

The Church as Ark of Salvation

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This essay is guided by two undergirding presuppositions.¹ The first presupposition is that the right context for Christian theology is the church itself, with its given discourses and practices. It is here that Christian theological reflection has its anchor and defining context. This means that ecclesiology—the doctrine of the church—is itself fundamental to any theological project. I propose the following theological definition of the church as a guide to our further reflections in this paper:

**The church is that liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the Gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy Spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God²**

The second presupposition of this essay is that the church itself, in its discourses and practices, is in wild disarray today in North America concerning what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. Not only is my definition of the church intended to guide us through the morass of confusion about the church today, but the whole of this essay will hopefully clarify some of the issues surrounding the identity and necessity of the church for the living of the Christian life. It is not uncommon in our American culture these days to say, both from within the church and beyond the church, that a person can be a good Christian, or at least authentically ‘religious,’ without any involvement in the life of the church. That conviction can be quite misleading about the connection between the church and the Christian life, and I intend to critique and dismantle that conviction.

Here at the outset of this essay, I propose that we should not assume that every group that calls itself the church of Jesus Christ is in **actuality** the church that is embodied in the definition I have just stated. While admitting that the church itself often lives amidst brokenness and disagreement within itself, I am weary of being called upon to defend—or even interpret—the discourses and practices of some groups that claim to be the church. Some groups are so profoundly antithetical to what I understand the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be and how the church is called into being by that Gospel, that I am ready to raise the question of their heretical status. I

¹ This essay was prepared for and presented to a seminar in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) at the Community Christian Church in Richardson, Texas, February 22, 2004.

² I have been massaging this definition of the church since my first years of teaching at Perkins School of Theology. It is explicitly developed in my *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 25-35, 609-654. Further references to this work will be in brackets within the text in the form of [GCF].

will not directly address the question of how we decide matters of orthodoxy and heresy, but I do contend that any ecclesiology that is incapacitated from discussing these matters is hardly an ecclesiology that could be called ‘Christian.’ [See GCF, 33-42, 645-58]

I am more than a little worried that the tradition in which I stand—the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—is so wishy-washy on issues of heresy that it allows its discourses and practices to be skewed by theological commitments that are deleterious to a faithful and truthful witness to the Gospel. Sometimes it seems that the real center of its ‘theology’ is the dogma that we are a church in which anyone can believe anything he or she pleases and that any diversity is a welcome participant in the church’s life and witness. For a church tradition that seems hesitant about ‘doctrine,’ that **dogma** of free belief and diversity is rather paradoxical in its occupying so central a place in the discourses and practices of Disciples.³

I am proposing, then, that by discussing the topic of the church as ark of salvation we will be plunging into and hopefully clarifying some aspects of what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ and how such a church might talk about human salvation. I will proceed according to this outline. First, I will construct a traditional model of the church as the ark of salvation, outside of which there is no salvation. Second, I will construct a model of the liberal church, that thinks of itself as in serious disagreement with the traditional model. Third, I will then construct a revised model of the church as ark of salvation that critiques some aspects of both the traditional model and the liberal model. It is this revised model that I am proposing to the church as a way of reclaiming its distinctive identity and mission.

A Traditional Model of the Church as Ark of Salvation

It was a common conviction of the church in its first centuries that there was no salvation outside the church: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.⁴ This is vividly expressed in the image of the church as the ark of salvation, harkening back to Noah’s ark. Relative to Noah’s ark, we find a reference joining the ark to salvation in 1 Peter 3.18-21:

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which he also went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during

³ For almost a quarter of a century I was a member of the Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The Commission made regular reports to the church over this period concerning basic issues of ecclesiology, culminating in a final report to the church on ecclesiology in 1997. This report, and other previous reports dating back to 1979, are helpfully contained in *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*, eds. Paul A. Crow, Jr, and James O. Duke (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1998). While I regard these reports as theologically sound for the most part and thoughtfully construed to encourage further study by the church, I am not aware of any sustained attempt by the officers of the General Church to see to the distribution of this book to the local and regional churches for serious study. Many of my remarks about the Disciples of Christ are diagnostic summaries of how I have heard and observed laity and clergy talk and act and make decisions at all levels of the church over a lifetime of being a member of the Disciples.

⁴ See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed., (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 206-207, 403, and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 157-159.

the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you...through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

Just as Noah's ark saved the eight persons from drowning and death during the flood, so too baptism by the church saves one from the perils and destiny of sin. Cyprian, a third century bishop, citing this passage in First Peter, said: "In saying this, he [viz. Peter] proves with his testimony that the one ark of Noah was a type of the one church."⁵ This facilitates Cyprian saying later, "...there is no salvation outside the Church..." [*salus extra ecclesiam non est*].⁶ The clear implication of this interpretation of the church is that only the members of the church are or will be saved, wherein one becomes a member of the church, as the body of Christ, through baptism.

This image of the church as ark of salvation retains a firm grip on the doctrines of ecclesiology and soteriology—the doctrine of salvation—throughout much of the church's history. It plays into what Avery Dulles calls the "institutional" model of the church in which the emphasis falls on the priesthood and episcopacy and definitive sacramental practices that determine what counts as church and how one comes to be a member of the church and by virtue of that becomes a recipient of salvation.⁷ As an institutional society, it is important that the church is an identifiable and distinct society in the midst of the many other societies, both large and small, that make up the human world. There should be no obscurity as to whether some group is truly the church of Jesus Christ, for if there is, then persons will be confused as to the group to which they must belong in order to enjoy the gracious and saving benefits of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Not every group that might claim to be the church of Jesus Christ is in fact that church that is the ark of salvation. Hence, the **visibility** of the church becomes the focus of this model. The church-visible exists where certain identifiable discourses and practices take place in public view.

The Roman Catholic Church has been most insistent on an ecclesiology that pivots around this institutional model. In its harshest moments, we can see that there really is no salvation outside of the church: the church is itself the necessary **means of grace** by virtue of which salvation is conferred. Hence, outside the church these means of grace—such as baptism, Eucharist, truthful teachings based on God's revelation—are simply not available. Those who are without these means are thereby also without the saving grace of God. Indeed at Vatican I Council in 1870 it was declared that "It is an article of faith that outside the Church no one can be saved... Who is not in this ark will perish in the flood."⁸

There are ways to soften this understanding of the church, and Vatican II strives mightily to open possibilities of salvation to those who are visibly outside the boundaries of the church.⁹

⁵ *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 5, *Early Latin Theology*, ed. and trans. S. L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 151 [Letter 73.2].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 169 [Letter 73.21].

⁷ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded edition (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 34-46. See Dulles' further discussions of other models of the church. In the long run, however, Dulles never repudiates the conviction of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

⁸ Quoted in Dulles, 41.

⁹ See *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium]*, articles 14-16 in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 32-35. See also the succinct discussion of "Outside the Church No Salvation" in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, ed. Karl Rahner (New York: Seabury Press, n.d.), 220-221.

One can, for example, distinguish with Augustine between the church-visible and the church-invisible. While the church, even at least in its invisibility, is necessary for salvation and outside of which no salvation occurs, membership in the church-visible does not guarantee ultimate salvation. The visible church can include both wheat and tares, a mixture of the good and the bad, which will be sorted out in God's consummating and ultimate judgment. The difficult question is whether the invisible church includes more than those who are members of the visible church. If it does not so include others, then the visible church is a necessary means of salvation, even if it is not a sufficient means. If it does include others outside the visible church, then membership in the visible church is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being saved.¹⁰

At the heart of this traditional understanding of the church as ark of salvation stand some basic theological convictions that should be noted. First, the church itself is founded in and by God's self-revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ. It is in the church that humans are taught who God is. This leads to the second conviction, namely, that God is triune as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Third, it is in the church that humans learn about the depths of their sin and the grace of God to overcome that sin. Without God's revelation humans might not know that they are sinful and will not know how that sin can be defeated. Fourth, the church is the bearer of the knowledge of God as triune, the knowledge of human creatureliness and sin, and knowledge of the means of grace to overcome sin and its destiny-determining consequences.

