Ecclesiology without Metaphor

Why even try? The Scriptures rightly give us “aid”, as Calvin would say, so that our faith can be supported, we being weak and constantly in need of assistance. The grand Biblical metaphors for the church – bride and groom, vine and branches, shepherd and flock, head and body - give us aid. They each have explicatory and normative power in our thinking about the church. They are not to be neglected. And they are metaphors – similes some – referring by comparison to something not itself, not the church. No less true or necessary for being comparative, but the question comes to mind, is there a presentation of the church in the Scriptures without metaphor? If so, might this presentation be foundational for the metaphors that build up our ecclesiology, and might it even be prior in our thinking, perhaps even to be privileged, so that we can have a lens from the Scriptures by which we read the metaphors of Scripture?

Two literary forms in Scripture come to mind. First the narratives - perhaps The Book of Acts. If Acts were chosen - a long book with few metaphors (can you think of one off hand?) - as the appropriate object of study, I would argue that the narratives of the history of Israel are as important to the study. Founding the study of Acts with and on Genesis and Exodus would be most fruitful and remains, as far as I know, undone. It also would be a long work, too long for the first steps of the ecclesiology project at hand. For that reason I chose a second form in Scripture – those rare statements concerning the church that are declarative but not metaphorical. These have promise of being helpful in interpreting the metaphors for the church because these statements – usually propositional in form – do not presume we know much about the church yet and so do not attempt to embellish on a knowledge that may not be held with a comparative language that is fully useful only when the referents are better known. Rather the declarations announce what is not known making it known.

Four things need to be said quickly here.
One, of course all language is metaphorical – the word analogical most often is used here. And I yes I’ve read David Tracy’s The Analogical Imagination and I’ve read the feminists, like Sallie McFague’s Metaphorical Theology, and with much profit. I’ve also read, indeed been taught by, Carl Henry (God, Revelation, and Authority) and others who argue that analogical speech is not a third way of speaking but a combination of the only two ways humans can speak – univocally or equivocally – again, with profit. (I’ve also read Wittgenstein’s Tractates twice, and have no idea was he was talking about.) Also, I would like to a read an thorough account of what Calvin calls the “condescension” of God to our speech. Is divine speech limited to univocal, equivocal, and analogical, because our ears are? Or does the Word speak beyond, beneath, or behind these categories of human speech, and we hear it and are transformed by it precisely because it is more than human speech in its source and content, and in its category? I speculate here. The point is simple. Though all human speech is a metaphorical attempt to describe reality, divine speech need not be so limited. (We’ll return to this point in a moment.) And, though all human speech is metaphorical it describes reality sometimes with intentional metaphor, and sometimes with the intentional absence of metaphor. Is there speech in Scripture –whether divine or human - which avoids metaphor in order to be more (what shall I say?) straightforward, probably more foundational, in the description of the church? Yes, I think so.

Two, the ecclesiologies that seem to motivate and which underlay the debates, deliberations, and decisions of the church are unexamined. They rely heavily on New Testament metaphors for the church and presume common understandings of those metaphors. “But, the church is the body of Christ…”, one hears another say desperately to a dialogue partner, yet no common conclusion for thought or action comes from the plea. Good preachers – I’ve heard them – are able to explicate these metaphors one by one, but when we gather together for common conversation, the common conversation has less in common than what is necessary, and the meaning of the metaphors are not shared. Is there a more foundational, (note: I am not saying more authoritative) expression of the church to the church in Scripture that, if explicated a bit, would help us
get a fuller use of the dominating metaphors given for our aid in the New Testament?
Yes, I think so.

Three, it is to be found in the Old Testament where we would expect the foundational to be. I don’t think this should be problematic. Again Calvin’s instinct, even theology, is at work here. If we remember that any good question about us must be in the context of the knowledge of God (Calvin is all over that statement), we want to know what God was doing prior to Pentecost, especially we want to know what God was and is doing in Christ, which has always required the Reformed to read as God’s Word to us (and about us) what was said to and about Israel, or as Calvin would say “the Old Testament Church”. Again, this is not about going to a more authoritative spot in the canon (nor a less authoritative spot), but it is a prior one and, I argue, a more foundational one, because it is the one on which the authors of the New Testament metaphors consciously built.

And four, after having made easy reference to Calvin several times above, this paper is not a Calvinistic project, it is a Zwinglian one. It does not seek the rich, even the full, expressions of the Faith in matters of ecclesiology. It will not inspire. It does not have Calvin’s aesthetic for language and theology. It is Zwinglian – simple, straightforward, severe, even intentionally austere. Stones at the foundation of a home are largely unadorned, for their beauty is not their essence. The foundational stones are clear cut, precise and, because trusted, permit the whole home to be built up in ways beautiful and which beautifully express the whole household. (How’s that for a metaphor?) This paper begins at the beginning.

