This paper is an examination of ecclesiology as a theological [i.e., dogmatic] area of investigation through the aperture of a single image. This image arises from Scripture and in turn takes on constructive significance as one that can allow us to understand the church within the larger frame of reference of God’s mighty work of salvation. It can thereby also provide a standpoint from which to discern the entailments of that situated location within the history of redemption. Before introducing that image, perhaps something might be said about the current state of ecclesiological reflection in general. For the direction of the argument in this paper will run against the stream of much of contemporary ecclesiological convention.

There can be no doubt that ecclesiology has assumed a significant role in recent theological work within the past fifty years and its preeminence has only increased in the last two decades. From the Roman Catholic side, such attention of course precedes the recent half-decade and flows from the birth of modern Roman Catholic ecclesiology in the work of Johann Adam Möhler and the Tübingen school to the important labor by the theologians of ressourcement prefiguring the Second Vatican Council.¹ Most important of course are that Council’s documents themselves, with none so significant as Lumen Gentium, documents that have given impetus to a

¹ For Möhler and the Tübingen school, see Michael J. Himes, Ongoing Incarnation: Johann Adam Möhler and the Beginnings of Modern Ecclesiology (New York: Herder & Herder, 1997). For the theologians of ressourcement, see especially the works of Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac.
wealth of ecclesiological literature and debate as to their meaning, coherence, implication, and continuity with past Catholic teaching. More recently, ecclesiology has become the touchstone for much work in Protestant theology as well, particularly among those affiliated with what have come to be known, however broadly or imprecisely, as a high-church form of Lutheranism and Anglicanism designated as evangelical catholic, as well as within that ill-defined school known as postliberalism. One can think here of the ecclesiocentrism of such persons as Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten as representatives of the former movement, and George Lindbeck and Stanley Hauerwas as representatives of the latter one.

More pertinent than these examples taken singly, however, is the fact that in much of contemporary Protestant theology the topic of ecclesiology has extended beyond its traditional and relatively bounded range of questions and in turn has swallowed up much of the dogmatic corpus growing into a kind of meta-doctrine. In light of such developments, Kevin Vanhoozer has described the theological landscape as one in which ecclesiology has become for many “first theology.” As he writes: “The doctrine of the church has, in the last decade or so, moved to the forefront of

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theological research and writing, primarily among non-evangelicals — so much so that ecclesiology has effectively displaced the doctrine of revelation as ‘first theology.’” Indeed, one could argue that the epistemological concerns reaching back behind Descartes to the post-Reformation period, concerns which in time prioritized the doctrine of revelation and its attendant questions of authority, scripture, and magisterium, have in more recent decades given way to linguistic, sociological, and now ethnographic concerns resulting in the rise of a theology which takes its primary task to be the thick description and examination of the narratives, rituals, and practices of the church. One might be forgiven by summarizing this shift as one from a predominance of concern with the questions of Descartes and Kant to the questions of Wittgenstein and MacIntyre.

Yet whatever gains may have accrued in such a shift, and they truly need to be acknowledged, a lingering question remains. Does replacing a doctrine made foundational due to an epistemological crisis of authority with one of Christian communal self-description really lead to a revitalization of theology itself? A movement from modern to postmodern sensibilities (broadly defined) may alleviate the tensions of the first but introduce new ones, and though foundationalism may rightly be set aside, one may legitimately ask if communitarianism is an adequate replacement as the linchpin and fulcrum for theological work. One need not deny that placing revelation as a self-standing and preliminary doctrine at the head of, rather than embedded within, the task of dogmatic description created numerous excrescences particularly witnessed in certain discussions of Scripture (for Protestants) and the teaching office (for Roman Catholics). Nor need one deny that the attempt by Schleiermacher to ground theology in the religious consciousness of

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5 With respect to Scripture, one can witness such foundationalist outgrowths in the inerrancy theories of Charles Hodge and the Princeton school, preceded in certain arguments of Protestant orthodoxy, and simplified and echoed in populist if unnuanced apologetics and polemics of fundamentalism.
the subject was an even greater mistake and in time degenerated from his brilliant if flawed confessional program of mediation to the ensuing problems of individualism and unconstrained subjectivity shorn from all confessional guidance, as well as to the evisceration of doctrinal substance and content characterizing his lesser successors. Yet one wonders if an adequate cure has been found for such a disease simply by trading the community for the individual as the focus and starting point of theological explication. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that in recent years the doctrine of the church has overtaken discussions of revelation on one side and religious subjectivity on the other as the center of the theological enterprise for many.

As already intimated, this substitution may introduce its own problems. Indeed, it may be a sign that the dogmatic ship has righted an epistemological lilt with an ecclesial overcorrection and still remains precariously out of kilter. Warnings of such dangerous lurching have indeed been sounded. Paul Zahl has stated that in his judgment “any period of Christian history for which ecclesiology and polity are the driving issues is decadent by definition.”6 Less provocative but no less forceful is Vanhoozer’s own conclusive judgment: “Ecclesiology cannot be first theology because the church enjoys only the first fruits of its salvation. As an eschatological reality, it is indeed already in union with Christ, but not yet completely so. The visible unity of the church is something for which we work and hope.”7 In this essay I want to examine these themes that Vanhoozer introduces – the church as an eschatological reality which he states is united with Christ, but, in his words, “not

yet completely so.” Moreover, I want to reflect upon why ecclesiology can only be misshapen when it becomes the center of the dogmatic corpus, and I want to give some encouragement to right the ship and strive for a more even keel. What is provided here is but an appeal for a change of direction, a proposal for rethinking ecclesiological reflection itself by thinking through the implications of starting with the simple admission that the church is a pilgrim community, a description that finds precedence in all strands of Western Christianity – Roman Catholic, magisterial Protestant, and the Free Church – and thus may itself hold some ecumenical promise.

