Can These Bones Live?
Can These Bones Live?: A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory

Barry Harvey

To Sarah
for her grace, courage, and beauty
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Barry Harvey,  
*Can These Bones Live?: A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory,*  
Introduction:
Where, Then, Do We Stand?
Toward an Ecclesially Based Theological Hermeneutics

Theology is a laborious attempt to explain the joke about this ordinary physical, political world.

Herbert McCabe, *God Matters*

The desire to ask about the beginning, writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is the innermost passion of our thinking as creaturely beings, imparting reality to every genuine question we ask. And yet no sooner is the question of the beginning put before us than our thinking is thrown back on itself, spending its strength like huge breakers crashing upon a rocky shore. In its desire to reach back to the beginning, human reasoning cannot help but pound itself to pieces. We are intractably located in the middle, knowing neither the end nor the beginning.¹

In contrast to those who are perennially tempted by the Gnostic illusion that there is “a spark of breath” in each of us going back “to before the Creation,”² the church has taught that we always find ourselves somewhere, that our patterns of speaking and acting take shape within a context formed by the time, place, and people of which we are a part. Indeed, if others are to take what we say or do seriously, we must take up and consistently maintain some standpoint, and they must


do likewise. The theological task facing the church, then, is not to try to find an unsullied point of departure, a method, impulse, or insight that can lift us out of our time and place so that we might see all the kingdoms of the world in a moment. It is instead to help a fallen world take its bearings here in the middle, to understand something of what went before, to learn about the ways things developed in the past that led to the way they are now. Instead of asking where do we begin, a more fruitful question would be, "Where, then, do we stand?"

This question can, of course, be parsed in several different ways. It can be taken in an epistemic sense: what are the warrants for our claims to know something significant about ourselves? It also suggests a historical referent: it is commonplace to say that we now live in a “postmodern” era, whatever that means. Though these are important considerations that we shall ponder in what follows, for Christians the question of where we stand has above all an eschatological trajectory. As citizens of another city that is to come (Heb. 13:14), we have no permanent standpoint or proper place in the present time. We are on pilgrimage through history, looking with anticipation for the coming of the commonwealth whose architect and builder is the Triune God (Heb. 11:10; cf. Phil. 3:20). When we ask where we now stand, we do so as a people seeking to go on and go further toward that future which summons all of God's creatures, and especially humankind.

In what follows I contend that the church, by being what it is—the earthly-historical body of Christ—constitutes an interpretive surmise about creaturely life as lived in relation to God. The existence of this people is grounded in a distinctive practice of life and language that is a socially embodied, historically extended interpretation of the world in general, and of human life in particular. The answer to the question of what is signified by the word God cannot finally be ascertained by the kind of conceptual clarification practiced by analytic philosophers (though that might be helpful at certain points), but only by observing how this community orders its life together through its worship, teaching, witness and work. This hermeneutical dimension is implicit in the understanding of the church as a sacrament, that is, as “a sign and instrument . . . of communion with God and of unity among men.”

Another way to put this is to say with John Milbank that theology in a postmodern setting can be practiced only by way of explicating Christian practice: “The Christian God can no longer be thought of as a God first seen, but rather as a God first prayed to, first imagined, first inspiring certain actions, first put into words, and always already thought about, objectified, even if this objectification

is recognised as inevitably inadequate.” The dependence of theory on practice is not limited to theology or religion more generally. From literary theory to the physics laboratory, all attempts at interpretation or explanation are at bottom forms of explication of already existing practices.

This book can be classified as an exercise in theological hermeneutics, though not in the narrow sense of formulating a general theory of meaning that establishes normative rules, procedures, and standards for the interpretation of written texts (though it does involve, among other things, the careful reading of scripture and other writings). Stephen Fowl contends, rightly in my view, that all efforts to produce a general theory of meaning, also known as a general hermeneutics, are necessarily question-begging and should be avoided. Interpretation, he argues, should be underdetermined, that is, it should be free to use a variety of interpretive practices and results without granting epistemic priority to any of them.

