

ON BEING THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

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My goal in this paper is to trace some of the problems American Christians face that are peculiar to the shape of American culture. That's not to say these same issues aren't faced elsewhere in the world. But I want to focus on how they have cropped up in America, and then consider a solution.

The basic problem we face stems from modernity, or the Enlightenment. In particular, I want to look at how the Enlightenment touched upon religion, politics, ecclesiology, anthropology, and Christology. Then we will sketch out an answer, focusing on the church's need to recover her unique mission and ministry in the world.

From Public Church to Secular State

As John Millbank has written, "Once there was no 'secular'"¹ – at least in the sense of secular *space* within culture. Secular space had to be imagined *ex nihilo* and then constructed from scratch in order to create a sphere of human life which would be governed by "pure reason," free from the dogmatic prejudices of "religion." Or to put it another way, a "private religion" (under the guise of "Christianity") had to be invented in which the religious life was fully severed from public and political life. Millbank's profound thesis is that sociology – which separated out the "social" from the "religious" as distinct factors in human life – in effect became a counterfeit theology and ecclesiology. The problem, of course, is that "religion" is *not* just one factor among many and cannot be factored out of any aspect of human life.² Nor, for that matter, can religion be brought into some human endeavor at a secondary or tertiary level. In reality, religion is *always already there* because God is *always already there* and religion is simply our way of interfacing with and interacting with God in our moment by moment existence. But the Enlightenment sought to carve out a

¹ These are the opening words to Millbank's profoundly insightful and difficult work, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

² "Religion" is a tricky term, and exceedingly difficult to define. Some evangelicals define "religion" as outward acts of piety, contrasted with a "personal relationship with Jesus." In this sense, religion is just a hollow shell of true holiness. But that's not the Bible's definition (James 1:27). As I use the term in this sentence above (and in many places throughout this paper), "religion" is simply the *coram deo* nature of our existence. That is to say, our "religion" is our way of interfacing with the living God through the whole course of our lives (and especially in gathered worship).

sector of life which was free from any kind of religious influence – that is to say, a realm where God is neither active nor relevant. This is the Enlightenment myth. Those who adopt the myth will be surprised to find in the end that not even hell is a secular space. Man never escapes the presence of God (cf. Ps. 139:7-12).

The impact of the Enlightenment shift would be hard to overstate. This movement inverted the worldview that had gripped the West for the previous millennia and a half. Previously, the church had thought in terms of “Christendom” – a Christian civilization, in which Christ’s preeminence extended beyond the human mind and heart to every nook and cranny of public life. Christ was Lord of soul as well as body, of the domestic sphere as well as the political. Christendom had its flaws, of course, because even the best of Christian societies (like the best of Christian individuals and Christian families) remain sinful.³ We should not overlook those flaws of airbrush them away. But we should learn from what Christendom got right.⁴ The notion that “Christ” and “culture” should be – or even could be – separated was unthinkable. Biblical religion was not something “tacked on” to generic human existence. The gospel was not a layer added to religiously neutral human life. Rather, biblical faith constituted a new way of living life *in its entirety*, a new way of being human. Nothing was “secular,” for everything belonged to Christ and came within the scope of his lordship and redeeming grace.⁵ Pre-modern expressions of biblical religion acknowledged no dividing line between the public and private realms. Or, to the extent such a line was recognized, Christ was hailed as Lord in the public square every bit as much as in the private sector. Christ’s lordship could not be put in a box.

³ One of Christendom’s major failings is that the church’s missional character was lost. Because it was assumed society in general was Christianized, “missions” became something the church did by sending preachers to foreign nations, rather than something that was bound up in the very life of the church wherever she existed. In a Christendom society, the task of the church to bring mercy to the wayward and the broken is easily lost, and the church is in constant danger of being co-opted by the nation-state. One of the goals of this paper is to show that being “missional” and desiring a Christian civilization (“Christendom”) are not antithetical or mutually exclusive. But I will also show that the demise of Christendom in the West requires church to become drastically more self-conscious about her missional dimension. We must learn to see the end of Christendom as a renewed opportunity to evangelize the barbarians.

⁴ The whole medieval period is enormously complex. It is possible to give plausible and wide ranging interpretations of the period depending on what one chooses to emphasize. In a paper like this, it is almost impossible to avoid over simplification.

⁵ Think of the great Isaac Watts adaptation of Psalm 98: “He came to make his blessings flow as far as the curse is found.” Unfortunately, these are dead lyrics for most Christians today.