To state that the church is a pilgrim people should be seen as in alignment with a well-attested theme in the biblical witness but should not be understood simply or even primarily under the rubrics of image or metaphor, nor even of model or type. Certainly the image of pilgrimage from one land to another permeates the canonical witness. Abraham is called from his home to a new one, and his descendants inherit that call as they are led from Egypt to the promised land. Their descendants are marked by a movement to an exiled existence and then in time a return to their Judean home. The New Testament witnesses can appeal to this imagery in explicating the church’s earthly existence as the fulfillment of these Old Testament precedents and types, and the author of Hebrews provides the quintessential summation of this transitory identity when he writes that as pilgrims, the Old Testament predecessors of faith were “strangers and foreigners on the earth” seeking a “homeland,” a “better country” (Heb. 11:13-14). Remarkable here is that the movement is no longer seen as that from one place to another upon the earth, but is now portrayed as one from earth to heaven. They are exiles not in Babylon awaiting a return to Jerusalem, but exiles upon the earth looking for a heavenly city. Their memory is evoked by the writer of Hebrews for the purpose of spurring on the church itself, so that those of the church, being “surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” might as pilgrims themselves in this world “lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,” and “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” as they look to Jesus, “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2).
is, quite simply, a pilgrimage of a different order entirely from those portrayed in the Old Testament. The author of 1 Peter can echo this theme of the church when he identifies the recipients of his letter as those who are “aliens and exiles in the world” (1 Pet. 2:11). Thus the church itself is a *communio viatorum*, a church on the way.

One might take this image of the church as a pilgrim people simply as metaphor, and certainly such would appear appropriate at first glance. Metaphors speak of similarity in difference and are perhaps less nailed down than analogies while more evocative in nature. Yet to use the language of metaphor cannot exhaust what is truly being asserted when the church is described as a pilgrim people. Nor, however, can such a description be understood as one more model for the church. Indeed, to provide models for the church is in itself of limited value. Not only are such models purely idealized abstractions, and thus prone to the limitations of any typology, but for this very reason the actual churches of every branch of Christianity do not see themselves as being rightly represented by any one model. The issue is more problematic still, for a typology of models intrinsically focuses upon an implicit if reductive institutionalism, functionalism, or essentialism that treats the church simply as the embodiment of a particular form (the church as hierarchy), as the locus of a particular practice or activity (such as proclamation in the model of herald), or a reality captured by an essential if somewhat abstract concept (such as sacramental mystery). There is of course no little truth to the importance of such activities and conceptions, and thus the relative hermeneutic benefit of such models. Yet such abstract functionalism and essentialism can be more distorting than illuminating in understanding the church, and for the following reasons.

A typology of function and essence addresses the church primarily in terms of a self-contained institution or people, but in both cases as an independent entity that can be grasped simply by means of a comparative ecclesiology. A comparison of models

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thereby abstracts ecclesiology from its placement in the larger backdrop of the entire range of God’s salvific action as well as the corresponding larger dogmatic fabric, particularly one that is Trinitarian, Christological, pneumatological and eschatological in its determinations. With this in mind, ecclesiology must itself be located in a surrounding matrix of theological topics in order to be rightly balanced. In effect, the church must be understood not primarily in terms of models of institutions, functions, or essences, nor even of polity and practices. Before these ecclesiological questions are (necessarily) addressed, the church must first be understood in regard to its placement within the divine economy of salvation, and for this to be so its curious eschatological location and its specific and ordered relation to and distinction from Christ who is its head and the Spirit who calls it into existence must be apprehended and appreciated. Behind both relations lies the fundamental distinction between God and his creature.\(^9\) In sum, all ecclesiology must begin with attention to the particular temporal location of the church in the light of God’s eschatological kingdom, as well as the relations of the church to God’s action for its salvation through Christ and the Spirit who moves to inaugurate and bring to completion that kingdom. In short, the church must find its identity within the matrix of God’s marvelous work of salvation, and most immediately his work to reconcile the world to himself and bring it to its glorious redemption.

To say that the church is a pilgrim people is therefore not to propose yet one more biblical image as the preeminent one, nor even less one more model for the church or “blueprint ecclesiology,” to borrow the term of Nicholas Healy.\(^10\) It is, rather, to draw attention to the *placement* of the church within the time of God’s salvific

\(^9\) Webster, *Confessing God*, 163. He writes: “The ontological rule in ecclesiology is therefore that whatever conjunction there may be between God and his saints, it is comprehended within an ever-greater dissimilarity” (p. 171). For an argument akin to that which I am making here, see ibid., pp. 153-193. Elsewhere Webster can state: “The distinction between uncreated and created being is ecclesiologically foundational” (Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* [London/New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2012], p. 24.

action, and its *location* within a set of relations of that action, first to God, Christ, and Spirit, and then in turn to the world. To determine this location rightly is to go a far way toward understanding the church’s own proper identity, activity, and end.\textsuperscript{11} Yet what must be said above all is that to determine this location within God’s economy of salvation cannot be separated but indeed is intertwined with, even as it presupposes, a clear vision of the relation between God and his created and redeemed people, which itself is reflected in the relation between Christ and his earthly body and the Holy Spirit and his spiritual fellowship and temple. And it is indeed only then that the relation of the church and the world can be taken up and rightly understood and an evaluation of its form of life undertaken. In short, the horizontal relationship of church and world can only be properly understood and their identifies demarcated when the vertical relationship of God and his people, Christ and his earthly body, and the Spirit and his saints is accurately grasped and depicted.

