission communities by calling them

and setting them apart to incarnate the Gospel in their particular cultural and historic

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[152] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 141.

[153] Ibid., 145.

[154] Ibid., 146. This particular notion is reminiscent of Miroslav Volf's "ecclesiality of the Church,"
described in terms of visible, tangible community presence necessary for the public profession of faith and
emphasizing the communal character of faith in his *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the
Trinity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 135-171.

context, and be witnesses to Christ.[155] While the concrete expressions of the mission community will differ from one place to another and one culture to another, the power behind its formation and the mission to which it is called remain unchanged. This observable dynamic is quite important and central to Guder's argument at the close of the 20th century. The ongoing demise of regional, national, and denominational structures appears to threaten the very existence of the Church, but in an ecclesiology where the local mission community is viewed as the basic and primary unit of Christian witness and incarnational living, all efforts in combating reductionism and undergoing continuous conversion can and should be focused on the life of the local congregation. Aspects of communal life, which will be harder to execute in the context of national or denominational structures, become manageable in the ongoing conversion and witness of the local Church.

The process of "continuous conversion" in Guder's ecclesiology includes both the ongoing formation for and the reformation that stems from the mission of the Church. This two-sided process of mutually influencing realities - identity and mission - express corporate and communal character.[156] Examining the Reformation principle of *ecclesia reformata… semper reformanda*, Guder stipulates that re-formation may not be enough to save traditional Churches from oblivion. What is needed to address the current Church's crisis of its fundamental vocation is not reorganization but an ongoing conversion into an identity and mission of being, doing, and saying faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

> *The continual conversion of the Church happens as the congregation hears, responds to, and obeys the gospel of Jesus Christ in ever new and more*

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[155] Guder follows Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*. (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1987).

[156] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 148.

comprehensive ways. Or to put it more succinctly: *If Evangelization is the heart of mission, then evangelization must be the heart of ministry.*[157]

It is quite clear that ecclesial "identity" is formed by the constant and ongoing return to Scripture, by listening to and obeying the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and being formed into an identity fit for our calling to evangelization. "Mission," then, - or relevance - is the incarnational witness of evangelization as Christians continue to be confronted with and transformed by the Gospel of Christ. This process of formation and ongoing conversion is not something the mission community can start and instigate on its own because of its own struggles with sin and the resulting reductionisms of the Gospel. Any mission community that wants to be renewed must be indeed aware of and willing to confront its own reductionisms. But the renewing and revival themselves are the prerogative of the Spirit and not a program for the Church to manage.[158] What we can do is start with the Biblical witness, return to Scriptures seeking to recover our true identity and calling, and in the process open ourselves to a "reviving encounter with the gospel." Only a converted community can also be a converting community. Here, again, we observe the coming together of these two concepts of *identity* and *relevance* in the process of *continuous conversion* and the crucial ways in which the two influence and reinforce each other in the life of the Church. The ongoing conversion in the life of the Church means constant change, a reorientation to the Gospel of Christ, and re-evaluation of our incarnational witness and living. Ironically, even though change is uncomfortable to many the way we change becomes a form of witness in itself.[159]

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[157] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 150.
[158] Ibid., 151.
[159] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 156.

Another important implication for the Church is to be found in the nature of ministry practices of the mission community. God calls, and the Spirit empowers all in the mission community to a ministry of witness. The division between a minister and lay congregants does not hold in the mission community.[160] The Spirit equips the witnesses for the Church's missionary calling by giving sufficient gifts for the "apostolic-prophetic-evangelistic-pastoral-teaching" ministry of that same community. The mission community then has the responsibility of recognizing and utilizing the various gifts expressed in its midst.

Any notion, however, that a continuously converting Church will have little to no problems along the way is summarized and rejected by Guder post haste. It is the seeking of unity in the process that is a mark of a continuously converting Church, that is, a Church that has answered in the affirmative the questions of its identity and mission.[161] It is this iteration of the Church that Guder sees as being able to withstand and counteract the problem of nominal Christianity with its "lowest common denominator" definition of Church membership. If the Church is to engage in evangelization and not in a "membership drive," the evangelization itself should serve as the initiation into the kingdom and unfold in a process that is "corporate, cognitive, moral, experiential, operational, and disciplinary."[162] With Patrick Keifert, Guder insists that, "the Church needs to move beyond making members to making Christians, disciples of Jesus the Messiah."[163]

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[160] Ibid., 164.

[161] Ibid., 166-167.

[162] William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism.* (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans, 1989), 103.

[163] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 173, Guder cites Patrick Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 118.

Incarnational Witness

One of Guder's main contributions to the field of ecclesiology is to be found in his insistence that at its very core ecclesiology is mission. The two underlying realities of this process are embodied on the one hand by the call to be witnesses to the Gospel, that is ecclesial relevance; and on the other hand by the need for an ongoing conversion into an ever greater conformity to Christ, that is ecclesial identity. Earlier in this chapter I explored Guder's views on ecclesial election and calling, mission, and sending as perfectly fulfilled in Christ. This means that for Guder the criterion guiding any and all of our missionary efforts is Christ. Since the Church does not do mission in addition to what the Church is, Christ is also the criterion for "who" the Church is in the process of fulfilling its mission. Christ supplies the model for the identity of the missionary community and of the individual witnesses.

But what does it mean for Christ to be the model of our ecclesial identity and mission in the context of the complex relationship between the Church and postmodern culture? Guder already argued that the nature of the movement of the Church to engage with culture after the pattern of Christ's mission and identity is embodied by what he terms, "incarnational witness."[164] The brief definition supplied suggested that the nature of this witness penetrates and dominates each and every aspect of ecclesial life of the Christian community.

In the years after the publication of *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* Guder continued working on expanding and further developing the notion of

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[164] See my note 48 on p. 176.

"incarnational witness" in a series of articles.[165] This topic has been developed further in Guder's brief but quite insightful work entitled *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*.[166] In the few chapters of this book, Guder addresses the questions of definition of incarnational witness; the "what" and the "how" of this witness, as well as the questions of exegesis and engagement with culture, among others.

The term "incarnational witness" has gained wide popularity in the conversation about missions. It correlates, Guder argues, the incarnation of Christ to the way Christian mission is to be conducted.[167] Despite its many detractors,[168] the concept of incarnational witness allows Guder to address two major concerns: First, it allows him to discuss missionary and evangelistic strategies and methods so prevalent in the modern missionary movement that have contradicted the life and teaching of Jesus. And second, it provides a Biblical basis for mission in direct relationship to the life and mission of Christ when addressing the content, method and motivation of mission. This is what Guder calls the "why, what and how" of Christian witness.[169] Thus, the main question to be asked is:

> Can and should the unique event of the incarnation of Jesus that constitutes and defines the message and mission of the Church have concrete significance for the way in which the Church communicates the message and carries out the mission?[170]

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[165] I am thinking specifically about Guder, "The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 32, no. 2 (April 1, 2008): 101-102; and also Guder, "Worthy Living: Work and Witness from the Perspective of Missional Church Theology," 424-432.

