

## **Bearing With One Another in Love:**

### **Engaging Objections**

I am sure that in the two preceding chapters I raised for my readers many more questions than I answered in the course of my argument. I introduced two ideas that are rather opposite to the ways many American Christians experience their church membership. I did so by arguing that the church is not a voluntary organization; rather, our membership in the church is the result of God's covenantal reshaping of our lives begun in baptism. Further, the church is not accidental to salvation; rather, to be saved means to be knitted into the fabric of God's new household, called "church." I concluded that, on account of both of these arguments, schism and dissent are prohibited and even put salvation at stake. In this chapter, rather than pushing the argument further, I pause to answer what I expect to be my readers' most pressing questions and objections. Here is a sample of the issues I will engage: Isn't it sometimes pastorally justifiable for a church member to leave one's congregation? If *medical way* ecclesiology true, shouldn't we all be Roman Catholic? Doesn't *medical way* ecclesiology sacrifice truth for unity? And doesn't the competitiveness of the American religious marketplace keep churches strong and vibrant rather than dull and sluggish? I will close this chapter by elaborating my understanding of salvation. I trust that engaging these questions and objections will give my readers a clearer sense of what *medical way* ecclesiology entails. In the final two chapters, I will resume my argument and explore what it, if adopted as a whole, would mean for the concrete, daily lives of American congregations.

#### *The Pastoral Objection*

Does *medical way* ecclesiology not demand too high a price for individual church members? *Medical way* ecclesiology holds that, because the church is not a voluntary organization and our church membership is not the result of choice, individual believers are not free to change their alliance to a congregation of their choice. In the Netherlands, this policy means that, with regard to church membership, people are geographically restricted – the address of your house determines what local parish you belong to. But can there not be good reasons for a church member or a family to want to move their membership?<sup>1</sup>

I will offer two hypothetical test cases involving people who want to move their membership, one for positive reasons, the other for negative reasons. Together these cases will give a better sense of how *medical way* ecclesiology handles the pastoral need of people moved to rethink their congregational alliance.

### Covenant and Call

The first case concerns a possible conflict between covenant and call:

Suppose I am a member of Faith Presbyterian Church. However, nearby Providence Presbyterian Church is really struggling to get its educational program off the ground. I happen to have a lot of experience with church education and feel passionate about both teaching and organizing such a program. My current church, however, has a whole staff devoted to church

---

<sup>1</sup> Let me underscore that I am not arguing for American mainline churches to embrace the geographical principle. This would simply be impossible; no American mainline church has the nationwide geographical presence necessary for the principle to work. I am arguing not for the principle itself, but for the theological ideas that support the geographical principle.

education and no need for my particular gifts. A *medical way* ecclesiology would make me feel that my gifts and calling were being stifled and that I was being prohibited from serving God in the particular capacity with which I had been gifted.<sup>2</sup>

What would the *medical way* theologian say? I think she would engage the problem by reformulating it. Rather than casting it in terms of the individuals involved, she would see the issue as one between these two church communities. Thus she would formulate the case in this way: Faith Presbyterian Church has an overload in gifts and talents, while Providence Presbyterian Church is lacking what it needs. Faith, therefore, needs to discern how it can help Providence, perhaps by sending some of its members to Providence “on loan.”

Recasting the problem in terms of community rather than the individual is itself a significant theological move. It leads away from an individualistic understanding of the Christian faith. “Gifts” and “talents” are not simply given to the individual. As believers, in our baptism we have died and have been resurrected with Christ; and in our resurrection we have become one body, in which gifts are allotted to individuals “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7). Gifts, talents, and financial resources belong, therefore, to the community as much as they belong to individuals. Churches know this truth – think about the way mainline churches deal with the issue of ordination. A discerning member of a church may feel gifted for and called to ordained ministry, but her personal discernment is insufficient for the church to grant her ordination. On learning of her desire for ordination, the church will, in one way or another, gather a group of people who, together with the candidate, confirm both whether she is called to ordained ministry and whether the church is called to ordain her. What holds for ordained ministry in particular also holds for all other ministries, gifts, and talents in general.

---

<sup>2</sup> I owe this example to my students Jake Clawson and Becca Siddle.

Recasting the problem in terms of community rather than the individual also gives the *medical way* theologian the theological resources to deal with the issue at stake. When Paul admonishes the Christian community in Corinth to contribute to the offering he is collecting for the poor in the Christian community of Jerusalem, he says:

It is not my intention that others should have relief and you hardship; rather, it is a question of fair balance. At the present moment your surplus can meet their deficiency, so that some day their surplus can in turn meet your deficiency, in order that there may be fair balance – as it is written, “The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.” [1 Cor 8:16–15]

In the last line Paul quotes from the story of Israel’s journey in the desert. The Hebrews on their way to the promised land are sustained by manna that falls from heaven in the morning and by quails that come down in the evening. When the people went out to gather the food, some ended up with a lot and some with a little. But when the final harvest was measured, God ensured that no one had too much and no one had too little (Ex 16:13–18).

Gifts, talents, and financial resources are the manna God provides while God’s people are on their way to the full consummation of God’s coming reign. Some communities seem to receive much and others little. Their job is to discern how they can create, as Paul says, “a fair balance” among them. If Faith Presbyterian Church has more resources for education than it can use in its own program, this church needs to discern how it can share from its abundance with its struggling neighbor Providence. And Faith can do so without feeling threatened because

Faith and Providence are not two organizations competing for a market share, but bound together by divine covenant.<sup>3</sup>

### Covenant and Conflict

What if a member wants to leave a congregation not for positive reasons – such as wanting to share her gifts with a church in need – but because of conflict, pain, or feeling blatantly neglected from the standpoint of spiritual nurturing? What about the long-term member who finds her church has changed to the point that she feels perpetually frustrated in worship – the she can no longer recognize herself in the nature of the music and liturgy, or the preaching is consistently weak and even manipulative, or ethical and theological difference have arisen for her? Does the *medical way* theologian not have to agree that at some point a member is justified in leaving?

