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# The Ecclesiastical Posture of an Evangelical

Melvin Tinker and Peter Sanlon

## Introduction

An evangelical minister explains his ecclesiology to the Anglo-catholic bishop...

Yet another journal article ridicules evangelicals for lacking ecclesiology...

A disaffected believer gives up on evangelical ecclesiology for riches elsewhere...

At what point in each of the above situations was the argument for an evangelical ecclesiology lost?

Perhaps the evangelical minister contending for an evangelical view of church failed to grasp the precise nature of the Elizabethan Settlement? Perhaps the nuance of the Greek word for church in the New Testament has faded since college? Perhaps the daily grind of ministerial duties has crowded out time for detailed study of the Reformation? Perhaps the opponents are wilfully obtuse and it is all their own fault?

Or perhaps the ecclesiastical views of evangelicals are doomed to be correct but unheeded at each point they are brought into play, because the battle is lost before it is engaged? That would be the view of Malcom Gladwell in his best selling book, 'Blink'.<sup>1</sup> Gladwell argues that many decisions are made in life almost instantaneously, in the blink of an eye. We are wrong to think such decisions are guided mainly by instinct, racism, rashness or intuition. Rather, he demonstrates, such decisions are often highly rational and surprisingly accurate. The distinguishing thing about decisions made in the blink of an eye is merely their incredible speed—and the fact that in order to avoid the implications of our giving in to decisions made in the blink of an eye, we rationalise the conclusion after the event. The sociology, psychology and experimental data is pretty convincingly on Gladwell's side. From a Christian perspective, we can add that he is studying the nature of human decision making and concluding that people truly are wonderfully complex creatures, capable of incredible insight and speed of judgment. His scientific conclusions are in the spirit of Psalm 8.

What does this study have to say to evangelicals contending for the evangelical view of church? It suggests that if we want to not just be *correct*, but also *convincing*, we have to not only have the right view but also be the right sort of people. The decision as to whether or not we are convincing is often made in the blink of an eye. Within seconds of meeting an evangelical, the other person has concluded that the evangelical is superficial. It may be a caricature—it may be a judgment made in the blink of an eye—sadly it may be the truth. We can have the correct view of ecclesiology, but unless we can become the sort of people who do not lose the argument before it has begun, we may as well not begin.

When we engage with other people on the issue of ecclesiology, we have to recognise that we need to not just have the correct answers, but to have so held to and imbibed the correct views that we have a posture to life, ministry and others that is deeply convincing. When people reject our ecclesiology it is often because they are rejecting us. This may be because they are wilfully wrong theologically, but if we sincerely wish to convince, reform and change others we cannot afford to make that assumption. We need first, rather, to develop a posture that convinces.

### 1. A Posture for Convincing Others

An evangelical seeking to convince somebody else of their ecclesiology can worry they do not have all the technical arguments clearly rehearsed, or get depressed by the fierceness of the inevitable opposition. It ought to be re-assuring then to consider the possibility that we are convincing not primarily by our correct arguments, but by being people who embody the reality of what it is to be church. In the eventuality that somebody rejects our ecclesiology and opposes our ministry, if we have been people of depth and maturity in our posture towards others, conscience will be on our side; both ours' and our opponents'. The key to having a posture that is not only correct but also convinces, is to live in the circle of, and benefit in right proportion from, two things—our living heartbeat and our family heritage. We need to be animated by the pounding heartbeat of Scripture and shaped by the family heritage of the Reformation.

### 2. Our Heartbeat: Scripture

Every beat of the heart brings life and energy. If we believe that Scripture is our heartbeat then we affirm in life and deed that the Bible is more than a guide to

correct theology; it animates and enthrals our every aspiration and action. Living with this heartbeat will be manifest in the opening seconds of conversation and is commended by minor actions as much as major claims.

### The teaching of Jesus

A good place to begin exploring the heartbeat of Scripture on this issue of ecclesiology is the first time the term ‘church’ is used by Jesus. This is recorded in Matthew 16, a passage over which much ink, if not blood, has been spilt.

This passage marks a quantum leap forward in the disciples’ understanding of Jesus, for it is from this point on that he begins explicit teaching about his mission which will lead him to the cross (v. 21ff)—

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Yes, he is identified as the Messiah. But this is no mere political Christ, hence the cautionary warning (v. 20)—‘he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.’ He was to be a suffering Christ, and so we have an amplification of the Divine Voice heard at Jesus’ baptism which links Psalm 2 and Isaiah 42. Peter has now recognised the Psalm 2 part; Jesus teaching in verses 21ff unpacks the Isaiah part—which is not so readily received (v. 22)—‘Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!”’ This is the wider setting of which the seminal saying of Jesus (v. 15) is a part, “What about you?” Jesus asked. “Who do you say I am?” 16. Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17. Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 18. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. 19. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.” Two questions immediately spring to mind: What is the church that Jesus is going to build, and what is the ‘rock’ upon which he is going to build it?