[166] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*.

[167] Ibid., xi.

[168] Most recently, Eckhart Schnabel and Andreas Kostenberger among New Testament scholars, and Todd Billings among systematicians, have criticized the use of the term "incarnational" in relation to human missionary activities or witness.

[169] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, xii.

[170] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, xii-xiii.

In response to this question, Guder offers his main thesis, which insists that only by viewing Christian witness incarnationally can the Church arrive at an integrative approach to its missionary vocation. It is intended to recast mission as the definitive calling of the Church and not just a program that the Church engages in.

The persistent question remains, however, what about Christ are we to emulate or incarnate? For Guder, the predominantly ethical and moralistic reading of Jesus' life so typical of 19th century liberal theology tends to dilute the event-character of the Gospel, which must define Christian witness. The event and history of the incarnation should be kept front and center in order to preserve its missional significance.

Thus, in chapter one, Guder addresses the "what" and "how" of the incarnation. The "what" and the "how" of incarnational witness flow from the centrality and ultimate nature of the incarnation of Christ as God's self-revelation to humanity. For Guder, the incarnation signifies that God is active in human history, and He has taken the initiative to heal and restore a broken creation.[171] In this way, the term "incarnation" as a noun summarizes the entirety of God's self-disclosure and initiative; in other words, the "what" of the Gospel. The adjectival - and adverbial - usage of the term then defines the "how" of the Gospel.[172] The shift from the noun to the adjective use of the term allows Guder to express "the essential congruence of message and its communication."

If Christian mission starts with the Triune God sending the Son into this world and continues with the sending of the Church to be a witness to this gracious event, the "what" of the incarnation demonstrates God's love for the world in Christ. The purpose of witness is to extend grace to more people for God's glory. But here is where the

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[171] Ibid., 2.
[172] Ibid., 3.

question of "how" reoccurs with some urgency in the context of most recent discussions about the Church's identity and purpose. If most of the missionary methods in the 20th century have run contrary to either the life or ministry of Jesus, the need for a shift to an incarnational witness is both apparent and urgent. If in the incarnation of Christ God is revealed as one who is for and with His creation, then the Church as a missionary community empowered by the Spirit needs to be "present in the world, with and for the world … pointing always to Christ."[173] As Guder puts it:

> The most incarnational dimension of our witness is defined by the cross itself, as we experience with Jesus that bearing his cross transforms our suffering into witness….An incarnational interpretation of Christian witness is an attempt to allow the Second Article, the doctrine of Christ, to define and shape our theology of the Third Article, the Holy Spirit and the Church.[174]

Having defined "incarnational witness" in this way, Guder spends chapter two warning about the actual and potential risks of reductionisms. In his treatment, they range from the artificial separation between lifestyle and suffering; through the temptation to sacrifice the centrality and the uniqueness of the Second Article, by focusing too much on the Third Article of faith and, therefore, on religious experience. This results in the dire consequences of replacing the Biblical concept of sin for that of human ignorance or lack of education. All these reductionisms affect both the content of the Gospel, as well as the ways in which Christians are to witness.[175] Our calling is "carried out as we 'embody,' 'incarnate' the good news in our forgiveness, our hope, our openness to all people, and our confidence in God's grace."[176]

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[173] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 9.
[174] Ibid.,
[175] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 16
[176] Ibid., 19.

In chapter three, Guder comes to the most important element in his understanding of the importance of incarnational witness - the formation of the missional community. Guder ties this formation to God's main strategy for communicating the good news of the Gospel. But what does that mean? For Guder, it means that because of the incarnational community the Gospel "never disembodies."[177] The Gospel itself is not contained in creeds, doctrines, or theological systems; it "dwells in and shapes the people who are called to be its witness. The message is inextricably linked with its messengers."[178] Simply put, this means that word must always become flesh, and this embodiment happens in the incarnational community. The mission of that community is shaped and formed as a continuation of the mission of Christ. This does not entail that the community needs to be perfect or sinless. Rather, it needs to embody God's grace in practicing repentance and rejoicing in God's forgiveness. After all:

> The incarnational character of the Church is rooted, not in its alleged perfection, but in its submission to Jesus Christ. Its identity is defined by its relationship to Jesus Christ.[179]

From this understanding of the incarnational community, Guder draws the following implications. First, the incarnational community runs contrary to the institutional Church in all of its forms. If God's purpose for the community is to embody the good news, it cannot be concerned at all either with the existence or the maintenance of the institutional Church. To be sure, the creation of institutions is inescapable in the process, but the institution should be subject to the call to continuous conversion as we question constantly whether the way we live together and spend our time and money reveal God's

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[177] Ibid., 22.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 23.

character and purpose for this world. Second, the correct formation of an incarnational

community challenges the rampant individualism that has come to dominate the West. If

the community is what embodies the Gospel, then individual Christians and their identity

are defined and understood only in relation to the incarnational community.[180] This

relationship is defined in the Biblical terms of discipleship, which instructs and enables

the disciples to embody Jesus' character and identity and, therefore, His mission in the

power of the Spirit.

The main characteristic of the community is not its perfection or sinless nature,

but its relatedness to Christ from whom and in whom the community finds its identity,

and to each other as God's chosen people witnessing to Him wherever they are sent.[181]

This particular understanding of incarnational mission carried on by an

incarnational community presents a challenge to the way the Church does ministry,

Guder suggests. It challenges the notion of evangelism only as proclamation or

communication. Incarnational mission requires congruency between words and actions.

The comprehensive character of the Gospel prevents the community from picking and

choosing aspects of the Gospel to proclaim and live out, and selecting whom to witness to

and whom to avoid. Above all, the Scriptures should test our embodiment of the Gospel

and our identity as witnesses.[182] Rightly so, all of these aspects fall into the incarnational

witness of the community of disciples. Missionary efforts often focus on the Great

Commission recorded in Matthew 28; on the sending and, most commonly, on the going,

often forgetting that before Jesus commissioned and sent His disciples, He called them

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[180] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 26

[181] Ibid., 29.