The post-Enlightenment view treated religion as an “aspect” of one’s existence. It came to be regarded as one of many social factors that shaped a person’s way of living. Other personal features, such as socio-economic class, nationality or race, gender, and so on, were considered just as determinative. Religion could be stripped away and public life remain unaltered because religion was seen as private business. Politics will remain unchanged, no matter what god, gods, or goddesses happen to exist – or not exist – in the belief of the people. In a democracy, “truth” is determined by the will of 51%.

Peter Leithart has captured this radical redefinition of religion quite well. The Enlightenment created “Christianity” – that truncated, individualistic, introspective version of the faith that shrinks it down to an ideology (that is, a set of propositions to which are paid mental assent) and/or to a private experience (which takes place solely in the interior psychology of the individual).⁶ Leithart points out the stunningly obvious, but overlooked, fact that “The Bible never mentions Christianity . . . [Instead] the Bible speaks of Christians and of the Church, but Christianity is gnostic, and the Church firmly rejected gnosticism from her earliest days.”⁷ For Leithart, “Christianity” becomes a codeword for privatized faith. The problem with “Christianity,” then, as Leithart points out, is that it is all too easy to think of it as “religious” layer of life added onto a religiously neutral human core. But in fact, religion is pervasive because religion is just our personal encounter with God. And God is always already there, as already noted. *Everything* is religious because God is always present. We can never get outside of God’s presence.⁸

Leithart’s point is that the modernized, post-Enlightenment conception of “Christianity” is just that – *a concept*. It becomes just another “ism,” another idea in the consumerist marketplace of ideas. In modernity, biblical faith has been internalized and privatized into an individual belief system.⁹ It’s a set of doctrines tucked away between one’s ears and behind one’s eyes.¹⁰ And when

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⁸ Cornelius Van Til had a clever way of capturing the inescapability of interfacing with God. He likened God’s presence to a radio dial. No matter where you turn on the dial, you are hearing God’s voice. And the radio cannot be turned off or the volume muted. If there was any place man could go to flee altogether from the face and voice of God, fallen man would reside there all the time (Rom. 1:18ff).

⁹ I am *not* denying the need for a personalized, individual faith. Evangelicals are right to stress the importance of a “personal relationship” with Christ. But we should be equally adept in talking about a nation’s “public relationship” to Christ (cf. Ps. 2:10-12).

¹⁰ Examples of this sort of thing in the modern Western church abound. For instance, earlier in history, Calvinism was regarded a comprehensive way of live, founded upon belief in the absolute sovereignty of God. Calvinists, though often small in number, made a huge impact in

this happens the Enlightenment's strategy has carried the field and won the day. Not only is Christ driven from the public square, but Christians are left vulnerable to other Enlightenment attacks, such as the "comparative religions" school of thought, which basically tries to boil down the world's religions to a common essence (usually some kind of moralism, completely devoid of the grace of the gospel).¹¹

Of course, as Leithart acknowledges, biblical faith *includes* propositional content. It gives us a "philosophy of life," a comprehensive world and life view. It touches on matters of both the heart and mind. But just about every form of idolatry offers those things as well. As Leithart shows, what separates us is *new life* in a Christ-formed, Christ-shaped community. The church is internal to the gospel because the church *just is* God's new humanity, the fruit and effect of Christ's work on the cross. Even as Adam went into a death-sleep, in order to be given a bride from the side of his body, forming the first human community, so through the death of Jesus on the cross, a bride has been formed out of the water and blood that gushed out of the Savior's side. This community is his inheritance (Eph. 1:18).

This may recall the old fundamentalist-liberal debates of the early 20th century. The liberals emphasized that "Christianity is a life," often focusing on care for the poor or the execution of a political agenda at the expense of Christian truth. The fundamentalists replied "Christianity is a doctrine," and went on to propound those basic "fundamentals" of the Christian worldview. While the fundamentalists were on the right side of the debate in that they represented orthodoxy, over against liberal heresy, the liberals actually had the better slogan: Christianity (rightly considered) *is* a life. It's a life that *includes* very definite doctrinal convictions, but it cannot be reduced to those ideas. The way the fundamentalists fought the battle automatically conceded the public square to the liberals. The hallmark of fundamentalism became "Christianity" as a private

politics, economics, art, science, and so forth. But today, Calvinism is generally defined ideologically, that is, as a theological system, reducible to a few points (e.g., the TULIP or the Reformational *solas*).

