



# **THINKING THEOLOGICALLY ABOUT THE CHURCH**

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## Foreword



“Church” is a layered, complex notion. A congregation of people, a building, a set of activities, a community, a communion, an organization, an institution, a denomination, the Body of Christ, sent in to the world, gathered from the world, visible and invisible, militant, triumphant, mine, yours, one or many, united and diverse, universal or particular, a stereotype, a lived reality.

Most of the time we don’t need to be too precise about what we mean when we say “church.” There are times, however, when this fuzziness becomes problematic. We end up fuzzy in our thinking, which leads us to be fuzzy in our conversation about the church and, ultimately, in our living.

Clearly, we are in a time that calls on us to seek greater clarity, to touch base again, to rethink who calls us into existence, who we are as those called into being by the Triune God, and what purposes God has for us as the church. We find ourselves assessing inherited structures—evaluating what will help us move forward, what we should set aside, what new wisdom we must gather.

At such a time it is easy to be driven by pragmatic concerns. The church is composed of organizations and institutions. We have good human knowledge about such things and are ready to apply that knowledge to the church. We find ourselves struggling to catch up with developments that seem to have overtaken us, doing the equivalent of bailing and patching, hoping for a calm stretch that will allow for more effective repairs.

John Burgess urges us to do better. To resist the pressures that shout for pragmatic responses long enough to touch base. To think theologically about the church. Yet Burgess doesn’t simply urge us to do so: He explains what thinking theologically about the church looks like, what its sustaining

sources will be. He points to places where thinking theologically about the church can reshape our attitudes and practices, turning us toward the world by turning us toward Jesus Christ. His essay offers us an example of thinking the church's faith in and for the church, articulating our faith both in its concepts and in its living-out.

John Burgess is the James Henry Snowden Professor of Systematic Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He is also a member of the Re-Forming Ministry program's Core Cluster. Re-forming Ministry is an initiative of the Office of Theology and Worship, funded by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Re-Forming Ministry brings together pastors, governing body leaders, and professors to do theological work together as equals in a shared task, engaging in discussion of pressing theological issues in an effort to help our denomination think its faith more deeply, in order that we might be better able to articulate and live our faith as we bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. Re-Forming Ministry groups have been focusing on the doctrine of the church for the last five years.

*Thinking Theologically about the Church* grows out of an essay Prof. Burgess prepared for the first meeting of the Core Cluster. It was a call to that particular group of Presbyterians to touch base in their work together. The essay presented here builds on that early essay and is enriched by the community of theological friendship that grew and flourished in the life of the Core Cluster.

We in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) find ourselves in a moment thick with endings, laced with opportunities for renewal and deepening. Our circumstances require us to think hard about pragmatic matters. They also require us to think theologically, to do so with all the skill and wisdom we can muster, to touch base. John Burgess's essay offers to draw us together into just such reflection. It is my hope that it will draw you too.

If it does draw you, we invite you to respond to this essay. We are establishing a Facebook group for discussion of the paper, and invite those who are on Facebook to join the discussion (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/create.php?customize&gid=196197225454#/group.php?gid=196197225454>). In addition, we invite your written comments. These can be sent electronically to [barry.ensign-george@pcusa.org](mailto:barry.ensign-george@pcusa.org) or [anita.brown@pcusa.org](mailto:anita.brown@pcusa.org). Finally, we

welcome responses sent to us through the postal service: Re-Forming Ministry Program, Attn.: Barry Ensign-George, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 100 Witherspoon St., Rm. 2619, Louisville, KY 40202.

The “Re-Forming Ministry Occasional Papers” series is one of three series of Occasional Papers published by the Office of Theology and Worship. None of the volumes in these series is a Presbyterian policy statement. Our intent in publishing the volumes in these series is to encourage deeper reflection and broad conversation. We hope that this paper will inspire its readers to such reflection and conversation.

Further information about the Re-Forming Ministry program can be found at the Re-Forming Ministry Web site: <http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry>. I invite you to visit, read other papers presented there, and learn about the program.

May we think the faith together with ever-growing depth, that we might walk a life together ever more fully faithful to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!