For many of my readers, this question will encapsulate the central objection. Whenever I give a talk or lecture on the topic of the church, a variation of this question comes up. And it might be helpful to know that the question comes from both sides of the current ecclesial debates. Conservatives have asked whether I should not give more leeway to conservative individuals to leave liberal congregations. Gay members of the church have asked whether my emphasis on unity does not prolong what they consider to be unjust suffering. Given my argument about nature of the church, what to say?

First, I believe the fact that we can ask this question – that is, the fact that we live in an ecclesial context in which we can switch churches if we want to – already puts a responsibility on our shoulders that is greater than we can bear. Even if we allow that “at some point” a church member is justified in changing her church membership, how would we determine what

---

<sup>3</sup> See also the discussion in chapter 1, pp. xx-xxx.

this point is? How weak does the preaching of the pastor need to be? What level of manipulation marks the tipping point that makes it no longer acceptable? How much annoyance with the liturgy justifies one's move from faithful forbearing to faithful leaving? How would we ever go about answering these questions, and answering them faithfully? The problem here is twofold: theological and pastoral. Theologically speaking, we lack the resources to make these decisions. Such questions presuppose that we are active agents of our own destiny. But Scripture speaks about our church membership as a matter of being brought out of darkness into a marvelous light (1 Pet 2:9–10); of being given a new birth (1 Pet 1:3); of being chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). These are not things that *we* do but that are done *to us*. They do not involve our active agency. But a church-shopping culture does. It expects us to make active choices about our church membership. If the true cause of our church membership is God's electing, rebirthing, recreating activity, what spiritual or theological resources do we have to make these choices? As to the second, pastoral problem, when "church choosing" becomes the norm, we are forced to face the questions I listed above: when is the preaching no longer good enough, when does the manipulation become too intense, when is the liturgy too annoying? Even if we always decide to "stick with it," a church-shopping culture constantly puts us to the test by confronting us continuously with the options of staying or leaving. If my argument is correct, we do not possess the resources to engage these options. So by confronting us with choices we are unequipped to make, voluntaristic church culture creates a pastoral problem that is at least as large as any problem created by a culture in which leaving is *not* an option.

A second important observation is that the nature of the question, "When can I leave?" is an expression of individualism. The question starts with the individual, with her relationship to the church. But in doing so it also puts the onus of church conflictedness on the shoulders of the

individual church member: *she* has to choose between the pain of staying and the pain of leaving. Instead, *medical way* ecclesiology starts with the church community. Doing so does limit the freedom of the individual church member, but it also puts the brunt of responsibility on the community rather than the individual. If God's covenant is the basis for the unity of the church, pastors and church leaders need to take full responsibility for the pastoral and spiritual well-being of all members of the congregation, including the ones with whom they disagree theologically. The implication is illustrated by what I wrote in the first chapter about the application of *medical way* theology to the polity of American mainline churches. I suggested we no longer write letters of transfer for members who want to transfer out because of a conflict, or accept people to transfer in because of conflicts or a perceived lack of resources in their congregation of origin. However, I also suggested that congregations express willingness to work through these issues with the unhappy members in a process of reconciliation and by sharing resources.<sup>4</sup> The primary responsibility for the (possibly painful) process of reconciliation lies with the church leadership and the wider church community, not the unhappy individual member. The church leadership is the stronger party; from these leaders, therefore, is more demanded.

Third, what if reconciliation does not work? What if a particular congregation moves on, and an individual member cannot move with it? This situation is, pastorally, spiritually, and psychologically, the hardest one to be in. It is the position in which many of the *medical way* adherents found themselves when the nineteenth century Netherlands Reformed Church was losing its theological identity. Nonetheless, they decided to stay. As with the prophets of Israel, the *medical way* stayed because they realized that being brought by God into a covenantal relationship trumps any experience of being spiritually underfed. They stayed because they

---

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1, pp. xx-xxx.

realized that, however hard it was to do so, Christ did not promise that following him would be easy. So they stayed, and they prayed.

### *The Missional Objection*

Thus far I have written rather negatively about church shopping and the marketplace model of American Christianity. But is this model not also a positive feature of American church life? Just as the competition of the marketplace forces companies to stay on their toes, could not the same be said about American churches? And in turn, would this feature not explain the vitality of American Protestantism? After all, the United States is unique among Western nations for its high rate of church involvement: 78.4% of all Americans claim to be Christian.<sup>5</sup> Compare this statistic to the situation in the Netherlands, where just a bit more than 50% of the population claims affiliation with a Christian church.<sup>6</sup> Maybe the high secularization rate of Europe in general and the Netherlands in particular is the result of its non-voluntary church model and the absence of a religious market place! Thus the missional objection to *medical way* ecclesiology. In addition, the argument often goes, *medical way* ecclesiology leads to internally highly divided churches. In a church governed by *medical way* ecclesiology both liberals and conservatives are members of the same denominational structure. What missional attraction do these churches have? What can be the witness of a church that is so internally divided about the content of the Gospel?

---

<sup>5</sup> See the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* by The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life (Pew Research Center, 2008), 5; available at: <http://religions.pewforum.org>.

<sup>6</sup> See *Religie aan het begin van de 21e eeuw* by the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Den Haag/Heerlen, 2009), 42; available at: <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/vrije-tijd-cultuur/publicaties/publicaties/archief/2009/2009-e16-pub.htm>.