Fifth, the church has basic theological convictions about salvation. While there are many uses of salvation language in the Bible and tradition, the most fundamental sense is that salvation stands in contrast to the condition of sin and the consequences of sin. Essentially sin is rebellion against the rule of God, and its consequences include humans being alienated from their own created nature, alienated from God, and alienated from other humans. One consequence of sin is that humans are propelled into a destiny of conflict and alienation in this life and a destiny of death and hell in the next life as the just deserts of sin.

Salvation, then, refers to deliverance from these destiny-determining consequences, and this deliverance is available by the grace of God acting in Christ and in the founding of the church. Salvation, however, includes two different but related spheres of actuality: 1) the being-saved in this temporal life, and 2) the being-saved to eternal life as life-beyond-death. The church carries the keys to being saved in this life as its discourses and practices are the means of grace that can transform human life now, or at least begin the process of transformation.

In this traditional grammar,¹¹ it is assumed that there is an intrinsic and necessary connection between how life is lived now in the context of the church and the life-beyond-death. The further assumption is that there is a **dual destiny**: a destiny of the saved and a destiny of the damned. The church is the necessary means of grace by virtue of which a person gains the destiny of being-saved. For the sake of some linguistic consistency, I propose that we label the temporal process by which God's grace transforms human lives in the church as **historic redemption**. The blessed life-beyond-death we will label **ultimate redemption**. In this context, then, the model of the church as ark of salvation asserts that the church is the necessary condition for achieving both historic redemption and ultimate redemption.

Before leaving this model, I must underscore that this model emphasizes the respects in which the church is a **unique** social group, with a distinct and visible identity in differentiation

¹⁰ See Kelly, 412-16.

¹¹ For this use of 'grammar,' see GCF, 4-19. To plot the grammar of basic concepts is to see how they relate to other concepts and are embedded in distinctively human practices.

from other social groups in the world. Hence, it is important that we are able to identify just what the marks or criteria are for identifying the church. If this cannot be done, then Christians and the world will be confused about the **unity**, the **holiness**, the **catholicity**, and **apostolicity** of the church. These are the traditional ‘marks’ of the church, even though it may not always be clear just which ‘Christian’ group possesses these marks.¹²

While there are many nuances that can be made to this model of church and salvation, I hope I have identified the grammar of its basic convictions and practices. We will now examine a modern model of church and salvation that I will label ‘a liberal model of church and salvation.’

A Liberal Model of Church and Salvation

While I have relied on some Roman Catholic texts to get us started on a traditional model of the church as ark of salvation, this liberal model is so widespread and so deep in the habits of mind and heart of Protestant America that I am not interested in trying to document exhaustively just who advocates this model. Its advocacy is all around us and perhaps in us. I surely grant the word ‘liberal’ has many other uses than the way I am using it here. There are folk in the church who would call themselves ‘liberal’ but would not concede to all the points I will attribute to this model. But notice, I am saying “A” liberal model, and thereby I allow that there might be other models of church and salvation that might claim the title ‘liberal.’¹³

Before elaborating the particulars of this model, I can specify two of its basic assumptions. First, it assumes that the traditional model of the church as the unique ark of salvation is almost completely misleading about the true nature and mission of the church and the nature of salvation. Second, it assumes that the church functions best under the conditions of liberal democratic theoretical discourses and practices. It should be obvious that this model of church and salvation has arisen primarily in the West as it has existed under the influence of theories of the function of religious language and the nature of moral and political discourse as rational enterprises developed by the Enlightenment philosophies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Let us look first at the reinterpretation of the primary discourses of the church. Instead of seeing those discourses pivoting around truth-claims thought to be grounded in divine revelation, this liberal model sees the discourses as ‘religious language’ participating in a universal form of human understanding and practice. George Lindbeck has called this reinterpretation the

¹² See CGF, 604-05 for a brief discussion of the classical marks. One of the ongoing disputes among churches pivots around the meaning of apostolicity. In ecumenical Protestantism the preferred definition is ‘the faith of apostles,’ wherein that faith is contained in the NT. But Roman Catholic tradition, along with some Protestant traditions, worry about how that apostolic faith is to be preserved and guarded from distortion and corruption, i.e. from heresy. It answers that it is the ordained office of the priesthood culminating in the office of the bishop that has the authority to teach and determine what the true faith is. The bishops and the priests bear the office of successors to the apostles. In this development we can see how the ‘institutional’ character of the church, in the office of the bishop, is decisive for determining also where the church exists.

¹³ It is well to note that the words ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ are always relative to some particular discussion of contrasts. There is no one abstract meaning of ‘liberal’ or ‘conservative’ that fits all uses of these words. So let us beware: these words often get up and walk around on us. But I can stipulate how I am using this word ‘liberal’ and expect thereby that the reader will allow me to so stipulate without objecting that my use is not the ‘real’ meaning of the word.

“experiential-expressive” understanding of religious discourse.¹⁴ The proposal is that all religions are rooted in a common core experience of the divine that is pre-linguistic and comes to expression in symbolic language. As symbolic language, a particular religion employs a range of images to express itself in ways conducive to social cohesion. As symbolic, religious language is not reducible to literal language. Literal language repeatedly misses the symbolic meaning of religious language and its deep resonance in the experiential and existential lives of persons.

It is in this context of understanding that we often hear folk say, “I do not read the Bible literally.”¹⁵ Apparently they read it symbolically, and especially when the symbolic rendering matches some of the putative universal themes of human literature about life and death. The odd point about this theory of religion is that in practice a religion will spend much time trying to interpret the symbols of its life, which means translating the symbols into other nonsymbolic language.¹⁶

Let us consider a couple of examples of this sort of liberal interpretation of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. The cross, while it happened to Jesus, is a symbol for Christians of the crucifying powers of the world that often brutally defeat and kill good and righteous people. The resurrection of Jesus is not really about something that happened to Jesus himself, rather it is a symbol of how the divine is always inviting folk to start over after an apparent defeat, to not give up in the face of one’s own culpable, destructive living but realize that tomorrow one can turn around and live differently. In calling these symbols, we are affirming that the meaning complexes of the symbols are universal in scope, even if a symbol arises in the context of the life and death of Jesus. The symbols, in independence of any particular beliefs about Jesus, express something universally available to any individual, and therein lies the real religious significance of that sort of language.

Consider also the word “God,” which we are implored to regard as a symbol for that which is ultimate, unconditioned, or divine. By appealing to a common core experience of the divine, this model proposes that somehow everyone already has a intuitive sense for what the divine is and therefore to what the word ‘God’ refers. The various religions, in their symbolic language about the divine, might have different and even disagreeable ways of talking, but these differences are not decisive. We are still entitled to say we all worship the same God, and we will thereby relativize and diminish the significance of the differences.

As a comprehensive way of understanding Christian discourse and the church we can appreciate that this model construes the Christian church as one among many religions of the world but not particularly more truthful or grounded in a more authoritative revelation than any of the other religions. Christians just happen to be Christians by historical accident of location and inheritance—but confirmed by personal decision—and, if they do not literalize the discourses of the church, can get along just fine in this modern or postmodern world.

This view fits nicely with the other presupposition of the liberal model, namely, that liberal democratic political theory and practice are the contextual givens—even the intrinsic

¹⁴ See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), esp. 31-32.

