

THE CHURCH AND
HER RIVALS:
CHALLENGES
FACING THE
CHURCH IN
TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY AMERICA

(Working Draft 3.0)

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Introduction: The Church and Society

American Idols

American evangelicals¹ have a long history of substituting the centrality of the family or state for the centrality of the church. Just consider the classic American response to any social problem: “There oughta be a law....!”² In practice, if not in theory, even many conservatives look for social transformation through legislation. Prohibition is one obvious example of attempting to accomplish regeneration through the agency of the state, but certainly not the only such case. The politics of the “Moral Majority” group come to mind as well, since its approach assumed the state is the fundamental arbiter and custodian of moral values.

Or consider the latest “family values” campaigns. Judging by the books we publish and the programs we air on our radio stations, one could easily conclude evangelical Christianity in America is a kind of patriarchal cult in which the family holds the key to cultural cohesion. The family is treated as the ultimate institution on earth and the source of social renewal. Some theologians and Christian Reconstructionists have explicitly stated that the family is the most important institution in cultural transformation.

In large measure, these state-centered and family-centered approaches are due to the church’s loss of an eschatological consciousness. Because the church has corporately forgotten that she is the center of the new world order established in the death and resurrection of Christ,³ it is all too easy for her members to look to structures belonging to the old creation – primarily the state and family – as the source of social renewal. The church must be ever mindful of her special calling to be the kingdom of God on earth, albeit in pre-consummation form.⁴ To be sure, the life of the kingdom is not to be confined to the boundaries of the institutional church. Its power must always be flowing out to the rest of human life to heal and restore it. But the church’s centrality in this process of social transformation must never be lost on us, however much it remains a matter of faith rather than sight. The church is nothing less than the first fruits of the world to come, the new creation in seed form, the first manifestation of the regeneration of all things. She has access to the Father’s throne room, the control center of the cosmos (Heb. 4:16). As the bride of Christ, she has the ear of the King of the universe. Thus, the church has tremendous power to transform the world.

True, the kingdom planted by Christ came in humility and hiddenness. It wasn’t big and flashy, like an incumbent Senator’s re-election campaign. Rather, it was more like a tiny mustard seed dropped into the ground, or a little leaven pressed down into some dough. But blessed is the man who does not despise the day of small beginnings, who does not stumble over the lowliness of the kingdom’s origins. For though largely hidden, within this kingdom lies the power of the world to come, the life of the new, messianic age. To those on the outside, the kingdom, and the church situated at the kingdom’s center, is an unsolvable mystery, a riddle wrapped in an enigma. But to those to whom the kingdom has been given, the mystery has been revealed and the kingdom is seen for what it is – a present and ever-growing reality.

Jesus Christ himself is the line of demarcation between the old, fallen age, and the new, restored age, between the old creation and its structures, and the new creation and its structures. Those who are in Christ are in this new age (2 Cor. 5:17). We have died to the old world and our lives are now hidden with Christ in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1). Baptism, our watery passageway into this new world order, severs all our attachments to the old world. Every tie to Adamic, old creation life is broken. True, these ties are re-established, but only in a transformed, relativized way, as we shall see. From baptism onwards, union with Christ is the tie that binds.

¹ In this paper I will speak of the “American church.” Obviously, in one sense, there is no such thing. The church is a colony of heaven on earth and cannot be too closely identified with any one nation or culture. It is a transcultural, transnational institution (Jn. 18:36). But the church is not an abstraction either, and cannot avoid interacting with the various cultures she finds surrounding her. A particular church will worship in English or Swahili or some other language. It may use that language differently than the surrounding culture, but it is still the culture’s language. The purpose of this paper is to address issues pertaining to the church’s history and present situation in American culture, though much that is said may have relevance in other times and places.

² One of the complaints the colonists lodged against King George in the Declaration of Independence was that he has not passed enough laws to serve the public good!

³ See my paper “Ecclesiocentrism: Exploring the Centrality of the Church in the Plan and Purpose of God.”

⁴ The WCF identifies the institutional church with the kingdom (27.2). Of course, in some sense the kingdom is broader than the institutional church, so complete, unqualified identification should be avoided. But the Confession, at the very least, requires us to confess that the church is central to the kingdom, such that we can say the church *is* the kingdom. By analogy, it *cannot* be said in any sense whatsoever that “the family is the kingdom” or “the state is the kingdom,” however much they may come under the kingdom’s sway.

What is Society? The Problems and Solutions of Sphere Sovereignty

The doctrine of “sphere sovereignty” has become the classic, Reformed way of viewing the organization of society. For our purposes, it is enough to focus on the three most prominent “spheres,” namely the church, family, and state. These spheres represent different zones, or sectors, of human life. Each sphere-institution has its own functions, responsibilities, and privileges:

To the **state**, has been entrusted the sword. It has been wisely said that political power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Simply put, the state has the power to tax, to coerce, and if necessary, to kill. Civil magistrates must use their God-given powers in accordance with God’s norms of justice, lest they devolve into tyrants. As ministers of God, they are to serve his glory and the common good, not their own personal agendas, or special interest groups.

To the **family**, has been entrusted the rod of discipline. As Proverbs puts it, parents have the power to beat their children (23:13-14). Obviously, the rod is to be used in a context of love and tenderness, but it is to be used nonetheless. Parents are to raise their children up in the Lord which means not only corporeal punishment to train them in righteousness, but also instruction, prayer, and example-setting. In this way, marriage produces godly offspring (Mal. 2:15).

Finally, to the **church** has been entrusted the greatest power of all. Ecclesiastical elders have been given the keys of the kingdom, that is, the power to open and shut the gate of heaven, in accordance with God’s word. Elders, of course, are not autonomous or infallible, and so we usually refer to their power as “ministerial and declarative.” But it is a real, governmental power nonetheless. We betray how politicized we have become by the fact that when we hear “government” we only think of the state. We have forgotten that the most powerful governing body on earth, to which even angels will be subject, is the church.

Abraham Kuyper, the prince of sphere sovereignty theologians, rightly argued that Christ’s lordship extends over each of these spheres. Sphere sovereignty is a helpful construct in many ways. At the most basic level, it teaches us that the fundamental pattern of society, with state, family, and church involved in various interlocking and overlapping relationships, is God-given. In a day when the monogamous marriage bond is viewed as a creation of Western civilization, sphere sovereignty reminds us that God ordained, and therefore defines, marriage. Similarly, in a time when social contract theorizing remains a popular, if unspoken, assumption, sphere sovereignty reminds us that the state is not the product of men entering into a voluntary compact with one another, but was ordained of God to reflect his own kingship (Gen. 9:6).⁵ Or, to take another example, sphere sovereignty teaches us that it is not enough to ask, “What does the Bible say?” We must ask, “*To whom* does the Bible say this? To magistrates, fathers, or elders?” Sphere sovereignty keeps authority within bounds, reminding us no human authority is ultimate. Your civil magistrate cannot excommunicate you from the Lord’s Table because of a speeding ticket, nor can your elders execute your child if he disobeys. But sphere sovereignty, unless carefully spelled out in the details, is fraught with problems, which, as we will see, degrade the church.

⁵ Social contract theory, originating primarily with Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, is not only contrary to a biblical theology of the state, but also tells a story that is so patently absurd it is hard to believe it ever gained credence in the first place. Social contractarians, in brief, assume that men, by nature, are isolated individuals existing in a state of war with one another. They then voluntarily enter into a social compact with each other, establishing the “state.” They consent to give up some of their individual liberties to enter into common life. Biblically, however, the hostility that exists between men is not “natural” at all; rather, it comes in as a result of the fall. Moreover, the story as told by social contract theory makes human community peripheral to human life, as though we were by nature isolated atoms. They claim the individual precedes the social. It would be hard to imagine anything more obviously false. Human beings, from the very point of conception onwards, already exist in community! Community is not something added to human life as a tacked-on, optional extra; it is constitutive of human life. As John Zizoulas has so aptly put it, being *is* communion; that is, to be is to be in communion. God exists only in community as Father, Son, and Spirit, a unity in Trinity. Mankind is made the communal image of God. The inescapability of community is seen, furthermore, if we ask how these isolated individuals could enter into social compact with one another unless they *already* shared a common socialization so that they spoke the same language, employed the same customs or rituals, and so forth. In short, the theories of Hobbes and Locke, so integral to modern Western democracies, simply don’t square with the way the world actually works. They require us to go against the grain of human life. Society always has (at least) temporal priority over the individual. There are certain “givens” in human life that are simply not a matter of individual consent. The stories Hobbes and Locke tell, as the mythical foundations of their theories, are non-sense. Social contract theory impacted the church in the rise of the Baptist movement, with its individualistic approach to the faith and its voluntaristic ecclesiology. More about these issues below. See also Peter Leithart “The Politics of Emma’s Hand” available at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9503/opinion/leithart.html>.

Why Do Americans Hate the Church?

First, the spheres are not always that distinct from one another. Indeed, the boundaries between spheres are often thinly dotted, at most. We must avoid an artificial, overly simplistic carving up of human life. Society, in reality, is far too messy to actually be cut up into discrete, atomistic compartments. At most, we should argue for a “fuzzy” sphere sovereignty, in which the core of each institution is preserved, but overlap in the peripherals is allowed.⁶ For example, many are quick to assign the function of education to the family. And no doubt, parents do have fundamental educational responsibilities for their children. But other spheres have a legitimate interest in education as well. Church members take vows to assist in the Christian nurture of every baptized infant. This nurture may legitimately include various forms of church schooling. The state also has some stake in education, since God ordained the civil magistrate not simply to maximize individual liberties (as Libertarians argue), but to serve the common good. Health care falls into a similar overlap. While families bear the basic burden of health care responsibilities (1 Tim. 5:8), the church diaconate may often be called on in this area as well (e.g., Acts 6:1ff). The church, in fact, was the originator of hospitals and the chief instrument of medical care for centuries.

A second, and more severe, problem with the sphere sovereignty model is its “leveling effect.” Sphere sovereignty all too easily gives the impression that each of these institutions are of equal value, as though the church was just one institution among many under Christ’s lordship. Because all spheres are open to kingdom influence and activity, the kingdom itself is viewed as the aggregate of Christian cultural involvement. In reality, however, the church is the central sphere, since, if for no other reason, it is responsible for the discipling of the other spheres. In and through the church, kingdom principles invade and shape the other spheres. In this sense, other spheres are under the authority and care of the church and in turn are to serve and promote the church. This view seems to be well grounded in biblical principles. Paul tells us that Christ rules over all things *for the sake of his church* (Eph. 1:22-23). Of course, since the church is his body and bride, this is just how things should be. The church is the first form of Christian culture and therefore takes primacy.⁷

When we speak of the centrality of the church, we have in view the church specifically as an institution, constituted by Word, sacraments, and government. Some have suggested that the church as an institution is relatively unimportant; what really matters is the organic body of the people of God. But this is a false dichotomy. The institutional church is itself a living organism, not a dead organization. One of Paul’s points in Eph. 4:1-16 is that the ministry is not a tacked on “extra”; rather it is inherent in the living constitution of the body of Christ itself.⁸ It flows from the new order ordained and inaugurated by the ascension of Christ into heaven and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Christ himself gave existence to the ministry at the same time that he gave existence to the church (cf. Mt. 28:18ff). As Nevin argued, church and ministry “spring from the same source and from the same time.”⁹

Moreover, how did the people of God, generically considered, come to be the people of God in the first place? How are they identified as a visible community in the world? As a culture (or counter-culture) within the mass of fallen cultures? Which comes first (logically and chronologically) – the church as an institution, with structure and organization, or the people of God, individually considered? The biblical answer is clear. Only through the ministries of the institutional church are the people of God constituted as such. It’s not simply having Christian ideas floating around in one’s head that makes one a Christian; it’s joining the institutional body of Christ and remaining in her fold by way of Word and sacrament that one becomes and remains a Christian. It’s professing one faith and submitting to one baptism and celebrating one supper that makes us an identifiable people among all the peoples of the world.

⁶ This organic conception of society is something the late medieval and early Reformed social theorists (such as Johannes Althusius) captured. They understood civil society was broader than the state. Instead, it consisted of a variety of institutions – including family, civil polity, trade guilds, schools, and so forth, with the church nestled snugly at the center. All these various institutions overlapped and interlocked in an organic network to form “society.”

⁷ Reuben Alvarado’s “When Dominion Theology Meets the Kingdom of God” from *Contra Mundum* No. 12 http://www.visi.com/~contra_m/cm/reviews/cm12_rev_kingdom.html is must reading on this issue of church, kingdom, culture, and sphere sovereignty.

⁸ See Sam Hamstra, Jr. and Arie Griffeon, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin*, 169ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

Americans often downplay the institutional core of the church because we are anti-institutional by nature.¹⁰ We fail to grasp that the church is a divine institution and tend to think that the church is a nice but unnecessary “add-on” to our “personal relationship with Jesus.” Americans want to deal directly with God rather than transacting with him through his ordained means of Word, sacrament, and minister. But the biblical view emphasizes the necessity of these means. Thus, we are justified in viewing the institutional, organized church as the center of the kingdom of God and the primary sphere in a properly constructed sphere sovereignty model.¹¹

Jesus makes this point in Matthew 13:31-33, as he describes the extensive and intensive growth of the kingdom, the breadth and depth of the kingdom. The mustard seed parable points to the *extensive* growth of the kingdom as it fills the earth. The leaven parable points to the *intensive* growth of the kingdom as it permeates every aspect of human life.¹² Jesus then brings these two forms together in the Great Commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Note the extensive growth of the kingdom included in the commission: all the nations are to be discipled. Jesus is calling on his disciples to do nothing less than christianize all the peoples of the earth. But at the same time, the intensive growth of the kingdom is also brought into view. The nations are not merely to be converted, but discipled. They are to be taught the whole counsel of Christ, with its wide-ranging implications for every area of life. Obviously the church is central in this double enterprise of kingdom expansion and maturation.

The double growth of the kingdom takes place primarily through the agencies of the institutional church, though we should not limit the kingdom to the institution, of course. Grace flows from the heavenly, Spirit-established, Spirit-indwelt community out to the rest of culture. Gifts received and wisdom learned in the church are taken out to the other spheres to remake and reform them in terms of God’s holistic design for human life.

The point, then, is not to get all areas of life under the umbrella of the institutional church. There are times in history when such an agenda may be appropriate and even necessary. At other times, such a model would squelch the proper development and maturation of a full-orbed, healthy culture. Ecclesiocentrism does not so much mean getting more “stuff” *into* the church; rather, it means the blessings of the church must be taken *out to* the world at large.

The church, therefore, must be understood as the nursery of the kingdom, as it nurtures and equips us to serve God in all facets of life. The kingdom grows out of the matrix of the institutional church, with its various ministries, the means of grace, and so forth. In an unfallen world, church, family, and state would have all worked together in the common project of growing the kingdom of God. The Garden of Eden would have progressed into the New Jerusalem quite organically. But in a fallen world, men build their own kingdoms (or

¹⁰ See Phillip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* on America’s disdain for institutionalization, especially in religion. Consider also Peter Leithart, *Priesthood of the Plebs*, 145:

Yet, no group’s existence as a group is either temporally or logically prior to its common practices. Thousands may be addicted to Tintin comic books, but these teeming multitudes do not form a Tintin fan club until they have declared the club exists, established membership fees and entry requirements, instituted procedures (including the secret handshake), and adopted club identities (e.g., Capt. Haddock, Bianca Castafiore, Prof. Calculus, Rastapopoulos, Snowy, etc.). The club as club exists only in and through these institutions and practices. Likewise, theoretically, any number of individuals may sincerely believe that Jesus is Lord without forming a church. The church as a recognizable human community exists only in her common confession of Christ, obedience to the word, liturgical practices, fellowship and mutual aid, and formal and informal procedures of correction and forgiveness. If the Spirit dwells in the church as church, He dwells in the people constituted by these practices. Baptism is one of the practices without which the church does not exist. Initiation is thus not so much a doorway through which one passes into the house as the first act of membership, and therefore the first contact with the Spirit who circulates through the body (cf. Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:12-13). [Rather, baptism itself constitutes membership in the Spirit-inhabited community.]

