Outside the (united) church is no salvation

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I. “Liturgical-Missional” and the Problem of Protestant Ecclesiology

What does it mean to speak of a “liturgical-missional” vision for the church? I have to admit that when Neal Presa asked me to make a contribution to this conversation, it was not immediately clear to me what, in this context, these combined terms were meant to mean. But the advantage of participating in the third and last Moderator’s Colloquium on Ecclesiology is that we have an opportunity to look back at how the conversation has developed so far; what themes have emerged, what arguments have been advanced, and what hopes and dreams have been expressed.

Looking over the presentations from previous colloquia, it seems that many participants were looking for a stronger, thicker relationship between the notions of “church” and “salvation” – church, that is, as the visible, tangible community of people gathered together, and “salvation” as the saving and transforming presence of Jesus Christ. For example, in his paper on the church as a missional community Darrell L. Guder spoke of the need for an ecclesiology which could counter ways of speaking about the church that reduce salvation to an individualistic and disembodied hope; that takes serious God’s mission as the outworking of God’s love for the entire creation; an ecclesiology that reclaims “the profoundly eschatological character of the church’s calling”; and which acknowledges that “the divine strategy for the healing of the world is the calling, setting apart, formation, and sending of a particular people.”

Corey J. Widmer, writing as the pastor of a multicultural church plant, called attention to the metaphor of “foretaste,” the notion that the church, in all its diversity, “is called to be an anticipatory foretaste of a new and coming future.”

Marney Wasserman, reflecting on our celebrations of the Lord’s table, mourned that so many eucharistic services seem trapped in the past, remembering what Jesus did instead of being focused on the present, on “the thing that God is doing here with bread and wine,”

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among us... with our eyes on the crucified Savior we miss the risen Lord.”

Thomas E. Smith, also writing about communion, focused on the missional effect of the sacrament, because “the sacramental significance of the eucharist lies in it effecting what it signifies, namely, in effecting in the lives of its participants the saving grace of Jesus Christ, enabling them to go into the world in the strength of his love to incarnate the same.”

If this is indeed the focus of the liturgical-missional conversation, it touches on the sore spot of Reformed ecclesiology. While it is part of the Reformed confessional heritage to say, in the words of third century church father Cyprian of Cartago, that “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” (outside the church is no salvation), over time this confessional stance has been gutted of real meaning. Reformed theologians, wanting to combine Cyprian’s saying with the dissenter roots of the Protestant movement, developed a set of concepts and distinctions that reinterpreted “church” as an invisible, spiritual community. As a result, Cyprian’s saying became a kind of tautology: that is, outside the spiritual community of faith, the gathering of the elect, the invisible church, no one is saved. Simultaneously, the ties between the visible church and salvation were loosened to the point of being accidental. Sure, most Christians will find Christ and salvation in the context of a visible ecclesial community, but this is not perceived as necessary. Listening to Christian talk-radio will do as well. Downgrading the place of the visible church in the story of salvation has left Reformed theology defenseless in the face of church schism and has crippled the development of a Reformed doctrine of ordination. If salvation is dependent on membership in the invisible, and not the visible church, there is no argument against breaking away from an existing church community. Moreover, if the visible church is accidental to salvation, so are ministers, whose ordinations happened in the context of public communities, not invisible ones.

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3 Marney Wasserman, “Getting Out of the Past tense at the Lord’s Table: Missional Implications of the Lord’s Supper,” unpublished manuscript, p. 3.


5 “Outside the Church of God there is no salvation. But we esteem fellowship with the true Church of Christ so highly that we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it” (The Second Helvetic Confession, XVII; The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I (The Office of the General Assembly: Louisville, 2007) 5.136, p. 87); “The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service” (The Westminster Confession of Faith, XXVII; The Book of Confessions 6.141, p. 152). For Cyprian of Carthago, see Letter LXXII.21: “...there is no salvation out of the church,” here quoted after: Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., Ante-Nicene Fathers, volume 5 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), p. 384.

6 Rather than expounding what it means to be “stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor. 4:1), Reformed accounts of ordained ministry have become functional and pragmatic. A perfect illustration thereof is the highly regrettable and hopefully short-lived decision of the PC(USA) to call its clergy “teaching elders” — as if ministers of
In this paper I wish to contribute to the “liturgical-missional” conversation by reflecting on the “extra ecclesiam nulla salus.” In the next section I will illustrate the history of Reformed reinterpretation of Cyprian’s saying by a brief discussion of the ecclesiological position of three key Reformed thinkers: John Calvin (1509-1564), Francis Turretin (1623-1687), and Charles Hodge (1797-1878). In the third section, I will propose an alternative Protestant reading of the relationship between church and salvation, which hangs on a reinterpretation of “salvation,” rather than a redefinition of “church.” I will make my proposal in conversation with a colloquium paper by David L. Stubbs, in which he offers the most extensive theological reflection on the pair “liturgical-missional” to date. Finally, in a fourth section, I will make six suggestions about what such reclaimed relationship between church and salvation means for the common life in the denomination, in our congregations, and for the formation of candidates for ordination in our seminaries.

II. *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*: Three classical Reformed interpretations

*John Calvin*

In the opening pages of the ecclesiological part of his *Institutes* John Calvin underscores his adherence to Cyprian’s position: “…for those who have God as Father, the church is mother… For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become Word and Sacrament are a kind of ecclesial educators. The liturgical acts of the minister - blessing and declaration of pardon, baptizing and breaking of bread, proclaiming the Word and yielding the keys of the kingdom, are in fact of a significantly different category than “teaching.”

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7 I use the word “illustrate” advisedly. My claim is not that these three theologians are themselves responsible for the shifting interpretation of the “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” among the Reformed, but rather that they embody three different phases in the development of Reformed ecclesiology. Turretin and Hodge are nonetheless pivotal figures given their central place in the history of education of North-American Presbyterian candidates for ministry. In the nineteenth century, Turretin’s three volume *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* was the textbook for instruction in theology at several important North-American Presbyterian theological schools (See: James T. Dennison, Jr., ‘The Life and Career of Francis Turretin,’ in: Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, volume 3 (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing: 1992), p. 648 (pp. 639-648).) At Princeton Turretin’s text was only replaced in 1872 at the appearance of Charles Hodge’s three volumes of *Systematic Theology*. Hodge himself taught at Princeton for more than forty years and instructed more than three thousand students (On Hodge, see now: Paul C. Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
like the angels… Away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.” If the church is our mother apart from whom no salvation is possible, how then can Protestants defend their leave of the parental home? To answer this question, Calvin makes use of two distinctions: one between the “visible” and the “invisible” church, and another distinction between a “true” and a “false” or “corrupted” church. The first distinction Calvin wields to underscore that when it comes to “the true church with which as a mother we must keep unity” it is the visible church of which he speaks. This is in itself quite significant since, as we will see, later generations Reformed theologians solved the Protestant ecclesiological dilemmas by taking the invisible church as their point of departure. Not so Calvin. Scripture uses the notion of church in two ways, he says: as the community of all those who are truly “children of God by grace of adoption” (the invisible church) and “the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ” (the visible church). In this latter community, Calvin admits, we find “mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance.” Nonetheless, it is this latter, visible community that “we are commanded to revere and keep communion with” and that Calvin designates as “the mother of believers.” If we are then to keep communion with the visible church as the conduit of salvation, how can Calvin justify the schismatic roots of his own Genevan community? To answer this question Calvin introduces his second distinction, between the “true church” and the “false” or “corrupted” church. When it comes to the true church, we should “keep its communion scrupulously in all respects.” False churches however are communities that have become “props of falsehood” and “receptacles of idols” from which one “must separate.” What distinguishes these two kinds of communities are certain “marks,” that help us to identify where “a church of God exists.” Following earlier stipulations in the Lutheran tradition, Calvin then lifts up as marks “the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution.” Here Calvin left his followers with a real puzzle. How do we

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9 Ibid., IV.1., title; p. 1011.
10 Ibid, IV.I.7; p. 1021.
11 Ibid., IV.1.7; p. 1021.
12 Ibid., IV.1.7; p. 1022; IV.1.4, p. 1016.
13 Ibid., IV.II.10; pp..1051, 1050; cf. the discussion throughout the whole of chapter II (pp. 1041-1053).
14 Ibid., IV.1.9; p. 1023.
distinguish the pure from the impure preaching of the Word, and what makes the sacraments administered more or less according to Christ’s institution? Calvin himself does not give us much to go on here. At some point in his exposition he even drops the qualifiers altogether. The closest Calvin comes in unpacking these qualifiers is when he introduces the notion of necessary articles of faith. There is a sliding scale as to the ‘purity’ of preaching, Calvin says. Not all disagreements about doctrine should therefore lead to dissent. But some articles of faith are non-negotiable. “Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.” Then the question is: What falls under the category of “the like”? In suggesting we identify the true, visible church by looking for the marks of pure preaching and rightful sacramental administration Calvin opened the door for further fragmentation of the Protestant community, as different groups unpacked Calvin’s qualifiers in different ways. Even more serious is a second problem: the marks which Calvin suggested are expressions of human and not divine agency. They are not acts of divine initiative but of human response: faithful preaching, rightly administered sacraments. If these are the things which distinguish the true from the false church, and there is no salvation outside the true church, then salvation depends on whether or not humans form faithful, true churches. To say this seems deeply problematic for a movement that had just discovered that salvation depends on God’s acts and not ours. If what makes a church to be true depends on our faithfulness, on a Protestant account this therefore has to inevitably weaken the ties between church and salvation.