¹⁵ This locution is so awful conceptually that one hardly knows where to get a hold on it. No sentence of the Bible is literal? Or, even if some sentences are literal, their religious meaning is only symbolic? Notice that when you buy into this sort of thinking, then all the particularities of Christian rootedness in history become relatively unimportant in relation to what is of universal symbolic significance.

¹⁶ Throughout his book Lindbeck critiques the essentialist-expressive model of religion and contrasts it with what he calls a “cultural-linguistic” approach. With some significant qualifications, I am sympathetic to Lindbeck’s position.

desiderata—of the church’s life. Before unraveling these, I must admit that contemporary American political discourse is so rife with disputes about ‘religion and politics,’ ‘the separation of church and state,’ and ‘keep God out of politics,’ that I cannot hope to sort through and untangle these conceptual knots in this essay. I can say that I have admired the work of Stanley Hauerwas, who has over three decades challenged the easy assumptions and alliances between the mainline churches and liberal democratic political theory.¹⁷

When I speak of ‘liberal democratic political theory,’ I do not mean the Democratic party as liberal in opposition to the Republican party as conservative. Rather, I am referring to those foundational beliefs that seem to undergird contemporary political theory and practice, whether it is Democratic or Republican. The following beliefs are what I have in mind as this political theory and its associated practices. First, human beings are **autonomous persons equipped with reason** in terms of which they morally should govern their lives by universal ethical principles grounded in rational self-interest. Only if a person stands in rational critique of all traditions and authorities will she be able to understand her rational autonomy and thereby be equipped to deal rationally and morally with other persons. Second, such autonomous persons’ rational self-interest compels them to enter into **political covenants** with other autonomous persons in which universal moral principles will apply. This rational covenant will confer rights and responsibilities on all who enter it and maintain it, and such necessarily will issue into democratic laws and procedures for the civic body. Third, religion may provide some emotional and cultural support for the engagement in public politics aimed at governing and ordering the civic community, but no distinctively religious argument is acceptable in the arena of public politics. Consequently, **religious beliefs are ‘private’ matters**, and it is open to each autonomous person to be or not to be religious in anyway he or she desires. Fourth, **no vision of human good and flourishing is to be allowed to occupy the center of political discourse and practice**. There can be a plurality of religious and metaphysical views of human life, but the fulcrum of democratic politics is the freedom of autonomous individuals to make up their own minds so long as they do not publicly subvert the principles of rational morality. It is precisely here that the liberal church can embrace the notion that America’s public polity and ethics should remain steadfastly **‘secular’** in distinction from favoring any particular religious view.

When these principles get transported into the discourses and practices of Christian churches, and when they are combined with a symbolic understanding of Christian discourse, we can see why the church becomes a dispensable community, why persons easily think they can be Christian—if they want to be—without any affiliation with a Christian community, why salvation itself gets translated into ‘whatever an individual finds meaningful for herself,’ and why a traditional understanding of sin and its consequences gets dropped from the discourse of the church—or simply interpreted as ‘whatever impedes or frustrates my self-determined self-fulfillment.’ For this model of church, then, **the whole of Christian faith gets translated into either individual satisfaction or into what is defensible morally in rational public discourse**.

Let us now put the implications—and the actual practices—of this model of church and salvation in contrast to the model of the church as ark of salvation. 1) The church is not a unique

¹⁷ Hauerwas is a prolific author and his critique of liberalism arises in most of his writings. A good place to start is his *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, written with William H. Willimon, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) is a lively and sustained critique of the liberal presuppositions of the mainline churches. *The Hauerwas Reader*, eds. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) is an excellent collections of his writings over a long period of time, with a useful index.

community, founded in divine revelation and necessary for salvation. Rather, the church is itself only one among many religious possibilities. Among religions there is not much sense to the distinction between the true and the false. 2) The liberal church is designed for a liberal political society in which there is a marketplace of religions and ideas, and the autonomous individual is encouraged to shop around to find that religion that is most suitable to his predilections. 3) The discourses and practices of any religion are expected to not violate the universal rational principles of morality that are the linchpins of a democratic society. 4) The liberal church, therefore, can minister to those persons who want to be consumers of religion. However, whatever critique it might undertake of American culture and/or governmental policies must be in accordance with rationally defensible moral principles, such as justice.¹⁸ 5) It can now be easily seen that the liberal church will construct its fundamental mission in terms of underwriting liberal democracy as the best hope for managing the future of humanity in rational and just ways. By so underwriting liberal democracy, the church will protect its own private and preferential symbolic discourses and practices from government interference. 6) Hence, the ethics of the liberal church becomes indistinguishable from the ethics of liberal democratic theory and practice. 7) Furthermore, this model of church neutralizes the apparent conflict among religions, reducing them all to preferential and experiential discourses that are humanly helpful and should not lead to violence or conflict or arrogant claims to possess ‘absolute truth.’

As should be obvious, this model sharply collides with the model of the church as ark of salvation. 1) The church is only accidentally unique as that community that shares certain symbols and practices. It is not unique as the bearer of salvation, as there are many other communities and religions that might be bearers of salvation. 2) The church itself is not necessary to human fulfillment and meaning; anyone can mold together a personal recipe of diverse religious symbols without being a member of the church. 3) The primary sense of salvation refers to those processes in human life and history in which persons are being liberated from social oppression, whether that oppression is brought about by socio-economic powers or by personal enslavements and incapacities. Hence, **freedom and self-realization, as being free from unjustified oppression, is the basic salvific aim of the church’s life.** 4) Salvation as ultimate redemption in life beyond death is a permissible but not an essential belief. It is in the living moment now that folk either do or do not find life meaningful and good or at least endurable.

Whether or not anyone of the readers or hearers of this paper would identify with all the points I have attributed to this model, I propose that the constellation of ideas and practices that comprise this model are deeply influential within the actual discourses and practices of the mainline churches in America.

A Revised Model of Church as Ark of Salvation

The revision of the traditional mode of the church as ark of salvation that I am proposing is similar to that view sometimes called ‘postliberal.’ The concept of postliberal is generally

¹⁸ It is one of the great ironies of democratic theory and practice that justice is repeatedly appealed to and is the primary paradigm of secular politics and morality, but it remains so vague and malleable in the hands of various persons, parties, and ideologies. It is a further irony that this last century, which experienced the worst and most extensive slaughter of humans in history, found most of this slaughter being justified by appeal to some idea of justice. For an acute discussion of the vagaries of views of justice, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

associated with George Lindbeck¹⁹ and his colleague at Yale, Hans Frei.²⁰ I deliberately refrained from using the word ‘postliberal’ to describe the position I developed in my recent systematic theology. While I have learned much from Frei and Lindbeck, I am not a whole-hearted follower of either, and therefore I did not want, in my systematic theology, to be saddled with having to explicate and defend their positions. It seemed less complicated to avoid the term and proceed on to discuss theological issues without the burden of that label. The explication of this revised model is my own construction, and I do not assume any responsibility for having accurately interpreted Frei and Lindbeck.

While I develop the concept of ‘grammar of discourses and practices’ a bit differently than Lindbeck, I do agree with his basic point that Christian faith and the church are more appropriately understood as a distinct “cultural-linguistic” social reality in the midst of many other social realities.²¹ I affirm that **the church only exists within its own distinctive discourses and practices**, and when these are in disarray or become neglected or are repudiated, then the church itself falls into brokenness and unfaithfulness.

Further, I am affirming that the church should be moving beyond its liberal phase, which has dominated much of its intellectual life for two centuries, into a new phase that avoids some of the pitfalls of the traditional model of the church and salvation and that positively appreciates some of the contributions of the liberal model. I am proposing that the church move beyond liberalism and pursue a **revised traditional ecclesiology** that might recover for us the truth of the claim that the church is the ark of salvation. What I develop in miniature in this section takes two volumes to develop more fully in my *Grammar*. However, I am convinced that the wholeness of those two volumes require an understanding of the church as ark of salvation, even though I will recommend some emendations in what we might mean by salvation and how it is conferred.