*Barry A. Ensign-George*  
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## I. A Pilgrim People

*Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;  
Hold me with Thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,  
Feed me till I want no more,  
Feed me till I want no more.*

An ancient Christian image for the church is that of “a pilgrim people.” A pilgrim church is part of society, yet always on the move toward God’s kingdom. It serves the world around it, yet looks for a new heaven and a new earth. It lives in solidarity with humanity, yet calls on God to cast out sin and death and to renew the creation. Weak by worldly standards, a pilgrim church knows that it lives by God’s power alone. Called to proclaim the gospel, a pilgrim church confesses that it needs bread from heaven to sustain it on its way.

These motifs may speak with renewed power to Presbyterians today, as we wonder who we are and where we are headed. We continue to suffer huge membership declines—what will become of us in the years ahead? Lack of resolution about key ethical issues continues to weigh us down—will we find a new sense of unity and common cause? Confusion about pastoral identity results in high rates of burnout—will ministers, along with elders and deacons, recover their call to bear witness to God’s redeeming power in Jesus Christ?

Whatever else may be the case, the happy days of cultural establishment are over and gone for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Whether we like it or

not, we are on the way to a different kind of existence in North American society from what typified the 1950s and '60s. Dare we believe that God is working in these changes? To make sense of them, we desperately need *theology*—a clear understanding of who God is and what God is doing. Specifically, we need a theology of the *church*, if we are going to figure out who we as Presbyterians are supposed to be and what we are supposed to be doing in the days ahead.



## II. Voluntary Association and Body of Christ

What is the church? From a sociological and political perspective, churches are voluntary associations that groups of individuals organize in order to achieve particular ends that are important to them, whether the moral education of their children, the sustenance of a particular ethnic identity, or the opportunity to worship God according to one theological perspective or another. As articulated by John Locke in the seventeenth century, the idea of the church as a voluntary association was a significant historical achievement not only for Enlightenment societies that wished to throw off the shackles of ecclesiastical control, but also for the church itself. No more would religious membership be dictated primarily by cultural circumstance or political coercion. Religious belief was to be a matter of free choice and personal conviction.

The principle of voluntary association has given the North American church an entrepreneurial spirit, an ability to respond creatively to social change. Peter Berger and other sociologists of religion once predicted that Western societies would become less religious. They now concede that they were wrong, at least in relation to the United States. Here is an

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Many of us really don't know what it means to confess the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

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advanced technological, information society that shows no sign of becoming atheistically secular. We live, instead, in the era of the "spiritual marketplace" (in the words of sociologist Wade Clark Roof). Churches as voluntary associations have learned to survey people's "needs," to create niche identities for themselves in a competitive religious

marketplace, and to promote and advertise their distinctive programs. The principle of voluntary association seems to guarantee that religion in this country will remain vibrant—that for every congregation that passes away, one or two new ones will take its place.<sup>1</sup>

We need to be cautious, however, about how we invoke the principle of voluntary association. What makes good sense as a sociological and political principle does not work to describe the church theologically. Thank God that Americans can gather freely in churches of their choosing, and that the state does not tell us what to believe. But too many Americans today think of the church *only* as a voluntary association—and, specifically, as a religious services provider. We are attracted to the language of organizational technique and management, and have a hard time knowing what to do with traditional biblical and theological images of the church as “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), “the household of God” (Eph. 2:19), or “the communion of saints” (Apostles’ Creed). We, too, often think of the church as our creation, not God’s; as a lifestyle option that we choose, rather than a divine reality to which God has joined us; and as a community defined more by human ambitions than by Christ’s redemptive work. Many of us really don’t know what it means to confess the “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church”—if we bother to confess it at all.

Take just the first of these attributes: *one* church. If we Presbyterians examine our language carefully, we find ourselves in peculiar contradictions. On the one hand, those who express anger and grief that the denomination could split are rarely scandalized by our separation from other Protestant denominations, let alone the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. On the other, those who call for “gracious separation” comfortably assure us that even a divided church continues to experience an invisible unity in Christ. The church is one, some say; yet it is the church’s diversity and pluralism that really interest them. The church is one, others assert, while insisting that like-minded congregations should be able to organize their own networks of ministry outside of the denomination. In both cases, the church’s unity seems to depend on human definitions—and human definitions are inevitably limited and self-interested.

No task is more important for us today than to think *theologically* about the church. We need not discount the legitimate insights of sociologists, nor should we reject sociological tools (survey instruments, demographic studies, etc.) that help us better understand the people whom we wish to serve. But sociological language for the church will not suffice, for one simple reason: As Christians, we believe that the church exists only because Christ has called it into life. To the eyes of faith, the church is first of all a theological, not a sociological, reality.

