

Outside the (United) Church is No Salvation:

An Argument

In the previous chapter I asked the reader to engage with me in a “thought experiment” – that of entering the ecclesial world of the Dutch *medical way* theologians to see how it fits together, and then, enriched with the theological concepts and moves encountered there, to return to the American church to see whether any of those concepts and moves could help us in our current situation. I did not, however, offer an argument for why the *medical way* theologians might be correct in their approach to the nature of the church. I described their ecclesiology, but I did not defend it. It is to such a defense that I will now turn.

Two theological ideas implicitly carry the *medical way* ecclesiology. The first is an Augustinian understanding of faith, namely, that faith is not born of human action but is rather a divine gift. We do not decide to believe; rather, we find ourselves with belief. Similarly, the church as the community of those who believe is also a divine gift. The faithful cannot forge their community – they can only receive it. As a result of God’s gracious and creative act we find ourselves in communion, but we do not form it. The second idea that implicitly carries *medical way* ecclesiology is that the church is embedded in Israel; therefore, the ways in which God formed and structured ancient Israel also hold for the church. As God’s dealings with Israel were covenantal, so is God’s dealing with the church.

The first idea can be found, in different forms, in the confessional and liturgical documents of all American mainline churches, whether Presbyterian or Lutheran, Anglican or Methodist. This idea should, therefore, appeal to my mainline readers. The second idea, however, is the most explicitly ecclesial. In the course of my argument I will make a few comments about the former, but I will concentrate on the latter notion that the church is embedded in Israel, and therefore God’s covenantal ways of dealing with Israel should shape our understanding of what it is to “be church.” If this idea is true, we can easily see

why a *medical way* ecclesiology should follow. It would mean that the church cannot be seen as a voluntary organization because Israel was not a voluntary organization: one did not join or leave Israel at will. It would mean that we cannot accept a distinction between the invisible and the visible church, the Church Proper and the empirical denominational expressions thereof. With respect to Israel, such distinctions do not make any sense. There is no “visible” and “invisible” Israel. There is only this concrete, particular people marked out by an empirical, visible, bodily sign – circumcision – even if within this people there are both faithful and unfaithful, believers and unbelievers.¹ Finally, this idea would mean that even if we believe that the church has become unfaithful, it is not up to us to leave the church and “start over.” After all, many of Israel’s prophets found themselves in exactly the same position. Deeply disturbed by the sins of their fellow Israelites, they preached, both inviting and threatening, begging and thundering about returning to God. But no prophet preached starting over with a “dissenting” Israel, as though the purity of God’s people could thereby be protected or won. Instead they prophets hoped, they prayed, they wrestled with God for the renewal of their people. One even went so far as to marry a prostitute and father children by her so as to drastically illustrate what Israel’s God was going through in relationship to God’s people (Hos 1:2). But the prophets would not leave, for they knew that Israel as a people was not *their* creation, but *God’s*. And it was up to God to determine this people’s fate. As John Calvin put it in an earlier century:

Fearful are the descriptions with which Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Habakkuk, and others bewail the sickness of the Church of Jerusalem. In the people, the magistracy, and the

¹ George Lindbeck makes the same point in the context of a similar argument about the nature of the church in his essay “The Church,” in Geoffrey Wainwright, ed., *Keeping The Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi* (Philadelphia and Allison Park, Pa.: Fortress and Pickwick, 1988), 179–208. Cf. George Lindbeck, “The Story-Shaped Church: Critical Exegesis and Theological Interpretation,” in Garrett Green, ed., *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 161–78.

priests, all things had been so far corrupted that Isaiah does not hesitate to liken Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah (Isa. 1:10). Religion was partly despised, in part besmirched. In morals we everywhere note accounts of theft, robbery, treachery, murder, and similar crimes. The prophets, however, did not therefore either form new churches for themselves, or erect new altars on which they might have separate sacrifices. But whatever their countrymen might be, because the prophets considered that the Lord had set his word among them, and instituted the ceremonies by which he was then worshipped, they stretched out clean hands to him, though amid the company of the ungodly. Certainly, had they thought that they thereby contracted any pollution, they would have died a hundred deaths sooner than suffer themselves to be dragged thither. Nothing, therefore, prevented them from creating a schism, but their desire to maintain unity. But if the holy prophets felt no obligation to withdraw from the Church on account of the very numerous and heinous crimes, not of one or two individuals, but almost of the whole people, we claim too much to ourselves if we dare withdraw from the communion of the Church just because the lives of all accord not with our standard or even square with the Christian profession.²

In this chapter I make a multilayered case for the *medical way* ecclesiology. First I will argue that the *medical way* theologians are correct in seeing the church as embedded in Israel and therefore in understanding it as a covenantal rather than a voluntary organization. Next, based on the letter to the Ephesians, I will make a much stronger argument: The church is not accidental; rather, it is essential to salvation, so dissent and schism put salvation in jeopardy.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.i.18; quoted from the edition edited by John T. McNeil, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1033/4.

Third, I will argue that the community of the church is not only essential to salvation but is also the community for which we were created. Dissent and schism, therefore, not only threaten salvation – they work against the very essence of human existence. If these arguments hold, they teach us that the church is not, as so often thought, merely a means to the salvation that is Christ (let alone an accidental means, as though what is received through the church could also be found in another way), but that, when Christ gives us to partake in the salvation he made possible, this salvation takes the form of incorporation into his church as the newly forming people of God's Kingdom.