[182] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 35.

first to come and learn from Him so they could be formed by Him for the mission ahead.[183]

The incarnational witness of the missional community is not a program or a project. It is a living, breathing organism formed by its relationship to Christ to continue His mission of God's love in this world in the power of the Spirit. Its formation is shaped by learning how to follow Christ. It takes place only when we:

> …allow scripture to read us and show us how we are, in fact, captive to powers and principalities that lead to reduction of the gospel we proclaim. Our conversion to incarnational faithfulness will emerge out of our corporate repentance of our dilutions and reductions of the gospel… Jesus who was the Word become flesh, gives us his Spirit so that we might be made into a people together is a constant witness to him. To be about incarnational witness is to be obedient to the apostolic injunction: 'Lead a life [together-the imperative is plural!] worthy of the calling to which you have been called' (Eph. 4:1).[184]

Conclusion

There exists little doubt that Guder's work is inspired by and in response to the ongoing "paradigm shift" in Christianity.[185] His entire work is marked by an acute awareness of the fact that the hegemony enjoyed by traditional Christianity in the West and represented by its institutional Churches is now over. He sees the ongoing paradigm shift to be particularly traumatic for Christianity in North America and the Christian West. But instead of being an alarmist and defeatist, as others have been, Guder uses this occasion to articulate an ecclesiology of mission and evangelization that calls the Church to do theology in unaccustomed ways. It is intended to teach the Church anew about how

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[183] Guder calls this going "to school with Jesus."

[184] Guder, *The Incarnation and the Church's Witness*, 59-60.

[185] See Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 8; and my notes 13-18. For a great summary of Guder's views on the matter, see "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church," 3-11.

it should relate first to its surrounding cultural context, or the pole of relevance and mission, and then to Christ, or the pole of identity, as it is learning to witness to the Gospel in a post-Christian culture.

The prevailing secularization of the West coupled with ongoing trends of diminishing Church memberships have created an environment in which Christianity has shifted from the privileged position of main and dominant religion to that of a diminishing one among many. This new situation is one quite reminiscent of the condition of the early Church, where ecclesiology and missiology were one and the same. The Pilgrim Church, as it is often called, was a community dedicated to the mission of its Lord. To put it in the words of Vatican II, "The Pilgrim Church is missionary by its very nature."[186]

In many respects, Guder turns ecclesiology on its head. Traditionally, ecclesiology has been concerned with describing what the Church is or should be, while missiology has been concerned with the planting of Churches. Guder now insists on an ecclesiology that instructs how a missionary community can be the Church. Unlike many others before him who have argued for the return to the principles of life and ministry of the early Church as representative of a pristine original state from which the current

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[186] *Ad gentes*, chaps.1 - 2. Accessed on December 12, 2013. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html, A great discussion on the matter including the theological influence of Congar in the creation of the document, can be found in Gabriel Flynn, *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief*. (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 36-51; section entitled "The Church; A Cause of Unbelief."

Church has now declined,[187] Guder is advocating a theological and practical return to what he considers the absolute core of ecclesiology, and that is mission.[188]

The process of becoming and being the Church, the People of God called to live as witnesses to Christ, is marked by two significant realities. On the one hand, the witnesses are called to "translate the gospel" into every culture, i.e., relevance, while on the other, they are confronted with the need for ongoing conversion away from their sinful desire for power and control over the Gospel and into a conformity to Christ, i.e., identity. To Guder's thinking, this close relationship between the identity and mission of the missionary community plays a central role. Since the process of evangelization is "rooted in the *missio Dei*," it also has to be shaped by God's acts in history, culminating in the incarnation of Jesus as the heart and model of the Gospel. For Guder, the purpose of mission and evangelism is not the formation of the Church, but it is "God's faithfulness to his saving intention for the entire world."[189] The Church is a tool God uses to advance His mission. The Church always and out of necessity points beyond itself. It cannot afford to worry about its own security or appearance. As Guder recalls Karl Barth:

> As His community (the Church) is always free from itself…its mission is not in addition to its being. It is, as it is sent and active in its mission. It builds up itself for the sake of its mission and in relation to it.[190]

Again and again one hears Guder's insistence that the Church is not simply to do mission in addition to what the Church is. By its very calling and nature, the Church is mission.

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[187] See my chapter one dealing with the question of method in ecclesiology and especially Neil Ormerod's discussion of methodological approaches, p 26-32, and following.

[188] Guder follows Martin Kaehler, for whom "mission is the mother of theology" and in this case, of ecclesiology, as well. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 21.

[189] Guder, "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church," 5.

[190] Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*. IV/1, 725; Guder cites in his "Missional Theology for a Missionary Church."

The people of God, be they Israel or the Church, are called and formed into a distinctive community whose nature and purpose are to serve as a concrete demonstration of the good news of God's love.

It is in this discussion of calling, election, and mission that we discover another crucial element in Guder's thought – the direct link between Israel and the Church. As in the history of Israel, in the history of the Christian community, election and calling are not to the salvation of individuals, not even the salvation of the whole group, but to mission. This mission comes from God and flows out through God's people to the rest of the world. This understanding of calling and mission should inform the Church's self-understanding. For Israel, as is the case for the Church, as well, the God-given promise and mission have been "perfectly fulfilled in Christ." For Israel, Christ is the culmination of God's salvific mission, while for the Church, Christ is the beginning of its mission. Christ is thus the criterion that guides any and all missionary efforts. Moreover, if Church is mission, and Christ is the criterion that guides it, how much more should Christ be the criterion and model for the identity of the missionary community and individual witnesses? Christ is the criterion for life and mission. As Guder states elsewhere:

> This is what it means to 'interpret [God's] will in the present.' Not only do we pray 'in Jesus' name' to ensure that our prayer is 'purified by the Spirit,' but 'equally, in the other direction, when we seek to interpret God's will in the real world of history, there too the 'name' – the criterion – of Jesus Christ has to be fundamental in controlling and determining our actions.[191]

Our calling and mission is indeed to take place in the real world of history where sin dominates both within and without the Church. Guder is quite adamant about the fact that we often fail to do our mission in the way of Jesus Christ, as we assume that indeed our

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[191] Guder, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission," 419.

way must necessarily be that of Christ. To him, this is indicative of one of the most

prevalent dynamics the Church needs to counteract expressed in the constant and ongoing

reduction of the Gospel. The call to being *in the world but not of it* is difficult without a

doubt when the Church allows surrounding culture to serve as the criterion for its

ministry. It can only be accomplished when the Church is constantly re-orienting itself to

the criterion and identity of Christ. Only then its witness can be truly incarnational in the

sense of identifying most closely with one's environment to serve as effective witness.[192]