To focus upon the church as a pilgrim people is therefore on this account not simply a cursory reflection upon a collection of pertinent biblical references to pilgrim imagery. It requires, rather, the explication of the church as a journeying people in its placement in the economy of God’s salvific time and in relation to that God who calls, sends, accompanies, and beckons this people. A large part of rightly understanding the church is comprised of determining its special temporal location, namely, in terms of eschatology, and grasping the ordering of its relations, and specifically those to the reality and activity of the triune God.

That the church is best judged in terms of this location and these relations leads to a number of important corollaries which can be unpacked when the pilgrim status of the church is taken with real seriousness and as fundamental to its life. The following theses and their exposition attempt to delineate the nature of the church in terms of its unique time and location.

\textsuperscript{11} These three are inseparable in actuality but can be somewhat conceptually distinguished for the purpose of teasing out different aspects of the church’s reality.
1. To speak of the church as a pilgrim people is to recognize its temporal location as that between Christ’s first and second advents. This time is rightly spoken of in the first and primary instance as the time of Christ’s ascended lordship, and secondly and derivatively as the time of the church’s witness.

To see the church as existing between Christ’s first and second advents signifies that it lives between the time of Christ’s ascension and that of his return. As such, it lives as it has been called into existence through the power of the promised Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and as it continues to be called together, constituted, and commissioned by its Lord through his Spirit. The church’s pilgrimage is neither initiated nor ended by its own determination, for it inaugurates neither Pentecost nor parousia. The destination is therefore, like the outset, not self-enacted, enabled, or achieved – the end of the pilgrim journey is marked not by a triumphal arrival by the church but the return of Christ in the clouds just as he departed (Acts 1:11; cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-18). That the church lives in this time between the times means that the time of the church is not an era of glorious fulfillment but of promise as the church lives between memory and expectation. Thus the relation of the church and the kingdom of God is not one of absolute contradiction nor of coterminus identity but of promise and fulfillment, wherein the church itself is a sign of the kingdom but not its completion.

To understand this temporal location between its divinely effected beginning and its divinely appointed end is to recognize that the church exists not as a continuation of Christ’s ministry but in, with, and under the continuing lordship of Christ’s own which he now exercises at the right hand of God. That Christ is seated at the Father’s right hand is both the sign and reality of the completion of his atoning work but is not to be taken as a state of passivity, as if at the ascension a baton had been passed to an active church that now extends and completes his ministry because it
has also assumed his authority. This time of the church does not mark the end of Christ’s own. That Christ continues to instruct, intercede for, and rule over the church and indeed the world with the singular and supreme authority given to him entails that the church’s own life and activity be articulated in the categories of reverent attention, receptive commemoration, and humble service. These dispositions and activities take their particular form precisely because they are a response to a wholly prevenient and perfect and thus completed and finished work, and one of an entirely different order and efficacy. It is only in this light that the church can then in its own appointed area and in its own circumscribed way, and indeed with its own qualified authority and liberating freedom, take up its divinely commissioned and correspondent task as a teaching church that intercedes for the world and that orders its own disciplined and indeed exemplary and ethical life. All of these tasks are themselves framed and shaped by the church’s prior act of response in praise and thanksgiving for the grace and gospel that grounds it, which is nothing more or less than its worship of the God who creates and saves, the One who made all things and makes all things new.

To rightly recognize the church’s placement in this particular time of Christ’s ministry is inseparable from the church acknowledging its Lord and its relation to him. Christ is the head of the church, ascended on high, yet joined to the church through the Holy Spirit. As such, Christ graciously joins the church to himself, but his activity is not dependent upon or exhausted by the church’s life. Such is not to denigrate the church but to remind it that his relation to it is one of freedom and lordship, while that of the church to him is one of obedience and service. Karl Barth articulates this state of affairs succinctly: “The ascension means not only...the transfer of a delegated, secondary power to the Church, but also the departure of the actual, primary holder of that power. It means that the eschatological limit set for

12 As Karl Barth wrote: “Christ’s bestowal of his power on his Church cannot be reasonably understood to mean that he had partially relinquished his own power, that in relation to the Church he had ceased to be wholly God.” Barth, Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928, trans. Louise P. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 293.
the Church becomes visible. The exaltation of the Head really means for the body a lowering, its demotion to a position of humility and waiting, and a definite limitation of the miracle of Pentecost.”¹³ For the church to truly know herself as existing in a state of such humility and waiting is nothing other than to understand her pilgrim existence.

2. To speak of the church as a pilgrim people entails that ecclesiology be understood as an exercise in the church’s proper self-understanding by means of a rightful appreciation and conception of the implications of Christ’s presence and absence during this time of his ascended lordship.

