

**A VISIONARY ECCLESIOLOGY:
A Primer for Church Members on the
Nature and Functions of the Body of Christ**

By Rich Lusk

***Introductory Note:** I intend this paper to serve as something of a “user’s guide” for church members, though church leaders may also find it valuable in developing vision statements for their local bodies. I have not “proven” all my assertions with Scriptural exegesis because it would have caused the essay to grow to unwieldy proportions. For further development and defense of several of the key themes in this short paper, see the reading list at the end. This paper is not really a “manifesto” of any sort; but I do hope it will get us thinking about the church and being the church in more historic, catholic ways. I believe God has situated the church’s liturgical gathering – the **Divine Service** -- at the center of the world. Flowing out of this, the body of Christ takes three basic shapes in the world, all deeply interrelated and inseparable: **community, discipleship, and mission**. Under girding and guiding us in these three areas is a backward looking appreciation for the Spirit’s work in the church through the ages (**tradition**) and a forward looking anticipation of what the Spirit will continue to do until every enemy has been put under Christ’s feet and he is all in all (**eschatology**).*

Who are we? We are the church, a local expression of the catholic body of Christ.

What is the church? *We* are the church: the people who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, who are baptized, and who share in the Lord’s Supper. Through these means of grace, the Spirit renews us and forms us into his people so that we may glorify God and serve the world in love.

God has placed his church at the center and summit of the world. The church is the body and bride of Christ, the people of God called out of the world into union with the crucified and risen Lord. As God’s new humanity, an outpost of heaven on earth, we are marked out by baptism in the Triune name, our gathering around his table to feast upon the Eucharist, and our common faith in Jesus Christ, who is now seated at the Father’s right hand in heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords. The Lord Jesus Christ rules over all things for the sake of the church (Eph. 1:22-23), which in turn exists for the sake of the world. But how does God serve the church? And how does the church serve the world?

God’s service to the church centers on his gracious action each Lord’s Day, when he draws his people into his presence to renew covenant with them. This gathering is called

the **Divine Service**. Why do we meet on the first day of the week? Because it is the day God raised our Lord Jesus from the dead, giving the world a new beginning. When we gather weekly on that day for the Divine Service, God renews his covenant with us through word and sacrament. This covenant renewal liturgy is nothing less than the gospel reenacted and reapplied to us.

What, then, happens in this Lord's Day gathering? The Triune God serves the congregation in *calling, confession, cleansing, consecration, communion, and commissioning*. This is the biblical pattern of worship, the pathway on which we drawn into God's heavenly sanctuary. First, the Lord *calls* us together, that we might be assembled as his people, set apart from the world. He summons us to *confess* our sin and *cleanses* us through the pastor's declaration of forgiveness. Then the Lord lifts us up into his heavenly presence to worship with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven. The Lord *consecrates* us to his service as he proclaims the life-giving gospel to us and instructs in us paths of righteousness through his minister. He graciously feeds us at his *communion* table, giving us the body and blood of his Son in the form of bread and wine, thereby manifesting our oneness as his chosen people through this corporate meal. Finally, the Lord *commissions* us, sending us out into the world with his blessing so that we might be a blessing to others. Throughout the service, we respond in union with Christ, our great High Priest, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our response includes prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and joyous singing. Because God gives what he requires, we are able to believe his word, join in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, give tithes and offerings to him for the work of the church, receive the feast of the kingdom, and commit ourselves to serve him and our neighbors in all of life.

This is the heart of what it means to be the church: God calls us out of the world to renew covenant with him and worship him in the heavenly sanctuary. Through the means of grace, he gives us the gifts of the kingdom: life, wisdom, and glory. Then he commissions us to go back into the world to disciple the nations, to do unto others as he has done unto us. The Bible's liturgical pattern of calling, confession, cleansing, consecration, communion, and commissioning impresses the gospel story upon us each Lord's Day, crafting us into a humble, obedient, service-oriented community. The church fathers had a slogan to encapsulate the transforming power of such worship: "*Lex orandi, lex credendi*," meaning, "As a man worships, so he believes." While we usually think it is our theology that will shape our worship, the reverse is also true. A gospel-shaped liturgy shapes us into a gospel-shaped people. The rest of the Christian life flows out of the Divine Service: Because God has called us together, we find that we want to continue experiencing rich, loving fellowship with one another throughout the rest of the week. Because God has forgiven us, we forgive others, even seventy times seven. Because God has taught us, we are driven to teach others, that they may share in the wisdom God has gifted to us. Because God has mercifully served us, we mercifully serve others. Because God has fed us His Son and clothed us in His righteousness, we are compelled to feed and clothe others. Because God has called on us to give generously, a tithe and above, we learn to be disciplined and generous stewards of our possessions in all of life. Because God has preached the gospel to us, we are led to preach it to others, that they may be brought into Christ's new humanity as well.