As with many statements of Jesus, the background is the Old Testament and two episodes in particular which relate to covenantal promises.

### Old Testament Background

The first scene is Mount Sinai. This is where God had called his people together to form a gathering or assembly. At this gathering they received God's Word—the law—as he promises that they would be his people and he would be their God. The more immediate background to Jesus' words in this context is Deuteronomy 4:10 where Moses reminds the Israelites of, 'the day when you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb when the Lord said to me assemble me a people.' In the LXX the word used is *ekklesia* and the verb *ekklesiazō*—so an over literal rendering would be 'the day of the church before the Lord your God at Horeb when the Lord said to me church me a people'. So church is a gathering, a crowd, an assembly; a congregation. No gathering—no church. We need to demystify the word 'church' if we are going to appreciate its *true* mystery as the Bible presents it.

Just as Yahweh formed his people into a gathering before him at Sinai, having redeemed them from Egypt, which came about by self-revelation of his own person and character (Exod. 3), so Jesus is going to form his church based upon the revelation and profession of faith given to Peter—and the redemption brought about through his sufferings. The background of Sinai also helps us to understand what Jesus means when he says, 'Upon this rock I will build my church'—a gathering which, as we shall see, is an unfortunate translation.

In Exodus 17:6, the 'rock' before which God's people are to be gathered—'churched'—is Horeb/Sinai, where God is to manifest himself; 'I will stand before you there on the rock of Horeb.' Jesus is saying he is going to form a church in terms drawn from the formation of the Old Testament church of God in the wilderness. There is an implicit claim to deity. As God gathered his people before the rock, Jesus is gathering his people before the rock. The rock in the Old Testament is Horeb, the location of the LORD before whom the people are gathered. Jesus is similarly going to gather people before himself, who is the rock.

One could object, did not Jesus say '*upon* this rock I will build my church' not *before* this rock I will build my church.'? Early in chapter 7 Matthew used the same words 'build on' 'the rock' in the case of the wise man. But the construction is different. There it is literally 'on top of the rock'. Here (Matt. 16) it is 'In front of this rock' or 'at the rock'. In Matthew 7, in dealing with

verbs of motion *epi* (on) governs the accusative, so the building is ‘on top of’ the rock. In Matthew 16:18, *epi* governs the dative and so it is ‘in front of’ or ‘before’ this rock.

What is more, the Greek word for ‘rock’ (*petra*) refers to a solid mass of rock, like a cliff face. Peter (*petros*) means a stone, a fragment of the rock mass. As Peter is the first to acknowledge Jesus as ‘the rock’ by that profession he becomes part of the rock, united to Christ. This is a parallel picture to that of being part of ‘the body’ or ‘the vine’.

So the rock is not Peter, nor his faith, nor his statement, but Christ. In 1 Corinthians 10, alluding back to the Exodus—Paul says ‘the Rock was Christ’. Peter has in effect declared the gospel; Jesus is the saving King. This is the message by which people are gathered together in front of their King by their King; it is ‘my church’, Jesus says. *Jesus* will ‘build’. In this way Peter forms a contrast to Moses (Num. 20:12). ‘The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you did not believe in me to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, you shall not bring them into the Promised Land.’ Moses and Aaron share the same fate as all the other unbelievers of the desert church. Peter however had faith, divinely given, but nonetheless personal. As a representative of the other disciples, the nascent church which Christ had begun to build with Peter, in a derivative, secondary sense he can be called ‘Peter’ the stone who is one with the rock. The contrast with the fate of Moses and others who died because of unbelief would also explain the reference to Hades or death *not* prevailing against this church because of true faith divinely given. Those who belong to this church will enter *the* Promised Land of a new heaven and new earth.