As already introduced, the church’s self-understanding is intricately interwoven and follows from a proper understanding not only of Christ’s cross and resurrection, but also the oft neglected matter of Christ’s ascension. That Christ is not only raised in body but ascended in body entails that it is mistaken to see his subjectivity and agency as raised and assumed without remainder into the church and its life, or his authority passed from him to the church as if his time and the church’s own were two consecutive eras marked by two differing authorities and salvific economies.¹⁴ Christ remains Lord even in his resurrection and ascension. He thereby remains over against the church and is not extended by or subsumed into its life. That he is Lord entails that his agency and subjectivity, his life and activity, his rule and reign, cannot be raised into and thus dissolved into the subjectivity of the church, its kerygmatic proclamation, its sacramental realities, its missional and ethical activity,

¹³ Barth, Theology and Church, p. 294.
¹⁴ The importance of Christ’s bodily ascension (and not only his resurrection) has been argued most powerfully in recent years by Douglas Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). One need not entirely follow Farrow’s own sacramental line of reasoning to appreciate the overarching cogency of his larger argument of the ascension’s neglected, yet central, place for Christ’s identity and ministry.
or its own story. Christ is raised into nothing else or other than his own singularly glorious and incomparable and inalienable and exalted life. And in that life, bearing the marks of his passion and sacrifice, he is raised first from death to life in Easter wonder and then to the glory of the Father’s right hand. In his state of ascension, there is no doubt that Christ fulfills his promise always to be with the church. But there also can be no question that this promise to the church can be fulfilled only because Christ stands over, and over against, it.

Yet it is precisely this over-againstness that entails not only the comfort but also the crisis of the church, and such must be acknowledged without despair or embarrassment. Here in the church’s cry of maranatha the tension between Christ’s bodily absence and his promised presence must be felt with full force (1 Cor. 16:22).

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15 This particularity not only of incarnation and revelation, but also of resurrection and ascension, marks the dividing line between the church’s historic confession and the demythologization, and thus relativization, of Christ’s unique identity in modernity, though one can find such moves predating the modern period. Nor should it surprise us that it is during this period that the bodily resurrection of Christ in his unique identity set over against the church fades into the far horizon until it disappears. That Christ is neither raised nor subsumed into the church and its consciousness (Schleiermacher), its authentic existence (Tillich), its proclamation (Bultmann), its sacramental life (Robert Jenson and certain preceding Catholic conceptions), and its mission, ethical or otherwise (Ritschl and his modern day liberal descendants) is at the heart of evangelical faith, for such faith and its confession simply extends the solus Christus from cross to resurrection to ascension. Christ, and he alone, reigns, even as he alone saves. That this confession also rules out a more general union of God and the world of which the incarnation is but an illustration or instantiation (Hegel and Strauss) should go without saying. But the divinization of the world in the modern period is in the end no large surprise once the divinization of the church is granted. It is simply to extend an error from the inner to the outer circle of Christ’s reign. But both moves in fact arise from the same transgression, and it should not surprise us when the world follows the church’s suit. In short, if Christ is not raised in his unique particularity but rather into the life of the church, and once this barrier is crossed, then how is one to prevent a further step, which is that Christ is raised into the world? To reject the first scandal of particularity simply is mirrored in the second, and both for reasons of inclusive immanence. There is not so far a line from the first to the second, from certain Christian confusions to their Hegelian and other mystical and pantheistic extensions. It is thus best remembered right at this point that “judgment must begin with the household of God” (1 Pet. 4:17).
The very fact that Christ is not raised into the church’s life, nor the Spirit given as a possession of the church, entails that the church must live in constant consciousness of both a real absence and a promised presence. Nothing tempts the church so much as the ever-constant desire to eliminate this tension, either into a moralism which makes Christ simply an exemplar from its past, or into a sacramental realism in which Christ is a constant presence guaranteed by the church’s life understood as an extension of his own. As such his heavenly and earthly bodies are collapsed into one, and the hypostatic union’s singularity is threatened with a doctrine of the church as an ethical savior or mystical body. Both such moralism and such ecclesial mysticism in the end, however, sacrifice Christ’s lordship over the church and replace Christ with the church itself, the first by sacrificing Christ’s promised presence to his absence, the second by denying his real absence by subsuming his life into the church to secure his constant presence. The problem of such a presence, however, is that if Christ is present everywhere, then Jesus as a particular person is nowhere. The church assures herself of his presence only by dissolving his personhood and particularity, and thus in turn his lordship. Moreover, the Spirit also disappears and is subsumed into the life of the church, for the Spirit no longer is that which joins the ascended Christ to his earthly body for the distinction of Christ and church is now collapsed. The net effect is that the Spirit’s own work and that of the church are directly identified.

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16 Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, pp. 12-13. For such a view, Farrow writes, the “ascension means, not the consummation, but simply the end of Jesus-history” (p. 13).

17 It is thus curious that criticisms of a Christocentric ecclesiology fail to appreciate exactly this point. It is precisely because Christ remains distinct from the church and its life that the Spirit’s joining of them is irreplaceably necessary. Should one wonder where the Spirit is, it is precisely here. The Spirit is the divine empowering presence and power that joins Christ with his earthly body and communicates his presence to his community and thus his benefits. The irony of an exaltation of the church as an extension of Christ is that the fellowship between them is lost, for there can be no fellowship where there is no demarcation between subjects (for a similar point, see Webster, *Confessing God*, pp. 166; 167).