In the sense I will use it here, hermeneutics is heir to the Aristotelian tradition of practical reasoning, phronesis, about the possibilities of human action, fulfillment and happiness, encompassing ethics, politics, poetics, rhetoric, cosmology, and metaphysics. Theology has a vested interest in all these areas of investigation and thus qualifies as a hermeneutical enterprise, but it attends to these matters, says Robert Jenson, in the course of asking how to carry on with a specified message at that point in life “where past hearing turns to new speaking . . . . Theology is an act of interpretation; it begins with a received word and issues in a new word essentially related to the old word.”

A theological hermeneutics thus attends to the question, What does the life, death, and resurrection of the man Jesus of Nazareth have to do with this life that we now live? If we are to grasp the significance of Christ and his earthly-historical body for our lives, living as we do in a different time and place, in circumstances that are marked by their own particularity and contingency, it is necessary that we learn how to narrate our lives both as distinct from his story and, at the same time, as a continuation of it. To this end theologians engage in a threefold hermeneutical activity: first, with respect to the scriptures as the book of the church; second,
with respect to the practices of the church (which are themselves interpretive actions in that they have to do with possibilities of human flourishing); and third, with respect to the political and economic regimes, cultural norms, and forms of knowledge that distinguish our particular time and place in history.11

This “venture of an overall view”12 consists principally of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual convictions, dispositions, and activities that have been handed on to us within the Christian community by our mothers and fathers in the faith. This heritage is now ours to take up and develop, not only so that we might learn how to conduct ourselves truthfully and faithfully in our own circumstances, but also that we might hand it on in good working order to our spiritual offspring.13 This book is therefore also a work in ecclesiology, with an emphasis on the constitutive practices of the church: scriptural reasoning, doctrine, baptism and Eucharist, and spiritual formation. I refer to these practices as constitutive because all Christians must engage in them in some fashion if we are to cultivate and sustain the distinctive form of life that characterizes the body of Christ in the world. In this respect the church is not unique. In virtually every society there are set practices that specify the nature and hierarchy of goods that order its common life, determine who belongs to the community and who is an outsider, facilitate the production and distribution of material goods among its members and guests, assign social roles and responsibilities to each man, woman, and child, and maintain just and orderly relations among its members and between members and those on the outside.

My proposal to outline a theological hermeneutics grounded in the life and language of the church immediately encounters a serious problem in the fact of a divided church, or, as I shall describe it, the dismembered body of Christ. Indeed, these divisions may make theology impossible, since the proper agent of such a hermeneutics does not exist, unless one simply declares that one particular branch of the church catholic totally comprehends that reality. If we are to go on and go further as the pilgrim people of God in the context of a divided church (if this can happen at all), writes Jenson, then we must confess that “we live in radical self-contradiction and that by every churchly act we contradict that contradiction. Also theology must make this double contradiction at and by every step of its way.”14 This need not be a pessimistic assessment, since the members of Christ’s body live by hope in the coming kingdom of God. And so we wait in the knowledge that it is a blessing to theology that we need not wait for the church to be “re-membered” to do our work.

Some may object at this point that proceeding from the standpoint of the church community and its interpretive tradition will mean that we must suppress the critical and speculative side of our rational nature, but these fears are ultimately unfounded. When inquiring after knowledge generally, writes John Henry Newman, “we must assume something to prove anything, and can gain nothing without a venture.” Human beings must therefore make a hermeneutical surmise of one sort or another to know or do anything at all, from the most mundane tasks to the most elaborate research programs in science, and such ventures are always subject to subtle reworking, substantive revision, or outright rejection. The church is not exempt from this principle, and it is the work of theology to test the convictions of its interpretive venture, to criticize and transform them when warranted, and to take account of the differences and disputes that exist between the church and other human associations.

What theologians must refuse, however, is the illusory notion that there is an unsullied beginning point, a “mid-air” position that we can occupy through the application of some sort of critical method, allowing us—without getting our feet wet, so to speak—to judge which claims are true and which are not. We should not confuse what William of St. Thierry refers to as the hesitations of thought (haesitationes cogitationum) that invariably accompany the thoughts of faith (fidei cogitationes) with the sort of dishonest rationality (rationalitas improba) that adopts an antagonistic attitude to faith. The skepticism that arises from this kind of antagonism necessarily leads to either despair or cynicism, or to both in alternation.

