

don't see, "a serious house on serious earth," a place where someone is surprised by "a hunger in himself to be more serious."

The Ontological Church

But this understanding of church is hard to come by — maybe especially in America. Americans talk and write endlessly about what the church needs to become, what the church must do to be effective. The perceived failures of the church are analyzed and reforming strategies prescribed. The church is understood almost exclusively in terms of function — what we can see. If we can't see it, it doesn't exist. Everything is viewed through the lens of pragmatism. Church is an instrument that we have been given to bring about whatever Christ commanded us to do. Church is a staging ground for getting people motivated to continue Christ's work.

This way of thinking — church as a human activity to be measured by human expectations — is pursued unthinkingly. The huge reality of God already at work in all the operations of the Trinity is benched on the sideline while we call timeout, huddle together with our heads bowed, and figure out a strategy by which we can compensate for God's regrettable retreat into invisibility. This is dead wrong, and it is responsible for no end of shallowness and experimentation in trying to achieve success and relevance and effectiveness that people can see. Statistics provide the basic vocabulary for keeping score. Programs provide the game plan. This way of going about things has done and continues to do immeasurable damage to the American church.

This way of understanding church is very, very American and very, very wrong. We can no more understand church functionally than we can understand Jesus functionally. We have to submit ourselves to the revelation and receive church as the gift of Christ as he embodies himself in this world. Paul tells us that Christ is the head of a body, and the body is church. Head and body are one thing.

"Ontology" is a word that can get us past this clutter of functionalism. Ontology has to do with being. An ontological understanding of

church has to do with what it is, not what it does. And what it is is far wider, deeper, higher than anything it does, or anything we can take charge of or manipulate. The Singapore theologian Simon Chan puts his finger on our persistent misunderstanding of the church as instrumental, as pragmatic, when he writes, "When it comes to understanding the church, sociology takes over."⁴ The *being-ness* of church is what we are dealing with. Church is not something that we cobble together to do something for God. It is the "fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph. 1:23) working comprehensively with and for us.

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Having introduced the term "church" into his "growing up in Christ" letter (Eph. 1:22-23), and having guided us through the treacherous terrain of individualism, Paul is ready to cut to the chase. He sets out to stimulate a praying imagination in us that is adequate for taking in all that is involved in church.

He begins his renovation of the Ephesians' understanding of church by reminding them of what church is not. "Remember," Paul says, what your pre-church life was like (2:11). He repeats the imperative "remember" (2:12). This is important; if you are going to understand what it is to be a church, you must keep in mind what church is not, remember your pre-church life. Do you remember how you were defined entirely by what you were not? Paul assists their remembering by hammering home seven negatives: Gentiles (all the Ephesians were Gentiles, that is, not-Jews), uncircumcised, without Christ, aliens to the commonwealth, strangers to the covenants, having no hope, godless.

Improvising on Paul's *remember*, I hear him saying, "Remember what that transition was like when you crossed the threshold into church, the transition from exclusion to inclusion? Remember the surprise of being an insider to God and his revelation after being an out-

4. Simon Chan, *Liturgical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 36.

sider? Remember this well, for church cannot be comprehended by negatives, by what it is not. And neither can you."

There is considerable irony in the probability that this negative definition was given to the first Gentile Christians by Jewish Christians representing church. But it is understandable. Jews had a long history as the people of God with ancestors like Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah in their family tree. They had a well-developed sense of being a chosen people, which they were. That was a good thing. But along with that, they had also developed an entrenched prejudice against non-Jews as a rejected people, which they were not. The originating covenant with Abraham was that "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3 KJV, quoted by Paul in Gal. 3:8); over a thousand years later the inclusiveness of the covenant blessing was reaffirmed in the Isaianic preaching of all nations streaming to "the mountain of the LORD" (Isa. 2:2-3) and God's "house of prayer for all peoples" (56:7) — Larkin's "serious house on serious earth."

This prejudice, formed contrary to the magisterial authority of Abraham and Isaiah, was not a good thing. And so when Jesus, with a solid Jewish pedigree, was recognized as the Messiah and his crucifixion and resurrection became definitive for salvation, it was hard for the Jews, who were the first Christians, to accept Gentiles into the family of faith. They eventually did accept them, but it was not easy going for the first Gentile Christians.

