

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ECCLESIOLOGY-TO-GO:
THE MISSIOLOGICAL TASK OF “BEING CHURCH”

by

Dr. Anita Koeshall

Dr. John Koeshall

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BEING CHURCH: IMAGES OF A MISSIOLOGICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

In the shifting sands of world ideological contexts, ecclesiology must be grounded on a solid biblical foundation and yet be free to encompass all cultures. The first lecture seeks to: (1) build a scaffolding on which our “being as church” can safely travel and morph, and (2) attempt to free church ecclesiology from its institutional box, informing and empowering our missiological task. We will argue for a Spirit-driven ecclesiology that is extroverted, liquid, generous, and power-giving.

In the second lecture, we will explore the praxis of generous ecclesiology in relationship to the ministries of Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) that are not traditionally classified as “church planting.” Students for Christ Europe (SFC) will serve as a case study to answer the question, “To what extent is SFC ‘church’?” How do we ground SFC and similar ministries in a “being church” trajectory that will empower them to become vibrant communities of faith?

The third lecture will focus on the capacity of a Spirit-driven, generous church to partner and covenant with others. After comparing the sociological differences of partnership, network, and covenant, we will lay a biblical foundation for power-giving relationships and critique the acid individualism that is implicit in our “self” culture.

Introduction: Images of Church Define the Missiological Task

For this series of Hogan lectures, John and I are going to explore an “ecclesiology-to-go.” J. Philip Hogan stated that “the final and only really successful unit for world evangelism is the church” and he ordered each new missionary to plant the church as they sat in front of him for their interviews.¹ If the

¹Everett A. Wilson, *Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide 1960-1990* (Cumbria UK: Paternoster Press, 1997), 50.

central task of missions, then, is to plant the church, the image of church that we take with us across borders will indelibly mold the task of mission.

It may seem fairly incongruous that John and I would choose to work on the topic of “church” as we have been involved in university ministries for the entirety of our ministry experience. However, every relevant topic for academic exploration should flow out of a perplexing problem in the praxis of ministry, and so it is with this topic.

Two facets of our work with students have left us in search of answers concerning the question: “What is church?” First, is the pesky question of how exactly would you describe the university groups? Are they simply a “club” on the university? Are they a Sunday school class in a church or an extension of the local youth group or “home group”? Or to what extent is the community of Christ-followers on the university indeed (being) a local church? In contrast to the Pentecostal denominations with whom we partner who tend to see the local church as the primary, if not the sole expression of church, many Christian students would say: “Church is wherever my spiritual home is, or, the church is all the Christians in the city, or most likely, I go to many different churches, because God speaks through all of them in different ways.”

Second, in the ministry with today’s students in Europe, we find most secular young people disillusioned with church—or more precisely, they are defining church in their own terms, usually outside the box of traditional or existing church paradigms. Ulrich Beck, a prominent German sociologist, describes the church as a European “zombie institution” (dead but still living).² The recent spate of allegations of sexual abuse in some Catholic churches of Europe,³ has given more cause for nominal parishioners to resolutely reject the “church,” withdrawing membership even though there remains a latent spirituality in many individuals. Miroslav Volf has been quoted as saying that in Europe it is

²Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 40.

³See for example: Doree Carvajal and Stephen Castle, “Abuse Took Years to Ignite Belgian Clergy,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/13/world/europe/13belgium.html?th&emc=th> (accessed July 13, 2010).

necessary to “wash the face of Jesus” due to the “compromises our churches ... have made through the centuries.”⁴ In light of present-day realities, we find that we must also be washing the face of the church, not just with words but by *being* church and, perhaps in doing so, a new vision of the crucified Lord will be cast across Europe.

Far from being a problem only in post-Christian, postmodern world of Europe, Timothy Tennent argues that in Hindu, Chinese, and Muslim nations, a churchless Christianity is flourishing.⁵ People are choosing to follow Jesus but remain embedded in their local religious tradition because the concept of “church” is endowed with negative meaning due to western imperialism, or simply decadent western culture. In many of these same nations, Christ is being accepted, but not the church, and therefore, it is necessary to “rethink the very nature of the church as it has been known in the Christian West.”⁶ The doctrine of the church “has become unnecessarily tethered to Western expressions of the church, which may not be appropriate for the growing church in the non-Western world.”⁷ Tennent suggests that the choice is not between “western church” or “churchless Christians,” but rather in discovering creative expressions of church that find a home in the particular context.

Finally, deeply embedded in the core vision of AGWM is the missions mandate to plant the church. “The aggressive missions programs of the church are designed to establish self-supporting and self-propagating national church bodies in every country.”⁸ J. Philip Hogan stated: “We cannot evangelize

⁴Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, ed. A. G. Padgett, *Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 28.

⁵Timothy Tennant, “The Challenge of Churchless Christianity: An Evangelical Assessment,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29 (4): 171-177. In an August 31, 2010 email received from Henry Mononen, a Finnish university missionary serving in Bangkok, Thailand: “Students want to believe without the obligation of the church ... and without the obligation of giving up on Buddhism. I.E. I know one student who told me that she believes that Jesus is her Savior, but she doesn’t feel that she is a Christian, but is still a Buddhist.”

⁶Ibid., 171.

⁷Ibid.

⁸“Brief History of the Assemblies of God,” Assemblies of God, <http://ag.org/top/About/History/index.cfm> (accessed on Sept 4, 2010).

the world until we realize that what the Lord of the harvest wants is the establishment of the local unit in the body of Christ.”⁹

Agreeing on a united vision of the “local unit of the body of Christ” is problematic. At the very heart of all that we do in mission is the question: “What is the essence of church; what is church in praxis?” The answer to that question guides, theologically and in a very practical way, the missionary task. The vision of church in the minds of many missionaries is experientially and culturally determined, coming from their individual church background, their culture, and experience. Some hail from emerging churches, others from traditional churches, mega-churches, seeker-friendly churches, home churches, and even cyber-churches, etc., but, in every case, the image of church is tainted to a great extent by western cultural individualistic tendencies and matters of taste—with perceived authenticity being the legitimizing factor.¹⁰

A national body of believers, or the church, exists in almost all the nations where the Assemblies of God ministers, with its own biblically legitimized structures and theological presuppositions about its existence. The ecclesiology of most, if not all, of these national churches will differ in some significant ways from what AG missionaries experienced in their home nation, either in reference to structures, hierarchies, or networks, for example, or the dynamic of group belonging. As we live and work with men and women from other cultural backgrounds, these differences produce significant challenges.

J. Philip Hogan believed that “the criterion by which everything else missionaries undertook would be evaluated” was the extent to which churches emerged from missionary efforts. More than the number of people evangelized, Hogan’s measuring stick was: “How many of these converts were finally

⁹Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas P. Peterson, *The Essential J. Philip Hogan: The J. Philip Hogan World Missions Series* (Springfield, MO: Assemblies of God Theological Seminary, 2006), 57.