Why do we speak of the Divine Service as covenant renewal? The covenant is an everlasting bond of union, communion, and self-giving love between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Triune God is covenantal. Each of the three divine persons eternally relates to the other two in peace and humility. God has graciously and sovereignly chosen a people to be included in his divine family. Believers and their children are made members of the covenant through Jesus Christ, the eternal Son incarnated in human flesh. We enter into this covenant via baptism. In and through the waters of baptism we receive, as John Calvin said, “regeneration and cleansing from sin.” Baptism unites us to Christ; this union gives way to communion, celebrated in our weekly partaking of the Lord’s Supper. At the table of the Lord, we receive the true body and blood of Christ, the glorified life of our crucified and risen Savior. This feast is the climax of covenant renewal each Lord’s Day, when our fellowship with the Triune God and one another is freshly experienced and manifested. The Divine Service, then, is covenant renewal because God renews and reapplies his pledge of redemption to us and we renew and recommit ourselves to loyal service in his kingdom.

Note also the special role given to the pastor, as the officiant of the liturgy. This is not sacerdotalism since the minister is no “nearer” to God than the rest of the congregation. In the New Covenant, we are all priests before God (1 Pt. 2:4-9). All the baptized now have equal access to God’s throne room in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 4:16; 10:19ff). The minister’s role, therefore, is symbolic, but not *merely* symbolic. We are not just “playing church” each Lord’s Day; God *really is* powerfully at work through the actions of the minister. As officiant, he represents Christ in the liturgy and is authorized to act and speak his name, so that what the pastor does for us in the service (e.g., baptizing, absolving us of sin, preaching, giving us the Lord’s Supper, blessing us) is really done by Christ. As the one entrusted by the community with the exercise of the keys in his ordination (Mt. 16:19), the minister has the role of authoritatively acting in Christ’s stead, of representing the husband to the bride. (One can see from this why Scripture only authorizes men to serve the flock as shepherds.) The pastor’s function as Christ’s special representative is critical for us to grasp if we are to understand God’s dynamic work in the Divine Service. The pastor’s liturgical role is at the heart what it means for him to “equip the saints” and do “the work of the ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

Thus, the gracious action of God in the weekly liturgy, when received by faith, generates the rest of our life together as the covenant people. As Augustine pointed out, men could not be bound together in a religious body apart from common sacraments and communal practices, distinguishing them from the world: “Our Lord Jesus Christ has knit together the company of new people with sacraments, few in number, easy of observance, explicit in meaning, such as baptism in the name of the Trinity, the sharing of his body and blood [in the Eucharist], and whatever other practice is commanded in the canonical Scriptures.” Through God’s ordained rites and rituals, we are congealed together into Christ’s new society. Therefore, as an outflow of the weekly liturgical, sacramental gathering, we begin to experience real **community** with our fellow Christians. Scripture calls us to share with one another, pray for one another, confess sin to one another, bear

one another's burdens, teach and admonish one another, and of course, tying it all together, love one another. This is the kind of common life we envision enjoying together, by the grace of God. Practically, this means we live in submission to those God has appointed to rule over us in the church, we invite one another into our homes for fellowship, we participate in various Bible studies and prayer meetings as opportunity allows, and we learn how to carry on deep, loving friendships with people who may be very different than ourselves. This is the day-to-day life of the church, the pattern of living we are called to exhibit from one Lord's Day to the next.