The Church Embedded in Israel

It is not difficult to show that, for the New Testament writers, those *goyim* who have come to Christ are now indeed incorporated into Israel. Of the numerous supporting passages in the New Testament, I will highlight three.

1 Peter

Writing to a Christian community consisting of gentile (non-Jewish) converts, the author of 1 Peter first points out that their conversion from former “ignorance” (1:14) and “the futile ways inherited from your ancestors” (1:18) is not the result of their own voluntary actions, but that they were “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his birth” (1:2). Their conversion is a new birth – “by his great mercy [God] has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the death” (1:3). No-one is an

active subject of one's birth; you do not do it yourself, but it happens to you. And because they have received a new birth, they now also have a new identity

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy [*hagion*] nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. [2:9,10]

"Chosen race" (Isa 43:20), "royal priesthood and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6), "once not a people, but now a people" (Hos 1:9) – these distinctives set Old-Testament Israel apart from the surrounding *goyim*. "The whole earth is mine," God claims in the Exodus text, "but you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples" – a nation that is different, a people with the unique calling to be God's priests among the surrounding nations. But now, as earlier in the days of creation when God brought forth light from darkness, God has also recreated the gentiles as honorary members of Israel. The members of 1 Peter's gentile audience are given a share in Israel's history, calling, and destiny.

1 Corinthians

The second text I will highlight comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul has received several reports about disunity in the congregation – a letter from a group around Chloe ("Chloe's people" [1:11]) a letter from the congregation itself (7:1). An important source of the disunity seems to have been the diverse social and cultural background of the members of the congregation. They were mostly converted gentiles; and while they had now become Christians, they still carried with them deeply ingrained pagan norms and beliefs concerning their status in life and society, norms and beliefs that resulted in the congregation's being split along the socio-economic class lines of the Roman Empire, in which they lived. Paul's response to this situation consists in challenging the members of the

congregation to a “conversion of the imagination.”³ Paul calls on them to rethink their inherited sociocultural norms and practices in the light of the fact that in becoming Christians, they have received a new identity. By becoming Christians, they are now embedded in Israel’s story and history; therefore, they are now one people, whatever their background and former status may have been.

Paul applies this strategy of converting the Corinthians’ imagination at the very beginning of his letter, when he addresses the Corinthians as “those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints [*hagioi*]” (1:2). In biblical language, to be “holy,” “a saint,” or “sanctified” does not mean to be an individual with special character qualities, as implied in our parlance; rather, it means to be set apart, to be made God’s people by God’s covenantal actions (cf. the earlier-referenced text from Ex 19:6). The Corinthian gentiles, coming from all kinds of different strata of Greco-Roman society, have now been made into one holy people by being incorporated into the story of God’s covenant with Israel. And Paul immediately applies this reality to some of the problems at hand. For one, the congregation has been torn apart by divisions (*schismata* [1:10]) because people are rallying around the names of various leaders and preachers. They declare themselves as “belonging to Apollos,” or “belonging to Cephas” (1:12), possibly because these people were the leaders who had baptized them (1:13–17). The situation brings to my mind the occasions on which I am asked whether our son and daughter, who have a Presbyterian father and a Lutheran mother, were baptized “Presbyterian” or “Lutheran.” Of course, they were neither – they were baptized Christian. But being baptized a Christian does not mean that “I belong to Jesus, but not to a church.” No, being baptized means that, because you belong to Christ, you also belong to the very concrete community of Christ, the covenantal community of the saints. Because of their *schismata*, the people in Corinth had lost sight of that community, so Paul implores them: “Now

³ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox, 1997), 11. Cf. his “The Conversion of Imagination: Scripture and Eschatology in I Corinthians,” in *The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 1–24.

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (1:10).

Another issue rooted in their differing socio-economic backgrounds consisted the eating of meat from animals sacrificed in pagan cults. Temple feasts at which such meat was served were regular events in Greco-Roman cities, and wealthier Corinthians partook in these feasts as part of their social life. They were the occasions for networking, for making connections.⁴ An important part of the Corinthian congregation argued that such participation should not be a problem, for after all, even if we consume food sacrificed to a pagan god, we Christians know that “no idol in the world really exists” (8:4). Pagan temple rituals are really acts without reference. But others in the congregation disagreed with these practices. They believed partaking in a cult devoted to idols, existing or not, does nonetheless lead one away from God. Paul answers with a very nuanced response – and the notion of a “conversion of the imagination,” the challenge to these converted pagans now to see themselves as part of Israel’s story, is not far away. Paul acknowledges the point made by the more lenient party by referring to a prayer central to the Jewish faith, namely, the *shema* (Dt 6:4), the confession that there is only one God – Israel’s God – albeit Paul reformulates the *shema* to include Christ (1 Cor 8:6). If there is only one God, as Israel claims, there exist no gods, represented by idols, to which food can be sacrificed. On the other hand, the Corinthian Christians should claim their newfound common identity as more important than their old Greco-Roman social ties. As Christians they are now members of one people; and because of the importance of their community, they should be willing to give up things that are “lawful” but not “beneficial” (10:23). Moreover, Paul argues, Israel’s God is a jealous God and does not want God’s people to associate with other powers, whether or not they actually exist . It is here that Paul makes most explicit his strategy of converting the Corinthians’ imagination: “I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters,” he writes, “ that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through

⁴ Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, 137.