The second Old Testament episode which probably lies behind this saying is the words spoken by Nathan to King David in 2 Samuel 7:12f, that God would raise up a son of David and ‘I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he shall be my son.’ Initially this promise points to Solomon whose kingdom will be established (1 Kings 2:46) and the building of the temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6). But this kingdom did not last, and so the prophets looked forward to another son of David whose kingdom would be everlasting (Isa. 9:6-7; 11:1-9; Psalm 2). In Matthew 16 Peter identifies who that King/Christ is—Jesus of Nazareth. He is the Son of David who will build

a house or household for God' name, i.e. he will build his church—gather a people to himself. The Old Testament temple was the shadow, the type, of which Jesus' church is the fulfilment and antitype. If Jesus, the rock, is gathering his people before him—'I will build my church' and we want to know where this church is that Jesus is building, we simply need to ask where is Jesus now? For where Jesus is, his church will be. Presently, he is in heaven, reigning at the Father's right hand. That is where his people are being gathered.

### **Eschatological Fulfilment**

This eschatological view of church is confirmed by the rest of the New Testament. The most obvious book which does so is Revelation—especially chapter 7:9—the great multitude that no man can number drawn from every nation and peoples group before the lamb upon his throne. It is also manifest in Hebrews 12:22ff—'You have come to mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God, thousands of angels in assembly, the church of the firstborn.' So certain is our salvation (the gates of Hades will not prevail against it—how can they when the church is in heaven?) that in principle we can be spoken of as being gathered there already (Col. 3:1-3). This is the invisible church, or universal church, or Catholic church which Christ is building as the gospel is proclaimed and believed. The contention that it is the heavenly church which is the goal of Christ's redeeming work which he goes on to expound in v21ff is further strengthened by the Sinai/exodus parallel. Ed Clowney writes, 'God's assembly at Sinai is...the immediate goal of the exodus. God brings his people into his presence that they might hear his voice and worship him. 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me' (Exod. 20:2, 3). Standing in the assembly of the Lord, hearing his voice, the people gain their identity from the self-identification of the Lord.'<sup>2</sup> Similarly we gain our identity as the Messiah's people by identifying with the Messiah, gathered before him to hear his voice.

That it is through gospel proclamation that this gathering is achieved is underscored for us by Matthew 16:19. In contrast to the scribes of Luke 11:52 who because of their approach to the Scriptures 'take away the key of knowledge' and fail to enter the kingdom themselves, Peter, by the divine revelation given to him, professes the heart of the gospel: Jesus as king is the one who ushers in the kingdom. So both in his own right and as a representative of a wider group,

Peter can open the kingdom to many as well as shut it. The most striking example of the opening was the day of Pentecost as Peter expounded the Old Testament Scriptures in relation to their fulfilment in Jesus with the result that 3,000 were added to the church that day. An example of a binding is Simon Magus. As Jesus' teaching is proclaimed to the end of the age, disciples are made and the church grows—that is the heavenly church—and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Where does that leave the local churches—the visible church? They are on earth as manifestations of the heavenly church. Revelation 2-3 affirms this. There we see seven local gatherings and the Risen, ascended Jesus is moving amongst them, his presence mediated by his Spirit. No one church is more or less a church than the others. Each congregation of believers, gathered by the Word of God, is Christ's church. Each one is a visible expression; a realisation in space and time of the invisible heavenly church which exists in eternity. As we gather as a local church, at the same time, we are gathering with the heavenly church.

#### The detail of a word: *Ekklesia*

In the context of the above biblical framework of Jesus' teaching, Old Testament hopes and eschatological fulfilment, the actual word church, or *ekklesia* finds its natural meaning. The word simply means 'gathering' or 'assembly'. This does not always have a religious association—e.g. Acts 19:32: 'The assembly (*ekklesia*) was in confusion'; referring to a pagan mob.

Generally, *ekklesia* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *qahal*. It is a term which describes the covenant making assembly at Sinai (Deut. 9:10) as well as Israel gathered before God for covenant renewal (Deut. 29:1). This view is confirmed by Stephen in Acts 7 where he uses the word 'church' to describe the Old Testament congregation of God. In the New Testament it is a term almost exclusively applied to Christian communities after Pentecost. The epistles use the plural when more than one church is in view: 'The *churches* of God' (2 Thess. 1:4) and the '*churches* of God in Judea' (2 Thess. 2:14, cf. 1 Cor. 7:17; Rom. 16:4; Gal 1:2). There are a few exceptions to the plural form. Paul speaks of 'every church' (1 Cor. 4:17)—a distributive expression, or 'the church of God' (1 Cor. 10:32) used in a generic or localized sense. Otherwise, it is a term which is only applied to *an actual gathering of people*. There are a



few instances of an extension of the literal, descriptive use of *ekklēsia* to denote persons who compose that gathering whether present or not: Acts 8:3; 9:31; 20:17 (e.g. Donald Robinson's alternative explanation). But the primary use with the referent being a 'gathering' predominates and one should be wary of building a theological construct on or one two extended references.

