

# *Theology Matters*

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## **Reformed Ecclesiology: “The Community of Christ”**

**by Dennis Okholm**

I teach at a Wesleyan university. One day as I unlocked my office I noticed that someone had posted a cartoon on my door. It showed a man in a suit carrying a briefcase walking out of a prison. The caption read, “A Reformed Theologian.”

Hopefully that is not the picture we have in mind when we consider Reformed ecclesiology and the contribution it might make to our denomination’s present situation.

Philip Jenkins has demonstrated that the future of the Christian church is in the South and the East—in Asia, Africa, and Latin America—where it is growing exponentially. On the other hand, though Christianity will still survive quite well in the U.S., many respond to declining numbers in the Western church with appeals to wisdom from the business world, the latest management guru, or tried and true Disney techniques (as one conference brochure advertised). But I am increasingly convinced that the churches in the West—particularly mainline churches—need to begin with biblically-oriented theology as they seek a cure for what ails them. In fact, it might even change the diagnosis of the illness. With that in mind, we need to consider how biblically-grounded theological insights from our Reformed tradition might guide us in our thinking about the current situation in our church.

It is always good to know the social location of the author, and so I confess that I am one who, as Richard Reifsnnyder said when he preached the sermon at my ordination, wandered in the wilderness of Pentecostals and Baptists before entering the Promised Land of Presbyterianism. One of the reasons I embraced the PCUSA 30 years ago was because of its liturgy, its refusal to separate evangelism from social concerns, and its connectional church polity. It is the last that is most relevant to what we are considering here. And it is perhaps more urgent today than it has been in recent history since we who are ambassadors of reconciliation need to demonstrate to a watching world by our life as church that the reconciliation we preach is actually a possibility in Jesus Christ. (And we don’t just have social issues that are threatening this demonstration, but also generational issues that discourage old and young from worshipping together and which compromise our witness of reconciliation.)

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What better place to start thinking about a Reformed understanding of the church than with the wisdom of fellow travelers such as John Calvin (a pastor-theologian who had to learn on the job what it meant to be a wise shepherd), Karl Barth, and others.

## The Nature of the Church

We should begin by reminding ourselves of *the nature of the church*. What is the church?

Simply put, it is the Body of Christ. To paraphrase Karl Barth, “The church is because Christ is.”<sup>1</sup> And to use the language of Barth’s *Römerbrief*, the church is “the great crater left by the impact of God’s revealing Word”—the Word whose chief function is to confront us with Jesus Christ. The church exists *only* as a witness to the One on whom it is dependent—who is its source—who called it into being. Insofar as it ceases to be that witness, it ceases to be the church. In fact, our word “church” evolved from the Scottish and German *kirk* and *kirche*, derivatives of the Greek *kurios*—Lord. This was precisely the concern of Samuel John Stone who wrote his hymn in 1866, supporting Bishop Robert Gray in his accusations against another Anglican bishop John Colenso who had questioned central tenets of the Christian faith: “The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.”

As Paul emphasizes in Ephesians 4 and as the Declaration of Barmen so forcefully insisted, the church has only one Lord, and, as a result, there is only one church—one Body of Christ. Ultimately, there are not two or three or more churches. If that were so, it would be a witness *against* the singular Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is something we will need to recall a bit later when we consider the question of schism.

The church is not only Christ’s body. It is also our mother. The third-century bishop of Carthage, Cyprian, famously said “He does not have God for his Father who does not have the church for his mother.” That sentiment and his insistence that “there is no salvation outside the church” were repeated by Calvin almost verbatim.<sup>2</sup> The importance of the church’s role in the Christian’s life is attested by the fact that ecclesiology takes up one-third of Calvin’s *Institutes*. It reflects God’s way of accommodating himself to us, said Calvin, as it provides the external means or aids by which we receive Christ’s benefits. In ordinary terms, there is *no* access to the work of Christ in redemption except through mother church. In fact, our tradition from Calvin to Barth insists that there is no private Christianity; there is only communal Christianity.

And so the church’s role as mother—as the one through whom we receive the means for our spiritual birth and

nurture until our sanctification is complete—is no light matter. Our salvation depends on God’s decision to use the church as the reality through which we receive Christ’s benefits.

Yet, in words that have probably been errantly attributed to Augustine, the church *is* our mother even if sometimes she’s a whore—a biblical concept if the church is anything like Old Testament Israel.<sup>3</sup> I suppose that is why Calvin needed to remind us that we do not believe *in* the church.<sup>4</sup> The church is *us*, and to believe *in* the church would be to misplace our trust, because “sinners are us.” Instead, the church is the community of Christ *in which* we are spiritually born and nurtured. It is, as Barth put, the “cultural and historical environment of Jesus.”<sup>5</sup>

Calvin admitted that the church has some hypocrites. In fact, I think it may be the only institution besides Congress that is *expected* to have hypocrites in its ranks. As John Huffman often reminds us at St. Andrews, when we welcome people to the gathering of the church, we invite them to another weekly session of “Sinners Anonymous.” But as Calvin went on to insist after acknowledging the presence of hypocrites in the church’s midst, still we are commanded to hold the visible church in honor and keep ourselves in communion with it.<sup>6</sup>

Augustine also reputedly once said that God has some people the church doesn’t have, and the church has some people that God doesn’t have. And that opens up the notion that there is an *invisible* church of God’s choosing whose boundaries we cannot always discern. *That* church is always visible to *God*, but its invisibility to *us* is simply a confession of our human finitude. We do the best we can with our limited abilities to know where the true church is to be found. And at that point the Reformers Luther and Calvin were quite helpful.

## Where Is the Church To Be Found?

Calvin insisted that the true church cannot be recognized by the individual quality of its members.<sup>7</sup> In other words, on this score we in the Reformed tradition do not share the Anabaptist assumption that the visible church and the invisible church are one and the same—that the only true church is the pure church or that the church known only to God and the church that we see are coterminous. For Calvin the visible church is no less the true church for tolerating reprobates in its midst.

Then how do we know where the true church is to be found? Calvin insisted that the marks or characteristics of the true church are two: (1) where the Word of God is rightly preached and heard and (2) where the sacraments are properly administered and received.<sup>8</sup> In

other words, Calvin explained, “the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace.”<sup>9</sup> So, with the two marks of the true church we are right back where we started: The church is because Jesus Christ is. What distinguishes the true church from the sham is this: The glory of Christ cannot and must not be compromised. Though it might often seem that the PCUSA is held together by little else but pensions and property, we would do well to recall the words of the Confession of 1967: “Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition.”

Further, our tradition as articulated in the Second Helvetic Confession<sup>10</sup> subscribes to the Augustinian insistence that even if the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered by one who is unholy (or even by a heretic according to Augustine<sup>11</sup>), still the voice of Christ is to be heard, because the Word and the sacraments do not belong to us; they belong to Christ. Faith is required for the effective reception, but the validity of the Word and the sacraments does not depend on our holiness, but on Christ’s promise.