Francis Turretin
Turretin starts his ecclesiological discussion at the same place as Calvin: the church is necessary for salvation, and therefore it is crucial to know which church is true and which is not. When he comes to discuss the distinction between the true and the false church, he again follows Calvin, lifting up two marks by which the true church can be recognized: “the pure preaching of the word with the lawful

16 “We have laid down as distinguishing marks of the church the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments.” Ibid., IV.1.10.; p. 1024.
17 Ibid., IV.1.12; p. 1026.
18 “Since there is no salvation outside of the church (no more than out of the ark; nor does anyone have God as his Father in heaven whose church is not his mother on earth), nothing ought to be dearer to our hearts than that this mother may be known (in whose bosom God has willed us to be educated and to be nourished). It behooves us to be directed by her care until we grow up and arrive at the goal of faith. Also it behooves us to know what assembly is that true church with which (according to the command of God) we are bound to connect ourselves that we may obtain salvation.” Francis Turretin, Institutio Theologiae Elencticae XVIII.i; quoted according to the Institutes of Elenctic Theology, Vol. 3, ed. James T. Dennison, trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing: 1992), p. 1. Cf. Ibid., XVIII.XII.i; p. 86: Since salvation cannot be obtained except in communion with the true church and many glory in this sacred name who are destitute of its truth, it is of great value to know its true marks that we may be able to distinguish the true fold of Christ from the dens of wolves.”
administration of the sacraments.” Turretin does want to make a distinction in importance between these two: without “the pure preaching and profession of the word” the church cannot exist, but the administration of the sacraments do not have an equal degree of necessity. The “marks of the church” continue to be understood in terms of human rather than divine agency. In his further unpacking of the “proper and essential mark” of the true church he describes its central characteristic as the correspondence between the church’s doctrine and the word of God.

However, between his opening paragraphs about the true church without there is no salvation, and the point where he discusses the marks that help us distinguish between true and false churches, Turretin offers about eighty pages of additional ecclesiological considerations – and in these pages he develops what can be read as an alternative strategy to understand the ‘extra ecclesiam nulla salus.’ The strategy is based on an identification between the true church and the invisible church. As I noted above, Calvin introduced the distinction between the true and the false church only after he had underscored that when it comes to the true, salvific church, he is speaking of the visible church. So not Turretin. Like Calvin, having staked his position on the essential importance of the church for salvation, he introduces the distinction between the invisible and visible church, but then says that the invisible church, “an assembly of elect persons, whom God by his word and Spirit calls out of the state of sin into the state of grace unto eternal glory,” is the true church. To underscore this point, Turretin argues that therefore “catechumens, the excommunicated and unbaptized... can be members of the true church, although they are not in the visible church.” In order to make this claim stick, Turretin builds on the distinction between invisible and visible church a dual ecclesiological structure, in which salvation is consistently connected with the invisible and not the visible church. For instance, Turretin makes a distinction between external and internal baptism, and argues that external baptism is not necessary for salvation. External baptism is necessary for membership of the visible church only; internal baptism is necessary for membership of the invisible church. Likewise, he makes a distinction between visible (or external) unity, and invisible (or internal) church unity: the former is only accidental, the latter essential to the church. At this point, the “extra ecclesiam nolum salus” has become a tautology – but at the expense of a place for the visible, tangible church community, for visible, tangible, acts like baptism, and for visible, tangible common life. But not only that. If obtaining salvation is a matter of being a member

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19 Ibid., XVIII.XII.vii; p. 87.

20 Ibid., XVIII.XIV.iv; p. 121.

21 Ibid., XVIII.II.x; p. 9; cf. the whole of Ibid., XVIII.VII; p. 32-41.

22 Ibid., XVIII.II.xi; p. 10.

23 Ibid., XVIII.IV.iv; p. 24.

24 Ibid., XVIII.IV.vii; p. 24.

25 Ibid., XVIII.V.ii-iii; p. 27.
of the invisible and not the visible church, salvation itself cannot be visible. This is indeed what Turretin seems to hold. As part of his argument for identifying the true and the invisible church, he makes this comment: “The church is the kingdom of God. It does not come with observation…. Because it is spiritual and internal, erected in the minds of men and occupied with things pertaining to the mind, not... in external and bodily things, but ‘in righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.”26 It is exactly here, I believe, that our theological suspicions should be raised. Is it true that the kingdom of God is spiritual and internal, only pertaining the things of the mind? Does that picture fit the ministry of Christ, who announces God’s reign not only by forgiving sins and engages people in questions of the soul, but whose hands also feed real hunger, heal real bodies, and raise people from the dead? If it is not true that salvation concerns solely the mental and spiritual, would it not likewise be mistaken to think that the true church, as the gateway to salvation, is internal and invisible? A concept of a true, invisible church will only holds as much as a concept of invisible salvation will allow, and if salvation is too rich to be squeezed into the invisible, spiritual realm, the true church cannot be kept in the invisible either.

Charles Hodge

In Charles Hodge’s work we find the final steps of the Reformed re-interpretion of the “extra ecclesiam nulla salus.” Strikingly, in his three volume Systematic Theology the church does not receive a chapter of its own. Hodge writes about the church in the context of a discourse about the difference between the Roman Catholic and Protestant views on the rule of faith and in a chapter on baptism.27 In the first discussion Hodge deals with “the nature of the church.” The idea that the church is essentially “an external, visible, organized society” is dismissed as a “Romish doctrine.”28 Rather, “the church as such, or in its essential nature, is not an external organization. All true believers, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, are members of that church which is the body of Christ, no matter with what ecclesiastical organization they may be connected, and even although they have no such connection... The condition of membership in the true church is not union with any organized society, but faith in Jesus Christ.”29 Hodge is so convinced that these are “the two opposing theories of the church, the Romish and the Protestant,” that “it is unnecessary to cite authorities on either side.”30 If that is the case, then what to make of the claim of the Westminster Confession that outside the visible church there is no ordinary

26 Ibid., XVIII.VII.xii; p. 37.
27 Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology [1871-1873] (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), volume I, pp. 129-139, and volume III,
28 Ibid., volume I, p. 131.
29 Ibid., volume I, p. 134.
30 Ibid., volume I, p. 135.
possibility of salvation? Hodge does not deal with this in his *Systematic Theology*, but he does so elsewhere. It is very simple, he claims: “it is only saying that there is no salvation without the knowledge and profession of the gospel; that there is no the name by which we must be saved, but the name of Jesus Christ.” Here the Protestant strategy to gut the confessional stance of real meaning has been completed: the visible church has been written out of salvation history.

Even while membership of the visible church is thus not necessary for salvation, it is not the case that Hodge wants to deplete the visible ecclesial community of all importance. Rather, as a logical consequence of the Protestant reinterpretation strategy, the visible church is an expression of human response to the gospel, and membership thereof a sign of human obedience: “God has imposed duties upon his people which render it necessary for them thus to associate in a visible body.” What is not necessary, however, is that there is only one such visible body. In fact, the diversity of opinion that exists among the faithful about all sorts of things theologically, calls for a variety of ecclesial communities. While “diversity of opinion is indeed an evidence of imperfection,” and therefore wrong, it is less problematic “than either hypocrisy or contention.” It is “to be deplored, as every other evidence of... imperfection is to be regretted, yet the evil is not to be magnified above its just dimensions. So long as unity of faith, of love, and of obedience is preserved, the unity of the church is as to its essential principle safe... if the unity of the church arises from union with Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, then all who are thus united to him, are members of the church, no matter what their external ecclesiastical connections may be, or whether they sustain any such relationship at all... It is plain therefore that the evangelical are the most truly catholic.”