Consider now the following theses about language that bring together my discussion of language, as comprised of discourses and practices, in the *Grammar* [17-18]:²²

1. *The uses of words and locutions to make sense are embedded in traditions of usage.* We can’t speak language without some community of users bound together through social conventions and rules of practice. These communal practices may be stretched, revised, or flouted, but they cannot be completely omitted and still make sense. Note: *making sense* is a communal activity as well as an individual activity.
2. *Language has to be learned and such learning involves learning skills in using words in social settings and communal games.* Mastering signs is

¹⁹ See Lindbeck.

²⁰ A good place to start on Hans W. Frei’s work is his posthumously published essays, *Theology and Narrative*, eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Types of Christian Theology*, eds. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). In a spirited way with his own creative voice, William Placher’s *Unapologetic Theology: A Christian Voice in a Pluralistic Conversation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) discerningly displays some of the main themes of a postliberal theology.

²¹ See Lindbeck, 32-41, for a brief explication of what he means by a “cultural-linguistic” approach.

²² I urge my readers and listeners not to despair when they run into some technical words in these theses. I trust the gist of my characterization of language and human understanding and experience will come through nevertheless. But I am indeed teaching some new concepts, however, and it will, in line with my theses, take some practice to learn how to use them.

learning how to use the requisite words in determinate social settings, to be able to engage in particular social practices. Mastering signs is like learning how to use *tools* for making sense in life, for working intelligibly in one's life in the world. Think, for example, of *learning how to sing praises to God*.

3. *Language provides the structure of our experience, understanding, and perspectives.* We experience the world and have a world in and through language, through signs, speech acts, and practices. Our *discourses and practices* are how we have a world, or worlds.
4. *In learning particular language networks, we are learning the discourses and practices that comprise having the world in that way.* Think of learning the language of physics: one *sees and understands* the world differently, and one acquires skills in investigating and explaining the world. What we are empowered to see, discern, and describe is dependent on the language we possess.
5. *The limits of our language are in some ways the limits of our understanding and therefore of our world.*
6. *Language is thus a human construct and construal.* It is produced by human interactions, agreements, and social practices. Hence, words do not have eternal and necessary meanings independent of their locations and usages in human communities and traditions.
7. *It is only within some language that we can test our construal of the world: we cannot completely abandon and step outside all language and look simply at the world.*
8. *Our humanity is shaped by our language and the communities of discourses and practices in which we participate.* Our living discourses and practices shape human self-understanding.
9. *The description of the grammar of language is a description of how language makes sense in its syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions.* The *depth grammar* of a particular set of linguistic practices will show how these dimensions of language hang together to make sense. For example, the depth grammar of trinitarian talk will show how embedded such talk is in self-involving, communal practices of identifying, praising, and witnessing to God in the church.
10. *Learning how to experience Christian faith is learning how to construe the world and oneself through the discourses and practices of the church with its peculiar language, its peculiar ways of being-in-the-world and having-a-world.*

From these theses you can understand why I worry about the church's discourses and practices in these times. The American culture, as a culture that is clearly dependent on many aspects of Christian tradition, uses many of the words of Christian tradition, such as, 'church,' 'sin,' 'grace,' 'Jesus is Lord and Savior,' without any sense for the distinctive Christian usage that is intended to shape human life and understanding. Even some folk ostensibly in the church no longer use distinctive Christian language to shape their lives. While mouthing the Christian words on repeated occasions, they are concretely shaped by the many discourses and practices of their larger culture. Or, as I have said on other occasions, they do not **inhabit** the discourses and practices of Christian faith. This tension between the discourses and practices of the church and those of the world is inherent in being the church.²³

In line with these theses about the inescapability of discourses and practices in actual human living, the central proposals for my understanding of the church are: 1) **The church is necessarily a distinctive language** rooted in the traditions of usage that go back to the Bible and come over the centuries through the discourses and practices that are handed on by the church. 2) **To be a Christian is to learn how to be a Christian** by learning how to construe the world in and through the discourses and practices of the church. 3) Since these discourses and practices do convey the faith of the church, they are themselves the **means of grace** by virtue of which Christian understanding and life have content and vitality. 4) Outside these discourses and practices a person simply does not have the means by which to understand himself and God in ways that are salvific. It is in this sense that the church is the ark of salvation, outside of which folk simply do not have salvation because they do not know who God is and what God has done for the salvation of the world. 5) However, in line with some of the primary doctrines of the church, I will propose a **revised way of understanding salvation**. 6) It is almost as if folk in our time in America have forgotten how to say and mean, and thereby occupy, the distinctive discourses and practices of Christian faith.

In short, I will be proposing some normative understandings of Christian faith, which are surely arguable; but I will not be able in this essay to display all the justifications that others in the church might require. I will start with the normative claims by recalling and explicating my opening definition of the church:

**The church is that liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God.**

By identifying the church as **liberative and redemptive** I am immediately saying the church has to do with human salvation. This, of course, poses the question of what 'salvation' means here. Earlier in this paper I proposed that most of the salvation language in the Bible and traditions pivots around a contrast between **what one is saved from** and **what one is saved to**.

²³ See CGF, 47-52, for a discussion of what I call the 'dialectic between the church and the world.'

At the heart of this contrast is sin: one is saved from sin and its consequences and is saved to a life and destiny not determined by sin.

The root of all the forms of sin is human unbelief: the practical refusal to live obediently before God. This primitive unbelief issues 1) into sin as **pride:** living a life in which the self is the center of all valuing and seeks to have life on its own terms; 2) into sin as **sloth:** the refusal to be a responsible self before God and the inclination to permit the powers of the world to tell us who we are and what we are worth; 3) into sin as **concupiscence:** a life of disordered desires driven to and fro by a quest to find fulfillment and satisfaction, yet not understanding that God should be the supreme desire of human life; 4) into sin as **falsehood and lies:** a life given to lies about others and one's situation in the world and to self-deception and its attendant falsehoods.

The consequences of sin are that human life is corrupted and lost, in alienation from God, from one's own created nature, and in alienation from one's neighbors and enemies. This corruption of life falls into envy, suspicion, anger, hatred, and much violence, culminating in a dominating fear of death. These corruptions also corrupt human societies, and they too suffer from and perpetuate human sinning, resulting in terrible rivalry, fear of the strange others—the stranger and the enemies—and perpetual violence. [See GCF, 343-364]

But all this language about sin is unavailable to us without understanding who God is and who God is in Jesus Christ. [See GCF, 345-352] The judgment of God—as we shall see in Jesus Christ—is that sin and its consequences, which include both our sinning and our being sinned against by others, is that sort of life that cannot of itself achieve human flourishing and well-being. God says 'no' to sin as that which leads only to the kingdom of death and death-dealing and therefore to no-life. Hence, left to our own sinful living and therefore to our own devices and stratagems, human life leads only to alienation, conflict, enmity, defeat, despair, and death.

The church, therefore, is a **community of persons** that is involved in the salvation of human beings from their own sinful living and its consequences for their destiny. The church is a community of persons, and this is not some vague social group. It is a community of persons, living in formative interaction with each other. I cannot emphasize too much that the church is not an abstract ideal but is a community of persons who live, think, converse, and act together in the actual formation of how they live in the world. There is a social physicality and concrete interaction that is essential to the church. The church is a visible social body always located somewhere and involving specific persons in interaction with each other.