¹¹ One further objection may be raised against this view: Even if it is granted that Word and sacrament constitute the people of God as a people, must we affirm that these means belong only to the church as an institution? Traditionally, ministers have been considered the proper officiants of the sacraments, though this is largely a matter of symbolism and order. It should be maintained, though it is not absolutely necessary. The Word may certainly function outside the context of the formal, institutional church. It is used in schools, families, civil governments, etc. But the oracles of God as such have been entrusted to the church as an institution. The church, institutionally considered, identified the Word in history and bears witness to it continually. So we are still justified in pointing to the institutional church as the “center of the center,” so to speak. The church as an organic body has an institutional core.¹² I recognize these parables may have a more specific, nuanced meaning in terms of redemptive history. But their application to the new covenant era cannot be denied.

Satan's kingdom), and they often use the family and state to do so. Virtually all false religions exalt either the family or state to virtual godhood. Think of the ancient divinization of the Roman emperors and Egyptian pharaohs, and in more modern times, Hegel's depiction of the state as "God on earth." Or, consider the divinization of the family in tribal religions and in cults like Mormonism. False religions do not so much create a counterfeit church, as they make the family or state into a rival of the church.

It is this dynamic, especially as it has played itself out in contemporary American culture, that we want to explore. As already stated, American Christians have been vulnerable to the temptation of putting both political and familial ties above the church. Yet, our highest loyalty is to Jesus Christ and his people. This loyalty to the church (conceived of as *totus Christus*, body and head) qualifies and relativizes all other loyalties. The natural family and the state are important, but secondary institutions. To a discussion of these matters, we now turn.

Against the Family

Family Frenzy

If we were to judge by the sheer number of Christian books, radio programs, magazines, and week-end seminars devoted to the family, we could safely say that American evangelicals are overdosing on the family. In its more mild forms, Christians speak of a return to “family values.” But “family values” are not what Scripture calls us to embody. “Family values” are not explicitly rooted in the gospel of Christ. “Family values” are still comprehensible on the world’s terms.

God’s vocation for us entails something more, namely, living the life of the age to come in union with the risen Christ. That is, we are to exhibit an eschatological form of life, in which new modes of behavior, new standards of ethics, and new powers for faithfulness, are held out and manifested. It is, in short, not a mundane life of “family values” we are called to attain to, but a life of radical covenant faithfulness “in Christ” and “in the Spirit.”

In its more extreme forms, this family-centeredness gives rise to what Leonard Payton has aptly called “the home fortress mentality,” in which families “home-everything” out of conviction. Of course, things like home schooling and home birthing are not sinful in any sense at all. But sometimes the underlying attitude accompanying these practices is if they are made into tests of covenantal commitment. The so-called “home church” movement, which blurs, if not obliterates, the institutional line between family and church, is especially virulent. The desire for autonomy, for independence from community, and for self-sufficiency, may sound promising and may have some truth laced in with error, but on the whole it reflects far too low a view of the institutional church and the trans-familial kingdom inaugurated by Christ.¹³

First Family

With the inbreaking of God’s reign into history through the person and work of Christ, every human institution, *including the family*, has come under judgment. The gospels are full of shocking statements about the family – and they are all the more shocking when we remember that ancient Israel was a culture in which family bonds were exalted to the highest possible level. While these passages do not necessarily give “timeless, abstract principles” since in some cases they address the trans-epochal situation brought about by Jesus’ kingdom inaugurating ministry, they must be carefully examined nonetheless. Consider:

- Luke 14:26: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...he cannot be My disciple.” Jesus refused to be simply one more name in a long list of loved ones. He rejected the notion that one could divide ultimate loyalty between himself and family. He is jealous for our highest affection. At the very least, he says here that we must love him so much that, by comparison, we hate the members of our families. I ask my four year old son all the time, “Who do you love more, Jesus or Daddy?” And he knows the right answer to give. I also ask him, “Who does Daddy love more – you or Jesus?” And, again, he knows the right answer. Jesus comes before the family.¹⁴ The sad story of Ananias and Sapphira shows what happens when one chooses loyalty to the old family above loyalty to the new (Acts 5).¹⁵ Jesus certainly honored his parents in accord with the fifth commandment, but also kept them in their proper place. Note that he considered his “Father’s house” not Joseph’s dwelling, but the temple (Lk. 2:41-52; Jn. 2:16). As he began and ended his public ministry, he refers to his mother in generic language (Jn. 2:4, 19:25-27).

¹³ The home-church movement must be rejected because it denies institutional integrity to the church as such. But lesser manifestations of familio-centric Christianity must also be rejected. For example, I know of some churches in which fathers take the eucharistic elements and serve them to their wives and children because they are “priests” of their home. While fathers do exercise a certain kind of qualified priesthood over their homes, this practice takes that too far. In the sacramental assembly, the entire family sits under the authority of the pastor and elders. The pastor is the father to all who are gathered. He, not the head of natural/biological household, acts as God’s representative. Worship takes place in heaven, so the Spiritual family takes precedence over the earthly family.

¹⁴ I cannot locate the reference for this, but an anecdote from Charles Spurgeon’s life illustrates the point well. Before Spurgeon converted, his Christian mother told him that unless he repented, at judgment day when he was damned, she would stand up and say, “Amen!” That, of course, had a sobering effect on young Charles and was enough to jar him into a more careful consideration of the claims of the gospel on his life. His mother understood the secondary nature of the natural family.

¹⁵ Note that Sapphira was given her own trial, rather than being covenantally included in her husband’s excommunication. This contrasts with the family of Achan in Joshua 5, and points to an important shift in redemptive history, which will be explored below.

- Matthew 10:34-37: “Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father and mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” We often like to stress that Jesus is the healer of relationships, especially within the family. That is certainly true, as we’ll see below, but it is not the whole truth. He does heal families, but he also tears them apart. These verses in Matthew come in the context of Jesus sending out his disciples on a missionary journey. Jesus knew one effect of that mission would be the rending of families over the issue of loyalty to himself, his aims, and his kingdom. If a son converts and his father does not, in an ultimate sense, they are now enemies. Our pluralistic culture may make this easy to forget, but it was obvious in Jesus’ day, as it still is in Islamic countries and other societies openly hostile to the gospel.
- Mark 3:21, 31-35: “But when His own people heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind’Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, ‘Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.’ But he answered them, saying, ‘Who is My mother, or My brothers?’ And he looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, ‘Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.’” If Jesus’ blood relatives will not recognize his messianic status, he will not recognize their kinship. Here we see Jesus taking a radical step for a first century Jew. He is redefining the family in terms of loyalty to himself. In a culture in which ties of blood had become everything, and covenant membership totally intertwined with ethnicity, Jesus claimed to be creating a new family, a new Israel, based not on blood ties, but on the obedience of faith. These faithful ones, apart from considerations of blood lineage, make up the family God promised Abraham (Rom. 4). On the cross, this transformation of the family was completed (Jn. 19:25-27).
- Luke 11:27-28: “And it happened as he spoke these things, that a certain woman from the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You!’ But he said, ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’” Jesus redefined what it meant for a woman to be blessed. For the matriarchs, giving birth was the ultimate blessing and barrenness the ultimate curse. Now that the promised seed had come, in fulfillment of the protoevangelion (Gen. 3:15) and the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15:4), women would no longer find their greatest blessing in faithful childbearing and childrearing, but in keeping the word of Christ (though of course these things usually go together for women). Even Mary the mother of Jesus is viewed primarily in terms of discipleship, rather than maternity.
- Mark 10:29-30: “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time – houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands with persecutions.” Jesus considers a willingness to part with one’s nearest relatives a condition of discipleship. Jesus must command our ultimate loyalty. However, there is also a promise attached – we may have to forsake our family in one sense (the natural family) but we get an even greater family back in the end in another sense (the ecclesial family Jesus forms around himself). In other words, whatever we lose when we leave behind the old society of Adam is regained a hundredfold in the new society created by the New Adam. Interestingly, in verse 30, “father” is the only item missing that occurred in the earlier list of things to be forsaken. Perhaps this is because Jesus has in mind the new Spiritual family in which God himself is the Father and in which other followers of Jesus become to us brothers, sisters, mothers, and children.
- In John 9, we have a story that shows what happens when the new family Jesus is forming around himself collides with the structures of the old eon. Jesus has healed a man born blind. When confronted with Pharisaical opposition, the man’s parents fear human approval more than God. They cling to synagogue membership rather than leaving it behind in order to be with Jesus. The healed man, on the hand, accepts his excommunication as the price of discipleship. He leaves behind the old family and old religious organization in order to follow Jesus into the new creation.¹⁶

¹⁶ John’s “new creation” theme, woven all through his gospel, comes to the fore in at least two ways in chapter 9. First, the man is healed by a washing, clearly pointing to baptism as the sacrament of the new birth. Physical sight, of course, is a cipher for spiritual sight. The man is made a new creature, whole once again, through the washing. The light of Jesus (cf. 9:5) is seen by the blind, but missed by those with functional eyes. Second, the reference to “since the world began” in verse 32 takes us back to the beginning of John’s gospel and indicates the cosmic, eschatological sweep of Jesus’ ministry. A new world is coming to birth in the signs and wonders he performs. The darkness of the old world is now being driven out. The definitive shift in world history from the relative darkness of the old world to the bright light of the new is taking place. The Day of the Lord has come in Jesus Christ (cf. Gen. 1 and the evening/morning pattern).

Turning from the gospels to Paul, we find the great Apostle clearly thought of the church as his new family. Repeatedly, he uses intimate, familial language to describe his ministry and corporate life in the church. Paul refers to fellow churchmen as “brothers” (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:20) and to the church as a whole as a “household” (1 Tim. 3:15). In Gal. 4:19, he depicts himself as a mother to the Galatian congregation. In 1 Thess. 2:7, he again uses this maternal metaphor to describe his ministry. Shortly thereafter, in 1 Thess. 2:11, he turns to a paternal metaphor. He refers to his disciple Timothy as his “son.” So the NT speaks, quite distinctly, of a family greater than the family, the church family. We must not confuse the natural family with the supernatural church family. Rodney Clapp, with help from N. T. Wright, summarizes:

Christians should in fact understand the church as their first, or, primary, family -- the social allegiance most determinative of their identity and aspirations in life. N. T. Wright nicely encapsulates the theological basis of this case when he notes that, for the earliest Christians, ‘from baptism onwards, one’s basic family consisted of one’s fellow-Christians. The fact of widespread persecution, regarded by both pagans and Christians as the normal state of affairs within a century of the beginnings of Christianity, is powerful evidence of the sort of thing Christianity was, and was perceived to be. It was a new family, a third ‘race,’ neither Jew nor Gentile, but ‘in Christ.’¹⁷

For Paul, no longer were familial-covenant ties more powerful than ecclesial-covenant ties. This discontinuity is seen clearly when we compare 1 Cor. 7:12ff to the practice of Ezra and Nehemiah in their day. For the Old Covenant administrators, intermarriage with pagans could only be remedied by divorce. The uncleanness of the non-covenant member overwhelmed and contaminated the covenant member. As a result their seed were unclean (cf. Ezra 9:1ff, 10:3; Neh. 13:23ff). Paul’s missionary labors, of course, resulted in many mixed marriages as some individuals responded to his preaching and others didn’t. But Paul’s instruction in handling this situation is precisely the opposite of Ezra and Nehemiah. Instead of forced divorces, Paul counsels the believing spouse to stay in the marriage and to live in peace as much as possible. In fact, Paul says that the unbelieving spouse now shares in some measure of the believer’s holiness! The eschatological situation is radically new and different! The sanctification of the Christian spouse flows out and overcomes the uncleanness of the non-Christian partner, not only allowing the Christian to stay in the marriage but even providing the expectation that the pagan spouse will convert. So far from requiring the dissolution of the marriage, Paul says it has been sanctified by virtue of one believing partner. Holiness has overcome pollution.

Moreover, the children of a mixed marriage are regarded not as unclean, as in the old covenant situation, or even spiritually neutral, but positively clean.¹⁸ They are within the sphere of covenant blessing and influence.¹⁹ If one spouse converts and another does not, there is no need to break off the marriage for the sake of the believer’s spiritual health. Nor is there any reason to doubt the inclusion of the children of such a marriage in the gracious covenant promises of God. In the new covenant era, unlike the old, there is no need to fear contamination or defilement from the world, provided we stand guard. After Pentecost, He who is in the believer is greater than he who is in the world. The power of the Spirit, now active in the world, creates new possibilities for ministry and always gives the believer the upper hand in the mixed situation. Uncleanness no longer spreads from unbeliever to believer; rather, holiness flows out from the covenant member to sanctify the non-covenant spouse.

Peter, interestingly, gave the same kind of instruction to wives (1 Pt. 3:1ff). Even though they were weaker than their husbands (3:7), the gospel gave them greater strength, so that the conversion of their wicked husbands became a real possibility. Even as the Christian wife submitted to her non-Christian husband in relative silence, she could exercise spiritual influence and dominion over him. The beauty of her holiness could effectively lead him to the Lord.

¹⁷ *Border Wars* 114. See also N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* 430-1, 449-50.

¹⁸ In the Old Covenant situation, perhaps one reason the marriages had to be dissolved was because they could not produce holy offspring. One of the fundamental purposes of marriage was frustrated (cf. Mal. 2:15), so the marriages themselves had to be terminated.

¹⁹ Paul uses slightly different Greek terms to refer to the holiness of the unbelieving spouse and the sanctification of their children in 1 Cor. 7. The text is very difficult, as the history of its scholarly treatment reveals. We shall offer only a few comments on this passage, as it pertains to our subject: [1] Paul does not tie the holiness of the unbelieving spouse or the child to baptism. The holiness gives each a *right* to baptism, though the unbelieving marriage partner forfeits that right through impenitence. [2] Both the unbelieving spouse and the child produced by the mixed marriage receive some measure of blessing simply by being associated with a covenant member in the family unit. This blessing increases both responsibility and privilege. [3] The believing spouse makes holy the unbeliever, as well as the offspring of their union. The Spirit flows out from the believing member to the others (cf. Jn. 7:37ff). If the non-Christian spouse leaves the marriage union, he also loses this status. [4] The believing spouse has received sanctification through a washing in the name of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11). This baptismal entrance into the sphere covenant holiness is what allows the believer to remain in the relationship without defilement and even transmit some measure of holiness to other family members. The washing of Christ is powerful enough to resist polluting stains from the unbelieving partner.

Thus, the family clearly remains a creational sphere in which God's grace is operative and active. As the Puritans said, God has cast the lines of electing grace through the loins of godly parents. And yet that grace does not come from internal means or ordinances entrusted to the family. The ultimate sources of grace in a fallen world are found in the institutional church, in the Word, baptism, and the Eucharist. This is why the family must take a back seat to the church in the new order. The household *per se* is not a means of salvation so much as it is a recipient of salvation through the means of the church. The covenant of grace, properly speaking, is with Christ and his church, not Christ and the family. The covenant of grace is with the family *through* the church we may say; but it is not with the family *per se*. God deals graciously with families as such, but only within the orbit of the church herself. The transgenerational promises made to believing parents are given to them in virtue of their membership in the family of Abraham (Gen. 17), a family demarcated now by baptism and faith, not bloodlines (Gal. 3-4).

The Family and the Flesh

The natural family is in Adam, in the flesh, and therefore is a failure if left to itself. Note how many Old Covenant leaders did not succeed in passing on the covenant faithfulness from one generation to the next (e.g., Samuel). This disruption in transgenerational blessing is expected to be reversed in the new age (cf. Mal. 4:6), but this is due to a new influx of power from the Messiah and the Spirit, not from any resources inherent in the family as a government or institution. This is why Paul requires New Covenant church leaders to have faithful children – covenant succession, often the exception rather than the norm in the old world, is to be the regular pattern in the Christian eon (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Tit. 1:6).

