

**Towards an Ecclesiology of Communion—Reflections on Modern and Postmodern Treatments of
Diversity and Differences**

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Abstract

Modernism seeks to establish community by abolishing differences, whereas postmodernism endorses pure hospitality towards otherness. Both presuppose human autonomy and result in the dehumanizing dilemma wherein individuals are radically isolated and boundaries violently dissolved. The Church is neither abolition nor simple summation, but communion of differences upon the basis of the common essence of holiness. This ecclesiology of communion proceeds from the exaltation of divine authority and denial of human autonomy, which presupposes the infallible authority of Scripture, and requires that the outward means of grace (sacraments, prayer, etc.) be considered of real significance in the life of the Church.

Introduction

This essay is aimed at discussing the relevance of the Christian treatment of diversity and differences in the ecclesial communion in the context of modernity and postmodernity. In line with J.-M.-R. Tillard's thesis, I will argue that "the church is neither abolition nor addition but communion of 'differences.'" ¹ I will show that modernism seeks to establish community by means of abolishing differences, whereas postmodernism attempts to bring together individuals by the summation of differences, which entails, in Derridean terms, "pure hospitality" towards alterity (otherness). Modernity and postmodernity share the same starting point in the desire for autonomy and the "will-to-self-definition", ² and though they proceed through different routes in the attempt to, in Peter Berger's language, "construct social reality", they arrive in a similar dilemma, wherein individuality is violently suppressed while individuals are radically isolated. Contemporary Protestant churches often experience a similar dilemma, because the nominalistic mindset prevalent among Protestants today resembles in many ways the secular "will-to-self-definition." My central thesis is that in order for the Church to proclaim to the world a way out of this dehumanizing dilemma, she has to take to heart the ecclesiology of communion, which entails not only the communion of diverse individuals, but also, in Tillard's words, "communion between the visible and the invisible, the communal and the personal, the

¹ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion*. Trans. Madeleine Beaumont. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 9

² Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.

hierarchical and the charismatic, the local and the universal.”³

The Communion of Differences

Gal 3:28 teaches a communion of differences: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” One might interpret this language of negation as indicating an abolition of differences, but such interpretation is apparently false for an obvious reason—union in Christ does not create a unisex community. Paul expressly teaches that men and women have different roles in Christ (Eph 5:22-33; 1 Cor 11:3-15; etc.). By inference, therefore, the negation rhetoric here indicates not the abolition of differences. Rather, it means that the grace of Christ is freely given to all without discrimination. Communion in Christ establishes unity and equality between all kinds of people, but it does not abolish individuality or diversity.

On the other hand, the ecclesial communion is not simply a summation of diverse individuals. Gal 3:26-27 indicates that we have become one in Christ because we are all sons of God through faith in Christ, and we all have been baptized into Christ. That means, despite the uniqueness of each individual, there is something essential that all Christians hold in common, namely, that we are all sons of the same God, share the same faith, and are baptised into the same Christ. Eph 4:4-6 puts it beautifully: “There is

³ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 136

one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” It is upon this common essence that diverse individuals are united in Christ, and it is through this unity that diversity and individuality may flourish in the communion.

Diversity and individuality will continue to be celebrated even in the New Jerusalem. According to John’s eschatological vision, the twelve apostles are still called by their own names; the saints in white robes are many; seraphim are not cherubim, nor are cherubim seraphim; Michael and Gabriel have different names and responsibilities; the elders form a distinct group; each of the four creatures has its unique features. John’s vision of the Church in heaven is an ultimate celebration of diversity and differences. Nevertheless, all the creatures in heaven will live in the same Lamblight and serve the same Triune God. With one voice they sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” The common essence of holiness will hold together all the diverse creatures in the heavenly Church, and this vision provides a pattern for the Church on earth: Although diversity and differences are to be celebrated in the Christian communion, we are called to deconstruct, on the basis of the values that we hold in common, certain differences that separate us. The Holy Spirit did not call us to stay the way we are. There is no “pure hospitality” towards alterity on God’s part. The Holy Spirit called us to be transformed to the likeness of Christ. Tillard puts it brilliantly:

The church is neither *abolition* nor *addition* but *communion* of ‘differences.’ Abolition levels everything to a single feature. Addition does not necessarily presuppose that the elements are assembled in view of the common good: an addition is a sum of individuals. On the contrary, communion demands that a *common reality*, a *unique value* be present in all members and that all have part in it, albeit in very diverse ways.⁴

Of course, it would be speculative to assert that Tillard intends to dialogue with modernity and postmodernity in this context, but certainly Tillard’s comments can be directly related to modern and postmodern circumstances. Modernity, according to Levinas and others, is preoccupied with the abolition of differences, while postmodernity, with its “impossible” ideal of pure hospitality, is concerned to create a sum of different individuals.⁵ Modernity and postmodernity face a similar dilemma.

The Modern Dilemma

In an analysis of modern individuality, Craig Gay posits that “the peculiar consciousness disclosed by modern developments is marked by the desire for autonomy and by what might be called the will-to-self-definition.”⁶ This modern impulse to autonomous self-creation requires the invention of worldview-metanarratives as an attempt to define the world.

It must be acknowledged that there are elements in modern metanarratives that are accurate and good in a Christian sense. The point is not that human beings cannot invent anything right or good when

⁴ Ibid., 9. Emphases added

⁵ See an intriguing analysis in Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 28-38

⁶ Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World*, 184.

they have declared autonomy, for human beings are, after all, created in the image of God, and common grace has been bestowed upon all human beings despite the universal depravity of humankind. The point, rather, is that the self-proclaimed “autonomous” human being has rejected the authority of the divine Word, and has audaciously assumed the role of, in the famous words of Protagoras, “the measure of all things.”

Modernity was slow to understand that this move towards autonomy entails Nietzschean perspectivism, but it has always been obvious that there has never been a single metanarrative to which everyone objectively subscribed. In a world in which God’s metanarrative has been denied for the sake of human autonomy, different people necessarily hold to different narratives according to their own interests. The immediate result is violence, because each individual holds to a different narrative, and in his “will-to-self-definition”, he cannot tolerate other narratives, since other narratives will hinder his process of self-creation. In other words, because of the “will-to-self-definition”, worldview differences entail not only differences in opinions, but also conflicts of interest.

Wars have been fought over colonies, and uprisings have occurred as a result of colonialism and racism. Genocides occurred when an entire nation became obsessed with the vision of a Third Reich, wherein all citizens are eugenic Arians. Proletariats in many parts of the world initiated brutal class struggles as an attempt to abolish class differences and establish a universal utilitarian community. These are examples of how the modern individual attempted to abolish differences, not because he wanted to

establish a loving community, but because he wanted a community wherein everybody, to his own interests, acted according to his own metanarrative.

However, there is a natural human tendency to prefer peace. Therefore, to avoid the intrusion of other narratives while minimizing violence, the modern individual must isolate himself from others. A wall was erected in Berlin to ensure peace. As a result of ceasefire agreements, siblings and spouses across the Taiwan Strait were separated for decades. North Koreans today speak with an accent that many South Koreans find difficult to understand. Even in a peaceful country like America, people have come to learn that being civilized means to avoid talking about faith and politics with one's neighbours.

Citing Toennie's thesis, Gay shows that "the process of modernization entails a shift from 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*) to 'society' (*Gesellschaft*)." ⁷ It is the creation of isolated "loose individuals."⁸ Modern society, then, has practically become at the same time a violent clash of different worlds as well as a radical isolation of different peoples, cultures, and individuals.

The Postmodern Dilemma

Postmodernism rightly sees intolerance towards differences as a cause to the modern dilemma, but it fails to take a different starting point from modernism. Postmodernism seeks the same kind of human autonomy, albeit by means of toleration towards differences, or—in Levinasian and Derridean

⁷ Ibid., 197

⁸ Ibid., 194

terms—“pure hospitality towards alterity.” In other words, postmodernism endeavours to allow every individual to be an autonomous human being in his own way; every individual is given the sacred right to define himself and define his own world, and no one is allowed to hinder the process of self-definition of any individual.

