

The Household of God:

Rooted in the Future

In the second chapter I described the church as an eschatological community. The church is the result of Christ's eschatological activity, his "gathering up all things into himself" (Eph 1:10). When we talk about Christ's work, I argued, it is not enough to think about it as completed in the past, as solely in reconciliation and atonement. The activity of the resurrected and ascended Christ encompasses much more through his current work to forge a new people – what the letter to the Ephesians calls a "new humanity," a new household of God. This is what he came to do: to inaugurate the Kingdom of God; and that Kingdom takes the shape of a new community, a people with a new common life, an altered set of relationships and alliances. Christ is now at work to gather and reunite the scattered fragments of humanity, and the visible result thereof is "the church."

In this chapter and the next, I invite you to live into this notion of the church as an "eschatological community." What exactly does this notion mean? What would it look like if our congregations were to see themselves in this light, if our discussions about the church and its future were shaped by this notion? How would living into it change the hopes and fears, the dreams and decisions of sessions and vestries, of synods and presbyteries? My contention is that at a time when so many of our hopes and expectations for the future of the church are bogged down by decline and distress, concentrating on the eschatological character of the church will reorient our conversations to hope and trust in the triumphant work of the resurrected and ascended Lord. In this chapter I will, therefore, concentrate on unpacking the notion of "eschatological community"; in the next chapter I discuss its practical implications for how congregations operate by looking at the church under four

more headings: the church as a missional community, a political community, a sacramental community, and a divided community.

An Eschatological Community

In the late Spring of 1909 the grateful crème-de-la-crème of the Dutch nobility gathered for a festive church service at the Willemskerk in the Hague. The long-awaited crown princess of The Netherlands, born a couple of months earlier, was to be baptized. The pastor climbed up to the pulpit; the dignitaries settled in their seats for what surely would be a festive sermon celebrating this glorious moment. Who can describe the shock of the congregation when the preacher opened his mouth and with a somber face declared, “Today, we will bury our princess...”?

The congregation was indeed shocked, but the pastor was correct. A baptism is not, as so often stated, a service of welcome for a new “member of the family,” in the case of infants, a new member proudly shown to the congregation by the pastor who, after performing the sacrament of baptism, strolls down the aisle with the baby in his arms, thus inviting smiles and adoring looks from the people in the pews. Neither is a baptism as often expressed by the parents of the baptized, a grateful celebration for a new life entrusted to their family as an acknowledgment of the good gifts of the Creator God. A baptism is not even only a symbolic enactment of the washing away of sins, removed from the newborn as the water gushes over her face – even while such an interpretation, in contrast to the “grateful celebration” notion, has actual Scriptural warrant (Ac 22:16). Baptism is a burial. To be baptized is to die and to be resurrected with Christ:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that,

just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk
in newness of life.¹ [Rom 6:3–4]

When Paul pens this teaching to the Christian community in Rome, he has in mind, of course, the early Christian practice of baptizing not by the sprinkling of some drops of water on the forehead of the baptizee, but by total emersion in the water. When you go under, head to toe, you go into the grave, Paul says – Christ’s grave. And when your head emerges from the water, you rise from death – with Christ. In your baptism you have already died, your old identity has been erased, your former existence has come to an end; in your baptism you have also received a new identity, a new life – one that is bound up with the resurrection life of Christ.

Thus baptism is not cute; it is deadly. Baptism is dying to self, then being reborn. It is not a celebration of creation but of recreation. For the nature the resurrection into which we are baptized is itself one of recreation. In raising Christ from the dead, God did not simply bring a human being back to life, but more, God established that “in [Christ] is *the* resurrection of the dead” (Ac 4:2). Christ’s resurrection is the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, the first fruits of the eschatological consummation of all things. And as his resurrection means that this “world to come” already has a foothold in our history, so our new baptismal identity means that who we are is no longer marked by who we were and where we have come from; rather, our existence and life are now shaped by the world we are awaiting – the Kingdom of God. To be baptized means that Christ’s eschatological work, his fragment-gathering, reuniting activity, has now also reached us, and we are being knitted into the newly formed household of God.

¹ Cf. Colossians 2:12: “...when you were buried with [Christ] in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” It is against the background of these texts that we should also read Ephesians 2:1–10.