So, if these Christocentric marks make the church visible to *us*, and if the invisibility of its ultimate boundaries (i.e., that which God knows) is a confession of our human finitude, then spanning a 500-year gap Calvin urges us with this bit of pastoral advice: by a “charitable judgment” we may hold all to be members of the church who by their faith, conduct, and participation in the sacraments “confess one same God and one same Christ with us.”<sup>12</sup>

Once again, we come back to where we started. The church comes into existence as it is called into being by the Word of God, and it exists only insofar as it proclaims God’s Word. The particular local church that is not obedient and faithful to proclaim and hear God’s Word—the voice of its Lord—ceases to be the true church. The church lives and is essentially held together by the witness of the Word about Christ. Barth was right to remind us that the true church is not known primarily by its organization or moral quality—not by the qualities that it possesses, but by the divine acts that create and nourish it as heard and seen in the Word and sacraments. But, at the same time, Barth<sup>13</sup> and Barmen<sup>14</sup> both remind us that the church cannot and must not domesticate or imprison this Word of God that calls it continually to repent and reform. Only as the church listens to the Word can the Church be a faithful witness to the Word and the world. Indeed, we can even make idols of our theological systems. Just as Stephen in Acts 7 argued against those who wanted to confine God in a Temple and to “localize” and confine God in their religious system, we need to be reminded that God

cannot be confined in any ecclesiastical political or doctrinal structure of human devising.<sup>15</sup>

If the church is not known primarily by its moral quality, what are we to do with one of the marks of the church that we confess in the Apostles’ Creed—“holiness”? Or, how are we to understand one of the “P’s” in PUP—“purity”? It is necessary to clarify what we mean by “holy” lest, as Calvin put it, “if we are not willing to admit a church unless it be perfect in every respect, we leave no church at all!”<sup>16</sup>

The creed’s characterization of the church as “holy” is not meant for self-justification, but for self-examination. It is not a human ideal that the church has achieved, but the divine reality to which the church is called. It has more to do with where we are headed than with how we have arrived. Calvin recognized that

...the Lord is daily at work in smoothing out wrinkles and cleansing spots. From this it follows that the church’s holiness is not yet complete. The church is holy, then, in the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect: it makes progress from day to day but has not yet reached its goal of holiness....<sup>17</sup>

In other words, there is no perfect church, and so one must have very solid grounds for leaving it. Conversely, as someone has pointed out, if you *do* find a perfect church, don’t join it or you’ll spoil it.

To enhance the progress of holiness Calvin instituted discipline. Martin Bucer, who had a significant influence on Calvin when the two were in Strasbourg (before Calvin’s return to Geneva), made discipline a third mark of the true church (as does the Scots Confession—chapter 18), but Calvin put church discipline in the service of communion. For Calvin, discipline belonged to the organization and functioning of the church—as demonstrated by its inclusion in our *Book of Order*, but discipline does *not* comprise the church’s definition or essence.

### So What About Schism?

Calvin recognized that there were degrees of importance of doctrine. Those having to do with our salvation were to be held with certainty and to go unquestioned. Those that fit more the category of *adiophora*—the nonessential matters—were not to be the basis of schism. He railed against the holier-than-thou Novatians and the Anabaptists “who wish to appear advanced beyond other people.”<sup>18</sup> In correcting what displeases us, Calvin urged us “neither to renounce the communion of the church nor, remaining in it, to disturb its peace and duly ordered discipline.”<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Calvin insisted that no one may leave the church due to the

unholiness of others in the church as long as the marks of the true church are present.<sup>20</sup>

So Calvin argued hard against schism in the body of Christ, urging a minimal number of fundamental beliefs that boiled down to Christ as the single foundation of the church. He recognized that there have always been dissensions and strife in the church—even over important matters, such as those debated by Peter and Paul.<sup>21</sup> Calvin was surprisingly liberal in his attitude toward Rome in this regard. Though he detested its doctrinal deviations and moral lapses, he could tolerate them, but only if he did not also believe that Rome was fatally in error on the one, fundamental, nonnegotiable point—the doctrine of Christ. And, on that score, he would not concede that *he* was guilty of schism, but that “Rome was guilty of heresy and schism from the true church by its rejection of God’s Word and above all by its rejection of Christ.” For Calvin, the painful choice, then, was Rome or Christ, and he had to withdraw from Rome in order to cleave to Christ.<sup>22</sup>

In practice, Calvin admitted that there were particular local Roman Catholic churches that met the Reformer’s criteria of a “true church,”<sup>23</sup> but, to repeat, the Church as a whole had wandered from the Christian faith sometime in the past. In fact, perhaps it is here (along with what I will say about cultivating the virtue of patience) that the Reformed tradition is most helpful when it comes to understanding schism. Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s successor in Zurich, wrote a treatise entitled *Der Alte Glaube*—“The Old Faith”—in which he argued that Protestants were in continuity with the one covenant God had made since the promise was made to Eve in Genesis 3:15. Therefore, contrary to the Roman argument that it was the Protestants who were schismatics, Bullinger argued that it was Rome that had strayed. These Protestant Reformers would use the language of 1 John 2:19 to describe Rome: “They went out from *us*.”

Yet, even in this Calvin was not rash; he counseled gentleness, kindness, and moderation. Calvin urged us to speak the truth in love,<sup>24</sup> for truth without love can be vicious and love without truth can be insipid.

For Calvin unity was both a gift *and a task*.<sup>25</sup> This is clear from the title of the first chapter of Book IV: “Of the true Church: the *duty of cultivating* unity with her, as the mother of all the godly.” Let’s not forget, for instance, that it took the church three centuries of theological debate and sometimes nasty church politics to come up with an ecumenical statement about the full divinity of the Son.

Here I would like to interject wise advice that predates Calvin and our Reformed tradition by many centuries,

but advice with which I think Calvin might concur. It comes from Tertullian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. He wrote a small treatise on *patience*. It was the first treatise in the history of the church on a specific virtue—a virtue that, along with humility, was not considered a virtue in the classical tradition. Tertullian had in mind what the Bible calls “long suffering,” an attribute of God that 1 Peter tells us caused God to wait in the days of Noah. The most visible sign of God’s patience, says Tertullian, is the Incarnation. God allowed himself to be conceived in the womb of Mary, *theotokos*, and waited patiently for nine months to pass before Christ’s birth. He patiently underwent the stages of childhood and adolescence, and, when an adult, did not rush to be recognized. But the supreme example of his patience was his Passion, and now we find the ground for our patience in the Resurrection that allows us to live in hope, the singular mark of patience. To be like God is to abound in patience. To be like the devil himself, wrote Tertullian, is to be overcome by impatience.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps Calvin understood this. It would make sense, since Calvin calls us to exercise a “charitable judgment,” especially in light of Jesus’ warning about pulling up the tares that are entangled with the wheat. After referring to Jesus’ allusion, Calvin firmly states two points:

First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons.<sup>27</sup>

Still, Calvin did not advocate unity at any price—certainly not at the cost of the truth of the Word. Indeed, the principle of unity itself can become idolatrous. While Calvin insisted that the church cannot exclude all those who are not elect, neither can it tolerate disorder or scandal over doctrine and morals insofar as this reflects upon and is an affront to Jesus Christ with whom we, as his body, are in union. Calvin insisted that rightly ordered churches do not bear the wicked.<sup>28</sup> Discipline not only edifies the church and encourages sanctification, but it is for maintaining the honor of God, keeping the good from contaminating the bad, and leading the guilty to repentance (to keep people from endangering themselves).<sup>29</sup> Or, as John Leith has said somewhere, in our tradition “church discipline provides the suitable environment for the work of the Spirit in human hearts.”

