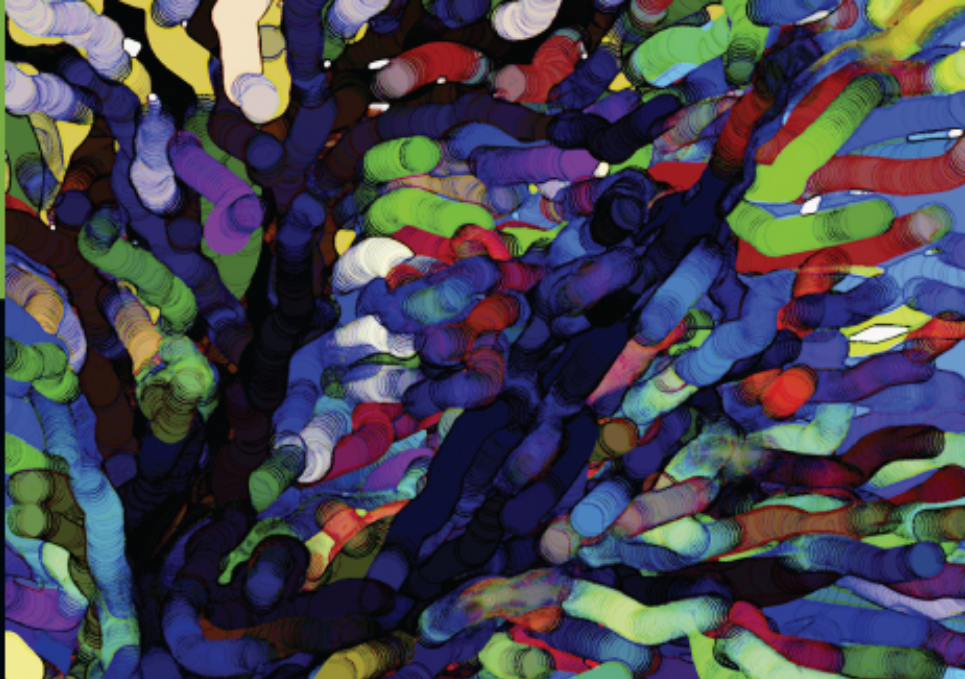


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CHRISTOPHER GREEN

The Message of
the Church

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: DEREK TIDBALL

The Message of the Church

Assemble the people before me

Chris Green
Oak Hill Theological College, London

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Author's preface

I am so grateful for being part of the experiment of Grace Church, Highlands, and for working at Oak Hill Theological College among many young people preparing to serve Christ's church. Wendy Bell, the librarian, has found me everything I ever wanted, and Adam Stewart, George Crowder, Andrew Sach and Andrew Towner have been more useful conversation partners than they realized. Philip Duce at Inter-Varsity Press and Derek Tidball the series editor have been consistently patient and encouraging. Many churches have listened as I have had this project on my heart, and my dear wife and children must at times have thought I love the church more than them.

One cannot write on the church without being aware of 'the communion of the saints', the crowd of believers across time and space. My great predecessor at Oak Hill, Alan Stibbs, is little known today, but his two short books on the church published half a century ago have sat on my desk as masterpieces of robust, succinct evangelical thought.¹ It is sometimes alleged that evangelicals lack a doctrine of the church; Stibbs alone disproves that.

The other 'saint' is the presiding genius of this series, the late John Stott, who died as I was working on the manuscript. All contributors to 'The Bible Speaks Today' hear Stott's meticulous phrasing as they write, and are rightly daunted by his passionate devotion to clear exposition of Scripture.

With gratitude for two such great saints, we are aware once again of God's permanent kindness to his church in never failing to give us such gifts.

Chris Green
Oak Hill College, London
Easter 2013

Abbreviations

Bibles

- ASV American Standard Version
ESV English Standard Version
HCSB Holman Christian Study Bible
KJV King James Version
LXX Septuagint
NASB New American Standard Bible (Chicago: Moody, 1977)
NIV New International Version
NKJV New King James Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982)
NLT New Living Translation (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2004)
NRSV New Revised Standard Version (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989)

Commentary series

- AB Anchor Bible
BECNT Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BST The Bible Speaks Today
CBC Cornerstone Biblical Commentary
CGTC Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
CNTC Calvin's New Testament Commentaries
EBC Expositors' Bible Commentary
ECNT Expositors' Commentary on the New Testament
ICC International Critical Commentary
IVPNTC IVP New Testament Commentary
NAC New American Commentary
NIBC New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC New International Version Application Commentary
PNTC The Pillar New Testament Commentary
TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentary
WBC Word Biblical Commentary

Other works

- BGD *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and augmented F. Walter Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer's 5th ed. 1958 (2nd ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979)

- DLNTD* *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, eds. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP, 1997)
- DPL* *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP, 2003)
- EQ* *Evangelical Quarterly*
- JETS* *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JSOTSS* *Journal for the Study of The Old Testament Supplement Series*
- LS* *A Greek-English Lexicon*, H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, new ed. H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925)
- NIDPCM* *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, eds. Stanley M. Burgess and Eduard M. van der Maas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002–03)
- NPNF* Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (<http://ecmarsh.com/fathers/index.html>)
- NSBT* *New Studies in Biblical Theology*
- RTR* *Reformed Theological Review*
- SOED* *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon 1978)
- SNTSMS* *Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series*
- TDNT* *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. G. Kittel, G. Friedrich and G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965)

1. Introducing the church

1. I have a dream...

I have been with fifteen thousand people singing to stunning contemporary rock, and with two people praying in silence. I have heard how Christ transforms lives, and how Christian friends encourage each other along. I have prayed the Lord's Prayer with people from thirty-five nations, each in our own language, and discussed with them how the gospel impacts the differences that so recently have led to war. I have met people from countries I could not place on a map, and we have treated each other as we truly are – closer than blood relatives in Christ. Time after time I have thought, 'I wish every church could be like this'. Often I have thought, 'I wish *our* church could be like this'. Perhaps you share that dream as well.