As this celebration of resurrection, baptism is also the rite of entry into the church; therefore, baptism tells us what the church actually is. Think about the people you see in your church on a Sunday morning. Recall those who sit with you in the pews: the sluggish teenagers in the back; the woman in front of you with her two developmentally challenged children; the elderly couple with their outdated clothes and hearing aids; the man in his suit and his neighbor in jeans; the successful two-income family and their neighbors whose house was just foreclosed on; the recent-immigrant family from India and the not-so-recent immigrant family from Scotland; the lifelong members and the woman who after a bitter divorce just started to go to church again, her hands hesitantly leafing through the hymnal as she tries to find the right page. All these “faces” represent people with whom, given your own social location or personal preferences, you might never “hang out with” on a weekday. Your respective pasts wouldn’t necessarily bring you together. But now Christ has gathered and knitted you together, because these faces are ones whose foreheads are marked by the cross of Christ forever, faces of ones who have died and been resurrected with Jesus. Together, you are a community unlike any other, for you are a community not rooted in the past but in the future. You are an *eschatological community*.

What does it mean to be and to live as an eschatological community? This chapter sketches a profile of such a community’s self-understanding. Here I will offer a set of Christian convictions that can help a community look at itself no longer in the light of its past, but in the light of the future – God’s future.

Living by the Grace of an Active Lord

To say that to be baptized is to die and be resurrected with Christ is not only to make a statement about the meaning of baptism, but also to make a confession about Jesus Christ. It is to confess that Christ is not just an inspiration from the past, but that he is the resurrected One, and therefore that he is alive and active. Likewise, to say that the church is an eschatological community, the result of Christ’s

gathering and reuniting work, is not only to characterize the church but also to say that Christ is the ascended One – that he has entered the royal throne room, is seated at the right hand of God, and is now the One in charge as he leads creation to its eschatological consummation.

To confess that Christ is the resurrected and ascended One, the One knitting and fitting together the church, could completely change our perspective on church work. It is remarkable how many standard ways of talking about the church and the Christian life place *us* in the leading role. Consider the question often asked in evangelical circles, “WWJD – What Would Jesus Do?” Or how about the idea that “God has no hands but ours,” which has now been made into an official ecclesial cheer as the ELCA tag line, “God’s Work. Our Hands.” Or think further of common church parlance about the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God. There are those – mainly in the middle and left of the church – who speak about the Kingdom as though it were a social project God wants us to enact. The language employed talks about the church as “building” the Kingdom or God, “establishing” or “fashioning” it, “bringing it about.” Others – mainly on the right – seem to think of the church’s mission as a sales project bent on “extending” the reign of God, on “spreading,” “growing,” or “expanding” it.² All these ways of talking put us in the driver’s seat. But if anything I have said so far is true, our question should not be, “What would Jesus do?” but “What is Jesus doing?” Jesus is not an historical figure who leaves to us right action in the here-and-now; he is the resurrected and ascended One who is alive and active. Surely God has hands other than ours – God’s hands are the hands of the ascended Christ. And the Kingdom of God is not something that is built, established, spread, or grown by us, for the Bible speaks about the Kingdom as something that is given (Mt 16:19; Lk 12:32), as something that we receive (Lk 18:17), are allowed to enter (Lk 18:24-25), inherit (Mt 25:34), are called into (1 Th 2:12), are

² Cf. Craig Van Gelder in his “Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God,” in Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 93 (77–109).

delivered to (2 Tim 4:18), are transferred into (Col 1:13), and are made worthy of (2 Th 1:15).³ We are passive recipients of the Kingdom, not its active builders.

Just yesterday I received a visit from a recent graduate of my seminary. She is getting ready to send her profile to some congregations with pastoral vacancies, and it has suddenly dawned on her that the life she's been preparing for is getting real – she might become a pastor. But then what? What is she to *do*? Yes, she'll take with her all the knowledge we taught her in seminary. But what about the Monday after she's installed, when she enters her new office, sits down, and now the responsibility is all on her? So she came to see me and asked, "What is the most important advice you have for a beginning pastor?" My answer: To remember that this is not your church, but Christ's church. It is not all on you, it is all on him. Your job is not to sit down behind your desk, take stock of the situation, and decide in what direction you are going to lead this church. That is Christ's job. Your job is to discern what Christ is up to, and to get in on the act. *His* act.⁴

What I advised my student does not hold only for pastors. It holds no less for church councils and sessions, for bishops and presbyteries, for evangelism task forces and for property committees. Realizing that we are an eschatological community, existing solely because of the gathering and reuniting activity of Christ, changes the focus of our work. If our existence is embedded in Christ's continuous eschatological work, our task is not to write mission statements and design strategies and action plans, however deeply rooted these might be in our Scripture-knowledge of Christ's past. Instead, our job is to discern what Christ is doing right now, where and how he is present and active in our community and neighborhood, and how we can serve him in what he is doing. Take note that what I am

³ Cf. also Van Gelder, 94–95.