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31 See footnote four.
33 Hodge himself astutely formulates the classical Protestant strategy when he continues: “the proposition that ‘out of the church there is no salvation’ is true or false, liberal or illiberal, according to the latitude given to the word church... In the mouth of Protestants, it means there is no salvation without faith in Jesus Christ” (Ibid., p. 46/7). Earlier in his argument he had spoken negatively spoken of those “Greek and Latin Churches” which made “salvation depend upon connection with a visible society” (Ibid., p. 34). It is a sign of the success of the Protestant re-interpretation strategy that Hodge did not realize John Calvin sided with these “Greek and Latin churches.”
34 Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, volume III, p. 547. One should not be misled by the title of this section of God’s work: “The Visible Church is a Divine Institution” (Ibid., p. 547). The upshot of Hodge’s argument is not that God constituted the visible church, but that God commanded the church to be constituted. How this works out, one sees in Hodge’s treatment of baptism. His preferred image for baptism is that of “a badge of Christian profession,” alike to an oath taken by an office holder at his inauguration (Ibid., p. 585). As such, it is an act of human obedience, not of divine initiative.
35 Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity*, p. 44.
It is not difficult to recognize in these last comments by Hodge the practice of twenty-first century North-American Christians. Institutional unity is valued lowly; institutional loyalty sacrificed at the altar of church shopping and ecclesial strife. Denominational pluralism is either bemoaned but seen as necessary consequence of religious diversity and authenticity, or even celebrated as a means to strengthen the religious marketplace. Visible church and salvation are disconnected; salvation is often perceived as a result of personal choice and faith. The question is, though: does this low esteem for visible ecclesial community do right by the narrative of Scripture? And if not, would this not call for a different interpretation of the “extra ecclesiæ nulla salus?”

III. Extra ecclesiæ nulla salus: An Alternative Interpretation

It is exactly at this point, I believe, that the “liturgical-missional” conversation offers important openings, because its participants are convinced that the church in its visible appearance is more than a voluntary organization and more than accidentally related to salvation. They are thus convinced because they believe the narrative of Scripture offers a richer, thicker account of the role of the visible church in the history of salvation. Based on these convictions, in this section I will offer an alternative interpretation of “outside the church is no salvation.” Rather than trying to redefine “church,” I will focus on the notion of “salvation.” In the first half of this section I will gather the exegetical material that helps us recognize the close connections between church and salvation in the biblical narrative. I will do so in conversation with a paper presented at a previous colloquium by David L. Stubbs. In the second half I will offer an alternative account of Cyprian’s saying which helps us turn away from the classical Protestant distinctions between true and false and visible and invisible church, but which nonetheless is rooted in a distinctive Protestant ecclesiology.

The narrative of Scripture

Stubbs starts his presentation with a reflection on the notion of a “liturgical-missional vision” for the church. To say that the church is missional “is to claim that the church is a people who participate in the ‘present reign of Christ’ in such a way that ‘the coming completed reign of God... is revealed and becomes effective in the present.’” ²⁶ The word “missional,” Stubbs argues, involves a series of claims about the church’s relationship to the reign of God. The Kingdom of God is “at the center of Jesus’ gospel.” It is not individual or spiritual, but embodied and relational: “a renewed state of the created world in which all relationships between God and humanity, humans and humans, and humans and the

creation are set right.” The church represents God’s reign “by partially embodying it and also proclaiming the good news that in and through Christ, the reign of God has been inaugurated.” Finally, this “task of representing the reign of God to the world” is the core on what the church is.\textsuperscript{37} To say that the church is \textit{liturgical} is to say that this community embodies God’s reign particularly when it gathers in worship, because it is here that “God is present to God’s people, molding and shaping them into the patterns of activity of the Kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{38} The bulk of Stubbs’ paper is then devoted to locating this understanding of the church in the context of the larger Biblical narrative. The burden of this move is to show that this notion of a liturgical-missional community is at the heart of God’s dealing with the world: a particular community is called to embody in its visible, common life God’s intend for creation. Stubbs takes his readers on a journey through the Old Testament, pointing at God’s dealing with the patriarchs, the covenant at Sinai, and the vision of the prophets. From there he moves to the story of Jesus, Pentecost and the church, and the new creation.

It seems to me that Stubbs has it exactly right: at the center of God’s gracious dealing of creation are not primarily single individuals, nor an invisible, spiritual community, but a visible, embodied community, which is called in its common life to live into the reality of the inaugurated Kingdom of God. For the sake of my own argument, I would like to underscore three things.

First, this community is \textit{covenantal}. At its core this community is constituted by God. God’s covenantal actions call this community into existence. When God chose Israel, God did not elect an already existing nation but formed one out of a barren woman and a man who was as good as dead (Rm. 4:19). One did not become part of Israel voluntarily but by birth and circumcision. Jesus’ disciples did not choose him, but he chose them (Jn. 15:16). One becomes a member of the Christian community by baptism – that is, by dying and being resurrected again (Rm. 6:3-4). To be resurrected is not something we do, but something God does to us. The repeated pattern is not that of choosing, but of being chosen; not of gathering, but of being gathered; not of constituting, but of being constituted. This covenantal gathering starts with Israel and spreads from there to the nations, as they are incorporated into the community of the people of God.

Second, this covenantal community is \textit{eschatological}. In the biblical narrative, God relates to creation in two ways. Having called creation into being, God does not leave it to its own devices, but leads it to a final goal, what theologians call “eschatological consummation,” and what Scripture calls the Kingdom of God. When humans wander away from God, God reaches out to creation and draws them back in reconciliation. Each of these two ways of divine relating has its own logic and content. Eschatological consummation is about leading creation to fulfillment; reconciliation is about restoring that which is broken. Consummation is about human flourishing in intimacy with God; reconciliation is governed by the dynamic of sin and forgiveness. In the concrete narrative of Scripture, God’s relating in reconciliation and eschatological consummation are intimately related, as a sinful humanity needs to be reconciled before it can be ushered into God’s Kingdom. Nonetheless, these two ways of divine relating

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 2.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 2
are still to be distinguished, as they relate to each other as means and goal. We are reconciled with God so that we may enter God’s Kingdom. As God’s covenantal community is thus concerned with anticipating and embodying the coming reign of God, it is therefore not simply concerned with the dynamics of sin and forgiveness. It is also, and maybe even primarily, concerned with living into God’s eschatological consummation.

Third, this eschatological, covenantal community is Christocentric. God’s relating to creation in eschatological consummation is centered in Jesus Christ. Going through the hills of Galilee and Judea, Jesus announces that God’s reign has come near: God is about to take on the powers-that-be, reclaim this creation, and usher in the abundance of God’s Kingdom(Mk. 1:15). When Jesus is arrested and killed by those very powers-that-be, and everything seems lost, it is Jesus’ resurrection which vindicates him and shows that he was right after all. In Jesus’ resurrection here God is doing exactly what Jesus said that was about to happen. After all, resurrection is an eschatological event. God is making good on the promises of a new creation, of a superabundant life under the reign of God. Jesus’ resurrection is the “first fruits” (I Cor. 15:23) of the world to come. The new creation now has a foothold, right in the midst of our history. Upon Jesus’ ascension he is seated at the right hand of God, the image of the place of power in the language of Scripture. Whereas Christ’s resurrection implies that the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated, his ascension means that Christ is now the one in charge, the King of the kingdom. He is the one defeating the powers and leading creation to its eschatological consummation.

Of course, Christ is also the one who brings about reconciliation. Here the distinction between God’s relating to creation in reconciliation and in eschatological consummation is crucial. In the narrative, Christ’s reconciling work is completed on the cross. Christ died once for all (Hb. 10:12). But his resurrection is only the first fruits of the new creation. The Kingdom has been inaugurated but not yet consummated. Christ’s consummating work is still ongoing, and at the center of this ongoing, consummating work is the church. The church is the community of the baptized. To be baptized is to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection. As we go under in the water, we enter with him into the grave; when our head comes up again, we receive with him resurrection life (Rm. 6:3-4; cf. Col. 2:12). But as we participate in Christ’s resurrection, we are already given to participate in the new creation (cf. Eph. 2:5,6). The church is therefore the only society on earth that is rooted in the future. Every other
entity has its roots in what is already passed. We have our roots in what, given Jesus’ consummating work, is certain yet to come.  