Church is made up of people, and God's people at that. Indeed, the English word, 'church' comes from the Greek word, *kyriakon*, meaning 'the Lord's'.² The Bible begins and ends with God dwelling with his people, from Adam and Eve in the garden, to untold billions in the great city garden in Revelation. And at each step, God gathered his people together, to speak to them, hear from them, and change them to be more like him.³ Jesus came to *gather* his reluctant people,⁴ and one day he will send his angels to *gather* us all.⁵ God gathering his people is what the Bible calls 'church'.

The awful opposite of being gathered as one of God's people is to be scattered as one of his enemies, lonely, loveless and lost, for ever.⁶ After people built Babel, 'the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel – because there the LORD confused the language of the whole world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth'.⁷ On the Last Day, Jesus will gather one group, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father', but scatter the other, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed'.⁸

God loves his gathered people. It was only to form his church that the Father sent the Son, that the Son went to the cross, and that the Father and Son sent the Spirit.⁹ God wrote the Bible solely to speak to us and bring us to salvation. He warns our leaders that we are 'the church of God' (say this slowly) 'which he bought with his own blood'.¹⁰

Whether your church is purpose-driven, Jesus-driven, deliberate or intentional, whether it is contagious, irresistible, unstoppable or provocative, whether it has been recently rediscovered or is only just emerging, whether it is five-star or 'come as you are', deep, wide, healthy, organic, equipping, connecting or even unleashed,¹¹ you trust God's unshakable plan to make a people for his own possession. Church – a group of vibrant, loving, risk-everything people who are passionately committed to living out the values of God's word and looking forward to the new creation – that is a plan worthy of God himself.

2....and I have a nightmare

But you and I have also endured the nightmare of dreadful services, deadly meetings, bitter power struggles and lingering hurts. It is easy to agree with our savage critic Friedrich Nietzsche, that 'They would have to sing better songs to make me believe in their Redeemer; his disciples would have to look more redeemed!'.¹² Those charged with teaching truth have spread lies, those charged with sharing ministry have hoarded it, the broken have stayed broken and – worst of all – the lost have stayed lost.

Some of us share responsibility for that nightmare. If a church is not functioning properly, and we are that church's leadership, we know where to begin to place the blame. Repeated surveys report that church is boring, irrelevant and bigoted, and that Christians yearn for what C. S. Lewis called 'Deep Church': passionately God-honouring, intimate, truthful, connected around the world and across the centuries.¹³

We can address all those things if we truly want to, but cheap solutions are as flawed as the problems themselves. Some have insisted on staying comfortably boring because change is painful – and then hinted that those who do adapt have trivialized the faith. A growing church *must be* a compromised church. Other churches try to make God interesting by making church entertaining, or intellectually relevant, or spiritual, and so the space is filled with lights and smoke machines, or is dark and candlelit, or is empty and Zen-cool – but the Bible is never opened and humbly taught. And so the church remains ignorant about itself.

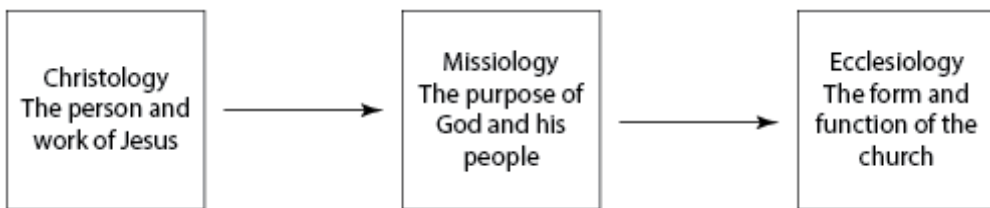
That is critical. William Gladstone, British prime minister under Queen Victoria, said of his evangelical youth, 'I had been brought up with no notion of the Church as the Church or body of Christ'.¹⁴ He was not the first or last to move to a different tradition of the church because of Evangelical silence on this theme, and was certainly not the last to complain about it.

3. The task

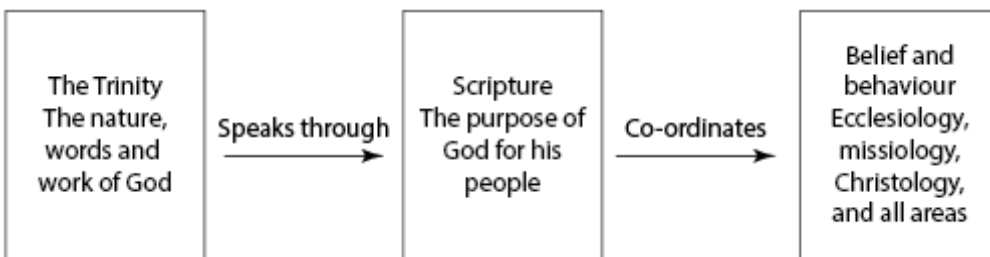
This series studies themes from the central biblical passages which bear upon them, for individual Christians, study groups, a leadership team, or the pastor preparing a sermon. Different churches must apply what they learn in different ways, but God wrote the Bible with your church in mind, and so this book contains an 'Action and Study Guide', to encourage your

leaders in obedient practice.