Dismembering the Body of Christ

So then, where do we stand? Though I shall deal with this question in more detail throughout the book, a preliminary statement is in order. Suffice it to say that we do not stand where our mothers and fathers in the faith once stood. They saw the world as followable, a “book,” as it were, authored by God, with the events of history unfolding in the manner of a dramatic narrative. The complex plot and many subplots of this story were detailed for the faithful in God’s other work, the Bible, according to which all things ultimately find their significance in their being either receptive to or closed off from the work of God in Christ’s life, passion, and resurrection.

The church's venture of an overall view of things was not confined to the privatized realm of religion, there sequestered from the everyday world, that is, the workings of politics, economics, and the like. It was interwoven with a complex social space that was comprised of intersecting associations—church practices and institutions, civil authorities, clans, monasteries, guilds, and towns. The obligations, immunities, and entitlements that men and women owed to one another within these *societates* were not conferred by an omnicient, centralized state but subsisted within these overlapping associations of which they were members. Each person and association was regarded as an integral whole that also constituted a part of a larger whole, generating a complex conception of space that was conceived on the Pauline theology of the body of Christ.  

Over the last several centuries, however, radically new configurations of world and self have been instituted to train those who formed the heart of Christendom in Western Europe and North America to think, feel, and act quite differently in every sphere of life. A vast technical and institutional apparatus—the emergence of the state as the normative form of political community, the commodification of property, goods and labor, the development of complex monetary systems, the rise to social prominence of managerial expertise, and radical changes in political and moral discourse—has uprooted the social relationships and personal identities that were previously embedded in local associations. In place of these encumbrances, modern institutions sought to establish a direct and unmediated relationship between the sovereign power of the state and the unencumbered individual whose only necessary identity was as a unit of production and consumption, and for whom other individuals were only variables in the calculation of self-interest.

The peoples of Christendom were thus divested of the practices, dispositions, and institutions that had enabled them to follow the world as an ensemble of signs uttered and intended by God. The accumulated social capital—the moral habits and conceptions about human community and the good—was reinvested in a series of political, economic, and cultural projects that stipulated that the social mediation of transcendence was no longer needed to ascend to truth, goodness, and beauty. People were set free from the constraints of shared past and the claim of others on their lives to fashion their own stories (save, of course, from the authority of the state, which promised to ensure that freedom in exchange for unquestioned political sovereignty). Progress would be measured solely by the degree to which individuals realized independence from any relationship or authority outside themselves.


Of all the relationships that needed to be dismantled for the modern project to go forward, none was more crucial than those once located within the church. The political and economic regime that separated the day-to-day lives of women and men from the social ligatures of family, clan, guild, estate and village also severed the ecclesial sinews that bound them to the risen Christ and to each other. Working gradually and methodically, the new order of things dismembered the body of Christ by abating its common life and vitiating its witness to the Triune God. The substance of Christian faith was separated from the constitutive practices that made it possible for women and men, in the power of the Spirit, to participate in the economy of God’s redemptive work in the world, with the capacity to imagine, reason, desire, feel, and act as members of Christ’s true body.

Apart from these practices and the habits they cultivated, Christians were increasingly subject to the political whims and machinations of the modern state, with little sense of the difference between the obligations they owed to God and those owed to the state. They also became caught up in habits of consumption that no longer served any higher purpose but became ends in themselves, to be desired for their own sake. Ensnared by stunted imaginations and unfettered appetites, we still routinely confuse having a plethora of choices with being free. These desires and habits not only are out of proportion to what men and women need to flourish as creatures made in the image of God, but radically transform the character of their relations with others, not only within the body of Christ, but also with those outside the fellowship of the church.

The dismembering of the body of Christ thus had a significant impact on the earthly commonwealth as well, for the institutions that for centuries constituted the social fabric of Western Europe and North America were largely fostered by the church. However deficient we might finally judge this arrangement to be theologically, it provided a measure of moral coherence and direction to a succession of temporal regimes that helped to preserve a fallen world for the gathering together of all things in Christ at the end of the age. People can only go about their business on the tacit assumption that error, deception, self-deception, irony, and ambiguity, though everywhere present in these interactions, will not finally render reliable reasoning and coherent action impossible. These assumptions are formed and sustained by the stock of activities, stories, habits, and institutions that foster a common life and language within a society. These practices and habits provide the conventions that enable the members of a community to engage one another in meaningful transactions by making inferences about future behavior and present intentions from premises about past behavior.