I believe the best illustration of this approach to ecclesiology is the letter to the Ephesians. The letter’s high emphasis on the visible church and its unity is well known:

I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all... (Eph. 4:1-6).

But for our purposes it is of interest that the writer of the letter places the church in the context of a longer narrative; a narrative shaped by the three characteristics discussed above – covenantal, eschatological, and Christocentric. The church, the letter holds, is the outcome of a divine, eschatological “plan for the fullness of time” (Eph. 1:10). The content of that plan was “to gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth” (1:9,10). God brought this plan to execution in Christ’s resurrection and ascension - by putting God’s power to work in Christ when he raised him from the death and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above the rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (1:20-23).

39 Stubbs does underscore the Christocentric nature of the “liturgical-missional vision of God’s people,” but does not mention either Christ’s resurrection or his ascension. He rather focuses on the “person” as the fulfillment of God’s vision for creation: “What the temple symbolically represented – the place on earth where heaven and earth come together... is fulfilled in the two-natured person of Christ... He is the kingdom of God in himself. Unlike the covenant of Sinai, which was a blueprint for what the people of God was to be and do but was never completely put into practice by the people of Israel, in Jesus Christ this vision of human life under God’s rule is fulfilled” (8). But it is not the fact that Christ is one person in two natures which in itself fulfill God’s vision for creation; it is that he, because of his resurrection and ascension, has a still ongoing history, and that in this ongoing history and activity he leads the inaugurated, but not as yet completed reign of God to its consummation.

40 The Letter to the Ephesians has always received significant interests of those interested in ecclesiology, ecumenism, or church renewal. See, for instance, Markus Barth, The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians (Chicago: Judson Press, 1959); Leslie Newbigin, The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church [1954] (Wipf and Stock, 2008); Eugene H. Peterson, Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). It is clear that Stubbs is drawn to the letter as well, as many of his expressions are drawn from this letter.
This gathering of all things in Christ follows a particular pattern. It has started with Israel, but now also those who once were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of Israel” (2:12), have been “brought near” (2:13) so that the resurrected and ascended Christ “might create in himself a new humanity” (2:15), a new “household of God” (2:19), as both groups “grow together into a holy temple in the Lord” (2:19).\textsuperscript{41} It was in particular Paul’s calling, the writer of the Ephesians letter declares, to proclaim this eschatological intent for creation to the Gentiles, so that they may know themselves to be “fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (3:5-8). As a result, this community formed out of both Jews and goyim, the church, “lets everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” and lets the powers-that-be know that their time is up (3:10).

It is exactly here that salvation is found: in this gathering activity of the resurrected and ascended Christ, in his knitting and fitting together of the scattered fragments of humanity into a new humanity, a new household of God. For the Ephesians writer “the gospel of salvation” concerns much more than reconciliation and atonement; it involves the very plan of God “to gather up all things in Christ.” Salvation is, according to the Ephesians letter, that this fragments gathering, reuniting work of the resurrected Christ has now also reached you; that you too are being knitted into this new humanity, that in your baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ you have now become part of God’s eschatological people (1:11-14). But this in turn means that the church is not accidental to salvation; that the church is not the place where you receive what you also could get on your own. Rather the opposite: the church is the visible result of this gathering, reuniting work of the resurrected and ascended Christ. Here this new humanity, this household of God receives form and shape. In other words: the church is not a means for salvation, no, being gathered to the church is your salvation.

\textit{The Theological Harvest}

The theological narrative expounded above allows us to embrace Cyprian’s saying in a new way: the church is indeed necessary for salvation – the church, that is, not as an invisible community of the elect,

\textsuperscript{41} Earlier generation exegetes were prone to understand the ecclesiological notions in Ephesians as shaped by either Hellenistic or Gnostic concepts about unity and community. But this ignores the fact that the notion of the “gathering up of all things” of chapter one is unpacked in chapter two as a “bringing near of those who once were far off,” an incorporating into the “covenant of promise” – the promise being that in Abraham “all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gn. 12:3). In other words, the background is Jewish, not Hellenistic or Gnostic. An additional argument for such Jewish background is the writer’s consistent speaking about “the Christ” in whom all things are gathered (see 1:10,12,20; 2:5,14; 3:4,8,17,19; 4:7,12,13,20; 5:2,5,14,23,24,29; 6:5). Ernest Best dismisses this as something “to which no signifance should be attached to” (Ernest Best, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1998), p. 143. But Markus Barth argues that these instances should consistently be translated as “the Messiah” rather than “Christ” (Markus Barth, Ephesians 1-3, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), p. 66; to my mind appropriately so, given the notion of the incorporative Messiahship (see, e.g., most recently, N.T. Wright, Paul and the Faithfulness of God (London: SPCK, 2013) pp. 825-835, with reference to other literature.
but the visible church, the concrete, embodied communities of which you and I are members. To be gathered to the church is one’s salvation because in it Christ’s eschatological work - his gathering of all things to himself - finds a concrete expression.

Everything here turns on the meaning of the term “salvation.” At the heart of my proposed reinterpretation of Cyprian’s saying lies the argument that salvation is more than being justified or forgiven, more than receiving eternal bliss. Salvation has a richer meaning because Christ’s work has to do with more than reconciliation. Christ’s work is two-fold: reconciliation, completed once-for-all on the cross, and eschatological consummation, the ongoing leading of creation to its final goal. Both activities are, in Biblical parlance, salvific. But “salvation” should not be narrowed to the former at the expense of the latter, lest we lose sight, among other things, of the result of the latter salvific work: the visible community of the church.\(^\text{42}\)

\(^{42}\) In his *The Open Table: What Gospel Do We Practice*, Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 22 (Louisville: Office of Theology and Worship, PC(USA), 2011) Stubbs makes a distinction between two kinds of ecclesiolgies which seemingly line up with the two kinds of salvation I am distinguishing here. Stubbs starts with making a point akin to the strategy utilized in his Colloquium paper, that the ways we think about the identity and role of the church go back to the ways we tell the gospel story. Stubbs then identifies a first way of conceiving of the church which he calls a “church as visible public” ecclesiology. It is rooted in a gospel narrative in which “God has planned to bring reconciliation to the world by healing it from the inside out,” that is, “by revealing Godself to a particular people, calling them to a particular role and working with them.” This plan starts with the calling of Israel and spreads because of God’s action in Christ “through the calling of a renewed people of God, the church.” While God’s salvific actions involve “the forgiveness of sins,” it is more fully focused on “the defect of sin and evil and the healing of humanity through the incorporation of all into this new community, this new household of God, this kingdom of Christ” (pp. 10,11). Stubbs contrast this with a telling of the gospel that is prevalent both in liberal and in conservative theological settings, in which it is emphasized that “in Jesus Christ, the sins of all are freely forgiven and walls are broken down between God and humanity,” and in which people are invited to “break down walls between human beings, especially those among human beings that marginalize some because of race, gender, or class” (p. 12; thus the liberal variant of this narrative) or “to put their trust in Jesus,” as “salvation is understood in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship characterized above all by love and acceptance based on Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross” (p. 14; the evangelical variation). Both in the liberal and in the evangelical variation on this ecclesiology the church “is largely invisible rather than a public foretaste of and witness to the coming Kingdom of God” (p. 14).

I sympathize with Stubbs’ distinction, and the resonance between the first Gospel narrative and implied ecclesiology on the one hand, and the letter to the Ephesians, on the other, are obvious. The problem, however, is that both ecclesiolgies which Stubbs here describes are what elsewhere I have called “infralapsarian,” that is, part of the divine response to sin. But the salvation narrative in Ephesians is “supralapsarian,” that is, it is concerned with God’s eschatological, final goal for creation, a goal that is not contingent upon sin. As the church is part of this supralapsarian goal for creation, the church itself should therefore be conceived of as supralapsarian: to be gathered up into Christ is that for which we were created. For a brief discussion of the supralapsarian nature of Ephesians’ account, see both my “Christ in Paul’s Narrative: Salvation History, Apocalyptic Invasion, and Supralapsarian Theology,” in: Mark W. Elliott, Scott J. Hafemann, N. T. Wright, and John Frederick, eds., *Galatians and Christian Theology: Justification, the Gospel, and Ethics in Paul’s Letter*, forthcoming from Baker Academics, and “Climax of the Covenant vs. Apocalyptic Invasion: A Theological Analysis of a Contemporary Debate in Pauline
At the same time, it is because of this dual salvific work of Christ that Turretin can argue that catechumens, the excommunicated and unbaptized can be saved, even if they are not members of the visible church.\footnote{See above, p. 6.} When Turretin speaks of “salvation,” he is thinking of Christ’s work of reconciliation; and, true to the insights of the Reformers, he wants to say that since we are reconciled with God unconditionally, by grace through faith, church membership should also not be seen as a condition for forgiveness of sins. In that sense, he is right. He errs though when he subsequently narrows salvation to reconciliation. Once we see that “salvation” not only includes reconciliation but also eschatological consummation, we have to say that salvation in its full sense escapes the catechumens, the unbaptized, and the excommunicated, because the gathering work of Christ has not yet knitted them into the fabric of the new humanity, the new household of God.