Postmodernity gives to alterity a sacred status. Any attempt to convert an individual would be considered blasphemous, because it violates his sacred alterity, hence the popular phrase of our generation, “Stop preaching to me!” Of course, this is not to say that postmodern society is monotonously hospitable towards differences, for, first of all, postmodernity has not brought an end to modernity, at least not yet, and, secondly, “pure hospitality” is more of an ideological mindset subconsciously accepted by most members of society, rather than a clearly stated doctrine to which all individuals subscribe and attempt to carry out consistently. The point here is that it has become increasingly normative in contemporary Western and Westernized societies to hold alterity sacred.

Postmodern society tries to avoid the violence and isolation of modernity by attempting to bring together diverse individuals without violating their sacred alterities. In Tillard’s words, it is an “addition” of differences—worldview differences, cultural differences, personality differences, etc. Many of these differences are radical. Radical differences entail radical boundaries—radical difficulties to establish relationship by means of communication.

A familiar example is generation gaps in contemporary society. Linguist and sociologist Peter

Schlobinski shows that as youths in Germany today try to exhibit their uniqueness and alterity, *Jugendsprachen* (youth speeches) are becoming increasingly cryptic.⁹ Language, however, is an indispensable means of human communication. Sociologists Martin Henkel and Rolf Taubert state bluntly: “*Die Grenzen meiner Sprache bedeuten die Grenzen meiner Welt*” (“The limits of my language entail the boundaries of my world”).¹⁰ As such, a wall is erected between two generations because of the *Jugendsprachen* as an attempt to exhibit and worship the alterity of the youth, and different generations become different worlds.

In 1998, news about the suicide of Matsumoto Hideto, former member of the popular rock band X-Japan, shocked an entire nation. The reason was not that such a successful young musician would kill himself, but rather that very few Japanese parents had even heard of X-Japan, whereas as many as 50,000 youths attended Matsumoto’s funeral, while three young fans committed copycat suicides following Matsumoto’s death. Evidently, the band was enormously influential among young people but hardly known among adults. In the suicide of a musician, Japanese society woke up to the greater tragedy of the existence of an almost unbridgeable gap between two generations. This tragic phenomenon is common to all postmodern societies, because the ideal of pure hospitality towards alterity inevitably brings about isolation.

⁹ Peter Schlobinski, “Jugendsprachen: Speech Styles of Youth Subcultures.” In Patrick Stevenson, Ed. *The German Language in the Real World*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 317-339.

¹⁰ Martin Henkel, Rolf Taubert, *Versteh mich bitte falsch! – Zum Verständnis des Verstehens*. (Zürich: Haffmans Verlag, 1991), 67.

This isolation, moreover, is not confined to different generations, but applies also to social subgroups and individual members of society. In 2004, the Japanese film *Densha Otoko* (電車男, translated as “Train Man”) swept through box offices across Asia and became one of the most popular Asian movies of the year. This movie portrays a social subgroup labelled “*Otaku*” (おたく), a slang word similar to the English word “geeks.” *Otaku* is characterized by a significant lack of social life. Members the *Otaku* are usually sloppy and nerdy in their appearances, addicted to video and virtual-reality games, computers, the internet, anime, comics, or pornography, and like to confine themselves to their own rooms or internet cafes. The enormous box-office success of *Densha Otoko* brought to attention the fact that an alarming percentage of young Asians today may either be classified as *Otaku* or possess certain traits of this socially impotent subgroup.