But we need to ask whether ‘church’ is the right place to start. Many contemporary writers assume a different perspective, which is that because God is a missionary God, we should begin with his mission, and let our doctrine and practice of the church follow. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch have argued strongly that we think as in the following diagram.¹⁵



This is attractive in many ways, and I share much of that passion. But two aspects trouble me. First, Frost and Hirsch are right that God is a missionary God; but he is simultaneously a Trinity of love, expressed in assembling his saved people around him. Since God is not at war with himself, mission and church are not competing for primacy.¹⁶ Secondly, where does the Bible fit? How are we to find out the right content of those three boxes? I suggest an alternative might be:



This diagram privileges one God speaking through the Bible, producing a coordinated result among believers. So a biblical theology of mission should shape the form and function of the church – and in the same way a biblical theology of church should shape the form and function of mission.¹⁷ For instance, we can say that mission is temporary, but church is eternal. Or, mission is a means, not an end, but church is both means and end. To rephrase John Piper, mission only exists because church doesn't.¹⁸ God coordinates his one truth, so getting one aspect right means getting the others right as well – provided we sit humbly under his word.

4. The plan

God is eternally and infinitely wise, so every doctrine is endless, and interacts with all others ceaselessly. There are almost one hundred biblical images of the church,¹⁹ feeding into the doctrinal questions of the past. And the doctrine of the church is not academic: pastors who lead churches, and the churches they lead, need what the Bible says about who they are and what they are to do. And differing publications, conferences, blogs and websites aim to equip pastors to be better at their roles (preachers, leaders, pioneers, prophets, managers, visionaries...), and to equip church members to exercise their ministries (gifts, callings, graces, discipleship...) in their particular kind of church (emerging, emergent, fresh expression, body-life, paleo-orthodox – you get the idea). Every debate in the church touches on some aspect of the doctrine of the church, yet any study has to draw the line somewhere.

One pastor advised me, ‘Whatever you talk about most is your gospel.’ And a scholar said, ‘Students don’t get what you teach, they catch your enthusiasms.’ So we need to agree at the start, that however much we talk about it, and however highly we esteem it, the church is not the gospel. It may be evidence, proof, plausibility, manifestation, physical or cultural expression of the gospel, but it is not the gospel.²⁰ So ‘The Message of the Church’, means, or at least I am going to take it to mean, that first, the church has a message, which is that God has saved his people through Christ; second, that the church is the created and saved result of that message, we are a ‘creature of the Word’ as Luther famously put it;²¹ and finally the church is a message, which is that God has saved broken people like us, and by belonging to his people we are trying to respond to him in the ways he requires. Theologically, believing comes first, because we cannot be members of Christ’s saved people except by faith, but many people encounter the reality of God’s new community (belonging on a human level) before they have saving faith and living discipleship (believing and belonging on a supernatural level, leading to behaving).

This study describes the main contours of the Bible’s teaching about the church. Sometimes there is a tight focus,

occasionally we move around to establish patterns. When choosing 'key' passages, the alternatives are usually footnoted. And on some debates I have had to say 'here is a problem, and you may find these books helpful'.²² I have used three principal translations: the ESV, the Holman Christian Standard Bible and the NIV (2011 1st ed.), although other translations appear occasionally as well.

God's plan for his church should give every congregation its purpose and direction. God said to Moses, 'Assemble the people before me, to hear my words, so that they may learn to revere me.'²³ And our prayer and praises echo back: 'Let the assembled peoples gather round you, while you sit enthroned over them on high.'²⁴

Ephesians

2. The church from eternity to Eden

To begin to understand the church we need a well-read Bible, and a long timescale. The word ‘church’ can be quite loose,^[25] but the biblical equivalent is precise. It did not suddenly appear from nowhere at Pentecost, or in Jesus’ teaching about ‘my church’. God had successively shaped his people through the Old Testament plotline, and the Hebrew word *qāhāl*, ‘assembly’, repeatedly described his solemn gathering of those people; above all, it summarized the Sinai meeting and anticipated a future gathering from exile.^[26] In its Greek translation, *ekklēsia*, it therefore became the term Christians reached for to describe their meetings, which were the fulfilment of those promises. But ‘church’ did not really start at Sinai, nor even with sinless people enjoying God’s presence in Eden.^[27] We must travel into eternity, where God drew his plans, examined the cost, and determined that his church would be his treasure. Ephesians is the book to take us there.

Many early copies of Ephesians have left the destination blank, and perhaps Paul intended his letter to have a wide readership; yet this letter to no-church-in-particular has ‘church’ as its unifying theme. In it, Paul four times describes ‘church’ in the most dazzling language, exploring his vision of its heavenly aspect, which is sometimes called the ‘cosmic’ or ‘invisible’ church. Those four references will give this chapter its structure, and along the way we shall pause to admire Paul’s images of the relationship between Christ and his church. Keep in mind, though, that in among those images and metaphors, ‘church’ stands out because it alone is not a metaphor: the word means what it says, ‘a gathering’.

Paul’s thinking in Ephesians stretches from before the creation of the world (1:4) until when the times will have reached their fulfilment (1:10), and reaches from the lower, earthly realms (4:9) up into the heavenly realms (1:3), and then even higher than all the heavens (4:10). He is painting on a vast canvas, but like all great artists, he relates everything to his one central subject: the Lord Jesus Christ.^[28] Nineteen times Paul says we are in Christ,^[29] three times that we are with Christ (2:5, 6, 20); everything exists under Christ (1:10), and we relate to God through Christ (1:5). Our actions show our reverence for Christ (5:21) and we should live and love as Christ did, and does (5:2, 25, 29). Otherwise, we are separate from Christ (2:12).

With Christ established as the dramatic centre, Paul can afford to direct our gaze elsewhere. Why did God launch this extraordinary salvation plan? *For the church* (1:22).^[30] How will he display his wisdom to his enemies? *Through the church* (3:10). Where is his glory to be found? *In the church* (3:21). Where is his love experienced? When Christians love each other *as Christ does the church* (5:29). Those are the four phrases about the church for us to study.