If this is what is meant by salvation and church, the distinction between the “invisible” and “visible” church is not helpful. Salvation, Christ’s eschatological work of drawing all things to himself, certainly engages both the visible and the invisible, the embodied and the spiritual. But his gathering activity is not said to establish two conceptually different, but only one, visible community.

Likewise, it will not do to speak of “true” and “false” churches. As I noticed above, this distinction differentiates visible ecclesial communities based on their response to Christ’s gathering work: whether they preach the gospel faithfully and administer the sacraments rightly. If a visible ecclesial community does not respond to Christ’s gathering work faithfully, it can become a “false” church. Over time, this strategy led some Reformed theologians conceive of the whole of the visible church as constituted by human response to the gospel. This is the prevailing ecclesiology in North America right now: churches as voluntary organizations one joins or leaves at will. However, the Biblical narrative excludes such ecclesiological account. The church is an expression of Christ’s gathering activity. It is thus not constituted by human response, but by divine initiative. Christ gathers people by uniting them to his death and resurrection through the waters of baptism, and knits them into the fabric of his new humanity. Of course, both individuals and communities can respond to this gathering activity by rejection. They can choose to live against the grain of their new baptismal identity. Even this though does not undo the fact that they are baptized, marked with the cross of Christ forever. Seen in this way, a disobedient church is still a true church. It is only in the context of it being a true church, that is, a church established by Christ’s gathering activity, that it makes sense to speak of a church’s “disobedience.”

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Let’s say it even more strongly: if “to be saved” means to be subject to Christ’s gathering activity, then to leave the church, or to break the church, is to jeopardize salvation – because it goes against the grain of the gathering work of Christ. One jeopardizes salvation not in the sense that one cannot receive forgiveness and reconciliation but in the sense that one does not experience what it means to be “joined together and to grow into a holy temple in the Lord” (Ep. 2:21).44

Finally: what does this reinterpreted “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” mean for the original problem that triggered so much Protestant ecclesiological reflection: the desire to adhere to Cyprian’s saying while justifying the schism of Roman Catholics and Protestants? The traditional Protestant strategy was to argue that the Roman Catholic Church had become a “false” church and that departing a false church is not only justified but even demanded. On my alternative proposal there are no false churches: each church which is established by baptism is constituted by Jesus Christ and thereby a “true” church.

An alternative Protestant justification would be argue that that while the Roman Catholic Church is a true church, it is nonetheless a disobedient church; and that disobedient churches should be left behind. It would go beyond the scope of this paper to explore this option, other than to say that, if my argument so far holds, it seems that schism itself is an expression of disobedience, and so it is questionable whether such alternative justification holds water.

But maybe it should not even be our goal to justify the schism. After all, the goal of the Reformers was not to split the church, but to reform the church. In that sense, the Reformation failed. The church split, and as a result, we jeopardized the salvation – “we,” that is, both Protestants and Roman Catholics, because in our separation and divisions all of us went against the grain of Christ’s gathering activity and thereby forfeited the change to experience what it means to live together as members of the household of God.

It is this last point which underscores that my alternative interpretation of the “outside the church is no salvation” is nonetheless an authentically Protestant interpretation. On the Roman Catholic interpretation of the “extra ecclesiam nulla salus” it are the Protestants, but not the Roman Catholics, who jeopardized their salvation in the Reformation schism, because they placed themselves outside of the community with Rome. There is no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church, because salvation comes to us through a visible community which is constituted by the historical act of Christ’s calling and sending out of the apostles. Or, as the Second Vatican document Lumen Gentium formulates the argument: salvation cannot be found other than in the visible community with the church’s bishops and the Roman pontiff, who together are the stewards of grace and “witnesses to divine and Catholic truth,” gifted as they are “with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit” that has passed down to them by

the imposition of hands in episcopal consecration from the original recipients of this gift, Christ’s apostles, onward.⁴⁵ A Roman Catholic interpretation of Cyprian’s saying would suggest that the relationship between church and salvation is thus shaped by Christ’s acts in the past. In contrast, my ecclesiological proposals hold that the relationship between church and salvation is founded upon Christ’s acts in the present. There is no salvation outside of the church, because salvation comes to us through a visible community that is constituted by God’s covenant with us in baptism. Salvation cannot be found elsewhere, because salvation is to be knitted into the new community called church. Churches are constituted not by episcopal ties to a past event, but by God’s covenantal redefining of our lives in baptism. Where this happens, there is church. The result of these contrasting ecclesiological arguments is a different attitude towards Protestant churches. Roman Catholic ecclesiology asks Protestant churches to think lower of themselves. The Roman Catholic position holds that, given its historical heritage, there is a fullness to the Roman Catholic Church that Protestantism lacks. Protestant communities, even while they are made up of people who carry the name of “Christian,” do not share in this historic apostolic succession, therefore miss a constitutive element of the church and so cannot be called “churches in the proper sense.”⁴⁶ However, my ecclesiological proposals ask Protestant churches to think higher of themselves. I am asking them to think of themselves not as voluntary organizations, nor as communities constituted by human choice or action, but rather to see themselves as constituted by divine covenant, by the eschatological work of Jesus Christ. On my account, the Protestant problem is not our lacking of ecclesial fullness; our problem is that, in our divisions and ecclesial strife, we live against the grain of who we are.

IV. Church, Salvation, and our Common life: Six Proposals

The argument in the preceding paragraphs lead us to a third section in this essay. What would it be like for our own ecclesial community, the Presbyterian Church (USA), to live into this understanding of what it means to be church – as a place where the gathering, reuniting activity of the resurrected and ascended Christ receives form and shape, a place where he makes visible and tangible the salvation of the eschatological consummation? How would it help us imagine new possibilities for our common life?


In this section I offer six proposals for the wider church, local congregations and mission plants, and, finally, our seminaries. In making these proposals I am mindful of our denomination’s present difficulties. We are a body suffering from divisions and strife; hurting because of schisms that ripped apart presbyteries, congregations, and families. We are a church with dropping numbers, dwindling resources, and aging membership, and therefore even more prone to conflict, because, as every pastor knows, where anxiety rules conflict soon will follow. In this situation, what difference does a “liturgical-missional” understanding of the church make?

1. As a denomination we should stop trying to find unity among ourselves and start losing ourselves in the unity we have in Christ.

   In 2012, General Assembly narrowly defeated a proposal to change the denomination’s definition of marriage. Realizing that the issue would come back again during General Assembly of 2014, the denomination was invited to engage in a study of “Christian marriage,” guided by material prepared by the Office of Theology and Worship. The goal, without doubt, is for the denomination to find some common ground, some agreed upon approach, so as to steer away from further division when General Assembly weighs proposals and takes its votes. Before General Assembly 2012 the denomination engaged in similar studies and debates regarding the ordination of gays and lesbians. Several years before that there were the conversations stimulated by the report of the denominational Taskforce on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. In all likelihood, the years before General Assembly 2016 will be occupied by similar rounds of conversations and debates.

   All these conversations, taskforces, and reports, concern real, important theological issues. They stir up many emotions because deep seated convictions are at stake. What I would like to call attention to though is the premise on which all these denominational efforts are based, a premise which, if the ecclesiology outlined above has any traction, is faulty. The premise is that our denominational unity is based on a common vision on theological and ethical agreement, and that in the absence of such common vision fracture and schism are inevitable.

