

Joining the Work of God

A CALL TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS

by Jonathan R. Wilson

In one of my favourite Peanuts comic strips, Sally, Charlie Brown's sister, is sitting at a desk with a blank sheet of paper with the heading, "Church History Exam." In the next frame she begins to write, "When thinking about the church, it's important to start at the beginning." In the last frame she continues her answer, "Our pastor was born in"

When did the Church *begin*? Many of us would say at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples who were gathered in one place. That's a good answer; it's one that I have taught and it's right in many ways.

In this article, however, I invite you to consider another beginning point for "the Church." If we think of the Church as the people whom God calls together in order to carry out God's work in the world, then the roots of the Church go back to Genesis 1. There, God makes humankind and blesses us by giving us work to do in God's good world – creation.

God renews this blessing after the Fall, when God calls Abram (later Abraham and Sarah) to carry out God's mission – to make of Abraham a people through whom God will bless all the peoples of the earth. (Genesis 12:1-3)

God makes Abraham's descendants into a people by freeing them from Egypt and bringing them to a land from which they may bless the nations (Exodus). Tragically, they mistake God's blessing as something for themselves alone. Their disobedience and idolatry bring God's judgment.

Our God, however, is sovereign and loving. God fulfils his intentions for humans and all creation in Jesus Christ: the good news that through Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel, the Messiah has come. Through him all the nations – the "Gentiles" – are also

blessed. So it is through Jesus the Messiah that God calls into being a new people – the Church – through whom the good news is declared to all creation.

Genesis 1 teaches us that the Creator is life-giving, world-ordering, ever-faithful love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (This is the loving, relational life that is without beginning or end, that we only come to know through Jesus Christ.) Genesis 12 teaches us that this God will not let creation and human creatures go on their way to death and destruction. The God of Abraham (and Isaac and Jacob) renews the blessing that God bestowed on us in the beginning. Exodus teaches us that God acts in the midst of human history to accomplish God's purposes. The "Word made flesh" teaches us that God loves, redeems, blesses and commissions in our midst – not from a distance.

Today, God continues to work through a people who love and relate and bless and fulfil God's commission in the midst of God's creation – a world captive to sin and death, in rebellion against God and warring against one another, alienated from God's love and ignorant of the one way to life.

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WHO IS BUILDING THE CHURCH?

The "story" of the Church is the story of God's work – Father, Son and Spirit – from beginning to end. As the people whom God has created to carry out God's work in the world, the Church receives life as a gift, joins what God is already doing in the world, and then extends that work as a blessing to all the peoples of the earth: life, love, good work, and a glory and delight to our Creator and Redeemer.

“People of God” means that through God’s work the Church has an identity that is larger, more inclusive than all other identity markers: nation, class, race, language, sex.



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WHAT ARE THE FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT BUILDING?

In his classic, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Paul Minear identifies 96 “images” that the New Testament (NT) authors use for the Church. Happily, he identifies a number of “minor” images, then groups the rest under four master images: people of God, new creation, fellowship in faith and body of Christ.

Image #1: People of God

The Father, Son and Spirit are building the Church as the people of God. This language of peoplehood establishes a continuity between Israel and the Church. This helps us understand that God is building the Church as a people who are united across space and time in a primary identity that absorbs and transforms all other identities. “People of God” means that through God’s work the Church has an identity that is larger, more inclusive than all other identity markers: nation, class, race, language, sex.

When we join God in building the Church as people of God, we must recognize that our partnerships in our mission to build the Church are partnerships in Christ. That means that we are not *primarily* “Canadians” partnering with “Kenyans” or “Bolivians” or “Chinese” or any identity marker other than our *primary* identity as people of God. (I have emphasized “primary” because we are naive if we think that we shed any of our other identity markers. Indeed, as we will see next, in Christ our “differences” become another way that we are the Church.)

To be the people of God means that the Church is not subordinate to another marker of “peoplehood” like nation, class, language or race. Too often, the Church has descended into being a servant of one of these. The images that cluster under the image of people of God bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ: in Christ all these differences are brought into unity – not uniformity. To see how this is the case, let us turn to the next master image.