## The Mission of the Church

Just as there is only one Lord and one church, so we in the Reformed tradition insist that the biblical narrative traces the history of only one covenant from the time of the Fall. And we in the church find ourselves in what some have characterized as the penultimate act in the drama of salvation.

The character of the church's mission emerges out of its place in God's history-of-salvation. It emerges from that history's center—Jesus Christ—in whom the church has been chosen before the foundation of the world, and then moves out to the world to participate in God's redemption of the cosmos.

As Oscar Cullmann put it, the church lives as witness between the D-Day of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection and the V-Day of the fullness of the coming of God's Kingdom. In between we engage in mopping up exercises as the church testifies to the ultimate victory that Christ's work has ensured. We have not yet arrived. We are called to pilgrimage—to become in *fact* what the church is by *faith*...to move from Ephesians 1-3 to Ephesians 4-6. We are not the Kingdom of God; that would be triumphalism—an intolerable glorification of the church. But the church *is* a branch office of the coming Kingdom.

In fact, in the context of the inaugurated kingdom, God's reign is already here proleptically as we live in the light of the final goal of history. One who was influenced by our tradition, Jacques Ellul, said it forcefully:

This, then, is the revolutionary situation: to be revolutionary is to judge the world by its present state, by actual facts, in the name of a truth which does not yet exist (but which is coming)—and it is to do so because we believe this truth to be more genuine and more real than the reality which surrounds us. Consequently it means bringing the future into the present as an explosive force. It means believing that future events are more important and more true than present events; it means understanding the present in the light of the future, dominating it by the future, in the same way as the historian dominates the past. Henceforth the revolutionary act forms part of history: it is going to create history, by inflecting it toward this future.... the incursion of this event [of the coming Kingdom] into the present is the only force capable of throwing off the dead weight of social and political institutions which are gradually crushing the life out of our present civilization.... To abandon this position would mean ceasing to believe that we have been saved, for we are saved by hope, through faith (Rom 8:24), and hope is precisely this eschatological force in the present world.<sup>30</sup>

When will the church obey the Lord's voice—"fear not, be anxious for nothing, let not your hearts be troubled"? Only when, with patience, it places its trust in the coming One who is the church's reason for existence and its future.

The church's agenda then *is* eschatological. The future consummation of the Kingdom is the reign of God in *all* affairs of his creation—a future that not only sustains the church in its present existence and activity, but makes its task necessary. If the Kingdom comes where God's will is done, as Jesus taught his disciples to pray, then the church must become the present locus of eschatological realities—the portal, if you will, which becomes not merely a preview of a coming attraction, but the means through which the Kingdom actually permeates the world. And, as Paul would remind us, the church is God's means to this end, but it is not the end itself. It is not even the goal of missions. It is the indispensable agent of God's mission to the world.

This is serious stuff. We are reclaiming enemy-occupied territory, overcoming the consequences of the Fall, fulfilling the promise of Genesis 3:15 and, as church, participating in the firstfruits of the redemption of the entire creation, as Paul loudly affirms in Romans 8:18-31.

I remind you of those last lines of Bishop Stone's hymn: "And to one hope she [the church] presses with every grace endured.... 'Mid toil and tribulation and tumult of her war, she waits the consummation of peace forevermore; 'til with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest, and the great church victorious shall be the church at rest."

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), IV/1:661: "This particular element of human history, this earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ, is the Christian community.... It belongs to Him [as his body], and He belongs to it [as its head]. We can put it even more strongly: Because He is, it is; it is, because He is. That is its secret, its being in the third dimension, which is visible only to faith."
2. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.1, 4.
3. Cf. Barth, *CD*, IV.1, 691: "[The church] may become a beggar, it may act like a shopkeeper, it may make itself a harlot, as has happened and still does happen, yet it is always the bride of Jesus Christ."
4. *Institutes*, 4.1.2.
5. See Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. Darrell L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 255.
6. *Institutes*, 4.1.7.
7. *Institutes*, 4.1.2, 7-8.
8. *Institutes*, 4.1.9.
9. *Institutes*, 4.14.17.
10. Busch, 166, 173.

11. Augustine, "On Baptism, Against the Heretics," 4.16.
12. *Institutes*, 4.1.8.
13. *CD I/1*, 259-60.
14. "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," 8.07: When the theological basis of the church is "continually and systematically threatened and rendered ineffective by alien principles" and these are held to be valid, then the "church ceases to be the church."
15. To that end, see "The Confession of 1967," 9.03: All confessions and declarations are "subordinate standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him.... Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition."
16. *Institutes*, 4.1.17.
17. *Institutes*, 4.1.17.
18. See *Institutes*, 4.1.12-13 (and n. 24 on p. 1027).
19. *Institutes*, 4.1.12.
20. *Institutes*, 4.1.19.
21. See the Second Helvetic Confession, 5.133.
22. John Hesselink, "Calvinus Oecumenicus: Calvin's Vision of the Unity and Catholicity of the Church" in *Reformed Review* 44.2 (Winter 1990): 101. Credit is due to Professor Hesselink for some of the insights in this paper.
23. *Institutes*, 4.2.12.
24. *Institutes*, 4.2.5.
25. Hesselink, 99.
26. See Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 283-85.
27. *Institutes*, 4.1.19; cf. 4.1.8.
28. *Institutes*, 4.1.15.
29. *Institutes*, 4.12.5.
30. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2d ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 38-39.

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**The Task Force on the New Form of Government, that would replace the G Section in the *Book of Order*, released its latest draft September 2008. The draft included minor changes to the previous draft that was sent to the 218<sup>th</sup> GA in June 2008. Governing bodies are now invited to make comments to the task force by June 30, 2009. A final proposal that will be sent to the 219<sup>th</sup> GA in 2010 will be available to the church no later than January 15, 2010. The current draft is not substantially different from the previous draft. Please see the study guide, "Altering the Covenant: A Critique of the New Form of Government" in the Mar/Apr 2008 issue of *Theology Matters*. Additional study tools will be available in the coming issues of *Theology Matters*.**

**"What is Missional Ecclesiology" is recommended reading for the church by the task force. It interprets the proposed new Form of Government.**

## A Review of "What is Missional Ecclesiology?"

by Viola Larson

As a new Christian, fifty three years ago, I loved the old hymns of the Church. One favorite was a bit sentimental but true for those who have encountered Jesus Christ. The song, "I Love to Tell the Story,"<sup>1</sup> has lines I consider missional. One verse explains:

I love to tell the story; 'tis pleasant to repeat what seems each time I tell it, more wonderfully sweet. I love to tell the story, for some have never heard the message of salvation from God's own Holy Word.