### **Holding together Particular and Universal**

The doctrinal challenge of systematic theology is forced upon us by the alternative realities presented in Scripture. That there is a church in a particular local place, and also a church universal gathered round the throne of heaven, drives us to ask how the two are related? The narrative of Scripture may not be systematic, but it demands that readers engage in systematic theology.

The Universal Church can be construed along the lines of thought expressed in Hebrews 12:22-24—

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Christians thus participate in the heavenly, eschatological church of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul primarily has in mind when he speaks of Jesus as being the 'head of the church' (Col. 1:18). Therefore, each local congregation is not to be seen as one member parallel to lots of other members which together make up Christ's body—the church. Nor is each church the body of Christ, as if Christ has many bodies. Rather, each congregation is the full expression, in that place, of the one true heavenly church. Each church is an outcrop or colony of heaven, reflecting the eschatological gathering of God's people around the heavenly throne.

Let us explore and tease out the implications of this, as laid down in Hebrews 12 and 13. First, a contrasting parallel is being drawn between the way God gathered his people around himself at Sinai (v. 18 c.f. Exod. 19:4, 5) and Christ gathering his people around himself (vv. 23-24). They are the church of the firstborn (cf. Exod. 13:2) approaching God through Christ the mediator, on the basis of a new covenant established by his blood. This is a present reality:

‘You have come (present tense—*proseleluthate*) to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God...’ When Christians gather on earth they at the same time gather around Christ’s throne in heaven. It is in the midst of the heavenly church that Christ is now seated (Rev. 7:9; 14:1). In principle Christians are already seated there with him (Eph. 2:6). It is this heavenly church that Christ is building and against which the gates of Hades will not prevail (Matt. 16:18).

Further, the heavenly church is to be equated with the ‘universal’ church and the ‘catholic’ church of the Nicene Creed, ‘I believe in one holy, catholic and apostolic church’. It is an object of faith precisely because it cannot be seen. It is also the principle of unity that by definition there can only be one gathering in heaven around the throne of the lamb. It is universal in that it is composed of people ‘from every nation, tribe and language’ (Rev. 7:9). This was the understanding of the term ‘catholic’ held by the early church as witnessed to by Ignatius: the first person to use the term to describe Christians gathered around Jesus, ‘Here Jesus is, there is the catholic church’ (ad Smyrn 8). Where is Jesus but in heaven? That is where the catholic church is located. The longer version of Ignatius’ letter makes it even plainer that this is what he means for it paraphrases, ‘Where Jesus is, there is the catholic church’ by, ‘where Jesus is, there is the heavenly army drawn up at the side of the commander’.

In summary, we may say that the universal, catholic church, is the heavenly church. It is a present eschatological reality gathered round the risen ascended Christ. All true believers belong to this gathering and are members of it. As Christians gather on earth—forming local church—they at the same time reflect the heavenly gathering, as well as participate in it.

### Being Church

How is this local gathering brought into being and what is to characterise it? The gathering is realised by the Word of the gospel, and so the proclamation of that Word is to be the central activity and one of the defining features of the gathering. When God gathered his people at Sinai we read that: ‘The Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire, you heard the sound of words, but saw no form.’ (Deut. 4:9) This constitutes the contrasting parallel with what happens when Christians gather according to Hebrews 12:18ff: ‘You have not come to a mountain...or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken.’ As New Testament believers gather, they

come to ‘God the judge of all men’. How is such a ‘coming’ made possible? It is through ‘Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel’. That ‘word’ was a cry for vengeance and justice. The word of the gospel, that of Christ’s blood, speaks of mercy. It is this word which gathers people into Christ’s body. As it is believed people are incorporated into him. It was the great Pentecostal gift (Acts 2) which led to 3,000 being added to that assembly in a single day.

What is more, it is this word of grace (Acts 20:32) which nourishes the spiritual health of the church. That is why the writer goes on to say, ‘See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks’ (v. 25) which is what the Sinai ‘church’ did—they did not wish to hear that voice. How does one hear this voice? Earlier in the letter we are told: ‘So, as the Holy Spirit says (present tense)’ and thereafter follows a quotation from Scripture (Psalm 95) ‘Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts’. It is through the Scriptures that God the Holy Spirit speaks. The Word that he spoke then is the same Word he speaks now.

For this purpose of edifying the church God has appointed leaders, that is why the writer exhorts, ‘Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith...Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings’ (13:7-9). Further, ‘Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over your souls as men who must give an account’ (13:17).