⁴ In saying this, I was merely echoing what my Pittsburgh Seminary colleague Andrew Purves argues in *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007) and *The Resurrection of Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2010).

suggesting is not necessarily *easier* than taking on the tasks at hand ourselves. And discerning what Christ is up to will certainly not take less time than the “do-it-ourselves” approach. But such discernment does put the onus of our congregational and church life where it belongs: on the living Christ, resurrected, ascended, and leading.

In a previous chapter I pointed out how the early Christian community lived in a mood of holy optimism because they kept mindful of the ascension of Christ. That Christ was ascended meant for them that he had gone to the place of power, that he was seated at the right hand of God, and that therefore their lives had received direction and their future was secure. When nowadays I visit congregations of the American mainline, I see very little of that holy optimism. In many congregations I encounter worry about the present, fear about the future, and mourning about a bygone past. I know all the reasons used to justify this worry and fear and mourning: budgets that can hardly be met, an aging membership, a shrinking group of participants. But could it also be that our insecurity is rooted in a lost sense of Christ as alive and active rather than being a figure from the past?

Living in a Wider Space

One of the reasons Christ’s ascension does not figure prominently in the life of the Christian community is that it is very hard for us to imagine what the ascension actually entails. The church’s traditional language about the ascension is rooted in a worldview that is no longer ours, an understanding of the cosmos as a three-layered universe: the earth under our feet, the sky above us with the sun, moon, and stars, and beyond that but almost still within reach, the heavens of God. The Copernican revolution has shattered that worldview – the universe turned out to be an ever-expanding realm, and if Christ’s ascension entailed his traveling through this realm on his way to a heaven beyond its borders, he would probably still be going. If this picture shows how we imagine Christ’s ascension, it is completely disconnected from the ways we otherwise think about the universe and our place in it. No wonder,

then, that the ascension has very little bearing on the ways in which we experience our lives. If the church wants to make of Scripture's stories about the ascension more than a mythological account of an existential truth (that "Christ rules our hearts"), if it wants to see any serious reintegration of the political claims of the ascension stories in the daily life of the Christian community, it will have to find language to speak about the ascension that is different from the language shaped by a pre-Copernican understanding of the cosmos.

One such different way of imagining the ascension is developed by Luco J. van den Brom in his book *Divine Presence in the World*.⁵ Van den Brom's account of the ascension makes use of the notion of "more-dimensionality." Science currently works with the possibility that reality contains more than the three dimensions we are now visually acquainted with. There might be four, five, or even many more dimensions. In this more-dimensional reality, our three-dimensional reality can be described as a subsystem of a much larger system. Within such a scientific worldview, we could imagine that in his resurrection Christ's body received to participate in this more-dimensional aspect of reality, and we could think of Christ's ascension as his triumphant entrance in a spatial reality much wider than the three-dimensional reality that we ourselves are aware of. But since our reality is a subsystem of the reality in which Christ dwells, our reality is still directly accessible to him.

To conceptualize this framework, imagine a two-dimensional world with two-dimensional entities – for example, this sheet of paper you are currently reading from, and the letters printed on it. (For now we will proceed as though the sheet has only width and length, but no depth). Also imagine that these two-dimensional entities, the letters, were gifted with consciousness. Such creatures are aware of left and right, of "in front of" and "behind," but not of above and below. Now imagine a three-

⁵ Luco J. van den Brom, *Divine Presence in the World: A Critical Analysis of the Notion of Divine Omnipotence* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 266–316.

dimensional creature entering such a two-dimensional reality from a third dimension: for example, your finger, moving toward the sheet of paper until it touches it. With no depth perception, the two-dimensional letter-creatures would not be aware of your approaching finger. But as soon as it touched the sheet of paper, that is, as soon as it entered their reality, your finger would be “suddenly in their midst” (cf. Mt 28:9). Your finger could now move around on the paper, in these creatures’ world, and they would be aware of your finger’s presence and movements. But if you removed your finger from the paper, the letter-creatures would not know where it had gone. It would “vanish from their sight” (cf. Lk 24:31). Their ignorance would not imply, of course, that your finger had left space altogether or ceased to exist. For your finger would only have left the space of which these creatures were aware. Neither would their ignorance of your finger’s whereabouts mean that your finger was no longer accessible to them. It would not even mean that your finger was far away from their space. It might be very near, though not visibly present to them. What if we were to understand the way Christ’s current realm relates to our realm in the same way that three-dimensional space relates to and surrounds the hypothetical, two-dimensional world of this page of your book?