There may be various reasons why young Asians find the *Otaku* lifestyle appealing. Perhaps one of the most important causes is the postmodern worship of alterity, wherein members of society are encouraged to define themselves and their own worlds in various ways. In North America, for instance, “define your body” has been one of the most overused slogans in As-Seen-On-TV commercials. In Asia, the *Otaku* lifestyle is one that enables an individual to escape to the fantasy world that he has created for himself. In video and virtual-reality games, one is able to create and assume a wholly different identity and enjoy the success otherwise unattainable in real life. Computer experts are able to design their own worlds with their programming skills. Anime and comic books provide a means for people to escape into

their fantasy worlds and be the kind of protagonist that they want to be. Pornography also allows *Otaku* individuals to define their own sex life. These, of course, are all within the imaginary realm, but they have a strong appeal to postmodern individuals who wish to define themselves and their own worlds. This impulse drives young people to assume the *Otaku* lifestyle at the cost of being detached from the real world and isolated from society. This is an example of how the postmodern will-to-self-definition results in the radical isolation of individuals.

The postmodern treatment of alterity entails the creation of radical boundaries and hence the isolation of different individuals. Then, out of desperation to reach out to others without reducing alterity, the postmodern individual must come to a radical breakdown of boundaries. Boersma comments that for Derrida, hospitality “is an attitude of utter openness and a readiness to give, unconditionally, all my possessions to the stranger knocking on my door.”¹¹ We thus see in postmodern society the breakdown of all sorts of boundaries—national, economic, cultural, linguistic, gender-marital, physical-sexual, etc. For example, while German youths are inventing their own cryptic *Jugendsprachen* (youth speeches) to create personal boundaries, linguistic boundaries are being broken as these youths pride themselves in the heavy use of Anglicism.¹² This example also reveals the paradox that the postmodern attempt to be unique and different actually results in assimilation.

¹¹ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 28

¹² See, for example, Bernhard Kettmann: *Anglizismen allgemein und konkret: Zahlen und Fakten*. Institut für Anglistik, Universität Graz. [on-line] available: <http://gewi.uni-graz.at/~kettmann/forschungsprojekte/anglizismus/anglizismen.doc>

Meanwhile, we see that solitude continues to characterize the postmodern individual. Practically, the simultaneous erection and breakdown of boundaries means, for instance, that a postmodern girl will find it difficult to find true love because she cannot communicate with her boyfriends, but she will be so hospitable as to invite boys over the internet into her bed without even knowing their real names.

The clash between different worlds under the breakdown of boundaries, furthermore, did not really eliminate violence, but rather created other forms of violence—school shootings, terrorism, etc. For instance, North American society has become so hospitable towards otherness, that it would be considered bigotry for anyone to intrude into Cho Seung-Hui's life to tell him that something was wrong with his alterity and that he needed to change, which in effect created boundaries of solitary confinement that Cho dared not cross unless he was armed with heavy firepower. The postmodern walls that confined Cho in solitude were so great, that he must have felt, out of desperation, that committing the massacre was his only way to reach out to society. Of course, this is not to say that Cho should not be held responsible for his own actions. However, the Virginia Tech tragedy is a typical symptom of the postmodern infirmity, and we can be assured that the advance of therapeutic techniques will not put an end to this kind of violence, because at the heart of this problem is a fundamental theological error. Boersma comments sharply:

It is not clear to me why our adherence to the limitations and boundaries of the created order would have to be branded as negative. Could it perhaps be possible that the violence involved in the conditions of the created order is actually a positive thing? Even if it were possible to extend “pure hospitality,” I would argue that the result would be more violence rather than less.¹³

Postmodernism seeks human autonomy by refusing to adhere to the limitations and boundaries of the created order that the Creator has set. In postmodern society, every different individual is worshipped as a god; alterity is his licence to be worshipped. Unfortunately, each of these gods is forced into solitary confinement by his own alterity. Cho might have chosen an extreme way to break free from his solitude, but the impulse to destroy boundaries and reach out to society is common to all postmodern individuals. There can be no healing unless the fundamental theological errors are corrected, and the ecclesiology of communion seeks to correct these errors.