¹¹ Secular, Enlightenment arrogance reaches its height when it makes the absurd claim that "All religions are the same." The secular person would have to be virtually omniscient to make this claim. It is a huge faith-claim with no firm support. Besides, it completely disregards what advocates of different faith actually say about themselves and their beliefs. It would be akin to an American saying "All Chinese people are the same." We would say such a person knows virtually nothing about Chinese culture or the inhabitants of China. But when secularists say, "All religious people are the same," it somehow gets passed off as brilliant scholarship! Biblical faith, as well as the other faiths, must be dealt with in all their messy particularities.

system of beliefs and experiences, but it was not a total way of life and it had no vision for the broader culture.¹²

God's work of redemption takes place in the time-space arena (Ps. 98:1-3). God did not just give us a set of ideas to master; he gave us himself in the person of his incarnate Son. The *Logos* became embodied in the man Jesus. And Jesus formed a community around himself – a community that shares in his very life and mission (Jn. 20:21). Insofar as "Christianity" is something that can remain unincarnated or disembodied, it is a perverse distortion of God's holistic work of salvation. The Bible does not give us a program for individual salvation, abstracted from the life of the community. The church is not a theology club for born again individuals. It is not a Jesus fan club for people who "into that sort of thing" in their spare time. It is not a self-help group or a therapeutic center where one can go to get group hugs. The church, rather, is God's new creation. She is the restoration and reconstruction of our shattered humanity in and through Christ. God's redemptive target is not isolated, fallen individuals; it is the entirety of creation, represented by a new human race formed by virtue of their union with Christ.

Leithart explains the scope of God's salvific work:

Biblically, however, salvation is not a stuff that one can get, whether through the Church, or through some other means. It is not an ether floating in the air, nor a "thing," nor some kind of "substance."

"Salvation" describes fallen creation reconciled to God, restored to its created purpose, and set on a trajectory leading to its eschatological fulfillment. Ultimately, "salvation" will describe the creation as a whole, once it is restored to God and glorified (Rom. 8:18-25). Grammatically, "salvation" is a noun; theologically, it is always adjectival.¹³

The church is the first fruits of God's saving work in the world. Thus, the church models, in principle, human life the way God intended it to be lived. We are God's renewed humanity. We live the life of the future in the present, the life of the kingdom in the midst of the world. As the church, we are a new city, set upon a hill, and therefore distinct, yet existing within the cities of the world. We are an alternative society, rivaling and subverting the idolatrous societies of the world. We are a counter-culture, called to reform and transform the cultures of

¹² Fundamentalism's privatization was aided and abetted by an increasingly other worldly, pessimistic eschatology (premillennial dispensationalism), which made Christian involvement in the public square seem like a distraction and waste of time – "polishing the brass on a sinking ship," as the saying went. Even today, though the Reformed church has become more optimistic in its eschatological outlook, we still tend to stress "worldview" more than "praxis," ideology more than action, orthodoxy more than orthopraxy. We always need both.

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the peoples around us. We are a kingdom, transcending the kingdoms of earth. And we are a new Israel, a new nation, dwelling amidst the nations of the earth, with our own defining story, rituals, songs, celebrations, and way of life marking us out as a unique people. We are a contrast society – specifically contrasting the light of a gospel shaped life with the darkness of the old fallen world order.

Suppose we were to ask, “What would our community or city look like if everyone here wanted to serve Christ and give him pre-eminence in *everything*?” The church should be the answer to that question in a microcosm. We should embody the answer to that question. The church is the put kingdom life on display. Just as car manufacturers release prototype models ahead of time to show in the present what we’ll be driving in the future, so the church is God’s prototype of the life of the world to come in the present age. In the church, we hold up a picture of heaven, a snapshot (or, better, video, or still better, drama) of resurrection life, to those around us. We show the cities of man what the City of God looks like.

Modern American evangelical Christians do not think in terms of this view of the church because they have a bankrupt ecclesiology. The church offers, at best, vitamins to supplement a staple spiritual diet of personal quiet times, email discussion lists, and fictional books thinly disguised as theology. The church is grafted onto a “personal relationship with Jesus,” which relationship is defined in only the vaguest and most sentimental of terms. This privatized connection with Jesus is considered the essence of true religion, rather than participating in new life and community in the body of Christ. For both the Enlightenment-devotees and evangelicals, “religion” is a slice of life, not the overall slant of one’s life. It is an isolated dimension of life rather than the totalizing direction of one’s life. We have severed salvation from the church, and in doing so we’ve ripped apart what God intended to come as a package. We’ve individualized the communal and privatized the public. We split apart religion and politics, and then comfort ourselves by reading that split back in the text of Scripture.

