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The Challenge of Evangelical Ecclesiology

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I. The Need for an Evangelical Ecclesiology

In evangelical theology, ecclesiology has until recently remained an under developed topic. As Donald Bloesch observed a quarter of a century ago, 'the doctrines of the church and the sacraments are conspicuously lacking in much contemporary evangelical writing'.[1] Commenting on the same issue twenty-five years later, Stanley Grenz devotes an entire section of his recent book *Renewing the Center* to 'The "Problem" of Ecclesiology in Evangelicalism'. He maintains that 'as a movement evangelicalism has never developed or worked from a thoroughgoing ecclesiology', and thus 'lacks a full-orbed ecclesiological base'.[2] Timothy George comes to a similar, though more sanguine, conclusion: 'As a theological movement, evangelicalism has been slow to develop a distinctive ecclesiology ….'[3]

Various reasons for this evangelical deficit may be suggested. First, evangelicalism is primarily a practically oriented movement. Some speak of the pragmatic bent of evangelicalism[4]. Its main focus has been and

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1 Donald Bloesch, *The Evangelical Renaissance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 41.

2 Stanley Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), p. 288. Later, under the paradoxical heading 'The Shaping of Evangelicalism's (Non)Ecclesiology', he speaks of 'evangelicalism's inattention to the church …' (p. 290; cf. p. 293).

3 Timothy George, 'Towards an Evangelical Theology,' in Thomas Rausch, *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), p. 123.

4 Robert E. Webber maintains that evangelical pragmatism results in an 'a-theological view of the church'. *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 75-76.

continues to be mission. Donald Carson describes the prevalent evangelical attitude as follows, 'We are too busy winning people to Christ to engage in something which seems too much like navel gazing.' Church planting trumps church-thinking, 'ecclesio-logy'.

Yet, the emphasis on mission does not adequately explain the low profile of ecclesiology. After all, evangelicalism's practical penchant has not led to a lack of attention to theological reflection in general. As Timothy George points out, other themes crowd out ecclesiology. He mentions 'biblical revelation, religious epistemology and apologetics'.[5] In addition to evangelicalism's practical bent and its privileging of other areas of theology, Timothy George mentions a third reason for the low priority given to ecclesiology, namely, the 'fissiparous' nature of evangelicalism, with its 'bewildering diversity made up of congregations, denominations, and parachurch movements ….' This highly variegated landscape prompts Timothy George to ask: 'Amidst such variety is it even possible to describe one single, or even central, evangelical ecclesiology?'[6]

Stanley Grenz elaborates considerably on one aspect of the variety that George mentions only in passing, namely, the parachurch phenomenon. Grenz considers this phenomenon to be not merely one among several distinctive elements but as something that characterizes evangelicalism.[7] Coining a term for this characteristic, he speaks of the 'parachurchicity' of evangelicalism. He affirms R. Albert Mohler's statement that 'the momentum and defining characteristic of the movement came from parachurch institutions which shaped evangelical consciousness'.[8] 'The evangelical ethos', says Grenz, 'is embodied in a variety of organizations and "ministries" that exist alongside of the ecclesiastical structures within which evangelicals hold membership.'[9] For many, the involvement in organizations alongside the church shapes their identity, or at least directs their activity, far more than belonging to a church.

Another reason for the lack of an evangelical ecclesiology relates directly to the different places in which evangelicals find themselves. Many belong, of course, to churches that would identify themselves as evangelical. Even though the development of an ecclesiology by theologians within this tradition may not be a high priority, it is at least an option. Elaborating a distinctly evangelical theology is far more difficult for evangelical groupings within established churches, such as the large groups of evangelicals within the Anglican communion. For evangelicals to remain within these churches is to recognize, with various reservations, the validity of the ecclesiology of the established church. Conversely, the development of a distinct

5 Ibid., p. 123.
6 Ibid., p. 124.
7 *Renewing the Center*, pp. 289f.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.

ecclesiology appears as a rationale for secession.[10]

The under-development of ecclesiology in evangelicalism is also a legacy of revivalism. Against a nominal Christianity, i.e., church membership without a clear commitment to Christ, evangelicalism stressed the need for personal rebirth, conversion, commitment. Church membership, in fact, could foster false security, obviating any need for an experientially devout and holy life. As Grenz puts it, 'The personal experience of the new birth became the sine qua non of authentic Christianity, a move that occasioned the development of a benign neglect of the church, if not a certain anti-church bias, among many evangelicals.'[11] He relates the case of a number of people in Norwich, Connecticut, who had been transformed in the evangelical awakening in 1745. These 'New Lights,' as they were called, proposed that to qualify for membership in the local church each person be required to testify to their experience of conversion. When the church rejected this proposal, the New Lights began to meet separately and later established their own church.[12]

The emphasis on personal experience as the criterion of authentic faith tended to propel revivalism beyond all denominational labels. In one of his sermons, George Whitfield, looking into heaven, launches into an illuminating conversation:

> Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No!
>
> Any Presbyterians? No!
>
> Any Independents or Methodists? No, no!
>
> Whom have you there?
>
> We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians.[13]

One might call this heavenly vision an eschatological prolepsis that relativizes all institutions that we call church and thus supersedes—and even preempts—all humanly devised ecclesiologies. Such transcendence also serves to highlight another reason for marginalization of ecclesiology, namely, the emphasis on the invisible church. The heart of the Christian faith was seen to transcend all institutions and to lie precisely in that invisible, yet very real, spiritual fellowship across denominational boundaries.[14]

Finally, one must point to individualism as a major retarding factor in developing a coherent evangelical ecclesiology. Robert Webber argues that the emphasis on individualism within evangelicalism has led to an 'a-historical view of the church'. He explains, 'It devalues the corporate life of the church. This neglect of the whole body of Christ for what has been called "freelance" Christianity is a dangerous rejection of the body in which Christ dwells.'[15] In view of

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10 Regarding the struggles over these opposing viewpoints, see Ian Randall and David Hilborn, *One Body in Christ: The History and Significance of the Evangelical Alliance* (Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 2001), pp. 246-257.

11 *Renewing the Center,* p. *291.*

12 Ibid., p. 292.

13 Ibid., p. 293

14 The National Association of Evangelicals (U.S.A.), e.g., declares in its Statement of Faith: 'We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.' On the issue of unity among evangelicals, see *One Body in Christ,* esp., pp. 232-257.

15 Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, p. 76.

this ecclesiological deficit, the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship, at its meeting in London in 1996, made pointed proposals regarding ecclesiology. It recommends that the WEF 'undertake an intensive study … to investigate what implications the soteriological aspects of the WEF Basis of Faith have for an evangelical understanding of the church'; 'to consider revising the WEF Basis of Faith to produce a clearer statement on the church'; and 'to describe carefully the relation between church and kingdom'. That is not all. A separate recommendation calls on the WEF to institute a commission on evangelical ecclesiology to implement these recommendations.[16] While these recommendations reveal a determination to overcome the ecclesiological deficit, the failure to act on these proposals by the subsequent WEF General Assembly appears to indicate ecclesiology's continuing low priority.