It must be understood that this relativizing of the family represents something of a shift corresponding to the transition from Old Covenant to New Covenant. To be sure, teaching such as we find in Lk. 14 that puts loyalty to God above loyalty to anything or anyone else was already found in the Old Testament Scriptures. Israelites knew they were to love God first (Dt. 6:1ff), and they knew that even fellow family members were to be handed over for judgment when they broke covenant (Dt. 13:6ff; 21:20). Yet a decisive movement from a family-centered structure to a church-centered structure for the people of God may clearly be discerned. The Old Covenant church was comprised of households (Num 1:16, 7:2, Dt. 1:15, 5:23; Josh. 21:1, 22:30; etc). It was a sort of “family of families.” The priesthood also functioned on a household basis, since membership in the priesthood was determined by genealogy. In the New Covenant, God still deals with us on the basis of households, but the importance of the family has been radically qualified. Israel relied upon the family for her existence. In one sense, under the Old Covenant, the family was the most important, most basic institution in society. The whole point of Israel's existence was to bring the promised seed into the world (Gen. 3:15; Gen. 12; 2 Sam. 7; Jn. 4:22; etc.). Thus, she was dependent on her member families procreating in order to accomplish her mission.²⁰ God gave her the Levirate law and miraculously enabled barren women to conceive children in order to ensure succession from one generation to the next. But now that the promised seed has come, the natural family recedes into the background. The Levirate law no longer functions,²¹ having been fulfilled in Christ, and barrenness for a believing woman, however disappointing it may be, is no longer the curse it once was. True, the household is still an important entity and is still dealt with in terms of the covenant. But in the New Creation, it is the church herself that is the true family of God. Church members, not people with a certain bio-ethnic background, are true sons of Abraham.

²⁰ Circumcision served – or should have served – as a constant reminder to Israel that she could not bring the promised seed into the world in her own strength. Circumcision, in fact, was instituted as the sign of the covenant in Gen. 17, just after Abraham attempted to fulfill the promise of seed in his own power by sleeping with Hagar. Ironically, Jews managed to turn a mark that should have humbled them into a badge of ethnic pride. Boasting about circumcision would be analogous to bragging that one was so clean he needed to be washed in the waters of baptism! It's non-sense.

²¹ The point of the Levirate law – to rise up a male heir and maintain the family's stake in the promised land – has been definitively realized in Christ.

We need to consider whether or not there is a shift in emphasis in the New Testament. The Great Commission is not phrased in terms of physical children but in terms of disciples....[yet] it is the same as the original commission to Adam and Eve. God wants the world filled with disciples, not with human flesh *per se*. The Old Covenant concept of blessedness is closely tied to the land and to seed. For this reason, if a man died without children, his brother was to raise him up one male heir to take his name *and* his land. In the New Covenant, the land has become the Church and the seed has become all believers. The Levirate marriage no longer applies in the New Covenant for this reason. *Land and children are relatively less important in the New Covenant* (Jim Jordan “The Bible and Family Planning” *Contra Mundum* No. 9 http://www.visi.com/~contra_m/cm/features/cm09_birthcon.html).

The impotency of the natural family is simply part of our doctrine of original sin. That which is flesh can only give rise to flesh. Or, to put it another way, that which is fallen can only give birth to that which is fallen (cf. Jn. 1:12-13, 3:6). The Levitical laws of uncleanness, of course, had already objectified this lesson for Israel. In the Levitical law, whatever flows out of a person's innermost being is both defiled and defiling (Lev. 12ff). In the New Covenant, this flow of death has been stopped up and even reversed, as the Mark 5:21-43 pericope reveals. There, Jesus comes into contact with two forms of uncleanness – a woman with a flow of blood and a dead girl – and in both cases, rather than their uncleanness flowing to him, his life flows out to them to bring healing and restoration (cf. Jn. 7:37f; Rom. 5:12-21). Life has overcome death! The world has been cleansed and renewed!

The fallenness of the family is also borne out (pun intended) in the ominous rhythm of “and he died” in the chronology of Gen. 5. Even the holiest parents can only conceive children who are dead in sin and under wrath (Eph. 2:1ff). The family has no internal resources with which it can redeem itself. Salvation for the family must come from the outside. This salvation for the family is promised in Mal. 4:5-6, but note that the inner-familial healing promised there is accomplished by the word of the prophet, not something within the family itself. The church, bearing in her bosom the means of grace, is the natural family's only hope of rescue and restoration. Christ makes his saving presence available not to the family per se, but in the ecclesial gathering (cf. Mt. 18:20). Your ultimate mother is not the one who gave you physical birth, but “Mother Kirk,” who granted you a new birth. This heavenly mother is the source of everlasting life and from her care we are never to depart (cf. Gal. 4:26ff; cf. Calvin's *Institutes* 4.1.4).

The Family of Christ

It is easy to show that the institutional church has now taken over the family's former place of prominence. In Gen. 1, the so-called Dominion Mandate is given to the family. Adam and Eve were to rule the earth and subdue it. But in Mt. 28, Jesus reissues the Dominion Mandate,²² not to a husband and wife pair, but to the eleven disciples who will become the basic building blocks for his church. Eph. 1:22-23 indicates that all things are *not* put under the feet of the Christian family, but under the feet of the institutional church. In other words, in the church, the promise of dominion made to Adam (cf. Ps. 8:6, alluded to in Eph. 1:22-23) comes to realization. What the old Adamic family could not accomplish because it was weakened by the flesh, the new family of the church will do in the strength of the Spirit.²³

²² Peter Leithart shows us that the Great Commission is not exactly the republication of the Dominion Mandate:

The Great Commission is acknowledged by nearly all Christians to be closely connected to the kingdom of God. When he commissioned the apostles to make disciples of all nations, Jesus was commissioning them to preach the gospel of the kingdom to the furthest corners of the world, to call men to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Some have suggested that the Great Commission is a republication of the original ‘dominion mandate’ given to Adam (Gen. 1:26-28). The two are certainly related, but I believe it is more accurate to say that the dominion mandate sets the context for the Great Commission. The Great Commission *assumes* that the dominion mandate is still in force. There was no need whatever for Jesus to ‘republish’ the cultural mandate, because humanity never stopped forming cultures. Instead, the Great Commission addresses sinful humanity's propensity to form corrupt, perverse cultures. When people turn from the living God to sin and idolatry, it affects their work. They continue to interact with the creation, form cultures, and produce cultural objects, but they do so in ungodly ways. When men abandon the Creator, He delivers their societies to darkness, ignorance, and chaos (Rom. 1:18-32). They feast at the tables of demons and go out to form demonic worlds. The Great Commission instructs the church to call sinners to abandon their ungodly cultural pursuits and to pursue godliness in their cultural pursuits. When people respond with faith and repentance to the preaching of the gospel, they are not delivered from culture. They continue to be cultural creatures, but they are regenerate cultural creatures. They become cultural creatures who know the truth that sets them free, who have access to God's life and his banquet, who love, worship, serve, and obey the Creator rather than the creature. The Great Commission calls men to abandon the table of demons and invites them to the feast of the kingdom. By feasting on Christ, they are conformed to His image, and return to the world, like Moses, reflecting His glory (*The Kingdom and the Power* 129-30).

Leithart is right to caution against too close an identification of the Great Commission with the original Dominion Mandate. But his point squares well with the one we are seeking to make, nonetheless: The family itself is one of the cultural institutions that needs to be converted and disciplined in terms of the Great Commission. The family is now impotent, since the fall, to fulfill the Dominion Mandate on its own. True, the family remains an instrument of dominion, in some sense, even after the fall. But only insofar as it trained by the church is it able to take dominion in productive and God-glorifying ways. The Great Commission, in a sense, swallows up the Dominion Mandate, and provides the preconditions, power, and context for its proper fulfillment.

²³ Mark Horne explains:

[U]nder the Mosaic economy the leadership of the church is constantly spoken of as being the heads of households and the congregation is described as a collection of households. But in the NC church such language simply vanishes. Rather, the

While it is crucial to do justice to NT teaching on the centrality of the church as our true family, we must be mindful that this in no way jeopardizes the fact that God still deals with the normal family as such. As a created institution, the family is a recipient of saving grace via God's ordained means. The NT is full of instructions about family life that need to be studied and obeyed and the NT still praises marriage and childrearing as honorable and critical functions to be performed. God still makes promises to believing parents about their children and grows his church from within through covenant succession.²⁴ The old Adamic family is, in some sense, brought into the new creation, even though its basic features of marriage and procreation will not last into eternity. But the point that needs to be understood here is this: the family is no longer central; rather, the church is central. The church, not the family, is the primary sphere of God's grace. Or, to put it another way, the true family is no longer natural, but ecclesiastical. We may think of it in this manner: When the gospel is applied to us in baptism, our bonds to the old creation are severed. We're taken out of the old Adamic world order, and plugged into the new creation established by Christ. But, having been cut off from the old world and transferred into the new, we are now sent back into the old world as ministers of the new creation. (This seems be Paul's whole point about the function of his apostleship in 2 Cor. 5). When we are called out of the Adamic order, all our connections to that world are broken. But we are then sent back into that world in order to sanctify and heal those old creation institutions, such as the family and state, by bringing the love of Christ to bear upon them. In this way, redemption restores creation.

This ecclesiocentric world order was already hinted at even before Christ brought in the kingdom of God. Under the Old Covenant, no one was born an Israelite (i.e., a covenant member). Simply having Jewish parents

church is made up of 'the brethren' or 'the disciples.' The elders are *never* described as heads of households. This is exactly what one would expect from a shift in the mark of initiation into the covenant [from circumcision, which applied only to males, to baptism, which males and females both receive]. *The institutional church is no longer overshadowed by the family.* Furthermore, the whole arrangement of divisions according to heads of households is part and parcel of the *tribalism* of that age of the church...Israel was organized by families because it was organized by tribes. Again, none of this is practiced today nor was it practiced in the NT era. In the transition from Moses to Christ, we have a transition from tribalism to cosmopolitanism. The church is no longer made up of tribes any more than it is made up of political kingdoms. The church is an institution in her own right without need to depend...on family or state. To go back to heads-of-households as the means of identifying membership in the church seems like a move back from the fullness of Christ into the shadows of the old covenant...*The [Adamic] family has been judged by Jesus and found wanting.* What is going on is a transition from the first covenant with Adam to the second covenant in Christ as the new Adam. God instituted the family through Adam and Eve and gave them the dominion mandate. Adam and Eve promptly rebelled against God and lost their dominion. What was needed was a new Adam who could undo the work of the first Adam and again take dominion. The second covenant was provisionally established soon after Adam sinned. Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and others were new Adams in a sense. Ultimately, of course, they fell short. They themselves were partakers of the first Adam. They sinned; they died; and the covenants established through them did not last. Nor were they able to establish a new institution to replace and fulfill the Adamic family. Jesus, however, was the true New Adam who did all these things." ("Heads of Household Membership and Male Only Voting in the Church," available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/heads_of_household_membership_and_maleonly_voting_in_the_church.htm, emphasis added).

Also, Jordan:

I believe that familism is a pervasive error in American Christianity. By and large, people who are anti-statist tend to be familists. It is understandable that this ethos should infect the churches... The influence of Mary Pride and of the home school movement also tends in this direction...In heaven [i.e., in Lord's Day sacramental worship], however, the family is not the nuclear, biological family. Jesus said that the natural family, not the state, would be the greatest enemy of His kingdom (Matt. 10:16-23, 34-37; Luke 14:26). The new family is the church. The parents are not the biological parents, but the elders of the church, who act for Christ. The natural, biological family is dead in Adam, and its children are born dead. We do not baptize children because they are born into the Church of Christian parents. Rather, we baptize them because they are born dead in trespasses and sins, and their only hope is to be transferred and adopted into the new heavenly family. After baptism, biological parents are mere stewards of Christ. They have no ownership rights. In the presbyterian ritual, all the members of the congregation take vows and become God-parents to the child. Weekly worship affirms this truth. The heavenly family takes priority over the natural family....Only in this way can the new heavenly family *restore* the natural family" (*Rite Reasons* No. 21 "A Letter on Paedocommunion" <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/rr/tr021.htm>).

The early church understood this. In many ancient church services, husbands and wives would sit separately. They knew when they came to church their families were being torn apart, only to be put back together anew by Word and sacrament. While I do not recommend re-implementing that practice, I do think we need to remember the principle it embodied. The church does not obliterate the structures of creation, but heals them. Apart from the church, families have no way to deal with their fallenness. This is why the church is primary: through her, the family is redeemed. This is also why it is so critical to maintain the church's integrity as a unique trans-familial institution.

²⁴ See Robert Rayburn's paper "The Presbyterian Doctrines of Covenant Children, Covenant Nurture, and Covenant Succession," available at <http://www.faithtacoma.org/covenant2.htm>.

did not make you a Jew; rather it gave you the right to *become* a Jew via circumcision on the eighth day.²⁵ Likewise, in the New Covenant, our children are not born members of the church, but enter the church by means of baptism (WCF 28.1), the watery doorway into the redeemed community.²⁶ The Old Covenant already acknowledged the failure of the Adamic family and the need for a new family;²⁷ the New Covenant still acknowledges the old Adamic family as the recipient of the covenant promises, even if its importance is greatly lessened. But in the Old Covenant, the family was the primary instrument of redemption because God had promised to bring the messianic seed into the world through the woman (cf. 1 Tim. 2:15); in the New Covenant, the church is the primary instrument of redemption because to her the ministries of word and sacrament, of conversion and discipleship, have been entrusted. The covenant has undergone a basic change in structure from familio-centrism to ecclesio-centrism.

Living out the Vision

What practical implications does this have for life in the church? Certainly the church should recognize families as her basic building blocks. In a sense, the church is still made up of household units and the family

²⁵ More specifically, the promise made to Jewish parents (cf. Gen. 17) gave the child the right to enter Israel by means of circumcision. It was not a natural birth-right, but a promise-right that entitled the child to circumcision. Similarly, those born into the Levitical family were not automatically priests, either, though the covenant made with their tribe belonged to them. They had to undergo ordination to enter the priesthood. In fact, the OT ceremonial law indicates whatever is produced by humans by ordinary generation is corrupt and must be cleansed before it can belong to God (cf. Lev. 12ff).

²⁶ Having Christian parents is not enough to make one a Christian or a member of the church. One must pass through the sacrament of initiation, baptism, to be reckoned a Christian. It's the water, not the blood, that counts. Proof of this is seen in the fact that orphans and adopted children are baptized, as well as slaves/servants, provided they will be given Christian nurture and discipleship. Sponsors who have no biological relation to them can claim the covenant promises for them and bring them to the font. Water really is thicker than blood! Or, to put it another way, it is the blood of the Lamb, not the biological father's blood, that determines one's identity in baptism. The nineteenth century debate over the ground and effects of infant baptism between Reformed theologians James Henly Thornwell, Charles Hodge and John Williamson Nevin is instructive here. Thornwell argued that baptized children were still to be regarded as unregenerate. Their church membership was merely formal, and had nothing to do with their spiritual relationship to Christ. It entitled them to no real privileges and laid upon them no additional responsibilities. Thornwell's position of an "external" covenant totally divorced from union with Christ and salvation is so obviously unscriptural (see e.g., Mt. 18:2-5, 19:13-15, etc.) and out of step with the Reformed tradition, we may safely set it aside. Hodge did better, arguing children of Christian parentage were born into the covenant. Baptism then formally ratified this pre-existing relationship. No later conversion experience was necessary since the child was regarded as a Christian from conception onwards. Hodge's view is thoroughly explored in Lewis Schenck's *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*. Nevin's position, it seems to me, was the most biblical on this point. According to Nevin, the child entered into a gracious covenant relation with God via baptism. The sacrament of baptism effected a transition from the old world of Adam, under the reign of sin and death, to the new world of Christ, in which grace reigns through righteousness. Nevin insisted that baptism was a genuine means of grace, not because of any inherent power in the elements or the officiant, but because God had promised to be present and active in the rite. Understanding the precise nature of the differences between the respective positions of Hodge and Nevin is critical. Hodge wrote,

[T]he doctrine that parents represent their children, and that, therefore children of professing parents are born within the Church, and on that ground are to be baptized, is the distinctive doctrine of the Reformed Churches. In opposition to this view, Romanists and Lutherans place the duty of infant baptism on the ground that all children are born outside the church, and by baptism are inwardly renewed by the Holy Ghost, and thus become members of Christ's body.