The Enlightenment Self

The Enlightenment not only invented “religion” in this modern sense, as a result of crafting a new view of the church and politics, it also essentially created the “individual” as we know him today. People used to think of themselves in terms of their relationships and communities. What gave you your unique identity (or individuality) was being *this* person’s spouse or parent, a member of *this* guild, a part of *this* local church, an inhabitant of *this* state. These relations and connections are not like pins stuck in a pincushion of identity; they are the

essence of who you are. These associations are not like layers of an onion that can be peeled away to get to a deeper core; they are constitutive of personal identity all the way down.

For modern people, individuality is defined by abstracting oneself from that network of relationships and communities. To “find yourself” you leave community behind and go into solitude. If you hike across Europe or go backpacking in Australia, surely the real you is bound to turn up somewhere along the way! The “real you” is not the husband, father, factory worker, and church member, but some free floating substance hovering behind or above all those relationships. The enlightened, rational man throws off the burden of relationships and external authority of the church and tradition. He defines himself in terms of himself. He carves out an identity for himself from scratch.

Peter Leithart captures well this Enlightenment anthropology in contrast to a more biblical, traditional view. Community is not something grafted onto individual identity, but constitutive of who we are. This is because we are made in the image of the Trinity, the divine society of Father, Son, and Spirit:

Man, as the image of God, is preeminently created as a “being-in-communion” and a “being-for-communion.” Man is made for communion with God, with the Father through the Son in the Spirit. But man is also made for communion with other men, and with the creation that God made. Just as there is no God except as He is in communion, so there is no man except as He is in communion, in relationship, with things and persons outside of himself. Lone Adam in the garden was already related to His Creator and already embedded in various kinds of relationships with the creation. For Adam as for his Creator, it is not one thing to be and another thing to be in relationship; to be human is to be in communion. And even this inherent relationality is “not good,” or not good enough, so Yahweh created Eve so that Adam and Eve could have more intimate and God-like communion.

But that’s not all. Just as each person of the Trinity derives his identity from the relation he sustains with the other members of the Godhead, so we derive our identity in and through relationships.

Each of the Persons of the Trinity, insofar as each can be considered *in se*, is what He is in relation to the others. The Father is Father only because He has a Son, and the Son is Son because He has a Father. Without the Son, the Father would not be who He is, and vice versa. Something similar must be said of the Spirit, though the formulation is here far more difficult. Augustine provided at least a starting point: The Spirit, he said, shares the holiness and spirituality of Father and Son, and therefore is what He is only in relation to the other two. The identity of each member

of the Triune family is thus determined by, even dependent upon, His communion with the other two. Again, we can apply the same principle to man as image of God: Man is what he is only in relation to God, to other humans, and to the world. It is *not* the case that I have an existence and an identity that can be distilled and isolated from my multiple relationships with my wife, my children, my students, my friends, my Presbytery, and so on. These relationships are not detachable pins stuck in the pincushion of the “real me.” These relationships constitute the real me. Even if you could strip away every relationship between me and other creatures (which is hardly conceivable) I would still be constituted by my relationship with God.

It’s not at all surprising that a post-Enlightenment decline of Trinitarian theology led to atheism and individualism in the public square. The Enlightenment desired to find some common underlying core that was at the center of all the great world religions. In this way, religion, so often a divisive force in human culture, could be used to unify people. But of course finding a “lowest common denominator” religion meant stripping away all that was unique to Christianity. And the one doctrine that has set Christianity apart from the very beginning is the Trinity.

With the eclipse of Trinitarian theology, it is not surprising that human personhood morphed from being-in-communion to the “self-made man” and the “rugged American individualist.” But these post-Enlightenment anthropologies leave people in a vulnerable state. We now no longer understand marriage and commitment. Friendship is on the wane. Millions of people now take drugs to offset depression brought on by loneliness. People fret over old age and retirement years because they have no confidence family and friends will be there for them when they are senile and decrepit. The loss of community life is one of the greatest crises in the modern West.

The church, as a community formed and sustained by life in the Triune God, should answer to our culture’s relational fragmentations and despair. Our churches should be growing into places where people can find authentic friendship and fellowship. Our churches need to work at creating what Miroslav Volf has called “catholic personalities,” that is, people who find their deepest identity in the context of the covenant community.

A Depoliticized Jesus

The Enlightenment not only recreated “religion” as a private belief system in order to evacuate the public square of religious stories and symbols; it not only redefined the individual in abstraction from community and tradition; it

also invented a new Jesus to fit with these new ideologies. The Enlightenment drove the so-called Quest for the Historical Jesus, perhaps best known in our day through the "Jesus Seminar." In post-Enlightenment Jesus studies, historians refuse to trust the canonical gospel accounts, and instead recreate a Jesus out of the scraps they believe to have been trustworthy. Because the gospel writers weren't neutral historians, because they had axes to grind and agendas to push, Enlightenment thinkers reasoned we had to get behind the texts of the gospels to find the *real* Jesus. Or even, better we need to go to the "gnostic gospels" to find out who Jesus was.