As a result, the Church is in constant need of continuous conversion, which to

Guder's thinking, is the only way the Church can maintain both its true missionary

identity and its mission to the Gospel.[193] To that end, Achiel Peelman has criticized

Guder's understanding of the Gospel, accusing him of adopting a model that presupposes

the existence of a "pure gospel," possessing of a "supracultural nature."[194]

One of the major contributions of Guder's work to the field of theology and

ecclesiology at the beginning of the 21st century is to be found in his evaluation of the

rather complex relationship between Christianity in the West and its postmodern cultural

context. When many have called for the radical reinterpretation of the Gospel in order to

make sure it again fits the changed cultural context, Guder calls for the radical re-

interpretation of the Church in light of the Gospel of Christ. Without such radical re-

interpretation or conversion, the Church will not be able to translate the Gospel to the

culture that surrounds it. As a result of this understanding, traditional Church structures

also need to change, allowing the Church to transition from the mindset of Christendom

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[192] Guder, "Incarnation and the Church's Evangelistic Mission," 421.

[193] Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,* 31.

[194] Achiel Peelman, "The Continuing Conversion of the Church." *Missiology* 29, no. 2 (April 1, 2001): 231.

into one mindful of the enormous paradigm shift, thus avoiding the ever-present danger of the "cultural captivity of the gospel." Peelman has further criticized Guder for assuming all cultures "are the same" and equally equipped to express the Gospel. But in fairness to Guder, he is not unaware of the difficulties associated with the emergence of contextual theologies. His employment of Newbigin's concept of the need for becoming "culturally bilingual" is a testimony to his acute awareness of the complex relationship between the Gospel and the receiving culture.

The perennial question on the minds of Guder's critics is if he has said enough. Bradford Hinze, while admiring Guder's call for churches to move beyond the bifurcation between "evangelism on the one hand and social work and service for social justice on the other," has sharply criticized him for the lack of any mention as to how "social service and work for justice contribute to the mission of the Church."[195] Admittedly, this is a legitimate question to ask, but perhaps not if we consider the scope and size of Guder's treatment. It is quite possible that Hinze's critique on this matter stems from his own work, which is contemporaneous with Guder's, in which Hinze addresses a similar set of issues, namely ecclesial repentance, or Christian identity and destiny,[196] or the Church's sinfulness within the context of his own Catholic theological tradition.[197] In fairness to Guder, his purpose for the work is not to address in detail all of the implications of the call to continuous ecclesial conversion. As David Schmitt points out in his review of Guder's work:

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[195] Bradford E. Hinze, "The continuing conversion of the Church." *Theological Studies* 62, no. 1 (March 1, 2001): 165-166.

[196] Bradford E. Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue." *Theological Studies*. Volume: 61. Issue: 2, 2000. The categories of "identity and destiny" are parallel to my categories of "identity and relevance or mission." See footnote below.

[197] Ibid., 208-209; see especially his footnote 5.

While uneven, then, in the depth of his treatment, Guder does accurately assess the topics for which theological conversation is necessary in order to better equip the North American Church for mission in its changing cultural settings. His work, therefore, serves well as a discussion starter for areas of conversion within individual congregational settings …, Darrell Guder provides a theology of evangelism that takes seriously the changing cultural situation in North America, the Church as an instrument of God's mission and the biblical foundation of evangelism.[198]

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[198] David R. Schmitt, "The Continuing Conversion of the Church." *Missio Apostolica* 9, no. 1 (May 1, 2001): 53.

CHAPTER FIVE
The Case for Missional Ecclesiology – My Contribution
to Advancing the Ecclesiological Discussion

Introductory Matters

So far I have examined the recent efforts on ecclesiology by three theologians

coming from diverse ecclesial and theological backgrounds.[1] The reasons for their

inclusion into this dissertation were discussed in some detail in the "Introductory

Matters" section of the preceding three chapters. To summarize these reasons briefly,

they come down to this: All three theologians are writing ecclesiologies in response to the

perceived formidable challenges to the Christian Church presented by the cultural, social,

and philosophical shifts occurring in the West at the end of the 20th and the beginning of

the 21st centuries.[2] Furthermore, their ecclesiological proposals exhibit some notable

similarities, namely the clear connection between the categories of ecclesial "identity"

and "relevance" alongside the key role ecclesial repentance (or conversion) plays in re-

appropriating both, and, last, but not least, the Church's intimate link to Israel found in

their common election.

I began this work by introducing a rather modest thesis that in an ever-hostile

environment and culture - where the Christian Church is finding itself in the minority for

the first time since Constantine and is increasingly being marginalized, the way to carry

on its life and mission for the Church is to begin constructing ecclesiology along the axis

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[1] Nicholas Healy, a Catholic theologian; Ephraim Radner an Anglican theologian; and Darrell Guder, a Presbyterian Reformed theologian.

[2] D. A. Carson, in his revisiting of Niebuhr's taxonomy of the relationship between Christ and culture, implicates what has come to be known as "postmodernity" and secularism as some of the culprits behind the ongoing crisis, though he remains quite critical of any sweeping definitions of terms such as "culture," and Christian culture in particular, or "postmodernism." In D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007), especially chapters 3 and 4.

between identity and relevance. Becoming stripped of its institutional trappings, and focused on its identity and mission rather than on its place of prestige and influence in contemporary society would allow the Church to regain its viability again.

But in the course of my study, I came to realize that quite apart from this type of theologizing along the lines of identity and relevance, having the potential to extend the Church's life and existence in rather difficult circumstances is indeed the way to conceive of the Church's life and mission not just under duress but in any historical and cultural context.[3] This, of course, requires more than just doing missional ecclesiology; it requires a missional hermeneutic applied to the reading of Scripture, as well. It is encouraging to point out that in recent years a number of notable Biblical scholars have engaged in the serious work of applying such missional hermeneutics to the reading of Scripture. Among them are N.T. Wright[4] in the area of New Testament studies and Christopher Wright[5] in the field of Old Testament. Their still small yet growing ranks have been joined by missiologists and theologians alike whose voices speak with urgency and renewed hope about the new possibilities before the Christian Church.[6]

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[3] At the time I formulated my modest thesis, I was unaware that someone like John Caputo, for example, has argued somewhat along these lines for the existence of thriving yet marginalized Christian communities who find their identity and ethics - could be substituted for mission or relevance, summarized by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount. I disagree with his radical stance on the need for and role of the institutional church, however. For an interesting discussion on the future of the Church by a philosopher, see John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), especially chapter 6, entitled, "The Working Church; Notes on the Future."