¹⁰Michael Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 178.

integrated in a church, a local segment of the body of Christ, where they can be fed, led and developed into normal followers of the Lord Jesus?”¹¹

So strong is this church planting focus that we struggle to categorize ministries that stand outside the activity of church planting. When the explicit goal or orientation of a particular ministry is not a local church in the classical sense, that ministry is often considered a step-child, “para-church,” or of lesser importance than that of church planting. An illustration of this mentality is found in a recent document written by a European think-tank: “The #1 priority of AGWM Europe has to be planting churches because ‘missional,’ life-giving communities that multiply themselves, are the sole agents to bring transformation in every aspect of European society.”¹² This group proposed an increase in the percentage of missionaries sent to Europe to plant churches, and that every person with an “auxiliary” missionary task be challenged to, even required, to invest themselves in a church plant in their city.

These questions raise very real and earnest challenges for missionary tasks in Europe and beyond. For these reasons, John and I have decided to devote these three Hogan lectures to a series that would explore the possibility of an innovative and creative ecclesiology for the missionary task. Our goal is to fund the imagination for an ecclesiology-to-go using both scriptural as well as sociological perspectives, and to infuse mission praxis of the multi-faceted ministries that shape our AGWM community with some thoughtful perspectives. We will begin by exploring an *anchored ecclesiology* for a church that is driven by the Holy Spirit to be an *extroverted* church. This lecture will continue and outline what it would mean to have a *liquid ecclesiology*, creating sacred space and fluid structures. Finally we will critique the individualism that has crept into our church identity, and propose a concept of *generous ecclesiology* in order to challenge us to embrace a larger perspective of who “we” are. The second lecture will focus on our life-long ministry, Students for Christ (SFC), and seek to answer the question: “To what extent is an

¹¹Everett A. Wilson, *Strategy of the Spirit: J. Philip Hogan and the Growth of the Assemblies of God Worldwide 1960-1990* (Cumbria UK: Paternoster Press, 1997), 68.

¹²“Church Planting Proposal for Europe,” Assemblies of God World Missions, November 4, 2009.

SFC group a church?” This case study of a “non-church planting mission” will be used to expand our understanding of the reaching, touching, and training ministries of AGWM. In the third lecture we will explore the intricate connection between a *generous ecclesiology* and a *power-giving ecclesiology* as ministries work together to see themselves as member churches in the body of Christ.¹³

Anchored Ecclesiology: Community Events of Member Churches

The purpose in these lectures is not to write a Pentecostal ecclesiology. However, it is important to establish a set of dynamic cross-cultural ecclesiological non-negotiables as a scaffold for our discussion. An ecclesiology-to-go is not an attempt to make every Christian effort a church! Rather, when anchored in a set of key principle events, a group of believers is free to creatively improvise in their context with their resources and Spirit empowered gifts. These key elements are not doctrinal statements;¹⁴ rather they are events, experienced by the community as they gather together in the presence of the Spirit. Although not a complete list, the presence of these *communal*¹⁵ events in a community of faith serve as identity markers that a community has been transformed into a member of the body of Christ, while allowing freedom for creativity and imagination to flourish wherever the Spirit may touch

¹³We will discuss this terminology later in the paper. For now, I am calling a congregation a “member church” indicating that she is one of many member churches that constitute the church.

¹⁴The classical arguments of Ignatius and Irenaeus and others concerning church are focused on the presence of the Spirit and/or Christ; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Toward a Pneumatological Theology: Pentecostal and Ecumenical Perspectives on Ecclesiology, Soteriology, and the Theology of Mission*, ed. A. Young (New York: University Press of America, 2002), 83ff. See for instance the following examples: Cyprian of Carthage said in the third century, the church is “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Cyprian 1891: 23; PL 4, II: 553; quoted in LG 4). In the famous words of Irenaeus: “... where the Spirit of God is, there are also the church and all grace;” Stephen B. Bevans, “The Church as Creation of the Spirit: UnPacking a Missionary Image,” *Missiology* 35 (1):6. Miroslav Volf quoted the following references to Early Church Fathers: Ignatius: “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal church” Smyrn.8:2; Tertullian: “Where three are, the church is” De exhort. castit. 7 Following which, Volf concluded: “Where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, not only is Christ present among them, but a Christian church is there as well;” Volf, 136.

¹⁵ The church (*ecclesia*) is a community. I will have further comments on this in the section titled “liquid ecclesiology.” Miroslav Volf bases the foundation for the existence of a church on Matthew 18:20: “Where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there I am in the midst of them.” Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, ed. A. G. Padgett, *Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). See also Kevin Giles who claims that “the Christian community” is the church in Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

hearts to bring a church to life. All of these events are: (1) initiated from the triune God himself as He has adopted us and included us in the Trinitarian fellowship, and (2) entered into willingly by persons so that the supernatural is transforming the human.

In this enumeration of dynamic non-negotiables, both structural and static propositional statements have been avoided, as well as traditional definitions, which explore church via polity or government.¹⁶ Instead, this list includes encounters that can be present in any cultural context and happen again and again as the community meets, where it meets, when it meets, so that ecclesiology remains alive and transformed.

Anchoring Event 1: Community Response to God's Presence

A member church is present when a community **gathers and experiences the presence of the triune God** (the Father who created and formed us, the Son whose death on the cross saved us, and the Holy Spirit who empowers and calls the church to life). The very presence of God calls forth the utterance, "He is Lord!" followed by awe, worship, submission, and obedience. Just as on the day that Peter spoke in the house of Cornelius and a decisive moment happened among them, this moment is repeated afresh when a community recognizes the Lord. Frank Macchia puts it this way:

The narrative of Acts has Christian communities caught up at decisive moments in the powerful presence of the Spirit in a way that moves them to vibrant praise, inspired witness with signs and wonders following, and bold acts of reconciliation. The presence of the Spirit was not just assumed by virtue of affirming a gospel message or performing a sacramental rite. The church knew full well when the Spirit visited, because it was a reality that was felt and that produced tangible results. Spirit events caused even unbelieving audiences to ask in astonishment, "What does this mean?"¹⁷

¹⁶See, for example, Michael L. Dusing, "The New Testament Church," in *Systematic Theology*, ed. S. M. Horton (Springfield, MO, 1995), 547-549 and Kärkkäinen. Andrew Walls makes the interesting observation that the "sign posts of historic Christianity" include: "the worship of the God of Israel, the recognition of the ultimate significance of Christ, the knowledge that God is active among the believers, the acknowledgement of a people of God transcending time and space; and join in the common reading of the scriptures, and in the special use of bread and wine and water;" Walls, 223-225.

¹⁷Frank Machia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 76.

Because of these encounters with a holy God, a community is formed with a religious identity, set apart for and aware of the fact that they have a destiny and purpose that is God-driven, and not meant to fulfill human desires for power, prestige, or possessions.