18 For all of the problems accompanying such understandings, see Kimlyn J. Bender, *Confessing Christ for Church and World: Studies in Modern Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2014), pp. 91-123. One might also remember Barth’s warning that the
Therefore in neither understanding of the relation of Christ and church does Christ remain a free Lord, and thus in neither can Christ be both recognized in his ascended bodily absence and particular life and in his presence through the work of the Holy Spirit who joins Christ with his earthly body. To lose this tension is to sacrifice in Christology what must also be held in tension in eschatology, namely, the “already and not yet” nature of the kingdom, which in Christology is translated as the presence and absence of Christ. Neither of these relations is identical with, yet both are intricately joined to, the unity-in-distinction of Christ and his church. All are dialectical in nature as they maintain proper distinctions and irreversible order between their terms. Farrow succinctly puts the matter of distinction: “It is the divergence of Jesus-history from our own that gives to the ecclesia its character and its name.” Yet it would be wrong to see these as only divergent histories. For the history of the church is not an extension of Christ’s own, but neither is it an autonomous one. It is, rather, best identified by the principle of annexation and inclusion. In short, Christ’s history takes up the history of the church into his own as the time of his ascended Lordship and earthly witnesses, just as he calls and forms and commissions a people through whom he pronounces his own presence to the world in the time of his bodily absence (Mt. 28:18-20; Lk. 24:48-49; Acts 1:8). He does so such that these histories are distinct even in their being united, and with the church’s history dependent upon his own with no hint of symmetry or equality between them. Jesus Christ is Lord, and thus the church is the herald and servant of that lordship. In the time of Christ’s bodily absence the church exists in the expectation of his return even as it journeys with his promised presence through his Spirit. To understand this unique journey between memory and expectation is nothing less than for the church to understand herself as a pilgrim people.

danger of an over-realized eschatology is an ever-present one. See Barth CD III/2, pp. 510-511.
19 Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia, p. 10.
3. To say that the church is a pilgrim people thus entails that it is both being led and comforted but also commanded and ruled by the free voice of Christ in the present.

That Christ continues to guide and lead his church in his ascended state of exaltation through the power of the Holy Spirit entails that the site of his address to the church be acknowledged. If Christ remains a Lord who speaks, the question must remain where his address to the church occurs, where he remains the Subject and agent of his own communication, where he commands so that the church might obey. This is the place of demarcation between the direct and absolute authority of Christ and the commissioned and relative authority of the church, “the cardinal point at which the subordination of the Church under its Lord comes to view.”20 The church has recognized this point as Holy Scripture.21 In it the church acknowledges not only the location of this address, but the correspondent rule for its own faith and life. For Scripture is Christ’s self-appointed witness in the works of prophets and apostles which in turn becomes the means of his own pronouncement to the church and the medium of his own presence and present rule.22 It is the locus from which arises the divine command that requires human obedience. From another angle, Holy Scripture is the medium produced and taken up and illumined by the Spirit for the mediation of Christ’s own pronouncement and presence to the church as the very

20 Barth, Theology and Church, p. 295.
21 Here traditions have moved in two directions. For some, the bridge between these two histories requires a link in sacramental reality. Yet if the question is framed not in terms first of provision but of lordship, then the question can be articulated in this way: “Where is the point at which Jesus Christ’s rule becomes concrete and evident in the church’s life?” And the answer that the church has given in its history, and particularly in its evangelical form, is that of Holy Scripture. Here too traditions can converge, for the answer that has been given by some in the Western church to the question of this site has been that of Peter’s personal successor and/or the early ecumenical council decisions. Yet it is at least worth pondering whether, as Barth asked, such a view can truly preserve the over-againstness of Christ to his church, and thus the rightful distinction of a Lord who commands and a church that obeys. See Barth, CD I/1, pp. 102-104.
22 “It is therefore true that Holy Scripture is the Word of God for the Church, that it is Jesus Christ for us, as He Himself was for the prophets and apostles during the forty days” (Barth, CD I/2, p. 544).
revelation of God. Calvin thus stated what was at the heart of not only his own but Luther’s discovery, and one that long predated them both, when he declared that it is the preaching of the Gospel as found within Scripture that is “the scepter by which the heavenly King rules His people.”

Christ’s rule is thus made real and effective as the Holy Spirit empowers Holy Scripture to be the voice of Christ to the church through the voices of his witnesses in the prophets and the apostles. That Christ alone exercises his rule entails not only that he alone is Lord, but also that he remains the one true shepherd with all others who are commissioned to feed his sheep his shepherds not by proxy but by their being conscripted for the purpose of serving the pronouncement of his one true Word and care for his people. Thus if Calvin described Holy Scripture as the scepter by which Christ rules his church, it might also be portrayed as the rod and staff that gives comfort yet also provides necessary correction and direction to the church.