But even more importantly, it is a community of persons **called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** When we place an emphasis on the church as called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are immediately denying that the church is primarily a voluntary society of folk who have similar interests and who get together to pursue those interests. It should also be obvious that the church is not a community formed by the free choices of *autonomous* individuals who regard the church as in their rational self-interest. Rather, the church is called or summoned into existence by the Gospel. It is comprised of folk who have heard something from God in Christ and are pulled into the community in the midst of their sinful brokenness as a matter of life and death. Persons may indeed saunter in and take up a place in the community of the church, but they only truly enter the vitalities of the church through the passion of baptism. Without the baptism and passionate confession of faith, persons, who may interact with the community from time to time but in avoidance of baptism, are tempted to become spectators rather than believers.

Over the years of teaching in seminaries, I have repeatedly asked my students in theology to tell me in a short form just **what they think the Gospel is.** It is a chastening and necessary

exercise and experience for the students, for they have presumably come to seminary because they think there is an actual Gospel revealed by God. While it is everywhere evident in the NT that there is some good news that calls the church into existence, the church sometimes becomes forgetful as to what that good news is. When that happens, the church forgets what its founding calling is. Similarly, if the church—in its denominational form or in its particular congregational form—does not have a shared sense for what the Gospel is, then it follows logically and practically that the church will find its actual discourses and practices in disarray. This disarray will result in confusion about its own identity and mission. Put another way, when the actual discourses and practices of the church make it conceptually and practically impossible to determine and discern heretical understandings of the Gospel, then the church falls easily into allowing whatever whim of the moment to occupy the center of its life.

This does raise, then, the question of what that Gospel is. Because its very heart and health are at stake, I believe that every generation of the church must struggle to identify and state clearly just what it regards as the Gospel that is basic to the church's identity and mission. The church is that community that sustains a continuing conversation within itself and in relation to Scripture and traditions concerning the Gospel. It is useless, however, for a congregation to construct a mission statement when there is no shared consensus as to what the Gospel is that calls it into existence. Such an exercise in finding a mission will only reveal the sad extent to which that congregation has lost its identity and is trying to find some way to pretend its fragile life together is really meaningful and perhaps Christian.

A critical question that the church must solve in formulating its understanding of the Gospel is whether 1) Jesus is merely the **bearer** of the Gospel but is not essential to its content, or 2) Jesus is essential to the content of the Gospel and it cannot be truthfully articulated without affirming that he is not only the **bearer** but also the constitutive **heart** of the Gospel. I will argue that Jesus is essential to the Gospel, and I judge that the liberal model of church would contend that the Gospel is independent of Jesus. Hence, it is important in my ecclesiology that 'Gospel' always means 'Gospel of Jesus Christ.'

In my *Grammar* I propose the following statement of the Gospel: [See GCF, 27]

**The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News
that the God of Israel, the Creator of all creatures,
has in freedom and love become incarnate
in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth
to enact and reveal God's gracious reconciliation
of humanity to Godself, and
through the Holy Spirit calls and empowers human beings
to participate in God's liberative and redemptive work by
acknowledging God's gracious forgiveness in Jesus,
repenting of human sin,
receiving the gift of freedom, and
embracing authentic community by
loving the neighbor and the enemy,
caring for the whole creation, and
hoping for the final triumph of God's grace
as the triune Ultimate Companion of all creatures.**

Notice that this statement of the Gospel almost has a creedal character to it as it aims to identify for us just what truly constitutes the essential good news that calls the church into being from its very beginnings in time. Further, notice that there are two outstanding and decisive **historical particularities** in the statement: **Israel** and **Jesus of Nazareth**. These two particularities, God's electing and covenanting with the people of Israel over a period of time in human history and God's becoming incarnate in a Palestinian Jew who lived at a particular time in history, are the deep anchor points of the Gospel. These particularities are not accidents of history that provide a mix for good symbols; these particularities are at the heart of the Gospel, and without them there is no distinctively Christian Gospel.

It is in this sense that we have a **narrative** framework that is essential to the Gospel. It is a large narrative that is rooted in the biblical testimony in which God identifies Godself to the people of Israel as the one who elects and covenants with them and therefore is the only God there is. As such, the God of Israel is the Creator of the whole world. Hence, we have a distinction between the Creator and all creatures who, in being creatures, are not-divine.

But human beings created by God and Israel elected by God fall into repeated rebellion against God and want to be divine themselves and have life on their own terms. They do not like being creaturely finite, and they do not like having to live peacefully with other humans. Their fear of others goads them into violence and wars. It is in this narrative context that God comes to the rescue of Israel and all humanity in a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. The church arises out of Jesus' life—his proclamation and enactment of the impinging Kingdom of God—his brutal death on the cross by the reigning principalities and powers in his historical world—and his resurrection from the dead as the vindication of his life and as hope for the world in a redemption that is eternal. Those who emerge out of these events as followers of Jesus come to realize they cannot properly narrate the course and significance of his life without regarding his life, death, and resurrection as the revelation of the being and reality of God. Indeed, **Jesus is God's own self-revelation**: the very incarnate presence of God in the events of this man's life and death and resurrection from the dead.

The good news about this is **that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself** and thereby not counting human sins against them and thereby giving them grace and forgiveness and hope of life and destiny utterly and completely conferred and sustained by God's grace. [2 Cor 5.16-21] This forgiving grace comes into the lives of the followers of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is not some vague spirit flitting here and there, but is the very Spirit of the God of Israel and of Jesus the Son of God. It is this Spirit that provides the empowerment for folk to **acknowledge God's gracious forgiveness in Jesus** and to **repent of their sin** and therewith to **receive the gift of freedom to live away from sin**.

But this living in a new freedom cannot be done without embracing other folk and forming **authentic community in which agapic love is manifested**. Strangely, this authentic community cannot truly be the community of the faithful without being open to the stranger and the enemy as persons for whom Jesus lived and died and was raised.

Hence, the church is called into existence to be the **body of Christ** in the world in order that the whole world might hear the Gospel and have their lives transformed as well. It is here that we can return to our definition of the church: **the church is called into existence by the Gospel to witness in word and deed to the living triune God for the benefit of the world**. Witnessing to God and God's gracious good news is then the purpose and mission of the followers of Jesus. Precisely in their **words or discourses** and in their **deeds or practices** they are witnessing to God so that the world might know God, might know themselves as loved and

forgiven by God, and might know themselves as beneficiaries of a hope in life and death that is the supreme good of human life. In all these respects, then, the life of the church—precisely in and through its distinctive discourses and practices—bears and conveys the **means of grace** by way of which God’s gracious Gospel becomes good news to the world.

Hence, these narrative particulars are essential to the Christian life and witness, and while they do have universal significance, the particulars are not accidental and dispensable. Rather, there is no Gospel message apart from these particulars. Hauntingly, then, where this Gospel-formed narrative is tattered or obscured or even subverted, then the life of the church has lost its vital center and reason for being.

So, in its discourses and practices the church is to witness to the triune God **for the benefit of the world**. It is the world, with all its violence and malevolence and selfishness and greed, that God loves and has already forgiven and reconciled in Christ. But the world knows neither Christ nor that reconciling forgiveness, and therefore the world does not really know how deeply it is riven with sin. The discourses of the world vacillate between 1) that tragic despair in the unhappy and conflictual nature of human life that is overwhelmed by the fear of death and suffering, and 2) that heroic optimism that just one more war or one more program will make the world safe and hospitable to human flourishing. The world repeatedly invokes divine authorities to buttress their own claims to be the decisive agents in history, but these are the no-gods that perpetuate human enmity and violence under the illusion of pursuing peace and justice.