II. The Development of Evangelical Ecclesiology

A. Ecclesiological Surge

If evangelical ecclesiology has suffered benign neglect in the past, it currently enjoys increasing attention. Although the Lausanne Covenant, for example, does not deal at any length with the church, it does underscore its importance. In the first article Lausanne highlights the centrality of the church. It affirms that it is the purpose of God to call out a people for himself and to send this people into the world as his servants.[17] Article six further elaborates the pivotal role of the church when it affirms that the church stands 'at the very center of God's cosmic purposes'.[18]

Evangelical theological conferences as well as books of essays have been devoted to ecclesiological themes. Two volumes, originating in theological consultations, were edited by Donald Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church* in 1984,[19] and three years later, *The Church, the Bible and the World*.[20] Two years later, *The Church: God's Agent for Change*, edited by Bruce Nicholls was published.[21] Moreover, in the past few years several biblical-theological monographs have appeared. Edmund P. Clowney's *The Church*[22] and Everett Ferguson's *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*[23] deserve mention.

Works by other evangelical authors venture towards a more systematic treatment of ecclesiology. The first is Stanley Grenz's *Theology for the*

16 *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21 (1997), pp. 21-22.

17 The Lausanne Covenant and subsequent Lausanne statements may be found in John Stott, *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement, 1974-1989* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

18 Ibid., p. 28.

19 D.A. Carson, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984).

20 D. A. Carson, *The Church in the Bible and the World: An International Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

21 Bruce J. Nicholls, *The Church: God's Agent for Change.* Exeter: Paternoster, 1986.

22 Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1995.

23 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Community of God.[24] Although this book is a complete systematic theology, ecclesiology obtains a rather high profile. As the title indicates, theology is conceived as arising from and directed to the church—it is 'theology *for the community of God*'. Moreover, even in the section on creation, Grenz treats human beings in terms of community, as is evident in the title of chapter six: 'Our Nature as persons destined for community'. Similarly, in dealing with the fall, he focuses on its communal dimension. The chapter is titled 'Sin: The Destruction of Human Community'. Finally, as to ecclesiology proper, Grenz devotes no fewer than four chapters to the doctrine of the church. One other notable example of evangelical work in ecclesiology is the monograph *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*,[25] by Miroslav Volf, formerly a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, now at Yale Divinity School. As even this furtive glance in the theological kitchen indicates, ecclesiology has moved to the front burner of many an evangelical stove.

B. Why Now?

Before we consider some of the lineaments of an evangelical ecclesiology, a few comments are in order about the reason for the increased interest in this topic. One factor is the realization that to concentrate on mission at the expense of reflection on the nature and purpose of the church hurts the very mission in which one is engaged. As the Lausanne statement indicates, one central aspect of mission is the creation of a new community and the call to join that new community. To treat the issue of the nature and purpose of that community as merely a by-product of mission that needs no further theological reflection is to short-change that community. Such cavalier treatment of ecclesiology leads to an uncritical importation, imposition, or perpetuation of alien structures and customs on the new community. Furthermore, just as one needs reflection on the nature of the 'salvation' one preaches, so too one needs critical reflection on the nature of the community that results. As Timothy George points out, loosed from any theological moorings, many evangelical churches appear to be 'more concerned with individualistic therapeutic spirituality than with churchly Christianity'.[26] This reductionist soteriology leads to an equally reductionist understanding of the church. Browsing through the books found on the shelves of Christian bookstores, Barbara Brown Zinkmund comes upon chapter titles such as, 'The Church as a Helpful Service Organization,' 'The Church as an Insurance Policy,' 'The Church Serves My Special Interests,' 'The Church Rescues Me in Times of Crisis'.[27]

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[24] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

[25] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[26] George, 'Toward', p. 124.

[27] Barbara Brown Zinkmund, *Discovering the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983); cited by George, 'Toward', p. 124.

Fortunately this smorgasbord of nauseous ecclesial dishes is not at all representative of the evangelical work in ecclesiology that already exists.[28] Nevertheless, it does demonstrate the continued need for developing and presenting an ecclesiology more deeply rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some years ago, Marty-Lloyd Jones put the matter starkly: ' … the failure to be clear about the doctrine of the church is one of the greatest hindrances to evangelism at this present time.' He even calls such ecclesiological malnourishment 'the greatest hindrance to revival'.[29]

A second reason for the increased attention to ecclesiology within the evangelical world is its increasing contact with other traditions. This ecumenical impetus may be illustrated by the international consultation between the WEF and the Roman Catholic Church. Its first consultation in 1993 dealt with the key topics that are in contention between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics: on the one hand, the authority of Scripture and the role of tradition, and on the other, the meaning and weight of justification by faith. During this consultation, two topics came to the fore, namely, the relation of divergent understandings of the church and the nature and practice of mission. This became the topic, not only of the next consultation, held in 1997, but of subsequent sessions of the consultation, held in 1999 and 2001[30]. A similar process appears to be evident in the much older Pentecostal-Roman Catholic Dialogue. This encounter began 25 years ago by concentrating on topics such as the Holy Spirit's role in Christian initiation, the Spirit and the Church, and the Spirit's role in prayer and worship. By the 1980s these discussions were devoted to the meaning of *koinonia* and its implication for mission, evangelism—and proselytism.[31]

A third reason for the increased prominence of evangelical ecclesiology must be attributed to the enormous impact of Lesslie Newbigin. During the past two decades, the writings of the great missionary pastor and theologian, spawned networks both in Britain and North America devoted to the relation of gospel and culture. Those involved in this project did not concentrate simply on the *mission* of the church, but began to examine the nature and shape of the missional *church*. The missionary ecclesiology that Newbigin fostered in the cities and towns of India and which, upon his return to

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28 As George points out, ibid.

29 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Unity in Truth* (Durham: Evangelical Press, 1991), pp. 46-47.

30 The papers of the 1993 consultation on Justification, Scripture, and Tradition were published in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 21 (1997), pp. 101-153; the papers of the 1997 consultation on the Nature and Mission of the Church were published in *ERT* 23 (1999), pp. 6-91, as well as in *One in Christ* 35 (1999) pp. 11-92. The results of the 2001and 2002 consultations on Evangelization, Proselytism, and Religious Freedom are in process.

31 See *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998*, eds. Jeffrey Gros, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 713-752.