the sea ... nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness,” after which Paul lists all the reasons why God’s judgment came down on Israel and then concludes, “These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, to whom the ends of the ages have come” (10:1–11). It is striking how Paul, in this letter to a mostly gentile congregation, writes about the Israelites who went through the wilderness as “our ancestors.” “His gentile converts, he believes, have been grafted into the covenant people (cf. Rm. 11:17–24) in such a way that they belong to Israel (cf. Gal. 6:16). Thus, the story of Israel is for the gentile Corinthians not somebody else’s story; it is the story of their own authentic spiritual ancestors.”⁵

Ephesians

The last passage I will address comes from the letter to the Ephesians. Here it becomes clear that Paul’s “conversion of the imagination” was not an ad hoc strategy to solve the problems in the congregation of Corinth: the writer of this letter uses the same theme, but even stronger language.⁶

Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have

⁵ Richard Hays, *First Corinthians*, 160.

⁶ I believe that it was Paul who wrote this letter – one of the last he penned to his congregations. If that is indeed the case, then Paul is now using the “conversion of the imagination” strategy for a wider audience. Most Pauline scholars, however, believe that Ephesians is the product of a later Pauline school rather than a letter written by Paul himself. If they are correct, my argument is strengthened, for it would mean that Paul’s move to understand his gentile converts as embedded in Israel had become ingrained in the theological discourse of a later generation of Christian writers. Since the authorship of the letter is accidental to my argument, I will refer to the letter’s author as “the writer.”

been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.... So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.... in [Christ] the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. [Eph 2:12–14, 19,21–22]

In Christ, the wall between Israel and the gentiles is broken down. The writer likely refers here to the balustrade in Jerusalem's temple separating the Court of the *goyim*, where non-Jewish visitors were allowed, from the inner courts and sanctuary. The balustrade bore this warning: "No man of another race is to enter within the fence and enclosure around the Temple. Whoever is caught will have only himself to thank for the death which follows."⁷ That is what it means to be an alien from the commonwealth of Israel! But now, thanks to Christ, the believing *goyim* have become fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household. Together, Jew and gentile, they form a new temple in which God dwells.

A New Humanity

As shown in the scriptural examples above, it is not difficult to find support for the notion of the *medical way* adherents that the church is embedded in Israel and that therefore we should treat church membership not as a voluntary action on our part but a divine, covenantal redefining of our lives. Paul's strategy of "conversion of the imagination" aligns exactly with the theological argument underlying the ecclesiology of the Dutch *medical way* theologians.

⁷ Quoted in Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 141.

However, the last quoted document, the Letter to the Ephesians, seems to make an even stronger claim. To see this claim, it is helpful to read the letter as a whole; yet in what follows, I will only be able to outline the main thrust of the letter's argument.

Ephesians opens with the writer's taking a wide view. He does not start with the Ephesian people and their experience of converting to Christ. He does not even start with God's covenant with the people of Israel. The writer goes much farther back, beyond Israel, beyond even the moment of creation, to narrate the story of Christ and his people from the perspective of God's eternal decision:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

[1:3–6]

What we see happening in events such as the incorporation of gentiles into Israel's story is not the result of the contingent unfolding of history, but rather of God's making "known to us the mystery of his will ... as a plan for the fullness of time." And what was the content of that plan? "To gather up all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (1:9–10) – a plan that God executed by putting God's "power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above the rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (1:20–23).

Having made this claim, the writer continues his argument with a long description of Christ's work, from which description came the passage I quoted previously: in Christ the dividing wall between

Jew and gentile is broken down, and Christ has brought near those who once were far away, so that Jew and gentile are joined together to form a new humanity (2:15) knitted and fitted together to be a temple for God.

The author of Ephesians declares that Paul's calling has been to proclaim this mystery – and proclaim it with a particular purpose:

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. [3:8–10]

Having made this claim, the writer formulates the application:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.... [4:1–6]

In other words, the letter makes the claim that the difference Christ's makes, the reason Christ came among us, the salvation he brings, is not just to bring reconciliation between God and human beings; it is also, and even primarily, to "gather up all things" into himself, to create a "new humanity," a new "household of God." And if that purpose is true, then the church is not just an accidental vehicle of salvation, the means by which we get to hear about the love of God for us in Christ. No! For *being gathered to the church is one's salvation*, so church dissent and shism, which oppose Christ's work of gathering, of knitting and fitting together this new structure, put salvation at stake. It is unpacking this

surprising claim in the wider context of the New Testament narrative that I will now concentrate in the remainder of this chapter.

“The Kingdom of God has come near!”

When I teach the required class in Christology at my seminary, I usually start by sketching for my students the three ways in which, according to the biblical narrative, God relates to that which is not God. The narrative tells us, first, about a God who calls into being everything else that exists. Second, it tells us that God not only gives creation existence, but God also cares for creation by leading it to a final goal – what theologians call “the eschatological consummation” of all things. And third, the narrative tells us how, when humans wander away and alienate themselves from God, God reaches out to them and reconciles them to Godself. These three ways of divine relating are interrelated but distinct, and they do not necessarily imply each other. After all, God could have called creation into being but also have decided not to give creation the superabundant grace of an eschatological consummation. Likewise, when human beings wander away from God, God could decide to leave them in their sin, decide not to reach out to bring them back to God.⁸

Having laid out this framework, I then ask my students, “In this threefold way of divine relating to that what is not God, where do you situate Jesus?” After some thinking, most will say they think about Jesus primarily or exclusively in terms of the third way: Jesus is the one in whom God reconciles the world to himself.