In response to these objections I offer three comments. First, it is true that church membership and church attendance in Europe are very low compared to the numbers in America. Within the context of this argument, it would take an inordinate amount of space to analyze the causes of European secularization and church decline. However, I strongly suspect that the unusually high percentage of church membership in the United States ignores a secularization of Americans' common life that runs as deep and is as intense as the secularization in the rest of the Western world. For an illustration, one only has to look at the numbers of what the American religious right likes to call "personal lifestyle choices": divorce, abortion, and children born out of wedlock. According to the latest available numbers, in 2007 the divorce rate (per 1,000 members of the population between the ages of 15 and 64) was 5.4 for the United States but 2.9 for the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> In 2003, 23.8% of pregnancies (excluding fetal losses) in the U.S. were terminated by abortion, compared to 12.5% in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> In 2007, 39.7% of all American newborns were born out of wedlock; in the Netherlands, 39.5%.<sup>9</sup> These numbers suggest that, while Americans claim much higher church affiliation than the Dutch, when it comes to the way they organize their lives both groups are greatly secularized – and America even more so overall – according to these traditionally Christian criteria. And this is how secularization works: the Gospel loosens its grip on the way a generation lives even while that generation continues going to church; then the next generation, seeing that the behavior of their parents is not significantly different from that of non-churchgoers and concluding that

---

<sup>7</sup> See the numbers of the U.S. Census Bureau, available at <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s1300.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s0099.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See: [www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s1299.xls](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2010/tables/10s1299.xls).

churchgoing makes no difference, gives up on church membership. If this observation is correct, the United States is simply lagging behind the Netherlands and Western Europe generally.

However, suppose I am wrong, and the unique American religious marketplace does indeed benefit church membership by keeping churches and denominations “competitive.” Would this circumstance count against the ecclesiology I am proposing? It all depends on what you believe are the role and nature of the church. If the church is only a means to a goal – the goal being salvation, and salvation being about an encounter with Jesus – then the religious marketplace works. An overwhelming majority of the American populace professes the Christian faith. And while the religious marketplace has created a highly moveable church consumer (roughly 44% of all Americans now profess a religious affiliation that is different from the tradition in which they were raised<sup>10</sup>), this circumstance is not detrimental to salvation, because salvation is not about loyalty to a church body but about building up a personal relationship with Christ. On the other hand, however, if salvation is seen as the result of Christ’s eschatological work of gathering and reuniting the scattered fragments of humanity, the visible result of Christ’s work being the church, then the marketplace actually undermines the church, for the marketplace works against the reuniting activity of Christ. The marketplace doesn’t want churches to embody unity – it wants them to act as voluntary organizations competing for each other’s market share. So it may well be that the religious marketplace keeps church membership up, but it does not embody salvation. Thus, from a missional point of view, the marketplace is actually *unhelpful*.

Finally, then, can a theologically divided church be missional? Yes, it can. Our church may be suffering from deep and serious theological disputes, but it can nonetheless be missional in that, if even in these circumstances our churches do not let go of each other, their mutual

---

<sup>10</sup> See the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, 22.

forbearance witnesses to the fact that our communion is built, not on human agreements, but on God's gracious reaching out to us in our common baptism, that our salvation does not lie in our choices but in Christ's gathering and reuniting work. Thus, exactly in its powerlessness, such a church proclaims that our hope does not lie in our actions but in the living Christ alone.

### *The Ecclesiological Argument*

#### Medical ecclesiology and Rome's Siren

The concept of church unity I defend in this book is unusually high for Protestants. With the schism of the Reformation in our DNA, we Protestants live as though church divisions are a given of ecclesial life. My emphasis on church unity seems rather "catholic." That impression is confirmed once one realizes that the title of the previous chapter is a play on a saying of the third-century church father Cyprian of Carthage: "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus," outside the church is no salvation. Since Cyprian this policy has become a cornerstone of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. For instance, the Second Vatican Council says in *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the church: "This Sacred Council...teaches that the Church...is necessary for salvation.... Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by Christ, would refuse either to enter it, or to remain in it, could not be saved."<sup>11</sup> So quite often I hear this objection: "If you put so much emphasis on church unity, don't you think we should all go back to Rome? Shouldn't we all become Catholic?"

---

<sup>11</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 14. This position is repeated in the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 846 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 196–97.

The objection is not just a theoretical one. In the last decade or two, quite a number of both mainline and evangelical Protestant theologians have indeed swum the Tiber.<sup>12</sup> Some have been motivated by what they see as liberal tendencies in the mainline churches. Many of these theologians say their motivation runs deeper than that, though. They've been motivated by the lack of unity in and between their churches of origin. They complain about the denominationalism of Protestant churches, in which the preservation of our own institutions has become more important than seeking the unity of the church universal – a development contradictory to the motivations of the Reformers, who sought to reform the *catholica* as a whole, not to start a new church in addition to the church in which they were born. Further, these theologians point to the ecclesiological anarchism that seems woven into the fabric of Protestant church life. According to one convert's polemical description, Protestantism is "one long, continuous line of protesters protesting against their fellow protesters, generating thousands of denominations, para-churches, and 'free churches,' which are simply one-church denominations."<sup>13</sup> Coming from fractious Protestantism, such converts to Roman Catholicism do not see their move as a common switching of denominations but as a "coming home," an entering of a "fullness of faith" they found lacking in their Protestant denominations.<sup>14</sup> "Entry

---

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jason Byassee, "Going Catholic: Six Journeys to Rome," *The Christian Century* 123.7 (August 22, 2006) 18–23; Scot McKnight, "From Wheaton to Rome: Why Evangelicals become Roman Catholic," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 (2002) 451–72.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Cram in M. C. Grodi, *Journeys Home: The Journey of Protestant Clergy and Laity Come Home to the Catholic Church and the Coming Home Network International, a Lay Ministry Committed to Helping Them* (Goleta, GA: Queenship, 1997), 94–95; quoted in Scot McKnight, "From Wheaton to Rome," 467.

<sup>14</sup> Scot McKnight, "From Wheaton to Rome," 458–59.

into the Roman Catholic Church was Christ's way of...mercifully granting me the fulfillment of my baptismal vocation," as one of the former mainline Protestant theologians put it.<sup>15</sup> So don't my arguments in this book just add volume to the voice of the Roman Siren?