Obviously, Van den Brom’s model of Christ’s heaven as a more-dimensional space is just that – a model. The goal of the model is not to prove how Christ’s ascension *did* happen, but to help us understand how, given all the things we know about our universe, the ascension *could* have happened, and thereby to help us integrate the way we imagine the ascension more closely into our experience of our own place in the universe. The model is technical, but its goal is to help our spiritual imagination. Finding new ways to imagine the ascension can help us realize that while Christ is ascended, he is not necessarily far away. Heaven, the space where he abides, is not necessarily far away. As close as your three-dimensional finger can be, undetected but present, to the two-dimensional world of this sheet of paper, so also can Christ be close, unseen but present, to every aspect of our reality. In entertaining the idea of a more-dimensional realm that surrounds every side our three-dimensional reality, we can feel

life opening up. Reality is much wider, much more spacious than the anxious, tragic world we inhabit; there is a glorious realm surrounding it, a realm governed by the ascended Lord and waiting to be laid bare on the day of consummation. There is breathing space.

Living as Rooted in the Future

Living in an eschatological community means not only having a different relationship to space; it also means relating differently to time. What sets the Christian community apart from any other people, group, or organization is that it is a community rooted not in the past, but in the future. It is a community brought together by the eschatological gathering work of Christ, a community that exists because the future Kingdom of God has already gained a foothold in our history. Rather than moving from a glorious past to an uncertain future, as other groups and communities do, the Christian community is moving from a single open grave to a glorious restoration of all things (Ac 3:21).

It is important to keep this in mind at a time when many congregations are, in fact, feeling bogged down by their past rather than able to embrace their future. This feeling can result in a forceful way from financial pressure. For many church budgets, building maintenance and the cost of utilities are two of the biggest line items, taking up dollars that otherwise could be used for mission and outreach. The buildings maintained are often artifacts from the past built for congregations of quite different sizes and designed for quite different ministries. Such buildings become millstones around a congregation's neck and hold them hostage to a bygone era. The past can also hover in more subtle ways. Who hasn't heard the sad and somewhat angry conversations during coffee hour: "There was a day, you know, when this church was full, and there was standing-room only on Christmas Eve. We heard the pitter-patter of little feet up and down that hallway and the sound of voices singing Sunday school songs. How many do they have in Sunday School now – four? That many! Humph. I wonder why they even come to worship." Congregations often mourn a past gone by; but in so doing, they often put themselves in

danger of letting the memory of the past be their vision for the future: “Oh, that the days of old might return!”

There is in itself nothing wrong with the love we feel for a building that saw the baptisms and funerals of so many of our previous generations. There is nothing wrong with mourning and sensing the loss of a culture that nurtured us and made us who we are. Every emigrant – and I am one – knows of that bittersweet sense of *Sehnsucht*, the painful longing for the home that no longer exists. But at the same time, members of the Christian community live in the awareness that they are more than emigrants, they are pilgrims. They do not move from a beloved past to an unknown future; rather, they live in the joyful knowledge that every step brings them not father away from home, but closer. As the letter to the Hebrews says about the mothers and fathers of Israel, Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. [Heb 11:13–16]

If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country. And therefore yes, the church of the future will be quite different from the church we grew up in, even quite different from the church of the present. We may have to give up the building we love; we may have to let go of ministries that no are longer relevant, while getting used to forms of ministry that at first feel strange and outside our comfort zone. But none

of these changes should deter us. For as an eschatological community we are meant for change – our very existence is rooted in change, namely, the great transformation of the consummation of divine reign, the better country, the coming Kingdom of God.