That Holy Scripture serves as the canon, even as it exists as such, entails that it is not simply a product of a people’s desire for help on a journey or even ecclesial expediency, much less something the church gives to itself, but the result of a recognition that there is a Shepherd who not only accompanies the travellers on their way but stands ahead of them and over them. Their conversation is therefore not only a community dialogue among journeyers but also the response to a Lord who has spoken and still speaks. In Scripture the church confesses that it hears the

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23 John C. Olin, ed., John Calvin and Jacopo Sadoleto: A Reformation Debate (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), p. 60. Here again a division becomes evident. When Henri de Lubac states, “Thus if one thing is certain in this world, it is that, for us, the Church precedes the Gospel,” the rift seems to widen, particularly when it is remembered that the Gospel is grounded in the singular work of Christ. See Henri de Lubac, The Motherhood of the Church, trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1971), p. 8. The issue at hand is not best approached under the topics of soteriological extrinsicism and ecclesial inclusion and mediation but first must be articulated in terms of Christ’s uniqueness, antecedence, and lordship. When this is understood, then one thing that must be confessed for certain is that Christ precedes the church. At issue is how that precedence is preserved, exercised, and expressed during the time of his ascension.
true voice of its shepherd and in turn renounces the voices of strangers. In Scripture the church acknowledges that it is God who calls them and God who sends them and God who leads them as he speaks through his Word by the power of his Spirit. In short, they live not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Deut. 8:3; Mt. 4:4). Insofar as the church acknowledges that it can live only in response to this Word given to it, the church acknowledges that it lives by faith and not by sight. To acknowledge this existence of faith and hope is nothing other than for the church to recognize that it is a society of pilgrims gathered around Holy Scripture.

4. To say that the church is a pilgrim people entails that its existence is provisional and its authority and activity are relative and standing under the absolute authority and activity of Christ.

If the history and existence of the church is assumed by Christ’s history rather than seen as an extension, continuation, or completion of it, and if it exists both in union and distinction from Christ’s own, then the church finds the dignity, integrity, and purpose of its life and history in taking up its proper role of creaturely witness and service in freedom and joy. This is indeed its own glory. As a human response and witness to the Word of its Lord, the church’s confession and life, its doctrine and practice, possess a real and true, though qualified and derivative, authority. As Christ is both joined to yet ever distinct from his earthly body, as the Holy Spirit both empowers yet is never assumed into or possessed by his fellowship, so also must the appointed witness of Holy Scripture ever be seen as precedent not only in time but in rank over all later confession and practice by the church. The particularity and finality of God’s revelation in Christ entails and finds its echo in the particularity and finality of the canon. Failures to demarcate between Christ and his earthly body, between the work of the Holy Spirit and that of the church, are thus themselves echoed in a corresponding failure to recognize the demarcation of
Scripture and later tradition, of canon and confession, of absolute and relative authority.

All such errors of demarcation are of one type, namely, a failure to retain the distinction, the asymmetry and the irreversibility of the relation, such that each relation is improperly ordered or reversed. The words of Christ from the cross announcing the completion of the divine self-giving and atonement for sin, consummated and manifested in his glorious resurrection, are words that the church can only stand in awe of and attest but not call into question by the self-attribution of language of incarnational extension and salvific continuation. This is at the very heart of saying that the church is a pilgrim, rather than pioneer, community, and that it stands both after and before the finished and eschatological work of Christ. This recognition is not a denigration of the church, but the very means of the preservation of its own creaturely glory.

If the church’s confession and practice are thus framed within the category of response to the work of Christ and the Spirit, and if they are framed within the larger relation of the Creator to his creature, then all such confession and practice, as well as liturgy and law, must themselves be seen as possessing a real though circumscribed authority, as provisional not only due to the church’s belonging to the category of creature but also as standing within a timeframe where sin has not disappeared even from its own life. The church’s journey is a following after Jesus in the midst of confusion and uncertainty, and such are not only extrinsic to its walls. Its words and actions are to be faithful but can imply no ultimate finality. It is for this reason that attention to its own faithfulness in its worship and its common and uncommon life, as reflected in the truthfulness of its confession and the fidelity of its

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24 Such a sober assessment is not a denigration of ecumenical achievement but the first step towards its very possibility. It does, however, entail the serious consequence that ecclesiological differences may go deeper than differences of polity or even soteriology. They are sometimes, at their root, differences of Christology itself. Douglas Farrow is thus correct in stating: “However it is asked, the question about Jesus underlies the question about the church” (*Ascension and Ecclesia*, p. ix).
action, is indeed right and necessary. Perhaps most overlooked is that nowhere in Scripture is the church as close to its Lord as in the sharing of his cross, though here too these are not simply the same. It is thus true that the time of Christ’s ascended reign is also the time of the martyrs. And because the Lord who has ascended is the Lord who still bears the marks and form of his crucifixion and servanthood, the church called to bear his own likeness can never ascribe glory to itself. To recognize the provisional nature of its teaching and life, to admit that it “sees through a glass darkly,” to confess that it must live by daily graces given as it travels on a journey to a destination at which it has not yet arrived, and to acknowledge that it will necessarily suffer on this way – these are nothing less than the first steps for the church to accept the call and costs of what it means to live as a pilgrim people.

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25 As Barth writes: “The special fellowship of the Christian with Christ involves participation in the passion of His cross” (CD IV/2, p. 604). Yet he also later adds: “Between Christ and the Christian, His cross and ours, it is a matter of similarity in great dissimilarity” (CD IV/2, p. 605). Once again we are faced with the necessity of a proper ordering but not a choice, and in this case that between a substitutionary and an exemplarist Christology, with the first firmly restricting but also establishing the second. It is in fact the high Christology of the former that grants weight and urgency to the latter. Moreover, that the cross of the disciple as witness (martyr) is not Christ’s cross of atonement does not in any way lessen the authority of the call that it be carried or the weight of its own cost. But it does allow us to reconcile Christ’s words from the cross as to the finality of his work (echoed and expanded upon by the author of Hebrews) and those of Paul that commend his own sufferings as “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). Careful readers of Paul could never accuse him of collapsing these distinctions or confusing the message of the cross of Christ with his own self-commendation. Here everything hangs on defining what is truly “lacking.”