It is correct that Roman Catholic ecclesiology and the ecclesiology outlined in this book are both "high," as illustrated by our common use of Cyprian's saying. But the theological arguments motivating ecclesiologies are quite different. For Roman Catholic doctrine, Cyprian's saying is embedded in a theology of history. There is no salvation outside the Roman Catholic Church because salvation comes through a visible community that is constituted by the historical act of Christ's calling and sending out of the apostles. Or, as *Lumen Gentium* formulates the argument, salvation cannot be found other than in the visible community with the church's bishops and the Roman pontiff, who together are the stewards of grace and "witnesses to divine and Catholic truth," gifted as they are "with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit" passed down to them by the imposition of hands in episcopal consecration from the time of the original recipients of this gift – Christ's apostles – onward.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, for my ecclesiological proposals here, Cyprian's saying is embedded in a theology of covenant. There is no salvation outside the church because salvation comes to us through a visible community constituted by God's covenant with us in baptism. Salvation cannot be found elsewhere because salvation means that Christ's eschatological gathering and reuniting activity has reached us and knitted us into the new community called "church." Churches are constituted not by episcopal ties to a past event, but by God's covenantal redefining of our lives in baptism. Where this happens, there is church.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Marshall, formerly a member of the ELCA, as quoted in Jason Byassee, "Going Catholic," 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no. 26, 25, 21.

The result of these contrasting ecclesiological arguments is a different attitude toward Protestant churches. Roman Catholic ecclesiology asks Protestant churches to think *lower* of themselves. The Roman Catholic position holds that, given its historical heritage, there is a fullness to the Roman Catholic Church that Protestantism lacks. Protestant communities, even while they are made up of people who carry the name “Christian,” do not share in this historic apostolic succession; therefore, they miss a constitutive element of the church and cannot be called “churches in the proper sense.”<sup>17</sup> In contrast, my ecclesiological proposals ask Protestant churches to think *higher* of themselves. I am urging them to claim the name of church rather than of denomination. I am not asking them to become something different from what they are – as when Rome is asking Protestants to join the Roman Catholic Church – but to live into the reality of what they already are: communities established not by human choice or action, but constituted by divine covenant, by the eschatological work of Jesus Christ. In my account, the Protestant problem is not that we lack ecclesial fullness; our problem is that we live against the grain of who we are.

#### Medical Way Ecclesiology and the Marks of the True Church

In arguing that the church is established by divine covenant rather than the historic episcopate, *medical way* ecclesiology takes a different direction from Roman Catholic theology. But *medical way* ecclesiology also differs significantly from an ecclesiological strategy deeply influential in Protestant theology, namely, to try to identify particular marks that will help us differentiate

---

<sup>17</sup> Thus the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in their “Responses to some questions regarding certain aspects of the doctrine of the church,” issued June 29, 2007, and available at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20070629\\_responsa-quaestiones\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070629_responsa-quaestiones_en.html).

between the “false church” and the “true church.” The idea behind this strategy is that not every community calls itself “church” is a “true church”; a church community can disregard certain core practices or disbelieve certain essential doctrines that, as a result, make it “false” rather than “true.”<sup>18</sup> Christian believers are to hold church unity in high regard; nonetheless, they are to dissent from their church community if it has changed from being a true church into being a false church. In this way the Reformation, rather than an acting out of disobedience to the divine command of unity, is understood as an act of obedience to the call to leave a false church. In a most charitable interpretation, the American practice of church shopping can even be described as an intentional quest for a true rather than a false community.

The problem with this ecclesiological strategy is that to formulate what kind of churches are to be accepted as “true” and which ones are to be shunned as “false” is a very difficult task. The ecclesiology of one of the theologians who shaped my own Presbyterian tradition, John Calvin, provides a good illustration. In the course of his discussion of the church, Calvin tries to use the strategy of formulating the marks of the true church. It is telling that he is never able to nail down what these marks are.

Calvin starts his discussion by saying, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it

---

<sup>18</sup> For instance, see the comments on the marks of the church in *The Augsburg Confession* VII and the subsequent discussion in the *Apology* (*The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 42–43, 174–83), and the discussions of the marks of the true and the false church in *The Scots Confession* XVIII and *The Second Helvetic Confession* XVII (*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), part I: The Book of Confessions*, The Office of the General Assembly (Louisville, Ky., 2007), 19, 86–88.

is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”<sup>19</sup> One would expect Calvin to follow up with an exposition of what is it to preach the Word of God “purely” rather than impurely. But he never explains this notion and, interestingly, on the next page he drops the qualifier, refers to the receiving of the Word rather than its preaching, and adds a very strong admission to unity:

We have laid down as distinguishing marks of the church the preaching of the Word and the observance of the sacraments. These can never exist without bringing forth fruit and prospering by God’s blessing. I do not say that wherever the Word is preached there will be immediate fruit: but wherever it is received and has a fixed abode, it shows effectiveness. However it may be, where the preaching of the gospel is reverently heard and the sacraments are not neglected, there for the time being no deceitful or ambiguous form of the church is seen; and no one is permitted to spurn its authority, flout its warnings, resists its counsels, or make light of its chastisements – much less to desert it and break its unity.<sup>20</sup>

What seemed to start as a strong case for the separation of what is truly a church of God and what is so only in name, ends in a strong rhetorical condemnation of schism.

Calvin’s argument makes the same fascinating turn in the next section, where he continues by writing, “there is nothing that Satan plots more than to remove and do away with one or both” of these marks of the church. Sometimes, Calvin argues, Satan tries to seduce the faithful into contempt for the Word. Sometimes he makes the preaching of the Word completely disappear. But rather than telling his audience how to identify whether these

---

<sup>19</sup> John Calvin, *Institutiones* IV.I.9 (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, volume II, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1023).