We are blessed by the Scriptures, for the Scriptures tell us not once but several times what is, I now argue, that foundational statement on which all ecclesiology, including the metaphors are built.

I will take you to be my people,
and I will be your God.
That’s the Almighty telling Moses what to tell the people (Exodus 6:7). Abraham had heard this Word earlier (Genesis 17:7),

And I will establish my covenant between me and you
and your offspring after you throughout their generations
for an everlasting covenant,
to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God will repeat this to Moses from Sinai, for him to tell the people again (Leviticus 26:12),

And I will walk among you
and will be your God,
And you will be my people.

The prophets Jeremiah (30:22) and Ezekiel (36:28), among others, just to name two and one passage a piece, will declare it repeatedly in new circumstances, but with the same declarative, unadorned language,

You shall be my people,
And I will be your God.

You shall be my people,
And I will be your God.

And Hosea (1:9), when he wants to threaten Israel with the potential loss of all that is of value, says simply on behalf of God,

You are not my people,
And I am not your God.
And when Hosea announces the restoration of all that is good, says with equal simplicity,

I will say, “You are my people.”
You will say, “You are my God.”

This repeated phrase is, by the time of the exilic prophets, a topos – stylized, formulaic, familiar. But it never seems dull or dismissible. It is always on the lips of the Almighty, always declarative, always the critical moment into whatever conversation (or silence) it is spoken. It appears to be foundational. Though there is a beginning to this statement (I spoke this to your father Abraham), and though there is illustration of this statement (I brought you out of Egypt) there is no explanation for this statement. There seems to be nothing before it.

What can be known then by the priority, pervasiveness, and power of this statement – unadorned, straightforward, without metaphor – which can inform our ecclesiology? Again, four things.

First, God speaks.

Divine speech creates reality. The closest parallel to this statement may be “And God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light’”. The Almighty creates by the Word. The creation of the people of God is a work of God by means of the Word of God. The Almighty can and will eventually birth, adopt, and marry this people, but prior to all the relational metaphors and historical narratives there is the creation of the people as the people of God by the Word of God. The people of God are creatura verbi. Consider the opposite: the people of God are formed by human associations making application – speeches - to the deity for privileged status as the people of the deity. That’s the pagan project – seeking, appeasing, even creating their own gods to be owned by them. The Old Testament people of God are sought out, formed, offered salvation, and owned by the Almighty in such a way as never to be let go. If there is a missing third line to the declaration “I will be your God, you will be my people” it sometimes seems to be “So get
used to it.” The Old Testament, it has been said, is the record of a people who did not want their God. This people never chose God; God chose, even created, them. This is the doctrine of election. The Almighty, taking only his own counsel, elects some for his own purposes. The people of God are created by the Word of God because elected by the inscrutable counsel of God, not and never by their own choosing.

Second, it is God who speaks.

Divine speech reveals reality. It reveals God. This is a declaration that not only creates the reality, it also reveals it – by revealing God. The declaration announces not only what they will be, but who God is and will be to them. The pagans would not be surprised to hear of a god who finally agrees to become a protector of a suppliant people, but they would be surprised to hear of a god who takes the initiative to reveal self to someone or some people, for the sake of both the deity and humanity. The lesser gods sought the favor of the great gods, always looking up, revealing their own lesser person and pitiable plight, and likewise expected humanity, lower still, in turn to seek them out, humanity revealing humanity because suppliant and subordinate. The initiator, the speaker, reveals self. This is the doctrine of revelation. The Almighty, again acting from his own counsel not from some external petition, initiates the conversation and reveals himself. In doing so, God presents and represents himself, defines, displays, and declares himself. Here, if there is a third line to the statement, “I will be your God, you will be my people”, it would seem to be “Because I say so”. The Word that creates the people of God and reveals God to them is external to the people of God – *verbum externum*.

In both electing the people of God and in the self revelation of God, the people of God are created and the Creator is revealed. The statement “I will be your God, you will be my people” is a statement of creation. The missing third line might be, “So there”. Perhaps that is the third point. And perhaps I’ve already belabored it.

Fourth, God speaks to us.
Not much can be made of the Hebrew that is best and most often translated as a future in the statement “I will be…/You will be…”. This is neither proleptic nor eschatological in any deep sense. But the past tenses of Hebrew are avoided in the many repetitions of this statement because, I think, they would sound pleading. This is not a request nor, though it should be a welcome statement, is it an invitation. The present tenses available in Hebrew are avoided for the same reason and perhaps also because they might connote command as in “I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.” God will, of course plead, invite, and command the people in due time and place, and this statement sometimes is found in contexts where those things are also present, but the statement announces an intention to establish what has not yet been or, at least, has not been known by the people. In this sense also it elects and reveals by announcing a creation, yet now, finally, here I wish to call attention to what is established – a relationship, better said, a covenant within a relationship.