Anchoring Event 2: Community Response to God's Word:

The church exists where the **community gathers together to learn and live by God's truth** as found in His word. As humble learners, they diligently seek the Spirit's help to discern God's will for their community and the world and to put it into praxis in community life. Behind this statement lies three premises. First, understanding Scripture is a community activity. Biblical knowing was never meant to be mental exercise—rather truth was not fully known until it was lived out in community. Parker Palmer writes: “Knowing is a profoundly communal act. In order to know something we depend on the consensus of the community in which we are rooted—a consensus so deep that we often draw upon it unconsciously.”¹⁸ More than personal Bible study as an individual activity¹⁹ (as important as that may be), or as a task that the pastor does, the community is able to teach one another. “We affirm that the interpretation of scriptures belongs to the church as a community of faith that seeks to understand and live the truth, beauty and holiness of the Lord.”²⁰

The interpretation and application of the text are inter-relational, trans-national, and trans-generational activities. This community of knowing extends to the past as scribes wrote the inspired Word, Church Fathers analyzed and chose those books that should be included in the canon, and scholars studied, taught, and wrote commentaries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Still today, the Spirit

¹⁸Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known: A Spirituality of Education* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), xv.

¹⁹With the privatization of spirituality and the deepening individualization of our culture, it is interesting how the emphasis on personal devotions with application and reflection taking place in the secrecy of a journal has been seen as the hallmark of spiritual maturity. When the community gathers around Bible study, it is often the case that the leader has prepared and the others either passively participate or they “pool” of randomly collected thoughts. Active theologizing by all participants is a sign of a mature community.

²⁰Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 276.

continues to move in theological dialogue among biblical scholars, in church halls, in prisons, living rooms, and university dorms as God's people study His Word. "In this way, the action of the Spirit enables the Christian community to fulfill its task of living as the people of God in the various historical and cultural locations in which it is situated."²¹ The hermeneutic of the African church has taught us to think more correctly about *koinonia* and has challenged the rational church of the West to understand and deal with the supernatural spirit world. The Pentecostal church in the U.S. critiques much of the world in light of the issues of women in ministry. "[I]n the community spoken into existence by the Father in the Son through the Spirit, the readings that should be truly privileged are those that have been recognized by the communion of saints in all times and places, not just our own."²²

Second, the community of believers are taught to think biblically (also referred to as "theologizing")²³ about the world that they live in—the context, the challenges, and Scripture's response. Whether the context is darkened by haughty intellectualism and secularism, polygamy or government corruption, poverty or human trafficking, divorce or childlessness, loneliness or racial antagonism, the lived out truth of the gospel shines light and gives hope. Out of this reflection comes a way of life that at once prophetically critiques the context as well as offers a radically alternative way of life that is indeed good news to those who are trapped in their cultural prisons. This way of life is explained by a public voicing of prophetic answers to the reason for the hope that is evidenced by the character of the community, just as Peter wrote to the chosen aliens of the first century (1 Pet. 3:15).²⁴

²¹Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 118.

²²Horton, 208.

²³George R. Hunsberger, "The Missional Voice and Posture of Public Theologizing," *Missiology* 34 (1):15-28.

²⁴Note the plural "you" in the Greek text. This does not appear to be a personalized hope, but a hope that is lived out in the community. *ku/rion de« to\n Cristo\n aJgia:sate e'n tai/ß kardi÷aiß uJmwδn, e'toimoi a0ei« pro\ß a0pologi÷an panti« tw^δ ai'touvnti uJmaδß lo/gon peri« thvß e'n uJmi/ñ e'lpι÷doß* (1 Pet. 3:15).

Third, in community, the Word is studied as a basis for discipleship, discipline, growth, and transformation in the individual's life. A Spirit-transformed community cannot exist unless its members are also Spirit-transformed, and it is through the study of the text that the Spirit renovates both community and individual.²⁵ The concepts of correction, fraternal admonition, and mutual accountability based in a loving, covenanted community are contrary to the individualistic social expectations in our world, as well as in the church, leaving the community anemic and broken.²⁶

Anchoring Event 3: Dynamic Asymmetry among Spirit-gifted Members

A member church exists and flourishes when the Spirit gives multiple gifts to a gathered group, creating a dynamic community of elders or more mature members and younger members who function in their mutual ministry gifts. The community then continues to produce mature followers of Christ (Eph. 4) enabling them to be the testimony of God's grace in a graceless world,²⁷ living out a radically alternative community lifestyle. Present church ecclesiology often reduces these relationships to laity and clergy distinctions. While it is impossible to underestimate the value of leadership in a community, their role must always be one of empowerment and community building, holding the community on course as they pursue the Lord's mission. Equally, the laity are to be far from passive recipients of the leaders' vision and theology. "[T]he only vision of value for Christian ministry is God's vision, and that vision is given not to individuals, but rather to the body of Christ. God uses individuals . . . to be a catalyst within the "body," but God's vision is always to his church and for his church."²⁸ Together, they theologize and receive their mission from the head of the church, Jesus Christ.

²⁵Grenz and Franke, 83.

²⁶John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottsdale, PAL Herald Press, 1992); Curtis Freeman, "Where Two or Three are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31 (3): 259-272.

²⁷"Graceless world" is a term favored by Frank Macchia.

²⁸Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 40-41.

Anchored Event 4: Healthy Covenanting

A group of believers who experience the community of the Triune God is a **community that is healthily covenanted** to each other. Community must be that which believers choose to do, and simultaneously the creation of God himself. Volf argues convincingly that a church is constituted both “from above,” and also “from below.”²⁹ A group of people who merely assemble together does not make them a church. “While several ‘I’s’ together do constitute a grammatical plural, they do not yet constitute an ecclesial ‘we’.”³⁰ When God is present, and believers make a volitional decision to covenant, submit, identify with, and belong to one another, a supernatural phenomenon takes place and community is born.

In Europe as in the U.S., acid individualism is perhaps the strongest cultural prison that must be critiqued by the gospel.³¹ Individualism insists on voluntary, individualized decisions to say “yes” to God, to choose with whom one will be in alliance, to interpret the Scriptures for one’s self. “Across the spectrum of evangelicalism, the presupposition is widely shared that the individual believer’s personal relationship with Jesus is immediate, inward, and direct, based on one’s decision to accept Christ, and that membership in the church is also an individual decision that may (or in some cases may not) serve that basic contract.”³² Michael Horton continues to critique the current privatized, pluralized, and rationalized ecclesiology, demonstrating this syncretistic blind spot in the way the West understands their connectedness in the community.

Once direct, internal, and unmediated divine action is opposed to authorized, external, and mediated creaturely action in principle, both the magisterial authority of Scripture and the

²⁹Volf, 176.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹It must be noted that in other cultural contexts, the opposite of this cultural dimension has the upper hand, that of collectivism. In this setting, the group has higher priority than the individual, and the individual can be/often is sacrificed for the sake of the community. This too must be critiqued by the gospel and is not a correct portrayal of the concept of covenant community, where there is a mutual laying down of one’s life for the others. Horton comments here too: “It is the grace that elects, redeems, calls, justifies, sanctifies, and glorifies rather than obliterates the biological individual, placing the self in a nexus of relationships identified as the new creation. We are one because we have all received the same Gift.” Horton, 185.