Nevin responded, showing that the position ascribed to Romanists and Lutherans actually more closely approximated the classical Reformed view than did Hodge's own position! Hodge, perhaps unwittingly, emptied the sacrament of baptism of salvific efficacy altogether. Nevin asked:

What do good men mean when they tell us, that children of professing Christians are Christian likewise, members of the Church and heirs of all its grace by their mere natural birth? . . . Our birth relation to pious parents may give us a right to be taken into the Church; but it can never of itself make us to be in the Church as our *born* privilege.

To put it simply: No one is born a Christian. Physical descent from Christian parents is not enough (cf. Jn. 1:12-13). The flesh profits nothing (Jn. 6:63) since flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50). Birth to covenant parents is insufficient; one must be born again from above to enter the kingdom (Jn. 3:1-16). Baptism, the birth of water and the Spirit, not natural conception/birth from regenerate parents, puts one in a saving relationship with God. Saving mercy cannot be passed on genetically or automatically from one generation to the next. Otherwise, we are in danger of falling into rationalism and naturalizing grace. Of course, Nevin also knew that without Christian nurture and a response of persevering faith, baptism would not save. The sacrament initiated salvation, but did not complete it apart from persevering faithfulness. Nevin also drew out the practical implications of this high view of baptismal efficacy. Thus, he knew the foundation for parental nurture was found in baptism itself. See James Hastings Nichols, *Romanticism in American Theology*, 243-258 for these Hodge and Nevin quotations and a fine overall discussion of these matters. More on all of this below.

²⁷ Again, note that circumcision itself – a symbolic castration – pointed out that the natural family was impotent to produce the promised seed. The true Isaac had to be born of the Spirit (cf. Gen. 15-17 and Gal. 4-5). Remember, circumcision was instituted right after Abraham's attempt to produce the promised seed in his own strength.

serves as the training ground and proving ground for church leaders (1 Tim. 3:4-5). The church needs to teach and support families in every way. But in a very profound sense, in the church, we are all members of *one* household, not several. My family does not come to church simply as the Lusks, as a husband/father, wife/mother, son/brother, and daughter/sister. These inter-familial relationships are all still present, and need discipling by the church, but they are all radically relativized. We come to worship not as members of the Lusk family, but as members of the family God promised Abraham. We are *all* mothers, brothers, and sisters to one another in the church (Mk. 3:33-34). We are all members of the same royal priesthood (Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Pt. 2:5ff). This is the family Jesus promised his disciples (Mk. 10:29ff).

The practical point, then, is this: The church can deal with both the one and the many; she can relate to us both as members of an earthly household and as individual disciples in the heavenly household of faith. Just as we have a double citizenship (in a worldly kingdom and in Christ's kingdom), so we have a double family membership (in a human family and the divine family). But in both cases, the latter is more fundamental to our identity and vocation.

Moreover, the church must recognize her role in discipling family structures. Nearly all evangelical treatments of marriage and parenting try to deal with the family directly rather than through the agency of the church. Jordan identifies the problem:

There is more Christian family literature for sale now than ever before, and divorce among Christians is higher than ever before. Why? Because the transforming power of the sacramental assembly of the Church is wholly absent from consideration.

How many of these books and seminars start by saying, "The first family is the Church. Join a Church that gives you bread and wine every week, that sings the Psalter, that teaches the whole Bible seriously, and has a decent community life. That is the most important thing you can do to build up your marriage and family." Do any of these evangelical marriage manuals ever say this? No. Why?

Why this blind spot? The answer is that the Church no longer regards worship as private family time with God. The Church no longer sees herself as the transforming dynamo at the center of life, the only place on earth where Life is set out in all three avenues: Word, Sacrament, and Community.

Evangelicalism cuts the cord between worship and the world, and the world dies.

I am not setting forth worship as a magical key to restore family and civil life; but I am definitely saying that unless worship is restored, family and civil life don't have a prayer!²⁸

Now we are in a position to see how the family can become a rival to the church. Jordan explains:

The family was the central institution of society in the Old Covenant and Old Creation...Because of sin, however, this first family is wrecked. Instead of protecting his wife, Adam set her forward to encounter the serpent. Instead of agreeing with God that she was fundamentally deceived, Adam tried to escape responsibility by putting the blame on her. Hatred between husband and wife soon matured to become murder of brother by brother. The first family, thus, was shattered by sin. Jesus stated that the greatest enemy of His new Kingdom would not be the Babelic power state, but the old fallen family (Mt. 10:16-21, 34-37; Mt. 12:46-50; Jn. 2:3-4). The new kingdom would stand as God's new family, and thus directly challenge the claims of the first fallen family. Thus, the Old Covenant provision that family responsibilities take precedence over holy war is no longer operative in the New Covenant: Allegiance to Christ must come first (compare Lk. 14:15-17 with Dt. 20:5-7). The new family of the church does not, however, simply replace the biological family. Rather, the new family puts the old to death only to grant it new, resurrection life . . . Moreover, not only is this necessary when the family comes into the kingdom the first time, it is a weekly necessity as well. Just as the bread is ripped in half, and the blood separated from the flesh in the sacrament, so also the family must be torn apart, coming under judgment, and then reconstituted in the sphere of resurrected, transfigured life . . . It is only when the natural family is subordinated to the church – the new family – that the natural family can be restored...Since the church restores the world, however, after worship is completed the natural family is restored.²⁹

This renewal of the family in and through the church is one thing desperately needed today. And yet the baptistic theology and praxis of modern American evangelicalism keeps the family as family from receiving the full measure of healing grace God intends for it:

²⁸ *These on Worship* 18.

²⁹ *Sociology of the Church* 232-3.

The baptistic worldview of American evangelicalism does not perceive that the family structure as such is dead and must be renewed in the kingdom. While evangelicals are very concerned about the family, its structure is not related to the specific work of the church. The church is seen as dealing with individuals, but not seen as taking hold of the family as such and transforming it. Baptistic evangelicalism thus tends to separate the natural family from the foundation and reinforcement of the new family, the church. Books on Christian family life abound, yet few if any refer to God's new family as the foundation for the restoration of the natural family. The natural family is simply enjoined to keep a bunch of rules – good in themselves – apart from the transforming life of the kingdom. As a result, pressures and expectations are placed on the natural family that it cannot bear, and rampant divorce is the present-day result in American evangelicalism.³⁰

Focus Off the Family?

Nowhere are the dangers of familioentrism more evident than in the rapidly growing home church movement. This movement grows out of a misunderstanding of basic biblical ecclesiology. It fundamentally distorts the nature of the church, refusing to see it as the “family that transcends the family.” It also misreads first century church history. Churches often did meet in homes, but out of necessity rather than any ideological commitment to the natural family as the key instrument of God's work. As soon as the church had the political liberty and financial resources to build her own buildings, she did so. The home church movement assumes the church was originally an informal, egalitarian community.³¹ Actually, there is ample evidence in the NT that the church from the very beginning featured an indispensable, and somewhat hierarchical structure. These were not later accretions that distorted the original purity of the church; they were built-in features of Christ's body from the beginning. Rich Bledsoe has some highly perceptive insights into the problems of familioentrism and the home church movement:

Families as self enclosed systems are inherently contradictory. Anybody who doesn't believe this only has to try to do marriage counseling for about ten minutes. You will hear often, exactly the same facts (but not always even that) with diametrically opposite interpretations of those facts (and sometimes even different facts, but I am giving the best case scenario). The two partners may just as well live on different planets. It is a naive man who thinks that the solution to this is just to delve in and umpire, and ‘get to the bottom of things.’ There is no bottom. This is just a specific application of Dooyeweerd's giant system that says that all autonomous systems contradict themselves. Or it is an application of Godel or Bertrand Russell, showing the same thing with all logical or mathematical systems. Finite systems can only resolve their contradictions by being pulled up into a higher system (which the church is supposed to be). Eventually, only the Trinity is a self-contained consistent system, and the church is the covenant doorway to this...House churches never transcend the family. Hence, you get a bunch of self-contradictory families that even in principle have no desire to transcend their own ‘familyness.’ The result is that contradiction and conflict has to be dealt with somehow, and the only way is to crush it. So the first step is to give the fathers almost a Hindu godlike authority that is never, never to be questioned. Every house church I ever saw had a bunch of crushed and demolished wives and mothers. And there is nothing funnier or more pathetic than a bunch of asses pretending they are steeds. They are still asses. All men are. But if you lose your sense of humor about it, you become even more ridiculous. But then, the asses all begin to differ amongst themselves. But, being very democratic (unlike the ‘traditional church’ with its ordained ‘false prophets’), everybody is equal. But some men turn out to be more equal than others, and somebody gets picked out to be the one who is heretical. For some reason, the gift of ‘discernment’ was always the most prized one in all the house churches I ever had anything to do with. Somebody gets discerned, and then turned on. And then parties begin to choose up sides. Finally, someone emerges with godlike authority that quells all opposition after a couple of splits. Now that is a lot like congregationalism. But congregationalists still have an ordained minister who represents something that transcends the family. And usually there is some sort of convocation that is made up of more than the fathers / prophets/ heads of households who tell all the women and children and families what to do. Congregationalism is light years ahead of house churches because it doesn't try to make self-contradictory family systems to be the sole building blocks of the world. It recognizes that families must

³⁰ *Sociology of the Church* 234. Familism leads to familolatry, that is, the idolizing of the family. And of course, this is an idol that cannot save itself, much less anything else.

³¹ It is sadly ironic that many in the home church movement denigrate ecclesiastical authority as “tyranny,” all the while turning their own brand of patriarchy in the home into a far worse form of tyranny.

have non-familial authority over them to become a church and to be called out of their own self-contradictoriness into something higher.³²

Even though the family is critical in God's purposes, it is not a self-sufficient institution.

“It Takes a Church . . .”: Paedobaptism and Familiocentrism

Paedobaptist churches have not been exempt from the debilitating effects of familiocentrism. In part, this has been because paedobaptists have been sloppy in formulating the precise grounds on which infant initiation is practiced. Sometimes the baptism of infants is made to rest almost exclusively on the familial relation, as though the child “inherited” his Christian status from his parent(s). Some have suggested the faith of the parents substitutes for the infant's own (lack of) faith.³³ A better answer has come from Lutherans who typically ground infant baptism in original sin (the child's need) and the infant's faith (e.g., Ps 22:9).

These considerations must play a role in any discussion of infant baptism. The familial relation and the faith of the parents are important. In addition, there is no question the child *needs* the cleansing God has promised to grant through the font. And children of believers are regarded in Scripture as believers also, in their own right.³⁴

But the best Reformed reflection on this question has placed the ground of paedobaptism most squarely on the transgenerational promises of the covenant. That is to say, in the last analysis, paedobaptism rests upon God's own faithfulness to his people in Christ. A child is not baptized simply because he needs it, or simply because he is presumed to have faith, or simply because he has a Christian parentage. The child's right to baptism is grounded on the promise of God to be his God, even as he is the God of his father (Gen. 17; Acts 2:39). Everything follows from this.

To illustrate in a way that fleshes out the details of this view, we may say the covenant child is *betroted* to the Lord from conception. But the *marriage* – that is, the actual covenant bonding – takes place at baptism. Or, to put it in more theological terms, God is already in the process of drawing the child to himself from the moment of conception onwards. The examples of David (Ps. 22:9-10)³⁵ and John the Forerunner (Lk.1:41) show God's *in utero* work. But this work isn't complete until the child receives the sign of initiation. The child remains in a limnal, transitional state until then. The threshold into union with Christ, new life in Spirit, and covenant membership in the family of God is actually crossed when the child is baptized. This model allows us to do full justice to biblical teaching on baptismal efficacy, but also keeps us from saying that baptism is *absolutely* necessary for salvation in each and every case. It is *ordinarily* necessary, but there are exceptions, such as when a child of the covenant dies before baptism was possible.³⁶

Of course, it must also be noted at this juncture that baptism is a rite entrusted not to parents, but to pastors.³⁷ The church, not the family, administers the saving sacrament of baptism.³⁸ The minister acts as official representative and instrument of Christ in applying the sacrament.

³² Private correspondence, used by permission.

³³ Those who take this approach usually point to those passages in the gospels in which one person believes for another, usually a parent for a child, resulting in restoration and salvation. We see one person's faith brining blessing to another in pericopes such as Mt. 8:5-13 and 15:21-28.

³⁴ Two helpful discussions of *fides infantum* are: Andrew Das, *Baptized into God's Family* chapters 3-4; Peter Leithart, “Do Baptists Talk to Their Babies?” <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/tr/rr047.htm>. Many theologians reject the notion of infant faith as absurd because their view of *pistis* is too cognitive rather than relational.

³⁵ Note that David's prenatal experience is embedded in Israel's hymnbook. Every Israelite would've sung these words in a corporate setting. David's experience of trust in God before birth was not unusual but normative. The Puritan/revivalistic model of growing up and then having a “conversion experience” is not found in Scripture.

³⁶ The ordinary necessity of baptism for salvation is simply the teaching of the Westminster standards. See WSC 85. The Confession teaches that there is no ordinary possibility of salvation outside the visible church and baptism is the mode of entrance into the visible church (25.2, 28.1)

³⁷ We need to come to grips with this, especially since it seems the Old Covenant sign of circumcision could be administered by anyone (see, e.g., Ex. 4). Ordinarily, baptisms ought to be performed by ordained ministers. When a child is brought for baptism, the parents are, in effect, giving the child up. “Here, Jesus. This child is yours. You have claimed him.” Jesus puts his mark of ownership on the child through the waters of baptism and then hands him back over to the parents, in effect saying, “He is now mine. But I entrust you to be my steward and raise him up for me.” Our children do not really belong to us; they belong to Christ. We need to parent accordingly.

³⁸ This does not necessarily discount the possibility of legitimate emergency baptisms performed by non-ordained persons, including family members. But I will not enter into that discussion here.

Focusing the Family

Focusing solely on the institution of the family, to the exclusion of the institutional church, is dangerous, not only to the church but also to the family.³⁹ Familiocentrism is a threat not only to healthy family life, but also to healthy church life. If our churches presuppose the centrality of the traditional nuclear family, the marginalized (e.g., single moms, widows, etc.) will stay on the margins. And yet these are the just the categories of hurting, broken people God calls his church to focus ministry upon. Like our Master, we are called to help the sick and sinful. It is especially as we take the focus off of our own families and direct our families towards the service of those whose home life has been shattered by sin that our families grow into maturity. But familiocentrism makes ministry to broken families awkward at best. It distracts the church from the real task at hand and keeps us oriented towards our own needs rather than those of others. It makes the church almost exclusively inward facing.⁴⁰

Moreover, family centeredness leaves the family without real resources for lasting change, since the chief means of grace have been entrusted to the institutional church. Yes, families need to engage in regular times of worship together. But these times should be seen as practice for the main event, which occurs on the Lord's Day, when we all gather together as one ecclesial family to renew covenant with our heavenly Father. Liturgy trains us for service in all of life. It integrates families into the new life of the kingdom so the old Adamic family order is transformed by redemptive grace. The family's hope of renewal, then, will not take place apart from a re-establishing of the church's centrality, especially her sacramental worship. The church, as God's family, provides the pattern and the power for kingdom living in the home.⁴¹

Some Final Thoughts on Family and Church: Catching the Vision

Space does not permit an in-depth discussion of other practical matters such as the propriety of youth ministries and so forth, though these issues deserve attention. We will only make a few brief comments in passing.

Certainly, church youth programs have all too often encouraged childishness and immaturity. But this does not make youth ministry per se bad. Age segregated instruction can be very helpful, provided it aims at true Christian growth and maturity. The church has a role in the discipleship of our children, beginning with their baptism (which constitutes them as disciples) and continuing with other forms of nourishment through the means of grace. Clearly the church can interface with children apart from the mediation of their parents. Paul does not simply tell fathers to teach their children to keep the fifth commandment; he speaks directly to children of their responsibilities (cf. Eph. 6:1-3). Parents in turn should require that their young ones learn the fifth commandment also entails that children obey other authorities besides Mom and Dad, such as church officers. The family is not a closed off, self contained system. Parents should also lead their children in regular times of worship at home. But family prayer is always secondary to common prayer, as Ps. 87:2 indicates: "The Lord loves the gates of Zion [that is, the temple, the center of corporate worship] more than the dwellings of Jacob [that is, the homes of the Israelites]." Most importantly perhaps, ecclesiocentric parents will constantly remind their children that God is their true Father and his church is their true Mother.