Holiness is to be a mark of the church: ‘Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy, without holiness no-one will see the Lord’ (12:14). This is linked to the call to brotherly love, ‘Keep loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers ...remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners’ (13:1-3) ‘And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.’ (13:16).

One aspect of the church which reflects the heavenly assembly is praise: ‘You have come to angels in joyful assembly’ (12:22). ‘Through Jesus, therefore let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name’ (13:15). Another notable activity which should characterise the earthly gathering is prayer: ‘Pray for us....I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon’ (13:20).

All these things are being achieved in the church by its great pastor who gathers them to form his ‘little flock’ and who is in their midst by his Spirit: ‘May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ’ (13:20).

### **Living with the Heartbeat of Scripture’s Ecclesiology**

Those who live with this heartbeat are animated to live lives that are convincing. We may be accused of being shallow, arrogant or ecclesiastically ignorant. If we live as people who embody a depth of scriptural vitality which commends our claims, we won’t be rejected out of hand before the discussion has started, and if in the end we are still opposed, it won’t be an opposition held in clear conscience before God. As for us, when our ecclesiology is rejected—if we are animated by the heartbeat of scripture we will be becoming the type of people who can embrace suffering and shame, as our Lord did.

### **3. Our Heritage: The Reformation**

Our families and heritage shape our genes, experiences, outlook and posture to the world. If scripture is to be the heartbeat that animates an evangelical, then the Reformation is the family heritage that forms him. Our posture to life and our vision for church is formed by our family heritage.

### **The Same Heartbeat in Divergence**

When we turn to the writings of the magisterial Reformers we, not surprisingly, find much reflecting this biblical understanding that the church is a congregation of professing Christian believers which is brought into being and sustained by the word of the gospel.

Martin Luther commentating on Psalm 110:2 writes: ‘In his invisible essence he (Christ) sits at the right hand of God; but he rules visibly on earth and works through external visible signs, of which the preaching of the gospel and the sacraments are the chief ones, and through public confession and the fruits of faith in the gospel.’ However, for Luther it was the Word of the gospel which supremely defined the church: ‘These are the true marks whereby one can really recognise the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Christian Church: namely, wherever the sceptre is, that is, the office of the preaching of

the gospel, borne by the apostles into the world and received from them by us. Where it is present and maintained, there the Christian Church and the kingdom of Christ surely exists, no matter how small or negligible the number of the flock.<sup>3</sup>

Note his use of the definite article for even the smallest Christian community—it is *the* Church. This is in accordance with the biblical view being outlined. It is the word of the gospel which constitutes the formal principle of the church: ‘Wherever the word of God is preached and believed, there true faith, that immovable rock, exists; where the bride of Christ is, there is to be found all that he has betrothed to himself.’<sup>4</sup> What else is this but a growth towards the view that the full expression of the universal church is found within a local congregation? The second generation of Reformers such as Philip Melancthon and John Calvin sought to develop Luther’s thought giving it shape.

In the Augsburg Confession (1530) Melancthon states: ‘The Church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and administered rightly.’ As with Luther, for Melancthon it was the preached word which constituted the church, ‘The Church, or the true people of God is bound by the gospel. Where the gospel is truly acknowledged, there are some who are holy.’<sup>5</sup> Later, for a variety of reasons, Melancthon moved in a direction which clericalised his ecclesiology, adding discipline to the word and sacraments as the third mark of the church: ‘Obedience owed, next to the gospel itself, to the ministry.’<sup>6</sup>

Calvin’s mature formulation of church is strikingly similar to that of Luther and the Augsburg Confession: ‘Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.’<sup>7</sup> The converse is also true: ‘On the other hand, where the gospel is not declared, heard and received, there we do not acknowledge the form of the Church.’<sup>8</sup>

### **Room for growth and disagreement**

There is room in our family heritage for growth and disagreement. While Calvin may not have fully arrived at a biblical understanding of the universal church as being that which is invisible and heavenly, there is nonetheless a straining towards this: ‘There is a universal Church, that there has been from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, we all acknowledge. The

appearance by which it may be recognised is the question. We place it in the word of God or (if anyone would so put it), since Christ is her head, we maintain that as a man is recognised by his face, so she is to be beheld by Christ...But as the pure preaching of the gospel is not always exhibited, neither is the face of Christ always conspicuous. Thence we infer that the Church is not always discernible by the eyes of men, as the examples of the ages testify... let us hold then that the Church is seen where Christ appears and where his word is heard.<sup>9</sup> In Calvin's thought we observe a coinherence of Word, Church and Christ. If this were to be refined further in the biblical direction outlined above, it could be said that the universal church has always existed since the creation of the world in that God has always gathered around him people by his Word. The visible expression of this universal church (where it is to be found impurely as distinct from where it is found in the heavenly pure form) is the local gathering of professing believers, called into being by the preaching of the gospel. Thus, in a secondary sense the Church is universal, in that it is manifested around the world in the form of local congregations.