To belong to Christ is to become a part of his body, a community and a fellowship that extend through time and space. We never simply pick the church. Rather, we are always on the way to discovering the church and its bonds of relationship, which we ourselves have neither created nor chosen but that Christ himself has offered us.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church are neither human achievements nor human ideals; rather, they are theological truths—that is to say, they tell us something about the very character of God and his ways with us. Take again the unity of the church, now from a Reformed theological perspective:

- “As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God . . . [and] whom the Father has given unto his Son Christ Jesus” (The Scots Confession, 3.16)
- Although the church is divided into many parts, there is only one church, “since there is always but one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, Jesus the Messiah, and one Shepherd of the whole flock, one Head of this body, and, to conclude, one Spirit” (The Second Helvetic Confession, 5.126).
- The church consists of all that “have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof” (The Westminster Confession of Faith, 6.140).

The confessions are confident that the church is one because God is one. Church unity is not for the sake of political or social stability, neither is it to preserve the church’s institutional power. Rather, it is a testimony to the one living God, who is “above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6).

It will not be enough for us simply to assert these truths, as though everyone knows what they mean. Rather, we must interpret them again for our time and place. This work of interpretation is demanding and imprecise, and therefore always subject to debate and correction, for “now we see in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). But it can help us to ask the right questions about who we are and where we are headed in response to what God is doing.



### III. Ecclesiology and Eschatology

To think theologically about the church is above all to think *eschatologically*. It is to remember that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15, RSV). It is to know that Jesus’ time has broken into our time, his kingdom life into our lives.

All theological thinking about the church begins from the confidence “that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ” (The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1). This Jesus is not dead, but alive. He is the resurrected Lord, and his body, the church, shares in his new, resurrection life.

As the baptismal liturgy of the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* reminds us, “God claims us, and seals us to show that we belong to God. God frees us from sin and death, uniting us with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection” (p. 404). By God’s grace, we already participate, however provisionally and incompletely, in Christ’s life everlasting. To be called into the church is to be privileged with an experience of God’s eternity here and now.

What is “life in Christ” all about, this resurrection life that begins even now? When we use such language, are we just speaking metaphorically about the man Jesus’ continuing historical influence? Or does life in Christ depend on some kind of esoteric mystical experience? Or is “life in Christ” simply a theological proposition that we must defend even though we do not know what it means? How do we avoid wishful thinking here, or merely playing around with words?

The problem with thinking about the church eschatologically is that we are trying to say more than we know how to say. No wonder that Orthodox,

Catholic, and Reformation traditions have differed on just how Christ's resurrection life is available to the church here and now. The Orthodox emphasize how God's holiness becomes present in the liturgy and, by extension, in the human institutions and persons that guarantee its integrity. For Catholicism, the church's hierarchy and especially the pope, Christ's vicar on earth, embody God's holiness, especially as they promote and protect doctrinal, moral, and ecclesiastical purity.

Reformation traditions, by contrast, have insisted that the church's eschatological reality is visible only to the eyes of faith. As a human institution, the church is as flawed as any other. Its representatives do not escape trial, temptation, and sin. Only God's promise of forgiveness, as set forth in Word and sacrament, sustains the church, calling it ever again into life out of death, into light out of darkness.

If the Reformation insight is correct, the existence of the church is eschatological only in the sense that the Holy Spirit continually empowers the church to recognize its sin, to confess it, and to trust again that in life and in death its members nevertheless belong to the risen Christ alone, "who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my [our] sins and has completely freed me [us] from the dominion of the devil" (The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1).

The ordering of articles in the Apostles' Creed helps to make this point. Note that we confess "the forgiveness of sins" in between our confession of "the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints" and our confession of "the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting." "The forgiveness of sins" is the theological bridge that holds "the Church" and "life everlasting" together. The church, then, is holy not in its visibility as a human institution, but rather only as its members make confession of sin and ever again gratefully receive forgiveness from the invisible hand of their gracious Lord and Savior, the risen Christ.<sup>3</sup>

A pilgrim church tries to walk the straight and narrow way between an eschatology that thinks too exclusively in terms of rewards and punishments in the world to come and an eschatology that is too confident about the human ability to capture divine glory here and now. An eschatology of future rewards and punishments threatens to turn the church into a place of

rigid moralizing, whose life is nothing more than preparation for a Judgment Day on which God will separate the sheep from the goats, the elect from the reprobate, and the obedient from the disobedient. At the other extreme, an eschatology that would capture God's glory here and now easily tempts the church to claim too much for ritual or emotion, as though the church could dispense the holy in sacred actions or ecstatic experiences.