³⁹ One of the ironies of American evangelicalism's obsession with the family is that it remains very baptistic, and therefore excludes children from the sacramental life of the church. Even among the Reformed, whose Calvinism has been heavily influenced by revivalism and pietism, children may be baptized but are still treated as outsiders until they mature to the point of making an intellectually sophisticated profession of faith or having a "summer camp" conversion experience. By grounding infant baptism in the promise of God rather than family ties, the door is opened to a fuller inclusion of our children in the life of the church. Since their baptisms graft them into the kingdom family, they belong at the kingdom feast. They've washed up and are ready to take to their place at the table. Our heavenly Father is a good Father and feeds his children. Paedocommunion, thus, may be considered the ultimate form of youth ministry and parental nurture. The bibliography on paedocommunion is immense. See, in particular, [paedocommunion.com](http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/for_the_childrens_sake_paedocommunion.htm) and my essay "For the Children's Sake" at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/for_the_childrens_sake_paedocommunion.htm.

⁴⁰ This is not to say a father should be more concerned about the needs of other people's children than his own. Obviously God calls each husband and father to care most directly for those immediately under his covenantal headship. But fathers especially would often do their families as a whole more good if they directed them to the service of those outside their nuclear family unit, especially the elderly, handicapped, single parents, etc. Outward ministries are critical to develop in our selfish, narcissistic age. The Christian church and family must not be self-serving but sacrificial. Traditional nuclear families, fed by strong local churches, should have the strength to pour themselves out for others whose family life is less Edenic. To paraphrase Calvin, it is certainly the duty of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own family.

⁴¹ To see what familiocentrism run amok looks like, see Tommy Lee's review of a family conference at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/tommy_lee/report_on_a_home_convention.htm.

Other “how-to” questions concerning priorities, ministry strategies, and so forth will have to be left for another time. The practical questions need addressing, but my approach in this essay is more theoretical than “hands-on.”

Practical matters aside, this paper hopefully will show us the importance of *orienting* our lives in a churchward direction. It does not necessarily mean that church work (e.g., as a minister, missionary, volunteer, or whatever) is more important than other work (e.g., as a doctor, banker, father, mother, etc.). It does not imply that we ought to spend more time each day doing “churchy” things than other activities. For most, that simply isn’t feasible. Rather, my intention is to provide a vision that will captivate us, drive us, and motivate us – in short, that will allow us to be more fully caught up into the awesome sweep of what God is doing in creation and recreation in order to accomplish his eternal purposes. Life in the church informs and transforms everything else we do; through participation in the church, we participate in God’s holy and gracious purposes for the universe. Scripture is clear that the focal point of God’s purposes is honed in on the church. If God is church centered in this fashion, we must be as well.

It should be clear from all of this, then, that the solution to what ails our culture will not be found in simply focusing on the family. We must focus on ecclesial issues: liturgy, sacraments, church government and discipline, tithing, the psalter, evangelism and discipleship, preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God, building up diaconal mercy ministries, developing parish community, and so forth.⁴² Families *do* need reform, and for precisely this reason we need to build up our *first* family, the church. The natural family is important, but secondary. The heavenly family is the model for the earthly family. Clapp’s double declaration is exactly right:

The negative declaration: The family is not God’s most important institution on earth. The family is not the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. The family is not the primary vehicle of God’s grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world. A positive declaration: The church is God’s most important institution on earth. The church is the social agent that most significantly shapes and forms the character of Christians. And the church is the primary vehicle of God’s grace and salvation for a waiting, desperate world.⁴³

Amen!

⁴² See my essay “Sword and Trowel: The Reconstruction of the Church” for more on ecclesiastical rehabilitation.

⁴³ *Families at the Crossroads* 67-8.

Against America

The Nation with Soul?

It's been said that America is the nation with the soul of a church.⁴⁴ More truthfully, we might say America is the nation with the complex of a Messiah. And while this messianic complex has been greatly secularized, it still persists in various forms and manifestations. How we got to where we are today from our starting point as a nation is a long and twisted tale. We cannot tell that whole story here, but looking at some aspects of the plotline should be helpful. Getting a handle on the shape and flow of American history is critical in understanding what moves the church needs to make at the present time in order to stay in the game.⁴⁵ What we will come to see is that though America has been a great blessing to the world in many ways, America also poses a subtle but dangerous threat to the church.

The Puritan settlers who first ventured to America's shores were thoroughly ecclesiocentric and theocratic. They inherited this church-centered view of society under Christ's lordship from Calvin, Bucer, Knox, and the other shining lights of the Reformation, who had in turn inherited it from the Constantinian/Augustinian order of Medieval Christendom. The Puritan settlers came not simply to escape religious persecution or to seek wealth, but to establish a "city on a hill," a holy commonwealth that would serve as a model for other nations within Christendom to follow. In a sense, they came because they wanted to play their part in the unfolding drama of Christendom.

One rather prominent example must suffice. Cotton Mather, a great Puritan pastor in seventeenth century New England, is generally regarded as one of the most brilliant men to ever live on this continent. Because of his vast knowledge and wisdom, he was frequently consulted by political rulers and became quite a statesman. All the while, though, he never lost sight of the lordship of Christ over the state or the centrality of the church and her ordinances in a Christian culture. In the words of George Grant,

He constantly reaffirmed what he believed to be a biblical verity: those social and political changes are always driven by a magnification of the ministries of the local church, not the other way around. He believed cultural and political activism were secondary to parish life, the life of the worshipping community of the local church, and if Americans lost this priority of the local parish church and its worship assembly, then the American experiment in liberty was doomed to fail.

Once, when called to testify before the colony's governor, he said,

I tell you sir, unless your priorities are set aright by the gospel of grace, the hope of liberty we now have shall be surrendered. I tell you sir, sober yourself in the good news of the gospel, lest we all be dragged off in chains.⁴⁶

Mather knew, as did most Puritans, that a strong institutional church was necessary to the maintenance of political liberty. As the church went, so the world would go – sooner or later.

The Loss of Ecclesiocentrism: Two Factors

Several forces eventually undermined this ecclesiocentric view. Over a several century period, Western civilization was reconfigured, removing the church from her role as the core institution in society. The cultural map was redrawn, such that the church went from being the capital city to "life in the backwoods."

It is crucial we come to grips with the factors that produced this dramatic shift. In large measure, the rise of *revivalism* caused the church to crumble from within.⁴⁷ Revivalism degraded the role of the clergy (largely

⁴⁴ This saying is from historian Sydney Mead.

⁴⁵ Engaging in broad historical interpretation as I am about to do is always risky. Necessarily, one "stylizes" history by simplifying, over generalizing, and stereotyping. Painting with such a broad brush can be dangerous, but becomes acceptable if author and readers both understand the limitations. We're only trying to give the big picture. Talking about various movements and forces and causes in history is mysterious but must be done.

⁴⁶ Quotations taken from taped lecture from the "Biographies of Great American Saints: Fifth Annual Credenda/Agenda History Conference." For a broad overview of the ecclesiocentric Puritanism of the early American settlers, as well as its decline, see Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart *The Reduction of Christianity* ch. 13-14.

through leaving them uneducated), de-emphasized sacramental worship (in favor of big tent “circus” style meetings), ignored the church’s theological heritage, particularly Calvinism (since tradition was regarded as crippling and confining to the “Spirit”), focused on experience rather than truth (often stirred up by means of emotionally manipulative sappy, sentimental hymns and choruses), and catered to the sovereign individual rather than building up the community (thus, playing right into the hands of the American frontier’s “self-made man” image). The church aided and abetted her own displacement from the center of cultural life to the periphery. This self-imposed marginalization has left the church with little or no social visibility or influence. Culturally, she is irrelevant.

However, our focus in this essay will be on a second factor, namely, the emergence *nationalism*. The architects of the modern secular state, men such as Hobbes and Locke, forced the church into the mold of a “voluntary organization” and privatized religion into a personal (in the sense of non-communal, non-institutional) relationship.⁴⁸ As the church moved to the fringe of society, the newly created secular state rushed in to fill the void.

In Europe, the so-called religious wars rocked society at its foundations. Religious dissent in the wake of the Reformation put a tremendous strain on culture throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁷ See my paper “Ecclesiocentrism: Exploring the Centrality of the Church in the Plan and Purpose of God” in which I develop in more depth the role of both revivalism and nationalism in the demise of the church’s cultural dominion. See also Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*; Peter Leithart, “The Great Awakening and American Nationalism” (Biblical Horizons Occasional Paper No. 7); and Philip Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics*.
⁴⁸ One illustration of this privatization may be helpful. Take the biblical term “regeneration,” which occurs two times in the NT. In modern evangelicalism, “regeneration” refers neither to the new cosmic order inaugurated by Christ (Mt. 19:28), nor to the public, communal rite of baptism (Tit. 3:5); rather it usually suggests a private, unmediated religious experience. This is the legacy of the anti-ecclesiastical shift in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries.

⁴⁹ Peter Leithart, provides a nice summary:

Modern politics was born, in a more than chronological sense, in the aftermath of the wars of religion. Wolfhart Pannenberg has pointed out that until the seventeenth century it was assumed that uniformity of belief was a prerequisite for orderly social life. After decades of bloodshed, violence, and terror in the wars of religion, however, many came to something like the opposite conviction that, in Pannenberg's words, ‘*religious passion destroys social peace*.’ Given a violently divided Christendom, the only sensible solution appeared to be to excise from political life the cause of these horrors -- namely, particular theological claims -- and to replace them with universally acceptable principles derived from human nature and natural law. *Modern politics was thus founded on the principle that religion is a private concern, useful insofar as it inculcates socially approved virtues of toleration and honesty, dangerous if vigorously pressed into the political arena.* Under the circumstances, it is difficult to fault those who arrived at this solution; they were, after all, desperate for peace. Yet, understandable as it may be, the solution is impossible to implement. The notion that politics can function in a religious and theological vacuum is a myth. Politics is concerned with justice; justice is inescapably a moral concept; morality in turn is inescapably religious; and true religion, in the Christian perspective, inescapably includes particular theological commitments. Christianity entails the invariably political announcement that Jesus Christ, not Caesar, is Lord; to concede that political actors may legitimately ignore this highly specific theological claim is nothing less than an abandonment of the Christian position (“The Very Modern Christian Right” <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9405/opinion/opinion.html>, emphasis mine)

Also, Lesslie Newbigin:

The nation-state, replacing the old concepts of the Holy Church and Holy Empire, is the center-piece in the political scene in post-Enlightenment Europe. After the trauma of the religious wars of the seventeenth century, Europe settled down to the principle of religious coexistence, and *the passions which had formerly been invested in rival interpretations of religion were more and more invested in the nation state*. Nationalism became the effective ideology of the European peoples, always at times of crises proving stronger than any other ideological or religious force (quoted in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* 34, emphasis mine).

For another interpretation of the wars of religion and the rise of modern politics, see Cavanaugh *Torture and Eucharist* 4ff. Cavanaugh says,

As the story is told, the separation of religion and politics was necessitated by the violence between Catholics and Protestants following the Reformation. Religious passion and coercive power is a dangerous mixture. Their differentiation with the creation of the modern state would be the only way to secure peace.

Cavanaugh disagrees with this standard genealogy of the secular political order:

Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 supposedly brought the age of religious warfare to an end, but in the process also did something else significant: by removing religion from the sphere of public truth, the modern secular state was birthed.⁵⁰ To greatly simplify, the logic ran something like this: somehow, peace between various warring religious factions in the post-Reformational situation had to be maintained. The newly formed secular state, theoretically religiously neutral and ecclesiastically uncommitted, would take over this role. This newly created state would in turn be governed by another Enlightenment creation, namely, universal reason.

Thus, in Europe, the modern state arose directly out of the disunity of the church. Once upon a time, the religious consensus of Christendom had provided the culture's stability and cohesion. One faith, one Lord, one baptism had been the glue that held society together. Now that older consensus had evaporated. A weakened, fragmented church required a strong, centralized, secular state to maintain order and keep peace.

Obviously much more could be said about the situation in Europe. But we will focus our attention on the shift that took place in America. The European story sheds light on the American story, though on this continent, religious strife never escalated to quite the same level.⁵¹ However, religious dissent did mean that the long

Protestants and Catholics often fought on the same sides of battles, for what was at stake in these wars was not mere doctrinal zealotry but the dominance of the rapidly centralizing sovereign state over the local privileges and customs of the decaying medieval order. In other words, the wars were the effect of the rise of the centralized modern state and its need to create an autonomous political sphere from which would be excluded its greatest rival, the church. To call these 'wars of religion' is anachronistic, for what was at stake in these wars was the very creation of 'religion' as a universal impulse essentially separate from an activity called 'politics.' The resulting appearance of the plural 'religions' is said to make the secular state necessary, but in fact there is nothing inherently violent in religious pluralism and theological politics *unless* one assumes that politics means the totalizing practice of the state. The distinction between politics and religion was not discovered but invented. Before the seventeenth century politics was associated with the commonweal in a broad sense, a political and moral order which included what we call state and society. The distinction of ecclesial and civil powers in the medieval period was a distinction not of spatial jurisdictions, not of means, but of ends; the temporal power served the temporary ends of *civitas terrena*, which was passing away . . . The state's monopoly on legitimate violence is meant to produce peace by resolving the conflicts in what has become known as 'civil society,' that is, the social organizations which stand 'outside' the state by virtue of their lack of access to the means of coercion. Even those who are keen to limit the state's power still rely on the myth of the state as peacemaker, as the place where the conflicts of civil society are taken up and resolved. Civil society, after all, is said to be necessarily a place of conflict, between workers and managers, retirees and taxpayers, members of one religion and members of another. It is the state's responsibility to oversee and absorb these conflicts through its political mechanisms. Many variations on the concept of social contract exist, but all agree that peace depends at the very minimum on individuals surrendering the right to use violence to the state, the impersonal center of sovereignty. Peace, therefore, depends on the differentiation of the universal state from all particular associations beneath the state, and the limiting of the power of the state. The differentiation is usually depicted in spatial terms; religion especially must be 'removed' from the 'sphere' of the state in order to assure peace . . . Much of contemporary Christian thinking on church and state is intent on limiting the power of the state, but in fact adopts Hegel's soteriology of the state as peacemaker for the conflicts inherent in civil society . . . Because the social is the realm of conflict and compromise, the purity of the Gospel must remain a possibility only for the individual. The Gospel is allowed an inchoate motivational influence on history through the actions of private individuals; the church is a collection of such individuals, and not in any sense a communal enactment of an alternative 'politics' within history . . . My suspicion is that the establishment of a political realm which fundamentally excludes the body of Christ as a body does not so much *solve* conflict as *enact* it. The rise of the modern centralized state is predicated, as we have seen above, on the transfer of authority from particular associations to the state, and the establishment of a direct relationship between the state and the individual.

I am not prepared to adjudicate between the standard reading of the history given in the main body of this paper and by Leithart and Newbigin on the one hand, and that of Cavanaugh on the other hand. For our purposes, it does not matter all that much, since both interpretations agree that the supposed split between religion and politics occurred at about the same time in history and required a corresponding overhaul in ecclesiology. The fact is, the social contractarians won the day, whether or not they had their history facts straight. The secular was created to drive Christianity out of politics. Whether the wars caused the rise of the secular nation-state or were the effect of the already emerging secular nation-state is a question to be settled at another time.

⁵⁰ One of the sad ironies in this whole shift, of course, is that the secular state has shed far more blood than the religious wars ever did.

⁵¹ George Will says the founding fathers

wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe . . . [Jefferson] held that 'operations of the mind are not subject to legal coercion, but that 'acts of the body' are. 'Mere belief,' says Jefferson, 'in one god or 20, neither picks one's pockets nor breaks one's legs.'