   It is no surprise that such premise is driving our denominational conversations. Most American mainline denominations function as if they are constituted by common confessional documents, liturgical practices, or polity agreements. In the PC(USA), the combined Book of Confessions and Book of Order are even called “The Constitution” of the denomination. But if my argument so far holds, the church is not constituted by its common confessions, liturgical practices, or polity, but by the gathering work of its resurrected and ascended Lord. Our common ecclesial life is not based on our agreement with one another, but on Christ’s reaching out to each one of us in the covenant of baptism, and calling us together into one community, knitting us into a new humanity. This is not to say that common confessions and practices and agreements on theological and ethical positions, are not important. But they are nonetheless only responses to Christ’s gathering, church-constituting work; they are not church constituting themselves. Even when we cannot come to theological or ethical agreement, even if we cannot come to a common confession, even if our liturgical practices lead us in different directions, we are still one church, because our communal church membership was not decided by us, but by the fact that Jesus Christ called us together in one body.
What would it mean for our denomination if, instead of moving from studies and debates about one “hot topic” after the other, we would focus our time and energy on living into this reality? What would it mean for us to learn practices, slowly, and sometimes painfully, of living together with people with whom we may strongly disagree, but with whom we nonetheless form the household of God? What would it mean for congregations to step away from developing one or the other specific theological identity, other than just the one given to us in baptism? What would it mean for presbyteries and General Assembly, to meet not to “settle” policy issues, but to bring rather our divisions at the foot of the cross?

Again, the issues that divide our denomination are real issues. I am not suggesting we smooth them over, deny the differences that exist among us. In fact, I believe the differences to be so serious, the fissures to be so deep, that, at least at this point, no compromise can bridge them and no “agreement” can forge a common mind. My point is that we already have a common mind: the mind of Christ. What kind of witness would it give to a culture used to dividing itself up along partisan battle lines, if a Christian community would say: “We too disagree among ourselves; and we do not see a way forward to solve our differences. But nonetheless we will not let any of these issues divide us, because we know that our lives are not shaped by what we think or believe but by what Christ has done for each one of us”?

2. If this is what it means to be church, we need to rethink our understanding of church membership.

If a church is not a community based on common agreements or practices, but a community gathered together by Jesus Christ, this should have consequences for the way our polity conceives of membership in the church. It is here that the PC(USA)’s Book of Order expresses significant theological confusion. The section on “The Membership of a Congregation” starts with the notion of baptism: “In Jesus Christ, God calls people to faith and to membership in the Church, the body of Christ. Baptism is the visible sign of that call and claim on a human life and of entrance into the membership of the church.”

This seems exactly right. The importance of this claim is that baptism is not something we do ourselves, but that is being done to us. In baptism we die and are resurrected (Rm. 6:3-4, Col. 2:12). Resurrection life is not something we can give ourselves; it is a gift we receive. In this way, we become part of the church.

However, the Book of Order does not stop here. Two sections further, it suddenly introduces the notion

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47 This, by the way, is exactly the kind of thing the new Presbyterian Hymnal Glory to God wants to support the denomination in doing. The book’s overarching theme is “salvation history,” God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. It was a theme chosen because the hymnal committee believed that in this time of insecurity and anxiety our attention needs to be re-directed from ourselves to God; that we need to be reminded that the focus of history is not the rise or fall of empires or institutions but the certain future of God’s inaugurated kingdom. See my “On the Theological Vision that Shaped Glory to God,” forthcoming in Call to Worship.

There seems to be a higher level membership of the church than the one granted with baptism; and this higher level membership is dependent on choice. An active member “is a person who has made a profession of faith in Christ, has been baptized, has been received into membership of the church,” and who “has voluntarily submitted to the government of this church, and participates in the church’s work and worship.” The difference between the baptized member and the active member is that whereas the first one is subject to “pastoral care and instruction of the church, and may participate in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper,” the active member is also supposed to commit herself to a set of “disciplines and responsibilities” such as participating in worship, prayer, reading Scripture, giving offerings, and so on. For some reason, the Book of Order seems to think that having been united with Christ in his resurrection life is not sufficient ground to engage in such practices. One first has to become an “active member.”

The Book of Order relies on two different notions: that of a “believers church” and a covenantal church, of an ecclesiology in which church membership is seen as expression of internal conviction and one in which it comes about through sacramental initiation. A believers church ecclesiology fits the North American cultural emphasis on freedom and choice. But the gospel speaks about Christians “being rescued from the power of darkness and [being] transferred into the kingdom of [the Father’s] beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). That’s very different imagery than a membership resulting from “voluntary submission to the government of this church.” Therefore, I believe my colleague John P. Burgess is right when, in a contribution to an earlier Colloquium, he champions the abolishment of the “active membership” category in the Book of Order.

49 Ibid., G-1.0303, p. 21.
50 Ibid., G-1.0402, p. 22.
52 There is, of course, one striking anomaly in this freedom and choice: that of the membership of this voluntaristic culture and its accompanying nationality itself. As Stanley Hauerwas comments: “We ... have great difficulty passing on our faith in God to our children because we think they get to make up the kind of Christianity they will practice, which usually means after a time they quit practicing altogether. It is interesting to note that often parents who believe they should let their children make up their own minds about being a Christian (or a Jew) do not think their children can or should make up their minds about their loyalty to an entity called America.” Stanley Hauerwas, Approaching The End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), p. 88.
53 John B. Burgess, “‘Is There Any Good Reason to Join a Church?’ – Baptism, Mission, and Life Together,” unpublished manuscript. The reader will notice that we differ in our argumentation however. Burgess’s position is that the practices the Book of Order currently assigns to an active member actually come to one by baptism. Burgess’ argument for this rests on the stories of Jesus’ calling of the twelve disciples (pp. 6-8). I am not convinced of the validity of that argument, as these stories are simply not about baptism. I think the stronger argument for Burgess’s specific claim would be to look at the Pauline notion of baptism as dying and being resurrected, and how Paul uses this notion to call his readers to a new way of life. But even so, these practices are not constitutive of
3. To counter a culture of ecclesial schism and splintering, the PC(USA) ought to invest in the common life with other denominations.

We are not just a conflicted church; we are a church that suffered schism. In the last couple of years we have dismissed several hundreds of congregations to other, dissenting denominations. The same has happened in other mainline churches. One of the poisons of schism is that it tends to shape the identity of ecclesial communities. That certainly is the case for “those who leave.” They often explicitly formulate an identity around the theme that caused the ecclesial strife. But it can happen no less with “those who stay.” It can come through resentment of those who left, a sense of hurt and betrayal, a certain smugness about “having chosen the right side.” It can also come through down-playing of the importance of visible unity: the “real” church is the invisible church and the visible structures are only human constructs, not the church proper. So we speak in North American culture about the visible churches as “denominations,” communities that possess only part of the Christian truth. We may even go so far as to defend denominational pluralism as good for the religious marketplace: Just like the competition of the marketplace forces companies to stay on their toes, could not the same be said about American churches?

I believe that the denomination needs to work consciously and explicitly not to let its identity be deformed by the poisons of schism. My first two suggestions could help with that effort. As many parting congregations are of a conservative bent it would be easy for those who stay now to identify as a more liberal denomination. If we do that, we fall in the trap of suggesting that our common life is held together by common practices and agreements. Instead, this is the moment to rather be focused on the identity we have in Jesus Christ. In addition, as a way to counter any down-playing of the visible nature of the church, I believe this is the moment for the PC(USA) to re-invest in the seeking of interdenominational unity. I suggest the PC(USA) turns to other American mainline denominations, beginning with its full-communion ecumenical partners – the ELCA, the RCA, and the UCC – and invite them to engage in an sustained conversation about the question: “What do we lose by not sharing in a visible common life?”

For a shrinking mainline denomination to seek closer institutional unity with another denomination could easily be interpreted as an economically motivated move. The economy of it all should in fact not easily be dismissed. What is lost – in terms of money, time, creativity – when we keep different but parallel ecclesial institutions running? The resources involved in church work are really God’s resources. These economical issues are therefore simultaneously theological issues. Nonetheless, my main motivation is not economical, but ecclesiological. If my ecclesiological argument so far carries any water, then in being ecclesially divided we are jeopardizing our salvation, as we live against the grain of Christ’s gathering activity. As continued splintering of our communities has led Protestant theologians

one’s church membership – baptism is. And it is here that the Book of Order notion of “active church membership” is wrong-footed.
to develop strategies that empty the visible nature of the church of any real meaning, we need to find ways to realize once again the evangelical connection between church and salvation.