The statement is relational in that it names the two covenantal partners and brings them both into a stated relationship. One will be the God of the other; the other will be the people of the one. Again, this is news. The gods of the Ancient Near East, the Olympian gods of late antiquity and the all the minor, local, tribal gods before, during, and after the cultures in which the Scriptures were written, all stand alone, and certainly stand apart from humanity. They care little for humanity, are often at cross purposes to any affinity for humanity, indeed they are most often at cross purposes with each other.

If any god is for humanity it is Prometheus. He created human beings. A very ancient god – a Titan, to be specific – he decries the uniform absolute neglect of his creation by all the Olympians. Rebelling against them all, especially Zeus, he gives humanity fire which permits humanity to progress and build civilizations (which, it is presumed, will finally get the notice of the gods). They don’t; he does. They gang up on him, defeat him, and punish him with an everlasting torment. No god will ever so identify with humanity again.
The gods of the pagans, whatever persuasion, stand alone, certainly apart, and do not create or value being in relationship with humanity. This God of the Scriptures clearly chooses to be in relationship. Indeed, a particular binding form of relationship – a covenant.

The statement of covenant is balanced grammatically; the relationship is to be mutual. “I will be... You will be”. The election of the people of God is to a relationship that is mutual. They face each other. Though one is tempted to ask if there are any other kinds of relationships, again it is noted that reference to silent, absent deities unresponsive to desperate pagans fill the narratives and myths of the ancients, and the critiques of the Biblical writers. Elijah on Mt. Carmel does not so much expose false gods but reminds the pagans of the falseness of the gods in relationship to humanity – they sleep, they are mute, frankly, they don’t care. No one went home that day from atop Carmel thinking there were fewer gods, but Elijah had demonstrated there was only one responsive God. This God chooses to be in a relationship – a relationship that is mutual.

This is a statement of a relationship that, though mutual, is not equal; the covenant is not between equals nor does it name equal obligations. Being God and being a people are not the same thing. In this sense there is a summons and response feel to the statement. I will do this; You will do that. The “this” and the “that” are parallel but not alike. This is not a division of shared, similar tasks between partners. The partners are unequal and the covenant names unequal obligations. God is always God and to be imagined as ever having been, but a people can at one time have been no people and now become a people. Which is Hosea’s point, I think, in the threat of becoming – again – a “no people”. There is no you without me, says the Lord. What makes the people, “the people”, is that they are the people of God. There is no other reason for their existence offered. The “that” they are to do is to become a people in relationship to God. The Almighty has created the people and the covenant with the people at the same time, they are a covenanted people by definition.
The statement – I will be your God; You will be my people - was first spoken to Abraham in the context of and for the purpose of making covenant. It is interesting to note that the mutuality is missing here alone of all the passages cited above. I will be your God infers, in the mention of Abraham’s offspring, the creation of a people, not the creation of God. But it is not until Sinai, and ever after that, that the people are called to be a people. The context for the statement and frequent restatement is covenanting. These are all covenant making, remaking, and renewing occasions. The language of covenant will often have additional terms and conditions, but at its core always stands the statement of relationship – I will be your God; You will be my people.

From these four points found in the foundational ecclesial statement – election, revelation, creation, and covenant making - we could go now in several directions. We could build out from each of them independently more implications toward a renewed doctrine of the church. But that is another set of papers for another day, which hopefully someday will help reestablish for the church a robust ecclesiology that is at once reformed, evangelical, and catholic. I prefer a different project to finish this paper - to keep the four together for a moment longer and draw out further from our foundational statement what may be obvious to all already but which, I argue, seems to be missing in many of the current ecclesioligies vying for attention.

The foundational statement is intensely personal. The one creates the other, chooses the other, reveals self to the other, and enters into a covenantal relationship with the other. God is thoroughly personal in all this. It is difficult to imagine how the Almighty could be more personal; no one has. The ancients, both limited to and thus perfecting personification, never imagined a deity like this.

Demeter, the goddess of harvest and a mistress of Zeus, lamenting the abduction of their daughter Persephone by Zeus’ brother Hades, appeals to the Father of gods and men for their daughter’s restoration from the place of the dead by threatening to stop all earthly harvests, thus destroying all humanity. Zeus responds by saying he couldn’t care less about his daughter’s well-being or the destruction of humanity. Demeter appeals several
times without success including a half-hearted appeal based on relationships. Finally she cleverly reminds him that the loss of humanity would mean not only the cessation of humanity but the cessation of humans sacrificing to him. “Oh, now I get it”, he responds, and sets about rescuing Persephone by negotiating with his brother to let Persephone be above ground half the year and with him below ground the other half. (This is why crops now grow above ground for half the year and only half a year. Don’t worry if you didn’t catch all that. It all makes more sense if you’re a pagan.)