For Jefferson, religion is by nature disembodied and Gnostic, sectarian and individualistic. It is 'mere belief,' rather a way of life with communal practices. Again, according to Will, this view

standing practice of church establishment would be challenged and eventually overthrown in America.⁵² By the early nineteenth century, the last of the state churches in the United States was being dismantled.⁵³ While the establishment system had its problems – many of them rather severe – it at least guaranteed the church would be a cultural force. How the church used her cultural power, then, was simply a matter of faithfulness. But there was no question the church would be a major player in shaping the culture.

Disestablishment played a vital role in the de-centering of the church in American society and the secularization of public life. Ann Douglas says,

Between 1820 and 1875 [the years following disestablishment], the Protestant church in this country was transformed from a traditional institution which claimed with a certain real justification to be a guide and leader to the American nation into an influential ad hoc organization which obtained its power largely by taking its cues from the non-ecclesiastical culture on which it came to depend.⁵⁴

In other words, from that point on, the church would no longer set the agenda for the nation. Rather the nation would set the agenda and ask for the church's rubber stamp. Whatever influence the church was able to maintain was kept at the price of compromise. The church would no longer exercise any genuine prophetic leadership role in cultural formation. From the early nineteenth century onwards, America would accomplish her goal without reference to the church, without the church playing any key part in the American drama. The church was demoted from playing the lead part to working on stage props behind the scenes.⁵⁵

Over time, in our collective consciousness, loyalty to the American nation came to replace loyalty to the church. There is nothing wrong with patriotism, of course, kept in its place. But the form of patriotism that arose in America has been quite problematic.⁵⁶ "One nation, indivisible"⁵⁷ replaced "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" as the chief point of integration for our diverse nation. In the minds of many, America became a sort of "Redeemer Nation" and "the primary instrument of God's meaningful activity in the world."⁵⁸ The nation itself became the primary society in terms of which Americans found their individual and group identity.

It is not necessary or possible for us to investigate all the historical details of this shift. Instead, we will turn to Richard Bushman, who summarizes the turn of events quite nicely:

rests on Locke's principle . . . that religion can be useful or can be disruptive, but its truth cannot be established by reason. Hence, Americans would not 'establish' religion. Rather, by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religion private and subordinate (quotations from Stanley Hauerwas *In Good Company*, 200).

In other words, religion was fine for private individuals. But reason alone was allowed sway in the public square. As Will points out, Christianity has been subordinate to politics and economics virtually since our nation's inception. The founding fathers of our republic relocated the sphere of religious liberty from the institutional church to the individual conscience, and in doing so remodeled Western politics and ecclesiology in a revolutionary fashion.

⁵² An established church meant that the state formally recognized, identified with, supported, and even sought counsel from a particular ecclesial body. The church had basically been established in the West, in one form or another, from the time of Constantine onwards. Thus, disestablishment was a radical step. Martin Marty considers it the most basic change in ecclesiological administration since Constantine.

⁵³ Nine of the thirteen original colonies had established churches. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights was not meant to prohibit states from establishing religion as they pleased; it did prohibit Congress from creating a national church. For an interesting study of the First Amendment from a unique angle, consult Kenneth Craycraft's *The American Myth of Religious Freedom*. Craycraft argues, with some degree of plausibility, that the ultimate intent of the First Amendment was not to protect religion from state interference, but to protect the state from religious involvement. Even if Craycraft's work could be challenged on historical grounds, there is no doubt this is how the amendment has come to be used in modern America. Thus, religious freedom in America is a myth – we are certainly not free to practice ecclesial Christianity, that is, Christianity with a robust public and communal dimension. Oliver O'Donovan likewise calls the First Amendment the symbolic end of Christendom, since it "ended up promoting a concept of the state's role from which Christology was excluded, that of a state freed from all responsibility to recognize God's self-disclosure in history" (244-5). Again, this may not have been the intent of the framers (in fact, they probably could not have even *imagined* a society so completely whitewashed of public religious expression), but it has certainly been the effect.

⁵⁴ *The Feminization of American Culture* 24. See also DeMar and Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity* ch. 13-14.

⁵⁵ The profound shift may be seen in looking at any of the numerous studies on the influence and importance of the clergy (especially Presbyterian) leading up to and during the War For Independence, and then their sudden lack of influence and decline in importance shortly afterwards. Of course, some may say the clergy were not as relevant as they may have appeared prior to the War since they were riding the wave of a cause most colonists would have supported anyway. Whatever the case, a steady waning of clerical influence is obvious.

⁵⁶ On the oddity of American nationalism, see Nathan Hatch *Democratization of American Christianity*, especially 63f.

⁵⁷ "Under God" was not part of the original Pledge of Allegiance.

⁵⁸ See Peter Leithart *The Kingdom and the Power* 7ff.

[After the Great Awakening] the civil authority was the sole institution binding society . . . The state was the symbol of social coherence, as once the Established churches had been. Group solidarity depended on loyalty to the government. United action in the wars of 1745 and 1756 restored a society rent with religious schisms . . . [and] assured religious dissenters they were not totally isolated from their community. Patriotism helped to heal ecclesiastical wounds.⁵⁹

Bushman's last sentence is the key to understanding the loss of ecclesiocentrism and the rise of statism in America: *Patriotism helped heal ecclesiastical wounds*. Those five words encapsulate all that really needs to be said about American history from 1750 to the present. Americans have progressively put the nation in the position once rightfully occupied by the church, a process that was greatly accelerated in the early nineteenth century after the process of disestablishment was complete. And, because we would not have mother church, we got the nanny state, with her false promise of cradle to grave security. Because the church was set aside as the primary institution in American social life, the nation became the substitute as God's central agent in history. As several scholars have pointed out, *the secularization of American public life was due directly to a failed ecclesiology*.⁶⁰ Again, patriotism effectively replaced loyalty to the church, with devastating consequences.

The change in American self-consciousness produced a corresponding change in our sense of national purpose and mission. No longer would America serve the higher calling of being a holy commonwealth, a church-shaped, church-driven society, as the Puritans had envisioned. No longer would our nation's fundamental purpose be to serve as home base for the discipling of the nations. Rather our mission would become (paraphrasing Woodrow Wilson) to make the world safe for our particular brand of liberal democracy. America would take on the role of world policeman, albeit a policeman with no explicitly Christian moral base any longer. She would play the game of empire.⁶¹ Instead of having our trademark as the sending out of missionaries to make peace through the gospel, we would send out our armies to make peace with the sword. As Richard John Neuhaus has suggested, none of this denies that America has been a force for good in the world, even through her military operations at times.⁶² The point is not to slam the American nation; there is much in our history to be thankful for and the residue of our Christian heritage has still not completely dried out. But it

⁵⁹ *From Puritan to Yankee* 208.

⁶⁰ Jim Rogers gives an excellent summary:

Until recently American Protestants did not really have to live with the practical working out of their low ecclesiology. After all, American national identity – "the nation with the soul of a church" – served to unify Christians in the face of Protestant denominational pluralism. American civil religion, nebulous as it was, nonetheless provided powerful cultural and social sanction to undergird Protestant belief and habit. The discipline of public opinion effectively substituted for ecclesiastical discipline.

With the erosion of social sanction as a force of de facto religious discipline for America's once dominant Protestant culture, entropy occurs and denominational pluralism reverts to ecclesiastical anarchy. The demise of a Christian national culture thus fundamentally threatens American Protestantism in a way that it does not threaten Roman Catholicism and other ecclesiastically centered traditions.

Issues such as corporate prayer and Bible reading in public schools agitate evangelicals not simply because of concerns about the practice of personal piety in public settings. The struggle over these issues represents for evangelical Protestants a struggle over the means of ecclesiastical authority. With the loss of these powerful cultural tools of Protestant discipline, evangelicals rightly fear the centrifugal dynamic inherent in the Protestant principle.

Spiritual exile from the centers of American public life thus does not simply represent a Babylonian captivity for the American Protestant church, with the promise of restoration after the season of exile, as Jeremiah promised Judah. The impoverished ecclesiology of American evangelicalism means that the loss of the culture war risks ecclesiastical disintegration. For evangelicals, the political fight over culture is a fight for the survival of their church (<http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/ob/ob027.htm>).

This is why American Christians have been so captivated by the "culture wars": we have such an underdeveloped ecclesiology, if we lose the major power centers of American culture (which we already have), we have virtually nothing to fall back onto. The most we can hope to be is chaplain to the Republican or Democratic party.

⁶¹ This is not to say empire building per se is evil in all circumstances. In the old creation, God seems to approve of several world empires (e.g., Babylon, Persia, etc.) at least in a qualified way. A biblical philosophy of politics does not necessarily entail isolationism. Of course, there are certain dangers that come with building an empire, even if it's an unofficial one as in the case of America. Some of America's actions as "empire" have been positive, some negative. To the extent that our nation is officially committed to a pluralistic non-Christian stance, one that does not acknowledge the kingship of Jesus, everything we do stands under judgment. It goes without saying that in the new creation, the only ultimate and lasting international empire is Christ's kingdom.

⁶² See Leithart *The Kingdom and the Power* 8-9.

must be admitted on the whole that there has been a profound shift for the worse in America's self-understanding.⁶³

This is seen most clearly in the shape that American civil religion now takes.⁶⁴ Of course, some kind of national faith, or civil religion, is inescapable.⁶⁵ But today, the only kind of faith that can be publicly practiced in America is one that is secular and politically correct. There is tremendous pressure to privatize and individualize Christianity – but of course, once this is done, the robust faith described in the Scriptures has been mangled and distorted beyond recognition. Again, this privatizing squeeze is due in large measure to the

⁶³ Americanism has increasingly displaced ecclesial Christianity as the fundamental religious outlook in our culture. That is to say, Americans have more and more looked to the American nation as such rather than the church as the focus of God's action in the world and as the agent of God's redemption in history. Phillip Lee catalogs this trend in *Against the Protestant Gnostics*:

Following the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher, the most prominent clergyman of the period, boasted: "This continent is to be from this time forth governed by Northern men, with Northern ideas, and with a Northern gospel." This immodest claim would prove to be prophetic, for not only had the Union army crushed the Confederacy, but also "Northern" evangelicalism in both its revivalistic and liberal forms would virtually annihilate any alternative spiritual expressions which tried to exert themselves in a public way (83-4).

That a notable minister would so intertwine the gospel with Yankee nationalism is telling. The so-called Civil War meant, among other things, the triumph of statism over decentralized politics. From the mid-nineteenth century forwards, Americans would expect less and less from their churches and more and more an ever increasing national government. In time, this political hubris over spilled its national banks into international politics:

The conviction that the salvation of souls throughout the world depends on the salvation of the American soul has been a continuing evangelical theme. Thomas Skinner, Presbyterian clergyman and professor of homiletics, declared in 1843 that "the moral condition of the United States is to decide that of the world." President Woodrow Wilson, despite all that had taken place since Skinner's time, could still affirm: "America was born a Christian nation for the purpose of exemplifying to the nations of the world the principles of righteousness found in the Word of God."

That America is a "nation with the soul of a church" is a well-established theme among historians. What is often overlooked by historians is the extent to which Protestants of all stripes have offered support to the essentially elitist notion that Americans are God's chosen people . . .

With the collapse of the great colonial empires of Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and Britain, the United States had the obligation of moving into that vacuum lest the world fall under the domination of a monolithic Soviet tyranny. Whether "manifest destiny" or "American hegemony," it amounts to the same thing. American Protestantism feels that the United States is a chosen nation with the burden of the world on its shoulders (168-9).

This notion that the salvation of the world hinges on America has infected Christians across the liberal/conservative spectrum. While America has played, in the general providence of God, an important role on the world scene the last couple of centuries, we can hardly claim to be the world's savior. While we may have kept communism in check, we have been guilty of grave moral sins ourselves. It is important that we refocus the biblical doctrines of election, world empire, and international peacemaker on the institutional church rather than the American nation. The church, not America, is God's gift to planet earth.

⁶⁴ Gerald McDermott defines civil religion as a set of symbols, beliefs, and practices that relate the nation to ultimate reality, or God's kingdom (*One Holy and Happy Society* 3). In that sense, civil religion is a rival to the church and must be rejected by Christians. It confuses the role of church and nation.

This modern form of civil religion must be utterly rejected by Christians. The god of Congressional Prayer Breakfasts and post-9/11 prayer services is not the God of the Bible. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob refuses to be an irrelevant national mascot. The church must boldly challenge this form of civil idolatry.

But in another sense, of course, we must remember civil religion is unavoidable. Every state will base its law upon some acknowledged (or in the modern world, unacknowledged) religious foundation. Virtually every state includes some religious trappings in its ceremonies, special days, etc. From this angle, we'd have to argue for a distinctively Christian civil religion, ala Christendom. This means a state in which the civil government acknowledges the centrality of the church as the body of Christ and the new Israel. The traditional typological reading of Scripture feeds into just such a view of church-shaped civil religion.

Further thoughts on the nature of civil religion and the threat it poses to faithful Christianity may be found in Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols For Destruction* 250ff and Michael Horton's *Made in America* 37. On the role of political and social factors in the rise of higher criticism's attack on Scripture (especially the Old Testament, see Gary North, *The Hoax of Higher Criticism* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁶⁵ Jordan reminds us that civil religion is unavoidable (since religious neutrality is impossible) and therefore not to be shunned in every sense. Rather, it must be reconstructed and rehabilitated in biblical terms:

It is surely unfortunate that civil religion is regarded with hostility by so many evangelicals today. Civil religion is inescapable. Every society has a religion. Every ruler of every nation on earth is sworn into office in terms of some god. Jesus told us to disciple the nations in the Great Commission, so we are to work towards making our society Christian. Our methods, however, are not those of the world: war and violence, but those of the Prince of Peace. The goal, however, is a Christian civil religion in every nation on earth (*Theses on Worship*, 17).

Jordan is exactly right: we must Christianize our political order, as well as every other facet of our culture. This is the task Jesus gave to the church. A pressing need in the Reformed church today is a complete overhaul of our political theology. We need to come to grips with the political nature of the biblical mandate. It is a different sort of politics that Scripture calls us to, but it is to politics nonetheless. Even the church is a political community, in the sense that it is a public, communal government.

collapse of a strong institutional church and the rise of our peculiar form of nationalism. As George Will has put it so succinctly, “religion [in America] is perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private – mere belief – but it must bend to the political will (law) as regards conduct.” In other words, the church dare not seek to present the gospel as public truth determinative for society as a whole. At this point, more needs to be said about the earlier historical currents that produced such a change.

Civic Religion: American or Christian?

We have already traced out the basic contours of the shift in America from an ecclesiocentric, theocratic social order to a secular one. Building on Locke and Hobbes, the Enlightenment accomplished an astonishing coup of Christendom. That victory for the secularists was only possible because Christians were too busy fighting with each other to guard against the real enemies. But once the flag of secularism was planted in the public square, it wasn't going to be removed easily.

At this point, before moving on, we need to examine more closely ways in which the original vision of the colonists was already becoming undone when America won her independence from Britain. While most of our so-called founding fathers were good and godly men, several were at best semi-Christians, or Deists, and many of them were openly hostile to the church. An anti-ecclesiastical spirit was definitely in the air. If I may exaggerate for the sake of effect: they loved *Christianity*, but hated the *church*.