Britain, he espoused in the West[32] reverberates in the titles of the publications by authors associated with the Gospel and Our Culture Network, as it is known in North America: *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America;*[33] *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*;[34] *The Continuing Conversion of the Church,*[35] and *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit.*[36] In a similar vein, the recent WEF global Consultation on Evangelical Missiology, held in Brazil in 1999, further underscores the need to elaborate ecclesiology within a missionary dynamic. After alluding to the Lausanne affirmation mentioned above, the third commitment of the Iguassu Affirmation states, 'We commit ourselves to strengthen our ecclesiology in mission ….'[37]

III. The Challenge of an Evangelical Ecclesiology

Building on the ecclesiological work that is beginning to develop in evangelical theology, I wish in the remainder of this paper to elaborate briefly a central biblical theme as a foundation for an evangelical ecclesiology and present some of its key features.

A. The Church as God's Provisional Home

The church comes to be as a result of the triune God's plan to dwell with, among, and in the community of those created as his icons. Accordingly, ecclesiology is the theological reflection on the mystery of God's desire to be intimately among us. More specifically, ecclesiology is the systematic reflection on the shape which this dwelling of God takes in the community of Christ that journeys between Pentecost and *parousia*.

From the outset of God's redeeming action described in the Pentateuch to the vision of its consummation found in the book of Revelation, the Creator of this vast universe appears to be determined to dwell on a minuscule. God seems not to be embarrassed about starting out this journey by setting up camp among a rag-tag band of ex-slaves:

> I will consecrate the tent of meeting and the altar;
> Aaron also and his sons I will consecrate, to serve me as priests.
> I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God.
> And they shall know that I am the Lord their God,
> who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them;
> I am the Lord their God (Ex. 29:34-36).

And God promises not to quit until his home spans the globe.

> See, the home of God is with his human creatures.
> He will dwell with them as their God;
> they will be his people,

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32 For a fine treatment of Newbigin's ecclesiology, see Michael W. Goheen, '*As the Father Has Sent ME, I Am Sending You': J.E. Leslie Newbigin's Missionary Ecclesiology*, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2001).

33 George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996)

34 Darrell L. Guder, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

35 Darrell L. Guder, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

36 Craig Van Gelder, (Grand Rapids, 2000).

37 'Iguassu Affirmation,' *International Review of Mission* 89 (2000) pp. 242-247; *Evangelical Review of Theology* 24 (2000), pp. 200-206.

> and God himself will be with them … I will be their God and they will be my children (Rev. 20).

Somewhere between the first glimpse of God enjoying a garden walk with his special creatures in the cool of the day to the vista of God setting up permanent camp with them, the triune God's new community of women and men comes into being.

The centrality of the church in God's redemptive plan, which the Lausanne Covenant confesses, becomes clear especially when one considers the church as the privileged dwelling place of God. The central covenant promise that resounds through the older and newer Testaments is this: 'I will be your God and you shall be my people' (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 30:22; Ez. 34: 30-31; 36:28; I Peter 2:9-10. Cf. Ps. 50:7; Is. 40:1; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; Ez. 34:31; 36:28). Moreover, God is determined not simply to 'have' a people, a situation in which God could remain at some remove. Rather, the covenanting One desires to be God to a people in such a way as to dwell with, among, and in them. It is striking that this motif almost always relates to a community. Accordingly, the language of God's occupying an earthly home coincides with the story of the formation of a special people. God's setting up house among his people finds its concrete focal point in the edifice called the tabernacle. The highly detailed description of the structure and function of the tabernacle reflects its importance as the central dwelling place of God. Even though the term means simply 'dwelling place', it is used almost exclusively for *God's* domicile.

One is sorely tempted to relegate the notion that God dwells in a specific place to the realm of primitive, antiquated beliefs. That God would live in a tabernacle the size of a fold-up version of a small bungalow suggests the idea of 'God-in-a-box'. God seems to be brought down to the level of one of the many localized deities. It is obvious, however, that in the Old Testament the God who dwells in a confined space is none other than the Creator and Lord of the universe. In fact, precisely the identity of this God as Creator and Lord of the cosmos underscores the grace of his wondrous dwelling in a specific space. Even when the modest tabernacle is replaced by a magnificent temple, the conviction concerning the uncontainability of God is very much alive.[38]

The characterization of the church as the dwelling of the *triune* God can refer, strictly speaking, only to the people of God A.D. The *ekklesia*, though existing among the older people of God, in its newness as body of Christ, is the creation of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the *pneuma* which shapes ecclesiology is none other than the Spirit of Christ. When the Spirit creates the new community the community that comes into being is the body of Christ. The Spirit shapes the body in the image of Christ.

A striking correlation exists between the incarnation and the church. John's prologue points to

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38 See I Kings 8:23, 27.

testifies to the fact that the Word who became flesh 'lived' or 'dwelt' among us—literally pitched his tent among us.[39] Yet, in this lowly animal-skin covered dwelling, the glory of the Father—that is his palpable presence—is to be seen, a glory suffused with grace and truth, i.e., permeated by the character of God. Then John drives home the exclusivity of this presence in Jesus: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' Literally rendered, John affirms that the Son has 'exegeted' God. In his flesh-and-blood tenting, the Son spells out the character and intentions of God.

The negation ('no one has seen God') combined with the affirmation ('the only Son has made him known') clearly attributes to Christ an exclusive revelatory role. If you want to know God, look no further, look nowhere else. In view of this singular role of Jesus, one would think that, after this earthly domicile is broken up, the apostles would point to this privileged exegete of the Father as the sole presence of God in human form. Yet, astoundingly, what seems to be excluded in the prologue of John is thrown wide open in the first epistle of John. Again we hear the same emphatic negation, 'No one has ever seen God.' And, again, this negative statement does not serve to announce a closed, but an open heaven. John trains the spotlight on the locus where God is *disclosed*, the realm where God is to become manifest. But, rather than pointing back to Christ as the one who has opened heaven, as the letter does so emphatically in its opening paragraph, John points equally emphatically to the fledgling community of Christ-followers as the locus of God's revealing presence. Preserving the word order of the original text makes the startling 'transfer' unmistakably clear: 'God, no one has ever seen—[but] if we love one another God dwells in us and his love is completed in us' (1 John 4:12). If we had only the statement in the prologue of the fourth Gospel extolling Christ as the exclusive God-revealer and God-embodier, we would probably resist extending this God-revealing and God-embodying role. Yet the parallel stands:

> No one has ever seen God—the only begotten is the face and presence of God.
>
> No one has ever seen God—the community that dwells in his love is the face of God.

In the path of that bold parallel between God's dwelling in Jesus and in his community the church appears.

B. Lineaments of an Evangelical Ecclesiology

1. Missional

An ecclesiology of God's dwelling with and in the Christ-community is intrinsically missional. Stretching out his wounded hands in blessing and bestowing his peace on a motley band of followers, Jesus by his Spirit turns them into bold missionary proclaimers. The dispirited become the en-Spirited. As the Father has sent me so I send you. No one has seen

[39] The same term for dwelling is used twice in the passage from the book of Revelation quoted above.