But as one scholar pointed out, all these "enlightened" theologians simply looked into the well of history searching for Jesus and saw nothing more than their own reflection. Every scholar recreated Jesus in his own image, and so Jesus was portrayed as a cynic, a social reformer, a hippie, a Gnostic philosopher, and so forth. Despite their skeptical worldviews, there was one thing they were absolutely certain of: Jesus did not rise from the dead on the third day. Whatever else happened, his body remained in the tomb.

"Enlightened" theologians, like the 1st century Sadducees, had a stake in denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus, not just because they didn't want to believe in miracles or the "supernatural," but they knew that if Jesus rose from the grave bodily, then He was not just Lord "up there" in the spiritual realm, but also "down here" in the earthly realm. If it was only, say, the teaching of Jesus or the inspiration of Jesus that lived on, Christianity could be safely relegated to a private cult. But if the resurrection actually happened in space and time, Jesus is Lord, not only in heaven but also on earth. He can't be relegated to the upstairs world; He's putting the downstairs world of family, politics, of business, and art in order as well. The resurrection is the ultimate challenge to Enlightenment dualism. A Jesus that remained dead is no a threat to secularism in the public square. A Jesus that only exists as "spirit" was perfectly compatible with the state's control of the "body." But a Christ was crucified in the public square and then rose again in that same public square is the rightful Lord of the public square.

So the Enlightenment promoted a dualism that compartmentalized the world, that privatized religion in order to unleash autonomous politics. It focused on the individual rather than the church community and it glorified human independence, free from the constraints of church authority and tradition, free to follow one's reason and conscience wherever they lead. Kant said, "Dare to be wise" — in other words, dare to figure out things for yourself, and invent your own reality.

Against the Enlightenment Jesus, the church needs to learn to read the story of Jesus as the fulfillment and completion of the story of Israel. Following

the likes N. T. Wright, the church needs to understand Jesus from within the context of the first century. It has been all too easy for both liberals and conservatives in the modern world to interpret Jesus through the categories of the Enlightenment, rather than categories derived from the Scriptural metanarrative itself. When we learn to view Jesus as the True Israel we will see his ministry has an inescapable political dimension that cannot be screened out. No matter how the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution gets applied, Jesus remains Lord over the state just as much as the rest of life and culture.

Wide Awake in America

In this post-Enlightened context — and this is still very much the world we live in — we have to ask: What does it mean to be Christian in America right now?

Or better: What does it mean to be *the church* in America right now?

In other words, given the fact that we no longer live in a “Christendom” situation, in which biblical faith is publicly expressed in the culture, we have to ask what our role is. We can still affirm the long term goal is a Christianized society, but what should our strategy be? How do we get there?

It has become increasingly obvious in recent years that no matter how much evangelical Christians get involved in American bipartisan politics, they cannot stem the tide of cultural degeneration. The more money we pump into the process, the more candidates we prop up, the less we seem to bring about real change. We’ve seen multiple evangelicals in the White House since the Roe vs. Wade decision, and still nothing significant has been accomplished. We are losing ground in the cultural wars. We are having to continually lower our standards and expectations.

The direct approach – seeking to change the culture through traditional channels of politics and media – have proven ineffective. It is time for the American church to wake up to a new approach – what I will call here a “missional approach.” As Peter Leithart points out in his book *The Kingdom and the Power*, the weapons of the “normal war” – the normal means through which Christians have sought to prosecute the culture war – have failed us. We need to focus more energy on the war behind the culture war, the war against the principalities and powers. We need to focus our efforts on the means of holy war, found in the ministry of the church. The world has no countermeasure against these sorts of weapons.

To understand more fully why we have essentially lost the culture war, but why there is still hope for the holy war, we need to come to a better

understanding of what America is as a nation and what the church is a covenant community.

What is America?

To answer the kinds of questions we've raised, we have to answer two foundation questions: "What is America?" and, "What is the church?" I have already looked at the nature of the American story to some extent in this essay, but I want to cover that ground again from a different vantage point.