Therefore I propose the formulation I offered above: What are we losing by not sharing in a visible common life? For one, I formulate the question in terms of “loss” instead of “gain.” Conversations about the gain of church unification seem to easily steer up anxiety about what would be lost if churches united – specifically the loss of denominational identity. We rather need to find ways to face what is lost by staying separated. What is lost when on Sunday morning my family leaves our driveway to go to church and turn right, while our neighbors simultaneously leave their house to go to church and turn left? And for another, I try to find a different term for what traditionally was called “institutional unity.” Esteem for institutions is low. The “institutional church” is associated with committees and subcommittees, with Robert’s Rules and church bureaucracy. In reality though, “institutional life” has to do with “common life.” Institutional life concerns a group of people engaged in a common effort to reach out to the neighborhood. It is people filling the shelves of the food bank. It is people gathering around the table, stretching out their hands, and receiving bread and wine. All of that is an expression of people gathered together in the common life of an institution. I believe that, exactly at this point of conflict, schism, and low investment in “institutions,” the denomination should reach out to its sister churches and ask: What is lost, when there are two, three, or four of such tables in the same street, but in different buildings? What is lost when there are two, three, or four of such groups of people wanting to reach out to the same town with the good news of Jesus Christ? Not just what is lost economically, but what is lost to the gospel that they are proclaiming, and what is lost to themselves? Are they still able to “let everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;” are they letting the powers-that-be know that their time is up (Eph 3:10)? Or does the very thing they do, suggest that the powers have won after all?

4. Struggling local congregations should be lead to join forces with a local ecumenical partner.

The gospel is a story of an empty grave. As Christians we believe that the natural flow of things does not have the last word, but that God can call forth a people out of a man who was as good as dead (Rm. 4:19). I believe the key to rediscovering the visible church may lie exactly with small, struggling congregations whom seemingly do not have a future.

American mainline churches consist mostly of small congregations. Research from the end of the last century indicate that more than half of all mainline Protestant congregations have one hundred or fewer members. This corresponds with the situation in the PC(USA): in 2009 50% of all its congregations had a membership under one hundred. Not even half of these congregations has an installed pastor, and a bit less than a third has no pastoral leadership whatsoever. Small churches simply do not have the resources to support a pastor’s salary, health insurance, and other costs, especially when this comes on top of the costs of building maintenance, some sort of ministry and outreach, et cetera.

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Mainline denominations stimulate their small churches to do one of three things: to call a part-time pastor, to yoke with neighboring congregations within the denomination, or to make use of the services of a trained lay person. Each of these three “solutions” has significant drawbacks. A part-time call often puts significant financial burdens on pastors. A yoked congregation significantly compromises the pastor’s pastoral presence: not only will the pastor spent significant time on the road moving between the points of her parish, but also because the pastor will live in only one of the communities in which her churches are located. Trained lay leaders, such as the PC(USA) Commissioned Lay Pastors, are hardly equipped for their task, having on average received a training the equivalent of less than one semester of introductory level college education.55

A much better solution is, I propose, for congregations to join forces with other mainline churches. Given the nature of the American religious landscape, most of these small, struggling mainline congregations are located in townships that also house similarly small, struggling mainline churches with different denominational affiliations. What if these congregations, rather than choosing one of the solutions mentioned above, would call a pastor together? Polity wise, this is possible. The PC (USA) is in full communion with the ELCA, the UCC, and the RCA.56 “Full communion” means, among other things, that a local congregation affiliated with one of these denominations can call an ordained minister affiliated with one of the other partnering denominations. In addition, there is precedent for cooperation between Presbyterian and United Methodist churches. The ELCA in turn is in full communion with the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church.57 This means that a wide variety of combinations is possible. The Protestant churches that are in full communion could call together one pastor from any of the partnering denominations. In a town where there is a Presbyterian Church, a Lutheran Church, and an Episcopal Church, the three congregations could call an ELCA pastor that serves all three congregations because, while Presbyterians and Episcopalians are not in full communion with each other, the Lutherans are in partnership with each. I am not suggesting that congregations would merge, nor even that they would worship together – although, in the long run, that would be most desirable. They would not even have to give up their separate church buildings – although that too, given the pressure that real estate puts on church budgets, that would be worth


serious consideration. They could all keep their own church plant and church services, but one pastor could serve them all. They could certainly combine church programs: adult education, as well as confirmation classes, Bible studies, and missional and outreach work. The advantages are numerous, starting with the fact that under this model congregations would have once again a fully trained minister of Word and Sacrament living in their own town. Thus, a minister would now have ample opportunity to get to know the local community in which she serves, including the many personal relationships that will tie these different church communities together, and would not lose time in traveling from one town to another. Churches will save significant amount of money, certainly if they would go beyond the sharing of the pastor in sharing ministries and buildings. But maybe most importantly: from being locked into the depressing spiral of lack of money, lack of leadership, and anxiety for the future, churches may find themselves once again be viable communities, whose cooperation is a visible witness to the gathering and reuniting work of Jesus Christ.58

What would need to happen for this proposal to be implemented? As for church polity, all requirements are in place. What I am advocating is legally already possible. Some practical measures would help, though. First of all, in most mainline denominations congregations have enough autonomy that they cannot be forced to work together. Ecclesial authorities however could certainly stimulate trans-denominational congregational cooperation. Regional authorities – Presbyteries, synods, dioceses – could identify congregations that would profit from these arrangements and initiate conversations. They could also propose arrangements for clergy called to these cooperations. For example, no clergy person serving congregations from two or three denominations should be forced to visit regional meetings of two or three denominational structures. Seminaries could prepare candidates for multi-denominational service by teaching theology and worship from more than one denominational perspective. They could, preferably in cooperation with regional ecclesial authorities, offer special continuing education trainings for clergy serving in these multi-denominational services. Most importantly, both local congregations and denominations will have to give up their denominational idolatry in forsaking the idea that proper ministry only takes place in one denominational context. For that, awareness of the eschatological nature of the church and of its calling to be a visible witness of the gathering work of Jesus Christ, could be a great help.

5. We should re-claim the notion of missional comity

The missional-liturgical conversation opens up new perspectives for mission and evangelism. For one, it emphasizes the ecclesial nature of mission. Over the last two decades or so the missional church movement has argued that the church is by its very nature missional. And rightly so: after all, Christ’s eschatological work, which constitutes the church, “missional”: gathering the scattered fragments of humanity, drawing them out from under the authority of the powers that have governed them so far, and knitting them together into a new people. But because of this, the mission of the church is

58 For a very similar suggestion, based on the experience of cooperation between a PC(USA) and an UMC congregation, see: Barbara Wheeler, “Ready to Lead? The Problem with Lay Pastors,” in: The Christian Century June 13, 2010.
intrinsically ecclesial: the salvation that is offered in mission takes the form of being gathered into the church.\(^{59}\) For another: On my proposals, missional churches will be internally conflicted churches. After all, my suggestions contain a strong emphasis on church unity, even in times of deep theological turmoil. Can such conflicted churches be missionally effective? What will their witness be, if they are internally so divided about the content of the Gospel? I believe the missional-liturgical response need to be that the missional strength of an internally divided church can lie exactly in its weakness, if by holding on to unity even while deeply disagreeing its members are a living witness to their Christ-given baptismal identity, which shapes them deeper than their own theological divisions are strong.