God—the only begotten, he has made him known. No one has seen God—but if you love one another, God stays among you and his love gets to where it needs to get. The triune God doesn't settle into a vacation cottage, let alone a retirement home. The God who moves in among his people continues to be on the move, ever outward, ever onward. The church is indeed a gathered community but it is that only as a *gathering movement*.

As in most of the New Testament, the first letter of John does not enjoin mission as a task. Rather, the missional dynamic is assumed to be intrinsic to the nature of the new community.[40] That is evident in the astounding and unexpected vistas that this brief epistle opens. Assuring the readers, for example, that Christ's sacrifice is wholly sufficient for the forgiveness of the sins *of this fledgling community* would have been quite adequate. But the author of this letter is strangely impelled to make assertions that leap far over the heads of the small assembly: 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, *and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'* (1 John 2:2). What propels the epistle to vault far beyond the needs of his hearers is the intrinsic dynamic of the message. This letter opens a vista equally vast and startling when speaking of salvation. The epistle most commonly describes the world in sweepingly negative terms. 'The whole world lies in the power of the evil one' (1 John 5:19; cf. 2:15-17). Given this bleak description and the stark antithesis between the Father and the World, one would hardly expect to find the world and Christ conjoined by a possessive preposition. Yet, the epistle affirms that the Father sent the Son not only *into* the world, but as Saviour *of* the world (4:9,14). While the epistle focuses on the small congregation, its missional scope embraces the world.

The intrinsic link between church and mission and thus between ecclesiology and missiology is critical for evangelical theology. A dwelling-of-God ecclesiology would help overcome the tendency within evangelicalism to play off mission against ecclesiology. It is easy to be comfortable about such polarization. After all, majoring in mission falls in lockstep with the Great Commission. Nevertheless, to accept passion for mission and concern about the church as an inescapable dilemma is to de-nature both mission and church.

Understanding mission as an integral dimension of the church—conceived as the provisional dwelling place of God—challenges us to a deepened reflection on both mission and church. The missional question cannot be reduced to strategies for winning a maximum number of converts. While conversion is the heart of mission, that heart is to be shaped by the heart of the God who wishes to dwell among his creatures. This divine desire forces us to ask the question: what kind of conversion renders the earth a place fit for God's

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40 See Lesslie Newbigin, on 'The Logic of Mission', in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 116-127.

dwelling? What form of conversion—conversion from what to what—constitutes a welcome to God's moving into our neighbourhood? What do we know about God's habits, God's likes and dislikes, God's predilections that would govern the task of home-shaping? For an initial answer to such questions, we need not go far afield. The Bible is full of testimonies regarding God's passion. For our purposes, the poignant statement in Jeremiah 9 will suffice: 'Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth' (v. 24). The conversion for which mission aims, then, is immediately related to God's delight declared here. The conversion that marks mission is therefore as broad and deep as the character and desire of the God whose home-coming the church exemplifies and serves.

The church, therefore, cannot be treated as merely an organization that fosters mission—an agency for recruiting recruiters. Such treatment represents a functional reduction, so that the church is defined purely by what it does; it becomes simply a means to an end. But the church is itself an 'end', a provisional end, but an end nonetheless. The church is constituted in its communion with the living, triune God. The church is to demonstrate, not simply by its *doing*, but in its very *being*, what *God* is all about—God's character—and what God is *about in our world*—God's *mission*. As the continuation of God's mission of reconciliation mission is exemplified, embodied, and channeled through a reconciled *people,* a *community*. For Paul, the summing up of all things in Christ is showcased in and by the very make-up of the church. The mystery of cosmic reconciliation, the reconciliation of all things in Christ finds its visible, empirical proof, in the reality of Jews and Gentiles sitting side-by-side as part of one community.[41] The church comes into being by virtue of God's *mission* but, since that mission entails the homecoming of *God*, the church is to embody the new reality of the Father's presence in Christ by the Holy Spirit.

The showcase role of the church, therefore, fundamentally challenges any privileging of 'effectiveness' as criterion of mission, without regard to ecclesiological questions. Insisting on the integral relation of mission and church calls into question, for example, the primacy that tends to be accorded to the so called 'homogeneous unit principle'. It may well be true that churches grow most readily along lines of natural, professional, ethnic, or social affinity. No matter how effective such growth strategy may be, however, if it fosters and sanctions a relatively homogeneous congregation, it is out of touch with the breadth of God's mission of reconciliation. One needs to be open to the possibility that a numerically effective mission is anti-normative because of the inadequate ecclesiology from which it proceeds and to

[41] Interestingly, in a somewhat different context, Volf too links the struggle against individualism with the missiological question (*After Our Likeness,* 11).

which it leads.

At the same time, the evangelical passion for mission, when brought into critical dialogue with traditions that give pride of place to ecclesiology,[42] can serve as a salutary antidote to the danger of an introverted ecclesiocentrism. There is a proper, biblical relativization of ecclesiology that occurs, not at the expense of the church, but for the sake of the church. It protests a preoccupation with the church—its essential structures, the validity of its ordained ministry and of its sacraments—that leaves mission as a topic of subsequent and subordinate concern. The evangelical relativization of ecclesiology, rightly handled, can serve as a call for the continual reform of the church.[43]

2. Communal: The Corporate Foundation of the Personal

To stress the communal dimension of ecclesiology seems tantamount to stressing the physical dimension of a rock. Yet, the evangelical emphasis on and interpretation of the experience of conversion or being born-again tends to foster a strongly individualistic approach that hampers the full appreciation of the communal dimension of the church.[44] Ecclesial community tends to be thought of as a loose 'fellowship', an aggregate of like-minded individuals. The *Lausanne Covenant* confesses the harmful effect of 'sinful individualism'.[45] Commenting on this document two decades later, John Stott, its principal author, again rues 'our evangelical tendency to individualism'.[46]

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42 In developing a missional ecclesiology, evangelical theologians need to take up the challenge of engaging directly with other traditions, particularly Roman Catholicism. The Second Vatican's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*. New York: Corpus Books, 1966, pp. 199-308) as well as Pope Paul VI apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1975) deserve evangelical engagement. The controversial document *Dominus Jesus* (*Origins* 30 [2000]: pp. 209-224) is especially relevant to the evangelical task. The link that this document lays between claims regarding Christ as the sole Redeemer and assertions about the highly privileged role of the Roman Catholic Church presents a peculiar challenge to evangelical theology. In a very different way, a recent ecumenical document deserves close attention. Issuing from the ecclesiology study of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission, the publication *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* seeks to expound the integral relation between church and mission, setting forth ecumenical agreements and disagreements on this topic (*The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*. Geneva: WCC, 1998; the suggestion that the title be changed to 'The Nature and Mission of the Church' is under active consideration). Even if evangelical theologians were to disagree with much of the document, their response to this document could open up new perspectives on the integral relation between mission and church.