My students probably typify how most of us think. We conceive of Jesus in terms of sin and forgiveness, of atonement or reconciliation. However, while this conception is certainly one way in

⁸ For an extensive reflection on these three ways of divine relating and their connections, cf. David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 120–31.

which the biblical narrative speaks about Jesus, it is not the only way, and it certainly does not exhaust fully the difference Jesus makes.

Think about the way Jesus presents himself. For instance, when the Gospel of Mark summarizes the content of Jesus' own preaching, it does not portray him as going around the hills of Judea and Galilee asking people to be reconciled to God through Jesus' death on the cross. Instead, Mark has Jesus proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God: "...Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God ["good news," Greek *euangelion*, "gospel"], and saying: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mk 1:15).

The "kingdom," the reign of God, is the term the prophets of Israel used for the final goal of creation. That goal consists in the moment when God will take on the powers that be, when God will reclaim and recreate creation, when people will finally flourish, and when creation will bathe in God's glory – when, as Amos says, "justice will roll down as waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Am 5:24).

When in teaching my students or preaching in church I try to find a concrete image for these abstracts words, I will often read the Gospel passage about an early moment in Jesus' ministry, a moment in which Jesus preaches in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,

To let the oppressed go free,

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Luke 4:16–19]

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor... "The year of the Lord's favor" refers to a passage in the book of Leviticus (chapter 25). There God is telling Israel how to organize their life in the new land of Canaan. They are to divide the land among themselves, work on it, and enjoy the fruits thereof. However, every seventh year they are to give the land a rest; they are neither to sow nor to harvest, but instead are to live that year in thanksgiving to the Lord. God will give them such an abundant harvest in the sixth year that they will have enough not only for the sixth, but also for the seventh year. Moreover, after seven times seven years they are to celebrate yet another year of thanksgiving to the Lord – "the year of Jubilee," or what the prophet Isaiah later calls "the year of the Lord's favor." In this fiftieth year they are not only neither to sow nor harvest, but are also to release all their slaves; and they are to forgive one another all their debts and return to the poor the land the latter had had to sell in order to survive. This year is a year set apart by God for the release of all who are poor, all who are suffering under debts, all who had moved to the fringes of society.

We do not know whether the Israelites ever really organized their economic life in this way. But we do know that, over time, the notion of the Jubilee became an image of the coming reign of God – of how God would one day, the day of God's reign, reclaim creation from the powers that be, the powers that have organized creation in a way contrary to God's will; how God would heal and transform all God's handiwork; how God would give out of God's bounty an abundance, a richness, a freedom, and a grace that would go far beyond even the gifts of creation.⁹

⁹ For a recent study of the year of Jubilee and its history, see John Sietze Bergsma, *The Jubilee from Leviticus to Qumran: A History of Interpretation*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum 115 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

This day, says Jesus, this day of the Lord's favor, this recreating reign of God, is upon us. It is about to break into our history. And indeed, Jesus' own ministry seems to be shaped by a grace and abundance that exceeds all imagination: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the demoniacs are released; five loaves become a meal for thousands, empty jars are filled with wine, surprised fishers cannot lift their overflowing nets, lepers are made clean, women are lifted up, outcasts are invited, feet are washed, graves are opened, the dead are raised. The kingdom of God has come near!

For our purposes, I would like to highlight four elements of this phenomenon. First, "the Kingdom of God" is an eschatological category. It is the term we use for the moment when God realizes the final goal of creation. If Jesus' ministry is characterized by the preaching and enacting of this Kingdom of God, his ministry is, therefore, primarily eschatological. In making this claim, I am in no way denying that Christ is also the one through whom we receive atonement and reconciliation with God. But I do want us to become aware that Christ's ministry is richer, more encompassing than a ministry of reconciliation only; for Christ's atoning work is embedded in the much larger framework of the inauguration of God's reign. To put it differently, that in Christ we also receive reconciliation is an implication of Christ's eschatological work. Given our sinful situation, we need to be reconciled before the Kingdom of God can be consummated. But reconciliation to God is thereby also the means to a goal and, as such, is secondary to Christ's eschatological inauguration of God's reign.

Second, to speak of God's reign is not to speak of something that is primarily individual, private, or internal; rather, it is to speak of an altered set of relationships and allegiances, of the formation and recreation of a new community. This notion is what both the year of Jubilee and the Isaiah text read by Jesus entail: human beings no longer relate to each other as debtor and lender, as captive and captor, as oppressed and oppressor, but as inhabitants of God's reign. Each of these relationships is fundamentally changed, and what makes this change possible is the abundance and generosity of God, whose eschatological healing, whose transformative and recreative acts forge new structures – religious, social,

political, economic – in which human beings revive and flourish. Just as the Jubilee shaped the life of a whole nation, so also God’s eschatological reign does not only change individuals but, first and foremost, forms a new people with a new common life.

