

Introduction

I still remember how strange it felt. Earlier that summer I had moved from the Netherlands to the United States in order to do graduate work in theology at Yale University. I had rented an apartment, gone out shopping to furnish a whole new household – it had not made sense to ship the cheap contents of my old student digs across the ocean. Now it was the weekend before school started. Sunday was approaching, and I wanted to go to church. Then it hit me: but where? What church, and of what denomination? Church buildings lined the streets of New Haven like cans on supermarket shelves: Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Congregational, Baptist, and so on. It was then that I faced doing something I had never done before: go church shopping. I had to assume the attitude of a consumer and find a church of my liking.

The Dutch do not shop for a church – at least, not those who are members of the national church of the Netherlands, the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC). As a member of the NRC I was used to its parish system, by which the whole country is divided into small geographical areas, each one connected to a local congregation. The geographical area in which you live determines what congregation you belong to. When you move, membership is automatically transferred to the congregation of the new place of residence. If you move to another country, the expectation is that you will join the national church of your new residence. Had I moved to Scandinavia, the NRC would have expected me to transfer my church membership to one of the Scandinavian Lutheran national churches. Had I moved to England, my home church would have expected me to become an Anglican. Had I moved to Germany, the church would have expected me to become a member of the united Lutheran and Reformed

Evangelische Landeskirche. But I had moved to the United States. And this country does not have what so many European countries have: a national church.

So here I was, having to do something I had never done in my life: go shopping for a church. It felt strange, if not impossible. For how does one go about the task of deciding which denomination and which local congregation one wants to belong to? And how does one do so faithfully?

Now, ten years later, I have supposedly been able to figure it out. I am a member of an American mainline church that, theologically, could be characterized as a sister church of my church back home in the Netherlands. In fact, I am even ordained in this American church and serve on the faculty of one of its seminaries. Nonetheless, I like to tell the story of my initial shock and confusion, for it illustrates an important theological difference between the American religious marketplace and the Dutch church.

Most Americans consider the church a *voluntary organization*. That is, they consider their membership in a denomination and a local congregation to be an expression of their free choice. They may have made that choice for a variety of reasons: maybe they agreed with the theology, or they liked the liturgy. Maybe, after moving to another town, they visited a couple of local churches and chose the one with the best youth program or the most riveting sermons. Maybe their church membership was the result of marital compromise: she was Baptist, he was Lutheran, let's become Presbyterian! Or maybe their membership is the result of family tradition: they are cradle Episcopalians or Presbyterians. But even in the last case they may conceive of their church affiliation as a choice – in this case the choice of staying rather than leaving. At least that is how, in practice, my own church, the PC(USA), sees it: as a Presbyterian you will be written down in the local church roll upon receiving the sacrament of baptism, but it

is only on the public affirmation of your faith – that is, your personal choice – that you become a full member of the denomination with full rights and privileges. Baptism is certainly important. But it is the *choice* to profess your faith that establishes your membership.

Church as a voluntary organization fits perfectly within the American cultural emphasis on freedom and choice. There is, however, a significant downside to such an understanding of the church: if I am a member of a church because I choose to be, I can also leave at any time I please. Having joined at will, I can dissent at will. The result of optional church membership has become clear in America over the last couple of decades. The country's mainline churches are deeply divided – most recently on issues of homosexuality, ordination, and the interpretation of Scripture. Since the unity of the church is conceived as the result of the voluntary assent of its members, such disagreements always put the threat of dissent and schism on the table. If I joined the church voluntarily, and the church moves in a direction with which I strongly disagree, why should I continue being a member?

In the case of the Netherlands Reformed Church, the situation is interestingly different. As a large national church, the NRC counts among its members both liberals and conservatives – just like the American mainline churches. Over the past few decades, these different wings of the church had serious theological arguments on issues similar to the ones debated in America's churches. But, despite all their disputes, the church's liberals and conservatives have continued to accept one another as members of the same church. The reason is theological: for the NRC, the church is not a voluntary organization but rather an entity constituted by a divine act, an act of covenant. One's church membership is not conceived as resting on a human choice but a divine one, expressed in baptism: "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16). And therefore, theological disagreements among church members do not allow one to say to the

other, “I will leave the church”; for if God has chosen the other as a fellow member of the covenant, what right would one have to separate from the “we” to form a “they”?

The American mainline churches, not only divided by strife and conflict but also worried and anxious about their loss of members and influence, are in deep need of rethinking their identity. In this book, I argue that in doing so American Christianity could be greatly helped by an ecclesiology like the one developed by the NRC. Rather than seeing themselves as voluntary organizations, American churches should conceive of their true identity as constituted by the divine act of covenant.

To make my case, in the first chapter I start by inviting readers to a “thought experiment.” Here I lay out the covenantal ecclesiology of the Netherlands Reformed Church and the way it came to embrace that understanding of what it means to be church. Rather than giving an argument for this ecclesiology, I ask the reader to explore it, to see how it fits together, and to “try it on.” Could this ecclesiology be applied to American churches? If so, how? And how would it help us?

In the second chapter I continue by a biblical and theological case for this understanding of being church. In so doing, I contest another deep-seated American intuition, namely, that the church is accidental to salvation. It is standard fare for many American Christians to think that the salvation we receive in Christ *might* be something we receive by way of the church, but that we could also receive salvation in another, much more individual way. After all, salvation is obtained when we “accept Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior.” And while as individuals we often encounter and accept Jesus by way of the church, this means is certainly not necessary. One does not need the church to get or to be saved, in other words. I argue for a startlingly

opposite thesis: that to be saved means to be gathered to the church, and that dissent and schism put one's salvation at risk.

I am certain that in these first two chapters I will already have raised many more questions than I will have answered in the course of my argument; therefore, rather than push the argument further, in the third chapter I pause to answer what I expect by then to be my readers' most pressing questions and objections. In formulating these questions and objections, I was helped especially by students who read the manuscript of this book in the context of a seminary course on "The Future of the Church." I suspect that the questions these future pastors posed will not be very different from the questions of current pastors and other church members. So in chapter three I deal with questions such as whether one is ever justified in leaving a congregation or breaking away from a denomination; whether the competition in the American religious marketplace does not actually work well for the church, allowing people to find a church that suits their needs; whether an internally divided church like the NRC can still be missionally attractive; and whether my understanding of the church is not rather Catholic than Protestant. To pique your interest, the answers will be that breaking the unity of the church is never justified, that the American marketplace works against rather than for the church, that an internally divided church can be a strong witness to Jesus Christ, and that all of this is authentically Protestant!

In the fourth and fifth chapters I bring the argument home by teasing out the implications of these answers for the concrete, daily lives of American congregations. I am writing here not only in the context of church conflict and schism, but also the general malaise and anxiety that has beset so many congregations as they wrestle with reduced membership, shrinking budgets, and a general insecurity about the place of the church in a rapidly changing society. I believe an understanding of the church not as a voluntary organization but as a

community established by the triumphantly resurrected and ascended Christ can give our congregations new hope and direction. Moreover, as I will argue, I believe such understanding of the church sheds fresh light on already ongoing conversations about church growth and mission, the relationship between the church and the world of politics and economics, and the ungraceful sight of dying congregations desperately competing for each other's slice of the religious market pie. These last chapters are meant to spur conversations in our congregations and are written such that they can be read and discussed not only by individual church members but also by church groups and congregations as a whole.