1. God’s power was exerted for the church (1:1–23)

Paul’s opening sentence contains over two hundred words, so to anchor us, he repeats that Christ is the consistent centre of God’s action: God *blessed us in Christ* (1:3), and *predestined us... through Christ* (1:5), by *making known to us* his plans that he purposed *in Christ* (1:9). He also emphasizes our response: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places* (1:3).^[31] God has *blessed us* in and through Christ, so we bless him. We can follow the trail of Paul’s logic by asking questions.

a. What has God done? Gathered his people

God *chose* (1:4) and *predestined us* (1:5) from eternity.^[32] *to be holy and blameless before him* (1:4) for eternity; in the present he applies Christ’s death to his chosen people, in *redemption and forgiveness* (1:7) Those combined benefits are *the gospel of salvation* (1:13): *In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory* (1:13–14).

Now, although each of us have *heard and believed* individually, at that point we became one of God’s people: so in that sentence Paul’s words *you and your*, like *our and we*, are all plural. God’s people are the visible result of his *guarantee* that Jesus’ work was effective, his reign is secure, his Spirit is given, and his word can be trusted for *our* (joint) *inheritance*. God’s eternal plan was to have a chosen, redeemed, forgiven people gathered around him, for ever. That heavenly gathering of his people, is his heavenly church.

b. When was this planned? Before creation

God’s time-frame begins *before the foundation of the world* (1:4), moves through our appropriation of Christ’s death, when we have *redemption* (1:7), and climaxes in his *plan for the fullness of time* (1:10), which is *to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth* (1:10). So today every conversion, every church plant, every prayer and every act of mercy, is *according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will* (1:11). God’s eternal plan for the world was always that Jesus should rule for ever.

c. Where was this achieved? In the heavenly places

The heavenly places (1:3) are the supernatural power-rooms where God has his throne – where too are the malicious

forces which enslave and blind people. Paul returns to those shortly, but notice that in this decisive spiritual battleground, God has already won his victory *when he raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come* (1:20–22). The *heavenly places* are the most important place to be blessed, and God in his loving wisdom has done that.

d. Who has done this? Father, Son and Holy Spirit

When Paul writes ‘God’ he usually means *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (1:3). Throughout the Old Testament, *Lord* is God’s personal name.^[33] but Paul uses it for *Jesus Christ, our Lord*. Furthermore, the one who brings us to believe in God, to grow in our knowledge of him, to pray to him and to live in a way that pleases him, is *the promised Holy Spirit* (1:13–14). Only God is *holy* in himself, so the *Holy Spirit* is also fully, characteristically, God. In other words, the God who accomplished this plan is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no other God, and he has no other plan, or church. We are the beloved focus of this God’s purpose.

e. So who is the most important person in the cosmos? Christ

The Lord Jesus Christ has no rival. He is enthroned at his Father’s

right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. [The Father] put all things under [Jesus’] feet and gave him as head over all things (1:20–22).^[34]

No-one is excluded from his rule, nor can anyone ever supplement him, or replace him in his Father’s affection. So now comes the critical question.

f. Why has God done all this?

From one angle, God has done it for the reason he does anything: *to the praise of his glorious grace* (1:6). More precisely, there are now Jewish Christians *to the praise of his glory* (1:12) and Gentile Christians *to the praise of his glory* (1:14). Paul continues in verse 6, *to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed* (literally, ‘graced’) *us in the Beloved*.

But that does not fully capture Paul’s thought. Until now I have deleted three words from verse 22; replace them and there is a dizzying change of perspective: God raised Jesus

from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church (1:20–22).^[35]

Those words, *for the church*, govern each of the four acts of God in this passage. God raised Jesus *for the church*; he seated him at his right hand *for the church*; he placed all things under Jesus’ feet *for the church*; and appointed him head over everything *for the church*.^[36]

In many parts of the world Christians are insignificant, and church is ridiculed. Their future is apparently inevitable decline, with buildings emptying by the week, and the few remaining leaders becoming increasingly shrill or accommodating to keep people coming. Other parts of the world see Christians being murdered into extinction. But neither is the ultimate truth. God has not only organized the whole universe to establish his plan of making a church, and then engineered the path of history and the patterns of billions of individual human hearts, but he eternally purposed that his Son, *the Beloved* (1:6) should die to achieve that plan. And day by day, across the world, he applies it to those *he chose...in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him and predestined...for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will* (1:4–5). There is nothing in the whole of creation which has any significance outside of God’s plan *for the church*.

g. Pause and wonder

(i) The church is God’s inheritance

Paul longs for Christians to grasp *the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints* (1:18), and *inheritance* means that there is a glorious future yet to be entered. But although in verse 14 Paul talks of *our inheritance*, meaning all that Christ has won for us, here he means Christ’s *inheritance*, the final and complete gathering of his chosen people that he has won for himself. We are his prize.

(ii) The church are saints

Saints simply means ‘the holy people’, a holy God’s possession, who reflect his holy character.^[37] All Christians are saints (1:1, 18), because they are *holy and blameless in his sight* (1:4, NIV), and members of his perfect, heavenly people. As perfect as him.

(iii) The church is Christ’s body

In 1 Corinthians, Paul used ‘body’ language for the relationships within a single, local congregation.^[38] but here he

switches scale, and just as in Ephesians 'church' means not one, local assembly but the all-embracing cosmic one, so too *body* means not the local but the cosmic. This is all Christians seen from heaven's perspective. We are Christ's body that he rules and directs as he sees fit, for his own ends. Just as with the word 'church', though, 'body' cannot be used of anything other than either a local or a heavenly gathering.

Is Christ in some way incomplete without the church? The phrase *the fullness of him who fills all in all* (1:23) is complicated,^[39] but it surely cannot mean that. Such confusion might come from combining 'head' and 'body' into one image, not keeping them separate.^[40] Rather than think of the church as 'completing' Christ, we should think of his filling of the church with his presence, by his Spirit.