Sometimes people wonder why the journey takes so long. Does God delay in completing what God began in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Why does history keep dragging on? In reality, however, the question may rather be, “Why has God’s grace reached us so soon?” Here we are, still in the midst of history, and we already taste and see a salvation that was promised only for the end. In resurrecting Jesus Christ, God already started making good on the promise of a new creation long before the old has passed away; in our baptism we die and are resurrected long before our end has come; in the community of the church the scattered fragments of humanity are already gathered and reunited before the powers are even defeated! None of this was yet supposed to happen: the dead were not to be raised till the end of time, humanity not to be renewed till history as we know it had come to an end. But here, while the days of old still run their tired track, the new age already has begun. The surprise of resurrection, ascension, and Church, is that salvation has moved from the future into the present: In the resurrected body of the Lord the recreated world is visible and tangibly present; in the church Christ gathers a group of people who already get to taste and see the goodness of God’s eschatological work, and who in turn are called to bear witness concerning this work to the world in which they live. It is for this reason that I speak of the church as being “rooted in the future.” This language is stronger than saying that the church has hope and expectations for the future. That characterization could still entail conceiving of the church as a community like any other: rooted in the past, living in the present, hoping its life will continue in the future. That language suggests the life of the church is one like that of any other group, a life in which the events of today are produced by a causal chain to the events of the past and will in turn produce a causal chain projecting into the future. But the church is not such a community! The church, as a community of the baptized, is established in Christ’s resurrection; and that

resurrection is an act that was in no way whatsoever causally connected to anything that came before it, but rather was caused solely by a unique, eschatological act of God in which God realized a completely new thing.

The Letter to the Ephesians, referred to extensively in a previous chapter, describes this “new thing” in terms of an *arrabon*, a downpayment:

In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the downpayment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory. [Eph 1:11–14]

In Christ we have an inheritance, the eschatological redemption of all things, the Kingdom of God; but in the here-and-now we already have a downpayment of that future reign, the gift of the Spirit, which we received at baptism when we died and were resurrected with Christ. And because of this downpayment, we can now live our lives “for the praise of [Christ’s] glory.” Glory is itself an eschatological term, for it is glory that creation will see when it is freed from bondage (Rom 8:21), and it is in glory that our bodies will be resurrected (1 Cor 15:43). At the same time, glory is a term that speaks of the presence of God. When Solomon had built the first temple, God’s presence was experienced when “the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD” (1 Kgs 8:11). When Jesus tabernacled among us, we saw “his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). At the renewal of all things, the son of Man “is seated on the throne of his glory” (Mt 19:28). Of all of these wonders the eschatological community called “church” has already received a foretaste, a downpayment, the first fruits. Such a downpayment might not be what is needed to sustain the structures of the past. But the church is not in

the business of sustaining the past. The church is here to witness concerning the future. And for doing that, the downpayment, resurrection life, is more than enough.

Living without Anxiety

In a well known passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus addresses his disciples:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.... Can you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet, I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.... Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be anxious, my little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. [Lk 12:22–31]

This passage is often read as a generally applicable admonishment to exercise faith rather than be anxious, and also as setting up an opposition between the physical and the spiritual, the earthly life and the life of the Kingdom. Reading the text in its actual context (Luke 12:13–34) sheds a different light, however. We know from chapter two of this present book that Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God is not an admonition to neglect the earthly for the sake of the heavenly. The kingdom is not an other-worldly realm; rather, it is God's reclaiming of creation, God's healing and transforming of it. God's eschatological gifts are so abundant that they create a permanent Jubilee for the earth and all its inhabitants. This Kingdom, says Jesus, this day of the Lord's favor, is upon us. The abundance of the

Kingdom is already visible in Jesus' own ministry: in the few loaves that become a bountiful meal, in the empty jars that are filled with wine, in the overflowing nets of surprised fishers. Jesus has been going around the hills of Galilee and Judea preaching the year of Jubilee and inviting people to align their lives with it: now that the Kingdom has come near, "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return" (Luke 6:35).

And then, in the midst of this Kingdom-embodying ministry, Jesus runs into a man whose family has been living against the grain of the coming divine reign (Lk 12:13–15). The man asks for Jesus' assistance in a conflict with his older brother. In ancient Israel custom dictated that when parents died, the oldest brother inherited their entire estate, and he was then to split the heritage with his siblings. In an agrarian culture such as ancient Israel's, most often the heritage would consist of a farm and land. As is still the case in some traditional agrarian cultures, sometimes the heirs would decide not to split up the heritage so as to keep the farm's revenue high; for splitting up the farm into smaller allotments causes production costs to rise and revenue to decline. The downside of keeping a heritage whole was, of course, that all the siblings had to stay and work together. In Luke's story, the older brother is clearly after keeping revenue up by keeping the heritage whole. But the younger brother does not wish to – he wants his independence. So he comes to Jesus for help.