As already suggested, a great deal of this can be traced back to the British empiricist and political philosopher Locke. Locke's philosophy was highly influential on several of our founding fathers and virtually required the privatization of religion. The new secular politics required a new, downgraded ecclesiology. His revamped view of the church was tailor made for liberal, individualistic democracies. Just as Hobbes political treatise included a hermeneutics, arguing the mantle of Israel was passed to the sovereign state rather than to the church, so Locke's political philosophy ensured religion would be subordinated to politics. Rodney Clapp, building on Kenneth Craycraft's analysis, explains:

Locke, Hobbes, and their followers presupposed a universal reason that resided in every sane and reasonable individual, prior to and beyond any distinctive religious convictions. This universal and secular reason would be the ground and final court of appeal for public matters such as government. Religion, then, would be relegated to the private sphere. It is only the individual's business and not that of the state – *or, note well, the church*. As Locke wrote, ‘The Care . . . of each man's Soul belongs unto himself, and is to be left unto himself.’⁶⁶ For Madison, the religious authority of the church reduced people to ‘slavery and Subjection,’ since in his estimate in no instance ‘have churches been guardians of the liberties of the people.’⁶⁷ And Jefferson inveighed against creedal or confessional Christianity, exactly because each assumes doctrines that are considered exclusively true quite apart from any given individual's opinions of them. So Jefferson called Athanasius and Calvin ‘impious dogmatists’ and ‘mere usurpers of the Christian name.’ But of what were Athanasius and Calvin impious usurpers? Exactly of Jefferson's Lockean liberal ‘Christianity,’ which determined to set aside the revealed faith handed down by the church through history, and replaced it with a ‘tolerance’ based the universal reason professedly resident in every reasonable individual. For liberals, then, every person chooses his or her own faith. Liberal religious freedom is freedom of the allegedly autonomous individual (not the church); it is freedom to of the individual to hold religious convictions as private opinions.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Compare with Calvin: “[I]t certainly is the duty of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul.” Quoted in Philip Lee *Against the Protestant Gnostics* 66. For Calvin, an individual's salvation was bound up with the salvation of the ecclesial community. Calvin knew that in the church, each man really is his brother's keeper. Locke, unfortunately, agreed with Cain, the first individualist.

⁶⁷ In saying this, it should be obvious Madison and others were engaging in a massive revisionary history project. A very strong case can be made that the church played a vital role in securing liberty and in fact was *the* defender of individual rights (albeit imperfectly) for centuries. Madison's social contract view, on the other hand, leaves no real mediating institutions between the individual and the raw power of the state.

⁶⁸ *Border Crossing* 45-6. Clapp is building on the fascinating work of Kenneth Craycraft in *The American Myth of Religious Freedom*. Essentially, Craycraft's thesis means that the church was only free to challenge the state in the inner realm of individual conscience after the Enlightenment and Awakenings. The sphere of the political and bodily was handed over to secular politics. Craycraft shows there really is no such thing as religious liberty in the modern sense of total autonomy. Liberty is always particular, that is, freedom for a particular set of actions in a particular set of circumstances for a particular group of people. “Religion” as such is an abstraction, so it is useless to speak of “religious freedom:” there can only be freedom a particular religion (or religions). For an interesting case study, see William Cavanaugh *Torture and Eucharist* 95-97; see also 120. Cavanaugh shows this movement towards privatized Christianity was a dramatic shift from the public, political presence of the medieval church (196-7). In addition, consult

But note well, it is *not* freedom to bring these religious convictions into the public square since that would mean “imposing” them society as a whole as though they had absolute authority.

Locke was the architect of the British Toleration Acts of 1689, which essentially did for Britain what the Treaty of Westphalia had done for the continent, namely, put religion in the sphere of private opinion. While Locke created social space for various Protestant bodies, since all could be expected to play along with the liberal game, Roman Catholics were excluded. The fact that Romanists had a trans-national loyalty to their church (centered in the Pope) and therefore refused to totally interiorize their religion meant that they may not be very good citizens in the newly created secular political order. Because their church necessarily took up public space, they were considered a subversive presence in the secular state. Locke, and Jefferson following him, flatly denied the social or communal nature of Christianity. Rather, the church came to be understood as a semi-private theology club, a free association of like-minded individuals, who could come and go as they pleased. Of course, in such a context, the biblical images of church as kingdom, city, body, or nation, made no sense.

The founding fathers not only displaced the church with the newly formed nation, they put the founding documents in the place of Scripture. The privatization of the church meant the privatization of the Bible. A new hermeneutics was introduced to curtail public, social, and political application of Scripture.⁶⁹ No longer would Scripture be the public voice of God to the nation. Secularization had to be complete. The god of American civil religion would certainly not be the God of Scripture; but like the God of Scripture, he would be a very jealous god.⁷⁰ Sebastian Mallaby explains:

The Founders . . . infused their precious ideas with the aura of scripture, hoping this would protect them from the wear and tear of everyday debate. George Washington pleaded that ‘the Constitution be sacredly maintained,’ while James Madison described the founding documents as ‘political scriptures,’ hoping they would acquire ‘that veneration, which time bestows on everything, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest government would not possess the requisite stability.’ And so Americans established a civil religion in place of a spiritual one. Their Protestant reverence for the Bible was transferred to the founding texts. The Founders’ civil religion has been preached enthusiastically by their successors. In 1837, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Constitution’s drafting, John Quincy Adams, paraphrasing from the instruction to the Israelites in Deuteronomy [6:7-6], urged his countrymen to ‘Teach the [Constitution’s] principles, teach them to your children, speak of them when sitting in your home, speak of them when walking by the way, when lying down and when rising up, write them upon the doorplate of your home and upon your gates.’⁷¹

The Constitution, of course, is a fine document in many ways and embodies many principles of Christian political thought, developed over centuries of practice and reflection. But clearly this is a case of Americanism run amok. In the minds of some of our founding fathers, the American nation was turned into a replacement for the kingdom of God. But the American nation is at best a cheap parody of Christ’s true “Redeemer Nation,” the New and True Israel, the church of God.

Again, Clapp, following Craycraft, helps us understand how Lockean liberalism worked itself out in America to a very secular conclusion. Locke placed the locus of religious liberty not in the covenanted community of the institutional church, as Christendom had, but in the conscience of the private individual. Thus, the church was no longer free to exercise any public authority over its members. A few examples will illustrate.

Peter Leithart’s “The Very Modern Religious Right” (<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9405/opinion/opinion.html>) and “Typology and the Public Church” (<http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9711/opinion/leithart.html>).

⁶⁹ See footnote 53 above on the way in which civil religion subverted the traditional typological reading of Scripture which was both ecclesiocentric and robustly political.

⁷⁰ Note that the founders were not hostile to religion per se, or even to Christianity. But they were hostile to institutional, established, ecclesial Christianity. Thus, many years later, President Dwight Eisenhower could say, “Our government makes no sense unless its founded on a deeply religious faith, and I don’t care what it is.” True enough, it doesn’t matter what religion it is, provided it stays in its private box and doesn’t invade the public realm. Christianity may have it’s seat at the table, perhaps, but only if it promises to abide by the rules of secular pluralism – in which case, one has to wonder what’s the point?

⁷¹ Quoted in Telford Work *Living and Active* 168-9. For more on the compromised Christianity of our founders, see Horton, *Made in America*, 25, 35.

Roman Catholic John Cardinal O'Connor's actions in the early 1990s make evident this shift to privatization. O'Connor, a faithful papist, stated forthrightly his church's policy that,

Where Catholics are perceived not only as treating church teaching on abortion with contempt, but helping to multiply abortions by advocating legislation supporting abortion or by making public funds available for abortion, bishops may decide for the common good such Catholics must be warned that they risk excommunication.

Expectedly, O'Connor's comments, temperate as they were, got hit by a barrage of criticism. O'Connor didn't even excommunicate anyone for their political actions – he only talked about doing so – and yet he was instantly subjected to fierce attacks from the media. O'Connor refused to play along with democratic liberalism's forced privatization of religion and paid the price.

This is not to say Roman Catholics have been immune to the plague of Americanism. Backtrack thirty years from O'Connor to John Fitzgerald Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960. Protestants, especially evangelical Protestants, expressed grave concern over the prospect of a Roman Catholic in the nation's highest office. But they were greatly relieved when Kennedy insisted his religious convictions would be kept private and would have no bearing on how he acted politically. Kennedy claimed the separation of church and state was "absolute" and that his vision of America was of a place "where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners whom to vote for."⁷² The church, after all, was not viewed as politically relevant. He said, "I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affairs." In fact, for Kennedy being a good American was far more important than being a good Christian or Romanist: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic party's candidate for President who happens to be Catholic." JFK's deepest convictions were not shaped by God, Scripture, or his church, but by his commitment to Americanism. He was determined to be an autonomous individual, unfettered by the bounds of an ecclesial community.⁷³

The secularization of American public life does not mean all references to religion have been expunged from the political scene. Rather, democratic liberalism has resulted in something much more sinister. We still hear a good deal of talk about faith, God, prayer, and so forth. But all these notions must be left vague, undefined, and therefore from a Christian perspective, seductively idolatrous. Even ostensibly evangelical Presidents have fallen into this trap, thinking that America is destined to play some unique God-given role in the drama of history.

For example, at the 1988 Republican National Convention, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed: "I believe that God out this land between the two great oceans to be found by the special people . . . from every corner of the world who had that extra love of freedom that prompted them to leave their homeland and come to this land to make it a brilliant light beam of freedom to the world."⁷⁴ Reagan also applied ecclesiastical titles, such as "city

⁷² I can't help but think of wicked kings in Old Covenant Israel refusing to listen to the God-sent prophets. Essentially Kennedy said, "No prophet of the Lord will tell me what to do."

⁷³ These examples of O'Connor and JFK come from Clapp (*Border Crossings* chapter 4), following, once again, Craycraft, *The American Myth of Religious Freedom*. I highly recommend Craycraft's book. It is a stimulating historical study of American political and ecclesial thought and practice.

⁷⁴ This represented a serious distortion of the original Puritan vision and suggests America had displaced the church even in minds of many evangelicals. According to the Puritan outlook, this nation would not primarily be a "light beam for freedom"; rather the church in America would be a "light for the gospel." In *One Holy and Happy Society* McDermott shows that Jonathan Edwards did not share in this kind of Americanism, despite popular perception. He was thoroughly ecclesiocentric and believed the kingdom was destined to include all tribes, languages, and nations of the earth. This was the early Puritan view, and many of the best Puritan theologians continued in this vein even after the Puritan vision was co-opted by the American politics. So civil religion of this secularized variety was not necessarily inherent in the Puritan project, even if it quickly degenerated into that. However, McDermott gives several other examples of Western civil religion in gone awry. This is not just an American problem, though we are the latest and most blatant manifestation of it. For example, in the fourteenth century, French lawyer Pierre Dubois argued that Christ had elected the French king to be the true successor to Moses and David, and to rule over all of Christendom. After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, Russia adopted Constantinople's heritage and declared Moscow to be the Third Rome, the center from which history would come to its climax. In the late sixteenth century, Tommaso Campanella declared the king of Spain to be the king of the world, for the express purpose of uniting all humanity under the Pope. In late sixteenth century England, Protestant John Foxe claimed the English were God's special people. The proof? Henry VIII had been the first to renounce the pope. Many Poles have believed their nation has a special covenant with the Virgin Mary and would be used to redeem the world. The fact that all these claims seem laughable now should make us think twice about making these boasts about our own nation. History is unkind to such hubris. See the wonderful parody on America's "Redeemer Nation" mentality, vis-à-vis the church, in Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power*, 7-8. Another interesting test case in civil religion usurping the place of the church is the nation of Chile, particularly from the 1970s-1990s. See William Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist*. Cavanaugh shows how the Chilean church conceded public, political space to the state

on a hill” to the American nation.⁷⁵ The idea, clearly, is that America is an elect people, chosen to bless the world in a special way. “In George Washington’s political seed all the families of the earth will be blessed” seems to be the prevalent idea.

Regan’s successor, George Bush, echoing Abraham Lincoln, called America, “the last, best hope of man on earth.”⁷⁶ When Bush called for a national day of prayer before the Gulf War, he declared this: “I have proclaimed Sunday, February 3, National Day of Prayer. In this moment of crisis, may Americans of every creed turn to our greatest power and unite together in prayer.” Stanley Hauerwas comments: “Such a prayer sounds Christian. But it is idolatrous and pagan, the same sort of prayer Caesar always prays to Mars before battle.”⁷⁷ Bush may have very well prayed to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ in his private prayer closet, but publicly he could not do this. Rather, he told every person to pray to his or her own god. In this peculiarly American theology, we citizens of this special nation have the right to pray *not* because we’re in Christ, who gives us access to the Father, but because we’re good, decent Americans. Surely god (or the gods) will hear such a fine upstanding people!

Perhaps I should add a caveat at this point. None of this is to say that love for country per se is wrong. Patriotism is a good quality. But our loyalty to Christ must always be greater than our allegiance to the body politic. Ideally, there will be no tension between these two loyalties. But when there is, it’s clear which takes precedence.

This runs counter to the modern ethos, which puts allegiance to one’s nation at the top of the heap. Institutions like church and family are viewed at best as “mediating organizations” that are secondary to the state in importance and power. Lesslie Newbigin explains the situation in colorful terms:

If there is any entity to which ultimate loyalty is due [today], it is the nation state. In the twentieth century we have become accustomed to the fact that -- in the name of the nation -- Catholics will fight Catholics, Protestants will fight Protestants, and Marxists will fight Marxists. The charge of blasphemy, if it is ever made, is treated as a quaint anachronism; but the charge of treason, of placing another loyalty above that of the nation state, is treated as the unforgivable crime. The nation state has taken the place of God. Responsibilities for education, healing and public welfare which had formerly rested with the Church devolved more and more upon the nation state. In the present century this movement has been vastly accelerated by the advent of the ‘welfare state.’ National governments are widely assumed to be responsible for and capable of providing those things which former generations thought only God could provide -- freedom from fear, hunger, disease and want -- in a word: ‘happiness.’

Of course, the modern nation is, at the same time, so depersonalized that, as Alasdair MacIntyre has said, dying for this state is “like being asked to die for the telephone company.”⁷⁸

Our True Homeland

Calvin was faced with just this sort of dilemma – a conflict of loyalties. He had to choose between church and nation. His beloved homeland of France remained firmly entrenched in Roman Catholicism. In fact, King Francis persecuted the Reformation movement with zeal. In the introductory preface of Calvin’s *Institutes*, addressed to the King, Calvin shows he embraced the cause of Christ above the cause of his nation:

Even though I regard my country with as much natural affection as becomes me, as things now stand, I do not much regret being excluded. Rather, I embrace the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself – a cause completely torn and trampled in your realm today, lying as it were utterly forlorn.

with disastrous consequences. This was made possible by the introduction of a new ecclesiological program in the 1920s that viewed the church as the “soul” of society, rather than the “body” of Christ.

⁷⁵ The Puritan use of this label was not necessarily limited to the church, but focused on Christendom more broadly. For Reagan, it applied almost exclusively to America as the flagship nation for liberal democracy, with the church seemingly removed from the picture altogether.

⁷⁶ McDermott *One Holy and Happy Society* 3.

⁷⁷ *In Good Company* 54-55.

⁷⁸ Newbigin and MacIntyre quotations taken from Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon *Resident Aliens* 34-5.

Calvin knew he served a greater King than Francis – the Lord Jesus. He knew the church of Jesus Christ was his *first* citizenship, and this ecclesial allegiance was to be maintained, whatever earthly, temporal loyalties had to be sacrificed.

We must learn the fate of the church does not rest in the hands of the American nation. In fact, the reverse is the case. While, the American church has been deeply intertwined with the nation as such for most of our history, stretching back to colonial days, it is now clear we must go our separate ways, at least in several important respects. The church must not act as a sponsor or underwriter for American bipartisan politics, secular education, institutionalized greed, etc. We must refuse to play the game on secularized American terms. We must also realize the twin responses offered by the American church thus far – namely, the sectarian response of withdrawal, ceding over the public square to the secularists, and the civil religionist response, covering over secularism with a thin veneer of talk about god and faith – have been disastrous. The American church today must position herself as a catholic counter-culture – publicly present in the world, yet stunningly distinct from it.

The early medieval church faced a similar situation to the church in America at the dawn of the twenty-first century. After the conversion of Constantine, it appeared the fate of the church was bound up with the Roman Empire. Hence, when it became evident Rome would fall, many Christians panicked. Augustine rose to the occasion, with his monumental work *City of God*. Rather than fear the fall of Rome, Augustine saw it as a prime opportunity for the church. The city of man may crumble, but the church, the city of God, will keep marching on.