A similar case for growth can be made for Luther's understanding of the universal Church: 'Wherever the substance of the word and sacraments abides, there the holy Church is present. The Church is universal throughout the world, wherever the gospel of God and the sacraments are present.'<sup>10</sup> If Luther had followed through the biblical data more consistently, a clearer conception of the way the universal Church is to be seen 'throughout the world' might have emerged. Luther developed in his views about how best to promote his ecclesiology. Early in his ministry he longed for the opportunity to call a council to debate his views. By the time of one of his last writings—provocatively entitled *Against the Roman Catholic Church an Institution of the Devil*—he revealed his altered outlook. He no longer cared if his opponents came to a council, because he believed that even if they came it would be a waste of time. Rather he would take his message to the popular masses who responded with faith. The point is not to argue that either the early or late Luther is a model to follow; we simply note that he grew and changed his views on how to promote his gospel in the face of a hostile environment.

The reformers, animated by the same heartbeat of Scripture as modern evangelicals, comprised a family within which there was growth and disagreement. Growth is seen even in the formation of the Articles themselves.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century the Latin ‘*congregatio*’ and the English ‘congregation’ could refer either to ‘the whole body of the faithful’ or to a particular local assembly or society of believers. As time went on distinctions were made. The Thirty-nine Articles and the developing Book of Common Prayer did not just reflect those distinctions; they helped make them.

It is important to point out that the Latin of the Article is *coetus* (‘a coming together’) and not *congregatio*. This is a clue to what the Article means. It means that Article XIX is not a verbatim repeat of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession on which it is based. The Augsburg Confession uses the Latin *congregatio* and in the context clearly means ‘the whole body of the faithful’. Article XIX has to be read in the context of, and in contrast with, both the *Homily for Whitsunday* and the contemporary *Reformatio Legum*. The former—the *Homily*—speaks of ‘the true church’ and says it is ‘an universal congregation...of God's faithful and elect people’. The latter—the *Reformatio Legum*—speaks of the ‘visible church’ and says it is ‘that coming together of all faithful men’. Article XIX cannot be understood as referring to ‘the pure church’. That is because Article XXVI tells us that ‘in the visible church of Christ the evil be ever mingled with the good’. Most significant of all Article XIX omits ‘universal’ (from the *Homily*) before ‘congregation’ and ‘all’ (from the *Reformatio Legum*) before ‘faithful’, while using the indefinite and not the definite article (in the English form of the Article). It says: ‘the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men.’<sup>11</sup>

If in the very formation of the Articles and the Elizabethan Settlement we see growth and development—we see it even more in the reformers’ varying attitudes to Rome. It is when we come to the Reformers view of the ‘church’ of Rome that we detect a certain degree of ambiguity, tension and self-contradiction. Surveying the Lutheran confessions, Edmund Schlink concludes—

Taking all their statements together, we find that the confessions refer to the Roman Church as both Church and nonchurch, and do this in a manner that leaves things unadjusted and unsatisfactory for systematic thinking. The question is left open whether the Church is still there and where it is to be found.<sup>12</sup>

Similar things could be said of Calvin. At one point he states categorically, ‘Rome is not a Church of God.’<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere he argues that there is a church

amongst the papists, ‘but hidden and wonderfully preserved’.<sup>14</sup> In the final edition of the *Institutes* he writes: ‘while we are unwilling simply to concede the name of Church to the papists, we do not deny that there are Churches among them.’<sup>15</sup>

As we move on to consider the English reformers we observe continuity with those on the continent—the primary mark of the true church is the word of God. Lacking the essential mark Rome, concludes Jewel, is no true Church: ‘We truly have renounced that Church wherein we could neither have the word of God sincerely taught, nor the sacraments rightly administered, nor the name of God truly called upon.’<sup>16</sup>

It is with Richard Hooker that we see a significant and radical departure in positively acknowledging Rome as a true Church: ‘Notwithstanding so far as lawfully we may, we have held and do hold fellowship with them. For even as the Apostle doth say of Israel that they are in one respect enemies but in another beloved of God; in like sort with Rome we dare not communicate concerning sundry her gross and grievous admonitions, yet touching those main parts of Christian truth wherein they constantly still persist we gladly acknowledge them to be of the family of Jesus Christ.’<sup>17</sup>