Image #2: New Creation

The Father, Son and Spirit are building the Church as new creation. In the broken creation, we are captive to the lie that life is a zero-sum game in which differences are threats. But in new creation through Christ, God brings all things into the peace, the wholeness, that God intends for the world that he creates. (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:19-20).

And the Church is the first sign of this new creation. In the Church, our differences and diversity become gifts of the Spirit that are sources of strength for one another. Where we are weak, others will be strong. Where we are strong, others will be weak. Together, we can build up the Church.

Since the Father, Son and Spirit are building the Church as new creation, when we join God in building the Church we must be intentional about making the Church a sign of new creation. This means that we place a priority on making visible the ways that our differences strengthen one another. We don’t take this visibility for granted or presume that it “just happens.” We are explicit and intentional about how we are building the Church as new creation.

Since the Church is sign of new creation, we also commit ourselves to bearing witness to God’s healing for all creation. The gospel is not just the good news that persons are being made new; it is also the good news that communities and all things in creation are being reconciled to God through Christ and being made new in Christ.

Guided by this conviction, we practise peace-building. We learn deeper practices of healing (beyond “reconciliation”) in partnership with First Nations followers of Jesus Christ. We deepen our understanding of the reconciliation of all things as we embrace “marketplace ministries” and “marketplace transformation.” And we integrate the celebration of creation as God’s gift and care for this gift in all that we do.

Image #3: Fellowship in Faith

The Father, Son and Spirit are also building the Church as fellowship in faith. Following Minear’s more detailed exposition of this third “master image,” I will develop this as the “fellowship” or “household” of *those who are believing*. This more precise meaning of faith represents the active practice of faith. “Faith” is the way of being and living that reflects – and is reflected in – the life of a community.

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This *fellowship of those who are believing* is gathered, sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit. This work of the Holy Spirit in the Church has two main streams. The first stream guides and sustains our confession of the faith, in which we confess “one, holy, catholic, apostolic church.” This language does not have to be recited as part of a creed to be helpful to us.

To confess that the Church is “one” is not to assert the foolish claim that the Church is organizationally one; rather, to confess that the Church is one is to acknowledge that the Spirit gathers a people for one purpose: to bless all people by bearing witness to the good news of God’s peace through the blood of Christ shed on his cross, and by inviting all people into that peace.

To confess that the Church is “holy” is not a claim to perfection, nor is it “a prideful assertion that we are better than others or more lovable or worthy of God’s praise.”¹ Rather, to confess that the Church is holy is to testify to our participation in the kingdom of God and the future destiny of all creation in the full reality of that kingdom. For this the Spirit sets us apart.

To confess that the Church is “catholic” is not to align us with the Bishop of Rome (the Pope); rather, to confess that the Church is catholic is to “bear witness to the openness of every culture to God’s redemptive work, which converts culture to a means of living in the kingdom.”²

To confess that the Church is “apostolic” is not to establish the office of “Apostle” as some super role in the Church; rather, to

confess that the Church is “apostolic” is to commit ourselves (1) to “the apostle’s teaching,” which we have today in Scripture, and (2) to “the apostolic mission,” which is witness to Jesus Christ.

In addition to guiding and sustaining our confession of faith, the Spirit equips and empowers us as the “*fellowship* of those who are believing.” Our thoughts may immediately turn at this point to Paul’s language about the Church as the body of Christ. We will consider that image next. But here, under the image of “fellowship in faith,” another set of images illuminates the building up of the Church. We will consider two: the disciple community and the household of faith.

The Holy Spirit gathers the Church as the disciple community for a very clear and compelling mission: to bear witness to and fulfil the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. This mission requires that we be disciplined. Most of us have at some point engaged in a purposeful activity that requires discipline: playing a sport, cooking, singing in a choir. We know that the fulfilment of the purpose of that activity requires discipline. The same is true of the Church as the fellowship of those who are believing; we must be purposeful and disciplined in our practices. But in our society, even inside the Church, we may interpret “discipleship” as an intrusion on our individual freedom or as an arbitrary exercise of power. We need to be a fellowship in faith who know that we are called to a mission, for a purpose, that requires discipline – costly discipline because we live in an age that rebels against discipline.