³²Ibid., 180.

ministerial authority of the church are undermined. And when this quasi-gnostic presupposition is combined with an extreme theological voluntarism, the church becomes a demographic profile of consumers rather than a communion of saints. Contract, in effect, replaces covenant. No longer the creation of the Word, the church becomes a creation of the market.³³

If God's people forget that the Holy Spirit is the one forming and empowering them to be Christ's bride, then being church morphs into a collaboration of like-minded individuals who have been culturally trained to connect and disconnect relationally with equal ease, and church is reduced to being a club or a voluntary organization.

Although there is much to be said about the meaning of sacraments or ordinances, often forgotten is the role these play in creating community. The sacraments are communal acts that signify participation in the covenant community. Baptism, according to Volf, is much more than an outward sign of an inward faith; it is an introduction into the community of believers. "Through baptism, whose necessary presupposition is faith and accordingly also, the will, one is initiated into a twofold communion— communion with God and a concrete communion with Christians. By wanting to be baptized, I also want to become part of a church."³⁴ Grenz notes that, among other things, baptism reminds the community of her responsibility to care for the new member, who is at "the beginning of a life of growth and character and service."³⁵ As a human act of commitment and covenant to follow God in obedience merges with the divine act of adoption as sons and daughters, the logical and supernatural corollary is that the believer is bonded into the company of the disciples, the church.

Second, the covenant supper that Christ ate with His people is most often celebrated individually (although together),³⁶ but it is, in fact, a sign and instrument of participation with one another in one body

³³Ibid.

³⁴Volf, 177.

³⁵Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids and Vancouver, British Columbia: Eerdmans and Regent College Publishing, 1994), 524.

³⁶Recently, as I participated in the Lord's Supper in a mature and prospering church, I was astounded by the individualistic tendencies of the celebration. The introspection with eyes closed to determine our own personal worthiness or genuineness, the professing of our sins to the Lord in the quietness of our own hearts, the bread and cup, each individualized little portions. Somehow, I wonder if this is what the Lord had in mind. It seems as if

of Christ. “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor. 10:16-17). When the church comes together³⁷ and rightly “recognizes what characterizes the body as different,” it understands that Christ’s body poured out in His salvific act on the cross was more than simply a physical body experiencing a physical death.³⁸ That divine difference transforms a voluntary group eating a meal together into a new “body,” the eschatological people of God.

This new community was to have different characteristics: No longer were they to eat their fill greedily while the second class citizens in the group went hungry, or to seek after their own affairs first. Instead, they were to “recognize what characterizes us as Christian believers” (1 Cor. 11:31), to recognize one another’s value and giftedness and care for one another. Just as Christ spent His life (body) as a sacrifice for the world, so Christians, in their pluriform backgrounds, skill-sets, and personalities, are called to be the broken body of Christ poured out for one another and the world.

Not only is community constituted through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, but the baptism in the Holy Spirit transforms the individual, supplying the underlying energy to live life in a community marked by humility and grace. Frank Macchia challenges our privatized view of Holy Spirit baptism by stating that the “Spirit is the Spirit of communion.”³⁹ To narrow the vision of what it means to be baptized in the Spirit primarily to personal transformation, victory over sin, or guidance misrepresents the Spirit and His work in the community. “Spirit baptism implies communion. This is why it leads to a shared love, a

community behavior is what is being called to account in 1 Cor. 11, although individual behavior is at the root of community life.

³⁷Five times, Paul uses the term *συνερχεσθαι* in this passage, which should give us a clue as to the importance of the “togetherness” of this event” (1 Cor. 11 17, 18, 20, 33, 34).

³⁸Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text: The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 897.

³⁹Macchia, 156.

shared meal, a shared mission, and the proliferation/enhancement of an interactive charismatic life.”⁴⁰ As the Spirit indwells the community of believers, the Church becomes more than simply a voluntary association of individuals with either a common set of interests or of values. The Spirit makes us capable of community! The dynamic of the Spirit invigorates the community and takes them far beyond the sum of their talents and capacity and makes it possible to embody or incarnate the truth of the gospel, the life of Christ.

The Pivotal Anchor 5: The Extroverted Church, Driven by the Spirit

Finally, if we can personify the church, she is an extrovert. The four signs of church mentioned above are centered on the inner life of a community in relationship to her Lord, but along with these signs, there must also be the character of the church in relationship to the world. Quoting Johannes Hoekendijk, Bevens states, “The essential nature of the church (its ‘inside,’ its *ad intra* nature) is not to be discovered by focusing on the church but on the church’s mission (its ‘outside’ or *ad extra* character). The church is radically ‘eccentric’ and ‘centrifugal.’”⁴¹ According to Bevens, the essence of the church is birthed through the process of mission. Without the mission there would be no church, without the church there would be no mission. In reference to the use of the word “church” in Acts, he argues that it is only “when the Spirit has lead the community, in mission, to the Gentiles, can we speak about the community as a ‘church.’”⁴² The narrative found in Acts traces the steps of the believers as they are pushed from the context of the known Jewish community to the regions beyond their cultural comfort zone. The church was wrenched from being a sub-group within Judaism to the realization that they were a church, with her own identity, moral laws, Head, and Spirit-directed destiny. Each step of the way over the eleven or more

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Stephen B. Bevens, “God Inside Out: Toward a Missionary Theology of the Holy Spirit,” *International Bulletin of Missionary* 22 (3): 102.

⁴²Stephen B. Bevens, “The Church as Creation of the Spirit: Unpacking a Missionary Image.” *Missiology* 35, no. 1 (2007): 10.

year period from Acts chapter 2 to Acts 11, the new community of believers was pushed by the Spirit—beyond, out of the nest, so to speak. Each agonizing decision and church council forced them to rethink identity, but the reality of God moving ahead of them assured their steps. Even as they went, Peter could be encouraged by the marks of a community of faith: they received the Word of God (Acts 11:1, 15:7), they were filled with the Holy Spirit (10:44, 15:8), they experienced the grace of God (11:23) in signs and wonders God had performed among them.

What is of utmost significance here, I believe, is that the way the Spirit calls this church into being is through mission. As the community is called ever more and more beyond itself—through Stephen’s questioning, evangelization of half-Jews and a “wannabe Jew,” breaking the boundaries of ritual purity and religious tradition with Cornelius and the Greeks in Antioch, the church becomes more conscious of itself as church. The Spirit creates the church, calls the church into being through mission. And so, in obedience to the Creator Spirit, the church is “missionary by its very nature.”⁴³

The Spirit continues to *equip* the church to be the church, in the multiple contexts of the world in which it finds itself. The church’s effectiveness will depend on her ability to follow the leading of the Spirit’s creativity, to understand the culture in which it finds herself, and to carry the Spirit into the context in the earthen vessel that is the community. Bevans reminds us that the Spirit has not stopped pushing the church out of the nest and the Spirit will continue to drive the Church across borders—ethnic, cultural, linguistic, generational, and social class. The church must follow, “recognizing that the church belongs to the Spirit, and not the Spirit to the church.”⁴⁴

A second aspect of extroversion is the fact that a mature church is also one that has an openness to other communities of faith in the city, region, and beyond. This outward expression of the church is marked by a sense of care and responsibility for the other, as well as mutual respect and friendliness. Just as Spirit baptism makes *koinonia* in a local church possible, Spirit baptism also makes each member church capable of participating in a larger community of churches. This topic will be discussed more completely below.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Bevans, *The Church as Creation of the Spirit*, 11.