We emphasize community formation because we realize salvation is ecclesial, not individualistic. To be saved is to experience the salvific presence of Christ in his church, through the means of grace, by the work of the Holy Spirit. Salvation is not just a matter of individuals "getting right with God." It also is about the restoration, healing, and transfiguration of human life, especially human relationships. Indeed, the whole creation will, in some sense, be included in the scope of God's redemptive plan (cf. Rom. 8:17ff; Eph. 1:9ff; Col. 1:15ff). God's salvation is thoroughly communal, aiming at the church's "life together with God," as Augustine explains. We must repent of the ways we have interiorized and privatized God's work of salvation, of ways we have traded in the rich, corporate view of salvation taught in the Scriptures for the mess of pottage that is American individualism. We must repent of the ways we have downgraded the church to a mere "voluntary organization," having no organic connection with redemption. The church is not merely an adjunct to the gospel, tacked on as an afterthought or an unnecessary appendage. Rather, as Calvin says, "the one effect resulting from [Christ's death] is, that there is a church." The very goal of the gospel is the existence of a people living in restored fellowship with God and in harmony with one another. The church is not merely an agent or means to salvation; it *is* salvation (albeit only partially realized, for now). The church is to be the Garden of Eden restored – and on the way to its glorious consummation as the City of God (cf. Rev. 21-22).

In the liturgy we learn that we are ignorant and need God to instruct us and make us wise. Thus, **discipleship** is a vital dimension of the church's vision, emerging out of the liturgical/sacramental matrix of the Divine Service. The church's motherly, nurturing role as discipler is indispensable. Consider Calvin's wise words:

[B]ecause it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn from the simple title 'mother' how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.

The church's educational ministry is varied. After all, Jesus called upon his first ministers to teach disciples *everything* he had commanded them (Mt. 28:19-20). This holistic discipleship begins with the proclamation of God's great work of salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And though we never stop learning the glories of

what Christ has done for us, we have other things to learn as well. The Bible addresses all of life, and thus the church's teaching ministry must be wide ranging. Discipleship includes learning God's will for family, business, and society, as well as the practical skills needed to live the Christian life (e.g., how to pray; how to be a peacemaker; how to share and defend the faith; how to apply biblical principles to one's calling; how to use and enjoy the things of the world without becoming "worldly"; etc.). Through preaching, teaching, and catechesis we hope to be educated in God's glorious truth. We envision being a people that is saturated in the whole counsel of God's Word.

But we must also remember that discipleship can never be reduced to a matter of 'ethics' or 'values,' in the way these are commonly understood. To paraphrase Stanley Hauerwas, "the church does not *have* a social ethic; she *is* a social ethic." But this social ethic cannot be grasped on the world's terms. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "The whole purpose of the gospel is to deliver us from morality." Discipleship is not *mere morality*; it is a matter of what the apostle Paul calls the "obedience of faith" (or "faith's obedience"; Rom. 1:5, 16:26). Faith and obedience are not two separate ways of relating to God, as though we had faith for justification and works for sanctification. Rather, faith-filled obedience is the holistic, full-orbed response to God's grace that the gospel calls for and calls forth, by God's Spirit. The obedience of faith is nothing less than eschatological life – the life of the new age, the life of the world to come, already experienced in some measure by virtue of our union with the resurrected and glorified Christ. The church, as a community of disciples, living under the sign of the cross and in the power of Christ's Spirit, is a signpost pointing ahead and above to the world to come. The church, in short, is a colony of heaven on earth, living the life of the future in the present (Phil. 3:20-21). Most of our talk about the Christian life (and the church!) is far too mundane; we must envision grasping once again Paul's eschatological consciousness that declares to the church body, "The new age has come! You are a new creation! Live accordingly!"

The Lord's Day liturgy ends with a benediction: we receive the blessing of God as we are sent back out in the dark, rotten world so that we can serve as salt and light. Thus the liturgy trains us in **mission**. As one theologian stated it, the church is the only institution in the world that exists for the sake of her *non-members*. The church does not merely *have* a mission; she *is* a mission. We have been called out of the world into the body Christ not merely for the sake of our own salvation; rather, we are to become the embodiment of God's love to the world. Through our loving service to the lost world around us, the world comes to see that she has not been abandoned by her Creator. As we humbly incarnate God's love to a dying, sin-enslaved culture, the kingdom of God grows more and more into its glorious destiny. It is our mission to bring the word of the prophets to fruition: to see to it that our city, our nation, and then the entire earth is as "full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