[4] Most notably in his *Justification: God's Plan & Paul's Vision*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009); and especially in *The New Testament and the People of God*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

[5] In order of publication, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006); and most recently, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

[6] I am thinking of missiologists, such as Craig van Gelder, who has authored or co-authored multiple volumes on missions and ecclesiology, along with Michael Goheen, who has authored multiple volumes on the intersect between Scripture, mission, and ecclesiology.

In the remaining few pages of this dissertation I will take a brief look at the conceptual contributions of Lesslie Newbigin to my discussion of identity and relevance as essential categories to ecclesiology in our current context. I will conclude this chapter by exploring directions for further developments of the topic and offer my conclusions.

<p style="text-align:center">Lesslie Newbigin's "Theology of Mission"</p>

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin was an influential voice in the second half of the 20th century on the subject of the Church's missional engagement with the world. His influence continues to this day, as evidenced by the growing number of recent dissertations, both in the United States and in Europe, and a plethora of scholarly articles and books.[7] Despite the ongoing interest in his theology, Newbigin continues to defy categorization. Not exactly a systematician, as his works lack the typical systematic organization, but so much more than a missiologist, Newbigin was one of the pioneer theologians who emphatically insisted on and succeeded in joining the fields of ecclesiology and mission. In my personal judgment, no other theologian has done more in helping clergy and theologians alike to better understand culture and the relationship between church and society in the world post-Christendom. It is this refusal to fit neatly in preexisting categories that leads Geoffrey Wainwright to present a long list of descriptors when examining Newbigin' life and work:

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[7] I am thinking of Michael W. Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You:" J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology. Dissertation on-line. (Zoetermeer, 2000); Jack Edward Clevinger, "The Implications of the Trinitarian 'perichoresis' for a Missional Ecclesiology: Lesslie Newbigin's Call for Renewing the Church's Missional Vocation in a Postmodern World" (2003). Tren Dissertations. Paper 4030. http://place.asburyseminary.edu/trendissertations/4030; Thomas Patrick Greentree, "Lesslie Newbigin's Apologetic for the Gospel in an Incredulous Society" (2007). Tren Dissertations. Paper 7910. http://place.asburyseminary.edu/trendissertations/7910.

> … an evangelist faithfully proclaiming to others the Gospel …; as an ecumenist passionate about recovering unity among divided Christians; as a diligent pastor and bishop in the church of God; as a missionary strategist under the guidance of the Spirit; as a student of world's religions and interlocutor with their representatives; as a visionary who saw human society and the daily lives of people in light of the Kingdom of God; as a liturgist and preacher leading the assembled community to glorify God …; as a teacher of Scripture and the doctrinal tradition that interprets Scripture; and finally as an apologist for the Christian faith in the world of late modernity.[8]

The closest I have come to defining Newbigin's effort is to call him "theologian of culture and missionary ecclesial engagement with the world."

On the following pages, I will examine briefly a few important aspects of Newbigin's theology that have direct influence on the major components of the identity-relevance axis for constructing ecclesiology.

At the very center of Newbigin's understanding of the Church's mission and, therefore, interaction with the world lies his understanding of the Biblical doctrine of election.[9] For Newbigin, election is corporate rather than personal and it is election to service, or mission, not salvation. It is intended to contribute to the announcing of the Good News of the Gospel to the world in the context of a cosmic history.

> It does not accept the view of nature as simply the arena upon which the drama of human history is played out. Much less does it seek the secret of the individual's true being within the self – a self for which the public history of the world can have no ultimate significance. Rather it sees the history of the nations and the history of nature within the larger framework of God's history – the carrying forward to its completion of the gracious purpose that has its source in the love of the Father for the Son in the unity of the Spirit. The first announcement of the Good News that the reign of God is at hand can be understood only in the context

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[8] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Lesslie Newbigin: A Theological Life*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), vii.

[9] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 80-89; chapter 7 outlines Newbigin's hermeneutic of the doctrine. Also, George R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

of this biblical sketch of a universal history. The reign of God is His reign over all things.[10]

Some important observations are in order here. While any discussion about the Good News of the Gospel starts with Christ, it is very important to observe how Newbigin grounds this movement of proclamation of the Good News in the mission of God as an outward movement of the Trinity.[11] We saw the same emphasis expressed by Healy, Radner, and especially by Guder in their treatment of the Gospel. Furthermore, we see Newbigin's insistence on election as corporate in nature and its intention for service, or mission, not salvation.[12] As Newbigin contends concerning the relationship between salvation, election, and the Gospel:

> Those who are chosen to be bearers of a blessing are chosen for the sake of *all*…
> The promised blessing is, in the end, for all the nations. Abraham, Israel, the tribe
> of Judah, and the faithful remnant are the chosen bearers of it. Bearers – not
> exclusive beneficiaries. Again and again it had to be said that election is for
> responsibility, not for privilege.[13]

It is no secret that Newbigin resisted highly personalized accounts of the Gospel and of privatized salvation, which he viewed as undermining the mission of the Church.[14] In fact, all of Newbigin's ecumenical engagements were predicated on his understanding

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[10] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 31.

[11] For an excellent analysis of this point, see Michael Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You:" *J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*. Dissertation on-line, especially chapter 10. *The Nature and Relevance of Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, 419-422.

[12] For a great discussion of Newbigin's notion of election see Deanna Womack, "Lesslie Newbigin's Missional Theology of Religions." (paper presented at Engaging Particularities Conference, Boston College, 2007). accessed on March 4, 2008, http://dcollections.bc.edu/R/59FDABR9LTUAIMEPTS2JQ71PG65YCUGB93YNPGM29I9TCR4UJ2-03459,.

[13] *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission,* 32.

[14] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 145. See also Newbigin, "The Gospel and Our Culture: A Response to Elaine Graham and Heather Walton." *Modern Churchman* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 1992): 2.

that what Christians of various denominations and ecclesial traditions hold in common is precisely their sharing into a common, corporate election to responsibility and service, and not exclusive salvific privilege.[15]

The next important element in Newbigin's missional ecclesiology that can be seen as a precursor and contributor to the ecclesiologies of the three theologians I examined previously, is located in his firm believe that the "divorce between biblical scholarship and missiology" and, therefore, ecclesiology as well, "affects the way the Bible functions (or does not function) in the life of the Church."[16] In other words, for ecclesiology to be functional and fortified to withstand the challenges of post-Christendom culture, it has to go back to Scripture, where the Church is to rediscover both its rightful identity and the functions of its election: mission. As Newbigin insisted, "… biblical scholarship (at least as perceived by non-expert) has worked in an area remote from the issues which Christians have to face in the worlds of ethics, politics, churchmanship and – of course – missions."[17]

Here we need to pause to clarify the kind of "return to Scripture" Newbigin advocates. Newbigin differentiates between two different approaches to Scripture; one is "the scholarly approach," with its very specific commitments to the nature of reality and knowledge acquisition. The other approaches the Bible with a very specific hermeneutic and a commitment "to the belief that Jesus is God incarnate, the one in whom all things hold together, and in whom all things are to be finally summed up."[18] It is only this latter

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[15] Ibid. Newbigin put forth very forceful sociological and theological arguments against denominationalism within Christianity, which he described as a form of "religious secularization."

