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Rebekah Lukas

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, lukasr@csl.edu

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THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY:
IMPLICATIONS OF FAMILIAL LANGUAGE FOR THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematics
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Rebekah Lukas
April, 2020

Approved by:

Dr. Joel Okamoto

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Leopoldo A. Sánchez M.

Reader

Dr. Benjamin Haupt

Reader

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To my family.

In this situation it is helpful to remember that the question of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one; that Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial, and that the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries. It is helpful also to recall that the repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer, but only a series of typical answers which together, for faith, represent phases of the strategy of the militant church in the world. That strategy, however, being in the mind of the Captain rather than of any lieutenants, is not under the control of the latter. Christ's answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another; yet his followers are assured that he uses their various works in accomplishing his own.

—H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my advisor, Dr. Joel Okamoto, I am thankful for his enthusiasm for my thesis topic and for seeing the potential it had. Throughout this process he has challenged me to think deeply about my ideas and to engage with many relevant sources to the point of even lending them to me from his personal library. This has been a very formational experience for me, and he helped me navigate through it all. I am a better theologian and writer because of the time and effort he invested in me.

I am also thankful for my readers, Dr. Leopoldo Sánchez and Dr. Benjamin Haupt, for taking my thesis and making it a better work than when you received it. Their encouragement and insights have helped me to think more critically and better express my own Lutheran perspective. I have appreciated that even from an early stage, they showed an interest in and support for my topic that pushed me to put my best work forward.

Also for my graduate school director, Dr. Beth Hoeltke, who encouraged me every step of the way, and kept me moving forward. Her long-distance support helped move my thesis along in a timely manner while I completed my internship contemporaneously, and I am grateful.

For the rest of the faculty, many of whom listened with an attentive ear while I wrestled with my convictions and sifted through ideas until my thesis topic emerged. While the entire faculty has contributed to my formation as a theologian during my time at Concordia Seminary, I would especially like to thank a few for their interest and support regarding my thesis: Dr. Eric Herrmann, Dr. Joel Biermann, Dr. David Peter, Dr. Peter Nafzger, Dr. Robert Kolb, and my deaconess program director, Dr. Gillian Bond.

For those who participated in my formation as a theologian and a writer before starting this process, including my professors from Concordia University Wisconsin, in particular: Dr. Daniel

Paavola, Dr. Tom Feiertag, and Dr. Joel Elowsky. I am also grateful for Mrs. Luanne Coltmann, I would not be the writer I am today without her.

For friends and family who have taken the time to listen, and to read and critique sections of my paper. I am thankful for the corrections, reflections, and insights that each of you have given to me.

I am especially grateful for my husband, who listened, discussed, read, re-read, listened some more, and endured this thesis as it has been a major part of my life and occupied a major part of my mind over the last year and a half. I have been given a new lens through which I see the world, and he has graciously supported, encouraged, and grounded me.

ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Augsburg Confession
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
SA	The Smalcald Articles
SC	The Small Catechism
LC	The Large Catechism
FC Ep	Formula of Concord, Epitome
FC SD	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration

ABSTRACT

Lukas, Rebekah L. "The Christian Family: Implications of Familial Language for the Identity of the Church." M.A. thesis, Concordia Seminary, 2020. 85 pp.

The family is a prominent image for the identity of the Church. Biblical language reflects the truth that the Church is a family, and God's promises include familial rhetoric. For Christians, God is "Our Father who art in heaven," and Jesus is our brother. Christians are made "sons of God" through Baptism, becoming a member of the whole family of God. These are essential aspects of the Christian's identity. When the Church neglects its use of this language, and in turn neglects its teaching of 'Church is family', the body of believers loses aspects of the richness of its identity. This thesis shows why the Church should be defending its definition as 'a family' and the impact this definition has on corporate and individual identity and life.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his coming death, resurrection, and ascent from this earth, he left them with many encouragements and warnings regarding his return. In Matthew we read one such account of Jesus' admonition: "Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Matt. 24:42–44).¹ Jesus was clear—he is coming back, and the world and all who are in it do not and will not know the hour when he will arrive. Because of this uncertain hour, Jesus appeals to his disciples (those who walked with him and those who would follow without ever seeing him)—to his Church—"Stay awake."