When these shared practices and dispositions begin to lose their authority over the habits of body and mind that bind men and women together into a community, and mutually incompatible accounts of what is going on around them begin to multiply seemingly exponentially, but with none achieving a “critical mass,” the result is the kind of social fragmentation that we see with the demise of the social project of Christendom. As a consequence, writes Rowan Williams, there is an ever-widening gap or wound in the secular body politic, “which neither conventional right nor conventional left are currently doing much to recognize or repair.” In place of shared patterns of judging human behavior and relationship that allow people to determine what they can reasonably do and say together to foster a just and equitable common life and language, the ruling regime of nation-states and global markets offers political discourse that is dominated by the marketing of slogans and sound bites, and the calculation of short-term advantages, which are incapable of sustained deliberations about the basic conditions of our humanity.23

Christians cannot lay the blame for this state of affairs solely on the advent of modernity. The corpus Christianum had been sagging under its own accumulated weight for several centuries, and the final supports are now giving way to the stress of a rapidly secularizing world. With its collapse, its patterns of relating to the world are rapidly deteriorating as well. The nations of Europe and North America delayed for a time the dehumanizing effects of this process by selectively drawing on a residual stock of practices, convictions and dispositions held over from the traditions of medieval Christendom. But as the contents of this reserve were disconnected from the ecclesial practices and institutions that had nurtured them over the centuries, their intelligibility and credibility began to unravel, somewhat slowly at first, and then more rapidly as the era of “enlightenment” and “progress” unfolded.

The compliment typically paid to this “postmodern” situation, cobbled together from the debris left by the ancien régime, is that it is pluralistic and multicultural, but this is hollow praise indeed. In the end these are but names for the reduction of all values to those that can be marketed as commodities in the global market. In place of a stock of images and ideas, inscribed in a shared body of texts, that foster a rich common life, the ruling consortium seeks merely to secure a pragmatic minimum of coexistence between unencumbered individuals and their mutually tangential projects by means of a combination of managerial skills and economic policies.24 The euphemisms of pluralism and multiculturalism serve as a facade to hide the incoherence and antagonism that afflict all. Many people now wonder whether there is anything at all genuinely and intrinsically human beyond their

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momentary appetites and desires, and any identity they might share in common resides not in a positive good that commands their assent, but in suspicion of and hatred for their enemies, both real and imagined.

The dismembering of Christ’s body, if it is to be adequately understood, must therefore be conceived diachronically as well as synchronically. It did not happen overnight, nor can it be simply laid at the doorstep of the Protestant Reformation or the Enlightenment. The logic of separation that emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and gained momentum in the modern era has its origins much earlier, when the church joined forces with the rulers and authorities of the present age to govern the saeculum. The division of the church must therefore be examined in conjunction with the emergence, development, and demise of the social project of Christendom. In addition to being a work in hermeneutics and ecclesiology, then, this book must also engage the much-contested domain of social theory.

Re-embaroking on Pilgrimage

As we prepare, then, to take our bearings for the future from what went before us, what lessons should we learn from our present circumstances? First, we need to be careful, lest we romanticize the past and find ourselves caught up in nostalgic longing for what has been. Though nostalgia can be a potent form of social criticism, the church cannot simply rebel against the modern in an effort to return to the simplicity and pristine faithfulness supposedly proffered by the premodern era. We cannot return, moreover, because modernity was shaped by the deliberate rejection of the past, and modernity is part of our past. Rebellion against rebellion imprisons us within an insidious antithetical bondage. Indeed, part of the modern world’s genius was its ability to conscript its adversaries into its modes of regulating behavior, which rely not so much on explicit coercion as on widely diffused modes of regulation that train us how to think, feel, and act in ways appropriate to its basic modes of governance and accumulation.