America has always had a somewhat ambiguous identity. We've been caught in a tug of war between the forces of traditional Christianity and the forces of the anti-traditional Enlightenment. Are we the nation the Puritans created? Or the nation the Enlightenment created? Are we the city of God, a city on a hill? Or the latest instantiation of the city of man

On the one hand, Americans originally viewed the nation as something of a new Israel. The Pilgrims and Puritans modeled their departure from Europe on the biblical exodus account. The American War for Independence was also interpreted as a new exodus, escaping from a new Pharaoh, King George. Deist Thomas Jefferson even proposed that the Great Seal of the United States display Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea to the promised land. New England preachers described the new ratified Constitution of 1789 as a new covenant, modeled on the constitutional covenant given to Israel at Sinai. When the slaves were freed, and later in the civil rights movement, the exodus narrative was repeated used, further burning itself into the American consciousness.

The point is not that all these uses of biblical images and stories were properly applied to the American nation or American political movement. In fact, there are deep problems with this sort of thing since the exodus story belongs to the church, not the American nation. It can belong to a nation state, as such, only in a remote, secondary, and analogous way.

Rather the point is that Americans, rightly or wrongly, have always sought after biblical ways of interpreting their national experience. They have sought to understand their role in the world in quasi-messianic, quasi-ecclesial terms. They have used the Bible (or misused it, as has often been the case) to shape the national consciousness.

But there was another prominent strand in America's identity, also present from the very beginning. America was not only stylized as a new Israel, she was also a new Rome. The Constitutional Convention used language that came from the old Roman Empire — such as "republic" and "senate." The great buildings in our nation's capitol and in many state capitols used Roman architecture and

symbolism. Several founding fathers chose Latin rather than biblical pseudonyms, such as Publius, in their political writings. There is more than a trace of Roman stoic thought among the founders. And in our building up of an international, commercialized empire, there are analogies with Rome.

So America is this strange concoction, this mix of things biblical (or semi-biblical) and things Roman (or pagan). Are we the new Israel or new Rome? That's the ambiguity Americans have wrestled with, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously.

But the one thing that virtually all Americans have agreed on — whether they lean more towards the America as New Israel strand of our heritage or the America as New Rome strand of our identity — is that church must remain marginalized. Either the church's story is claimed by the nation and reinterpreted accordingly. Or, the church is required to underwrite American imperial ambitions and democracy. But either way the church is essentially silenced and privatized. The church is free to help individuals in their personal spiritual journeys, but she has no standing an institution in the public square. She is not a political entity.

Neither liberals nor conservatives in American have taken seriously the centrality of the church — particularly the public, political, and social role of the church. In the midst of this situation, it is all the more urgent to ask: what does it mean to be the church *right now, right here*? I think the answer is simple. It means the same thing it always meant. *The fundamental task of the church is to be the church.* And what is the church? *The church is the city of God and kingdom of Christ on earth.* Thus, the church is the most important institution on the face of the earth, for it is a divinely ordained and created institution, for the purpose of gathering and maturing his people.

In other words, it is more important for us to ask "What does God want the church to be?" than it is to ask "What does God want America to be?" Both questions have their place, but the church has primacy. The church is the hub of the wheel. Other institutions like nation and family are the spokes coming out from that center. But the church is the core of Christian culture and civilization. It's the nursery of the kingdom of God, the first form the kingdom takes in the world. In the church, especially in gathered worship, we find our true identity as citizens of heaven. We celebrate and reenact our basic story as those who were slaves to sin but who have now been redeemed by being brought into the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

The first task of the church then, is not to be another special interest group, clamoring for a place at the table. We already have a far superior table after all (cf. Heb. 13:10). Rather, the first task of the church is to be the church, This is so not only because this is what God requires and what is best for us; it is

also what is best for the world. The church has got to be herself. She has to be true her purpose, mission, and calling. Mark Twain once said the worst advice you can give someone is “Be yourself.” That may well be true for most of us, but not for the church. In the church, the practices of liturgy, the sacraments, preaching, saying the creeds, hospitality and mercy, binding and loosing, all constitute the church as a distinct public body in the world. And that is what the world needs. The world needs the church to be the church. The world needs the church to focus on doing churchy things.

Re-Politicizing Ecclesiology

While in one sense, the church is part of the American culture, in another sense we are a counter-culture, an alternative culture with our own worldview, praxis, way of life, stories, and symbols. We are a distinct nation within the American nation. In a sense, the purpose of the church is to show America in a microcosm what she would look like if all her citizens wanted to serve Christ.

But while the church is her own culture and is indeed a counter-culture, she is also the transformer of culture. The church is the body of Christ. She is the public representative of Christ, who is King of all the earth. She is his emissary, a colony of heaven on earth. She is the visible, historical manifestation of Christ’s lordship and redemption — not the *only* manifestation, to be sure, since Christ’s lordship is also seen in other spheres — but she is the first and central manifestation.