Reformed explications of the Second Commandment—"thou shalt make no graven images"—have countered temptations toward empty ritualism. Reformed understandings of Word, sacrament, and life together, as means of grace, have countered the temptation toward moralizing. A pilgrim church is always in the process of being shaped more fully into the image of Christ; it is a sinful people still utterly dependent on God's mercy.

The church is not the kingdom, but as the church faithfully attends to God's commission, it does train us in kingdom life. In the world to come, there will be no temple in the city (Rev. 21:22). God will be all in all, and the church will have been transcended by a renewed cosmos, in which all creation will sing to the glory of God. But in this earthly life, we need the church both because it calls us into a fellowship wider and deeper than we could otherwise imagine, and because it schools us in a sense of the divine.

The first question of The Heidelberg Catechism, having assured us that we are not our own but belong in life and in death to our faithful Savior, goes on to say that by the Holy Spirit, Christ "also assures me [us] of eternal life, and make me [us] wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him." The catechism captures the straight and narrow way of the pilgrim church. On the one hand, the catechism assures us that we are privileged to experience something of life eternal even here and now: "I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy" (Q. 58). On the other, this sense of God's eternal presence is nothing more than a kind of first fruits—a holy anticipation of what is yet to come, an assurance that "I shall possess, after this life, perfect blessedness, which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, and thereby praise God forever" (Q. 58). The church is privileged to see just enough of the kingdom to long for it. Like Moses, it is poised on the brink of the promised land, able to look from Pisgah over the Jordan but not yet able to cross.



Those who belong to Christ are a pilgrim people, lined up behind the heroes and heroines of Hebrews 11. A race still lies before us; we have not reached the finish line. But, as Hebrews 12 assures us, we run this race with perseverance. We lift our drooping hands, strengthen our weak knees, and make straight paths for our feet (vs. 12–13), because we know where we are headed. We are not simply nomads who wander aimlessly from one place to another, never able to settle down and make ourselves at home. Rather, we are pilgrims who know where we are headed, even if we are not there yet.<sup>4</sup>

The way into the kingdom is still long and difficult, and we remain dependent on a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire to lead us. But the fruit of the Spirit sustains us along the way. The Reformed tradition has often spoken of this fruit as “piety,” those deep-seated orientations of the heart that guide faithful thinking, speaking, and acting. To develop a sense for God’s eternity here and now is to grow in joy and patience, humility and compassion, kindness and gratitude, and the other dispositions that flow from the assurance of forgiveness in Christ.

In the words of The Westminster Larger Catechism, “members of the invisible church have communicated to them, in this life, the first fruits of glory with Christ, as they are members of him their head, and so in him are interested in that glory which he is fully possessed of; and as an earnest thereof, enjoy the sense of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory” (Q. 83). A church that thinks eschatologically will cultivate this piety of longing for the kingdom that faith still sees from afar.

The Reformed tradition has majored in a piety of gratitude.<sup>5</sup> Notice how The Heidelberg Catechism comes to a climax not in its discussion of human misery, not even in its discussion of human redemption, but rather in its third part, “Thankfulness.” Gratitude is not a complacent satisfaction with the way things are but rather a gracious sense of God’s eternal presence, which even now is “a ferment in the world, stirring hope in [people] and preparing the world to receive its ultimate judgment” (The Confession of 1967, 9.54).

Right gratitude for God’s self-giving, forgiving love inevitably includes elements of lament and protest. As we see and experience the injustices of this world, we call out to the Lord of life to make things right once and for all. The thankfulness of the pilgrim people for the way traveled thus far does

not diminish but rather stokes their desperate longing for God's peace and justice to come to perfect fulfillment.

In sum, because Christ is the resurrected Lord, his body, the church, is also an eschatological reality. This eschatological existence does not turn the church into a heavenly glorification of an earthly institution. Rather, a pilgrim people lives between the times. It falls short of God's ultimate purposes, yet daily experiences God's renewing power and blessing.

Next to "a pilgrim people," a key image for the church has been that of a beggar who gratefully receives God's forgiveness. Through confession of sin, the church discovers new possibilities of reconciliation in its own life and within the world. Such a church becomes a school of the Holy Spirit, spurring its members to grow more fully into life in Christ. They give ever-greater thanks for God's presence among them here and now, even as they long all the more for God's new heaven and earth, when Christ will fill all things with himself (Eph. 4:10).