Nostalgia also clouds the fact that the social arrangements of Christendom failed to a significant degree because, as Vigen Guroian expresses it, the church “endeavored to be not what it is but what it is not.” These arrangements failed not only the church, in that it lost sight of itself as “the sacrament of the Kingdom, a holy community, God’s eschatological vehicle of passage for this world through time into the world to come,” but also the world to which it was sent as sign and instrument. According to Guroian, the failure was twofold. First, in its efforts to

25. In the original sense of that term, both church and world are secular realities. The Latin saeculum did not designate a space or realm separate from the religious or sacred, but a time. Early Christian writers used the term to refer to the temporal period between fall and eschaton, and after the coming of Christ to the overlap of the two ages in the here and now.

redeem and sanctify the existing social order, the church forgot its earlier understanding of the world as both created and therefore good, and fallen and therefore a mortally sick order. Second, when the church accepted its status as a juridical and hierarchical institution within the established order, it forfeited its calling as a free community of faith whose very presence in the world is both a judgment on and a boundary to the claims of every worldly authority and power.27

The collapse of Christendom is thus a timely opportunity for the church to recover its missional status as another city making its way toward the age to come. The laments and prophetic rebukes in scripture remind us that among the remnants of the failed kingdoms of Israel and Judah, there was a struggle to understand what had happened, and out of their humiliation they revised their own history, seeing it as “a story of unceasing resistance to and rebellion against God.” They nonetheless concluded that God had not utterly abandoned them, but in his faithfulness had instead folded the destruction of the northern kingdom, the fall of Jerusalem, the exile to Babylon, and the dispersion of the chosen people among the nations of the world back into the saving history of Israel. In their affliction they learned to “recognize their guilt and turn back to God, thus correcting the direction they [were] going. The very crisis of the people of God would then be one of the reasons why God’s cause does not fail, but instead goes forward as a history of salvation.” The end of the monarchy in Israel did not spell Israel’s end but led instead “to a rebirth of the people of God,” thus making the event of the exile part of “a saving history and a step into the future.”28

Unfortunately, the church, particularly in North America, seems more oblivious to its precarious situation than were the exiles in Babylon. One must look long and hard for similar retrospectives on the part of the church with respect to its own history. “On the contrary,” writes Gerhard Lohfink, “[t]he faith for which Israel still struggled and over which it wrangled is dissolving in the current decades . . . almost without resistance, and unnoticed by a great many, into religion: a religion that permits everything, that surrenders to everything, that has countless gods but no longer a history with the biblical God.”29 In our feeble efforts to hold on to the remnants of the ancien régime, too many Christians willingly accommodate the substance of the faith to the demands of a world that no longer is interested in what the church has to say.

Nevertheless, we have the opportunity as members of the body of Christ to reconsider our own history with the biblical God, to acknowledge our failures and guilt, and to return to our first love, so that we too might learn to see what has


29. Ibid., 96–97.
happened over the past few centuries as part of God’s redemptive history and thus as a way forward. The turn of fortune that has thrust the church back outside the city gate (Heb. 13:12), no longer having a portfolio in the ruling regime, is an occasion for Christians once again to take our cues from the story of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, and to reclaim our identity as an eschatological commonwealth whose interests are ultimately vested not in institutions that are condemned to pass away, but in the world to come.

Organization

The book is divided into two parts. In part 1, I endeavor, first, to describe briefly what it means for the body of Christ to have been dismembered and to set forth what the church must do to recover its status as the earthly-historical form of Christ in the world; second, to locate the hermeneutical surmise of the church in the apocalypse of the reign of God in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection; and third, to narrate the events and the changes that dismantled the church’s traditional regime of life and language that extended the apocalyptic action of God to every time and place, leaving the scattered members of Christ’s body at the mercy of the powers and authorities of this present age.

In chapter 1, I contrast the general understanding of nature and history proposed by the patristic and medieval church, according to which all created things are also signs that refer to their beginning and end in God, with new configurations that arose with the modern world, and which contend that the intelligibility of nature, the meaningfulness of history, and the purposefulness of human existence no longer require these sorts of references. I then provide an initial sketch of the interpretive art that allows us to follow God’s critical, decisive, and final action and purpose for the world in the apocalypse of the long-awaited reign of God in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2 takes up and develops further the apocalyptic motif that is at the heart of the church’s interpretive art. The first group of disciples who followed the way of Jesus found themselves caught up in a set of allegiances, convictions, dispositions, and loves that put them in the middle of the divine struggle with, and triumph over, temporal powers and principalities that sought to usurp divine sovereignty over creation. God’s intrusion into a world enslaved to sin and death did not, however, appear out of a social or historical vacuum but marked the continuation of the story of Abraham and Sarah’s offspring under new and distinct circumstances. The early church understood itself to be the first fruits of messianic Israel united with the risen Lord, recapitulating the sorts of trials and temptations that the chosen people had faced for centuries, only now under the figure of Jesus’s cross, resurrection, and return.