The church is even political in a sense, as we have seen. She is political not because she wields the sword, nor even because she’s concerned with advancing particular pieces of legislation or organizing voters, or supporting candidates. Rather the church is political because in the very act of *being the church* — doing Word and Sacrament, in ministering in Word and deed, in binding and loosing — she’s announcing and embodying the truth that the world has a new King, the crucified and risen Messiah of Israel. By these means, she is serving and shaping and reordering civilization as a whole. She is creating a new way of doing politics and a new way of structuring and organizing human community.

Because the Enlightenment cut the world in two, into a private half and a public half, we think when we’re doing to churchy things, we’re not acting politically. But nothing could be further from the truth. There is no gap at all between the spiritual and the public or the liturgical and the political. Political activism is not something tacked onto the gospel and the church’s ministry. Rather politics, properly understood, is always already there. Every true act of the church is an act of defiance against false lords and messiahs, and act of allegiance towards King Jesus.

So for example, preaching is deeply political if it is faithful to Scripture. Preaching, after all, is just the church's public declaration that Jesus is Lord. The Greek word for gospel in the NT bears this out. *Euangelion* was a highly charged political term in the day, used by the emperor to announce his ascension or a great military victory or some other piece of imperial "good news." Preaching is the church's counter-declaration. Indeed, through preaching the church re-narrates the story of the culture so that Christ is seen as its only hope.

Baptism is also a political act. Through the waters of baptism, we are joined with Jesus Christ and begin to share in his kingly rule over all things. Allegiance to him now dominates our lives, relativizing all other commitments and alliances. Traditional theories of Christian resistance actually derived from the baptismal covenant: We can disobey earthly magistrates when they would require us to disobey God because baptism has made us citizens of a heavenly kingdom. Baptism forms a new nation, a new humanity that transcends the nations of the world. As our new covenant exodus, it forms us into the new Israel.

The Eucharist is a political sign as well. It manifests the church as a worldwide, catholic community. The church is what the United Nations could only dream of being. Our common feast reveals the church as our primary community at both the local and global levels. The Lord's Supper reveals a different kind of politics, a sort of counter-politics; a different kind of economics even.

Consider: At the Lord's Table, we don't grab for status, power or privilege. Paul chided the Corinthians for turning the Eucharist into a meal for the wealthy that left the poor hungry (I Cor. 11:17ff). Instead, at this table, we share, we eat together in peace, we wait for one another, and we include the marginalized — the very young, the very old, the very poor — the very people worldly politicians tend to walk all over. At this table it doesn't matter if you're a prince or a pauper, black or white, young or old — all that matters is our common union with Christ.

Moreover, in the church's culture, we counter America's gross consumerism. We become consumers of a different sort. Instead of living to consume or acquire as much as we possibly can, the way most Americans do, at this table we consume something capitalism cannot offer us, something we can't get off the rack at Wal-Mart. This meal satisfies a hunger that can't be met anywhere else. At the Lord's table, it is more true than anywhere else that we become what we eat. As we ingest the body of Christ, we *become* the body of Christ. Thomas Aquinas said that whereas we convert natural food into ourselves, the spiritual food of the Eucharist converts us into it—it makes us into

the body of the Lord. And as we “do this,” we learn to live in a sacrificial, cruciform fashion, like Jesus Himself.

So focusing on the church as the center of culture, even of politics, is not a retreatist or escapist strategy. We certainly believe with T. S. Eliot that the Christian faith ought to have official recognition by the state — that the state should be shaped by and organized upon biblical principles every bit as much as the family and the church. We believe the state should be attentive and make way for the church to “do her thing,” to fulfill her mission. But we don’t get there thru a power grab; we get there thru living sacrificially over time.

Here is where early church history is so helpful. Jesus and the apostles and the first Christians were regarded as a threat to the Roman Empire, not because they tried to grab hold the levers of political power. That would have been impossible for them anyway.

Rather they were a threat precisely because they enacted a different kind of politics than the Empire had ever seen before. They embodied and enacted a new way of being of human that showed the earthly powers that the handwriting was on the wall. They acted politically – but in a way Rome could not anticipate or hold in check, even through persecution.

Against the depoliticized Enlightenment Jesus, the gospel shows us a Jesus who embodies and forms a new Israel. Jesus addressed all the burning political issues of his day, but not because he was a mere social reformer, but because he understood that all the political issues were theological issues, too. But he put a different spin on thing.