Third, the Kingdom of God is not some otherworldly reality; it is the future of *this* creation. There is a strong tendency in Western Christianity to spiritualize both Jesus’ ministry and the coming Kingdom, as though Jesus came just to save souls rather than human beings, and as though our eschatological destiny were a disembodied heaven rather than a recreated earth. Becoming aware of the Jubilee dimension of Jesus’ ministry can guard us against such an impoverished reading of the gospel. The idea that, in the end, the Creator God would give up on part of creation – the material part – rather than save and renew it all does not fit Israel’s creed that *all* of creation, including the material, is the product of God’s handiwork and was good in God’s eyes. Creation, this concrete, material, physical creation, will not be abandoned but rather flooded with God’s justice and peace (Isa 11:6–9). And this future is indeed reflected in Christ’s eschatological ministry: whereas he does forgive sins (see, for example, Mt 9:2) and engages searchers in questions of the soul (for example, Nicodemus’ wonderings, the Samaritan woman’s thirst), his hands also feed real hunger and heal real bodies, and his words make a corrupt tax collector compensate his overcharged victim fourfold and return a dead son to his widowed mother, thus restoring her only hope of income and protection in a patriarchal world.

Fourth and finally, the coming reign of God also has a political dimension. The very notion of “kingdom” and “reign” should already clue us in to this dimension – after all, these terms are political. But so are the notions of “captives” and “oppressed” used in Jesus’ reading from the Isaiah scroll. Ancient Israel and the Mediterranean world did not use imprisonment as a form of punishment. Prisoners were not common lawbreakers, but either prisoners of war, political adversaries, or defaulting debtors constrained to forced labor until their debts were paid off. The proclamation of a peaceable kingdom in which such captives are set free must have deeply resonated with a people exhausted by

wars of occupation and financial distress. For centuries Israel had lived under foreign rule, first by the Babylonian Empire, then by the Persians, followed by the Greeks, and now the Romans. And while in the United States we may admire the ancient Romans for their building projects and political ingenuity – we even called the central institutions of the nation, the Senate and the Capitol, after theirs – in reality the Romans ran a harsh military regime, the costs of which came down on the inhabitants of the occupied territories – such as Judea and Galilee. Taxes were high, so high that the small farmers and fishermen of Israel’s countryside often had to take out loans on a year’s harvest to meet their obligations – which situation, of course, meant that the following year they faced the current year’s tax plus the payback of the previous year’s loan. As we now know, foreclosures and bankruptcy were rampant.¹⁰ In such a n economic climate, the proclamation of the inbreaking Kingdom of God is not only religious gospel, it is political good news to boot.¹¹

Jesus Christ, the Resurrected and Ascended Lord

¹⁰ See, for instance, Richard A. Horsley and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Message and the Kingdom: How Jesus and Paul Ignited a Revolution and Transformed the Ancient World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 25–26, 46–47, 150.

¹¹ My sketch of Jesus’ inauguration of God’s eschatological reign obviously resonates with the work of N. T. Wright and John Howard Yoder. For the former, see, among many publications, especially *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) and *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008). For the latter, see *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994). I depart from the latter in that I believe that Yoder’s understanding of the Christian community as a believers’ church based on the voluntary commitment of its members does not take into account the ecclesial implications of the *structural* nature of God’s reign. For this critique, see my “The *full* politics of Jesus? A conversation with John Howard Yoder” (forthcoming).

When God's reign is being inaugurated the poor are lifted up, the captives released, the oppressed set free, for God takes on the powers that be and reclaims and recreates God's creation. That is what Jesus preached. And then those very same powers, whose end had supposedly come, take Jesus, put him on trial, and nail him to a cross – a brutal form of execution reserved only for those who undermined the power of the state, a form of torture designed to terrorize an occupied population and preempt challenges to the Empire.

The disciples' world falls to pieces. They thought Jesus was the Messiah, the one through whom God's reign would be inaugurated – but they were wrong. A dead Messiah is no Messiah. A dead Messiah is nothing more than one of those many would-be leaders who roamed first-century Palestine, a pseudo prophet whose premature death revealed the emptiness of his claims. And so the disciples huddled together in a house and barricaded the door (John 20:19). With Jesus arrested and executed, will they not soon follow? "We had hoped that he was the one to set Israel free" (Lk 24:21). But it was not to be.

Resurrection

Until Resurrection morning. On that morning, it turned out that the disciples' world had indeed fallen to pieces. Their lives had been changed forever – but not by the brutal force of the executioner, rather, by the victorious presence of the one who entered their barricaded house and their terrorized hearts and greeted them: "Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19).

It is fascinating to read the ways in which, according to Luke's account in the book of Acts, the disciples witnessed to their newborn trust in Jesus in the first weeks after Easter. If Jesus' preaching had been about the inbreaking Kingdom of God, the disciples' proclamation all turns on the resurrection. "You that are Israelites," Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost,

Listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. [Ac 2:22–24]

And again, having just healed a man in Jesus' name, Peter's says,

You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. [Acts 3:12–16]

And again,

Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone." There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. [Acts 4:8–12]

Of course, proclaiming the inauguration of the Kingdom and preaching the resurrection are one and the same. In Jewish understanding, resurrection was an eschatological event. It meant entry into the life of the Kingdom, entry given to the living and the dead alike at the final consummation of all things.¹² Thus, when Jesus was resurrected, it was not simply a matter of God's "bringing Jesus back to life," but of God's doing exactly what Jesus proclaimed was about to happen: the Kingdom of God was breaking into our world, and God was making good on the promises of a new creation, of a superabundant life under the reign of God. In other words, Jesus' resurrection *is* the inauguration of the Kingdom – it is "the first fruits" (1 Cor 15:23) of the world to come. Here the new creation has taken a foothold, right in the midst of our history! This is the context in which the disciples proclaimed the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, as is illustrated by a telling passage early in the book of Acts where the priests, the leadership of the temple, and the Sadducees, those who had been responsible for Jesus' trial, are said to be "much annoyed because [the disciples] were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (Ac 4:2). These religious leaders were not annoyed at the teaching, "Jesus was resurrected," but at the teaching that in him is *the* resurrection of the dead — that is, the final, eschatological moment in which, as Jesus had been proclaiming, God makes good on God's promise of the final consummation of all things.