In the third chapter I discuss in more detail how the church was dismembered as the body of Christ. It began when the Christian community exchanged its
distinctive way of life as a company of fellow pilgrims garnered from every tribe and language, every people and nation, to serve the nations a sign and instrument of God’s eternal commonwealth, for a power-sharing arrangement with the rulers and authorities of the earthly city. As a result, the body of Christ was gradually caught up in an unfolding series of disciplinary regimes that effectively domesticated, marginalized, and exploited the church’s life and language. Special care must be taken on this point. It is easy to issue a blanket condemnation of “Constantinianism,” and though that might allow some to give voice to their dissatisfaction with the present situation, it would not address what is basically at stake in this matter. As Oliver O’Donovan reminds us, the corpus Christianum of the medieval and early modern worlds was “the womb in which our late-modernity came to birth. Even our refusal of Christendom has been learned from Christendom. Its insights and errors have fashioned, sometimes by repetition and sometimes by reaction, the insights and errors which comprise the platitudes of our own era.”

At the same time the concern with the momentous changes that took place beginning in the fourth century must be accounted for.

In part 2, I turn our attention to the question of how the church might by God’s grace be gathered together once again and re-membered by the power of the Spirit as the body of Christ. I say “might,” for we can never ensure the presence of Christ by means of a formal institution that connects the present with the past, as though it were an expression of an immanent historical process. We cannot compel the grace of God through some sort of procedural or ritualistic alchemy. God’s messianic reign only comes to gather the church epicletically, that is to say, “in the constantly renewed pleading of the faithful that the Holy Spirit enact the Kingdom in their midst. Historical continuity never determines the presence of Christ; the eschaton rules history, but is also enacted in history.”

A people cannot set out on a journey and reasonably expect to survive, much less make progress, without being properly trained and provisioned. We must constantly be gathered together so that we will not scatter along the way; we must learn how to take our bearings, so that we know where we are, where we are headed, and how to get from the one to the other; we must be disciplined so that we keep our eyes trained on what lies before us and not be tempted to return to the fleshpots of Egypt; and we must learn how to distinguish among the wide range of regimes we shall encounter in the earthly city along the way.

The convictions and skills that make up the art of surviving and prospering as a community whose homeland lies in the future are not easily or quickly acquired but must be carefully cultivated over extended periods of time. The assumption of some that though specific features of the church may vary according to time,

place, and circumstance, its existence and basic character will always be relatively unproblematic has proven to be false. We cannot take it for granted that there will continue to be a church that more or less resembles the one we have inherited.32

Re-membering the church as Christ’s body involves, among other things, recreating a universe of theological discourse that has grown stagnant from misconstrual and neglect.33 In the first two chapters of part 2, I attempt to spell out in some detail the relationship between imagination and intellect in terms of the practices of scriptural reasoning and church doctrine. I contend in chapter 4 that imagination is the crucial point of exchange between the senses and the intellect, and that it gives rise to the convictions and dispositions that allow us to reason truthfully about the inscrutable mystery that is the reality and activity of the Triune God. The wellspring of the Christian imagination is the generative memory of the Bible, and thus the practice of reading the scriptures as a narrative that directs our steps toward the future constitutes the church’s basic mode of reasoning.

Scriptural reasoning, though it is basic to the life of discipleship, cannot by itself sustain the body of Christ over the long term. As the members of this body seek to testify truthfully to the triune God, interpretive questions about God, Christ, and the world arise that cannot be resolved strictly within the scope of biblical imagery and narration, no matter how winsome these images and stories may be. Imagination and abstraction, metaphor and concept, figure and analogy, story and doctrine are “undivided and yet distinct,” to borrow from the Chalcedonian definition of Christ’s divine and human natures. In chapter 5, then, I examine the development of doctrines by the church over the course of centuries that address these questions. The principal function of doctrine is to explicate the church’s convictions about the significance of Christ and his earthly-historical body, through which the peoples, powers, and principalities of this world are confronted time and again with the Word of God made flesh.