But of course, one must tell that story in a language and a way that leads to understanding for those in each generation and every nation, who either have never heard or fail to hear the true meaning. And one must keep telling the story, because as another line of the song declares, "I love to tell the story, for those who know it best seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest." Missional surely includes all of the Church as well as her outreach.

Yet there is understandably a debate about the word missional and the meaning of a missional church. The debate about the meaning of a missional church has entered one of the papers offered by the new Form of Government (nFOG) Task Force.

The nFOG Task Force has now released new drafts of its work including *Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Proposed Form of Government* (both are on the PCUSA web site [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org)). One of the documents made available by the task force is *What is Missional Ecclesiology?*. This document is recommended reading for both individuals and groups preparing to study the new drafts. In other words the nFOG Task Force wants members of the PCUSA to shape their thinking around the theological concepts in Rev. Paul Hooker's paper "What is Missional Ecclesiology?"

There are some helpful thoughts in the paper such as "It is not the Church who sends; it is God who sends the Church." Or "Mission does not happen at the initiative of the Church; mission happens at the initiative of God." But, in the paper, the theology concerned with both Church and mission is terribly flawed.

*Missional Ecclesiology* attempts, in the midst of the missional debate, to define not only missional but also to redefine a multitude of words which have always held important meaning for the Church. First it redefines the core message of the Church, and this shapes the whole paper. Next the paper looks at the first part of the Nicene Creed and redefines the words catholic and apostolic.

Beyond the redefinition of those two words, in order to ascribe holiness to the Church, *Missional Ecclesiology* takes sin, and like many Christian Panentheists, places it in the being of God as a redemptive action. Then it turns to the Reformation and its core teaching about the true Church and redefines the proclamation of the Word, the giving of the sacraments and discipline.

I will look at each problem in turn.

### **The Core Message of the Church**

In its attempt to define missional, *Missional Ecclesiology* claims, "the *foundation for all mission*—all 'sending'—*is the act of the Triune God to enter the world in Christ, to suffer and die and be raised again*" (italics author's). But in another part of the paper, under its third truth about mission, the paper destroys the foundation it has just laid. The third truth is, "*The calling of the church is to be a community of witness to the future God is creating*" (italics author's).

After giving several biblical word pictures to explain the future including the phrase "kingdom of God," the paper redefines the Church's core message as it claims:

But running through all this language is the common theme of anticipation of the future God is creating in the world. The character of that future [is?] visible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but the Church is not a memorial community called simply to remember and relive the past. The calling of the Church is to be a community of witness to and participation in God's future. It draws its strength from its hope for what God will yet do, more even than from its memory of what God has already done.

No! The good news, the witness of the Church, what God has already done, is what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross and in his resurrection. It is perhaps *Missional Ecclesiology's* use of Jürgen Moltmann's theology that allows it to place eschatology, the future, above the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, thus changing the mission and witness of the Church. As John W. Cooper, Professor of philosophical theology at Calvin Theological Seminary puts it, "Moltmann argues that the unity of God is eschatological. God is completely One only in the fulfillment of the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

But the Reformed and biblical view holds to the completeness and freedom of God and places the mission of the Church absolutely in the telling of the story of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection. The first sermon, preached in Jerusalem to Jewish people from all over the known world, is still the witness of the Church today. Peter speaking of the resurrection of Jesus proclaims, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified."

Peter goes on to urge his audience, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself" (Acts 2:36, 38-39).

Because Jesus Christ is alive and the head of his Church, to proclaim constantly his death and resurrection does not make the Church a "memorial community" but a living community nourished by the life of Christ and sent with a life-giving message for the world.

### **Redefining the Nicene Creed**

**Catholic:** The paper discusses the Nicene Creed's confession that, "*The Church is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic*" (italics author's). First it attempts to

show how the Church in her life has not lived up to the Creed. She is not holy. She is not catholic. *Missional Ecclesiology* defines catholic as, “inclusive,” using the Greek definition of *katholos*, giving the meaning “pertaining to the whole.”

But the whole of the Church does not necessarily mean “inclusive” if those included under the term are not those who have turned in repentance to Jesus Christ. The catholic or universal Church does not include those who reject Jesus Christ or his Lordship. Rebuking the Church, the paper claims, “we have routinely squelched and silenced people on the basis of culture, language, or lifestyle.”

**Apostolicity:** *Missional Ecclesiology* says, “The apostolicity of the Church becomes the ground of our calling to be one, holy, and catholic.” However, it defines apostolic as being sent because “God the Father sends God the Son to live in, die for, and be raised from the world through the power of the Spirit.” While that sounds good it is not the traditional meaning the Church has given to apostolic. It is not the meaning the authors of the Nicene Creed intended.

The word “apostle” in the Greek of course is about being sent, but apostolic refers to the teaching of the Church. Luke, in the book of Acts, states that the new believers “were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Calvin contrasts this verse with the Catholic understanding of apostolic succession. He writes,

Do we seek the true Church of Christ? The picture of it is here painted to the life. He[Luke] begins with doctrine, which is the soul of the Church. He does not name doctrine of any kind but that of the apostles which the Son of God had delivered by their hands. Therefore, wherever the pure voice of the Gospel sounds forth, where men continue in the profession thereof, where they apply themselves to the regular hearing of it that they may profit thereby, there beyond all doubt is the Church.”<sup>2</sup>

The Church is only true to her calling and mission when she adheres to the teaching of the Apostles as found in the Holy Scriptures. God’s sending is never in contradiction with his Word.

**Oneness:** *Missional Ecclesiology* rightly equates the Church’s unity, holiness and universality with God’s oneness, holiness and outreach to the whole of life. But as it works the process out, and the paper does see it as a process, it changes the biblical teaching about God and the Church.

The paper insists that the Church’s oneness is being completed “in the new reality God is creating.” Here it is not the paper’s idea that the Church is growing into a unity that is the problem, rather the idea that God himself is still creating some new thing to bring about that unity. The new thing, however, has already occurred with Christ. It is complete. Now, as Paul explains, God has given gifts to the Church that she might “attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

**Holiness:** *Missional Ecclesiology* insists that the holiness of the Church happens as a result of Christ’s death on the cross which for him means that “all that is unholy” is being “claimed and redeemed—including the sinfulness and failure of the Church.” It is correct to state that the Church is holy because of the death of Christ on the cross and the redemption he gives his people. Our righteousness is after all the righteousness of Christ. But Jesus Christ does not claim sin in order to redeem it. It is not sin that is redeemed, rather it is humanity that is redeemed from sin.