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Institutiones* IV.I.10 (*Institutes*, 1024).



developments have occurred, Calvin continues with this warning: “But how dangerous – nay, how deadly – a temptation is it, when one is prompted to withdraw from that congregation wherein are seen the signs and tokens with which the Lord thought his church sufficiently marked.”<sup>21</sup>

The closest Calvin comes to helping his readers distinguish between churches true and false is when he introduces the notion of necessary articles of faith. “Every congregation that claims the name ‘church’ must be tested” on whether “in Word and sacrament it has the order approved by the Lord,”<sup>22</sup> he continues his argument. How would you know that the ministry of Word and sacrament in a given congregation is “pure”? By the adherents to “the articles of true faith,” some of which “are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion.” Which ones are those? “Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God’s mercy; and the like.”<sup>23</sup> But what articles of faith does “and the like” include?

The *medical way* theologian would argue that trying to separate the true church from the false church is just as difficult as separating the wheat from the weeds, to use Jesus’ image (Mt 13:24–30). The real problem with this approach is that it locates the criteria for determining a church’s truth or falsehood in the behavior of its leadership and members: their pure preaching of the gospel, their reverent listening, their attentive celebration of the sacraments, their adherence to a set of difficult-to-identify doctrines. Instead, the *medical way* theologian locates the truthfulness of a church not in human behavior but in God’s actions. A church is truly church simply because it is established by God – because its members are baptized. These

---

<sup>21</sup> John Calvin, *Institutiones* IV.I.11 (*Institutes* 1025).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Institutiones* IV.I.12 (*Institutes*, 1026).

members may be disobedient members who disregard the Scriptures, neglect the sacraments, disbelieve the church's doctrines. But they are nonetheless truly a church because their foreheads are marked by the sign of Christ forever.

### The Juridical Objection

If you are a person with "juridical" rather than "medical" leanings, you might at this point feel rather uncomfortable. The *medical way* theologian puts all her cards on unity, it seems. But isn't doing so embracing "unity" at the cost of "truth"? I have noted that especially many internet discussions on developments in the mainline churches quickly evoke this objection. For example, one objector insists that "Christian unity must be based on the truth of God's word or it isn't Christian unity at all."<sup>24</sup>

Does *medical way* ecclesiology sacrifice "truth" for the sake of unity? The first response the *medical way* theologian would give would be to say that Christian "truth" is not a set of correct doctrines or practices, nor is it actually to be identified with Scripture. Truth is a person: Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6). For the Christian community to hold on to the truth is to hold fast to this person and to hold on to what he says and does. I have argued in the previous chapter that at the heart of Christ's current, eschatological activity is his forging of unity – his gathering of the scattered fragments of humanity so as to knit them together into a new humanity, a new household of God. Thus truth and unity are not unrelated characteristics that can be emphasized separately, one at the expense of the other. Rather, there can be no truth without unity, for it is in the One who *is* the truth that "all things are gathered up, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10); it is the One who *is* the truth who has been made the head of all

---

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.pcusa.org/resource/belhar-confession>, a comment left by Viola Larson on July 16, 2010.

under whose feet all things are put (Eph 1:21–22). So when *medical way* theologians set themselves against schism and dissent, it is not for the sake of some idealistic notion of unity, but because in losing unity we lose the Truth by going against the eschatological gathering and reuniting activity of Christ, thereby putting our very salvation at risk.

“All right,” the juridical-leaning blogger may say. “But is there not also a separating aspect to Christ’s work? Does not Christ himself command his disciples sometimes not to seek unity but instead to distance themselves?”

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. [Mt 17:15–17]

“Does Paul not say that there are times when it becomes necessary to give over to Satan sinners from within the congregation?”

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father’s wife.... You are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.... Now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it

not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside.

“Drive out the wicked person from among you.” [1 Cor 5:1, 5, 11–13]

“Is it not because of these and other texts that the church has always used the instrument of church discipline, even if doing so breaks unity with someone?”

The *medical way* theologian may forward at least three responses. First, she may deny that the biblical passages quoted undermine a *medical way* ecclesiology. These passages are not as juridically cut-and-dry as her opponent may believe. For example, Jesus tells his disciples that sometimes they have to treat offenders as “Gentiles and as tax collectors.” It is difficult to read this saying without also remembering what treating someone as a tax collector meant for Jesus: “And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.... He said: ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.... For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners’” (Mt 9:10, 12–13). Likewise, Paul’s demand that the man sleeping with his stepmother be removed from the congregation is for (spiritually) medical, not juridical reasons: “so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.” Yes, the gospel sometimes demands not unity but separation; but it is separation with an eye to unity, with an eye to healing the sinner and to his reintroduction to the household of God.

Building on this argument, the *medical way* theologian may point out, secondly, that she no less believes in church discipline than her *juridical way* opponent does. The difference lies not the notion of discipline – the difference lies in the instruments used to bring the wandering sinner back to the flock. It may be good to remember that the nineteenth-century Dutch *medical way* theologians themselves were, for lack of a better term, “conservative.” They had a great love for the church’s traditional confessions. They were deeply distressed about what they perceived as the church’s “liberal” leanings, most concretely in the church’s refusal to take a

stance when one of its ministers confessed to being more influenced by Buddha than by Christ. They deeply longed for the healing of the church. They wanted to see a church that faithfully and joyfully confessed Jesus Christ as Lord. But they were also very much aware of what such a confession looks like. Confessing Jesus Christ does not consist in adherence to a set of truths, but to a person. Confessing Christ is therefore the expression of an interpersonal relationship.

But, they asked, how can we help people develop and nurture such a relationship? How can we help the church develop such a relationship? Not by gaining the majority vote in a synod meeting. Not by sending people to the ecclesial courtroom. Those things may help us get or hold on to power in the church, but they will do nothing to nurture the relationship the church is after. The *medical way* theologians believed, instead, that church discipline needs to use the very same means by which such a relationship is offered to us: by Word and sacrament. It is through these means that Christ reaches out to us. It is through the sacrament of baptism that we are being declared to belong to him. It is also through the administration of Word and sacrament (or, as church discipline sometimes rightfully does, through withholding them) that an individual sinner or a sinning community is enticed to the way of healing.