Since his ascension into heaven, Christ's Church has been in the 'End Times,' keeping watch for Christ's return. Saint Paul wrote to many of his 'Church plants,' the congregations he started throughout his missionary journeys. In these letters, he reminds these young congregations of Christ's promise and Christ's warning. The Church Fathers, following Paul and the Apostles, kept watch as well and guided God's people. They encouraged Christians to remain awake through various practices such as asceticism and monastic life. Even today, the Church must be reminded of and guided concerning the return of Christ, the end of this world and the coming of the New Heavens and the New Earth. Christ continues to call to his Church, "Stay awake!"

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

How easy it is to fall asleep. Even while suffering and pain abound in the world, the Church so easily falls away from its identity, swept up by the “philosophy and empty deceit” of the world (Col. 2:8). Particularly in Protestant North America, the Church faces this temptation about which Paul warned the Colossians. And a most troubling aspect of this temptation for the North American Church is that they do not even see it. Many Christians in America have fallen so deeply asleep they do not even realize they are not awake—they do not recognize the temptations and the departure from their identity, the loss of grounding and understanding. They do not hear their Lord calling, “Stay Awake!”²

During these End Times, how does the Church ‘wake up’ from this slumber? In this paper, I argue that the use of familial language for the Church can have important implications for how the individual Christian and the Church as a whole understand themselves. I also argue that the Church reinstates and uses familial language in her practices. In this way, Christians will better understand their identity as members of God’s family. And as Christians understand themselves to be God’s children and their fellow Christians as their true brothers and sisters, they will also practice their faith in accordance with that truth. This will help them to live more fully and consistently their lives as God has called them to. They will better understand their place in the story of salvation and will more actively be a part of the furthering of God’s Kingdom on earth until Christ returns. While my suggestions here are informed by Lutheran theology, my hope is that others throughout Protestantism will find the arguments made to be intelligible and helpful as well.

The methodology of my thesis should be understood from two standpoints. First, the entire

² This particular claim is bold and bears substantiation and discussion. Throughout this thesis, the noted claim is addressed, particularly in chapter two in the section entitled, “Identifying the Problem.”

thesis follows the method outlined by Richard Osmer in his article, “Practical theology: a current international perspective,” where he describes four tasks as part of what he calls “the paradigm of reflective practice.”³ My thesis is framed within this paradigm, attending to the following four tasks: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic. The thesis describes the current status of the question, then describes how we arrived here. Then the thesis brings forward a theological solution to the problem and describes what this solution will look like in certain practices of the Church.

But my thesis also should be understood as following a theological method made well known by so-called “Post-Constantinian” theologians such as John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, and William Willimon. They stress how the Church always embodies her convictions and values. Their approach might be called “sociological,” because it analyzes the Church in terms of her life. These terms certainly include beliefs and sources, but they also include practices and forms of the Church as well as her cultural and social situations. This approach might also be called “ecclesiological.”⁴ An example of this theological method is found in Yoder’s *Body Politics* where he reviews the Church in political terms according to her calling, then focuses on five Church practices in which she is called to operate as a *polis*, thus establishing a pattern to be applied throughout the Church’s life.⁵

Through this paper, I hope to embody some values and convictions that too often are missing in the life of the Church. Perhaps through the study, understanding, and use of familial

³ Richard R. Osmer, “Practical theology: A Current International Perspective,” *HTS Theologese Studies/Theological Studies* 67 no. 2, (2011): 2, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v67i2.1058>.

⁴ This term and this approach are used in the dissertation of Chad D. Lakies, “An (Enduring) Ecclesiology: Beyond the Cultural Captivity of the Church,” PhD diss. (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 2013).

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992; repr., Scottdale: Herald, 2001), ix.

language, some of these values and convictions can be reclaimed. The apathy and disengagement of Protestant North America has been allowed to persist for too long and Christ continues to call to his Church, “Stay awake!” While many Christians may be sleeping in North America, having lost their grasp on their identity in the midst of society, there is hope and comfort in knowing that the Church still belongs to Christ, and he is working in her and through her. H. Richard Niebuhr remarks in his book *Christ and Culture*,

[I]t is helpful to remember that the question of Christianity and civilization is by no means a new one; that Christian perplexity in this area has been perennial, and that the problem has been an enduring one through all the Christian centuries. It is helpful also to recall that the repeated struggles of Christians with this problem have yielded no single Christian answer, but only a series of typical answers which together, for faith, represent phases of the strategy of the militant church in the world. That strategy, however, being in the mind of the Captain rather than of any lieutenants, is not under the control of the latter. Christ’s answer to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another; yet his followers are assured that he uses their various works in accomplishing his own.⁶