A deeper understanding of what the paper implies can be seen by its statement about the universality or catholic nature of the Church. It says:

In the death of Jesus, the separation of Father and Son at the moment of the cross is so great that it creates a space within which all the sin, brokenness, and fractionalization of the world can be included and brought into the being of God by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, no human condition or reality lies outside the power of God to heal and redeem.<sup>3</sup>

This thought, once again, is couched in Christian pantheism. It is Christian because it includes the Incarnation and the Trinity. It is pantheism because it places evil in the being of God in order to redeem it. It in fact necessitates evil in the being of God since the new reality is a movement forward toward something God has not yet created. It is not necessary to see redemption this way and it changes the way the believer understands God, the Church, and mission. It invites, in a very practical manner, an inclusiveness that excuses sin rather than repentance and transformation.

## **Redefining the Reformation Marks of the True Church**

*Missional Ecclesiology* turns to the Reformers’ insistence that the true Church is known by its proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and discipline. The paper suggests that others have dismissed these marks of the true Church as being too “internal,” too “in house” to allow for a

missional ecclesiology. While the paper disagrees, it “re-understands” the marks “in light of the self-sending of God into the world.”

**Proclamation of the Word:** *Missional Ecclesiology’s* reworking of the proclamation of the Word references its understanding of God’s new reality. It argues:

It [the proclamation] articulates in word and work the new reality God is creating for people, and it invites people into that new reality. Missional proclamation invites people not merely to “hear the old, old story” but to understand their own personal narratives as part of that larger and ongoing story of God’s engagement with the world.

This places each personal story on par with the holy act of God in Jesus Christ. This way of framing proclamation not only allows mission to begin with human experience it makes human experience the gospel, the good news. But the good news begins with Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and it ends with believers united to the resurrected Lord. This is the only story; the true new reality which is the old, old story.

**The Sacraments:** Once again *Missional Ecclesiology* uses its concept of God’s new reality to reinterpret the sacraments. It says, “the sacraments—understood missionally—become a nexus between our reality and the new reality of God.” Using this understanding it goes beyond the true understanding of baptism. The paper says:

In Baptism, we do more than initiate a new life into the fellowship of the congregation. We also publicly affirm our solidarity with those outside the congregation, because we understand that it is by the grace of God and not by our deserving that we are brought to the font.

The paper seems to interpret the Lord’s Supper in much the same way as it does Baptism, but its use of Lk 13:29 makes its intent unclear.

The sacraments are a sign and seal of what God is doing in an individual’s life. The Church does not affirm her solidarity with those outside the congregation through the sacraments. There simply is no connection between the two actions. Beyond that the congregation must constantly affirm her solidarity with the universal or catholic Church, but not with the world. Instead she proclaims the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to the world.

**Discipline:** It is important that *Missional Ecclesiology* has addressed discipline in the Church and it is right that it is “much more than judicial process.” It rightly adds that “the proper use of the Rules of Discipline to

reconcile and restore” is an important part. The paper also insists that such discipline must be part of a community which practices “mutual accountability.” *Missional Ecclesiology* sees the community engaged in prayer, worship and Bible study. This is good.

But later in the paper, under Missional Ecclesiology and Missional Polity, it enlarges on the concept of accountability and discipline, and it does this under several subtitles. Under a missional polity which defines the work of the councils of the Church, it once again insists that the Church’s mission must reflect the new reality that God is creating.

The paper describes essential tasks not essentials of the faith. It also describes unity in the connectional work of the Church councils. But all of this is grounded not in the good news of what Jesus Christ has already done but in the new reality of what God is creating. This means that the essential tasks of the Church can become work that is outside of the biblical mandate and instead pertains to the new thing. The new reality can itself shape an improper use of discipline.

Under the missional polity which shapes mission and makes it flexible, *Missional Ecclesiology* says:

A missional polity must identify the essential functions and define the standards of the Church, but it must also provide maximum flexibility to fulfill those functions within the limits imposed by the standards. So, *for instance, a missional polity might define the basic educational, behavioral, and competence standards for those seeking ordination to the ministry of the teaching elder, but permit presbyteries to devise their own process for determining whether those standards have been satisfactorily met by a given candidate.* (Emphasis mine)

## Conclusion

This paper rather than helping those who are studying the Form of Government drafts will confuse, shape erroneous views about God and his Church, or simply cause more division in the body of Christ.

The paper replaces Reformed biblical theology with an unacceptable theology that promotes the progressive understanding that God is doing something new in our generation. It thereby marginalizes all orthodox, Reformed and evangelical Presbyterians, pushing their theological views out of sight as the Church begins her deliberations on the acceptability of the new Form of Government.

1. John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers: From Plato to the Present*, (Grand Rapids: Baker

- Academic 2006), 249. Cooper is citing, Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 149.
2. John Calvin, *Calvin New Testament Commentaries, The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1, translators John W. Fraser & W.J.G. McDonald, Editors, David w. Torrance & Thomas F. Torrance, reprint, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977), 85.
  3. Hooker attempts to connect this thought to Karl Barth by foot noting a quote from Rowan Williams, “Barth on the Triune God,” in *Karl Barth: Studies of His Theological Method*. Ed. Stephen Sykes. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 177. The quote is, “Our distance from God is itself taken from God, finds place in God.... In the Incarnation, God distances himself from

himself.... And the separation between Father and Son is bridged by the Spirit.”

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# Lessons from Nehemiah on Wall-Building

by Terry Schlossberg

*The last time we met as a Coalition Gathering, we were looking at a plan for reformation called “Let Us Rise Up and Build.” The title is taken from the second chapter of the book of Nehemiah. I’ve read that book several times. I think I still cannot imagine the condition of Jerusalem when the people living there made a commitment to rebuild the wall around that demolished and ruined place. It wasn’t piles of stone that Nehemiah found when he arrived. It was rubble. Restoration was no small challenge. And, in fact, it wasn’t very long before the people changed their tune. They barely had a start at the project when angry opposing forces arrived to taunt them and disparage their work. There was the scorn of Sanballet: “What are these feeble Jews doing?... Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” Tobiah, the Ammonite, jeered at the weakness of the wall that the people were throwing their strength and energy into: “If even a little fox climbs up on it,” he sneered, “it will break into pieces again.”*

As these mockers looked on, the people sorted through the rubbish for the stones they would put one on top of another. The work was long and hard and when the opposition became more threatening, they lost heart. They complained that “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.” And to top it off, their friends and families outside the city

implored them to give it up and come home. It looked as if the Nehemiah project was finished.

I know that when this story is retold, the emphasis often is on Nehemiah the organizer, who at this point divides his forces into fighters and builders and thus accomplishes the completion of the wall. But that was only his tactical move. Nehemiah’s strategy was to remind the people of why they were rebuilding the wall, for whom they were rebuilding the wall, and under whose protection they were rebuilding the wall. “Do not be afraid of them,” he said—that visible opposition up on the hill, mounted on horses and armed with weapons, “Remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.”