We certainly should not think the church as Christ's body in the sense that he cannot act without us, or is indistinguishable from us. Catholic and Orthodox theology has often applied the doctrine of the incarnation to the church as Christ's body, and in such thinking, the church continues Christ's incarnation. Liberal theology, both Catholic and Protestant, can speak similarly, but there the incarnation is a metaphor, as true for us as it was for Jesus. Both produce a 'high' ecclesiology, but Mark Saucy has shown that both are confusing and dangerous.^[41] Taking the descriptions of Christ as prophet, priest and king, he insists that none of those describes the church. Unlike Christ, the church is not a prophet of new truth but merely a witness; not the sacrifice for others, but the sinful recipient of his work; not the King, but rather his willing subject. Saucy argues that the alleged 'high' view of the church actually replaces Christ, because only one may be the prophet, priest and king, and if it is to be the church, it cannot be Christ.

That warning is helpful, because some evangelical churches also use those three terms to describe their predominant character: some are prophetic, teaching-based churches; some kingdom-based, justice churches; some priestly, experience-rich churches. If we do that, we should take care to insist, first, that such characteristics are only ever the pale counterpart of Christ's work, second, that Christ holds those three together so we should not dare choose between them, and third, that they are at best a doctrinal summary of several of Christ's offices, never a direct, complete biblical model of church. We are certainly not taught to see church leaders as prophets, priests or kings.

Christ's incarnation was and remains a physical reality, so language about the church being Christ's body is metaphorical, just like our being the vine, the bride, the stones, sheep and so on. That does not mean it is not true, but that we should not push it beyond its intended limits. We are Christ's flock, but that does not mean we have wool and bleat. Similarly, we are Christ's body, but we have not replaced or completed him.

I am therefore uneasy about saying that a church has an 'incarnational' mission, even though the idea has rightly challenged Christians to be compassionate in potentially dangerous situations. The New Testament uses a number of arguments to provoke us to act compassionately, but the similarity between the incarnate Christ and the church as the body of Christ is not one. Equally, the New Testament has a number of conclusions about the church being the body of Christ, but social action is not one. The uniqueness of Christ's incarnation, and its glorious enthronement in heaven today, is a treasure too easily lost.^[42] We are dependent on Christ's care, exercised from his heavenly throne, *for the church*.

Equally, compassion is too important to build on flimsy exegesis.^[43]

2. God's wisdom is demonstrated through the church (2:1 – 3:13)

In the second main section of Ephesians, Paul says that God's intent was that that *through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord* (3:10–11). God's eternal plan has an outworking now. Again, asking questions shows Paul's thinking.

a. How is God's manifold wisdom displayed? Christian unity

The fundamental human division lies between Jew and Gentile. Addressing Gentiles like me, Paul says that *you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient* (2:1–2, NIV). Remember before you became a Christian, and remember that at that time *you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world* (2:12, NIV). We were Christless, homeless, friendless, hopeless and Godless.

Not that Jews were in any better condition. As Paul points out, *we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind* (2:3). Jews were, as regards salvation, no better off than the Gentiles, except that God had covenanted he would save them. God made no similar covenant with Gentiles.

But here is the wonder of Christ's work:

Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called 'uncircumcised' by those who call themselves 'the circumcision' (which is done in the body by human hands) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (2:11–13, NIV).

God has permitted Gentiles to enter into the blessings which he promised to Israel. In fact, this was what God had eternally planned, and Abraham had been circumcised for this very reason.^[44]

This was Paul's concern as a *prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles* (3:1). He now knew God's age-long plan, and our joint place in it. *This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel* (3:6). No longer stateless, but heirs. No longer hopeless, but sharing in the same promise. No longer Christless and Godless, but in Christ. No longer friendless strangers, but heirs together, members together, sharers together.^[45] Christ came and *preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God* (2:17–19).

Obviously this insight treats racism with contempt. It must make us passionate for Jews and Gentiles both to become believers. But first, we must pause to adore God's wisdom, that his promises to one man eventually blessed every nation, and in his great mercy, those to whom he has made absolutely no covenant promise at all become his people. *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved* (2:4–5). God owed us nothing, yet he saved us.

b. Before whom is God's manifold wisdom displayed? The heavenly rulers

Now hear the wonder in Paul's voice as he reveals what the church has to do with this.

To me...this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord (3:8–11).

The *rulers and authorities* are those personal forces in the heavenly realms, most likely the malevolent ones led by Satan, the *prince of the power of the air* (2:2). Paul calls them later, *the rulers,...the authorities,...the cosmic powers over this present darkness,...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (6:12).

Here is Paul's extraordinary thought. The mere existence of the church demonstrates that Christ has been victorious and is enthroned. The mere existence of a Gentile believer as a full member of God's people displays God's wisdom, and the malevolent beings who hate and defy God are forced to see the evidence of his might and their destruction every time they see the church. Which is permanently before their eyes, because they are *in the heavenly places* (6:12) where God has seated Christ *at his right hand in the heavenly places, and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus* (1:20; 2:6). How wonderful that *through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places* (3:10).

c. Pause and wonder

(i) The church as a temple

When Paul said we are together becoming a *holy temple*, he brought a central Old Testament motif through Christ to us. The Jerusalem temple, like the tabernacle before it, presented several truths simultaneously. Most obviously, it was the place where God dwelt, and its construction climaxed when his glory arrived, making the mountain, the city and the people his holy possession.^[46]

But it simultaneously taught separation. The constant sacrifices exposed the sin which God had not yet removed. Only priests could sacrifice, and only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies. There he encountered curtains embroidered like a garden and statues of two cherubim, reminders that glorious as the temple was, the way back to Eden was barred.