But the church cannot witness to that world in words separated from deeds of faithfulness in living and being the body of Christ in the world. “Word separated from deed is hypocritical, vain, deadly, and a lie. Deed separated from word loses its proper context, intentionality, and luminosity.” [GCF, 164] Hence, the church can only live in faithfulness when it is shaped and formed by the distinct narrative of God’s life with the world, which we have been discussing in outline.

The definition of the church speaks of “the triune God” and it is fair to ask why I refer to God as triune? Of course, the triuneness of God simply is the language of the ecumenical traditions of the church. It arises in the grammar of the church as it sorts through what it means to say “Jesus is Lord,” which is uttered throughout the NT. While Jesus is undeniably human, it would certainly appear to most Jews that he could not be Lord, for there is only one Lord and his name is Yahweh, the God of Israel. But, if Jesus, precisely in his life and in his death and in his resurrection, is the self-revelation of the God of Israel, then he is not only the bearer of the Gospel but is himself the Gospel.²⁴ He is what God is doing on behalf of human salvation. It is because Jesus was finally considered to be divine that trinitarian language emerges in the life of the church’s witness. Were one to believe that Jesus is not divine and that his divinity is not crucial to understanding who God is, then trinitarian language becomes symbolically optional and even negligible and is not essential to the statement of the Gospel. Jesus may then be the bearer of good news but he is not himself essential to that news. That I affirm with the ecumenical church that the human Jesus is God incarnate and that God is triune goes to the marrow of what I regard as heretical in the liberal model of church I constructed earlier.

I have tried to make the case for the appropriateness of trinitarian language in the church throughout my *Grammar*. But rooted in the narrative I have outlined above, trinitarian grammar intends to say God has three internally related ways of being one God: as the One who creates all things and elected Israel—**God the ground of all that is**; as the One who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth for salvation of the world—**God the One who salvificly encounters us in**

²⁴ See the stunning transformation of meanings taking place within Jewish language in Philippians 2.5-11.

life; as the One who is the Spirit that endows life and transforms life—**God the One who is the dynamism that works within creaturely life to bring it to redemption.** The point: we cannot adequately speak the narrative and identify God without speaking in these three different but interrelated ways of God being God.²⁵

I want now to propose some distinctions in **how we use salvation language.** These distinctions all presuppose the contrast between sin and its consequences and the grace of God. I affirm that there are three spheres in the use of salvation language in the church. First, there is the sphere of salvation in what God has done for humans in Jesus Christ, which I call the objective sphere of **Reconciliation and Justification.** Second, there is the sphere in which persons say ‘yes’ to what God has done in Jesus Christ, which is what I call the sphere of **Historic Redemption.** Third, there is the sphere of salvation that pertains to the final destiny of persons in relation to death and to God’s final consummation of all things. I call this the sphere of **Ultimate Redemption.** To keep our discussion of salvation straight it is helpful to remember these distinctions, explore their interconnections, and to see that we may be asking different questions in each sphere.²⁶

This gets us into the interpretation of the first sphere of salvation as **Reconciliation and Justification.** I interpret **what happens in Jesus Christ as God-acting and being-acted-upon and as human-acting and being-acted-upon for the salvation of the world.** Apart from Jesus Christ the situation of humanity is life in sin, suffering those consequences I have enumerated earlier. God’s wrath is God’s ‘no’ to sin as that which is not intended by God as part of the good creation, even though it is permitted by God in conferring finite freedom on humans. But God’s wrath is not something God externally imposes on human beings. Rather, God’s wrath is God’s permitting sin and its consequences to unravel and thwart human well-being. The ways of sin are not the ways to human flourishing. Evil is writ large and small in the ways in which the world organizes itself and distributes goods and powers.

These powers of human sinfulness, who pretend they are the real powers of meaning, life, and death, brutally slay Jesus on a cross of shame. Little do they realize they are slaying the divine Life in the form and presence of this man Jesus. Jesus the eternal Son of God dies a human death on the cross. This is God taking the sins of the world upon and into the divine Life, and thereby disarming the powers of their pretense that they are in control of human life and death. It is God who is in charge of human life and destiny, and, in taking these powers of sin and death into and upon God’s own Life, God is graciously forgiving humans their sin, reconciling them to Godself, and refusing to treat them as sinners who are doomed to despair and death.

Further, without the resurrection of Jesus, as something that happened to Jesus and involves his self-manifestation to others, the powers of the world might still be apprehended as the real makers and rulers of the world. The raising of Jesus is the vindication, through redemptive and healing power overcoming death, that the life and death of Jesus is truly the revelation of the Life of God. [See CGF, 458-473 on the resurrection of Jesus]

Hence, in this first meaning of salvation, **in Jesus Christ it objectively happens that God graciously forgives sinners and invites them to new life without suffering the consequences of sin.** In the NT and the traditions of the church this is variously talked about as

²⁵ See the full statement of trinitarian rationale in GCF, 167-215. My claim is that the Gospel itself cannot be fully conveyed as to who God is without trinitarian language, however difficult and perplexing it might from time to time be.

²⁶ See CGF, 503-509 for a brief schema of salvation grammar.

atonement, reconciliation, and justification. God's wrath is revealed as only a preliminary word and judgment but not as God's final judgment. That final judgment is manifested in the cross as God's loving humanity with a love that will not leave us to our devices and self-wrought destiny. In this first sense of salvation, then, all persons are in Christ, whether they know it or not, and whether they live it or not. [See CGF, 443-457 on the cross, and 473- 480 on the salvific benefits of Christ]

Given, then, what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the world, we come now to the second sphere of salvation I have called **Historic Redemption**. It is, of course, God's desire that human beings should know and rejoice in what God has done on their behalf in Christ Jesus. The church in its simplest and most primitive form is comprised of those persons who have encountered Christ—living, crucified, and raised from the dead—and have said 'yes' to him as salvific good news. These are the ones who acknowledge Christ as sheer grace, who are caught up in the process of living in conformity with Christ, who are learning how to be loving and forgiving to others, even enemies. These are the ones who worship God as the One who has come among us as a human being and has acted on our behalf and who will continue to act on our behalf. In short, these folk are **new creations** and a **new community** that God has launched into human history to witness to God and thereby to witness to a new way of being-human and being-together with other humans. In other words, these folk form a new community as an **alternative way of life** compared to how they used to live and how the communities of the world actually live.

The Christian life and the church are thus rooted in what God has already done in Christ. We can put it this way: what God has done in Jesus Christ is the **indicative foundation** of the Christian life, and it gives rise to those imperatives for living that I characterize as the **ethics of grace**. This ethics asks: given what God has done for us in Israel and in Jesus Christ, how are we called to live? It is, therefore, not an ethics that seeks the reward of grace and forgiveness. Rather, it is an ethics that is rooted in forgiveness and empowered by the grace of the Spirit, and it seeks to conform human life to God's life in loving God and loving the neighbor, which now includes the stranger and the enemy. This ethics, of course, is to be differentiated from that liberal, presumably rational, ethics that presupposes rational self-interest and calculates obligations according to a utilitarian, cost/benefit analysis. [CGF, 511-528]

This life-together in the church can be schematized as **liberation, sanctification, and emancipation**. The church is comprised of those who know they have been given in Jesus Christ liberation or freedom from sin and its consequences. They are forgiven and now called to live that freedom. The full living out of that new freedom intrinsically involves being caught up in the process of sanctification: to live into that holiness that has been given in Christ and now is appropriated in holy living.²⁷ Further, the Christian and the church are the ones who are committed to the nonviolent emancipation of their neighbors from the domination and subjugation of the powers of the world. The church cannot live its life in ignorance or forgetfulness of the consequences of sin that still stalk life in the world. At the heart of its emancipating works is modeling peace within itself for the world and working in the world to bring about peace in nonviolent ways.