God does make good on the promises of the superabundant life under the reign of God. And God does so by raising Jesus from the dead in *bodily* form. On the one hand, there is clear discontinuity between the Jesus of before the resurrection and the Jesus after that event. The resurrected Jesus is one who is not immediately recognized – Mary thinks he is the gardener (Jn 20:15), the two men on

¹² For a discussion of the history of Israel's belief in the resurrection, see Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2006), and Kevin J. Madigan and Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press, 2008).

their way to Emmaus recognize him only when he breaks bread with them (Lk 24:31; cf. Jn 21:4, 12). The post-Easter Jesus has a command of space different from before his resurrection: he is able suddenly to appear in the midst of his disciples (Lk 24:36; Jn 20:19, 26; note, however, that these texts nowhere suggest that Jesus passes through the solid walls or door, as popular understanding has it). Likewise, Jesus suddenly vanishes from their midst (Lk 24:31). But on the other hand, the New Testament emphasizes that while Jesus' resurrected body seems to be transformed, it is nonetheless continuous with his pre-resurrection body in that it is physical. Jesus shows Thomas the marks of the nails and spear visible in his body (Jn 20:27). John writes about Jesus eating fish with his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:9–13). Likewise, Luke tells us that when the startled disciples believe the resurrected Jesus to be a ghost, Jesus first tells them to touch him so that they can feel his flesh and bones; and when they still disbelieve, he asks for food and eats a piece of fish before their eyes (Lk 24:42–43). Ghosts do not eat fish. There is no place for the fish to go.

“Sown in dishonor, but raised in glory. Sown in weakness, but raised in power. Sown a body animated by the soul, but raised a body animated by the Spirit” as Paul writes (1 Cor 15:43–44), and that phenomenon is exactly what we see in the resurrection of Christ.¹³ Christ is raised in bodily form, but his

¹³ Of course, the standard translations of this verse give us a translation exactly opposite to the point I am making: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body,” as the NRSV has it, which makes many a reader think that Paul tries to describe Jesus' resurrected body as exactly opposite to the material nature of his pre-resurrection body. However, Paul's Greek says something else. Not only does Paul contrast, not the physical and the spiritual but rather, the soul and the Spirit (he speaks of *soma psychikon* vs. *soma pneumatikon*), he also uses words that express, not that from which something is formed, but that by which something is animated. Cf. the discussion in N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 347–56. Nonetheless, that Paul in both cases thinks about two physical, material bodies is confirmed by the way this verse is introduced: Paul compares the contrast between Jesus' body before and after his resurrection with the contrast between the

body is renewed, recreated, richer, more glorious than it was before. And as such he is “the first fruit of those who have died” (1 Cor 15:20), the embodied promise of the consummation of the Kingdom of God.

Ascension

Ascension Day has all but in name disappeared from the Christian calendar. Few mainline churches will have a church service on this day (the second Thursday before Pentecost), and if they do, the attendance will be low. People might know that Christ’s ascension is part of the Christian creed, but that event does play any role in their life of faith.

How different in the early church! A careful reading of the New Testament shows that references to the ascension almost outnumber references to the resurrection. Not only is Christ’s ascension the linchpin to Luke’s two-volume work on Jesus ministry (Luke tells the story twice – both at the end of his Gospel [Lk 24:44–53] and at the beginning of Acts [Ac 1:6–11]), but Jesus’ ascension is also mentioned in nearly every document of the New Testament.¹⁴ What is remarkable about these references is that, while for many of our contemporaries one of the first associations with Jesus’ ascension is the notion of Jesus’ absence, in the New Testament the first association is one of Jesus’ presence – presence because in the New Testament the ascension means Christ’s assumption of power.

materiality of the sun and stars and the materiality of earthly objects. According to the physics of his time, all of these objects are material, but they have materiality of a different kind.

¹⁴ See, for only a limited selection of texts, Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 275–77.

Ascension is equivalent to a royal accession to the throne.¹⁵ Jesus' ascension is the moment that Christ is taken into the divine throne room in heaven and receives the invitation to seat himself at God's right hand – in scriptural language, the image of the place of power. The ascension is, therefore, also and primarily a political moment. Whereas Christ's resurrection implies that the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated, his ascension means that Christ is now the one in charge, the King of the kingdom. He is the one defeating the powers that be and leading creation to its eschatological consummation. This picture is perhaps most clearly expressed in the famous passage from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, in which Paul describes how God responds to Christ's obedience, obedience even to suffering death on a cross:

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [Phil 2:9–11]

The name above every name – that is, as the end of this passage says, “Lord,” (*kurios*). This name has a twofold cultural background. In Scripture, this name is that of God. The practice of calling God “Lord” goes back to Greek-speaking Jews who sought to avoid pronouncing God's holy covenantal name, YHWH, by using a replacement: “Lord” (*kurios*). In applying to Jesus the name of Israel's God, the New Testament makes a startling statement about Jesus' identity: in Jesus, it is none other than God who has become present among us. But “Lord” (*kurios*) is also a significant term in the *Graeco-Roman* world, for