[16] Lesslie Newbigin, "Witness in a Biblical Perspective." *Mission Studies* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 1986): 80.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Newbigin, "Witness in a Biblical Perspective," 80.

understanding or approach that results in a faithful Biblical witness committed to a very different, Biblical world view, one that frees the witnesses to bring forth a faithful testimony without the heavy burden brought about by the insistence that this witness is also the pronouncement of God's final judgment.[19] Such form of epistemic humility practiced by the witnesses allows both the hearers of the Good News and the witnesses to the Good News to constantly seek to orient themselves to Christ as the source of ultimate truth.

Finally, we come to the most important elements Newbigin contributes to the missional ecclesiology discussion, namely, the two-fold connection of the Church to Christ, or, as I have termed them, "the identity-relevance" axis. This is where we see the linkage of the former two important elements, namely, election and return to Scripture, to the latter two, identity and relevance. As George Hunsberger astutely observes, "The connection of election with the question of the authority for 'faith' adds new depth to the continuous relevance it has for the identity and mission of the Church."[20] It is in Scripture that the Church discovers both its election in Christ and draws its eschatological identity from Him. On one hand, the Church is connected to the historical Christ, as it finds its true identity in the "life, death, and resurrection of Jesus."[21] On the other, it similarly receives its mission, and, therefore, finds its relevance in election to service, by continuing the mission of Jesus in the world.[22] This is the way in which the Church becomes a part of or is called to participation in the *missio Dei*, where it finds the source

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[19] Newbigin, "Witness in a Biblical Perspective," 81.

[20] *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*, 66.

[21] "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You:" *J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, 433.

[22] Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way: Bible Studies*. (Geneva, SUI: World Council of Churches, 1987), 14.

of its own mission in the Father's love for this world, expressed in the sending of Jesus and empowered by the Spirit.[23] In short, Newbigin's missionary ecclesiology can be summed up along these two poles that describe the Church's nature: the call of God on the Church, and the Church's place in and interaction with the world. The relationship of the Church to God's call and, therefore, to God Himself ultimately becomes a question of the Church's own identity, while its place in and relationship to the world signals the question of the Church's ultimate relevance in the way it relates to its cultural context.[24] As Michael Goheen succinctly states,

> The church is called to embody the cultural forms yet at the same time to subvert them and give them new meaning shaped by the Gospel. In this way, the church is both for and against its culture: it identifies with the form of its culture but stands against the idolatry that gives meaning and direction to these forms.[25]

It is at the crossroads of identity and relevance that the Church finds its missionary and prophetic voice. This, in Newbigin's understanding, is the only way the missionary church can remain true to Scripture, and at the same time manage to address adequately the questions and needs of its cultural context.

The reasons I examine Newbigin's thought should be apparent. In so many ways, his theology of church and mission is the precursor to the main arguments Healy, Radner, and Guder make in their ecclesiologies. Along with the importance of the categories of

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[23] Virtually all scholars studying Newbigin agree on the movement visible in his ecclesiology, where he starts with an expressed Christocentric emphasis only to move steadily in his later work toward a decisively Trinitarian framework for ecclesiology and missions. For an insightful discussion on this shift, see Michael Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You:" *J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, especially chapter 3, *From A Christocentric to a Trinitarian Missionary Ecclesiology: (1959-1998),* 60-112.

[24] See Lesslie Newbigin, "Christ and the Cultures." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 1-22.

[25] *The Nature and Relevance of Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, 424.

"identity-relevance, or mission"[26] operational in his ecclesiology, in his own way

Newbigin lends additional credence to the individual arguments developed by the

theologians I have examined in this dissertation.

Newbigin aids Healy in his insistence that we should deepen our understanding of

culture in doing ecclesiology, while at the same time maintain the prophetic nature of the

Church's witness. While Newbigin did not openly advocate doing ethnography as a

necessary step to evangelization and ecclesiology as Healy does, it is obvious that he

placed a great emphasis on the necessity for understanding culture if one is to engage in

an effective witness to that culture.[27]

To Radner's insistence that the main reason for the radical loss of ecclesial

relevance is to be found in the deep intra-ecclesial divisions in the Christian Church since

the reformation Newbigin says "yes" and, in fact, goes quite further than just the intra-

Christian divisions stemming from the Reformation. He applies a hermeneutic of division

- or unity - and uses it as an interpretive lens in building his argument for restoring unity -

not reunification as some have misinterpreted him - as central to restoring ecclesial

mission.[28] In closely linking the unity of the Church to its missional effectiveness,

Newbigin is advocating a form of spiritual ecumenism rooted in individual Christian

communities finding common ground in sharing into a common identity, be it tied closely

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[26] Though the categories come directly from the work of Jürgen Moltmann, the concepts are clearly present and central to Newbigin's work. For an insightful overview of Newbigin's emphasis on these two concepts see, Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*.

[27] On extensive discussion about the need for engaging with culture, see Newbigin's "Christ and the Cultures." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31, no. 1 (January 1, 1978): 1-22; *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); "The Gospel and our Culture: A Response to Elaine Graham and Heather Walton." *Modern Churchman* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 1992): 1-10.

[28] See especially, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture*, 144-146.

to very different cultures, and common mission, both of which derive from their incorporation in Christ.[29]

In the case of Guder, Newbigin definitively plays a formative role, along with theologians such as Barth. The role that culture plays in Guder's theology clearly owes to Newbigin's foundational work on the interaction between theology and receiving culture.

The intention behind bringing these conceptual similarities - if not dependencies - between Newbigin and the ecclesiologists examined in this work is not to argue that all three, Healy, Radner, and Guder, are directly dependent on Newbigin's formative work for their most recent efforts.[30] Rather, the idea was to demonstrate that the constitutive elements of the "identity-relevance, or mission" axis appropriated in the theology of Newbigin are now coming to fruition in a new and exciting way in the recent efforts of these three theologians whose work I have examined above.