*Open now the crystal fountain,  
Whence the healing stream doth flow;  
Let the fire and cloudy pillar  
Lead me all my journey through;  
Strong deliverer, strong deliverer,  
Be Thou still my strength and shield,  
Be Thou still my strength and shield.*





## IV. Word, Sacrament, and Life Together

In a time in which the church is fascinated with psychological and sociological techniques for rescuing itself, the notion of eschatological pilgrimage may seem foreign, even offensive. Were we to take it seriously, we would have to repent of our misuse and misunderstanding of Word, sacrament, and life together. We would have to confess that too often we have reduced them to instruments for achieving human ends, and have neglected them as divine disciplines that lead us to fullness of life in Christ. We need to learn again that Word, sacrament, and life together are means of grace by which the risen, living Lord comes to us today. To think eschatologically about the church is also to think eschatologically about Word, sacrament, and life together.

Critical doubts and questions quickly raise themselves. How much can preached words accomplish in an era of the screen and the visual image? What, if anything, makes baptism and eucharist more “sacramental” than the wonders of nature or the joys of human love? What does life together mean in congregations whose members meet only sporadically? A pilgrim church again needs basic biblical, theological orientation to guide it through land that sometimes seems barren.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Word

Human language, along with heaven and earth, will pass away at the end of time, but in our present—the time between the times—God makes use of our meager vocabulary. The risen Lord seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty does not hide himself in blissful silence but rather chooses to speak to us, using words that we can hear and understand. Humans employ language for one self-interested purpose or another. As we try to

convey information, arouse emotions, or win people to our point of view, we regularly misuse words and empty them of meaning. As a result, we find ourselves always weighing each other's words, to assess which are reliable and which are not. In contrast, God's Word teaches us that the true purpose of words is communication that makes possible communion. God uses words in order to become present to us.

How often in the Gospels the breakthrough to communion occurs when Jesus calls a person by name. "Peter." "Zacchaeus." "Mary." He speaks, and suddenly they awaken out of their slumber and come back to their senses. His Word calls them out of themselves into relationship with him. To think eschatologically about the church's ministry of the Word is to regard it as a means by which Christ still calls to men and women today.

The church's words are subject to the same threats as other human words. Our preaching constantly veers between moralistic lecturing, on the one side, and emotional manipulation, on the other. We are constantly tempted to use words to dictate what others should say or do, or to work them up into some kind of powerful emotional experience, as though we could bring heaven down to earth. The church always and again stands before the challenge of using words to clarify rather than obscure its Lord.<sup>7</sup>

A pilgrim church seeks to avoid these pitfalls by focusing, instead, on God's covenant promises. Its ministry of the Word lifts up the biblical story of a God who comes ever again to humans, makes himself known to them, and invites them to respond to him with trust, adoration, and obedience. The preached Word should help us remember who God really is and therefore who we really are and what the world really is. This remembering does not merely bring back to mind the life and message of the ancient prophets and disciples. Rather, it invites us into living relationship with God here and now. To remember the Lord who offered communion to humanity in the biblical past is to live by the confidence that he still offers himself to us and to every man and woman today.

We have relationship with God by faith, not sight. The fact that we live by memory of God's covenant promises, not by immediate vision of God, reminds us that we are still a pilgrim people. The Lord who is present to us is also in some sense absent; we follow him from a distance, along the road

that he has already taken. We nevertheless know that the promises of the gospel are not empty. They allow us even here and now to glimpse God's ultimate purposes, a world made right with God and with itself, where even "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb" (Isa. 11:6, RSV). The ministry of the Word is a joyful invitation to exercise our imaginations—to draw on a rich biblical reservoir of images, symbols, and metaphors that enable us to say more than we could ever say by ourselves about life in the risen Christ.

A pilgrim church not merely recites the biblical promises but also interprets and applies them. The minister's words will be most faithful to the Word's eschatological character when they school us in the fruit of the Spirit. Pastors must be pastor-theologians who know how to apply the gospel to our specific personalities and to our particular circumstances. Nevertheless, the preacher is only the first among equals. Like their listeners, preachers themselves are still learning to recognize the Lord's living Word. Ministers and members need each other's encouragement and help in order to exercise their memories well. They must together remember God's gracious faithfulness so that they may together grow in faithfulness and gratitude.