Nehemiah’s strategy was to help the people lift their eyes from their awful circumstances to the Lord who is sovereign over all circumstances, and who is ever ready to change the circumstances in the blink of an eye.

This was an effective strategy. The immediate result was that the enemy withdrew and the people went back to work.

We know that this did not mark the end of their troubles. But we also know what they did not know when they began to make something of their rubble. We

know that they finished that wall. And we know that it was a grand wall that encircled the entire city. We know that much more than a fox climbed the wall. Great companies of rulers, choirs, and marching bands paraded around the top of the wall, rejoicing with great joy, the Scripture says, so that, “the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off.” If you have visited Jerusalem, even now you can have a sense of what a monumental achievement this was. Nehemiah says at the conclusion, “When our enemies heard that the wall had been completed, all the nations round about us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.” (6:16)

We are living in a time in the Church that is analogous to the early chapters of Nehemiah. We do not think we are living in Chapter 6 and marching on top of the wall. We are living in the midst of a once great denomination that is now in ruins. The challenge of rebuilding is before us and rubble is the stuff we are given for the rebuilding project. Discouragement and loss of heart are hard to avoid. Even this vote on the new Amendment B tempts us to discouragement.

But this vote does not discourage us because we keep losing. No. Actually, we keep winning this vote. And we have done that by wider margins each time we vote.

It’s discouraging, isn’t it, because we have to keep voting on the same thing. It’s like the people of Jerusalem getting up every morning and finding the same pile of burned rubble, and yet another part of the broken down wall to repair.

It’s discouraging and its tiring, isn’t it, because even when success comes, we discover that there are still breaches in the wall. The presbyteries, by repeated and stronger votes, demonstrate the will of the church on this matter, and then the opposition finds a way to thwart the majority—by defying the constitution, or using authoritative interpretation to rewrite the constitution.

It’s confidence-shaking because the rubble we have to deal with includes losing the support of our friends who abandon their posts and go elsewhere. So, while the world around us presses against the biblical standard, our own numbers are diminished.

So, we too are tempted to complain that: “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”

Would Nehemiah’s strategy work for us?

It’s probably the only strategy that really works: Lifting our eyes from the rubble and remembering the Lord who is great and awesome.

This fourth vote is our opportunity to put that strategy to work.

It is another opportunity for this prominent mainline denomination to stand against the prevailing trend of the age. It is another opportunity to hold up the timeless biblical truth that marriage and godly sexuality are demonstrations of lives committed to follow the teaching of the Lord of Scripture.

It is another opportunity for us as a body to proclaim and rejoice in the power of the cross to transform lives. It is another opportunity for the Church to bear witness to her faith in the Holy Spirit’s power to forgive and receive the repentant sinner. And day by day, to effect the most extreme of make-overs—to create a new person in the very image of Christ. The wall was evidence of and witness to God’s work among his people. So also is the Presbyterian Church’s maintaining a high standard of sexual morality in a sexually immoral age.

I hear some things said about this issue, which we are voting on, that I think need the corrective of Nehemiah.

We hear sexual morality described as a peripheral issue. We hear it said that we should be more concerned about what is at the center and less concerned about these “peripheral” issues. But, it is because of what is at the center, the place that God inhabits, that the periphery is important. The center was why the wall mattered. And sexual standards matter for the same reason.

We did not invent sexual moral standards. They were handed to us as the design and good purpose for our lives by the One who dwells at the center. The Scripture makes so much of the marriage relationship as to compare the husband and wife to Christ and his Church. It is Scripture that warns us against sexual sin and declares what is and what isn’t good, and blessed, and moral in sexual relationships. The wording of the current G-6.0106b is rooted in Scripture, in our ordination vows, in the church’s historic teaching on marriage. This paragraph of the Book of Order bears witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that brings new life and new power to us. Our weakest confession and repentance can actually open up heaven to us in the transformation of our lives by the work of God’s Holy Spirit in us. It is our forgiven and repentant lives that qualify us for service to the Church.

This is peripheral only in the sense that it is where our presence and our visible witness come closest to contact

with the outside world. Our witness about sexuality and the way in which we live out our sexuality in this age is a declaration to the world of who we are. The standard held up by G-6.0106b of fidelity in marriage and chastity in singleness is a circle of protection for the whole community. And it is a clear line of demarcation between the Church and the unbelieving world.

We are told that we are facing an inevitable acceptance of homosexual relationships both in the world and in the Church and that we need to step back and reconsider how big a deal we want to make of such a small thing.

Even though it is our opposition who sought and gained this vote—we are told that these debates are too contentious and divisive and that the contention is harmful to the Church. We are told that we must stop these incessant debates that we did not invite, and turn our attention to the weightier matters of mission and evangelism. That we need to join in common mission with our opponents and let our disagreements over sexual relationships go.

But surely we see that we have no Gospel to proclaim, no mission, no evangelism, if we turn away from upholding the standards that define the manner of life of the believer; if we turn away from the path that seeks to grow into the knowledge of Christ through daily acts of repentance and obedience; if, in fact, we turn away from the hope of the transformed life for our brothers and sisters who are in bondage to sinful sexual relationships.

We do indeed face hostility in this call to remain faithful and constant in the struggle for the Church's witness in our age. It is the same sort of terrible spiritual battle that others before us faced. Martin Luther, seeing the same misunderstanding and the same loss of heart in his own century, wrote these words:

If I protest with loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved and to be steady on all the battlefield is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that one point.

This is it. This matter of sexual relationships is exactly that little point which the world and the devil are attacking right now, in our age. And to confess Christ now, in our age, this is the point on which we must not flinch. We must go faithfully and confidently into this vote, well-prepared and determined to deliver a stronger vote than last time around.

Some of the finest words of witness and counsel on this matter have come from our high church court, the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission. In their unanimous decision in the *Bush* case last February, the court wrote this: "Under our polity, violations of behavioral standards are to be addressed through repentance and reconciliation, not by exception or exemption." If we are to be truly the church on this matter, we will lift our eyes above the rubble and remember the great and awesome Lord of the Church. We will hold high the biblical standard of fidelity in marriage between a man and a woman and chastity in singleness. And we will pray for and minister to the end that our erring brothers and sisters be led to repentance and reconciliation that is at the very center of the Gospel message.

The substitute amendment gives us at least four reasons for voting against it. First, its rationale makes clear its intent to separate Jesus Christ from Scripture so that what Scripture says can be discounted. Second, the amendment has no ordination requirement. The "shall" language is gone and a vague "faithfulness" is assumed. Third, the language of "fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or chastity in singleness" will disappear as a standard for ordination, and it is not likely to matter if that standard appears anywhere else in our denominational documents. And fourth, each ordaining body will be free to act without reference to the will of the majority on manner of life standards for holding office in the PC(USA). But the majority will be negatively affected by the actions of a minority in this new "local option" situation. It is essential that we vote "no" on Amendment B.