We have probably passed alongside the field of soteriology somewhere on our brief path through the four points, but let us note the grace viewed nearby which has constantly been within our reach. Who was not, now is; who was excluded, is now included; who knew not, now knows and is known to be known; and who was alone, now belongs. Is this not grace, starkly and beautifully stated?

The creating, electing, self-revealing, covenant making God personally engages the people, declaring them to be his; and he to be theirs. They belong to each other. It will take centuries for the pagans to their head around that one.

The rest of the Scriptures will narrate this, adding eternal qualities and historical particularities in the words of the prophets; flesh it out most perfectly and wonderfully in the life and ministry, person and work of Jesus of Nazareth; and finally explicate it all by helpful metaphors in the letters of the apostles. All that, I argue, is connected to the simple, stark, severe, austere, bold declaration of the Almighty early and often – I will be your God; You will be my people.

Would someone dare to argue this is not love? It is as intimate and public as it can be. If we had only this, could we not foretell branches and vine, flock and shepherd, body and head, certainly bride and groom?

Convinced by the personal, I am as convinced that any ecclesiology that is not also intensely personal – intimate and public both – has diminished a, if not the, central genius
of the Biblical record. And the personal is, I think I see, missing in some of our ecclesiology and much of our talk. We began at the beginning and found the intensely personal; let’s go to the end to see if it survived.

Current eschatology has long since abandoned a dispensational framework, and reformed ecclesiology, when true to itself, rejected it from the outset. The fundamental flaw of evangelical ecclesiology in the last century or so has been that, because of dispensationalism, it has been ecclesiology in the service of eschatology. No robust ecclesiology emerged from a movement that showed signs of strength in other areas of theology. But now, I worry, that among the reformed the error has been repeated. I am not sure why. We think of the church more in terms of its end, than in light of its beginning. The church is being pulled, seldom pushed. Eschatology influences our ecclesiology more so than the reverse. I missed when that choice was made, but it seems dominant.

Closer to the point I wish to make, the end is now “realized” or “unrealized”, “under’- or “over’- realized, and ubiquitously stated as “already not yet”. The kingdom of God is here, near, coming. We live in it, work toward it, some would say help establish or build it, and we expect it. We experience, usher in, and await shalom. I confess, I hear all this as uninspiring. Where is God in all this? There is us to be sure, and probably enough of us together with each other, but too little of God for my taste. The kingdom of God is coming, but name the theologically respectable book or rigorous article that lately inspired you about the King who is coming. Shalom surely is on the way, we can see it from here maybe, (and we seem to know with a high degree of certainty how that should inform our politics), but has anyone argued lately for the necessary arrival of the Prince of Peace? Heard or preached a sermon lately on the imminent return of Christ? Last week, the First Sunday in Advent, begs for it. I search my Presbyterian Hymnal, both the one that has served me since ordination and one just now published, and remain at a loss to find much of anything that helps me to sing of the return of the Savior while I prayerfully await him.
Perhaps this is just my piety learned in childhood that lingers around my theology and haunts it. But can we not agree that, “I will be your God; You will be my people” is still awaiting its glorious consummation. That day, the last book of the Bible shows us, is very, very personal. God is present on the center stage of human history and seated central in the sanctuary of worship. God acts for us; we worship God. The feast enjoyed is a marriage feast for the Lamb (how’s that for a mixed metaphor?). We are with God. Indeed in our individual eschatons, to be absent here is to be present with the Lord.

Alas. I don’t suppose I really need to argue for all this, but wonder if I alone lament the absence of the personal God in our ecclesiology talk. And I wonder if our (impersonal) eschatology has, like it has for others, displaced our ecclesiology from its proper role and diminished its central genius – a personal God who makes us, chooses us, self-reveals to us, and makes covenant with us. God. us.

I argue that our proper focus, indeed hope, is intensely personal, both in this life and the one to come. Kindgom, shalom, and the eschaton, are (I almost said “merely”) the train that follows in the wake of the King, the Prince of Peace, the Spirit of eternity.

The statement “I will be your God; You will be my people” whether considering its individual companion doctrines – election, revelation, creation, covenant making – or all of them together, argues, I argue, for the intensely personal nature of the church – God; us. Establish that and the metaphors of the New Testament find their true foundation. The statement announces that our ecclesiology is to be personal. The metaphors explain in what ways it is personal.

The metaphors can now be experienced with renewed life and used with more common understanding. Branches/vine, neither of which is human, can now be explicated more deeply, remembering the personal; flock/shepherd, one of which is human (and that referent assigned to the deity), is better positioned now to be recalled in our discussions; bride/groom, both of which are human, can now enrich us with its profound beauty; head/body, which is intrapersonal, can reveal more of its treasures now.

It is not primarily for the event or the idea, or for the feast or even the wedding, but for the Groom that wise virgins still oil their lamps.

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