A pilgrim church will inevitably discover that its words are too limited and inadequate to speak rightly of the things of God. It will always have to make confession of sin. Yet, its confession can be more than just a frustrated outburst about its failures. Paradoxically, we are able to use words to confess our words' limitations, because we are confident that God offers us words of forgiveness that renew our language and our ability to speak the divine promises to the world.

## **2. Sacrament**

The church's ministry of the sacraments must also be understood eschatologically. Let us focus here on the Lord's Supper. Just as God uses weak human words to proclaim divine promises, God uses earthly elements of bread and wine to seal and ratify these promises. Calvin never tires of reminding us that we are fleshly creatures with physical senses. We are not merely a mind in a body, but rather embodied souls and ensouled bodies. The Word of promise is pressed more fully upon us when physical signs and gestures accompany it.

As Calvin writes, “The sacraments . . . are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word. And because we are of flesh, they are shown us under things of flesh, to instruct us according to our dull capacity, and to lead us by the hand as tutors lead children” (*Institutes*, 4.14.6). “The function of the Sacrament is to help the otherwise weak mind of man so that it may rise up to look upon the height of spiritual mysteries” (4.17.36).

Calvin asserts that the Lord’s Supper does more than memorialize a meal that Jesus and his disciples once shared. Rather, it draws us into an active remembering that by the power of the Holy Spirit becomes a wondrous sensing of God’s gracious presence, God’s eternity with us, here and now.<sup>8</sup> In the Supper, we are revived by the promise that God—Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, the One who is all power and glory and majesty and dominion—nevertheless claims us and is not ashamed of us. The One who by definition (“almighty”) could dominate and terrify us, the One whose purity of existence could in principle only contradict and destroy us, impure as we are, is the One who instead becomes human flesh, a baby’s cry from the manger and a son’s cry from the cross. As we take the bread, God promises: “This is my body, given for you”; as we take the cup:

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The Supper is never complete in itself, but rather calls us into a new way of life.

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“This is my blood, shed for you.” God, author of the universe, has not hesitated to offer his very self to us in the Son, Jesus Christ—not a small, insignificant part of himself, not merely external appearances, but rather “my body, my blood,” and so everything that he is.

Here again the church must pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” The eschatological dimensions of the Lord’s Supper easily deteriorate into mere moralizing or mystification. The danger on the one side is to become obsessed with questions of our (or others’) worthiness or unworthiness to receive the Supper. The danger on the other is to use the Supper in search of mystical self-transcendence and “mysteries too bright.” When we become moralistic, we tend to neglect the sacrament, afraid that we are never quite good enough for it. When we seek mystical experience, we easily become promiscuous with the sacrament, manipulating it to evoke vague feelings of wholeness of self and solidarity with others.

By contrast, the pilgrim way is marked by eschatological tension. We believe that in the Supper we are lifted up into heaven. Yet, we remain all too aware yet that the kingdom has not yet come. We are filled with good things, yet leave the table still hungry and thirsty for God's coming reign of righteousness. Calvin captures this tension well: "Christ pours his life into us, as if it penetrated into our bones and marrow" (*Institutes*, 4.17.10). One is "now quickened by his immortal flesh, and in a sense partakes of his immortality" (4.17.32)—but only "as if" and "in a sense." For here we not only celebrate the joyful feast of the people of God but also make painful self-examination and honest reckoning of our sin. On this table lie the world's longings piled high. The straight and narrow way of a pilgrim people involves both confession of sin and communion, both contrition and confidence in God's renewing power.

The point of the Supper is neither to leave us with moralistic words nor to move us into a mystical realm beyond all words, but rather to give radiant clarity to God's Word. It helps us hear God's promises in Christ more fully, hold on to them more tightly, and trust in them more deeply. In service of the Word, the sacrament offers us further training in the fruit of the Spirit. If we have experienced the risen, living Christ in the bread and the wine, we will grow in a capacity for praise and adoration, righteousness and peace, and will offer these gifts to the world. After we eat, we will pray, "Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory" (*Book of Common Worship*, 76).<sup>9</sup> The Supper is never complete in itself, but rather calls us into a new way of life. This way of life is characterized especially by a capacity for thanksgiving. It is truly a "eucharistic" life. In response to God's self-giving love, we only have words to offer, but they are now words of gratitude: "Thanks be to God."