²⁷ I believe it is urgently the case that the Protestant traditions need to rediscover the meaning of sanctification as that disciplined way of living and growing into relationship with God. It is in relation to sanctification that the current popular talk of 'spirituality' should be developed. See my extended discussion of sanctification and spirituality in CGF, 537-545. See also how it relates to Discipleship, 545-553.

Thus far I think I have shown that this historic redemption is unique, grounded in what God has done in Israel and in Jesus Christ for the whole world. The narrative that captures these activities of God is not a general symbol available wherever people might look or whatever tradition they might live. They need to hear the narrative and learn how to live in the light of it, and that narrative is available only in the church of Jesus Christ. Put another way, **the church itself only truly exists where that narrative is recited and lived in the discourses and practices of a community.** That is why the actual discourses and practices of the church must be continually critiqued lest they fall into disarray and falsehood. These discourses and practices—in their precious specificity, faithfulness, and truthfulness—are wonderfully the **means of grace** by way of which persons come to know God, have a relationship with God, and come to know themselves as sinners who have been forgiven and called to a new way of living. Here is the heart of what it means to say the **church is the ark of salvation**, outside of which these means of grace do not exist.

We can now deal with two important questions often asked by the liberal church. First, it asks whether the church, even in my revised model, is presumptuous in thinking it knows God truly. However, notice that this question presupposes that there might be some other context or some other concept of deity that will show us just how presumptuous our discourse about God is. But what is this other context or concept of divinity and where does it come from and what is its privileged status? I suspect it is formed from other premises than those that affirm that God has revealed Godself in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ and called the church into existence. While it is intrinsic to the grammar of deity in the church that God is incomprehensible, this primarily means that God is not simply characterizable as an object in the world. It does not mean that God is utterly unknown and that Christians and others alike are just ‘gassing and guessing’ when they speak of deity. [See CGF, 31-32, 152-54, 178]

I pray that the church will have the courage to recognize that this liberal critique and my rejoinder represent a clash between two radically different ways of construing God and the world. And I pray and have written this essay in the hope that the church will then have the courage to go about its witness to the God known in the narrative. **Either the rough outlines of the narrative are bedrock for Christians and the church or they are not.** When it becomes apparent that they are not for some folk, then that church is subverting its biblical and traditional witness. Whatever the subverting group might claim to be, it is difficult to acknowledge them as the church of Jesus Christ.

Second, the liberal model asks whether my revised model of the church implies that folk outside the church, in other religions or not, simply do not know God and thereby do not know ‘salvation’ in historic redemption? Isn’t it arrogant to condemn nonChristians to hell? Well, whatever then does the word ‘salvation’ mean in this question? Surely we must admit that, outside the church, folk in the world in other communities do often perform, for example, acts of kindness, charity, loyalty, justice, self-giving, and truth-telling. So the question being raised requires a complex answer that I will give here in a shortened version.

According to the narrative of Christian faith I have proposed, every person, even those who are not actively engaged in saying ‘yes’ to God’s grace in Christ, are in theological fact ‘in Christ.’ **They are included in those for whom Christ lived and died and was raised.** Hence, before God they stand **forgiven and graced.** But surely our saying that, as devout utterances of faith, may make no sense to them. Yet the point is, from the church’s perspective, whether that language makes any sense to those outside the church, it does make sense within the church. This means immediately that for the church these others beyond the church are our brothers and

sisters before God's grace and are the ones we are summoned to love and to whom we are to witness. And because we believe God has not and will not leave the church to its own devices, so too we can and should believe that the God who is the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer will not finally forsake those beyond the church. Unfolding this point will take us into the sphere of ultimate redemption, which will be forthcoming below.

We can also affirm that intrinsic to trinitarian theology is the belief is that the three ways of God being God—the three persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are dynamically interrelated such that each way is implicated in what the other ways do. Accordingly, in the NT it comes to be said that Jesus Christ was there at the beginning of all things as the Logos that it is at the heart of all things creaturely. Now if the Logos is Jesus Christ through whom all things creaturely were made, then the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus must further define for us just what is at the heart of the creation: namely, suffering and self-giving love that is the final redemptive Word in all things.²⁸ So, we might admit that there are 'signals' of this Logos/Christ in other places and traditions in forms that are now hidden from us. But having said that, we must also say that Christ could not be revealed in other places and forms that 'contradict' what we know of Jesus Christ. God is not duplicitous and in self-contradiction to Godself.

Likewise, the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ is at work in the world wherever redemptive healings and transformations are taking place in the world. **The Spirit's work—just as is Christ's work—is not restricted to the boundaries of the church.** Yet, in the construal power of the its discourses, the church is that **specially gifted community** that can discern, name, and rejoice in the Spirit redemptively at work in the world. In the church, through its ways of talking and understanding, we are given the **grace of conceptual lens** through which to identify the work of Christ and the Spirit, which are paradigmatically at work in the church. [See CGF, 483-502 on the Spirit]

We come now to discuss the third sphere of salvation I have called **Ultimate Redemption**. Under this rubric I especially include those matters of human ultimate destiny in relation to death and God's final consummation of all things. I have spent a laboriously long chapter in my *Grammar* trying to develop a way of talking about these matters that is in significant conflict with many of the ways in which church traditions have talked. I cannot recapitulate here the fullness of that discussion. [See CGF, 709-748] But there should be no surprises here, given what I have said to this point.

I have repeatedly emphasized the sovereignty and power of God's love and forgiveness as we know them in Jesus Christ. This is about God's graciousness to humanity that is not given as the just deserts of humans. It is not a reward for being and living righteously. Rather, it is given in spite of the fact that humans deserve condemnation for the sinful ways in which they live in relation to others and to God, and are thereby destructive even of their own good. When we are justified in Christ, we are not being justified as a reward or as what we deserve. We are being justified by an act of God that is prior to any response of ours, but it is, when we acknowledge the justification, evocative of our gratitude and repentance. Put simply: God justifies and forgives us even before we ask for forgiveness. Among ordinary humans, forgiveness is usually given to another only after the other has repented, sincerely apologized, and asked for forgiveness. God works otherwise and by a different logic. [See CGF, 513-519]

I propose that this basic and irremovable theme of Christian faith flies in the face of another traditional theme of the church's discourses. That is the theme, expressed at points in the

²⁸ See John 1.1-14; Col 1.19-20; Heb 1.2-3.

Bible and dominant in the tradition, that ultimately there must be **dual destiny**: a destiny for the saved and a destiny for the damned. When we ask how this destiny is decided, the church ineluctably has moved to say either 1) persons are saved by their own righteous living or 2) persons are saved by the grace of God.

The first alternative comes dangerously close to saying that we **earn** ultimate salvation by how we live. Herein, then, ultimate salvation is a **reward** for holy living. Precisely what that holy is has been hard to pin down in the tradition. But it may look as though one could say that only those in the church, as the ark of salvation, are those who will be ultimately saved.²⁹ But if the community of the church is comprised of folk who are struggling to learn how to live under the grace of God in Christ and who may not yet be ‘perfect’ in all of their living, then by what criterion do they earn ultimate salvation. My point is that **reward** and **just deserts** language in any of its forms is dramatically misleading about the Christian life itself and is therefore also dramatically misleading about ultimate salvation.

