



Perhaps We Need More Seven-Year-Olds

The idea of church (or Church—even the capitalization is disputed) is for many Christians a deeply contentious theological idea. Where is church located—in a structure, in a theological idea, in a congregation or an organization? Almost from the beginning of the Christian movement, when it became clear that Jesus’s second coming would not occur as soon as was initially expected, Christians needed to figure out more permanent conceptions of how the Christian community should be rooted, and what kinds of organization it should have. Disputes over these questions have continued over two thousand years of Christian history, and seem no closer to being resolved now than they ever have been.

Martin Luther, he of the “sound bite,” once famously observed that even a child could figure out what the church was:

God be praised, even a seven-year-old child knows what the church is; holy believers and “the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd.” This is why little children pray in this way, “I believe in one holy Christian church.” This holiness does not consist of surplices, tonsures, long albs, or other ceremonies of theirs that they have invented over and above the Holy Scriptures. Its holiness exists in the Word of God and true faith.¹

But even a pithy statement like this is problematic, as the idea of the church as being holy believers and faithful sheep called into being by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, while true, does not get at the complexities of what we have, over the centuries, called church.

¹ Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles” III, 12:3 (1537), in Robert Kolb, et al., eds, *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 324–25.

Now certainly the church is, as we confess in the creeds, “the communion of saints” gathered together by the Holy Spirit around the proclamation of the word of God and the grace-giving experience of the sacraments. In this sense, then, the church is the work of God, and we are drawn into this by means of God’s grace. However, the trouble with this is that there is a human element to this church as well. When Christians gather in the church, it is necessary, for the continuation of its mission, to develop structures, rules, leadership, and other forms of human organization. And since these are humanly derived organizations, they will fall prey to the all-too-human weaknesses we have come to expect from each other and ourselves. In the church we dispute, we quarrel, we disappoint, we wound, and often we live our lives in denial of the very gospel we claim to represent. Even when we do attempt to follow the leadings of our God, our efforts are often inadequate and fall short of what God commands of us. It is common to hear the skeptics proclaim that the church is full of hypocrites, and that they want nothing to do with it. They want to be “spiritual,” not “religious,” and certainly not “churchy.”

For some individuals, hurt or disappointed by their church, this is understandable. But for many, this rejection is simply a lazy and facile avoidance of human community. And the people who proclaim this are missing out, missing the proclamation of God’s grace through worship and study and prayer, even if these elements usually are clouded by the humanness of the church. Winston Churchill popularized the saying that “democracy was the worst form of human government, except for all the others.” This is most certainly true of the church as well. The church is the worst form of human religious community, except for all the other forms of human community. Because, despite its all-too-evident faults, the church is simply human beings attempting to respond faithfully to the call of God and the needs of the neighbor.

The glory and the trauma of the church are that it is contextual (a modern buzzword if there ever was one). The church is the community of faithful believers in a particular time and place, in a culture determined by human hands and minds. But it aspires to be more than that. In its best moments it aspires to be better than the culture of which it is a part, and to be faithful to the Spirit of God that calls it into being. We fail big because we dream big, and we ask our Lord to forgive us our failings. And then we start all over again with the work of the church.

This issue of *Word & World* is all about the church, about the ways we fail and the ways we strive to be faithful. There are certainly many ways we can structure our churches, and many ways we can attempt to live ever more faithfully as Christian communities under the will of God. We have no choice—we are commanded to be in community with one another—and we pray that God can make of our inadequate efforts something that is faithful to this command.

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