What led Hooker to this conclusion was not a careful consideration of the scriptural teaching concerning ecclesiology, but a moral problem concerning the salvation of those who had lived and died within the Roman communion. Proceeding on the assumption that no salvation is to be found outside ‘the Church’, he concluded that if Rome were to be placed totally beyond the pale by not being regarded a true Church, then would be no hope of salvation for ‘thousands of our fathers living in popish superstitions’.<sup>18</sup>

We submit that the ambivalent stance of Luther and Calvin towards Rome and the compromised position of Hooker could have been avoided had a clearer and more consistent biblical understanding of *ekklesia* been grasped and applied. Confusion was inevitably introduced by applying the term ‘church’ to an institution without the necessary qualifications which a biblically led theology would have provided. It can be granted as a plain historical fact (let alone a biblical promise that God will preserve a remnant) that within the prevailing corrupted institution of ‘Rome’ true believers existed (otherwise



how do we explain Wycliffe and the Lollards?) and that congregations (true churches) also functioned with varying degrees of faithfulness (as many do today). Here the true Church was manifest. This is the theological trajectory in which both Luther and Calvin were developing.

In this ecclesiology lies an answer to Hooker's moral dilemma. If there is but one isolated individual who cannot meet with other Christians because circumstances do not allow it, and yet throws himself upon the mercy of Christ, trusting in his death, then he belongs to the true Church, the heavenly invisible Church which Christ is building. There is no need to dignify a corrupted institution with the title 'Church' conceived in a primary sense.

### **Shaped by our Family Heritage**

Our family heritage, like any family, is far from perfect. If the Reformers' teaching can be shown to be inadequate at points; not being entirely consistent with Scripture (and we have attempted to show that is the case), then we are being most true to the Reformers when we depart from them and draw closer to the teaching of the Bible. This is because the reformers were animated by the same heartbeat as modern evangelicals are—Scripture.

In the final analysis, our family heritage is to form us but not control us. Nobody appreciates an overbearing parent determined to mechanistically dictate every detail of their child's life. The reformers themselves never would have wanted their latter-day descendents to look to them for that sort of instruction. Rather they would have desired us to accept them as flawed, frail and imperfect family, who lived with the same passion that ought to enliven us. They are most respected when the heritage of active reformation and revival is pursued in ways that respectfully grow and develop from their firm foundation. The ministries of the reformers were effective ministries. They sought to proclaim the gospel far and wide, to poor and rich. They were willing to suffer. They were energetic and enthusiastic in embracing all aspects of gospel ministry. Such a posture to the challenges of promoting the evangelical cause is the heritage they bequeath us. An attitude and outlook that will not rest till the work is done, that will not rush to short term solutions or illusory activism. They sought to not only be correct, but also convincing. Is that not why we still read them today—because they are convincing, even in print, 500 years later?

#### 4. Living out our Ecclesiastical Posture

As we seek to live out an ecclesiastical posture animated by the heartbeat of scripture and formed by the family heritage of the reformers, at least six concluding points may be made.

Firstly, the way we personally appropriate evangelical ecclesiology will be determinative of our success or failure—not only before the local church but also before the onlooking eschatological church. When assessed by our Lord we will be asked not only did we accurately teach an evangelical ecclesiology—but did we love the flock we taught it to? If we failed to genuinely care for a person in our local church, treated an individual as less than a person made in God's image or used ministry for selfish ends, then having taught correctly that the local church is at the centre of God's plans for the world, will be not part of our defence but part of the charge. We who teach that the local church is at the centre of God's plans must follow the example of the master who loved that church deeply enough to put its needs above his own comfort. People can tell, as we argued above—in the blink of an eye—if we are the sorts of people who within the inner recesses of our hearts have personally appropriated the sort of evangelical ecclesiology that sent Jesus to the cross. The ecclesiology Jesus taught was lived out by him; it looked like a battered body on a plank of wood. Are we wise to expect our living out of it to look more sanitised and professional?

Secondly, the reality of church and the terminology of church are distinct but related. We have for many years taught accurately that the terminology of church ought to be used correctly. At the crude level a church is not a building, at the more sophisticated level, neither is it a denomination. Once the reality is accepted to be as the scripture teaches, it is of course understandable and reasonable to use the words in other secondary ways, which are not technically accurate. The reality and terminology are distinct but related. The terminology does matter, so we must teach the words correctly. If this is done, secondary usages can be accepted without fear. To protest every 'wrong' use of the word makes us look obsessive and narrow minded. To do so while not living out the full costly reality of the terminology—that is more serious.

