

## PREFACE

Two spiritual maladies cause immense harm to the church in its service of God's mission in the world. First, the church in the North American context faces the disease of a rampant individualism that conceives religiosity primarily as a matter of personal preferences rather than communal responsibility. Sociologists, such as Robert Bellah and Robert Putman, have diagnosed the nature of contemporary religion as "expressive individualism." This means that "spirituality" (not religion!—which is viewed as oppressive institutionalization) serves the individual as a therapeutic device to improve the quality of private life and as a way of expressing one's idiosyncratic proclivities. All those who serve in congregational ministry know the challenges of forging communal bonds that transcend the self-interest of individual members. Moreover, church leaders have experienced the phenomenon of "church shopping" by consumers who are looking to meet their individual needs in the most satisfactory way from the dispensers of church goods. The trend is only reinforced and accented by the individuated accessibility of all forms of electronic media, which are tailored to massage the peculiar desires of each individual. The extreme individualism of contemporary society threatens the vitality of congregational life as it has developed over the generations.

Second, the core identity of the church is at risk today due to an increasing gravitational pull toward construing its mission most ardently in relationship to those things that it opposes. A negative identity is forged by overly concentrating on those matters that the church is "against." One might not be surprised to see this development in Protestant traditions that bear the word "protest" as a central feature of their historical identity. Perhaps in these traditions the church has been predisposed to self-definition by opposition. However, the trend toward negative

identity in the churches transcends all historic distinctions between Protestants and Catholics. It is the “hot button” issues of our times that are frequently used to provoke passionate reactions from otherwise passive church members: abortion, evolution, homosexuality, representational principles (“quotas”), church growth, contemporary worship, and ecumenical agreements. In the process, it may eventually prove that we are witnessing the emergence of new denominational fault lines to replace those disappearing through ecumenical rapprochement. In any case, it has become a matter of some urgency that the church define itself not primarily in relation to what it is against but what it is for!

This book in its own way addresses these critical problems in contemporary church life. It does so by proposing and articulating a constructive ecclesiology for the church as ministering community. In this project Luther’s two kingdoms teaching and Bonhoeffer’s interpretation of the church as “Jesus Christ existing as church-community” play integral roles. Luther’s concept of the two kingdoms is here retrieved and reinterpreted as God’s two “strategies” for ruling the world: the right hand strategy through the proclamation of the Gospel by the evangelizing church and the left hand strategy through the social ministry initiatives of the shalom church. The innovative proposal of Bonhoeffer regarding the sacramental nature of the church—building upon the New Testament metaphor of the church as the body of Christ—provides the theological impetus for exploring the personality or character of the church with reference to its four classical marks: one holy catholic apostolic.

These threads of the theological tradition are woven together with strong interconnections to the fiber of the biblical narrative into a constructive ecclesiology for the church as ministering community. The rampant individualism of contemporary church life is countered by the strong medicine of defining membership in the church as integral participation in the body of Christ. As one is baptized into the church, one becomes a member of Christ’s body, which is formed by the biblical narrative and liturgical practice with a distinguishing character. Christianity entails participation in the corporate body of Christ by definition, not option. Furthermore, the church is inoculated against a negative identity by the character of Jesus Christ that it inhabits collectively. The four classical marks of the church provide a constructive agenda delineating what the church is “for” in its corporate life: peacemaking, social justice, creation care, and respect for human dignity. Each of these themes is developed based on the biblical narrative that authorizes the church’s commitment to this distinctive ministry agenda.

The eight chapters of the book build the constructive argument that the church participates in God’s mission both through the work of evangelizing and the work of social ministry. These two go hand-in-hand as the primary forms of the church’s engagement with the world that God seeks to bring to wholeness.

The New Testament metaphor of the church as the body of Christ provides the basis for imagining how the character of Jesus Christ infuses its communal existence in the world. The four marks of the church, as classically formulated in the Nicene Creed, are not only theological descriptions of the church's essence but entail involvement in a powerful ministry agenda.

Chapters Four through Seven examine how the church, immersed in the biblical narrative, acquires particular character or virtues that lead to the engagement of the body of Christ in distinctive social ministry practices. These virtues are demonstrated by how they have been embodied in particular lives—Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., A. J. Muste, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa, Francis of Assisi, Chief Seattle, Wendell Berry, Bartolomé de Las Casas, Sojourner Truth, and Desmond Tutu—which embolden the church in its responsibility for peacemaking, justice, creation care, and respecting human dignity. These twelve figures were especially selected for how they have given leadership to movements for social change, not just for their inspirational value as individual witnesses. Each of these four chapters includes guidance for congregational ministry practice, as does the concluding chapter (which also addresses formidable contradictions based on the sinful history of the church). Together the interconnections among the four central themes constitute the fabric of what I am calling “shalom church.” A shalom church embodies what it means for the church to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic in ethical responsibility to God for the life of the world.

Recent ecumenical conversations have focused increasingly on the retrieval of the four classical marks of the church in the Nicene Creed for the faith and life of the global church in our times (for example, *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper 198 of the World Council of Churches or *One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church: Some Lutheran and Ecumenical Perspectives*, edited by Hans-Peter Grosshans and produced by the Lutheran World Federation). These discussions have accomplished much for reclaiming the relevance of these four marks for the advancement of ecumenical understanding. However, this book seeks to make a further constructive contribution to this process by interpreting the intended unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church in ethical categories and connecting these to the church's social ministry efforts. In this way, characteristics of the church that have been traditionally considered matters of “Faith and Order” in the ecumenical movement become inextricably linked to the matters of “Life and Work.” Even more, the Conclusion of this book proposes making these ethical considerations core to interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Finally, it is God's purpose to mend the world. This concept is wonderfully expressed in the Hebrew notion of *tikkun olam*. Literally, *tikkun olam* refers to the

“repairing” or “perfecting” of the world God has made. This phrase is included in the Jewish prayer, the *Aleinu*, which according to tradition is to be recited three times each day. The *Aleinu* praises God for allowing the Jewish people to serve God and expresses hope that one day the entire world will recognize God and abandon idolatry. When all people of the world abandon false gods and acknowledge God, the world will have been perfected. By following the commands of God, people of faith contribute to the mending of God’s creation. It belongs to the work of the shalom church to participate in God’s purposes of mending and perfecting the world. The idea of *shalom* is itself a reflection of a world perfected—where peace, justice, care for creation, and respect for human dignity are grounded in the love of God and neighbor, a restored creation.

*Shalom Church: The Body of Christ as Ministering Community* is a book designed both for personal study and group discussion. The Study Guide provides guidance for personal reflection and questions for group discussion. The bibliography provides suggestions for further reading, and the appendix summarizes key themes from Part II. In addition to use in academic settings it is my hope that the book will prove useful to all of those engaged in congregational ministry, including pastors and lay leaders. Social ministry committees and organizations should find particular value in the biographical sketches for exploring how social ministry has been embodied by leaders of social movements and in the twenty core practices for the purposes of concrete implementation. For convenient reference, the appendix summarizes the twenty virtues, twelve representatives, and twenty core practices of the shalom church in a concise list.

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