Thirdly, the medical way theologian may note that the real issue she and her juridical conversation partner have between them is not church discipline but schism. And for this dispute the scriptural passages referred to above are of little help. These passages lay out a way in which a church community can use means of healing discipline to remove temporarily a sinning member from the community. In the case of schism we are, however, dealing with a minority group who wants to leave the church body – not for the sake of healing in the body, but for the sake of its own confession.

Even here, the *medical way* theologian is not radically opposed to her *juridical way* conversation partner. In the first chapter of this book I indicated that there may indeed be

circumstances when even a *medical way* theologian sees no other way than to break the unity of the body of Christ. The acknowledged reason for church schism would be the refusal to confess Christ as Lord.<sup>25</sup> If the church's confessing is centered on its acknowledgment of the person of Christ as the truth, as the one Lord of all, there may be times when a church is so blatantly disobedient to that confession that, even while theologically it should still be understood as God's covenantal people (God's disobedient covenantal people!), a member's or multiple members' obedient confession of Jesus Christ will entail leaving the disobedient church rather than remaining in it. It is very difficult to mark exactly when such a moment will have arrived. And it is difficult exactly because "confessing" is not a juridical category but an expression of a wrestling for the truth. At what point does this wrestling need to be aborted for the sake of faithfulness? There may be one example in recent Western church history when that point came very close: the struggle between the German Christians and the Confessing Church during the Second World War. At that time, an important part of the German Protestant church, united in a group called German Christians, welcomed Hitler as God's gift to the German people and embraced the Nazi ideology of a racially pure nation as an expression of Christian truth. The Confessing Church, led by, among others, the theologian Karl Barth, resisted this ideology and in response drew up the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*. In it, the Confessing Church rejected any other lordship but the lordship Jesus Christ. In the end, even in this situation the Confessing Church did not leave. But could we not imagine a circumstance in which a church becomes so

---

<sup>25</sup> Chapter 1, pp. xxx-xxx

beholden to an ideology, a Fuhrer, an emperor, that our confession in Christ demands that we leave rather than to stay?<sup>26</sup>

This issue, however, is not the one that is currently at stake in the American mainline churches. Today most threats of schism come from conflicts about the blessing of same-sex marriages and the ordination of candidates involved in a gay or lesbian relationship. Until this point, I have not said anything about this particular issue for the simple reason that this book is about ecclesiology, not homosexuality. I am not about to change this direction, but for the reception of my argument it is important that the church's current disagreements and divisions about homosexuality not be misinterpreted. They are not disagreements concerning the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord; rather, they are the result of both parties' believing their particular position *is* an expression of the confession of Christ as Lord. Those who oppose the blessing and ordination of practicing homosexuals do so because they believe that Scripture explicitly forbids sexual relationships between people of the same gender, and that obedience to Christ entails obedience to this scriptural prohibition. But those who support same-sex blessing and ordination of practicing homosexuals also hold their position for the sake of obedience to Christ. They do not deny that Scripture contains the texts cited by opponents, but they do believe these texts must be reinterpreted in the light of the freedom given to us in Christ. And let us not forget – the idea that some very clear commandments of Scripture can nonetheless be reinterpreted in the light of Christ is a hermeneutical move that in principle is supported and shared by all partners in this conversation. For instance, Scripture is very clear that the seventh day of the week, our Saturday, should be honored as the sabbath. Scripture

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. "Barth, Barmen, and the Confessing Church Today" and "Where the Battle Rages: Confessing Christ in America Today," in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 60–113.

even anchors this command both in the order of creation and the history of God with Israel by telling us to keep the Sabbath holy, because it was on the seventh day that God rested from creation (Ex 20:11), and to honor the memory of God's liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt (Dt 5:15). Scripture nowhere tells us to drop celebrating the Sabbath celebration and take up the observation of Sunday instead. The first Christian community continued to meet on the Sabbath. Nonetheless, over time the Christian church almost unanimously adopted as its central day of celebration the first day of the week instead of the last day, thus reinterpreting the Sabbath commandments in the light of Christ and his resurrection on the first day of the week. It goes against the letter of Scripture, but, so the claim goes, it is hermeneutically correct. The current conflict in our churches is analogous: it is not about exegesis, it is not about the authority of Scripture, it is not even about confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. The conflict is about hermeneutics – it is about the question of what the lordship of Christ means for the biblical passages on homosexuality.

But if this analysis is true – if the conflict is not one about affirming or failing to affirm the lordship of Christ, rather, about what our confession of Christ implies – then it becomes all the more important that in the midst of the conflict, however deep and insurmountable it seems, we remember that it is the very same Christ who brought and holds us together as people who have been baptized in his death and resurrection and marked by his cross forever. The conflict about homosexuality cannot be conceived as ecclesially dividing for the simple reason that what motivates the opposing parties is rooted in the very thing that binds them together: their confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.



Still, eventually a church body in conflict makes a decision. The majority has its say; the minority loses. What the minority believes to be Christ's will is rejected; the opposite view becomes church law. What then to do?

Let us remember that if my analysis of the conflict is correct, each mainline denomination has such a minority party within its community. In each of the churches that recently changed its policy to allow for same-sex blessings or the ordination of gays and lesbians involved in a committed relationship, there is a group of faithful members who are disappointed, wounded, even despairing about how now to live out their faith in Jesus Christ. We usually call them "conservatives." But in those churches that have *not* made such changes, there are also groups of faithful members who are disappointed, wounded, and despairing about how to live out their faith in Jesus Christ. They are usually called "liberals." How are you to act if you are part of that disappointed, wounded, despairing minority?