Referring to those who saw themselves as the last remnant of a Church which was headed for inevitable decline, [Augustine] laughed, ‘The clouds roll with thunder, that the House of the Lord shall be built throughout the earth: and these frogs sit in their marsh and croak – We are the only Christians.’⁷⁹

William Carrol Bark explains the vital role Augustine played in disentangling the church from Rome:

It remained for Augustine of Hippo, however, to accept the challenge of his time on the highest intellectual plane and state the case for the rising Christian culture in his powerful philosophy of history. He saw that it was necessary not only to reply to the gibes of the pagans, but also to scotch the popular identification of the welfare of Christianity with the welfare of Rome. Though he doubtless thought of the problem primarily and immediately as one of apology, he was unquestionably aware that the whole meaning of history for Christians was also involved . . . His recognition that Christianity must be cut loose from the Roman State was not timeserving; naturally in his philosophy of history the *civitas dei* would always be independent of the destinies of worldly states . . . His accomplishment was to prepare the minds of his more thoughtful contemporaries and successors for the possibility of a change in the political state of affairs as they knew it, and to enable them to adapt themselves to this change.⁸⁰

Augustine broke the ties that bound the church with the Roman Empire just in time for the church to emerge from Rome’s rubble with renewed vigor and health. Indeed, this was one of the keys that opened the door to the world of Christendom. Augustine effectively destroyed the popular identification of the welfare of Christianity with the welfare of Rome. He cut the tie binding together the fates of the Christian religion with the Roman state. The American church needs a new Augustine who can accomplish the same project in our day. The preservation of America is simply not necessary to the success of the kingdom of God. With or without America, the kingdom of God will march on until the earth is as “full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

Peter Leithart explains what this means:

If evangelicals and fundamentalists . . . are to formulate a public theology and practice, they must *first* formulate an evangelical catholic ecclesiology . . . A catholic understanding of the church would enable the nationalistic elements in evangelicalism and fundamentalism better to estimate America’s place in history. The religionization of national life that existed in the late eighteenth century is still with us. Edwards is still quoted approvingly and out of context in support of American nationalism. America is still viewed by some as something of a redeemer nation. American values and ways are still identified

⁷⁹ David Chilton *Paradise Restored* 218-19.

⁸⁰ *Origins of the Medieval World* 74-5. Thanks to Peter Leithart for pointing me to this quotation.

promiscuously with Christian values and ways. It is impossible to deny that God has used the American people and even the American nation as a political entity in remarkable ways to advance the gospel, but we must avoid any hint that America is God's unique instrument in history. Instead, the church is God's chief instrument in history.⁸¹

Reformation Begins With the Household of God

All of this should make clear that no political solution to our problem is possible. Of course, our nation must be disciplined, and this includes politics. The lordship of Christ is comprehensive and the gospel is a thoroughly christocratic message. So focusing on the church does not mean retreating to some kind of "evangelical ghetto." But Doug Wilson and David Chilton have the right perspective on our present situation:

The need of the hour . . . is theological, not political. The arena is the pulpit and table, not the legislative chamber. The message is Christ crucified and risen for his chosen sinners and now acknowledged Lord of all. This risen and conquering Christ is the Head of the Church. Before we are equipped to proclaim his lordship to the inhabitants of the earth, we must live as though we believed it in the Church.⁸²

[The apostle Paul begins his work of cultural reconstruction] with the Church and will move out to bring the rest of the world under Christ's dominion 'once your obedience is complete [2 Cor. 10:6]. *The center of Christian reconstruction is the Church.* The River of Life does not flow out from the doors of the chambers of Congresses and Parliaments. It flows from the restored Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church of Jesus Christ. Our goal is world dominion under Christ's lordship, a 'world takeover,' if you will; but our strategy begins with the reformation and reconstruction of the Church. From that will flow social and political reconstruction, indeed a flowering of Christian civilization (Hag. 1:1-15; 2:6-9, 18-23) . . . The orthodox Christian faith cannot be reduced to personal experiences, academic discussions, or culture-building activity – as important as all these are in varying degrees. The essence of biblical religion is the worship of God. And by *worship* I do not only mean listening to sermons, even though preaching is certainly necessary and important. I mean *organized, congregational prayers, praise, and sacramental celebration* . . . True Christian reconstruction of culture is far from being simply a matter of passing Law X and electing Congressman Y. Christianity is not a political cult. It is the divinely ordained worship of the Most High God.⁸³

That's where true reform begins: in the household of God, especially in her worshipping assemblies. The local church, even with all her problems, is the centerpiece of the kingdom of God. She is the nursery of Christian civilization. If American culture is going to be re-Christianized, we must begin there. *Ecclesiastical reformation is the key to cultural transformation.*⁸⁴

This also means we have to rethink our strategy in another respect. With the rise of the so-called "culture wars," American evangelicals have tended to take an us-versus-them approach to culture. It's surprising that as Christians have found themselves increasingly marginalized that their response has not been along the lines of the early pre-Constantinian church, which also faced marginalization. We have not postured ourselves as a counter-culture, an alternative nation within America, with our own story, rites, symbols, holidays, and form of life.⁸⁵ Instead, we have tried to play the game of power politics. We tried to regain influence in a worldly way. Instead of suffering and serving our way to victory, as the early church did, we've tried to lobby and vote our way to victory. A wonderful opportunity for ministry and evangelism is slipping through our fingers. We've been content to languish along with the rest of the culture. The American church is facing something of an identity crisis. While we know that individually Christians are called to engage the world, rather than retreat, we do not understand the social or cultural functions of the church as an institution. We simply drift wherever the prevailing winds (whether they be Democratic winds or Republican winds) take us. We've lost our sense of direction, and therefore our sense of mission.

⁸¹ "The Great Awakening and American Nationalism" (Biblical Horizons Occasional Paper No. 7) 9-10.

⁸² Doug Wilson *Mother Kirk* 21-22.

⁸³ David Chilton *Paradise Restored* 214-15.

⁸⁴ This is not to say American Christians should abandon politics altogether, even as a temporary strategy. We still need Christian involvement in the entire political process. But this does mean we need to get our priorities straight. Until we do, our efforts in the political sphere will accomplish very little lasting good. As Chilton points out, we are often practical atheists, putting more confidence in the political process than the means of grace (*Paradise Restored* 216).

⁸⁵ On the church as culture, counter-culture, and the transformer of culture, see my paper "Sword and Trowel: The Reconstruction of the Church." On the social posturing of the early church, see, among many good resources, Barry Harvey, *Another City*.

Thus, the “culture wars” approach is no longer helpful, if it ever was.⁸⁶ We must learn to see America not as a battle field, but as a mission field.⁸⁷ The need of the hour is for the church to be the church! In other words, the first item on the church’s agenda must be the church. This is not because church and state are “separate,” though in an institutional sense, that is true. Nor is it simply because theological/ecclesial questions are more important than political questions. Rather, we must understand, as Peter Leithart has pointed out, theological/ecclesial questions are more important *to politics* than political questions.⁸⁸ America is a threat, not so much because she is under the rule of secular humanists, but because she is a distraction from the real task at hand, from what should be our chief concern, namely, reforming the institutional *ekklesia*. The rehabilitating of local parish life is our most critical need: “What matters at this stage [in history] is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”⁸⁹ To survive these new dark ages, the light of the world, the church (cf. Mt. 5:14), must learn to shine again. This will only happen through the formation of worshipful, virtuous, disciplined, and tightly knit communities of love, joy, and service.

⁸⁶ On this, see Peter Leithart’s *The Kingdom and the Power*. Leithart calls the church to fight holy war, the war behind the culture war. Holy war uses the tactical weapons of preaching, sacramental worship, prayer, service, and church discipline to reshape society. These are more powerful tools than anything in the arsenal of American politics.

⁸⁷ The mission field/battle field motif comes from Michael Horton’s book *Beyond Culture Wars*. There is much in this book to appreciate, but also much to critique.

⁸⁸ See “Politics at Prayer” <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0106/opinion/leithart.html>. See also Cavanaugh *Torture and Eucharist* 11f. Richard John Neuhaus has rightly said, “The first political task of the church is to be the church.”

⁸⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue* 263. All MacIntyre’s concluding analysis to his profound book is missing is a call to seek this kind of community life where it is truly found: in the covenanted community of the local church.

Conclusion: The Need for a New Christendom

Singing Zion's Songs in a Foreign Land

The American church has come to be viewed largely as a voluntary organization, a kind of religious club. Individuals are free to come and go as they please. No real commitment is expected and no real commitment is made. To speak of the church as a covenant community under the governance and oversight of elders who admit and expel people from the body; as a new nation knit together by common rites, stories, songs, and symbols; as a new family bound together by sacred ties of loyalty and love to King Jesus and to one another – all this is simply foreign to us. American Christians have proved to be far more American than Christian.

The church must recover a proper, biblical self-understanding. She must understand what happens – and what is supposed to happen – in a Lord's Day covenant renewal gathering. She must learn what it means to practice vibrant, transforming discipleship, applying the Word of God to every facet of life and culture. She must learn what it means to exist as the "communion of the saints" – a community of kindness, forgiveness, prayerfulness, service, generosity, and love. She must learn what it means to do holistic evangelism involving both word and deed, and to join with her Savior in laying down her life for the sake of the world.⁹⁰

At the same time, we must recover a proper understanding of what it means to live in a Christian society. A Christian culture is one in which the three basic spheres of family, state, and church all work together on the common project of cultivating the kingdom of God on earth. And yet, it is also a society in which the family and state recognize the primacy of the church.⁹¹ The church, rather than the family or state, is understood to be God's central agent in history. As Martin Luther said, if you want to know what God is up to in the world, just look at the church. Here, we might say, is the center of the action.

None of this is demeaning to family or state as God-given, God-ordained, God-blessed, and God-honoring institutions. Obviously, God uses the family for good. As the parents bring seek to nurture their children though teaching, discipline, and prayer, the world becomes a better place. The state too has been a force for good. Sometime rulers have led the way in pointing people to the true God (see, e.g., Jonah 3; Daniel 6; Constantine). Godly magistrates have played a vital role in shaping character, suppressing open wickedness, and maintaining peace and justice. But neither family nor state is self-sufficient. Both institutions feed off the means of grace that God has placed into the hands of the church. Thus the fidelity of the church is the key to a virtuous, just society. Societies are blessed and cursed primarily through the agency of the church.⁹²

Getting Our Story Straight

In a Christian civilization – a Christendom situation – the church is central because her story, rites, practices, and symbols shape the rest of society. Take the church's story, as one example. "Story" has become a very important category in hermeneutics, philosophy, ethics, sociology, anthropology, and so forth.⁹³ We naturally give our personal identities narrative shape. If someone asks, "Who are you?" we generally tell them our personal narrative, where we came from and where we're going. The "Who are you question?" is really a way

⁹⁰ See my paper "A Visionary Ecclesiology" at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/a_visionary_ecclesiology.htm for an exploration of some of these themes.

⁹¹ On the state's recognition of the church's centrality, see Oliver O'Donovan *Desire of Nations*, especially 195.

⁹² On the necessity of a faithful church to a stable social order, see Peter Leithart's "The Gospel and the Virtues" in *Biblical Horizons* newsletter No. 67 available at <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/bh/bh067.htm>.

⁹³ Since "narrative," or more informally, "story," has become a fundamental, irreducible worldview category, employed broadly and variously in a number of academic fields, it would be impossible to give anything like a thorough bibliography. Thus, I will only offer a brief sampling of the work that has been done on narrative studies in recent years. For an inter-disciplinary study of narrative, consult *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones. For a look at pioneering work in narrative theology, see George Stroup's *The Promise of Narrative Theology*. Stroup's intriguing work focuses especially on the role of narrative in the formation of Christian identity. Also of value are two articles by Robert Jensen: "How the World Lost Its Story," *First Things* October 1993 <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9310/articles/jenson.html> and "Can We Have a Story?," *First Things* March 2000 <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft0003/opinion/jenson.html>. For a narrative reading of Pauline theology, *Paul's Narrative Thought World* by Ben Witherington is of great value. Witherington shows several basic narratives underlie almost all of Paul's theologizing, such that Paul is more of a "story theologian" than a "systematic theologian." Peter Leithart uses narrative and ritual theory to develop a sophisticated theology of baptism in "Modernity and the 'Merely Social': Towards a Socio-Theological Account of Baptismal Regeneration" in *Pro Ecclesia* Vol. 9, No. 3 (319-330). N. T. Wright shows how the Christian metanarrative resists postmodern deconstruction in *The Millennium Myth*. D. A. Caron's *The Gaggling of God* employs the story motif in examining postmodernity. Finally, see my essay entitled "John Calvin, N. T. Wright, and the Promise of Narrative Hermeneutics" for an examination of how narrative helps us read Scripture covenantally.

of asking, “What’s your story?” But what is true of personal identities is also true of corporate identities. A shared narrative – sometimes called a metanarrative – gives cohesion and stability to a group. The church is defined as the people who share in the story of Jesus, and in turn, the story of Israel. Paul in 1 Cor. 10 can tell a predominately Gentile church that the exodus narrative belongs to them. They’ve been grafted into the unfolding drama of Israel. Israel’s story is now their story.

But narratives do more than give identity. They also give rise to an ethic, a particular way of being in the world. So, in Romans 6 Paul tells the Roman Christians that in their baptism they were united to Christ. His story of death to sin and resurrection into new life is now their story as well and so they are to live accordingly. If they live in rebellion to God, they are being inconsistent with their deepest identity. The story made theirs in baptism requires that they live a certain way. And so in Rom. 6, Paul has said, in essence, “Be who you are! Be true to your story! Follow the script!” If they don’t play the role assigned to them in baptism, their story will have a not so happy ending.

America once took her corporate story from the church. The Puritan settlers, as already mentioned, saw themselves as inheritors of the basic narrative of Christendom. Within medieval Christendom, that glorious ecclesiocentric era of the so-called “Middle Ages” and early Reformational period, the church’s story was the culture’s story. Western civilization as a whole took her cues, however imperfectly, from the biblical narrative. The story of Scripture, of redemptive history, of the kingdom of God, was fundamental. The first colonists came not simply to escape religious persecution or discover great wealth; they came to write the next chapter in the unfolding story of the kingdom of God on earth. They interpreted their mission in terms of the outworking of the gospel story. Their sense of identity and their way of life arose from this basic narrative. Their desire to build a godly social order founded on biblical principles, to evangelize the natives, and so forth, all only make sense in this light.

We’ve already traced out how the Christian story was exchanged for another the story – the story of the modern nation-state, the story of liberal democracy, the story of autonomous individualism – over the last few centuries.⁹⁴ While the American drama has taken a turn for the worse, this is not necessarily a problem; Scripture, I think, leads us to expect the kingdom will ebb and flow in history. There are seasons of growth and fruitfulness, just as there are winters of barrenness and stagnation. The mustard seed grows into the greatest of all trees slowly, not overnight. And even if America is apostate, along with the rest of the West, she can still be brought back to repentance in due time. America may have been lost, for the most part, but she can be regained once again someday. Christians need not panic as though the kingdom failed when America went secular.⁹⁵

What *is* problematic is that American Christians can’t seem to get their own story straight. They can’t seem to disentangle the America-as-modern-nation-state story from the church’s biblically formed story. This is why we have so much worldliness – or really, Americanness – in our churches. We take our cue from the surrounding culture rather than Scripture. Thus, from one angle, our most pressing need is to recover the centrality of the gospel itself – particularly as it is preached from pulpits, rehearsed in the liturgy, enacted in the sacraments, and embodied in various forms of ministry and service. In other words, the church, as a gospel formed community, must learn once again to be the body of Christ in and for the world.

Such an undertaking is our only hope of restoring and recreating Christendom, a culture in which church, state, and family all prosper in their respective places.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ For more, see Peter Leithart’s taped lecture “Theocracy, Revivalism, and Democracy” from the 1992 Biblical Horizons Conference on Calvinism, Arminianism, and Theocracy.

⁹⁵ It is telling that the rise of pessimistic premillennial eschatology correlates with the rise of secularism in America. As Christians lost hope for the American nation, they lost hope for the progress of the kingdom of Christ.

⁹⁶ For more on the topic of “The Church and Her Rivals,” see my sermons series, available at www.trinity-pres.net.