### **3. Life Together**

The church's ministries of Word and sacrament call people into "life together." They become a community whose life takes up space in the world. The church of Jesus Christ is composed not of ideas or rituals, but of people of flesh and blood who physically interact with each other and become a community.

Life together depends on shared patterns of existence—what we might call “discipline” or “disciplines.” In its fullest sense, church discipline is not about church courts and judicial proceedings, but rather about encouraging each other in the faith and holding each other accountable to the gospel.<sup>10</sup> The Reformed tradition has debated whether “discipline” should be regarded as a third mark of the church, but it has never doubted that the community of faith is called to be a provisional representation of the kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> Christ calls us to ways of life together that draw us into fuller life in him, the resurrected Lord. Like Word and sacrament, life together, when rightly understood and practiced, has an eschatological quality.

Here, again, the twin dangers of moralizing and mystifying lurk nearby. Church efforts to prescribe and enforce righteous behavior inevitably encourage one group or another in zealous self-righteousness. The church becomes a regulatory agency that justifies its existence by dictating external behaviors, forgetting that only the Holy Spirit can change people’s hearts. This moralizing is not far from a prideful presumption that if people would only get their act together, the church could become a holy shelter from the blasts of the wicked. We think too confidently of ourselves as “the saints,” and whether we identify ourselves as politically right or left, seem all too sure that we know the will of God in detail.

Different dangers lie in churchly efforts to induce feelings of mystical communion with each other. We then try to create emotional communal experiences that lift us all up into the holy beauty of “worship” and its music and rituals, or that movingly celebrate our diversity and human good will toward each other. All is temporarily well in such a world, but it proves to have no holding power. Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized that every wish dream about the church inevitably comes crashing down.<sup>12</sup> We have to learn instead the difficult but rewarding work of dealing with each other in all of our humanity. The church is not “the magic kingdom,” but rather the body of Christ that suffers and sighs and ever again cries out for God’s renewing Spirit.

A pilgrim church knows that it is not holy, but rather always on the way to life in Christ’s holiness. Such a church can be nothing more—and must be nothing less!—than a school of piety in which the Holy Spirit continually guides us into deeper communion with Christ and each other. The



Reformed tradition has often explicated the Ten Commandments as gracious pathways of personal and communal reformation; Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* looks to the Sermon on the Mount. In either case, the goal has not been to develop a checklist of right and wrong behaviors, but rather to delineate patterns of life together that reorient our hearts toward Christ and each other.<sup>13</sup>

Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* (as well as a wealth of more recent literature on church practices and disciplines) helps specify rhythms of life together that we need today.<sup>14</sup> One church practice deserves special mention, because it so clearly reflects the eschatological dimension of

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life together: *prayer*. When Christians make intercession one for another, and when the church makes intercession for the world, we are privileged to point to God's kingdom. We call on the Lord to make things right and not to abandon us to ourselves. We imagine the world as it should be—as indeed Scripture promises that it will be in the fullness of time. In prayer, we dare to be relentlessly honest about human sin and brokenness, yet steadfastly confident that God is stirring up new possibilities of reconciliation and healing here and now. A pilgrim people lives by Word and sacrament—and daily prayer.



## V. A Confessing Church

I have argued that our task as Presbyterian leaders is to learn to think theologically about the church in an era in which we are tempted merely to talk about techniques for managing the church as a voluntary association. I have also contended that theological thinking about the church will be eschatological thinking. We will confess that the church is the body of the living, risen Christ, who calls us to life in him through Word, sacrament, and life together. The church's practices and disciplines will cultivate in us a sense of the divine. By faith, we will glimpse God's eternity here and now, as it casts its clarifying light into our lives and shows us a way into God's future.

I serve as Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's faculty marshal, and every year at commencement, I carry a tall, heavy oak staff at the front of the faculty procession. A simple stone shaft pierces its top, making the arms of a cross. A metal tip clicks loudly against the marble floor. The wood is gnarled and bent, but human hands have lovingly smoothed it off and polished it. That staff vividly reminds me of the journey of faith that we walk as Christians, individually and corporately—from birth to death, between the times.

The early church father Augustine gave special emphasis to the pilgrim theme in his *Confessions*. Scholars have often noted the ambiguity here. Is Augustine confessing his sin or his faith? Is he referring to the long, circuitous process by which God lay claim on him, or to the rule of faith that he would come to defend as a bishop and theologian? The answer, of course, is yes. For a pilgrim people, there is no confession of one without the other: Our confession of God's promises exposes our sin, and our confession of sin brings us to more profound confession of God's forgiveness.