The temple also demarcated Israel. Solomon prayed that Gentiles would be able to pray towards, but not in, the temple.^[47] Ezekiel later reported God's revulsion that Israel had not noticed their privileged status:

Thus says the Lord GOD: O house of Israel, enough of all your abominations, in admitting foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, to be in my sanctuary, profaning my temple...Thus says the Lord GOD: No foreigner, uncircumcised in heart and flesh, of all the foreigners who are among the people of Israel, shall enter my sanctuary.^[48]

That corruption led God to withdraw, and Ezekiel's opening describes the terrifying reversal of God's arrival. His judgment was that the temple should be destroyed, desecrated by the presence of *foreigners*.^[49] But God promised a new temple, with sin and guilt removed, and all nations welcomed. Isaiah prophesied that the *destroying* Gentile armies would be removed, and 'there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean'.^[50] Instead, believing Gentiles would be welcomed:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these I will bring to my holy mountain,

and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples. ⁵¹

So calling the church a *temple* says we are what the prophets foretold, ⁵² and the answer to Solomon's prayers. God is truly among us. That is how the inclusion of the Gentiles in the salvation plan for Jews demonstrates God's wisdom.

(ii) The church as a building

Paul's other image in this section is a growing *building*, ⁵³ with the apostles and prophets as the *foundation*, and Jesus the *cornerstone* (2:21). ⁵⁴

In most industrialized countries, large buildings go up with dizzying speed, but once they took decades or even generations to complete, and the image of a building 'growing' would have been entirely natural. More importantly, the picture of a new, expanding temple was another way of describing God's increasing reign over the nations, until 'the whole earth be filled with his glory'. ⁵⁵ The church is a building which grows because God's glory is among us, and attracts his people; it grows *from Christ* our Lord (4:16) and *to Christ* our goal (4:15). It is ironic that in common use 'church' means the very kind of physical building which cannot grow at all.

3. God's glory is shared in the church (3:14–21)

We have so far explored two of Paul's four sections about the church in Ephesians, and they have both been quite long and complex. The other two are much briefer. This third section about the church is a prayer. If the church is God's temple, then we can see why he prays that *Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith* and that *we may be filled with all the fullness of God* (3:17, 19). That is another way of saying that God's infinite and eternal glory dwells in us, and Paul prays that *we may comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge* (3:18–19). He dwells in us, and we dwell in him. We are that temple which God promised to Solomon.

This prayer is that God will *strengthen us with power*, and that we may *have strength* to grasp all that he has done, is doing and will do in and for the church. The church has *his power...at work within us* (3:20), and the result of God's powerful action will be the presence of his *glory in the church and in Christ Jesus...for ever* (3:21). This is not a day to be pessimistic about the church.

But if we have the wrong idea of God's glory and power being in and among us, then we will turn up to church with quite the wrong expectations, and we shall become pessimistic and cynical very quickly. Paul does not mean that churches deserve any kind of necessary visible success because of this. Instead, God's glory is shown as we slowly become more like Jesus, at church, and therefore at home and at work (5:15 – 6:9).

a. Pause and wonder: the church as God's household

The idea of the church as a *family* is perhaps so familiar to us, it is a shock to realize that 3:15 is the only time Paul uses the *family* concept, and he is not even referring to the church. God is the *Father*, and there is wordplay between 'Father' (*pater*) and 'family' (*patria*) to keep in mind. But the word *patria* means more properly *line* or *people*. ⁵⁶ It is a broad word, and the majority of commentators and Bible translations prefer something like, *from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name*, referring to every possible grouping and allegiance. God is the supreme *Father* over every other. We cannot take *family* as a particular synonym for the church here, and the phrase 'the church family' probably ought to be played down. ⁵⁷

Instead the images from 2:19–22 show the privileges of being *members of the household of God*. Six words share the Greek word *oikos* (*house*). Gentile believers are no longer *aliens* (*paroikoi*) but *members of the household* (*oikeioi*), *built on* (*epoikodomēthentes*) a sure foundation, where the *building*. ⁵⁸ (*oikodomē*) is being *built together* (*synoikodomeisthe*) to become a *dwelling* (*katoikētērion*). The emphasis falls on the privilege of being allowed to belong to God when we are, by nature, foreigners with no claim on him.

It has its roots in the idea that God's *house* is another way of describing his global reign. At the precise moment that David began to plan a temple (a *house*) for God, God promised:

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house (Gk, *oikodomēsei*) for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ⁵⁹

That is the *house* God is building today.

4. God's love is expressed between Christ and the church (5:22–33)

Having described God's power exerted *for the church*, his wisdom demonstrated *through the church*, and his glory

displayed *in the church*, Paul's fourth and final insight is the relationship between Christ *and the church*, modelled by the way a husband loves his wife *as Christ loved the church* (5:25).

Notice the past tense. Obviously Christ *loves us*,^[60] but Paul insists twice in Ephesians that Christ *loved* us, and in almost identical words, he means on the cross (5:2, 25). On that second occasion, Paul is moving through his instructions to various groups in the church, and it looks initially as though he is digressing from marriage to talk about the church. A closer look, though, reveals that for him marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship with the church, not the other way round. That order is important. If Christ loved the church as a bridegroom loves his bride, that would open up areas of delight, affection and romance. But if bridegrooms love their brides as Christ loved the church when he died for it, that opens up areas of loving sacrifice. Similarly if brides are to love their husbands as they love Christ, that infuses romantic love with something quite different.