Thirdly, living out this reality will mean accepting *in practice* that the denomination is not a church. If we do not do that, then the high view of the

church as congregation, and the loyalty and love that is meant to engender amongst us will be usurped by the denomination, at the expense of the local church. Consider these two statements: The first is a statement made in support of the parish share system by someone who would identify himself as an evangelical: ‘The Church of England is not a church made up of separate congregations. We are a single Christian family worshipping in different places.’ The second statement is from Andy Lines of *Crosslinks*—

I was very excited last year when I visited a particular diocese in the Anglican Communion, and saw for the first time what I thought was a biblical model of leadership in a diocese with the diocese seeing itself clearly as the servant of the local churches trying to enable them for mission. So often the local churches seem to be there just to pay their dues, with the diocese as the end point.

Andy Lines’ comment alone reflects evangelical ecclesiology. A denomination is meant to be serving the local church; we are not independents and so do believe in some form of connection, accountability and support for each other. Thus if we are to speak of the denomination as a ‘church’ in a secondary extended sense, then it is legitimate to apply some of the encouragements and warnings which we see the risen Lord applying in the book of Revelation to his churches. If the church is founded upon God’s revelation, the Gospel, then so should be the denomination which supports the churches. If there is departure from that, then in time the local churches will be weakened and in some cases destroyed. We then need to be mindful of Paul’s warning in 1 Corinthians 4:17: ‘Whoever destroys God’s temple. God will destroy him.’ The same principle applies to the wider Anglican Communion. Why should we allow, say, our brothers and sisters in Africa to be offended and their witness weakened when facing militant Islam, by the apostasy of the Episcopal Church in the States and their teachings on the gay issue? Just as there comes a point when a church ceases to be a church if it abandons the gospel which brought it into being and sustains it, so it is with a denomination.

Fourthly, the heartbeat of scripture should give us a desire to be neither more narrow nor broad than scripture itself. Talk of ecclesiology inevitably involves a certain ‘them and us’ mentality. This is in itself unavoidable. However, as soon as we engage in the debates about who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’, there is the danger that we erect barriers where scripture does not. An evangelical

ecclesiology should seek to reform the barriers that divide our own churches and bring shame on our ministries. Are we correct to run churches in university towns which effectively separate young people from the older people who could pastor them? Have we inadvertently formed an ecclesiology which reinforces the British class divide? Have we over-reacted to the over-reactions of the charismatic movement in our treatment of charismatics? Does our effective ecclesiology create a new priesthood of professional full time workers? At these and other points we, as evangelicals, need to be self-critical and consider if our narrowness and breadth reflects the very scripture which should be our heartbeat.

Fifthly, the heritage of our earlier reformation family, by their divergences and growth, should stimulate us to further reflection and self-critique. If we only listen to the teachers who are alive today, with whom we agree, then we are consigning ourselves to only learn from leaders alive at a stage of church history when Western Christianity can hardly be argued to be in anything other than a weak, sorry state. Our family heritage in the reformers is rich and varied. Their acumen, scriptural insight and desire to spread the Gospel in ways that differ to our methods should act as a real stimulus to our own growth and maturity. We ought not to freeze any leader or period of history and simply try to repeat that. Engaging with the reformation writings earnestly would prevent us doing so, for as was shown above, the reformers were animated by the same heartbeat of scripture, but displayed considerable growth and difference.

Sixthly, we should enjoy again the wonder of the local church. When an evangelical minister talks longingly of the chance for a 'holiday' from his church—one knows he has lost his evangelical ecclesiology. When we say that we 'would not do the job unless we were convinced the gospel is true', we speak a half-truth. If we really believed the gospel to be true—we would enjoy the job. Evangelicals are known for many things—some fairly some unfairly. Our ecclesiology has for some time been dismissed as non-existent. Intellectually this is not accurate, but it may be fair to say that we have not served our churches with the enthusiasm and joy which could convince all onlookers that we love people more than programmes and the church more than the world. The wonder of the local church is caught when the minister truly and deeply re-appropriates the relationship between local and universal,

Lord and church. That is, when you look at the faces of people in your congregation, the wonder is that around, through and among them, are the citizens of heaven itself, and somewhere, standing in their midst, like a mysterious one among candlesticks, is the Lord Jesus himself, watching. It should take our breath away every time we go to church. If it does not—then we have not yet adopted an evangelical posture to ecclesiology and are doomed to be correct but unconvincing.

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#### ENDNOTES

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