If the church is that unique place in which we learn who God is and how gracious God is to sinners and how inexhaustibly God is committed to human redemption, then we ought to talk about ultimate redemption in a way that keeps its focus on God’s grace and not on human just deserts. Accordingly, Christians should not be thinking of a life beyond death in which they will meet God as the kindly bestower of what they have properly earned. Christians should not be thinking and saying that we are to trust in our own righteousness as we die and encounter God. Rather, in the church Christians should learn—as they encounter death in others and as their own imminent possibility—that they are to trust in the forgiving graciousness of God rather than their own presumed righteousness. If that is so about Christians in their extremities of dying and death, then must it not also be the case that Christians and the church should teach that we trust and hope in the ultimate triumph of God’s grace as the **Ultimate Redeeming Companion** who meets every person in death and transforms him and her into God’s own eternal companions. [See CGF, 722-24, 724-736]

What about hell, then? Surely hell primarily refers to the ways of human living in which destruction and retribution and wrath subvert and destroy human flourishing. Hell and thereby the Devil do indeed occupy the hearts and minds of the human family when they live adamantly and indifferently in sin. But hell as an ultimate residence for erstwhile sinners? I think the church should begin to say that such **an ultimate hell is empty**, for it has been emptied as the final and just judgment on any person by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the Apostle’s Creed says of Christ, “he descended into hell” as he suffered the death-dealing hatred and enmity of his crucifiers. Are we to suppose that Christ left a fully occupied hell as the just deserts of folks? Or are we rather to believe that hell, as that place of extreme and horrendous separation from God, is also a place into which the Son, in his extremities of dying a brutal and forsaken death, plunged deeply and freely and lovingly and gathered up its occupants as the ones who are embraced even in their extremities as persons finally to be redeemed by God?

But if the church does decide to talk and act in the way I have proposed, then its discourses and practices will **modify but not delete the image of the church as the ark of**

²⁹ It is interesting to note that in our earlier discussion of the traditional model of the church as ark we saw that the church had to admit that it was itself comprised of both saints and tares. Hence, it is not a sufficient condition of being saved that one is a member of the church through baptism. Something more is required in order to be ultimately saved. When Augustine gets his mind around this dilemma, he finally affirms that anyone ultimately saved is saved only by the grace of God and not in any sense by their own righteous living and its deserts. When the crunch really comes, salvation is finally by the grace of God only.

salvation that contains the saved, both in historic redemption and in ultimate redemption, outside of which there is no salvation. We should say, and say joyfully, that it is in the church that humans are led to encounter God's gracious ways with humanity. Outside the church it is certainly not evident that persons know who God is and how God loves and know therewith how to live as folk who earnestly trust in the grace of God and earnestly desire to live in conformity to God's life. Being in the church, however, is the unique place in which people learn to be transformed by the grace of God in Christ Jesus. The uniqueness resides in the narrative definiteness, the truthfulness, the faithfulness, and the vitality of the church's distinctive discourses and practices.

Yet it is not that we are in the church in order to **earn** our ultimate salvation. Rather, it is in the church that we find the means of grace to live in the hope of an ultimate salvation that is also the hope for the world. The church might then dare to proclaim that hope, even though it may not be understood and embraced apart from being in the church and learning profoundly and lovingly that God is ultimately gracious.

Let me draw these points together about the church and salvation in my revised model of the church. I am urging that the **church is properly the ark of salvation as the means of grace—in and through its distinctive discourses and practices—in God's historic redemption**. However, I am proposing that **these very means of grace—as the mediators of God's saving grace in discourses and practices—empower the hope for ultimate salvation that should lead to and ground the hope for the ultimate salvation of all God's children. In this sense, then, the church itself is a living witness to the ultimacy of God's grace as we know it in Jesus Christ.**

Some Concluding Remarks

I hope I have been able to persuade folk of the necessity and dignity of the church as the ark of salvation—as that visible community that teaches and witnesses to a gracious God who has come among us in Jesus of Nazareth. It should be clear, I hope, that **being a Christian is impossible without being in the church**. Being a Christian is not possible as the lonely person relying on her own powers of discernment and her own powers of will. Being a Christian is necessarily a matter of **learning how to be a Christian**. To pursue that involves being a member of a community that has characteristic discourses and practices about the narrative of God's grace. When the discourses and practices of the church are alive, vibrant, specific, and Gospel-grounded, then the church is the **body of Christ** in and for the world.

Let me now specify more nearly what those practices are that one should learn in the church.³⁰ First, there are those practices of **nurture**. This is especially evident in the many-sided practices of worship in which we learn how to identify God and are thereby empowered to praise God. Not all purported 'praises of God' are praises to the triune God who has come to us in Israel and in Jesus Christ. To praise God depends on knowing who God is. In gathering for worship, as a defining practice of the Christian life, we engage in the regular practices of praising God, praying to God, singing hymns to God, receiving nourishment at God's Table of Communion, reading Scripture, listening to Scripture as the Word of God, and hearing the Gospel proclaimed by wise and saintly persons. These are all practices that we have to learn how to perform. They are not innate in us.

³⁰ For a fuller discussion of the church as the body of Christ in and through its distinctive discourses and practices, see CGF, 617-644.

Under nurturing practices are also the practices of communal care in which we learn how to be a community that upbuilds its members in the faith. These include practices of loving others in the church, of praying for others, of tending to the care of others in distress, of educating others in faithful and truthful discourses, of forgiving others, of seeking forgiveness from others. How can Christians love the neighbors in the world if they cannot, do not, and perhaps know not how to love the folk who are their neighbors in the church? When these practices are not occurring regularly and devoutly in the life of a congregation, then it is difficult to know the liveliness of the Spirit.

Second, there are the practices of **outreach to the world**. If the church is called to witness to the triune God for the benefit of the world, then the church is always aimed at the salvation of the world. Briefly, there are 1) the practices of **evangelization** in which the church invites the world to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, 2) the practices of **prophecy** in which the church identifies those powers in the world that are demonic and destructive of human good, 3) the practices of **emancipating works of love** for the neighbors in the world, and 4) practices of **vocation** in which the individual Christian lives faithfully in places of home, of economic work, of citizenship, and of recreation at no other's detrimental expense.

Third, there are those constitutive practices of the church in **administration**. It is in these practices that the church organizes itself for its mission in nurture and outreach, and they are profoundly theological practices. I will refer my reader to my long discussion of these practices. [CGF, 634-644] But I want briefly to express my worry when the institutional character of the church becomes dominant, because it begins emphasizing that the church's very reality depends on the offices of an apostolic priesthood and episcopacy. These two offices then emerge as the critical defining signs of where the church exists. Rather, I would emphasize that the church only truly exists where its discourses and practices are in conformity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and effectively witness to the triune God for the benefit of the world. But it nevertheless is the case that the church, in whatever institutional shape it might exist, will need to have some **magisterial authority**—that is, a teaching and decision-making authority about matters of faith—invested in some communal form. Here I prefer a **consensual body, comprised of laity and ordained ministers, that is prepared to decide urgent matters of orthodoxy and heresy and to identify areas in which disagreement is permitted and often needed**. But churches with a polity that inhibits such a magisterial form from emerging are dangerously inclined to being ruled by the discourses and practices of the larger social worlds in which they exist.

When these distinctive practices are not alive and well in a congregation, then we can easily be overwhelmed by the brokenness of the church. The key, however, to overcoming this brokenness is to repeatedly proclaim the Gospel in the hope that it might be heard as good news to folk disheartened and in disarray.

In conclusion, let it be affirmed that, when the church is called and formed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it will also contain folk who are having their lives continually transformed by the gracious works of God. Persons in the world and outside the church need the community of the church as that place where the Gospel is proclaimed and lived. The world needs the church as the ark that carries within itself the **means of grace** that transform human life and give hope for the world. Are these means of grace still available when the community is itself shattered and broken and in conflict? Such brokenness certainly confuses folk and corrupts the language and undermines the efficacy of the practices. But there remains hope as the church still reads the Bible in worship and at least gives lip service to the practice of claiming there is a Gospel. However empty those practices might be performed from time to time, the very form of their

repetition keeps alive the hope that the church might once again hear the words of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as good news for themselves and therewith transformative of how they actually live in the world.

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