Paul, with impeccable credentials as a Jew, self-identified as "apostle to the Gentiles" — those perceived as outsiders, aliens, strangers — was tireless in insisting that church brooks no divisions, no condescension, no rejection of anyone for any reason. He allows no exceptions: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28-29) — that promise of blessing cited from Genesis 12:3.

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The preconditions of church are not unlike the preconditions of creation: "without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2 RSV). God speaks over that formless void, that dark and watery chaos, and brings forth the forms of creation.

The "Father's only Son," who was "in the beginning with God," through whom "all things came into being," Jesus Christ (John 1:1-14), also speaks over a wreckage following the fall — disintegration, disconnection, depersonalization, the chaos of splintered humanity, empty souls, divided families — and brings forth "out of the womb of the morning" (Ps. 110:3 ASV) . . . church.

The church that Jesus Christ speaks into being is formed against the backdrop of the creation that the Word, who was in the beginning with God, spoke into being.

This is the ontological church. This is the church in its Isness. This Isness is previous to whatever we do or don't do. We do not create the church. It is. We enter and participate in what is given to us. What we do is, of course, significant. Our obedience and disobedience, our faithfulness and unfaithfulness — what we *ought* and *ought not* to do — are part of it. But what I am wanting to say is that there is more — far more — to the church than us. There is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Most of what the church is, not all, is invisible. We miss the complexity and glory of church if we insist on measuring and defining it by the parts that we play in it, if we insist on evaluating and judging it by what we think it *ought* to be.

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Fifty years ago I fell in love with a woman who would soon become my wife. I was in graduate school at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore; she was about to graduate from Towson State University. Our studies were demanding, and we didn't have much time to spend with one another, not even to go to Druid Hill Park to stroll through the zoo or to the Inner Harbor to enjoy the jugglers and magicians and musicians who provided sidewalk entertainment. Nor did either of us have

much money to spend going to the theater or concerts. The university gave graduate students a free pass to all athletic events, and so we went to every game that was played, whether we cared about it or not — it was free space to be together. Because everyone else was watching the game, it also turned out to be essentially private space in which we could continue to get to know one another without interruption, which was the primary reason we were there anyway.

When spring arrived, the game was lacrosse, a game neither of us had ever seen. At our first game, out of curiosity, we gave it our attention, hoping to get some idea of what was going on. We couldn't make out anything. To our unpracticed eyes it seemed like organized mayhem, the players on the field caught up in a vortex of legitimated violence. We soon went back to what we were there for in the first place. Every Saturday afternoon we were in the bleachers at the lacrosse field, mostly oblivious to the game that we had failed to figure out. We were learning to understand one another, and we were getting better and better at that, but pretty much gave up on lacrosse.

During this time I had to go to the hospital to repair an old athletic injury to my knee. A few days after being dismissed from the hospital I was diagnosed with a staphylococcus infection contracted in the surgery. I was placed in the university infirmary on the campus. The infirmary was a single room about thirty feet square with beds arranged around the periphery. There were three other students there, all of them lacrosse players who had been injured playing the game — one with a broken ankle, one with a broken collarbone, the other with a broken rib. They had their lacrosse sticks and a ball with them and spent their convalescence using their lacrosse sticks to throw the ball to one another, caroming it off the walls, bouncing it off the floor.

Their stickwork was impressive. The ball went around that room with incredible speed but also with precise accuracy. Sometimes I feared for my life as the ball passed inches from my head, but I needn't have — they knew what they were doing and they were good at it. I was there a week. During that week I had an intensive seminar in lacrosse. They patiently instructed me in the ways of lacrosse. Out of my origi-

nal perception of chaos and mayhem an amazingly intricate and exquisite game, graceful and beautiful in execution, emerged.

I have spent the fifty years since that week in the infirmary as a pastor in a church with people, a lot of whom seem to have no idea what is going on. What they see is chaos: hostility, injury, brokenness, church fights, church sleaze, church grandstanding, religious wars. Many of them find a place in the bleachers with a few other likeminded people and make do with what they find there. They survive by ignoring what they find confusing and disorienting. They remove their attention from what is taking place on the field (in the congregation, in the denomination). They do pray together, study together, socialize together. Life in the bleachers isn't all that bad.