Above all, as a marriage, this is a covenanted unity that Christ will not break. Paul takes the most intimate relationship between a husband and wife, and says, that is how closely Christ has become one with us. In an almost shockingly graphic way he takes the Genesis pattern for marriage and transforms it: *'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'* *This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church* (5:31–32). The *mystery* is that physical union in marriage shows how closely bonded we are with Christ. That great phrase, *in Christ*, could not be more clearly explained, because we have become *one flesh* with Christ, and we are *members of the same body* (3:6; 4:25; 5:30). Listen again to the care that Christ shows us: *In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body* (5:28–30). We are so closely identified with Christ, that in caring for us it is almost as though he is caring for himself.

a. Pause and wonder

(i) The church as a bride

In the Old Testament marriage described God's persistent faithfulness, despite his people's unfaithfulness.^[61] So sin is *adultery*.^[62] Jesus described himself as a bridegroom planning his wedding,^[63] and Paul's concern for the doctrinal purity of the Corinthians was because he 'betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ'.^[64]

Paul uses these ideas here, without using 'wife' or 'bride' for the church. This is the work of Christ portrayed as a wedding ceremony:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (5:25–27).

Normally it is the family which takes pride in the bride's beauty on her wedding day. Here, though, it is Christ who has taken all that trouble, and showered on us not transient glamour, but a *radiant* beauty.^[65] We neither possessed nor deserved. Our perfection is not found in the rapture of a dazzled groom, nor the magic of make-up, but the straight gaze of a holy God who can say, because *Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her*, she is indeed *holy and without blemish*.

(ii) Christ as the church's head

Of all the descriptions of the church this is the one which causes most contemporary anxiety, because of the implications for the relationships of husbands and wives. It has generated enormous literature in which both sides have claimed victory several times.^[66] We need first to understand the concept as it relates to Christ and the church, and then to draw two lines of conclusion, one for marriage and a second for ministry.

Ephesians 1:22 combines three similar but quite distinct images: *And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.* We have seen that in Ephesians head refers to Christ's position of royal supremacy, but body is a separate expression of our intimate relationship of being one with him and each other.^[67] Feet draws on Psalm 8:

Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honour.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet.^[68]

The victory of God's king (*crowned, dominion*) is summarized by *all things under his feet* – as Ephesians says. Both *head* and *feet* are therefore political terms, both describing the position of the exalted Lord Jesus over the whole cosmos, for the church. The alternative proposed translation for *head, source*, cannot work here because the motif is of a victory won and enemies defeated. Christ's headship here is not a position which he occupies as the eternal creator, but one he was appointed to on the basis of his resurrection victory, over an already existing cosmos.^[69] Paul then transfers that idea to Christ's particular and loving headship over the church. He is our absolute Lord and Saviour, or Head, and our proper response to him is to *submit* (5:24).

It lies outside our study to explore what loving headship means for marriage, although Paul must mean that the husband is in some sense ‘in authority over’ his wife. That needs to be explored with cultural sensitivity – and above all with *love* – but I cannot see that the text will bend in any other direction. It might even be said to be a mark of how willing we are to *submit* to Christ that we accept this.

Second, we should notice that the term *head* is used for the Lord Jesus in his relation to the church, but for no-one else. Since the Lord Jesus is not an absent master but exercises his active headship by continually giving gifts to the church,^[70] it makes sense to keep that title for him alone. Evangelicals are unlikely to describe a pope or archbishop as the ‘head’ of their churches, but we should still be wary. For instance, in many debates over the respective roles of men and women in ministry,^[71] the issue is frequently described as a ‘headship’ issue – but that is to confuse categories. The relationship between Christ and the church is one of headship, and the marriage relationship is like that. But the relationship between a pastor and a congregation is *not* like that, because if it were it would imply that the pastor has replaced the Lord Jesus. No, the pastor works under the active and present headship of the Lord Jesus Christ.^[72]

5. The church, both local and cosmic

‘Church’ means ‘gathering’, and in Ephesians we have seen it means all Christians in permanent heavenly assembly, around the eternally enthroned Jesus. You might be reading this at home, or during your lunch break, but at this moment you are, as always, a member of that heavenly gathering. You are in cosmic church. So, why bother about the local church you turn up to?

Paul does not explain exactly how, but our ‘local gatherings...are earthly manifestations of that heavenly gathering around the risen Christ’.^[73] When a city or province contained more than one gathering, the New Testament always uses the plural, churches of Galatia, churches in Syria and Cilicia, churches of Asia, churches of Macedonia, churches of Judea, even though it would never talk of Christ having ‘brides’, ‘flocks’, ‘temples’ or ‘peoples’.^[74] To use the singular word ‘church’ for something that never met would stretch the word impossibly. In English, to use the word ‘gathering’ for something that never ‘gathered’ would be equally odd.

It is worth grasping this at the outset, because we must let the Bible teach us how to speak. Consider the unconverted Paul’s determination:

And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. Devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.^[75]

The impact of Paul’s destruction shows it was the undoing of a meeting: ‘they were all *scattered*...Now those who were *scattered* went about preaching the word.’

That explains the only apparent exception. Once only, Luke uses the singular phrase ‘the church’ to describe what was happening in several locations: ‘So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied’.^[76] The key is that this occurs when a concerned reader would wonder what had happened to the Jerusalem ‘gathering’ which Paul had *scattered* all around the countryside? Luke’s answer is ‘the church’ (that is, that very Jerusalem ‘gathering’, which Paul had ‘scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria’) ‘had peace’ and ‘it multiplied’. Luke consistently uses ‘church’ to describe a local meeting, even though, on this unusual occasion, it was scattered. It immediately ‘multiplied’ – became plural.

So the New Testament never used ‘church’ to describe all earthly believers, except in those very early days when they all met together and none had died. It was not used for all the Christians in one city who never met all together.^[77] It is not a synonym for ‘the people of God’. It was certainly never used to describe a sub-group of believers, as when we describe denominations as ‘churches’. There are biblical words for ties between local churches, but ‘church’ is not one of them. And to use ‘church’ for a denomination places a wrong emphasis on such structures, and encourages us to misread and overlay them. Similarly, it is unhelpful to use ‘church’ to mean all living Christians, as when the phrase ‘the church visible’ contrasts with ‘the church invisible’. But the ‘church invisible’ is the cosmic church we have seen in Ephesians, and it includes us. The ‘church visible’ is where that appears as a meeting of believers.