In summary, a discussion of the question, “What is church?” has led us to see the church as a group of believers who gather together and are transformed because, in the midst of the earthly community, God himself is present. The gathered community “makes visible a relationship that eternally exists between the almighty God and the people of God.”⁴⁵ As a result of the “discernible interaction between the divine and the corrupt, between the infinite and the small,”⁴⁶ a community is ignited that is:

- worshipping and obedient in response to the presence of God,
- learning and living radically in response to the Word of God,
- serving and empowering one another in mutual relationships with gifts given by the Spirit,
- committing enduringly to one another in response to the invitation of God to be in communion with him, and
- missionally embedding themselves in the real world as they are driven by the Spirit.

These reenacted events shape the face of the church. Notice that none of these are restricted to a particular structure, form, context, or liturgy. The next section of this lecture will attempt to explore a church ecclesiology that is freed from its institutional box, in order to inform and empower the missiological task. We will argue for a Spirit-driven liquid ecclesiology that creates sacred space and fluid structures for the multiple contexts in which communities of faith find themselves, and a generous ecclesiology that embraces other member-churches in a more holistic view of church in a city or region.

Ecclesiology-to-Go—Liquid Form and Fluid Structures

A community of believers embedded in the slums of Calcutta, or on the University in Nairobi, or among the gypsies of Southern France should all have distinctive organization styles, meeting places, worship, and mission. Each must be empowered to live in such a way that those who exist on the permeable edges of the community see the testimony of life in the Kingdom of God and perceive a glimmer of hope for a different way of being.

In this section we are, therefore, arguing for a liquid ecclesiology. The world is the home of a vast array of cultures, ideas, and philosophies, each of which is rapidly changing. Without close attention to

⁴⁵Amy Anderson, *When You Come Together: Challenging the Church to an Interactive Relationship with God* (St. Paul, MN: Expected publication, October, 2010), 87.

⁴⁶Ibid.

the actions and essence of church, form will become dried mud that allows meaning to leak out through the cracks. A missiological ecclesiology must remain pliable, moist, capable of being created, and re-created by the Spirit who is working in each of our contexts. James K. A. Smith's words concerning theology can easily be transposed to address the issues of ecclesiology: "the best [ecclesiology] will be a kind of ethnography—a 'thick description' of our present, attentive to the layers of complexity of those institutions and practices that constitute our globalized world."⁴⁷ If it is the Spirit of God who is equipping and shaping the visible, geographically located church, it is to be expected that the church will be as creative and resourceful as the Spirit himself.

Kevin Giles, after doing a careful study of the New Testament church, states: "We discovered not a community established and defined once for all, but a community in transition."⁴⁸ Andrew Walls calls Christian faith "infinitely translatable" and so must be the life-giving communities that spring from faith.⁴⁹ In my "broader-than-most-but-still-limited" experience, however, the vision of church in much of the world is a building, a pastor with elders, and a congregation. An ecclesiology-to-go gives permission and empowerment to "do and be" church in more than one way, as long as we build on the above scaffolding.

For the European context, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that the postmodern era could better be described as "liquid modernity."⁵⁰ This period, which is the logical end to rational, critical modernity, is so-called due to the fact that the bonds of modern constructs such as traditions, structures,

⁴⁷Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 11.

⁴⁸Giles, 182.

⁴⁹Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 22.

⁵⁰Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 21. Recently, Jerry Nance from Global Teen Challenge told the story at a recent conference in Rimini Italy, that, as he was interviewing a perspective boyfriend of his daughter about what he wanted to be in the future, the young man responded: "Be liquid." Jerry was befuddled by the answer, but basically the young man was saying, free of ties that bind or obligation.

geographical boundaries, and hard realities are being tossed aside for a “made-up certainty” by the individual.⁵¹ This includes being free from non-liquid assets, such as buildings and factories, which rapidly decline in value with ever-changing technology. Yesterday’s bright idea is thought of as today’s depreciated burden. According to Bauman, the person or group that has the capability to flow freely on the market, geographically and relationally, is the one who will prosper in the age of liquid modernity. Although there is much to be criticized biblically about this cultural context, there is much to be gained by allowing this culture to critique the syncretistic influence of modernity on church praxis.⁵²

The complexity of being church in this kind of context cannot be underestimated. As a result of the dissolution of constructs that directed yesterday’s life, pluralism has entered with its risks and loss of security, causing some, who according to Bauman, find the uncertainties too bewildering, to choose fundamentalistic religious groups who give black and white answers.⁵³ Those who prefer final truths and pat answers tend to produce cookie-cutter churches that expect to be replicated regardless of the cultural context. They are often quick to condemn those who do not conform to their way. On the other hand, there are others who have no respect for any tradition or truth, and cast off all boundaries that would call them into accountability. Those who are mature in the church must be careful not to fall into the trap of enjoying the unquestioning followership that the first group offers, neither may they despair at those who reject structures and traditions; for note, they are not rejecting the five events that anchor the community of faith!

Churches must remain liquid, particularly in totalitarian societies, where ideologies such as Islam, communism, secularism, or materialism reign. Churches that are identifiable by the transformation of

⁵¹Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

⁵²Mark Noll remarks that “American Christianity has continued to exhibit a striking degree of modernity. It takes free choice for granted, it is comfortable with open market competition, it is adept at using popular media and popular entertainment for religious purposes, and it is inescapably democratic;” Mark Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009, 157-158).

⁵³Zygmunt Bauman, “Postmodern Religion? In *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. P. Heelas, D. Martin, and P. Morris (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 74.

their life-together are less easily attacked because it is hard to put a finger on a structure or organization. A physical building that does not exist cannot be burnt, a community that has no official organization cannot be outlawed, and Spirit-gifted, shared leadership, cannot be so easily silenced.⁵⁴

It is the outward forms of church that can become stuck in the prison of a tradition, architecture, or organizational structure that once had meaning, but which remains as empty vessels. Two of these outward forms that we offer for dialogue are: (1) a place—a building with seats in a row and a podium in front, and (2) a leader-follower structure of pastor over elders over congregation. (Others could and should be considered, such as liturgy or worship forms). These concrete objects and regularized functions which we *have* and *do* often become the definition of “church” which may be appropriate for one place or generation but may not have been re-created for the next generation or the neighboring village.