43 See Richard Mouw, ibid., p. 133.

44 The individualistic tendency is not simply a theological conclusion from the experience of salvation. Especially in North America, the catalyst for an individualist approach to salvation is the individualism that is rampant in society. In his study of the relation of individualism and social ethics in evangelicalism, Dennis P. Hollinger, concludes that individualism represents an accommodation to North American culture. The subtitle of his book indicates the gravity of such individualism, calling it an 'Evangelical Syncretism'. (Dennis P. Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics: An Evangelical Syncretism; Lanham, NY: University Press of America,* 1983). Hollinger does suggest that the 'seeds of modern individualism' (p. 222) lie in the Reformation: ' … it is clear that Reformation theology, with its potential for individualistic interpretation and application, is one contributing factor to mainstream Evangelicalism's rendezvous with individualism' (p. 223). At the same time such 'seed' or 'potential' can lead a life of its own only by virtue of evangelicalism's 'selective inattention to the corporate dimensions of the Reformation theology …' (p. 223).

45 *The Lausanne Covenant*, par 7.

At stake in the penchant towards individualism is not merely a sociological defect, however. Such individualism flies in the face of the biblical notion of community. While each person, as a unique creation of God, is irreplaceable and singularly esteemed by God, each is a unique person-in-community. Community is the matrix of person. It is striking, for example, that when Paul reminds Christians, 'you' are the temple of the Holy Spirit, the 'you' is always in the plural, while 'temple' is in the singular.[47] Similarly, Peter speaks of Christians as living stones that are being built into a single spiritual house.[48] Focusing on ecclesiology as reflection on God's dwelling 'place' acts as a safeguard against any attempt to lock God up in the cubicles of individual human hearts, or of any notion of the church as the concatenation of such cells—a honeycomb ecclesiology. With infinite love for each unique creature, God delights to live among us. Yet, God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is not infinitely divisible, distributed among a host of single occupancy dwellings. Considerable efforts are currently expended by evangelical theologians to develop a better account of the communal dimension of the Christian faith. Prime among these is the work by Miroslav Volf. In the preface to his ecclesiological study, he states the purpose of his book as the attempt to overcome the individualistic malady: 'The purpose of the book is to counter the tendencies towards individualism in Protestant ecclesiology.' He seeks to demonstrate and undergird this communal dimension by appealing both to sociological and theological, and more specifically, trinitarian considerations.[49]

The difficulty of disentangling evangelical ecclesiology from individualistic thought forms is evident in the work of Stanley Grenz. He clearly intends to give the corporate dimension its rightful place,[50] Yet, in developing the notion of covenant, the 'individual' believer often appears to be primary and the community derivative. The covenant, which is primarily 'vertical' is said to 'stand at the foundation of the church' as a corporate reality.[51] At

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46 John Stott, 'Twenty Years After Lausanne: Some Personal Reflections', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 19 (1995) pp. 50-55; citation p. 53. Here he couples 'individualism' with 'empire building' which he sees displayed in 'a most unseemly scramble of Western missionary organizations' into the countries formerly under communist rule.

47 See 1 Cor. 3:16, 17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16 ('we'). See also Eph. 2:19-22.

48 1 Peter 2:5; subsequently amplified by a proliferation of communal terminology for the new community: chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation, God's own people (vv. 9-10).

49 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness,* pp. 4-5, 159-214.

50 See,e.g., the title of the ecclesiological chapter, 'The Church—The Eschatological Covenant Comunnity', as well as many of the headings in this chapter; *Theology for the Community of God*, pp. 463-485.

51 While wishing to affirm a 'reciprocal relationship between the individual believer and the corporate fellowship', this reciprocity seems to break down. The 'individual' gains ascendancy, interestingly, through Grenz's notion of covenant. The church, he states, 'is formed through the coming together of those who have entered into covenant with God in Christ and thus with each other'. The other side of the reciprocal relation is described in terms of 'fostering' the faith of those who join this fellowship (ibid., p. 480).

the same time, Grenz describes this covenant in a way that seems to equate covenant with a social contract. After stating that 'our common allegiance to Jesus' impels us to 'join together to be the people of God', Grenz concludes, 'The covenant which inheres in the church, therefore, is *our agreement to walk together, to be a people in relationship with one another.*'[52] This emphasis on the decision of individuals does not mean the abandonment of the more corporate understanding of the church. In the next sentence, he contends, 'We who name Jesus as Lord, therefore, are one body—a community.'[53] Unfortunately, Grenz does not indicate how the personal and the communal constitute an integral unity. Instead, he keeps the two in tension. Within that tension residual individualist thought forms appear to undermine the communal reality that Grenz wishes to undergird.

Contrary to the dominant western tendency to proceed from the supremacy of the individual, one can make a more compelling case, not for the supremacy, but for the priority and a certain primacy of the church, the people of God, as corporate reality. One does not become a Christian on one's own. Becoming a child of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit is normally not a private event between an individual and God. One would not know the name of Jesus without someone having spoken it, explained it, having said something about what following him might mean. This person, in turn, has learned the meaning of words about Jesus within a specific community. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that a person who has not heard a single word about Jesus comes to believe in him upon reading a Gideon Bible in a hotel room. Yet, even this solitary event presupposes a community and a network of relationships. In that Bible is invested the community of translators who stand in a long tradition of translation and who are part of the body of Christ. The Gideons, moreover, are in some sense present, in the Bible's fly-leaf inscription, in any referral information, and in their prayers. But even abstracting from the hidden presence of community, the new life begun there can be sustained and rightly directed only within some expression of the corporate community of faith.

The Church Father Cyprian said long ago, 'You cannot have God as your Father without having the church as your mother.' Assigning to the church the role of mother of faith sounds foreign to evangelical ears. In fact, it may seem to undermine the necessity of personal decision. Yet, Luther who, as few others have done, opened up the way to a vital, personal faith, went beyond simply juxtaposing, as Cyprian did, God and the church. He insists that 'Those who are to find Christ must first find the church'.[54]

Such statements sound strange to

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52 Ibid., p. 481 (emphasis added).
53 Ibid.

54 Cited in *Church and Justification*, Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission (Lutheran World Federation, 1994), par. 111.

our ears because evangelicals, while often 'propositionalist'with respect to the *fides quae creditur*, the content of faith (Scripture, truth, and doctrine) tend to be 'experiential—expressivists' with respect to the *fides qua creditur*, the act of faith. The category, experiential-expressivist, developed by George Lindbeck,[55] fits the solipsistic way we tend to regard the genesis of faith: the Holy Spirit works faith in one's heart and this personal experience comes to expression in a personal testimony. What one sees and hears is the outward expression of a strictly personal, if not private, experience.