How do we go about this practically? How can we act as a missional church? How do we show that we exist as the covenant people, set apart from the world, for the sake of the world? We must remember that our God is a missionary sending God: He *sent* Christ and the Spirit to redeem us, to take on our suffering and bring us new life. We must remember that our mission is Christ-shaped through and through: "As You sent me into

the world, I have also sent them into the world” (Jn. 17:18). In other words, what Jesus did for the people of God, the church is now to replicate (albeit in a qualitatively different way) for the world. We are not merely to be *in* the world, but *for* the world. We are to be the efficacious incarnation of God’s redeeming love and renewing presence to the fallen world order. God’s ministry to us through Christ involves both word and deed, and so our ministry to the world must do the same. Our mission includes evangelism, the triumphant gospel proclamation that the crucified and risen Christ is now King of kings and Lord of lords. In the gospel, God promises believers forgiveness of sin, victory over the world, the flesh, and the devil, and eternal life in the kingdom of God, which is nothing less than the redeemed and consummated new creation. But announcing the gospel is not the full extent of our mission. A faithful church will also envision extending God’s work in the world by showing hospitality to those in her surrounding community, especially by welcoming strangers into homes; by performing mercy ministry, especially through her diaconate, giving people spiritual and material assistance; by engaging in parish church planting that ministers to specified geographic communities; by supporting missionaries in domestic and international fields; and by working for social justice (in the best sense of that term), primarily through prayer and service, but also through political involvement when need and opportunity arise. Our mission means we do not shy away from joining in the world’s suffering, but embrace it and make it our own, knowing that because Christ dwells in us, his healing presence can flow out from us into a hurting world. This often means taking on great pain and even persecution, but to seek to escape this would be to (in a Jonah-like way) forsake our divine calling. Indeed, God himself suffered for us in human flesh, so we must be willing to endure suffering for and with others as well. As we carry out our mission to be the servant-leader of our culture, to live as the body of Christ – indeed, the *broken* body of Christ – for the world, we will find God using us to transform the culture and make the kingdom more and more manifest. The faithful church suffers and serves her way to victory.

A visionary, biblical ecclesiology is anchored in God’s weekly service to us through the liturgy; it extends to community, discipleship, and mission. What strategies will a faithful church implement in order to achieve this full-orbed vision? Reformed Christians should seek to learn from their forerunners in the faith, not because Reformed theology is a finished product, but because it is, to this point in church history, the purest expression of catholic, orthodox Christianity. Thus, a strong awareness of **tradition**, a robust *historical consciousness*, is needed to inform our theology, liturgy, and praxis. The Spirit has been working in and through the church now for nearly 2000 years and we would insult his ministry to the covenant people if we ignored the creedal and confessional documents, the songs and festivals, the liturgies and stories, he has bequeathed to the church. Dialogue with church history informs our vision at every point; we are not starting from scratch but seeking to take our part in the great conversation of our ecclesiastical heritage, a heritage that did not begin in 1973 (with the founding of the Presbyterian Church in America denomination), or in the 1640s (when the Westminster Standards were drafted), or 1517 (when Luther spearheaded the Reformation), but stretches all the way back through the medieval and patristic church to Pentecost. As G. K. Chesterton put it, tradition is the “democracy of the dead”; it serves

as a guide and control on our doctrinal, liturgical, and practical growth. Church tradition, of course, is always subject to the authority of Scripture, so it cannot be blindly embraced. It must be understood as a home, not a prison. An irreformable tradition is an idol. This means we are not simply interested in looking backwards; we are also always looking ahead to God's work in the future. We are not slaves of the past; we trust God to continue the kingdom work he has begun until all things have been put under Christ's feet and death is swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:20-28, 54).

In other words, our vision is **eschatological**. Thus, we have a strong interest in maintaining *covenant succession* and developing a *future orientation*. The Reformed church is to be ever reforming. We believe that God is continuing to mature his church "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). We plan and build not just for the next year, five years, or fifty years, but for centuries to come because we know "the Lord [our] God [is] the faithful God, who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations" (Dt. 7:9). Throughout Scripture, God's redeeming work includes the children of his people. This means we baptize our children and fully include them in the life of our body; but it also means we do everything with a view to the generations to come. Thus, our vision must be long-term. It ultimately concerns not just worship and ministry in the present, but building for the future, for the reestablishment of a Christian civilization, for the rebirth of Christendom in all its glory, when Christ's lordship over every square inch of creation and every split second of time is acknowledged.