26 This point was perhaps only fully appreciated in the modern world by Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard’s understanding of the lowliness of Christ even in his ascended and exalted state, and the ramifications of this for the church and the Christian, see David R. Law, *Kierkegaard’s Kenotic Christology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 260-261; 263-265; 280-281. For Kierkegaard (via Anti-Climacus), the exalted Christ continues even in his ascension to address the church in the form of a humble servant depicted in the canonical Gospels. Law writes: “This means that human beings are presented with a task, namely that of following the suffering Christ and, like him, learning obedience to the Father” (p. 281).
5. To say that the church is a pilgrim people entails that it lives not only apart from but within the world and is not unaffected by it.

The distinction between the church and the world, as that between Christ and the world, is also of a dialectical ordering. But the absolute distinction between the ascended Lord and the church is not replicated in that between the pilgrim people and the world, for the relation between church and world is such that no ethical absolutism between them can be maintained that overlooks the church's sharing in the world's own history. The church journeys in and among the peoples of the nations and is called to be a light in the midst of a common life with them. The second great temptation of the church in this horizontal sphere is an echo of that in the vertical one. It is to eliminate the ramifications of the tension of Christ's presence and absence in this time between Pentecost and parousia by eliminating the tension it faces with the world through either withdrawal or assimilation.

That the church's own life is called into existence by the Holy Spirit and is to be fashioned according to Christ's own, that it lives not only within this world but as a sign pointing to a kingdom beyond it, does grant to the church a unique role as an exemplary community. Yet its true reality cannot be fully grasped by an appeal to its ordinary visibility or by a summation of its traditions and practices. That the church is in but not of the world means that it must be spoken of as both invisible and visible. The first is not a flight from its responsibility to embody the rule of Christ in its concrete life, but rather the acknowledgement that the ultimate power

\[\text{27} \text{ This entails not only, positively, that the church sets forth another way of life than that of the world, but negatively, that there are things of the world in which the church cannot participate. There is thus a real and proper necessity to speaking of the “otherness” of the church. For one such elaboration, see John H. Yoder, Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 62-63; cf. 54-64. Such “otherness” cannot be abstracted from, but is a necessary implicate of, the very act of the church’s confessing its faith.}\]
of that life lies not in the forms and practices that give it its visible concreteness.\textsuperscript{28} To say that the church is in but not of the world is not first of all an ethical distinction but an acknowledgement of the spiritual power that gives it life before it pertains to the particular liturgical, confessional, and ethical form of life it takes. Yet it is precisely because of the uniqueness of the Spirit of holiness who constitutes it and the Lord who rules it that the church itself is to be a community that lives not only within but as set apart from the world. As Farrow states, “Now the church is only really itself when it accepts and embraces this situation of radical continuity, and equally radical discontinuity, with the world.”\textsuperscript{29}

That the shape of what this life should look like is itself the cause of internecine arguments taken up within the church as it journeys through various times and places should not be surprising (one can think of the first church council in Jerusalem, as well as the heated confrontation of Peter by Paul). That in this time between the times the church exists between these poles entails that the church is not, will not be, and has never been a static entity of absolutely fixed forms or practices. It is a people that exists in movement, and its existence is not only marked but also constituted by this movement such that its life is one of navigation and necessary, recurrent, yet provisional judgment within the circumstances of an ever-changing journey. Faithfulness on the journey will require constant vigilance, creative imagination, resolute perseverance, and even the negotiation of firmly held internal standpoints as to what such faithfulness requires and what form it takes in the face of external challenges. To appreciate this fact is itself for the church to understand that it is a people who are strangers in a strange land and yet also sharers in that strangeness. It is to embrace the particular existence of pilgrims who are called not in spite of but in and through these challenges to live for Christ and for the good of the lands in which they find themselves.

\textsuperscript{28} Both its divine origin and its creaturely reality are evident in Webster’s definition of the church: “The church is the form of common human life and action which is generated by the gospel to bear witness to the perfect word and work of the triune God” (\textit{Confessing God}, p. 175).

\textsuperscript{29} Farrow, \textit{Ascension and Ecclesia}, p. 11.
Conclusion

Let us circle back around to the beginning to reach our end. The way forward may be not without some irony a coordination of two errors that leads to a resolution of their missteps. A doctrine of revelation cannot, as has often happened, decontextualize Scripture by removing it from its ecclesial setting in which it exists and over which it serves as Christ's own appointed means of his self-presentation and communication. But ecclesiology itself can suffer its own form of decontextualization. When rightly understood in the light of its unique temporal location and its subordinate place in relation to the Triune God and God's revelatory, reconciling, and redemptive activity, the church's identity and task begin to be seen in their true proportion. Ecclesiology itself is shown to be a secondary doctrine, one that is seen as the corollary, and not the source, of the prior divine work of salvation as set forth in theology proper as well as in a rich and developed Christology accompanied by an attendant pneumatology. The description of the church must therefore emphasize it not only as the setting of the reception of Christ's self-communication, but also as the penultimate goal of God's work as the representative people reflecting in this given time the final summation of the kingdom, a people who are called to exist “for the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12) and for the sake of witness to the world.