The emphasis on the personal as such is not misplaced. For support one may appeal to Paul's assurance in Romans, if you 'believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (10:9). But one can press this in an experiential-expressivist mould only by isolating this aspect from the immediate context and flow of Paul's writing. Paul does not draw a trajectory from the inside out, so to speak, but from the outside in. His reference to the confessing mouth of the believer is preceded and surrounded, shaped and determined by the proclaiming mouth of the preacher. Paul begins by speaking of the preached word, the 'word of faith' which he proclaims. Confession is on the lips first and thus in the heart. It reaches lip and heart because the word of faith is first of all *heard*.

Similarly, Paul elaborates in conclusion what he merely mentions at the beginning. In a domino like series, Paul works back from the believer who calls on the name of the Lord to the preacher of the good news: Every one who calls will be saved; how are they to call if they have not believed; how are they to believe if they have not heard; how are they to hear if no one proclaims? (10:13-15). And as if this concatenation were not clear enough he spells out the conclusion. So faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ (v. 17)—*ex auditu verbi*.

What we might call the 'impressivist-traditioning' dimension of Christian faith has important ecclesiological implication, as becomes clear in the opening verses of the first letter of John. All the emphasis falls on the traditioning role of the apostolic witnesses to Jesus Christ. What they have seen, touched, looked upon—that they declare. Believingly appropriating their declaration brings about *koinonia*, fellowship, communion. Now we would expect that this letter would describe communion first of all as fellowship with the one preached, with Jesus Christ. But the first thing this letter mentions is that by accepting the apostolic testimony, communion is established with *the proclaimers*. Only then does the writer mention that the believing recipients are—as if by extension—connected with Father and Son (1 John 1:1-4).

This indirect connection is the more pertinent given the fact that this Johannine letter takes aim at

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55 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

people in the early church community who vaunted a straight line, vertical connection with God. Recognizing the lethal effect of such verticalism, John disfellowships its proponents. He does so for all kinds of abberations but all of them come to painful expression in believers' isolation from the community of Christ-followers. While the emphasis to root Christian faith in the apostolic testimony may be called a hall-mark of evangelicalism, this nexus is often conceived of cerebrally, as if the link exists in the acceptance of orthodox doctrines. The ecclesiological implications of this apostolic grounding are commonly ignored.[56]

The communal character of the Christian faith is intrinsic to that faith. The corporate reality of Christian faith is not a by-product of a faith that resides first of all in the hearts of individual believers. Christian community is not constituted by the common faith confession that arises out of the hearts of initially solitary, individual believers.[57] Corporate communion—body of Christ communion—is the very matrix of faith. Even when the New Testament describes the growth of the church in terms of the addition of a number of believers, it is not the simple addition that adds up to the people of God. Rather, James encapsulates Peter's description at the Council of Jerusalem by stressing God's work in taking a people: 'God first looked favourably on the Gentiles to take from among them a people for his name' (Acts 15:14). The church indeed grows by 'addition' but the church is not constituted by addition; the 'additions' exist by incorporation. Miroslav Volf rightly speaks of the 'ecclesiality of salvation'.[58]

The challenge for evangelical ecclesiology is to develop a more integral understanding and practice of the communal reality of the new reality inaugurated by Christ. At the same time, the challenge presented by evangelical ecclesiology to other traditions is the intrinsic and authentic place of the personal dimension of this reality. One may, for a time, be taken along by Christ by being borne by—even born into—a group of his followers, but the point of being borne is to be born anew, from above, as a follower of Christ.

3. Relational: 'The Divine'as God's Presence within the Human Community

A major ecclesiological challenge lies in breaking through the high-church versus low-church dilemma into which much of ecumenical theology

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56 This bracketing of the priority of the community may well be accounted for by the tendency to consign the content of the faith to an objectivist-propositional realm. In a review of John Stott's *Evangelical Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), John Stackhouse Jr., comments on the polarity in evangelicalism between experientialism and objectivism. He describes the tendency to rationalism as follows: a tendency to prize soundness of conviction more than intensity of experience, to champion the objective work of justification above the subjective work of sanctification, and even to identify, at times, more quickly with the Bible than with the Lord Jesus. (Surely we should be 'Jesus people' even more than we should be 'Bible people'[Stott's description]!), *Christianity Today*, February 7, 2000, Vol. 44, No. 2, p. 89.

57 Compare Volf, *After Our Likeness,* p. 162.

58 Volf, *After Our Likeness,* p. 172. In the introduction to his book, Volf states that the very purpose of his book is 'to counter the tendencies towards individualism in Protestant ecclesiology', p. 2.

forces ecumenical discussion. Such framing of the discussion readily translates into formulating the dilemma as choice between an adequate, or even valid, ecclesiology, on the one hand, and a deficient, or worse, absent ecclesiology, on the other. As Richard Mouw points out, the discussion is closed from the outset when one type of ecclesiology is assumed as the standard by which all others are judged.[59] By denigrating evangelical ecclesiology, even at its best, as being 'weak' the standard of the 'strong' remains unexamined and unquestioned. The standard in question is not necessarily a particular ecclesiology in all its specifics, but one that consists rather of more general ecclesiological assumptions. One basic assumption we will examine here concerns the way in which the relation between the divine and the human in the church is conceived.

The New Testament description of the church as the body of Christ appears to justify speaking of the 'divine nature' of the church. After all, in distinction from all other communities, the church is *Christ's* body. Since the church is obviously also human, the next step seems a matter of course, namely, to distinguish between the divine and human aspects, elements, or dimensions of the church. However, approaching the uniqueness of the church by differentiating between 'the human' and 'the divine' leads ecclesiology down errant paths. This approach leads to comparing the way in which these elements relate in the church to their relation in the incarnation.[60] Within this framework, one is forced to substantialize 'the divine' within the church. The church's uniqueness is assumed to consist of a 'divine' quality of the church. The uniqueness of the church is located ontologically, i.e. by ascribing to the church a special order of 'being', namely a quality of 'divine being'.

Ascribing a 'divine quality' to the church appears to be sanctioned by the image of the 'body of Christ': the church *is* both human and divine; hence some aspect or element of the very being of the church must be truly divine. The problematic nature of this postulate can be demonstrated by an examination of another key image, namely, that of the 'bride of Christ'. Suppose one were to conclude by way of the incarnational analogy that the church in its being is in some sense 'divine'. The image of bride acts as a check on that conclusion. To speak of this 'bride' as 'divine' destroys the poignancy of this image. If God were interested in a divine or semi-divine partner, God need hardly look to the church. The differentiated partners of the triune being would more than suffice. The wonder of God's relationship with

59 See *Church Unity*, p. 131.

60 See, e.g., Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,* par. 8: The hierarchically structured society and the Mystical Body of Christ 'form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and a human element. For this reason, by an excellent analogy, this reality is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word.' This comparison of the church to Christ need not entail understanding the church to be an extension of the incarnation. Usually the relation is conceived of (merely) analogically. But even when the analogical character of the relationship is stressed, the operative framework remains the doctrine of the two natures of Christ.

the church is diminished precisely to the degree that her otherness, her humanness, is diminished.[61] The infinite measure of divine love is displayed in God's pursuit of an entirely finite, human spouse.