Here it will be worthwhile to share some extensive quotations from an online article written by an individual in such a situation. David S. Yeago is a professor of theology at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary. His church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), decided at its 2009 Churchwide Assembly to allow the ordination of same-sex partnered candidates. Yeago, a declared opponent of this decision, writes about what to do "In the Aftermath" of this decision.<sup>27</sup> As a good Lutheran, Yeago went for guidance to Luther's writings, and in his remarks he focuses on Luther's exposition of Galatians 6:1–3, where Paul says: "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one

---

<sup>27</sup> David S. Yeago, "In the Aftermath: Reflections following the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly," published at: <http://lutheranspersisting.wordpress.com/david-yeago-in-the-aftermath>. The article has no page or section numbering.

another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves." Expounding these words, Luther writes that believers receive the Spirit in order to imitate the Spirit in the face of another's sin. Unlike Satan, the Accuser, the Spirit is the *Paraklētos*, the helper and advocate. For Christ's sake, the Spirit "excuses, extenuates, and completely covers our sins. On the other hand, He magnifies our faith and good works."<sup>28</sup> Applying this principle to the actions of the Churchwide Assembly, Yeago writes: "should we jump to describe the assembly's actions as deliberate 'heresy and crimes against the Holy Church' or should we regard them as 'failings of the weak,' a huge mistake by well-meaning but confused Christian brothers and sisters? What does it mean to 'put the best construction on my neighbor's actions' (Luther's Small Catechism) in this situation?" To answer his own question, Yeago continues to read Luther's argument that those whose burdens we are to bear are those whose faith is confused and those whose behavior is sinful. So Luther argues:

those who in order to become good flee the company of such people are doing nothing else but becoming the worst of all. And yet they do not believe this, because for the sake of love they are fleeing the true duty of love, and for the sake of salvation they are fleeing what is the epitome of salvation. For the church was always best when it was living among the worst people. For in bearing their burdens its love shone with a wonderful sheen....<sup>29</sup>

Luther then applies this line of thought to the question of church fellowship:

---

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," in *Luther's Works*, Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., (vol. 27; Concordia: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 388.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," 392.

As a result, the separation of the Bohemians [i.e., the followers of Jan Hus] from the Roman Church can by no kind of excuse be defended from having been an impious thing and contrary to all the laws of Christ, because it stands in opposition to love, in which all laws are summed up. For this solitary allegation of theirs, that they defected because of fear of God and conscience, in order not to live among wicked priests and bishops – this is the greatest indictment of all against them. For if the bishops and priests or any persons at all were wicked, and if you were aglow with real love, you would not flee. No, even if you were at the ends of the ocean, you would come running to them and weep, warn, reprove, and do absolutely everything. And if you followed the teaching of the apostle, you would know that it is not benefits but burdens you have to bear. Therefore it is clear that the whole glory of this Bohemian love is mere sham and the light into which an angel of Satan transforms himself (2 Cor. 11:14).<sup>30</sup>

The course of the Lutheran Reformation was largely consistent with this statement, Yeago writes. The Lutherans struggled to maintain unity and asked only to be tolerated in preaching the pure Word, and to that end they presented their Confession at Augsburg. From their perspective, at any rate, they did not leave – they were kicked out. Luther did not demand that Rome adopt the Protestant doctrine, only that such doctrine be allowed.

Luther than continues to give full weight to the Pauline notion of the bearing of each others burdens:

If there is anything in us, it is not our own, it is a gift of God. But if it is a gift of God, then it is entirely a debt one owes to love, that is, to the law of Christ. And if it is a debt one owes to love, then I must serve others with it not myself. Thus

---

<sup>30</sup>

Ibid..

my learning is not my own; it belongs to the unlearned, and is the debt I owe them. My chastity is not my own; it belongs to those who commit sins of the flesh, and I am obligated to serve them through it by offering it to God for them, by sustaining and excusing them, and thus, with my respectability, veiling their shame before God and men, as Paul writes in 1 Cor. 12:23 that those parts of the body that are less honorable are covered by those that are more honorable. Thus my wisdom belongs to the foolish, my power to the oppressed. Thus my wealth belongs to the poor, my righteousness to sinners. For these are the forms of God of which we must empty ourselves, in order that forms of a servant may be in us (Phil. 2:6), because it is with these qualities that we must stand before God and intervene on behalf of those who do not have them, as though clothed with someone else's garment, not unlike the priest, when, on behalf of those standing about, he sacrifices in a ritual garb that does not belong to him.<sup>31</sup>

Yeago comments:

Luther presents us with a very different approach to issues of purity, defilement and fellowship than that which became prevalent in the wake of the Reformation, which was all 'Get thee out of Babylon' and don't be defiled by going to church with heretics. Luther does not trivialize the difference between true and false teaching, right and sinful actions. False doctrine and sin are to be resisted and admonished. But the wrong of another is not seen as a reason to separate but a reason to draw near. My neighbor's wrong causes me to suffer —

---

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians (1535)," 393.

it is a burden for me to bear — and my better knowledge or better behavior are gifts given me for the sake precisely of my erring, sinning brother or sister.

Having thus laid the groundwork for a theological evaluation of the ecclesial situation in which he finds himself, Yeago continues:

I am far from having penetrated, in either my thinking or my practice, the depths that open up in Luther's reflections. And we may legitimately ask whether Luther himself always or even often modeled what he prescribed. But he has at the very least offered us an alternative to many more common ways of thinking about conflict and church fellowship. Personally, I must say, my conscience is caught in what he has written, and it is the background against which I've tried to think about how to live now, in the aftermath of the 2009 Assembly.