There are other people who are so disturbed by what they perceive as chaos on the playing field that they decide to "do something about it." They want a game that looks like a game, a church that looks like a church, where no one gets hurt and everything is orderly and stays in place. They understand church as something they need to take charge of. And of course there are a great many people who just walk out and look for a game that they are already familiar with or go home and turn on the television where they can satisfy, if you can call it that, their religious needs by picking a brand without dealing personally with either God or people.

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None of these three responses to the perceived messiness and bewildering chaos of church is without value, whether it is finding a comfortable niche, finding something to fix, or looking for something that is congenial to one's individual temperament and circumstances. But all of them, by reducing church to matters of function and personal preference, miss church in its richness, its intricacy, the complex aliveness that is inherent in everything that is going on.

Paul wants us to first understand and then participate in church as it is, as the living Christ. He wants us to understand church first of all and primarily in terms of ontology, its being, not its function. There

are, of course, functions — things happen, things are done, there are jobs to do, there are tasks to be obeyed. But if we don't grasp church as Christ's body, we will always be dissatisfied, impatient, angry, dismayed, or disgusted with what we see. We will never see the elegance and intricacy of church; we will entirely miss the "praise of his glory"; we will fail to discern what is going on right before our eyes in our congregation. A great deal of what is observable in church is simply incomprehensible as church if we have no ontology of church.

"[Jesus] is our peace"

Peace is Paul's word of choice to help us into an ontological understanding of church. He begins by identifying Jesus as "our peace" (Eph. 2:14). He goes on to describe Jesus as "making peace" (v. 15) and "proclaim[ing] peace" (v. 17). He elaborates on this triple evocation of peace by telling us that we are "brought near" by Jesus (v. 13), that Jesus "has made both groups [Jews and non-Jews] into one" (v. 14), that Jesus "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (v. 14), that Jesus has "abolished the law . . . that he might create one new humanity in place of the two" (v. 15), all this so that Jesus "might reconcile both groups to God in one body" (v. 16) — five distinct actions of Jesus that add up to peace. Each of these five actions contributes detail and texture to our understanding of peace: Jesus brings us home, Jesus brings us together, Jesus breaks down hostility, Jesus re-creates us as a unified humanity, Jesus reconciles all of us to God. Peace is complex and many-layered. A lot of action goes into making peace — and Jesus is the action.

So far so good. But here's a puzzle: If Paul is right — and I would not be writing this if I wasn't convinced he is — then why isn't church with Christ as its head the most conspicuous place on earth as a place of peace and peacemaking?

Three things account for this dissonance between Jesus "our peace" and the church that more often seems like a war zone. All three things have to do with the way that Jesus is our peace.

First, Jesus is a person. That means that peace is personal. It is nothing if not personal. There are no other ways. Peace cannot be achieved in impersonal ways. It is not a strategy, not a program, not a political action, not an educational process. Jesus is always relational, never a disembodied idea, never a bureaucratized arrangement. Peace doesn't come into being by fiat. It requires participation in the ways of peace, participation in Jesus who is our peace.

Second, Jesus respects us as persons. He does not force himself upon us. He does not impose peace. He does not coerce. Jesus treats us with dignity. His peace is not a decree that everyone must get along without hurting or killing or despising one another. Peace is never external to us. It is not the absence of war or famine or anxiety that makes it possible to live in peace. It is not accomplished by getting rid of mosquitoes, rebellious teenagers, and contentious neighbors, or burning heretics at the stake.

All of us are participants in peace. Jesus is at work bringing us, all that is us — our eternal souls — into a life of connectedness, of intimacy, of love. There is a lot going on, a lot involved. We are all involved, whether we want to be or not. It takes a long time, because Jesus doesn't push us around and make us shape up, doesn't shut us up so that we don't disturb the peace. Peace is always in process, never a finished product.

Third, the way that Jesus becomes our peace — and this is the crux, literally! — is by an act of sacrifice. The sacrifice of Jesus is what makes Jesus Jesus; it is what makes peace peace; it is what makes church church. Paul says it two different ways: "by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13), and "through the cross" (2:16).

Church is the one place in the world that holds all these three components of peace together, refusing to simplify by eliminating any of the aspects. Church is the place where God cannot be depersonalized into an idea or force. The evidence? Jesus, the "word made flesh."

Church is the place where men and women cannot be depersonalized into abstractions such as insider and outsider, in-group and out-group, friends and enemies. The evidence? Our worship: Holy Baptism, in which we are personally named in the Name of the Trinity, and