¹⁵ In this respect, it is telling that Psalm 110:1 (“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool’”) is the Old Testament text which appears most often in direct quotations or in indirect references in the New Testament. Cf. Martin Hengel, “‘Sit at My Right Hand! The Enthronement of Christ at the Right Hand of God and Psalm 110:1,” in Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995), 119–226.

it is the title of the Roman emperor, who is said to be the *kurios* of this world. In proclaiming Christ rather than Caesar to be Lord, with one word Scripture takes on the center of the Empire. Caesar is a man of the past, a representative of a power that has seen its day. The future is Jesus. For the writers of the New Testament, therefore, the ascension, rather than being a cause of grief about an absent Christ, is a source of joy and confidence. They know themselves living in eschatological time: with Easter Morning and Ascension Day behind them as the inauguration of God's reign, they live in joyful obedience to a Lord who is at work to bring about the full consummation of that reign.

Ephesians, again

It is now that we are ready to return to Ephesians to understand what is going on in that letter. It is *an extended meditation on the eschatological work of Christ*. That is, the letter does not so much concentrate on the work that Christ did in the past, but on the work that Christ does in the present and will do in the future. The emphasis is not on the work that is completed – atonement, reconciliation – but on the work that Christ is still undertaking – leading creation to its eschatological consummation. And the nature of that consummation is that “all things are to be gathered up into Christ, things in heaven and things on earth” (1:10). In the power of his resurrection (1:20) Christ is at work, as the letter says, to reunite the scattered fragments of humanity into the household of God (2:19), “fitting and joining everything together” into “a new humanity” (2:15). For as we have seen, that new humanity is the shape of the Kingdom: a new community, an altered set of relationships and allegiances, a new people with a common life.

Salvation, according to Ephesians, means that this fragment-gathering, reuniting work of the resurrected Christ has now also reached “*you and me*”; that we too are being knitted into this new humanity, that in our baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have become part of God's eschatological people (1:11–14). But in turn this reality means that the church is not accidental to

salvation, that the church is not the place where we receive what we could just as well get on our own. Instead, the opposite is true: *the church is the visible result of this gathering, reuniting work of the resurrected Christ*. Here this new humanity, this household of God receives form and shape. In other words, the church is not a means to salvation, rather, being gathered to the church *is* our salvation.

As this gathered, reunited community the church is the visible sign to the powers that be that their time is up (3:10).¹⁶ Powers that have established their grip on people by pitting one group against another – political powers, socio-economic powers, powers of ethnicity, nationality, race, class, and gender – are conquered by Christ, not so much by a direct confrontation but because their subjects have been drawn out from under their authority. Against a united church, the authority of the powers that be is empty.

It is for all these reasons that the letter exhorts the Ephesian Christians to preserve their unity. To leave the church, to dissent from it, to split it, would be to work against Christ's gathering and reuniting activity. At best, it would be to give the powers hope that their time is not running out after all; more likely, however, it would be again to bring oneself under the rule of the powers that be rather than the lordship of Jesus Christ. One only has to look at how many a denomination or church in the United States is, in fact, a reflection of ethnicity, race, or class as much as of a particular confessional

¹⁶ It is important not to interpret the powers and authorities mentioned in Ephesians (1:10, 21; 3:10; 4:8) as exclusively spiritual and heavenly rather than also as material and earthly. The letter's utterances about powers go back to Jewish apocalyptic thought, which holds that to such powers and principalities there is simultaneously an earthly, visible side and a spiritual, invisible side. It is in this context that we should read the letter's pronouncement that both the heavenly and the earthly entities are subject to Christ (1:10). For a discussion of the language of powers and principalities with references to other literature, see Markus Barth, *Ephesians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1974), 170–76.

identity. But most importantly, if salvation is to be knit into the fabric of the new humanity by Christ's gathering and reuniting work, then to split the church is to put salvation at stake.

A Plan from before the Foundation of the World

There remains one element in the argument of Ephesians that we have not yet explored. According to the letter, Christ's eschatological gathering activity not only determines the future; it is also deeply rooted in the past. The gathering of everything into Christ, says the letter, is the content of a divine plan – a divine plan that far preceded Jesus' ministry, that preceded the history of Israel, and that even preceded creation and "the foundation of the world" (1:4). In other words, the letter suggests that God's desire to gather all things into Christ preceded even God's decision to create anything at all. But if this statement is true, it means that the church, as the first fruits of Christ's gathering work, is not only essential to salvation but also to our lives. In this picture, God did not first create us and only thereafter decide to gather us and all creation into Christ; rather, we were created *in order* to be gathered into Christ – and therefore to be knitted into the fabric of this new community, the community that has become visible in the church. For this purpose we were born; from before we ever saw the light of day, this purpose has been the goal of our lives. But again, if this understanding is true, then leaving the church, causing a schism, breaking the bond of peace, not only works against Christ's reuniting, gathering activity, it actually works against the very goal for which we were created.