Ecclesiology is in this light best served not by its neglect but by recognizing its proper situatedness and location in the dogmatic corpus that in turn pays tribute to the church's own proper context within the larger areas of God's work of salvation in Christ by the Spirit. A way to translate this claim is to confess that salvation

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30 Webster writes that “Scripture is an ecclesial reality because the place of Scripture is in the economy of salvation, and the economy of salvation concerns the divine work of restoring fellowship through the gathering of the sanctorum communion” (Confessing God, p. 53).
comes from God alone, through Christ alone, by the Spirit alone, but all for our good and in order to establish fellowship with the triune God. The church is invited and indeed commissioned to not only participate in but also proclaim this fellowship to the world. The work of God thus precedes, frames, and establishes the real and proper work of the church. When this is understood, a proper distinction between questions of revelation and ecclesiology, and in turn the distinction between Scripture and tradition, and both reflecting the fundamental unity-in-distinction of Christ and the church, can be maintained. Here again, the way forward is not predicated on a matter of choice between two terms but of their right and proper ordering that preserves their intricate union but without sacrificing their distinction and proper rank.

Granted, what has been provided here in placing the church in its unique time between Christ’s ascension and parousia itself requires some attention to this time’s own relation to pretemporality and indeed supratemporality, just as the work of God’s salvation that provides for the ordering of the relation of God to his people, of Christ to his earthly body, and of the Holy Spirit to his fellowship requires seeing this work as grounded in God’s own inner life and eternal election. But that exceeds what can here be done, and it need not be done for the more delimited investigation here made. For the mystery of God’s will has been revealed in time (Col. 1:25-29). And in the revelation of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended to the right hand of the Father from where he now reigns and from where he will return to judge the living and the dead, we find the proper understanding of the church’s place in this time of the ascension. It is the time of Christ’s mediated rather than bodily presence, but he is Lord and agent of this act now in heaven as he was on earth, and both then and now no one can confess him as Lord apart from the act of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). Such mediation is thus properly ascribed to the Holy Spirit and not those who are the recipients of its revelatory and reconciliatory benefits. Insofar as this is so, the church lives as it is joined to Christ through the Spirit who enlivens, empowers, and equips it for its own proper task as a light to the nations.
Epilogue

When surveying much of Baptist life today, and specifically that in North America, one cannot help admitting a certain theological impoverishment. That Baptists in America have stayed close to the Scriptural descriptions of God’s action and have not given themselves to abstract systems of theology is of course to be appreciated as both a constructive and preventative strength. It has indeed protected them at least in their more traditional strands from nineteenth century speculative excesses and heterodox forays and departures. That Baptists have by and large not, however, developed a rich theological tradition is a given, and Curtis Freeman’s recent diagnosis of the diseases of the Baptist left and right in North America is incisive and builds on that earlier done by persons like James McClendon, Jr. and Nancey Murphy.31

Yet one wonders if we have yet found the proper cure. Certainly placing Baptists into a richer historical and ecumenical context can treat some of the worst symptoms of the disease. In that sense, a rightly defined catholicity, and indeed richer ecclesial and historical contextualization, can be not only helpful but also quite necessary. But a long-term cure would seem to require not only a proper placement of Baptists into a larger historical frame of reference within the universal church, but also a proper theological (i.e., dogmatic) placement of the church itself in relation to God’s economy of salvation through Christ and the Spirit. This not only means that ecclesiology must be seen once again as a subordinate doctrine to those of Trinity, Christology, and pneumatology and set in relation to them. It means even more importantly discerning the proper placement, location, and task of the church in relation to the work of Jesus Christ her Lord and the Spirit who calls her into

existence. If this is done, the supremacy of the witness of Christ’s own prophets and apostles over the church’s own pronouncements and actions, and a proper distinction between not only the actions but also the stories of each, can then be maintained. Such is not the undermining or neglect, but the establishment, of the church’s own proper identity and task in all of its visible and concrete richness. What we might discover, amid such work, is not only the distinctive calling and shape of our discipleship, something dear to Baptist understandings of Christian faith, but also the evangelical convictions that must precede and undergird them. Such might protect us from statements like “no creed but the Bible” in seeing sola Scriptura in its proper role and its intrinsic grounding in the prior solus Christus.

The righting of the dogmatic ship is not achieved by a neglect of ecclesiology, but a placing of it within its theological context and the church within its own proper sphere of operations, which is that of the divine Self-giving as mediated through Christ and the Spirit. For it is in this proper sphere that the church can be seen as both a privileged and provisional community in the realm of God’s mediate goals for the ultimate summation of the kingdom. The focus of ecclesiology should not be first upon the activity and practices of the community, but of the community itself as the result and response of prior divine action. Such a view of ecclesiology shows once again how it holds together with a proper eschatology that neither identifies the church with the kingdom of God nor divides them such that the church is jettisoned. We may discover that such an ecclesiology is an evangelical ecclesiology – humble in tone, responsive in stance, urgent yet not despairing in its witness, confident in a hope that stands outside itself, rejoicing in rather than resenting its creatureliness, and grounded in the Gospel of Christ. In other words, the church will be marked by prayer first and last because it recognizes God’s prevenience and provenience as the basis of both its redeemed and created existence, announcing and displaying God’s mercy as its proper form of life. That the church be

32 “The task is not that of putting the church in its place so much as recognizing the place which is prior to the doctrine of the church in an orderly unfolding of the mighty works of God” (Webster, Confessing God, p. 156).
characterized as a creature of the Word of God will then be seen not so much as an evangelical distinctive but as its true and proper catholic description.