Theology by itself, even when it is rightly situated as a practice of the church, is limited in what it can do. Milbank offers a sad yet insightful commentary on the current state of the church when he observes that theology is tragically too important today, with many feeling as though it falls to the theologian to resuscitate true Christian practice.34 Some go so far as to state that it is the unique task of theology to open as many windows on the infinite as it can, “and thus to make a view of God once again possible in our culture.”35 But when our speech about

34. Milbank, The Word Made Strange, 1.
God rests on theological performance for its vitality and verisimilitude, we shall likely be talking about a deity other than the God of Israel.36

Attempts by theologians to make a view of God possible in isolation from the other practices of the church trade in a fundamental misconception—that Christian faith subsists in a worldview, that is, a set of beliefs that can be understood and embraced by virtually anyone apart from the other practices and habits of God’s pilgrim people.37 Disembodied concepts and propositions will not reunite us to Christ or to one another as members of his body; neither will they cultivate the requisite dispositions and desires. The mind does not move spontaneously to truth, goodness, and beauty but requires power of a certain sort to create the conditions for telling the truth (in both senses of “tell”), delighting in the beautiful, and striving after the good. This power, which is mediated to us as the effect of an entire network of dedicated practices, is not the antithesis of what is good, true, and beautiful.38 It is a question, rather, of whose power and which practices suitably frame their pursuit.39 For Christians, then, this is a question that brings us to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Christians encounter the Spirit whose power binds us to Christ and to one another, sanctifying and sustaining his earthly-historical body in its work and witness, principally through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. As I suggest in chapter 6, these sacramental signs constitute the material point of entry of God’s apocalyptic regime into the day-to-day life of this world, creating in the body of Christ an alternative social idiom for creaturely existence. Baptism and Eucharist, by incorporating us into the mystery of God’s redemptive presence and activity in the world, propel us beyond the boundaries within which state and market seek to confine us, gathering us together in a new political body through which the age to come confronts the powers of this age.

With its intrusion into the disordered loves of a fallen world, the apocalypse of God in the midst of history requires a radical restructuring of our life together. In order for the members of Christ’s body to make this alternative social idiom our own, however, we must undergo an extended process of spiritual formation, in which we give ourselves daily to God as we live “unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.”40 In chapter 7, then, I examine some of the ways that practices generally associated with spiritual formation—prayer, confession, fasting, hospitality, the giving and receiving of counsel, 

37. See John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 386.
rites of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the works of mercy—incorporate the habits and skills of the church’s interpretive art into our bodies. The telos of these practices is unselfing, being unmade so that we can be remade. Unselfing interrupts the solidifying of our identities as disembodied consumers and faceless producers promoted by the state and the global market, in order to cultivate a new selfhood within the politics of the Spirit, one that is not confined by humankind’s “Adamic” past, but liberated for its future in the messianic kingdom.

In the concluding chapter I examine some of the recurring tendencies in the social idiom of the present age that set the context in which the members of Christ’s body must practice the art of pilgrimage. In one way or another these tendencies are linked to what Augustine calls the libido dominandi, the lust for mastery that is predicated on the possession, threat, and use of coercive force, and thus on death and the fear of death. The desire to control our world manifests itself most destructively in war, but it also finds its way into activities overseen by the state and the market that are connected to the needed goods of daily life. The church needs to develop habits of discernment regarding the use of these goods, so that we might discriminate between those that are open to God’s apocalyptic activity in Christ, and should therefore be thought of as natural, and those that are closed to Christ, and must be regarded as unnatural.

Discernment by its very character involves the use of reason, which belongs to the natural realm, and so Christians must become discriminating artisans of our ability to reason, particularly to the extent that our powers of rationality are developed within the structures of the liberal state and the global market. In the next chapter I attempt to say why this task, which is challenging under the best of circumstances, is now much more difficult because we have been separated from each other and from the interpretive art that allows us to be attentive to the ways of Christ in a world that is fallen but nonetheless still cherished by its Creator.