One common element that all churches share today is the historic creeds: the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed and the much longer Athanasian Creed. Together, they teach that the church is ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’, and all four of those terms have been defined in Ephesians. The church’s unity is our membership of one body under one head; the church’s holiness comes from being God’s prized possession; the church’s catholicity (meaning, its variety) is in the bridging of the Jew/Gentile division; and the church’s apostolicity is our foundation, from which we cannot shift, in this apostolic teaching (2:20). This is the church which exists *to the praise of his glorious grace* (1:6).

Additional note: The church and the Trinity

Some chapters have ‘Additional Notes’ at the end. These address issues relevant to many, but not all, readers, and this one addresses the relationship between the church and the Trinity.

Contemporary theologians normally begin their theology of the church with a theology of the Trinity, tracing God's eternally loving community onto ours. Kevin Giles writes that the Trinity is the 'model on which ecclesiology should be formulated. On this premise, the inner life of the divine Trinity provides a pattern, a model, an echo, or an icon of the Christian communal existence in the world'.^[78] This is part of a much larger renewal of the doctrine of the Trinity, which lies outside our scope,^[79] although it is surprisingly hard to find one clear biblical passage which makes Giles' precise point and which could have formed a chapter for this book. Perhaps, although theologians present it as a starting point, they might be better to present it as a conclusion. But one aspect of that debate does concern us, and is one which Ephesians addresses.

Part of the renewal of Trinitarian doctrine has been to describe the internal life of the Trinity. Stanley Grenz puts it well: 'God's triune nature means that God is social or relational – God is the "social Trinity"'. And for this reason, we can say that God is "community". God is the community of the Father, Son and Spirit, who enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship.'^[80] And this takes us to the heart of one of the hottest debates of today – what doctrine of the Trinity do we map onto the church?

Much contemporary writing insists that within the Trinity there is absolutely no hierarchy between the three persons, and therefore there should be no hierarchy within any church. Giles insists, 'Nothing in scripture indicates that the Father-Son-Spirit are eternally hierarchically ordered in being, work/function, or authority'.^[81] and more broadly, 'Historic orthodoxy has never accepted hierarchical ordering in the Trinity'.^[82] Gilbert Bilezikian agrees: 'The notion of such a relationship of submission in the Godhead is completely foreign to Scripture. Indeed, its content teaches exactly the opposite.'^[83] The words 'hierarchy' and 'submission' mean that this obviously spills into our leadership and gender debates, and Frank Viola agrees: 'The Trinity is the paradigm informing us on how the church should function. It shows us that the church is a loving, egalitarian, reciprocal, cooperative, non-hierarchical community.'^[84] Again, 'Within this divine dance of love, there exists no hierarchy. There exists no control. There exists no authoritarianism. There exists no conflict of interests. Instead there's mutual love, mutual fellowship, and mutual subjection.'^[85]

These authors together insist that the biblical language of Jesus' obedience applies only to his incarnate, historic nature. Addressing several of those passages, Viola says they 'refer to [Jesus'] temporal relationship as a human being who voluntarily submitted Himself to His Father's will. In the Godhead, the Father and the son experience communality and mutual submission through the Spirit'.^[86]

The common allegation is clear: contemporary Christians who claim that the Bible teaches a hierarchy within the Trinity which should be modelled onto the church, particularly but not only in male/female roles, have imposed that on the Trinity. Giles even goes so far as to identify that teaching as a new version of an ancient heresy that the creeds were formulated to deny, that the Son is not as fully God as the Father.^[87]

Naturally this has been hotly denied, because the allegation that much contemporary evangelical thought is fundamentally heretical is a strong one. Steven Holmes has surveyed the field as thoroughly as Giles, and insists that it is the social, complementarian view which is the imposition.^[88] Although this debate is technical and difficult, it is obviously hugely important, and both scholars and pastors need to be informed.^[89]

Ephesians contributes by using a phrase which occurs in all three of the great creeds that every church affirms: the Father *raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms* (1:20). That phrase *at his right hand* is a widely used biblical description. In the Old Testament it describes a place of royal honour, favour, victory and power.^[90] Psalm 110:1 describes it as the place occupied by the coming, victorious Son of David:

The LORD said to my lord:
'Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Jesus himself anticipated that this would be the position he would occupy for eternity.^[91] So New Testament writers take up the idea, and either explicitly quoting Psalm 110 (which is the most frequently quoted psalm) or more generally using the thought, state that Jesus is, now and for ever 'at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven'.^[92]

What does this language mean? Commenting on Acts 2, David Peterson says it 'suggests that a king who rules in Jerusalem is the Lord's earthly vicegerent. God rules his people through his chosen representative (his "anointed")'.^[93] – 'vicegerent' means a monarch who reigns in the presence and under the authority of another, like Solomon who was crowned while David was still alive.^[94] Commenting on Hebrews 1:3, Peter O'Brien says Christ's 'enthronement "at the right hand of the divine Majesty" shows that the rank and rule of God the Father is not compromised in any way'.^[95] In other words, this image shows us that Christ's enthronement still places him, for eternity, as subordinate to the Father.

Notice too that this is not a reversible image: the Father is never seated at the Son's right hand. So Michael Horton concludes:

From his incarnation to his reign at the Father's right hand, Jesus is not only the Lord who became the servant, but the servant who is Lord and *continues even in this exalted state to serve his Father's will and his people's good.* From

eternity to eternity, he offers his 'Here I am' to the Father on behalf of those who have gone their own way. 96

That imagery is decisive for me. Yes, the Son is fully and eternally divine, from and for eternity, and yes, he is seated on and shares his Father's throne and glory. 97 But he is at his Father's right hand for eternity, and that is what is meant by the eternal subordination of the Son. We may map that onto the church.