Creating Sacred Space: Filling Space with the Presence of God.

The gathered Spirit-filled community occupies an actual geographical space with the word and works of God and creates a place for His people to minister to Him and to one another and the world. God, it seems, has no problem changing venues in where He meets His people. He is tethered neither by time or space. From the Garden of Eden to Mt Sinai, the Tabernacle to the Temple, to the Upper Room, God came with smoking, fiery signs that He was with His gathered people. In the New Testament, we see even more radical changes in spatial location where God meets His people. God’s presence is no longer in a building (tabernacle or temple), but His presence moves into the hearts of His people. Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” (Matt. 18: 20), and the meeting place for His church becomes *wherever* the two or three are! You (plural) are the temple of the Holy Spirit! (You all constitute together the temple of the Holy Spirit!)

⁵⁴In a study of German Pentecostals through World War II, leadership was characterized by a strong, centralized, singular male leadership. Men like Heinrich Vietherr, Hermann Zaiss, and Karl Fix made it quite simple for Hitler’s regime to rock their large and vital churches, simply by imprisoning the one leader. I often question if, the leadership had been shared, would the churches have not been so devastated during the time of National Socialism?

In the New Testament and the early years of the church, people gathered in the “upper room” of homes as house churches. It is informative that the church met in the very place that was of “fundamental importance for society and economy in the ancient world” rather than a place that is set apart specifically for religious purposes.⁵⁵ It was in the homes that the burgeoning believers were able to meet and practice *koinonia* and during this time of tremendous growth one can only suspect that the natural networks of family, neighbors, and business relationships contributed to the growth of the church. This simple structure, available to all, allowed for the natural migration of the church from Jerusalem to Antioch and beyond.⁵⁶ The household was not chosen by God as an alternative place to meet; rather, it was simply the space in which the early believers were situated in daily life.

Most instructive to us in Scriptures is the fact that with the dawn of the age of the Spirit, the community of faith, which is the Temple of the Spirit, met in the location that was embedded in their cultural context, not separate from it. From our U.S. or Western culture of isolation, privatization, and separation of religion from public space, the example we see in the Scriptures is a community, complete with their networks in the world, functioning as a church. A liquid ecclesiology will seek for that place where Christians find themselves busy with life. A liquid ecclesiology will allow for a vast array of possibilities.

No place is sacred. The great Cathedrals of Europe stand as mute testimonies to the fact that God is not hesitant to abandon structures no longer inhabited by God’s people. Elliott contrasts the temple as the locus of God’s presence to the household and demonstrates that the temple, as it became “an

⁵⁵Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Missions: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity*, trans. R. W. Gehring (Peabody, MA: Hendricksons, 2004), 17. (Original edition, Hausgemeinde und Missions: Brunnen Verlag, Giessen 2000).

⁵⁶Gordon Fee (2002), in this fascinating exploration of household relationships, reminds us that the whole of Ephesians 5 calls the Christians in their households to ““live a life of love, just as Christ loved us...”” and to be ““filled with the Spirit.”” The texts concerning submission are only part of what it means to be filled with the Spirit, along with singing, speaking, and giving thanks. One can only imagine this family, business enterprise, and church that is filled with this kind of interaction would attract the attention of their neighbors and work networks; Gordon Fee, “The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18-6:9: Is there a Divinely Ordained Hierarchy in the Life of the Church and Home that is Based on Gender Alone?” *Priscilla Papers* 16 1 (Winter 2002):3-8.

alienating form of collective, institutional life,” was displaced by the household, “a creative form of integrative group life.”⁵⁷ Because of the corrupt power structures of the priestly system and the political involvement of the religious leadership, the place God had given for His people to come together as a people and meet with Him lost its primacy. In the household, believers “assemble, pray, receive the Spirit, break bread and generously share all things in common” while the temple had become the “center of political and religious control, a place for seeking alms, and the scene and object of conflict (arrest and imprisonment, critique of temple rulers, mob violence, beating, and death).”⁵⁸ The Spirit fills and equips His church, to improvise and create a sacred space to meet with each other and with God.

Creating Sacred Space: Fluid Organization

Social organization is a human necessity. Faith communities, too, develop forms and regularized ways of doing things that become an integral part of the identity and spirituality of a group. A quick trip around the world would reveal that with a few exceptions, the *titles* for Pentecostal church leadership are very similar. A bishop or a general superintendent is the head of a national or regional group of churches. There are pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday school teachers, and worship leaders. However, the roles and rules for these titles and their function in the organizational structures vary greatly. It has been shown that social organization is dictated as much, if not more, by cultural bias as it is by biblical understanding.⁵⁹

To explore social structures, anthropologist Mary Douglas places hierarchy and egalitarianism on a dimension, with hierarchy at the top (which she calls High Grid) and egalitarianism (or Low Grid) at the bottom of the dimension.⁶⁰ In a High Grid culture or organization there are strict rules and

⁵⁷John H. Elliott, “Temple Versus Household in Luke-Acts: A Contrast in Social Institutions,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Modes of Interpretations*, ed. J. H. Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 214.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁹Anita Koeshall, “Toward a Theory of Dynamic Asymmetry and Redeemed Power: A Case Study of Reflexive Agents in German Pentecostal Churches,” School of Intercultural Studies, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2008.

⁶⁰Mary Douglas, “Occasional Paper,” no. 35, in *Cultural Bias: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1978.

“institutionalized classifications” that inform the individual about how to act and with whom one may interact. These roles and rules are defined by the culture or the tradition of the institution and a person’s identity is formed by the role he or she is assigned. Hence, in southern Europe, with a predominantly Catholic cultural background where hierarchy is culturally legitimized, a Pentecostal pastor is often jokingly called a “little pope” and the elders are appointed for lifetime, making many groups of elders all retired gentlemen, centrally controlling the vision and resources in their churches.

As one moves down the Grid dimension to egalitarianism, the insulation between the privileged and the not-so-privileged begins to break down and the roles and rules become a point of negotiation, competition, and conflict. Sometimes this results in a great differentiation of status, with the “Big Man” at the top and a “Rubbish Man” at the bottom, or by contrast, the one who rises above the others is put back in his or her place, for it is considered arrogant to presume leadership roles. In northern European countries it may be difficult to discern who exactly the leader is. One may be hosted by a lay member or elder, while the pastor scurries around preparing coffee. On closer inspection the lay person may exert great influence, but does it through covert collaborating, consensus, and maneuvering.

Many Pentecostal churches in Western Europe and the U.S., particularly, defend the egalitarian, democratic structure as biblical.⁶¹ In Southern and Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, a hierarchical structure is prevalent in the churches, offending our egalitarian sensibilities and creating great challenges in the process of working together to build the church. Thus roles and structures vary from place to place, where they often become concretized power relationships that are culturally defined, then biblically legitimized making them difficult to critique.