Towards an Ecclesiology of Communion

The Ecclesial Communion—Commons Values and the Deconstruction of Unholy Differences

The ecclesial communion does not seek to abolish differences—this was the mistake of modernity; nor is it the summation of radically different individuals—this would lead to the postmodern dilemma. In line with Boersma’s comments above, Tillard states:

¹³ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 35

On the contrary, communion demands that a *common reality*, a *unique value* be present in all members and that all have part in it, albeit in very diverse ways. There is a radical unity on which their difference flourishes... By causing the *common reality hidden under differences* to emerge, one manifests a communion, one reveals the riches of unity, one acknowledges the nobility of difference.¹⁴

Tillard is at pains to point out that difference, albeit noble, must not be given a sacred status as in postmodernism: “Individual members of Christ or a local church should not be completely engrossed in what makes them different.”¹⁵ Christians should “see in this difference the *essential* part of their Christian experience.”¹⁶ Rather than seeing difference as inviolable, “every local church must always be critical of its difference and judge it in reference to those values that are held common.”¹⁷

Tillard warns that “paradoxically, for a Christian to cling tenaciously to one’s difference, to the point of seeing nothing else, amounts to excluding oneself from the body, the vine, the dwelling of God.”¹⁸ “When diversity and difference become division and selfish concentration on oneself, to the tearing apart of mutual love, then Scripture calls it the evil of humanity, a failure which spells wounds and pain, death and tears.”¹⁹

There are universal Christian values, “values that are held common”, that serve as the basis on which we may proceed to deconstruct the walls that separate us, and these values themselves must not be

¹⁴ Ibid., 9. Emphases added.

¹⁵ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 10

¹⁶ Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138

deconstructed. These values—of the love of God and of others—are the basis of communion.

The Word—Basis of Unity and of the Denial of Human Autonomy

Christians are called to share the same essence of holiness, and this entails giving up some of our differences, because these differences may be unholy. Holiness, moreover, is defined not by autonomous human judgment, but by the infallible authority of the Word—this is a point that Tiliard has unfortunately neglected.²⁰

Biblical authority is no trivial matter to ecclesiology. If Scripture is not infallibly authoritative, then it must be subjected to the judgment of human reason. Human reason must then autonomously judge the correctness of any biblical doctrine, and in the end, human beings will be creating gods in their own images. Feuerbach rightly uses the terms “the true or anthropological essence of religion” and “the false or theological essence of religion” to describe such liberal theology.²¹ Cornelius Van Til points out rather mockingly that every liberal theologian from Schleiermacher onward has created a different god in his own image and thus fallen into Feuerbach’s trap.²²

If Scripture is not infallibly authoritative, then human beings will be left to assume the role of “the measure of all things”, thus creating many gods in their own subjective images. Different Christians will

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7

²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (NY: Prometheus, 1989)

²² Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (NJ: P&R, 1962), 4.

not have the same God or the same faith, and the essence of the ecclesial communion will be destroyed.

The essence of the ecclesial communion is founded upon the basis of Scriptural authority, without which autonomous human reason can never be denied.

In a word, diversity and individuality may flourish only upon the basis of unity in the ecclesial communion, and this unity presupposes the infallible authority of Scripture, which firmly denies the autonomy of human reason. It is only in the denial of human autonomy that human community can truly be established and individuality truly celebrated.

The External Means of Grace: The Reversal of Human Autonomy

Aside from the divine Word, it is interesting how Paul in both Gal 3:26-28 and Eph 4:4-6 names baptism as another basis for communion. The common essence includes not only one God and one faith as revealed in Scripture, but also one baptism. God and faith are unseen, but baptism is physically visible. Tillard also links the ecclesial communion to the Eucharist. He calls the Eucharistic communion “the very source of what is called the ecclesiology of communion.”²³

Tillard sees the sacraments as having real significance: “On this earth, its [referring to the communion] reality and depth find their seal in the sacraments.” He even uses the Eucharistic table to

²³ Ibid., 28

demonstrate that “the ecclesial body of Christ is not an addition of members.”²⁴

This emphasis on the connection between the visible communion of the Eucharist and the invisible catholic communion pinpoints Tillard’s efforts to reject the kind of nominalistic mindset that sees nature as independent of grace.