The Holy Spirit also gathers the Church as the household of faith and gives to that household a way of life – an economy – in which the power of the Holy Spirit nourishes the common life of the household so that all may flourish. The “household” is the NT analogue to the “family” – with a difference. As the Holy Spirit called people to faith and united them across all natural barriers, the language of family expanded in the NT to become the language – and the practice – of “household.” Here, people who had no “natural” kinship recognized their deeper kinship in the Spirit. And in this household they practise a new economy – the economy of the Spirit that promises and gives abundant life in which death is not the final word.

Both Christian and pagan literature attest to the generosity of the household economy of the early Church as they gave up their lives for the sick and dying, the widow, the orphan, the poor – even those who were not part of the “household of faith.” If “God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” (Romans 5:8) then the fellowship in faith is called to do the same.

Recognizing that God builds the Church as *fellowship in faith*, we must continually re-learn what it means for the Church to be a disciple community. Perhaps Canadian Baptists, through CBM, may offer strengths in leadership development and theological education, but our partners may sometimes be ahead of us in the practice of discipleship. We may build them up by providing the vision and teaching necessary to sustaining discipleship; they may build us up by their sacrificial practices of following Jesus day by day.

Image #4: Body of Christ

Finally, as far as NT images are concerned, God builds the Church as the body of Christ. Although this image occurs only in the letters of Paul, it gathers up all the other images and deepens and extends their meaning and significance. In his letters, Paul uses this image in different ways. Thus, “the body of Christ” does not have one static meaning; rather, it is a way of seeing that illuminates different realities of the life of the Church.

We are familiar with some of the ways that the body of Christ illuminates the life and mission of the Church: the oneness of “the body”; the diversity of “members” and gifts; the exhortation to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:1-16)

Here, I invite you to explore a different, relatively neglected, reality of the Church that the “body of Christ” illuminates: as the body of Christ, we live in such a way of discipleship that we bear witness to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul’s letters are filled with the recognition that as followers of Christ, we will suffer: “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” (Philippians 3:10-11)

What Christ made known *in his body*, we now make known as the body of Christ. We must be careful to recognize that our bodily life is *not* the incarnation of one who is “fully human, fully divine.” It is *his* suffering and death and *his* resurrection in which we participate and to which we bear witness. We can be faithful to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission *only* by being the body of Christ today.

As we join God in building the Church as the *body of Christ*, we do not discern our call to participation in God’s mission by calculating the suffering that we may be part of. On the contrary, we must continually commit ourselves to recognizing

that we join Christ and bear witness to his good news when we join our life in Christ as part of the body of Christ to those who have suffered or are suffering. When we embrace a broken world with the healing reality of Christ, we must expect and also embrace the suffering that comes to us as the body of Christ.

It’s taken quite a few words to explore *what* the Father, Son and Spirit are building when they build the Church and when we join with that work. Now, we can consider some other questions more briefly, since the answers to the *what* question leads directly to answers to these other questions. In fact, I hope that you could do a fairly good job of answering the next set of questions on your own or with a mission group.

WHY IS THE ONE GOD – FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT – BUILDING THE CHURCH AND WHY SHOULD WE JOIN WITH GOD?

The answer to *why* moves in two directions: one asks for cause or motive, the other asks for purpose. God is not caused to act or motivated by anything external to God, otherwise God would be under the control of some other power. So we say that the sole motive or ground for God to build the Church is God’s love for God’s broken world that simply is who God is. The Church is the first sign, the down payment, the guarantee of God’s healing of all creation. We, followers of Jesus the Messiah, want to get in on this joyful, courageous work, and so we build the church.

God’s purpose in building the Church is to prepare a people to spend eternity with God in a new creation, where “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4) In this new creation, members of every tribe and language and people and nation will gather to sing everlasting praise to the One who is worthy. (Revelation 5:9) We want to get in on this hopeful, glorious work, and so we build the Church.

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