Lest we fall into a cultural bias, we must realize that both ends of the hierarchy-egalitarian dimension are fallen, and both need to be redeemed. There is great tension between living as transformed individuals but still embedded in humanly necessary organizational structures. Paul juxtaposes Colossians

⁶¹I have shown that in Germany, at least, the democratic process of electing candidates for eldership by voting was generally not accepted as “biblical.” Elders would decide and choose possible candidates for election and then the members would vote on them; Koeshall.

3:11, “There is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all,” with 3:18, “Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.” The text between the two verses, however, relativizes and dramatically changes the quality of the culturally legitimized relationships. The same can be seen in Ephesians 5, where “be filled with the Spirit” creates the possibility of mutual submission and being “in Christ” redefines what it means to be the one man who is the husband, the father, and the master. The fact that the household slave is made an equal member of the church in these two passages is an extraordinary example of the prophetic critique that a church has in a society, simply by how it builds and lives out its relationships.

Church structures can mimic the culturally legitimate hierarchy or egalitarian society—but the roles must be filled by redeemed individuals, so that the community takes on a new character. Or, structures can defy an insufferable cultural way of life in order to demonstrate a redeemed counter culture. However, a particular form is never to be taken as a universal biblical principle. These things are certain: the church is a community of “resident aliens” in a culture that is groaning for transformation, and the way the church organizes itself in each particular culture and setting must be prophetic, bearing the Good News in her relational structures.⁶² The church must live a subversive lifestyle (one of Walter Brueggemann’s phrases) or as Snyder wrote decades ago, the church must exist almost exclusively as a counterculture ... “as culture deteriorates morally and spiritually and comes increasingly under Satan’s domination, the Church must move progressively from active involvement to the counterculture stance.”⁶³

⁶²To state the obvious: The context of missionary Church planting is most likely in a culture that is either hostile or indifferent to the Gospel and the community of faith, where the value system of the political power structures does not correspond with nor dialogue with those of the community of faith, where the population knows little to nothing of the text or tradition of the community. Those of the faith are truly “resident aliens” By contrast, in the U.S., churches are in a culture that is transitioning (or has recently transitioned) from a context that is quite the opposite. The fact that a presidential campaign would include a debate with a prominent religious leader, Rick Warren (August 16, 2008), is an anomaly that would not happen in much of the world. In the first instance, the church is able to participate actively as a dialogue partner in the public discussions, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, it must live out an underground counter-culture.

⁶³Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 115.

Whatever the structure, its purpose is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all ... become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4: 12-13). Volf argues that “the church lives through the participation of its members, that is, the laity and the office holders, and is constituted through them by the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁴ These members are both laity and clergy who are a “communion of interdependent subjects.”⁶⁵ Volf, eager to raise the laity to active participation and Spirit giftedness, states that “the task of leaders is first to animate all the members of the church to engage their pluriform charismatic activities, and then to coordinate these activities.”⁶⁶

Rather than a static organizational structure that is legitimized for all times, church structures must be liquid. This can best be described as a dynamic asymmetry, where those who are mature⁶⁷ are teaching, training, encouraging, and empowering the younger or less mature to reach their highest potential in the Lord, and creating space (even re-creating the mission) for the next generation to flourish. As more members become active theologizers and envisioners, the community’s mission is expanded and recreated while leadership is continually empowering, creating space, setting free, and relinquishing control. Logically, the greater the number of mature members, the more the ministry roles should be shared and the flatter the organizational structure should become. In reality, we often see churches create more structured hierarchies with centralized leadership as a church ages and grows. Problems develop when there is no possibility in the DNA of a church to change the structure because the power relationships have been legitimized and entrenched in traditions. A dynamic, liquid social organization

⁶⁴Volf, 222.

⁶⁵Ibid., 224.

⁶⁶Ibid., 230.

⁶⁷I prefer not to use the term leadership, because of the leadership cult that is prevalent in the West, and the implication that is often attached to the term that there is one, or only a few in the community who are responsible to serve, to hear from God, to study the word, and to determine mission.

will allow the church to mold into new forms as it crosses cultural and generational borders, to face the challenge of new tasks, and to welcome maturing, Spirit-gifted members into its decision-making circles.

Generous Ecclesiology: Embracing the Church Beyond the Local

A question of vital importance to the understanding of an ecclesiology-to-go is, “When we think “church,” who is included?” I am going to build a case that an ecclesiology that understands a local body of believers as an independent, autonomous church, is perhaps one of our greatest Western cultural blunders. Mary Douglas’s cultural bias theories help us see beyond our own cultural blinders. Previously, we mentioned the hierarchy-egalitarianism dimension, but in the section, Group, a dimension that addresses the two extremes of collectivism and individualism will be the focus. Geert Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist, describes it this way:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.⁶⁸

In a high group or collective culture, a person does not have an identity that is separate from his/her group; a person thinks in terms of plural pronouns rather than singular ones.

Seventy-five percent of the world is a high group culture, and America is the opposite—the *most* individualistic culture in the world.⁶⁹ The effect of that is seen on our theology, as we apply Scriptures to our own private lives without considering that it may be written for “us” as a community.

⁶⁸Hofstede, Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 76.

⁶⁹See Geert Hofstede’s raw scores for Individualism on his webpage. The United States scored 91, Australia 90, the United Kingdom, 89, the Canada, Hungary and the Netherlands scored 80. European countries are less individualistic than the rest of the world. In general, a certain amount of wealth in order to be independent is necessary for a culture to be individualistic. Individualism in much of the western world has been “institutionalized” making it the legal right of all citizens to make independent choices; “Geert Hofstede Cultural Dimensions,” ITIM International, http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php (accessed August 24, 2010).

How often do we read Ephesians and not see the plural you? For we (the church) are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

The New Testament church in singular was composed of numerous house churches within a locality, who considered themselves as a whole. The study of house churches in Acts and Pauline literature reveals that in most of the cities receiving Paul's letters, multiple house churches existed, whether the letter was addressed to "the church in..." or "the saints in"⁷⁰ Gehring argues that the four Pauline passages that use the term *κατὰ ὄικον*, (Rom. 16: 5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Philemon 1-2, and Col. 4:15) are "an implicit reference to a plurality of house churches within the local church as a whole."⁷¹ In Corinth, there may have been several house churches that, from time to time, met all together in the house of Gaius.⁷² Indeed, it appears that the schisms taking place in Corinth had to do with different house churches, rather than individual people in the same local church. Yet Paul wrote to "the church" at Corinth, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours (1 Cor. 1:2), reminding them that "Corinth is *not a self-contained autonomous entity: they are not a self-sufficient community; they are not the only pebble on the beach*" (his emphasis).⁷³ Thiselton continues to argue that, similar to today's pluralistic society, Corinth believers expected to be able to choose parties, to exert their independence, and to exercise their new-found freedom. Paul, however, insisted that they not use their freedom for freedom's sake, but rather for the good of others (1 Cor. 8:9, 6:12, 10:23). "[T]he notion of each community as an internally *self-contained autonomous* democracy finds no place in Pauline theology."⁷⁴ Indeed the connection among the house churches was more than a "loose confederation of autonomous communities;" rather, they were reminded that each gathering of

⁷⁰For a discussion of plurality of house churches in a city, see Gehring, 155-159.