We cannot keep this matter from coming back again and again. In our form of government, the will of the people apparently can be tested *ad nauseum*. But there are at least two very important things we can do to encourage an end to endless voting.

First, we can discourage future votes by delivering a stronger-than-ever "No" vote in our presbyteries. Though a simple majority wins, the church has delivered super-majority votes twice on amendments like this one. We need to lend our support to doing that again. We need to reaffirm that the church knows her mind on this matter.

And, we can discourage future votes by focusing attention on cultural change. We have been good at delivering strong votes. But we cannot hope to *continue* doing that if we neglect the influences on the culture in which we live and do ministry. We need to do the hard pastoral work of preaching and teaching and offering a loving environment and ministry in our churches. The workshops here and the resources on the Coalition's

website will help you with that. We need your participation in building culture-changing ministry in our denomination.

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*Mrs. Terry Schlossberg is campaign director for the Presbyterian Coalition. This presentation was given at the Presbyterian Coalition Gathering in October 2008, Newport Beach, CA. It is reprinted with permission.*

**For resources to defeat Amendment B, see the  
Presbyterian Coalition website  
at [www.presbycoalition.org](http://www.presbycoalition.org) and  
Theology Matters website  
[www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)**

# The Lamp Has Not Yet Gone Out

by James R. Edwards

At the beginning of 1 Samuel, Israel finds itself in dire circumstances. It is not the only time in Israel's history that the faith was close to extinction—one thinks of Elijah's day when Yahweh worship hung by a thread. Nevertheless, 1 Samuel was clearly the most desperate moment between Moses and David. The complexity of the situation needs to be parsed out if this critical juncture is to be properly understood.

The great leaders of the Exodus—Moses, Aaron, Eleazar, Joshua, Caleb, and the elders of Israel—have all died and passed from the scene. One cannot read the end of Joshua and beginning of Judges without sensing the melancholy at the passing of an era that will never be recovered. The various tribes are now left with the formidable task of completing the conquest of Canaan with leaders of lesser ability, parochial vision, and sporadic tenure.

Second, Israel's loose tribal confederacy and occasional charismatic chieftains are unable to compete with the cultural and technological superiority of the Philistines. Israel's political and religious populism, characterized by each person doing what seems right in his own eyes (Judg 21:25), is incapable of defeating Israel's enemies without or sustaining the cause of peace and unity within. This is unmistakably evident in Judges 17-18, where the establishment of a personal priest at a seeker-friendly sanctuary results in idolatry and theological anarchy. The brutal rape scene at Gibeah in Judges 19-20 further illustrates the moral depravity of the tribe of Benjamin and the moral bankruptcy of Israel as a whole. The *laissez-faire* tribal alliances and

covenant festivals, and the rustic religious sanctuary at Shiloh, are no match for the idolatry, syncretism, Baal worship, and postmodern culture of Canaan. Israel was seeded in a league in which it could not compete.

Third, 1 Samuel attests that times of transition and uncertainty *may* bring forth leaders of exceptional ability, but they *always* bring forth greedy elements fueled by opportunism and corruption. Political and religious systems disintegrate because of weak and incompetent leadership. It is precisely the weak, incompetent, and uncommitted who succumb to corruption rather than uphold the principles for which they were installed. First Samuel opens on this unfortunate note. The complacent leadership of Eli leaves the sanctuary at Shiloh unprotected—and his sons Hophni and Phinehas abuse it for self-gain and vice.

This is the situation in which the tribes find themselves at the beginning of 1 Samuel. Disparate and desperate, the tribal amphictyony faces a leadership vacuum. The tribes function according to an archaic organizational model that is ill-equipped to deal with the situation in Canaan, and especially against Philistia. Israel's political and religious system is exposed to abuse and piracy by personalities and special-interests.

In this context an unannounced and unnamed "man of God" pronounces a blistering judgment (1 Sam 1:27-36). Given the moral turpitude in the tribal amphictyony, we should expect the judgment to fall on Israel's immorality. But it does not. Rather, the man of

God condemns the clergy. Of all the tribes of Israel, the tribe of Levi had been chosen to offer sacrifices, wear the ephod (the priestly garb), and burn incense. The priesthood was intended to symbolize and safeguard Israel's eternal call. But Eli's sons have made a scandal of ordination standards, and instead of rebuking them, Eli has accommodated his sons rather than honoring God. According to the man of God, Eli "maliciously tramples the sacrifices and offerings that I have commanded." He has condoned what God despises. Judgment has fallen on Eli and his house: his power will be broken, his sons will die suddenly, and God's call, which was intended to be *in perpetuity*, will be revoked.

The scene now changes to the boy Samuel (1 Sam 3). The story is well known from Sunday school and children's sermons. This is anything but a children's story, however, for the driving point of the story must be omitted if it is reduced to a morality tale for children. God appears to the boy Samuel and announces an equally scathing judgment: Eli knew about the iniquity of his sons, but did nothing—or less than he could have done. "The iniquity of the house of Eli will never be expiated by sacrifice or offerings." Perhaps you note what I note: the judgment of the man of God and God's judgment here seem to fall on the wrong person. The real culprits are Hophni and Phinehas. But Hophni and Phinehas play almost no role in the judgment. The judgment again falls on Eli. This is unsettling because, as a priest, Eli looks decent enough. True, he could have done more to prevent the mischief of his sons, but could not similar things be said of all of us? He was certainly not wantonly derelict in his ministerial duties. Perhaps like many of us who are clergy, Eli tries to be understanding and tolerant in the face of diverse theologies and lifestyles.

Now, in between these two judgments occurs a terse but prophetic declaration. "The boy Samuel was serving Yahweh before Eli, and the word of Yahweh was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.... The lamp of God had not yet been extinguished, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple of Yahweh next to the altar of God" (1 Sam 3:1-3).

"The word of Yahweh was rare." That is a strong condemnation of both the preaching and catechesis of the day. There were priests and prophets, but one did not often hear the word of God from them. But we already know this, for we would not be treated to a double dose of judgment from the man of God and the divine announcement to Samuel were this not the case. What comes as a surprise is the simple assurance that despite all this, "the lamp of God had not yet been extinguished." A word of hope in bleak circumstances is worth pondering.

Two things are remarkable in 1 Samuel 2-3. The first is the rebuke of the clergy. The priestly-clerical office is held to a rigorous standard in this narrative. We can understand the severity of the rebuke with regard to the flagrant abuses of Hophni and Phinehas, but Eli seems less deserving. As we noted above, however, the brunt of the rebuke falls not on the two sons, but on Eli—relentlessly and repeatedly so. Ordination was instituted by God to ensure the continuing power of the divine word in the life of the people of God. The ordained leader is a steward of the sacred tradition. The ordained steward guards and defends the holiness of God, and recounts the tradition in such a way that the people of God can see their own election and participate in the continuance of the saving story. The ordained leader, in other words, is a critical link in a three-fold nexus between God, his saving history, and the people of God. When the ordained office is misappropriated, the saving lifeline is endangered. The outrages of Hophni and Phinehas are different from the "indiscretions" of Eli, but *both sever the saving lifeline* according to 1 Samuel 2-3. It is worth recalling that the Apostle Paul says something very similar: the judgment of God falls not only on those who do such things, but equally on those who *condone* such things (Rom 1:32). This is surely an admonition to clergy to walk worthy of our calling.