Too often, contemporary Christians see the visible means of grace as having no real significance, and as a result the invisible aspects are considered impertinent to daily life. It is typical for contemporary Protestants, even conservative Evangelicals, to say that God looks only at our hearts, and the external aspects of the Church—the sacraments, prayer, Scripture, liturgy, proclamation, etc.—become increasingly unimportant. What happens when these visible things are treated as mere formalities is that we start to find ourselves detached from grace, because these visible things are precisely the “external means of grace,” as Calvin and the Westminster divines put it, through which the Holy Spirit works in our hearts.²⁵ Nature will be detached from grace if the means of grace is downplayed, and human beings will be left to live, as Gay puts it, “as if God doesn’t exist.”²⁶

As shown earlier, this assumption of the autonomy of the created order is precisely the root of the common dilemma between modernity and postmodernity, and in order for the Church to show the world a way out of this dilemma, she has to reject the kind of nominalistic mindset that is so prevalent among

²⁴ Ibid., 61

²⁵ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), Book IV. Also see Westminster Larger Catechism Q.154, in S. W. Carruthers, ed., *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, Rpt. 2001), 246.

²⁶ Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998)

Protestants today.

A note of clarification may be helpful here. Nominalism, of course, can refer to various schools of thought, some of which have had positive contributions to Christian theology. By nominalism, it is meant here the Aristotelian thinking that the physical world exists independently of a transcendent and ontological world, and that Platonic discussions of a higher, ideal world are futile and irrelevant, i.e. what Platonists consider essential and ontological are merely names. This nominalistic mindset gave rise to a culture that considers the created realm independent of divine grace, and hence the warrant for human autonomy.

How this kind of nominalism has infected many Christians, especially Protestants, today deserves investigation. Of course, one may easily blame the Church's contact with secular culture during the Enlightenment, which may certainly be valid, but there seems to be a deeper cause.

Nominalism arose during the medieval period. One may ask, Did Calvin, the most influential Protestant theologian of all time, not vehemently repudiate scholasticism, and was he not always at pains to maintain consistency between the visible and the invisible, the outward and the inward? Did he not expressly reject nominalism by those famous words, "God is a law unto himself"?²⁷

Calvin certainly did not intend to bring the type of nominalistic thinking under discussion into Protestantism, and one may easily argue the same for Luther and other Reformers. However, Calvin did

²⁷ John Calvin, "A Defense of the Secret Providence of God," accessed 4 April 2006, available from http://www.the-highway.com/Calvin2_sectionI.html

not work in a theological vacuum, and he readily utilized some of the methodological tools that were available to him. Sometimes the consequences of doing so were difficult to foresee.

The Aristotelian understanding of causality is one of the methodological tools that Calvin used. In a discussion on “uncreated energies,” Eastern Orthodox writer Vladimir Lossky comments that “the western conception of grace implies the idea of *causality*, grace being represented as an effect of the divine Cause, exactly as in the act of creation; while for eastern theology there is a natural procession, the energies, shining forth eternally from the divine essence.”²⁸ The idea of causality became significant in Western theology in medieval scholasticism, and Calvin readily adopted this Aristotelian framework in discussing justification through faith:

For Scripture everywhere proclaims that the *efficient cause* of our obtaining eternal life is the mercy of the Heavenly Father and his freely given love toward us. Surely the *material cause* is Christ, with his obedience through which he acquired righteousness for us. What shall we say is the *formal or instrumental cause* but faith? ...As for the *final cause*..., it consists both in the proof of divine justice and in the praise of God’s goodness.”²⁹

In his polemic against Sadolet, Calvin names this doctrine the “first and keenest” point of contention, and “wherever the knowledge of it is taken away, the glory of Christ is extinguished, religion abolished,

²⁸ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Rpt. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Press, 1976), 88

²⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 784 (III. xiv. 18). Emphases added.