Foreseeing already the objections of his juridical brothers and sisters, Yeago closes his considerations with these words, which are again worth quoting at length:

"Still," it may be asked, "what is the point of staying on in a denomination that seems now to have committed itself irrevocably to a wrong path? What can traditionalists look forward to besides muttering on the sidelines as we dwindle and fade away?" Much depends, it seems to me, on what sort of success we think Christian witness should look for. Are traditionalists likely to rise up and sweep all before them in a grand triumph of orthodoxy? Doesn't seem likely, though God does strange things. I do recall something in the Bible about mustard-seeds. But are we promised that kind of victory if we're faithful? How about: "I" — as pastor or teacher — "stayed in the ELCA and as a result, in spite of everything, sinful human beings came to know the Lord who died for them and

found hope and began to learn love”? How about: “I” — as baptized believer — “stayed in the ELCA and learned hard but important things about being a disciple of Jesus?” Would that be sufficient “point” for staying in the ELCA?

Here is my dream for the future of traditional Christians in the ELCA. Instead of thinking of ourselves primarily as dissenters and opposition, let us ask God to make of us a movement of repentance and renewal, so that the continuing presence of traditionalists in the ELCA will be a blessing and an adornment for the whole church. Let us traditionalists be the ones who live most deeply in the Scriptures, who bring forth the bread of life most richly from the Scriptures, who let themselves be most drastically challenged and remade by the word of God, who live most intensely in prayer, who are able to teach prayer to others. Let us traditionalists be in the forefront of ministry among the poor, the apparently hopeless, the despised; let us be the ones who volunteer to go to the hard places. Let our revisionist brothers and sisters, let homosexual persons in the church, be conscious when they meet us mostly of how much we care for them, how far we are willing to go for them, of the respect and honor with which we treat them, despite our clear disagreement with aspects of their teaching and/or life.

### *The Soteriological Objection*

I would like to engage a final set of questions that amount not so much amount to objections as requests for elucidation. In the course of my argument I will use an expansive notion of

salvation. The biblical notion of salvation is much broader than “forgiveness of sin.” In the Bible salvation connotes God’s grand eschatological transformation of all things: God in Christ reclaims creation, recreates it, and leads it to its final goal, namely, the reign of God. Part of this transforming, recreating work is the formation of a new community, a new people, whose common life is the result of the resurrected Christ’s gathering, reuniting work. Having been drawn out from under the authority of the powers that be – political powers, socio-economic powers, powers of ethnicity, nationality, race, class, or gender – they now form the new, eschatological household of God. Being part of the church is therefore not a *means* to our salvation, a place where we get to hear about salvation as something that will happen to us elsewhere; rather, being part of the church *is* our salvation. To be saved means for Christ’s eschatological gathering work to reach us now by knitting us into the fabric of this new priestly nation called the church. Breaking away from the church, or breaking the unity of the church, therefore, puts our salvation at stake. To break the unity of the church is to go against the grain of Christ’s gathering and reuniting work; to break away from the church is to put oneself outside the social structures by and in which salvation is received and experienced.

I am often asked the question, “What does this view mean for our *eternal* salvation?” Salvation as described above clearly is not only something obtained in the hereafter. If what I am saying about salvation is correct, salvation comes to us already in the here-and-now, in Christ’s current gathering and reuniting activity, in the community of the church. If then this salvation can be jeopardized by leaving the community of the church, is it only the experience of salvation in the here-and-now that is threatened, or also salvation in the hereafter?

My response is usually that this same question can be asked of someone who interprets salvation in a much more narrow and common sense: as the forgiveness of sins. For we can also speak about forgiveness as received and experienced now, and as received and experienced in

the future at what is called the “last judgment.” Presumably, on this understanding, salvation can also be jeopardized. Consider that an individual may refuse God’s offer of forgiveness in the here-and-now. Does this refusal mean only that this individual does not experience God’s forgiveness now, or does it necessarily mean that this person has forgone God’s forgiveness eternally? Different answers are given to this question. For instance, many evangelicals would answer that those who do not accept Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior in the here-and-how will not receive God’s forgiveness at the final judgment for eternity. But someone with universalist leanings would answer that one’s disbelief in the here-and-now does not preclude the universal triumph of God’s love in the eschatological consummation of all things.

So returning to answer the original question, just, on a narrow understanding of salvation as the forgiveness of sins, differing accounts are possible concerning the relationship between refusing salvation in the here-and-now and the eternal fate of the refuser, likewise differing accounts are possible concerning this relationship on the more expansive understanding of salvation that I have advocated in this book.

If dissent or schism puts salvation at risk, is not the salvation of all at risk? The church of Christ is splintered beyond recognition. While in our local congregation or our particular denomination we may experience some of the life of a people gathered together as God’s new household, part of what it means to be an American Christian is to live in a competitive religious marketplace. Some of our congregations are remarkably diverse, but many are still painted with the powerful separating lines of race, economics, and politics. Does this reality not mean that we all live against the grain of Christ’s eschatological, gathering activity?

The answer is simply “yes.” We do live against the grain of Christ’s eschatological work, and thereby we do put our salvation at risk. It is not that salvation is not offered to us; it is here, it is available, and it can be seen and touched and embraced. But we do not live into it. We may



taste some of it in the context of our local congregation or denomination, but our divided ecclesial life prevents us from tasting it in its fullness.

It is not without reason that I ended this chapter with a section about salvation, for salvation is central to my argument. My case for church unity is not rooted in idealism – I am not pleading that we hold on to each other for, let us say, the beauty of diversity, or the survival of our denominations, or the peace of our churches. Diversity can be enriching but also deeply frustrating and confusing. I suffer no illusion that church unity makes church life easier. In fact, it makes life harder. But we are not in the church to make our lives easy, rather, to be saved. And part of God's saving activity is to forge a new people from very different stripes and backgrounds as a foretaste of the moment in which God will "gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). Church unity is an act of obedience to the saving intervention of God in our lives; that is, church unity expresses that we ourselves no longer attempt to define our lives and the lives of our communities, rather, we find life in losing it – losing it in Christ. What losing our lives in Christ means for the concrete, daily lives of our congregations I will discuss in the next chapter.