Rejecting an ontological understanding of the 'divine' aspect of the nature of the church need in no way derogate from the unique nature of this new community. The church is indeed divine in origin and constitution. The church is divine in origin because the New Testament church comes into being by the unique (redeeming) work of God in Jesus Christ through the outpouring of the divine Spirit. The church does not owe its existence to the will of human flesh. It is birthed by the breath of God. The church may also be said to be divinely 'constituted'. Once birthed, this community is not thrown into the world and left to its own devices, but, for its existence and unique reality, is continually dependent on the embrace of the divine spouse. In this sense the church is unthinkable without the divine. Ironically, to speak of the 'divine' as *an element* of the church is to deprecate God's role in relation to the church. For the church that is truly church, God is her 'everything'. Speaking in this way, however, takes place in a *relational* framework. The church is in no way divine but it is church only by its unique relationship to 'the divine'. This relationship is so unique, however, that to speak of a 'relationship to the divine' is far too weak and abstract a description. The relationship consists of the triune God's provisional and proleptic dwelling with and in the new community. The church is constituted by this unique relationship.

This relational understanding of the church is crucial for the development and reception of evangelical ecclesiology. Only a relational understanding as outlined creates room for a distinctive evangelical contribution to ecclesiology. Such room is precluded if a standard critique of evangelical ecclesiogical thought is allowed to go unchallenged. It is the critique that all alternatives to an 'essentialist,' 'ontological,' or 'sacramental' understanding of the divine dimension of the church betray a minimalist or reductionist or purely functional ecclesiology.

If one manages to resist the temptation to bolster a putatively weak ecclesiology by employing christological motifs, one may seek strength in yet another ontological conception. It is has the allure of being even more sophisticated and orthodox, since it involves an ontological recourse to the trinity. Whether this trinitarian recourse is more viable than the christological depends largely on the way in which the triune God is theologically invoked.

4. 'Economically' Trinitarian: The Redemptive Shape of the New Community

In advocating an ecclesiology of God's dwelling, I have not spoken explicitly or thematically of a 'trinitarian' ecclesiology. Yet, the exposition of God's dwelling among us has been elaborated within a trinitarian

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61 Ascribing the divinization of the bride to grace does not mitigate the problem.

framework. The church comes into being and exists by the creative and redemptive presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In that sense a developing evangelical ecclesiology is fully trinitarian. Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of much of contemporary ecclesiology, the ecclesiology espoused here will again be judged to be deficient, if not defective. In contemporary theology the term 'trinitarian ecclesiology' usually refers, not merely to the relation between the triune God's redemptive activity and presence with respect to the church, but more specifically to a certain correspondence between the inner nature of the triune God and the nature of the church. This approach is becoming increasingly popular and is beginning to make inroads in evangelical theology.

This ecclesiological recourse to the nature of the trinity is problematic in various ways. The difficulties can be most readily demonstrated by considering the fine ecclesiological monograph by Miroslav Volf, which we have already mentioned, namely, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

Within the scope of this article we cannot give this book the extensive examination it deserves, but let me in a few brush strokes sketch Volf's approach to trinitarian ecclesiology. As the title and subtitle indicate, Volf considers the understanding of the trinity to be decisive for the understanding of the nature of the church. He seeks to demonstrate this by analysing two constructions, one by Cardinal Ratzinger, the other by the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Zizioulas. Their conceptions become the foil for Volf's own ecclesiology. In very different ways, both proceed from hierarchically conceived inner-trinitarian relations, from which both theologians derive hierarchically conceived ecclesiologies.

In contrast to these trinitarian theologies, Volf, following Moltmann, conceives of the unity of the trinity as consisting in the 'reciprocal interiority of the divine persons.' This he describes as a 'perichoretic' model of the trinity. The three fundamentally equal persons exist in 'reciprocal relationships to one another', a relationship of 'mutual interpenetration' (217). For Volf too the nature of the church is a correlate image of the nature of the trinity. Just as in the perichoretic nature there is no hierarchy, so in the church a pyramidal ordering is avoided. The equality and mutuality of the divine persons provides a basis for the equality and mutuality of relations among members within the church and among local churches.

This all too brief a sketch of Volf's profound reflections on trinity and church suffices to indicate the method and procedure of this ecclesiology. For the purposes of this essay, I wish to challenge the very basis of this elaboration of ecclesiology, namely, the assumption that the structures of the church, and among churches, are to be inferred from the composition of the immanent trinity. This method needs to be challenged at three levels.

First, there is no biblical warrant for an appeal to the nature of the

trinity, to the 'composition' of the inner relations of what is now commonly referred to as 'the triune life' as a basis for understanding the structure and composition of the church. John 17, for example, does not provide such a basis. At most, it refers to a bi-unity, the relation of the Father and the Son. Moreover, its focus is the relation between the Father and the Son in God's redemptive mission in history. The unity of Father and Son of which John 17 speaks explicates the significance of God' dwelling among us as the Word that has not simply taken on, but has *become* flesh.[62] One of the dominant themes of the Gospel of John is the Father-Son relation that is demonstrated in Jesus' intimate communion with and subservience to the Father in the specific life-giving mission of the Son. When, on the basis of these revealed 'economic' relation, theologians draw conclusions regarding immanent triune relations, these conclusions need to be regarded as human speculation, interesting, perhaps, but no more than the imaginative labour of the human mind.

In addition to John 17, the first chapter of the first Letter of John, explicitly links the koinonia of the Christ-community to God. But this passage provides no basis for trinitarian analogies. As has been noted earlier, these verses link our koinonia directly with that of the apostles and thus with the church through time. This letter, therefore, affirms that in our koinonia with the apostolic witnesses we have koinonia with the Father and the Son. The letter in no way justifies a recourse to the specifics of intra-trinitarian relations to illumine the specifics of ecclesial relations. The passage affirms the oneness of Jesus the Christ with the Father, so that, as we read later, to 'have' Christ is to have the Father, and, conversely, to miss out on Christ is to miss out on the Father (1 John 2:23; cf. 4:15; 2 John 9).

Later the letter makes a similar point about the indissoluble link between our relationship to one another and our relationship with the Father through the Son. This time, however, the letter does not use the term *koinonia*. Rather, it expresses the same reality by using a familial analogy: To believe in Jesus is to have God as Father—and unavoidably a host of brothers and sisters. One cannot have one without the other. (1 John 5:1).

The bond of a believer with the Father in Christ through the Spirit turns out to entail incorporation into a community of believers. The triune God is intent on creating a community, one that is designed as a dwelling place of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. None of these biblical motifs, however, provides any ground for the attempt to derive the nature or shape of the new community from the inner relations of the triune being.