The second remarkable thing is the "lamp" that burns bravely in the dark world of 1 Samuel 2-3. The lamp, of course, is related to Samuel, whose name is woven in and out of 1 Samuel 3:1-3. But the lamp is not simply Samuel. Beginning in 1 Samuel 8, Samuel, now Israel's chief judge, prophet, priest, general, and leader, ushers in the monarchy, which becomes the greatest political reorganization in Israel's history. The boy Samuel is the beginning of something in moribund Israel that will grow and develop into Israel's greatest day. This will not happen suddenly, or magically, or by turning the clock back to a better day. Rather, God is directing Israel's eyes to the future in the prophecy of the man of God. "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest who will act according to my own heart and soul, and I will build up for him a true house and he shall walk before my Anointed One (= Messiah) forever" (1 Sam 2:35). From the rotten core of the problem, God elects to begin the process that will lead to Israel's renewal. From this "lamp," God will build an "enduring house of his anointed one," i.e., the house of David. Samuel's lamp will in time become the "lamp of Israel" in King David (2 Sam 21:17). The "lamp" is thus the providence of God that will raise up Samuel to be a faithful priest. As a faithful priest, Samuel will heed God's word both in the restructuring of Israel and in the anointing of David as Israel's greatest king and Messianic prototype.

But this is to get ahead of the story. In 1 Samuel 2-3 we are not told what the lamp will accomplish or how things will turn out. We are not told that regarding our denomination either. A “lamp” is a modest image. A “lamp” is not a full and final blueprint, but simply an image of hope. A lamp does not illuminate everything, although it does provide enough light to carry on and move forward. The “lamp” means that God is still working, but it does not tell us how he is working, or what he is doing, or when he will do it. In 1 Samuel 2-3, God is working through very few persons, indeed, seemingly only through the boy Samuel; God is working in small ways, perhaps in only one way. It is the small and insignificant that God habitually chooses for his purposes. Peter of Damaskos, a twelfth century Orthodox saint, said, “It was through victories in small things that the fathers won their great battles.” And not only the fathers, but our Lord himself. Through humble Mary and a mean manger and insignificant Nazareth the Incarnation takes form in the world; with five loaves Jesus feeds five-thousand; through the foolish things of the world God shames the wise, and through the weak things of the world he shames the powerful.

In desperate times it is hard to be content with a mere lamp. A lamp rarely provides the light we want. It may

not bring the results we work and pray for, or as soon as we want them, perhaps not even in our lifetimes. For all these reasons a lamp may be a disappointing image. But ultimately a lamp is not disappointing, for it communicates the one thing necessary, with which we can live, without which we cannot. A “lamp” is the symbol of God’s presence and God’s abiding promise with us. It means, quite simply, that God is still in the story, and with God in the story all things are possible. The lamp has not gone out. God is still present, still at work. The lamp allows us to surrender our presuppositions, our conditions for what should happen, and when. “Walk in the light you have,” says Jesus. “As you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become sons of the light” (John 12:35-36). The lamp allows us to walk in the light God gives, to do the small but necessary things the lamp makes possible, and above all, to trust that the lamp is a prelude to the Light of the world, who overcomes the darkness of the world. “Believe in the light”!

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## **The Reformation of the Church: Where Is the Power Lodged?**

**by Sue Cyre**

There has been an insistence by some evangelicals for a number of years that first, renewing the church has failed and second, that the renewal groups should work more closely together to lead the church, possibly joining together as one super-group.

In answer to the first criticism, renewal hasn’t failed even though there remains much to be done. Just to name a few successes: the Justice-Love paper was defeated; the Trinity paper was received but not adopted or approved; the fidelity and chastity amendment (G-6.0106b) was put in the Constitution and

defended twice against removal (this attempt to replace it, is the third attack on it); the Women’s Ministry Unit that was a major sponsor of the Re-Imagining Conference no longer exists; the GA has been told to destroy any remaining copies of the sexuality curriculum that was unbiblical.

The 1992 position on abortion is more moderate than the former position. The GA has condemned partial-birth abortion. The list goes on. The renewal groups perhaps have not done a sufficient job in reminding us what has been accomplished in the renewal of the

church. There is a reason for that, which brings us to the second point.

The successes that the church has experienced in renewal are because some commissioners to presbyteries and the General Assembly acted faithfully to obey Christ's will revealed in Scripture. The power to do right, the power to reform the church, does not lie with renewal groups. The successes are not the successes of the renewal groups. They are the successes of faithful, courageous commissioners. Renewal groups can only provide background on issues, monitoring of denominational activities, help with process, and resources for the issues. The power to reform the church lies with church members, elders, and clergy. The successes are their successes.

The desire of some people for a super-renewal group may stem from a faulty view of the locus of power in the church. Some people view "Louisville" and the "General Assembly," as the locus of "bad" power in the church. Those people therefore want a super-renewal group to be the "good" power on their behalf. They think that by representing a large constituency, this super-renewal group can influence the bad power and bring change. It's a model of back-room deals with renewal people representing evangelicals in the back-room trying to strike deals with the denominational powers. That notion of power, however, is contrary to our constitution and if it occurred, it would subvert the constitution.

The power to do right and bring reform to the church lies with church members. It is church members who elect their pastor and their elders, and those in turn elect commissioners to presbytery. The commissioners to presbytery elect commissioners to General Assembly.

The commissioners to General Assembly elect denominational leaders like the PCUSA Stated Clerk and General Assembly Council Director. All of the committees of the General Assembly including the GA Nominating Committee, the GA Permanent Judicial Commission, the Advisory Committee on the Constitution, plus 500 other positions are elected by commissioners sent by presbyteries to the General

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Assembly. General Assembly actions are determined by the votes of those commissioners who are elected by presbyteries.

Church members, elders, and clergy have the power to reform the church. It is their informed participation and vote that will bring change. This means that church members, elders, and clergy must know the faith of the church in Scripture and as expressed in the *Book of Confessions*. They must know the polity or governance of the church found in the *Book of Order*. They must take steps to insure that people elected to their session know Scripture, the confessions and the *Book of Order*. They should assure themselves that the person nominated for the session or as a candidate for Minister of Word and Sacrament is living a life in accordance with Scripture and the constitution and will not depart from them.

The PCUSA constitution gives the power of governance to the church members who elect their leaders. It is the power of Jesus Christ himself that works through individuals, leaders, congregations, and sessions who seek his will revealed in his Word and then step out in courage and boldness to reform the church for the sake of his Name and for his glory.

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