Jesus was concerned with Israel’s standing among the nations. In the Sermon on the Mount gives the covenant people something of a political program, a foreign policy, for relating to Rome—Israel is to seek the Empire’s good by going the extra mile and turning the other cheek. Rather than fomenting revolution, she was to be submissive to her God-appointed overlord.

Jesus dealt with the hot topic of taxation, which is always a matter of lordship, of sovereignty. Caesar’s image is found on the coin so he can have it, but where is God’s image found? God’s image is imprinted on our bodies and souls. Our whole persons belong to God. We are to render everything we are and have to him.

Jesus engaged in prophetic political forecasting. He warned the nation of Israel about coming judgment at the hands of Rome unless she changed her ways. He said she would lose her temple, land, and covenant. He threatened her with doom unless she walked in his way of peace.

Politics were internal to His ministry. He announced the kingdom of God—in other words, he announced that the Empire’s claim to be a divine order was false. It was actually the kingdom of Jesus that took its source from another

world. It was this alternative kingdom that got Jesus in trouble with the powers-that-were. A non-political Jesus could have lived to ripe old age. If he only promoted a private belief system and not a counter-imperial way of life, that challenged everything Rome stood for (and that the Jewish elite collaborated with), he would have been no threat.

The basic Church confession was “Jesus is Lord,” which means Caesar is not. As Paul and Silas found out in Acts 17, you could get in trouble for proclaiming that there is another King! Paul made Rome rather than Athens the apex of missionary journeys, which shows that his agenda and he spoke more to political rulers than philosophers. Paul announced the gospel revealed God’s righteousness, directly challenging the cult of the Roman goddess Athena (Justice).

The Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) was used to describe the Greek assembly of citizens called together to decide matters affecting common welfare. Early Christians, by calling their gathering the church/*ekklesia*, showed they intended to act in a public way, to exercise rule, albeit thru different means than Caesar employed. Through prayer and praise, they would shape the course of history and of their society.

Likewise, the word “gospel” was highly charged political term, as it was used by the Caesars to announce enthronement, or the birth of a son, or a military victory. But Christians took the term over, calling Jesus’ birth, enthronement, and victory the true gospel and showing up Caesar’s rule as the parody.

In Acts 4:12 when Peter announced “Salvation was not found in any other, for there is not other name under heaven given to men whereby we may be saved,” he was very likely paraphrasing Caesar Augustus who proclaimed in 7 B. C. salvation found only in the name Augustus.

If the early Christians has wanted to escape persecution from Rome, they could’ve easily done so by simply registering for the status private cult and they could have pursued an otherworldly agenda to their heart’s content and Jesus could have taken his place in the pantheon with the other Greek and Roman gods. But the Christians knew they couldn’t go that route.

And we can’t go that route either. We cannot settle for being a private cult or a subculture. We may not have a church bell that we can ring to announce to the community that it is time to worship the Creator and King and Redeemer of the world, but in whatever ways God sets before us, we need to make the Lordship of Christ visible and audible in the world.

We need to remember *God is not an American*. And God’s chief agent in history is not America, but the church. We have to be against America, for America -- a counter-American movement for the sake of transforming America.

In our day this means being what Lesslie Newbign called being a “missional church.”

The Missional Church

What is a missional church? A missional church is outward facing; it faces the world, reaches out towards the world, and seeks to find ways to serve the world. A missional church is willing to die for the life of the world. A missional church turns the world upside down and inside out, announcing that the last shall first, the servant is the leader, and the cross is stronger than the sword. A missional church will refuse to allow herself to be co-opted by the American political process; instead she engages the culture on the gospel’s terms

A missional church will announce the gospel, not as a private value, but as a public fact, as the objective truth about the world. A missional church will hold mercy ministry and evangelism together so she ministers holistically to the world.

A missional church will tell the world that no individual can learn and live the Christian way of life apart from the community of the church. We don’t offer correspondence courses in salvation. We summon people to enter into the church, the new family, the new colony of heaven, the new flock, the new nation, the new culture. Salvation is found in this community, not apart from it.

A missional church knows individuals are no match for institutional evils and so the missional church will work *as the church* to reshape, remold, and transfigure society. The missional church not only trains her members to live out their faith in their vocations. The missional church also engages the culture as the church, as an institution, as a public body.

A missional church will do all things in a spirit of love, humility, and compassion. This will be our posture, our stance. We will not take an us-versus-them approach. We will be self-effacing instead of selfish.

Finally, most importantly, a missional church will announce that Jesus Christ is not only King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but also President of presidents, Senator of senators, and Judge of Supreme Court judges! When we proclaim this gospel boldly, and live out its implications in charity, the world changes.