This, then, is our vision: as members of a local expression of Christ's church, we are called to live human life as God really intended. As contemporary liturgical theologians like to say, in church we "do the world right," we practice life the way it really ought to be lived. We embody a new way of being human. The church is the center of the world, the nursery of Christ's kingdom. It is the most important institution on earth. With the church and through the church, societies live and die, rise and fall. What London is to England, Tokyo to Japan, and Paris to France, the church is to the world – only more so. The church is the *polis* and *basilea* of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the capital city and temple-palace of Christ's kingdom. We who are in Christ are the new humanity, the first fruits of the new age. The church is God's eschatological beachhead in the cosmic war against evil, for only here, through her ordained means of grace in the liturgy, is the Spirit at work to turn back the forces of sin and death that otherwise hold men, women, and children captive. In the church, the life of the world to come is to be a present, if imperfect, reality. In our day, the church has generally failed to be an authentically Scripture shaped community. She has failed to carry out her calling as the servant-leader of culture. She has failed to be the body of Christ, giving herself for the life of the world, as her Lord did. As the prow of culture, she has misdirected the world by her own unfaithfulness. She has failed to authoritatively and prophetically herald God's truth to the society around her. We understand that if the church is to recover her mission and sense of identity in our day, if she is to begin to reshape the wider culture in more biblical patterns of life, she must repent and learn to function once again as the early church did in similar cultural conditions: as a counter culture, an island of Christian culture in the

midst of a raging sea of apostate, anti-Christian culture. This is the vision we embrace as members of Christ's church. May God give us the grace to fulfill it!

But God still wishes in these days to build his spiritual temple amidst the anxieties of the times. The faithful must still hold the trowel in one hand and the sword in the other, because the building of the church must still be combined with many struggles.

- John Calvin

Therefore, he who would find Christ must first of all find the church. How would one know where Christ and his faith were, if one did not know where his believers are? And he who would know something of Christ, must not trust himself, or build his own bridges into heaven through his own reason, but he must go to the church, visit, and ask of the same...for outside of the church is no truth, no Christ, no salvation.

The Holy Christian Church is the principal work of God, for the sake of which all things were made. In the Church, great wonders daily occur, such as the forgiveness of sins, triumph over death, ...the gift of righteousness and eternal life.

- Martin Luther

For further reading:

On biblical religion –

“A Place at the Table” by Mark Horne

On the Trinity –

The Trinitarian Faith by Thomas Torrance

On the church –

The Kingdom and the Power by Peter Leithart

On ministry –

Order in the Offices edited by Mark Brown

On church membership –

“Life in the Father's House: Why Should I Join A Church?” by Rich Lusk

On the Divine Service –

- The Lord's Service* by Jeff Meyers
- On the role of men and women in the church –
 “Women, Ministry, and Liturgy” by Rich Lusk
- On covenant –
 Call of Grace by Norm Shepherd
- On redemptive history –
 Through New Eyes by James B. Jordan
- On sacraments –
 “Why Sacraments?” by Peter Leithart
- On baptism –
 “Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future” by Rich Lusk
- On infant baptism –
 “Why Baptize Babies?” by Mark Horne
- On the Lord's Supper –
 Blessed Are the Hungry by Peter Leithart
- On tithing –
 “Nine Theses on Tithing” by Rich Lusk
- On community –
 “God is Not Enough” by Rich Lusk
- On discipleship –
 “Christian Piety: Deformed and Reformed” by James Jordan
- On faith-filled obedience –
 “Jesus Is Lord’: A Practical Suggestion for Struggling with Sin” by Mark Horne
- On mission –
 For the Life of the World by Alexander Schmemmann
- On evangelism –
 Powerful Evangelism for the Powerless by John Miller
- On apologetics –
 Apologetics to the Glory of God by John Frame
- On mercy ministry –
 Ministries of Mercy by Tim Keller
- On the gospel –
 The Challenge of Jesus by Tom Wright
- On the church and culture –
 “Against ‘Christianity;’ For the Church” by Peter Leithart
- On church history –
 Church History: An Essential Guide by Justo Gonzalez
- On tradition –
 The Shape of Sola Scriptura by Keith Mathison
- On Reformed theology –
 Back to Basics edited by David Hagopian
- On Reformed catholicity –
 “An Immodest Proposal For Pursuing Peace and Unity in the Body of Christ: A Plea for Reformed Catholicity” by Rich Lusk
- On family –

Standing on the Promises by Doug Wilson
On covenant succession –
“The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and
Covenant Succession” by Robert Rayburn
On the church’s glorious future –
Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope by Keith Mathison
On Christendom –
Angels in the Architecture by Doug Jones and Doug Wilson