Closely related to these biblical caveats is an epistemological objection to the ecclesiological recourse to

62 To speak of the Word being 'en-fleshed' is in danger of being understood docetically. For the same reason, the term 'in-carnation' fails to capture the mystery of the 'becoming' of which John speaks.

the inner nature of the triune life. We know precious little about the inner being and interior relations of the triune God. After all, the very notion 'trinity' is a human, theological construct,[63] a feeble (though necessary) effort to do justice to the fact that God is revealed as Father, and that Jesus, his son, and the Spirit are truly divine, without there being three gods. The most sophisticated theological elaborations of the eternal, inner relations of three persons within God's triune existence are still no more than that, *our* elaborations, our limited theories about the transcendent infinite being of God.

Paul reminds us that to know the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for us in Jesus Christ is to *comprehend* that which is *beyond comprehension*. If that holds true for the *revealed* mystery, what confidence can we possibly have that our puny minds are at all able to grasp even the 'rudiments' (even such a term here seems offensive) of the inner being of God? Moreover, it is telling that immediately after extolling the wonder of this disclosed mystery, Paul concludes by pointing precisely to what I have designated as the heart of ecclesiology. His prayer that the Ephesians may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge ends with a 'so that': 'so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God'! (Ephesians 3:19). That is the 'earthy' locus for theological reflection on the nature of the church as divine domicile.

The trinitarian revelation is the good news that God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not only rescues us, gives us peace, *shalom*, but that the triune God does so by dwelling among us. God has pledged to fill the new community—so that it bursts at the seams, so to speak. Accordingly, it is *'through the church'* that 'the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places' (3:10). The God who fills the new community of women and men cannot be contained in it.

Given the paucity of biblical testimony regarding the inner being of God and the limitation of our own minds, the ecclesiological recourse to the inner trinitarian relations is in danger of transmuting theology into conjury: theologians project their own theories into the trinity, then withdraw them from there, and apply them to the church. This procedure only *appears* to provide divine sanction for one's ecclesiology.[64]

The final reason for resisting the inner trinitarian recourse is the concern to keep evangelical theology from straying into a metaphysical minefield. The ecclesiological recourse to the inner nature of the

63 As Charles P. Price puts it, 'Scripture can be cited to support any Trinitarian heresy, and it is difficult to prove conclusively from the New Testament even the Trinitarian structure of God.' ('Some Notes on Filioque', *Anglican Theological Review*, 83 (2001), pp. 507-535; here, p. 516.

64 See the excellent article by Mark D. Chapman in which he warns that this trinitarian methodology is in danger of turning theology into ideology. 'The Social Doctrine of the Trinity: Some Problems', *Anglican Review of Theology* 83 (2001), pp. 239-254.

trinity diverts ecclesiology into ever more sophisticated trinitarian constructions. Once one accepts this recourse as a legitimate, even normative, ecclesiological methodology, much theological acumen is invested into producing ever more refined theories of the inner trinitarian relations. To move down this path is to be drawn into a trinitarian labyrinth—a humanly constructed ontology of the divine. In the incisive review-essay of Volf's book by Ralph Del Colle, one glimpses the entrance to the maze.

Del Colle challenges both Volf's critique of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, as well as Volf's own proposal. Del Colle does so by a lengthy excursion into the niceties of the 'Latin scholastic tradition that was at pains to lay out the explanatory regime of trinitarian predication'. In the process one gets into highly complex metaphysical theories which the scholastics applied to God. Before evangelical ecclesiology ventures into the 'explanatory regime of trinitarian predication', however, the critical questions regarding the validity of the entire enterprise need to be carefully considered. Clarity on this point is urgently needed.

The sheer allure or pressure that the dominance of the ecclesiological recourse to the inner being of the triune God exerts, especially in combination with accusations of 'weak' or 'defective' evangelical ecclesiology, is all the more reason for evangelical theology not to shut down its faculties of critical discernment. Del Colle's correct estimation of the state of the question should serve as a warning rather than an invitation: 'That the church is constituted and grounded in the trinitarian life of God now forms a major trajectory in ecclesiological understanding and has captured the imagination of the ecumenical movement.'[65]

If evangelical theologians are to follow this trajectory, let it at least be with eyes wide open to the hazards that mark this path. This caution is echoed, interestingly enough, by another Catholic reviewer of Volf's work. Though highly appreciative of Volf's accomplishment, Gregory Baum concludes with a caveat, appealing, interestingly enough, to another side of the scholastic tradition:

> My earliest training in theology, guided by Thomas Aquinas, created in me a preference for *apophatic* theology, the *via negativa,* the knowledge of God's unknowability. One consequence has been a reticence in regard to exploring the inner trinitarian life.... According to negative theology, concepts such as father, son, and spirit, inevitably drawn from the created order, do tell us something true about God in an analogous sense. However, such concepts do not shrink God's unknowability; they reveal, rather the ever greater measure of our ignorance.

Baum concludes with words that should strike a sympathetic chord in every evangelical heart: 'While God, the Father, Son and Spirit, is announced in Scripture and tradition and hence plays a central role in the spiritual life of Christian believers, there seems to me no good pastoral reason why one should make extended theological speculation on the inner life of the Trinity part of the proclamation of the Good News.'[66]

Baum's admonition applies equal-

ly to the good news about the missionary community called church. Even if it were possible to scale the heights of heaven—be it with the help of an incarnational ladder—there is no need. It is enough to reflect on the inexhaustible riches of the Word that is near, who, together with the Father and the Spirit, dwells in the new community.

Conclusion

The need for making a distinct ecclesiological contribution is great. The challenge of elaborating an evangelical ecclesiology would serve the integrity and wholeness of the evangelical community and its witness. Developed in dialogue with existing ecclesiologies from other traditions, these evangelical endeavours would also make a contribution to the wider discussions. The lineaments of an ecclesiology shaped by the drama of the triune God's gracious desire to live among the new community of men and women created in his image is meant as a sketch that will, it is hoped, stimulate further reflection that will probably produce very different sketches. Whatever the shape of future ecclesiologies, however, their fruitfulness is thwarted by uncritical acceptance, as well as by unthinking rejection of reigning ecclesiologies. Developing a robust and vital evangelical ecclesiology is long overdue. The resources for this development are plentiful. In critical interaction with existing ecclesiologies, evangelical theology can make a distinctive and fruitful contribution.

The Rhetoric of the Cross

Between statement and suggestion,
Between proclamation and implication,
Between forthright pronouncement and oblique allusion,
We discover the meaning in your death.

Here upon the Cross,
Between Earth and Sky,
Heaven and Hell,
Life and Death,
We see your giving, your bleeding, your loving;
And we understand the reason in your sacrifice.

Verse from Becoming . . . (poetry reflecting theology) by Garry Harris, Adelaide, South Australia (used with permission).