But Jesus refuses to "go there." This is not the sort of problem he came to take care of, he says. But then he tells a parable (Lk 12:16–21). It is about a rich man whose land produced abundantly – so much so that the man had no space to store his harvest. But he didn't want to give it up or give it away, because he believed this harvest could secure his future. If only he had a way of saving all his crops, he could retire and live the good life, drink and be merry! So he decided to build bigger barns than he already had, barns in which to store his harvest. "But," says Jesus, "that very night his life was to be demanded of him. All his work on his material possessions was for nothing." He would have done better to "be rich toward God."

I have noticed that this story about the rich man is often read as though Jesus told it to rebuke the younger brother who came to him for help: “Why do you care so much about getting your heritage? You’d better concentrate on other things.” Of course, the story could as well, or more likely, be read as a rebuke of the *older* brother. Jesus does not sit down with the family to solve their dispute, but he does make clear what he thinks of the older brother’s desire to subordinate his sibling’s happiness to generating better revenue for his farm: “You fool, what ultimate gain will you get from a large harvest? How do you think it will help you? Do you not realize that now it is no longer business as usual? This is the time of the Jubilee!” And to clarify what he means, Jesus tells the story of the rich farmer. The farmer in Jesus’ story received plenty. He could have acknowledged his bounty as a gracious gift from God; he could have received that gift and generously passed it on to others, as Israel was supposed to do with the double harvest they received from God in the year before the Jubilee. But rich farmer does not do so. He cannot. He is worried. Yes, the harvest was bountiful this year – but what about next year? He’d rather play it safe. And so, instead of passing on God’s gifts to others, he decides to build bigger barns to secure his own future. “Securing your future?” Jesus asks. “The future is the kingdom!”

And then there are Jesus’ disciples. They know what Jesus is talking about. They have heard him speak about the Jubilee; they have heard him talking about God’s generous eschatological giving; they have heard his invitation to align their lives with the inbreaking Kingdom of God. But they are anxious too: “Can we really live this way? Will there be enough?” And Jesus responds, “Look at the lilies, how they grow; if God give food to the lilies, how much more will he give to you, his beloved children? My little flock, be not anxious!”

What Jesus says here is not a general admonition to exercise faith and stop worrying. Rather, it is a very contextual encouragement. Jesus addresses people like you and me – people who have heard the preaching of the Kingdom, people who feel challenged and attracted by it, but people who at the same time are anxious – anxious about the future, anxious about where things are going. Many of us

today are anxious because our churches are getting emptier, and the margins of our budgets are getting narrower, and change seems to be coming but we aren't sure we like it. To worried and nervous folks like us, Jesus is saying, "You would be right to worry if it were business as usual. If time were unfolding as it always has done – day after day and all the same, you would be right to worry about where they are all leading to. But business as usual is gone. The future is not the extension of the present; the future is the Kingdom of God. So don't keep striving after saving your buildings and paying your bills. Stop worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well."

I have argued in previous chapters of this book that the church is a covenantal community. It is not a voluntary organization established by the free assent of its members, but a community established in God's gracious reaching out to us in baptism. In this chapter I have continued this argument with an exploration of the nature of baptism. To be baptized is to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is to die and to be raised with him. But Christ's resurrection is not simply the bringing back to life of a man who recently died; it is God's making good on the promise of recreation, it is the inbreaking of the future Kingdom of God to our world. Resurrection is thus an eschatological act, and so is baptism. But if baptism is an eschatological act, and if we are gathered to the church by baptism, the church is also eschatological. Thus the church is rooted not in the past but in the future. The church is the visible, tangible result of the gathering, fragment-uniting work of the resurrected and ascended Christ. There is therefore no reason for the church to feel bogged down by empty buildings and depressing statistics. The church's time is not running out; as an eschatological community, the church has the future!

The church's character as a community rooted in the future is, however, not only its consolation in times of despair, it is also that which shapes the church's calling and direction. Christ calls the church into being exactly for the purpose of making visible to the powers that their time is up, for the purpose of witnessing to the world about the Kingdom inaugurated in Christ's resurrection. What do these purposes mean for the concrete, day-to-day life of Christian congregations? It is to answering this question that I will devote the last chapter of this book.