A confessing church is always learning not only what it can say about God and itself, but also what it cannot. A pilgrim people is truly still on the way.

The past offers us critical orientation, but it cannot walk the path of faith for us. To think theologically about the church is to let God have the last Word, the Word for which we attentively and gratefully wait, now and to eternity.

*When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of death, and hell's destruction,  
Land me safe on Canaan's side;  
Songs of praises, songs of praises  
I will ever give to Thee,  
I will ever give to Thee.*





## VI. Postscript: Ten Theses

### Ten Theses: What It Means to Think Theologically about the Church

1. To think theologically about the church is to set aside personal feelings—whether pride or cynicism about the church; satisfaction in the sense of community that we have experienced, or hurts and frustrations that we have had inflicted upon us there—in order to ask, “What does God intend for the church?”
2. To think theologically about the church is to remember that the Triune God has established the church and its ministry of Word, sacrament, and life together in order to call into existence a people who live in the light of the resurrection and who bear witness to God as they “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”
3. To think theologically about the church is to believe that words, ideas, and critical reflection matter, and that speaking as truthfully as possible about the church (rather than hiding its problems) will help us live together and confess the gospel to the world more faithfully.
4. To think theologically about the church is to attend to the best wisdom of our forebears in the faith, in the acknowledgment that we cannot think responsibly about the church without the help of critical insights from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition and its confessions.
5. To think theologically about the church is to acknowledge and confess the church’s sins, even as we acknowledge and confess that God forgives the church and calls it to new life.

6. To think theologically about the church is to learn to distinguish between the church's identity in the risen Christ, the living Lord, and the church's life as we presently experience it, which always needs reform to bring it into greater conformity with its identity in Christ.
7. To think theologically about the church is to acknowledge and grapple with the real differences that exist between different confessional families and denominations, and to assess which of these differences God calls us to overcome (because they destroy the church), and which God calls us to affirm (because they enrich the church).
8. To think theologically about the church is to live by God's justifying grace alone and hence not with pessimism or optimism about the church's future, but with buoyant confidence in God's future.
9. To think theologically about the church is to remember that our task is not to help the church succeed or fail in worldly terms but to allow Word, sacrament, and life together to draw us into God's righteous purposes in Jesus Christ.
10. To think theologically about the church is to cultivate a life of prayerful gratitude for the privilege of Christian fellowship.

## Notes



1. The vitality of American congregational life is captured well by Nancy Tatom Ammerman in *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
2. The principle of voluntary association is embraced in the historic principles of order in the *Book of Order*: “every Christian Church, or union or association of particular churches, is entitled to declare the terms of admission into its communion” (G-1.0302). But the *Book of Order* goes on in its following chapters to explicate a rich *theology* of the church.
3. Calvin makes this point in the *Institutes*, 4.1.21. German Reformed theologian Michael Weinrich speaks of the “visible invisibility” of the church. The church that we see is full of imperfection, yet by the eyes of faith we are also to behold it in light of God’s promises.
4. M. Craig Barnes writes eloquently about nomads and pilgrims, in *Searching for Home* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003).
5. See Brian Gerrish’s insightful reflections in *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
6. Joseph D. Small writes thoughtfully of some of the challenges before the church, in “A Church of the Word and Sacrament,” in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 311–323.
7. German theologian Wolf Krötke writes powerfully of God as a God who brings clarity into our lives, in *Gottes Klarheiten* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).
8. For beautiful reflections on this theme from an American Orthodox theologian, see *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973–1983* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000).
9. In this sense, the sacraments, as well as the Word and life together, always have a missional dimension, as the work of Darrell Guder and other missional theologians remind us.
10. The Scots Confession speaks of discipline in terms of the church’s responsibility not only to repress vice, but also to nourish virtue (3.18).
11. See, for example, the Presbyterian *Book of Order*: “The Church of Jesus Christ is the provisional demonstration of what God intends for all of humanity” (G-3.0200). Among the great ends of the church is “the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world” (G-1.0200). For helpful reflections on church discipline, see Charles Wiley, “Ordinary

and Extraordinary Discipline,” Office of Theology and Worship Church Issues Series, No. 6, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

12. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper, 1954), 26–28.
13. The Heidelberg Catechism makes this point by placing its discussion of the commandments and sanctification in its section on “Thankfulness.” We do good works “so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us” (Q. 86).
14. For representative books of essays, see Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