the Church destroyed, and the hope of salvation utterly overthrown.”³⁰

Calvin’s doctrine of faith is linked causally to ecclesiology. Calvin opens Book IV of the *Institutes* by naming faith as the Aristotelian fourth cause of the Church: “As explained in the previous book, it is by the faith in the gospel that Christ becomes ours... Since, however, in our ignorance and sloth we need outward helps *to beget and increase faith* within us and advance it to its *goal*, God has also added these aids that he may provide for our weakness.”³¹ In other words, there is a chain of causes here. The word “goal” in this passage indicates that not only is faith the instrumental cause of salvation, but also salvation is the final cause (i.e. purpose) of faith. Faith, in turn, is the final cause of the Church. So in Calvin, ecclesiology and the rest of the Trinitarian economy are intimately linked together in terms of Aristotelian causality.

Scripture, of course, affirms these causalities. However, there is a weakness in this system, because the chain of causality seems to break between the Trinitarian economy and the immanent Trinity. Lossky readily acknowledges causality in God’s work of creation, but he emphasizes that “it is in creation alone that God acts as cause.”³² Relying too heavily on causality may lead to the danger of detaching God’s works in creation from His ontological being. There is thus in Protestantism a weakness in explaining the Church’s participation in the ontological life of the Triune God, which is the strength of the more Platonic

³⁰ John Calvin, “Reply by John Calvin to Letter by Cardinal Sadolet to the Senate and People of Geneva.” [Online] Available: <http://www.beavervalleysoftware.com/historysources/>

³¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1011 (IV. i. 1). Emphases added.

³² Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 88

tradition of the East.

Indeed, Aristotelian causality cannot be applied to universals that exist in a transcendent world of ideals, but only to universals that exist inseparably within the particulars. Of course, many will agree that Aristotle himself held to a realistic view towards universals, but to carry Aristotle one step further from Plato is to adopt nominalism. Employing the notion of causality so extensively in theology, then, entails a weakness in resisting nominalism, though it does not lead necessarily into nominalism. This weakness may be a reason why the parts of the Western world most influenced by Protestantism are also ones that most rapidly become secularized.³³ The same weakness may also have contributed to the increasingly “disenchanted” lifestyles of contemporary Protestants, wherein the visible aspects of the Church are widely considered as mere formalities, and theology is considered detached from daily living. Tillard comments sharply:

Whereas the great tradition of the undivided church, to which the East has remained faithful, sees in the sacrament “the locus of the Spirit,” the West has sometimes sought for the Holy Spirit in pseudo-sacramental activities. It will even happen that in the Latin Catholic Church, and not only in the Reformation, the unbreakable bond between church, Holy Spirit, and Eucharist will be forgotten.³⁴

³³ See a sociological analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and secularization in Craig Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World*, 256-261. Also see Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. (New York: Anchor, 1969)

³⁴ J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 139

For us as Protestants, then, it must be remembered that both Calvin and Luther aspired to the eschatological hope of an other-worldly home, and that both saw the visible aspects of the Church—the sacraments, Word, prayer, etc.—as *real* images of things unseen. Lutherans can readily agree with Calvinists that Christians are pilgrims in this world with a heavenly hope. In very anti-Aristotelian fashion similar to the Platonic tradition of the East, Calvin and the Puritans insisted on the virtue of self-denial—which goes hand in hand with the exaltation of divine sovereignty—not only in inward thoughts, but also in outward asceticism and spiritual discipline. For instance, Calvin names fasting a “sign of self-abasement”, and encourages believers to “appoint fasting along with prayer”, “whenever men are to pray to God concerning any great matter.”³⁵ The Reformers certainly never intended to give rise to the great disenchantment of modernity.

As modern Protestants, therefore, we must return to our roots in the Reformation and re-establish meaningfulness in the external means of grace and outward religious practices. If the nominalistic disenchantment is the very cause of the destruction of individuality and community in modernity and postmodernity, then the Protestant view of the external means of grace will be the very reversal of this unhappy situation, and it will be the basis of ecclesial communion—both visible and invisible—on which individuality and diversity may truly flourish.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1242 (IV.xii.16)

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