To understand what Ephesians is saying here, recall God's threefold manner of relating to that which is not God – God's relating in creation, in leading creation to eschatological consummation, and in reaching out in reconciliation when creatures wander away from God. Earlier I observed that most of us tend to locate Jesus in the third manner of divine relating, namely, in Christ God reaches out to us in reconciliation. I argued above that this is too narrow an understanding of Christ's ministry, for Christ is also and primarily the one in and through whom God leads creation to its final goal, the Kingdom of

God. But Ephesians makes a further claim: God's first way of relating to that which is not God – in the act of creation – happens with an eye to the second way of relating, namely, the eschatological consummation, in which Christ takes the central place. In other words, when God creates, God creates with creation's goal already in mind; and creation's goal is from the very beginning the gathering of all things into Christ. Christ is not a Johnny-come-lately, one who was added to the divine plan once creation was estranged from God in sin; rather, everything has been created *for* Christ. The Letter to the Colossians makes exactly this point: “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:15–17).

At the heart of such an understanding of the place of Christ is, I believe, the notion that the goal of creation is friendship with God. God called us and all of creation into being so that we would be God's friends; and in this relationship of friendship God comes to us as close as God can, namely, by becoming a human being. In Christ, the incarnate Word, God is no longer a voice from afar, one who speaks to us from behind a burning bush or a pillar of cloud, but God in our midst, visible, tangible, with a human face and a human voice, so that God can be seen, touched, and heard.¹⁷ This divine friendship, this

¹⁷ I have written extensively about this understanding of the incarnation in my *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). In relation to the argument above, see especially chapters 1, 7, and 8. It might be important to point out that, just as my earlier argument for the importance of Christ's eschatological work does not deny the fact that Christ is also the agent of atonement and reconciliation, likewise the idea that the goal of the incarnation is God's intimate presence with God's friends does not deny that once these creatures become sinners rather than friends, God also reconciles these sinning friends through the incarnate Christ. In other words, my argument does not deny that we receive

intimate presence of our Creator has been the goal of creation from the very beginning, as shown in the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians. So the community in which this friendship is experienced and expressed is, from before the foundation of the world, the goal of our lives.

Conclusion

The *medical way* theologians believed that the church is not a voluntary organization but instead is constituted by divine covenant, and that church membership is not a voluntary action on our part but instead is a divine, covenantal redefining of our lives. Because of these truths, the communion of the church cannot be broken at will.

In this chapter, I developed three theological arguments to support the *medical way* ecclesiology. The first argument explicated an idea embedded in the work of the *medical way* theologians: the church is embedded in Israel, and therefore God's covenantal ways of dealing with Israel should shape our understanding of what it is to "be church." It is not difficult to show that indeed the writers of the New Testament approach the newly formed Christian community in this way. Gentile believers are urged to a "conversion of the imagination": born as *goyim*, they are now ingrafted into Israel and are to see themselves as sharing in Israel's covenantal inheritance. From this point it is easy to see how a *medical way* ecclesiology follows. The church cannot be seen as a voluntary organization, because Israel is not a voluntary organization: one does not join or leave Israel at will. We cannot accept a distinction between the invisible and the visible church because, with respect to Israel, such a distinction does not make any sense. Finally, even if we believe that the church has become unfaithful, it is not up to us to leave the church and "start over," for like Israel, the community we belong to was not gathered by us but by God.

reconciliation through Christ, but it says that there are more and deeper reasons for God's act of incarnation, the central one being God's desire to engage us in friendship.

While my first argument is an extrapolation of ideas explicitly appealed to by the *medical way* theologians themselves, my second argument goes beyond *medical way* ecclesiology. Taking my cues from the letter to the Ephesians, I argue that the church is essential to salvation. The resurrected and ascended Christ is at work to “gather up all things” into himself, to create “a new humanity,” a new “household of God.” Salvation means that this reuniting, gathering activity of Christ knits one into the fabric of the newly formed community, while dissent and schism go against the grain of Christ’s salvific work and thereby put salvation in jeopardy.

In making this argument, I obviously assume a wider definition of “salvation” than something akin to “receiving forgiveness for one’s sins.” To support this wider definition I make a distinction between Christ’s work of reconciliation and his work of eschatological consummation. While reconciliation is one aspect of Christ’s salvific work, it is not the only aspect, and maybe not even the most important one. And while atonement and reconciliation arguably come to us individually, in the end we stand before God guilty of our own particular sins. Christ’s work of eschatological consummation comes to us communally, in the form of God’s Kingdom, inhabited by a new people with a new common life.

Third, I have argued that dissent and schism not only go against the grain of Christ’s salvific work but also against the grain of our existence. According to the witness of the letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians, God intended before the foundation of the world to center God’s relationship with God’s creatures in the incarnate Christ; therefore, we were created for this new community that is forged by and finds its center in Christ.

Finally, implicit in all three of my arguments is that the salvation which comes to us in Christ is embodied. It is not the promise of saved souls in a disembodied heaven, but salvation of *this* concrete, material, bodily creation. This claim leads to support for the *medical way* theologians in a different way. I believe there is a direct connection between the tendency to distinguish between visible churches and

the invisible Church with a capital “C,” and the tendency to spiritualize Jesus’ ministry and the coming Kingdom of God. If one takes Jesus to be concerned with the salvation of disembodied souls rather than all of created reality, it should be no surprise if that person takes spiritual unity between the baptized to be enough for the church. But once one sees the fullness of the work of Christ as not only concerned with the spiritual but also and no less with the material, one realizes that God’s new household is not only spiritual but also a concrete, visible, embodied community.

Together these three arguments teach us that the church is not, as so often thought, merely a means to the salvation that is Christ, let alone an accidental means, as though what is received through the church could also be found in another way. Instead, when Christ gives us to partake in the salvation he has made possible, that salvation takes the form of being incorporated into his church as the newly forming people of God’s Kingdom.