My main suggestion is however that mainline churches, as they re-discover their missional identity, should also re-engage the notion of missional comity. “Comity” refers to the late nineteenth century agreements among Protestant mission boards to a division of territory and assignment of spheres of mission. The idea was not to waste resources by competing in the same territory with missionaries from another ecclesial tradition, and to support one another’s efforts by mutual agreement on employment of workers, their salaries, standards of membership for the churches, transfer of membership, the adoption of similar standards of discipline, and respect of each other’s disciplinary process.\(^{60}\) According to Lesslie Newbigin, the spiritual father of the North-American mission church

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\(^{59}\) Contra the popular book by Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, \textit{The Shape of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21\textsuperscript{st} Century Church} (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003). For Frost and Hirsch, the church has become completely instrumental, a means to evangelism. In fact, on close reading of this book for Frost and Hirsch the “church,” as agent of mission, can as much be an individual or a group of friends rather than a body sacramentally united and with its own meaning as the place where salvation is found. Coming from a very different perspective, Teresa Lockhart Stricklen, “Worship as the Missional Church’s Whence and Whither: A Liturgical Missional Ecclesiology,” unpublished manuscript, shows the same lack of appreciation of the ecclesial shape of mission when she argues, with Clark Cowden, that “the institution of a missional church functions like an airport that helps people get to their destinations for service to the world in Christ’s Spirit. No one wants to live, or even stay long, in an airport” (p. 6). The church is much more than a transit place: it is the destination, be it not the destination in its completed form. I wonder whether Stricklen’s position is the result of an under appreciation of the particularity of the work of Christ and the Spirit. Earlier she had argued, this time quoting John Dally, that “God’s Reign is present on earth whenever life accurately reflects the will and sovereignty of God. It is the way life and society would be if a compassionate God were in charge or imitated instead of human powers that lord over others... Preaching the Realm of God is difficult, though, because there is no there to point to, for God’s Reign is not a place, but a way of being under God’s Rule in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit” (pp. 5/6, quoting from John Dally, \textit{Choosing the Kingdom: Missional Preaching for the Household of God} (Herdon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008), p.50). On the account of the Ephesians Letter the universality expressed in this line of thought is to be applauded; but what seems lacking is its particular center. God’s reign is not wherever life reflects the will of God, but wherever Christ gathers all things to himself. And as such, there is a place one could point to if one wants to find God’s kingdom: the place where God’s reign becomes visible, in the community of the church.

movement, the notion of comity shaped the way the newly founded churches related. “The acceptance of this principle... means that in any one place – town or village – there is normally but one Christian congregation, and upon this congregation rests the responsibility for the evangelization of the area allotted to it under the principle of comity.”61 Following this comity principle, the Church in South India, Newbigin’s church, “has refused to accept the necessity to cater for varieties of tradition, caste and class by setting up a variety of congregations in each place. The principle of comity has meant this, that the typical congregation in a South Indian country town consists of men and women who have nothing in common save the redemption in Christ. That means, as has been said, strain and stress within the congregation... But it also does mean that men are driven back to Christ and compelled to ask themselves again and again how much it matters to them that Christ died for them.”62 Comity however not only had a strong influence on the internal relationship in the churches; it also had a profound influence on how these churches thought about mission: “Where there is only one Christian congregation in a town or village or district, its members can never forget the fact that the responsibility for making known the Gospel in that area rests upon them alone. If they do not do it, no one else will. Where, on the other hand, there is a multitude of competing congregations it is well-nigh impossible for their members to feel resting upon themselves the full responsibility for their neighbours. Inevitably each congregation becomes more concerned with the maintenance of its own distinctive life.”63

The notion of comity became part of American church life in the late forties and early fifties of the twentieth century, when the suburbs were built and American mainline denominations coordinated their church planting efforts.64 Since then, “comity” has virtually dropped out of the missiological conversation. But now that the mainline churches are reclaiming their missional identity, and a church like the PC(USA) wishes to support 1001 new worshipping communities, should the church not also reclaim the notion of comity? Assuming the goal is not so much to strengthen our own tribe, but to be in the service of Christ’s gathering activity, how can we assure that these new worshipping communities do really engage those areas where the church does not have a place yet, instead of competing with existing church communities? In fact, would this not be extraordinary chance to found communities who are not tied to just one denomination, but who are cooperative efforts of several ecclesial communities? Doing so will raise whole new questions, and create extra difficulties. But it would also be a much better reflection of the salvation given to us in Jesus Christ.

6. Seminaries ought to pay more attention to the ecclesial formation of candidates for ordination


62 Ibid., p. 13.

63 Ibid., p. 15.

Protestant seminaries are good at intellectual formation, training their students in the classical academic theological disciplines of exegesis, history, and theology. They are also good at professional formation; for decades now they have thought of themselves as “professional schools.” They are becoming good at personal and spiritual formation, as the recent attention to seminary education as a form of *paideia* and formation starts to shape their educational practice. But what about ecclesial formation? By “ecclesial formation” I mean the creation of a disposition to understand our engagement with and sharing of the treasures of the gospel as fundamentally a catholic project. By being ordained one becomes a representative on the ministry of Word and sacrament as entrusted by Jesus Christ to the wider, visible church. Through his ministers Christ enacts his gathering work, as he gives them “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:12-13). While as a minister one works in a particular place, in that place one represents the wider church, and, in the end, of Christ himself. This is why ordination to Word and Sacrament is not performed by a local congregation, but it is “an act of the whole church carried out by the presbytery.” It is also why, in the PC(USA), in her ordination service a candidate makes promises concerning her relationship to the wider church, not a local congregation. Finally, this is why, in the PC(USA) upon one’s ordination one is no longer a member of a congregation, but instead becomes a member of Presbytery.

If my argument holds, awareness of this wider ecclesial context of one’s ordination is of utmost importance, because in representing the unity of the wider, visible church to a congregation, the pastor represents that what is salvific: Christ gathering all things into himself. Seminary is the place *par excellence* to be prepared for this aspect of ordained ministry because it is a microcosm of that wider, visible church. Students who may know only one, or a few, local congregations, are brought together with fellow Christians coming from very different locations – geographically, socio-economically, racially, and theologically. And not just in the class room, but in all aspects of life. By going to chapel together, eating in the common room, living communally in the dorms, in family play dates and sharing of personal joys and woes, students of very different backgrounds learn what it will mean to serve together in one church.

I doubt that this aspect of seminary training receives much explicit attention. Not only is the formational role of places like chapel, the refectory, and a school’s living quarters highly under

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65 I owe this formulation to Sheldon W. Sorge, the Pastor to Pittsburgh Presbytery.


67 For example, she promises to be instructed by the confessions of the church, to be governed by the church’s polity, to abide by its discipline, to be a friend to her colleagues, to further the peace, unity, and purity of the church (not a *congregation*, but the *church*), to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love (not a *particular* people, but the *people* that are part of the church), to be active in government and discipline, and to serve on the governing bodies of the church. See Ibid., W-4.4003, pp. 122-123.

68 Ibid., G.2.0704, p. 36.
theorized, but I believe ecclesial formation plays hardly a role in the way seminaries reflect on the purposes and desired outcomes of their education. When we train students for church ministry, the implicit understanding of “church” is usually either local or global. We train them in the things they will do in a local congregation: to lead worship, to preach, to teach and to offer pastoral care. We give them a sense of the worldwide Christian community by courses in global Christianity and mission and by sponsoring trips to ecumenical organizations and Christian communities oversees. But other than offering an obligatory polity class, where in our seminary teaching do we give our students a sense of the wider visible church as the primary context of their future ordination? And in that case, can we be surprised if pastors see themselves primarily in the service of a local congregation, and feel free to take that congregation to another denominational community if they feel so compelled?69

If “to be saved” however means for one to be folded into Christ’s gathering work, for one knitted into the fabric of the new humanity, the new household of God, then seminaries ought to reflect explicitly upon that extraordinary gift that is given to them, to be a place where people can experience what it means, even for a season, to live and eat and pray together as “citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).70

IV. Conclusion

Reformed ecclesiology has always suffered from opposing intuitions. Reformed theologians inherited from Calvin on the one hand a high appreciation for the church, and on the other hand a need to defend the schism of the Reformation and a strong sense that God’s forgiveness is unconditional, and therefore also not bound to church membership. The strategies the Reformed developed over time to combine these different theological desiderata let to a significant erosion of the role of the visible church in salvation history.

The way forward is to rediscover the richness of the notion of “salvation” in the Biblical parlance. Salvation is not just concerned with forgiveness and reconciliation, but also with eschatological consummation. The goal of creation is for all things to be gathered up in Christ, and the visible church is

69 I realize that raising this question in the context of a Colloquium facilitated by Fuller Theological Seminary may receive some push-back, but I believe it needs to be asked nonetheless: is ecclesial formation even under more pressure at seminaries that are theologically rather than ecclesially aligned? It is my observation that in my own presbytery, of the pastors who led their congregations out of the denomination without adherence to the denomination’s ordering of dismissal of congregations or the presbytery’s separation procedures, in overall majority were trained at non-denominational seminaries.

70 An explicit reflection on the formational aspects of a seminary’s school, common room, and living quarters should have consequences for how we evaluate the pro’s and con’s of online theological education. It is telling that in the discussions about this phenomenon there is lots of attention to the ways in which online learning may facilitate spiritual formation of seminarians, but there is no reflection at all on the relationship between ecclesial formation and online education.
the place where Christ’s salvific, gathering activity already shapes our lives. Once we rediscover that, we may not only have found a way of solving the dilemma of Reformed ecclesiology, but we may also be able to develop richer relationships within the denomination and among the still divided Christian churches.