Missional Ecclesiology – The Need for Further Developments

The limited scope and focus of my work up to this point precludes me from exploring in greater detail the implications of the identity-relevance axis for ecclesiology. I would like to point out at least two areas for potential exploration which, if addressed properly, will open other avenues for exploration and development.

The term missional ecclesiology[31] has been gaining in popularity and visibility in more recent times. The majority of definitions of "missional ecclesiology" or "missional

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[29] *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture*, 144-146. Newbigin often spoke of "local ecumenical projects" that brought denominationally separated churches together in one place in order to create more coherent and credible Christian witness.

[30] It is obvious from their works that at least two out of the three ecclesiologists whose work I examined are very aware (in Radner's case), and indebted to (Guder's case), Newbigin for developments in their own work.

[31] In the literature the more commonly used term is that of "missional church."

church" focus on identifying missional ecclesiology with the self-sending mission of God in Christ, where the Church itself does not have a mission of its own but rather it joins in the *missio Dei* in Christ. This idea, of course, comes from Newbigin, and, as more recent work has argued - has its presence in Bonhoeffer as well.[32] But this overemphasis on mission at the end leads to an overemphasis on what the Church does in distinction from what the Church is. One can predict that such overemphasis will unbalance any ecclesiology pursuant of it. This, in the words of Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, calls for a "missional theology as participating in the life of the Trinity and thus mission as 'joining in with the Spirit'."[33]

What my own work brings to the fore is the missing element from most of these definitions, that is, the need to balance this missional drive by ground it in the identity of Christ which the Spirit forms in the ecclesial community and in individual believers. To this end I define missional ecclesiology as, *the call on the Church to repent and be formed in the identity of the Son, through the work of the Spirit in obedience to and alignment with the mission of the Father that is the missio Dei in this world*. In this way an ecclesiology constructed along this axis between ecclesial identity and mission - where these two dynamic elements are in constant interaction and are perpetually enforcing each other - will be balanced by the constant interplay of its constitutive elements. This interplay then carries the promise of producing direct practical results in the life and practice of the community where positive growth in one of the constitutive elements directly influences growth in the other element. This formational process is not forced

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[32] Patrick Franklin, "Bonhoeffer's Missional Ecclesiology." *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 9, (2007–2008), 96–128.

[33] Cornelius J.P. Niemandt, "Trends in Missional Ecclesiology," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 68(1)*,* 2012, Art. #1198, 9 pages. accessed 10-10-14. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v68i1.1198.

and based on the indiscriminate action of the Spirit. It is the result of a *concursus divinus*, where the individual and communal readiness to be formed into the identity of Christ is signaled by ecclesial conversion/repentance. This process of ongoing reorientation or formation into Christ's identity and His mission is, then, accomplished by the Spirit's work in the missional community. In the words of Craig van Gelder,

> The concept of a church being *missional* moves in a fundamentally different direction. It seeks to focus the conversation about what the church is – that it is a community created by the Spirit and that it has a unique nature, an essence, which gives it a unique identity. In light of the church's nature, the missional conversation then explores what the church *does*. Purpose and strategy are not unimportant to the missional conversation, but they are understood to be derivative dimensions of understanding the nature, or essence of the church. Likewise, changing cultural contexts are not unimportant, but they are understood to be conditions that the church interacts with in light of its nature or essence.[34]

If, as I defined it earlier, the proper way of understanding missional ecclesiology is the call to community initiated by the Trinity and properly responded to by those being called, then clearly the Trinitarian aspect of ecclesiology deserves further study and explication.

One crucial element needing further explication is the role and work of the Spirit on both the identity and the mission horizon. Radner's instinct is correct in that the development of a functional pneumatology is essential to the Church. But his proposed solution leaves a lot to be desired. A pneumatically abandoned church stands no chance of either realizing its need for repentance or experiencing any identity formation. In the absence of the Spirit bringing about transformation and formation into the identity of Christ one cannot speak in any meaningful ways about the Church taking on and carrying

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[34] Craig van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 17.

out the mission of God in this world. This realization strongly suggests the need for

further exploring and developing a Spirit ecclesiology or an ecclesiology of the Third

Article and its theological implications for the forming of the mission community and

empowering it for witness.[35] The strong relational element implied by the Trinitarian

nature of ecclesial formation, communion, and mission holds significant promise for the

relevance of the Church in the 21st century.

Another area in need of further exploration that has often been neglected is the

whole area of worship. Any ecclesiology that does not give proper attention to worship

does so to its own detriment. The centrality of worship in the religious life and practice of

the faith community and the individual believer cannot be overestimated. Worship

encores the ecclesial life. It facilitates the relational dimension of Christian life by

bringing the worshiper in communion with God and with other believers in the act of

worship brought about by the Spirit. It is in worship that one is led to see and understand

who God is and in light of this vision – to see and understand one's own self, one's own

shortcomings, and the need for transformation. Worship then becomes a powerful tool for

forming true Christian identity.

Conversely, worship has a missional dimension. The proclamation of who God is

and of His mission of reconciling creation to Himself made visible in the worship of the

Church serves both as the missional call to repentance and as a powerful demonstration

of redeemed lives and relationships in the context of a reconciled community. It is not by

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[35] Cheryl Peterson, *Who Is the Church?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 93; she insists on the need for developing a Spirit ecclesiology based on a narrative method. I agree with her insistence on developing a Spirit ecclesiology but not necessarily with her proposed method. Peterson has argued previously for an ecclesiology of the Third Article in her dissertation entitled *The Question of the Church in North American Lutheranism: Toward an Ecclesiology of the Third Article*. Thesis (Ph. D.)--Marquette University, 2004.

chance that the liturgy or the Mass tends to follow a deliberately programmatic outline. It demonstrates how the Sprit is active at work on both the formational and missional horizon. The Spirit shapes the communal and individual identities in light of the character of God and having tasted the joy of redemption, the Spirit empowers the communities and individuals to join in the mission of God.

From all this it is clear that the identity-relevance or identity-mission axis demonstrates its potential for orientating theological explorations of ecclesiology. Because of its quasi-methodological nature this axis can be utilized by various ecclesial traditions in conjunction with different ecclesial polities. This ability to transcend traditional ecclesiological boundaries and demarcation lines suggest that the identity-mission axis holds promise for promoting further inter-ecclesial dialogue and could move churches closer to unity.

Conclusion

Mark Noll has argued in favor of the concept of "turning points"[36] in the history of Christianity and the Church. The turn of the 21st century fits, if not the profile of a turning point, at least the search for a turning point, which Noll has identified.[37] The challenges to traditional Christianity mounted by the postmodern shift, with its anti-institutional and antiestablishment bents, have resulted in eroding the Church's privileged position in society and undermined public trust in it.