⁷¹Ibid., 157.

⁷²Ibid., 134-142.

⁷³Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text: The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, ed. I. H. Marshall and D. A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 74.

⁷⁴Ibid., 75.

believers was a member-church together with other house churches who were part of a trans-local network under the “countercheck” of the apostles and traditions (such as those found in the household codes in Colossians and Ephesians) common to all the churches.⁷⁵

Hence, we find in the New Testament the use of the word *ekklesia* referring to several different entities. First, there is the universal church, a world-wide fellowship that transcends spatial boundaries, or a mystical church, joining all believers of all ages—a “cosmic fellowship that transcends time” such as found in Col. 1:18, or Matthew 16:18.⁷⁶ Kevin Giles demonstrates that there were three further “earthly” understandings of “church”: (1) a world-wide company of believers, “predicated on belief in Christ, characterized by the forgiveness of sins and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and realized through baptism;” 2) the community of Christians in one location, city or region; and (3) the community formed by those who met together in one particular setting.⁷⁷

Giles found his own understanding of the primacy of the “local church” challenged through his study of the New Testament.

Not only is the thought that the congregation is somehow primary in antipathy with the apostolic vision of the church as one world-wide community, but it is also alien to the communal thinking of the biblical writers to suggest that much of the congregational thinking of modern Christians that sees the congregation as complete in itself and primary is misguided.⁷⁸

Giles believes that this reflects western cultural value of individualism rather than biblical understanding. I would concur with him that the sub-groups, or the house churches within the cities of Paul’s day had a far greater sense of corporate belonging and purpose than is found today in the European and American

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Grenz, 467.

⁷⁷Giles, 184. See also Craig Van Gelder’s description of ecclesia. In his case, he points first to the local congregations, then the regional and finally the whole church (p. 163-164). Van Gelder sees an “integration of life, cooperation in actions and the making of collective decisions” as part of the church’s organizational life. Obviously this requires a reciprocal, mutual fellowship among all three; Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 163-164.

⁷⁸Giles, 184.

settings. This can be seen in the praxis of the Pentecostal churches of Europe who have adopted Gile's third definition of *ekklesia*—the local body of assembling believers, as their primary meaning.

Throughout the last century, a congregation with a pastor, elders, and deacons, localized in a building was an all-encompassing, independent, and autonomous entity.⁷⁹ A fraternal relationship with other Pentecostal churches in a city or nation may exist, but the concept of mutual submission or accountability, or a true *koinonia* is hard to find.⁸⁰

Theologians, too, often agree that the “local church” is the primary meaning of *ekklesia*. Grenz states, for example, “As the visible fellowship of believers gathered in a specific location, the local church is the most concrete expression of the covenanting people.”⁸¹ Volf points out that in typical free church ecclesiology,

a congregation *is* the body of Christ in the particular locale in which it gathers together ... that the church in the real sense of the word is exclusively the concrete assembly. A particular denomination, the local churches in a cultural or political region, or the totality of local churches can be called ‘church’ only in a secondary rather than a strictly theological sense.⁸²

Contrary to Volf, I would argue with Giles, that the city/regional grouping of member churches is the primary meaning of church in the New Testament, which calls for a rethinking of missiological ecclesiology.

As missiologists and theologians, we must never forget that culture influences how we read Scriptures—just as Scriptures transform cultures. One of our greatest difficulties is that English does not have the capacity to distinguish between singular and plural second personal pronouns (unless you all are from the South).

⁷⁹Koeshall.

⁸⁰For an extensive look at this phenomenon in the German Pentecostal church see Ludwig Eisenloeffel's history of German Pentecostalism *Freikirchliche Pfingstbewegung in Deutschland: Innenansichten 1945-1985*, (Gottingen, Germany: V&R Unipress, 2006) or you will find current data in my dissertation; Koeshall.

⁸¹Grenz, 467.

⁸²Volf, 138.

For instance, in reading 1 Corinthians 12, our primary focus, is the individual and his or her particular gift by which he or she serves the body of Christ. Just as the Spirit gives multiple gifts to individuals in a local *ekklesia*, could it follow that God gifts particular local communities to build all the churches up and accomplish God's mission in a city, nation, or region? Could it not be that there is a group of Christians who gather together who are especially gifted to be Christ's presence in the red-light district of Berlin? Or another group that is gifted to be the church among the Turkish people in Kreuzberg, or the students who gather on the Free University of Berlin? Are we not all the body of Christ, the church? Can any one of these ministries *alone* make disciples of the nation of Germany?⁸³ Wouldn't it be presumptuous to say, "If you are not..., then you are not of the body?" Are any one of them complete without the others? In essence, the giftedness of each of these groups brings together diverse skill-sets and passion in order to "be" or to accomplish the mission. I argue for a generous ecclesiology, one that broadly plants the tent pegs to envision and include each of these various gifted groups of Christians, who are "being" church and doing their unique mission in a context in a city as "the body of Christ, the church." Interdependence, mutuality, and *koinonia* is a worthy goal of the member churches in a city.

If we are to move from the present image of church as a building plus a pastor plus a congregation to a generous image of church in which numerous fellowships in a region embrace one another in communion and friendship as the body of Christ, a new sense of "openness of every church toward all other churches" must be part of our ecclesiological DNA.⁸⁴ They do have, after all, the same body, Spirit, and Lord, the same faith, the same baptism (Eph. 4:5).

A narrow view of seeing only the local church, with its pastor(s), elders, deacons, and members as *ekklesia*, indicates an absence of appreciation for community diversity and responsibility, as well as a certain lack of humility that is necessary for a group to admit that their own community of believers is

⁸³Walls points out that it is the nations who are to be discipled, not individuals: "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matt. 28:19).

⁸⁴Volf, 156.

limited in its resources and gifts. The Lord of the harvest has not given any one member-church all the gifts or all that is needed to fulfill the mission task in a city, region, or nation. One church does not have the ability to be a whole tree; rather, each is a leaf on the tree in a city. So we pray for other leaves and together we become the shelter under which the residents of the region can find protection, hope, and wholeness.

Connection and Conclusion

In this lecture, we have attempted to establish an ecclesiology-to-go that was anchored in community events that signal the presence of Jesus among those who are gathered. These included:

- (1) a community responding in worship and obedience to Christ's presence,
- (2) a community studying Scripture to learn and live by God's truth,
- (3) a community of Spirit-gifted members mutually ministering to one another,
- (4) a community of covenant relationships, and
- (5) a community that is extroverted, driven by the Spirit to the world.

A gathering of Christ-followers that have built on this scaffolding is free to be liquid in space and organizational structure, and generous in embracing others as member-churches. In the next lectures we will look at case studies of member-churches and explore the implications of a liquid and generous ecclesiology on church partnerships and networks. Finally, Spirit-inspired power-giving will help us understand just how any of this is possible.

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