

‘What is the Good of the Church?’: A Series of Reflections on Ecclesiology for Advent 2021

Session I: ‘The Kingdom and the Church in the New Testament’

(with Professors Sarah Coakley and Richard B. Hays)

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A. Jesus’s Teaching on the Kingdom, and his Envisioning of a Community of Disciples:

(Alfred Loisy (*L’Évangile et L’Église* (1902), ‘Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, and what came was the Church’.)

1. Jesus’s core teachings on the ‘kingdom’ (*basileia*: divine rule, not territory) as the restoration of Israel and the recovery of the heart of the Law: note the already/not yet structure (cp. Mark 9.1/Matt. 4-17 as imminent, yet an unknown time of appearance: Matt 24.42-44; Matt 25.13). Luke 17. 20-21: not ‘inside you’ but ‘amongst you’ – already unifying a following. The Lord’s Prayer has this same structure: Matt. 6.10: ‘They will be done on earth ...’. *Question*: How can the existential *urgency* of the call to the kingdom be maintained in any contemporary ‘ecclesiology’?
2. Did Jesus envisage a ‘church’ (*ekklesia* – gathering)? Not as such. The term is only used twice, both in Matthew: cp. a. Matt. 16.13-20 [note difference from Mark 8.27-30 and Luke 9.18-21], and punning on *petros* and *petra* (slab): not a ref. to an institution but to Peter’s confession; b. Matt. 18. 15-20: ‘church’ here for Matthew is already a community of accountability. c. Other metaphors for the community in Matt.: 5.14-16 (a ‘light’ to the world, a ‘city on the hill’). *Question*: Could we then call Matthew’s vision of Jesus’s followers as already ‘proto-institutional’, compared with John’s organic metaphor of ‘vine and branches’ (John 15) and 1 John’s stress on ‘communion’/ ‘fellowship’ and union: 1 John 1. 1-4 (*koinonia*)? [We shall return to ‘communion’ ecclesiology in Video 3.]
3. The institution of the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist): *Question*: is this the point at which Jesus indicates most profoundly, in facing his own death, how his followers are to take forward his ‘memory’ – by eating his ‘body’ and drinking the blood of the new ‘covenant’?: Mark 14.22-25 (cp. Matt. 26. 26-29; - note mention of ‘forgiveness of sins’; Luke 22. 14-19).

B. The Birth of the ‘Church’ and Paul’s Theology of the ‘Church’:

1. Resurrection as the *Sine Qua Non* for Christian faith: 1 Cor 15, esp. vs. 14. Romans 6: the whole Christian life as a conjoining in Christ’s *bodily* death and resurrection. In Luke/Acts (Acts 2) and John (John 20.19-23) the reception of the Spirit *after* the resurrection technically marks the birth of the Church.
2. The Marks of the ‘Ethical Community’ of the Earliest Church: Acts 4. 32-35 (*Question*: discuss Richard Hays’ critique of the NRSV translation here, which ‘de-fangs’ the radicality of the effects of the resurrection on the earliest Christians.
3. The Eucharist in Paul’s Church: The controversial *context* of 1 Cor 11.23-26 – although the chapter starts with a debate about women’s attire, the chief point of contention is how to eat together *across classes* and the Jewish/Gentile difference. Consider Hays’ interpretation of vs. 34. *Question*: do you see the Eucharist today as socially radical? Does it shore up, or destabilize, social hierarchies in the churches?)
4. The central Pauline Ecclesiological Theme of ‘the Body’: Romans 12, 1 Cor 12 - ‘mystical’ unification with Christ and each other, not a mere aggregate of individuals, yet (perhaps cp. John on ‘communion’?) also allowing for myriad *differences* of ‘gifts’.

5. The Radical Pauline understanding of ‘Adopted’ Family as Ecclesiological Model: Romans 8, flowing directly from the unifying baptismal theme of Romans 6. Gentiles are ‘adopted’ into the Jewish inheritance and the Jews then have to be ‘grafted’ back (Romans 9-11). The social upheaval envisaged in this vision: existing class and genetic hierarchies are again undermined; slavery, though seemingly taken for granted by Paul as part of the socio-economic system, is interestingly questioned and upended in Philemon: Onesimus is a ‘beloved brother’ (vs. 16). *Question:* Do you think that the Church today tends to speak too uncritically of itself as a ‘family’? What are the contemporary implications for ecclesiology of taking both Jesus’s (see Mark 3. 31-35) and Paul’s views about displacements of ‘worldly’ views of family seriously?

Final *Question:* What do you think of Richard Hays’ concluding account of what the New Testament teaches on ‘The Good of the Church?’

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