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[36] Mark Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

[37] *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, especially chapter 13 and the Afterward to the newest edition, in which Noll makes the case.

This type of challenge requires a response. As I observed in Chapter One, theologians have sought to address the changing context and circumstance of the Church by proposing correctives to ecclesiological method, and, thereby, to the way we think of and do church. As I discussed there, a good ecclesiological method needs to be normative, dialectical, and very practical. In conjunction, good ecclesiological method will have to pay more than just lip service to, but also engage seriously with sociology and the other social sciences. The Church as divine, but also as a very human reality, cannot be explained and understood fully in theological terms alone. The theological and sociological elements of the Church should mutually inform and complement each other within ecclesiology.

In response to these methodological considerations, I argued all throughout this dissertation that the ecclesiologies constructed along the quasi-methodological axis of "identity and relevance" represent a viable response to the changed circumstances, and an honest effort on the part of the three theologians I examined, to provide a suitable corrective to the Church's missional involvement in the world. I also alleged that attempts to construct ecclesiologies framed by the notions of identity and relevance can best be described by the label "missional," or "missionary" ecclesiologies. This suitable corrective should not be viewed strictly and exclusively in terms of guaranteeing the Church's survival but, rather, in terms of enabling the Church to return to or recapture its God-given purpose for being and mission within the *missio Dei* as the instrument of faithful proclamation of the Gospel of Christ in word and deed.

For one, I carefully traced the efforts of Healy, Radner, and Guder in taking seriously history in general and the history of the Church in particular, in their

ecclesiological deliberations. They all were quite explicit and deliberate in their accounts of the constant interplay between the social-communal and historical aspects of the Church. This interplay is particularly evident in the way all three tie their ecclesiological accounts to the history and mission of Israel, as expressed in Israel's election by God to mission. This intentional move away from individualized accounts of salvation and toward corporate understanding of the Church and its mission evident in the theologies of Healy, Radner, and Guder, signals a departure from traditional modes of doing ecclesiology. Where over the years so many have sought to demonstrate how the Church now has replaced Israel as God's chosen people, all three theologians examined in this work advocate for and practice a return to ecclesiologies faithful to Scripture and, therefore, closely connecting the Church to Israel, and not just on the level of an archetype-descendant relation.[38]

Furthermore, ecclesiologies constructed along the lines of the "identity-relevance" axis, though in their infancy, carry on a trans-denominational appeal in their ability to deliver commonality of purpose, mission, and elements of identity despite differences of theology, or Church polity, which traditionally pose nearly unsurmountable challenges to any form of ecclesial unity. To be clear, I am neither envisioning nor advocating that this type of ecclesiology will suddenly overcome the serious challenges to ecclesial unity facing the ecumenical movement. In fact, I do not believe that the changed context and the current cultural milieu in the West call for the formal and institutional reunification of Christian churches by virtue of which the Church can and would regain its relevance within contemporary society. I do think that ecclesiologies of the "missional," or

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[38] Romans 9-11 comes to mind, with a particular emphasis on Paul's theology of the relationship between Israel and the Gentile church developed in Romans 11, all linked to the notion or doctrine of election.

"missionary," type constructed within the contexts even of different theological and liturgical traditions, which are, nevertheless, centered on the notions of ecclesial identity and mission, will open the door for what Newbigin envisioned as instances of "local ecumenical projects," or cooperation.[39] Such engagements then represent an open and honest interaction with culture and society in a particular locale, stripped of any "imperialistic" aspirations or tendencies; clothed in epistemic humility and focused not on building Christendom, or a particular institutional organization, but entirely devoted to the mission of communicating the Gospel of Christ to the world. I believe that Newbigin's proposal for local ecumenical engagements is, in many ways, akin to Walter Kasper's call to "spiritual ecumenism" and quite in line with a missional ecclesiology constructed along the axis of identity-relevance.[40]

What I have observed from the subsequent efforts of Healy, Radner, and Guder, is that they have all pursued various and largely different trajectories for developing their ecclesiologies further. Healy is exploring ethnography and its promise to further the practice of ecclesiology. Radner has engaged with a form of politically responsible and kenotic in nature ecclesiology of self-sacrifice. Guder has continued to carefully examine the practice of incarnational living as a form of authentic witness to the Gospel. To me, their highly divergent subsequent efforts signal two important conclusions: first, the field of missional ecclesiology along the axis of identity-relevance is yet to be developed. The Christological, Trinitarian, and pneumatological dimensions of ecclesial identity and

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[39] See my note 29, on p. 238. See also, Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel in Western Culture*, 144-146.

[40] See Walter Kasper's, "The Ecumenical Movement in the 21st Century." Presentation at the event marking the 40th anniversary of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC., Geneva, SUI: WCC, 18 November 2005; as well as, *Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007).

mission, if fully explored, promise to produce fruitful theological discussions on the nature of the Church and its role in the world. Second, and most important to me personally, is the realization that the plethora of visions and directions for further exploration and development of this type of ecclesiology can only signal its viability, staying power and capacity to produce credible accounts of both the Church's missional identity and its relevance in multiple contexts and social settings.

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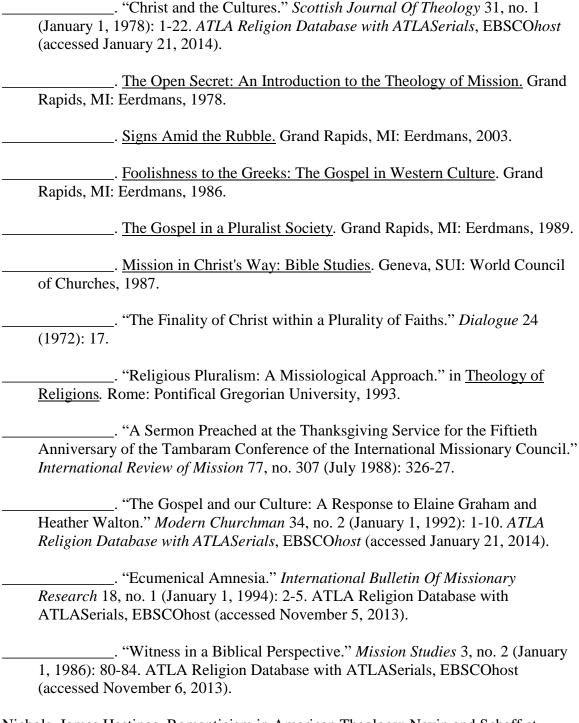
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