This thesis is one of those works, a Christian answer to the Church’s problem in North America. Until the return of Christ, problems will exist and arise. May the Church not be complacent in her existence amongst and in the face of the problems. Rather, may she grasp her identity, holding fast to the place she has been given in God’s story: The Family of God.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 2.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CURRENT PROBLEM

Identifying the Problem

As noted in the Introduction, this thesis is prompted by the conviction that many American Protestants, including Lutherans in North America, have lost some important values and convictions about themselves as the Church. As a result, I want to explore in thinking and in practice what it means for a Christian to be a member of what we confesses in the Nicene Creed, “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.” This definition has been accepted, preserved, and taught for more than a thousand years. Not only is it an assumption made by both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, but it has been, and continues to be, expressed in our own Lutheran confession, such as Luther’s example of the “holy little flock and community of pure saints.”¹ This is the first premise of this paper, that there is only one holy catholic and apostolic Church, as we confess in the words of the Nicene Creed. This communion—or community—of saints is a distinct gathering of people, a people who are holy, who are “under one head, Christ.”² This ancient and universal confession goes along with the conviction that, if you are a true Christian, you are a part of the true Church, and if you are not a true Christian, you are not a part of the true Church. This, then, has immediate consequences. For if you are outside of the true Church, then you are beyond salvation. As stated in the Large Catechism, “Outside this Christian community, however, where there is no gospel, there is also no forgiveness, and hence there also can be no holiness.”³

¹LC II, 51 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 437.

²LC II, 51 in Kolb and Wengert, 437.

³“However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it

Yet the belief that Christian identity is bound up with being a member of the one holy Church led by her Lord is often confused or obscured in the lives, if not the teachings, of American Protestant congregations or their individual members. When one considers the language, the practices, and the concerns of many congregations and their members, different understandings of the “church” and of “Christian identity” are apparent. This is the problem I seek to explain and address.

The kind of problem is illustrated by the common understanding of “church membership.” People who are a part of the Church are called “members” and have a “membership.” This language is undeniably biblical. But how is it used? What does it usually mean? C.S. Lewis explains how this language has become a problem in his essay “Membership”:

At the outset we are hampered by a difficulty of language. The very word *membership* is of Christian origin, but it has been taken over by the world and emptied of all meaning. In any book on logic you may see the expression “members of a class.” It must be most emphatically stated that the items or particulars included in a homogeneous class are almost the reverse of what St. Paul meant by *members*. By *members* ([Greek]) he meant what we should call *organs*, things essentially different from, and complementary to, one another, things differing not only in structure and function but also in dignity. Thus, in a club, the committee as a whole and the servants as a whole may both properly be regarded as “members”; what we should call the members of the club are merely units. A row of identically dressed and identically trained soldiers set side by side, or a number of citizens listed as voters in a constituency are not members of anything in the Pauline sense. I am afraid that when we describe a man as “a member of the Church” we usually mean nothing Pauline; we mean only that he is a unit—that he is one more specimen of some kind of things as X and Y and Z.⁴

This understanding of membership—that members are units of one kind or another—is

is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ. Moreover, this church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by his Spirit as Paul testifies in Ephesians 1. . . . Therefore those in whom Christ is not active are not members of Christ.” Ap VII and VIII, 5 in Kolb and Wengert, 174.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: And Other Addresses* (C.S. Lewis Pte. Ltd., 1949; repr., New York: HarperOne, 2001) 163–64.

common in American congregations. Members frequently are understood and interpreted as belonging to and supporting an institution. For instance, each and every *member* is encouraged, expected, and occasionally required to give weekly to the “offering” which is collected to offset costs to run the building and facilities, pay salaries, or fund projects. This could easily be understood as paying their “dues.” Each and every member is expected to attend. The attendance of members is taken for the purpose of having a head count.

This idea of “membership” fits into a larger idea: the congregation as a “cultural institution,” that is, the local congregation operates as a cultural and social fixture. Any local congregation by its very existence is in some way a cultural and social fixture, but here I am referring to the local congregation whose life and concerns reflect a need to be *identified* as an institution, that is, as a particular cultural and social fixture. For convenience, I will call this “institutionalization.”

Institutionalization comes through in the ways a church uses language. The word “membership” gives an apt example. The members of a congregation are less members of the Body of Christ than members of another social institution, like a club. The titles and functions of ‘church workers’ often reflect institutionalization as well. Congregations have senior pastors, administrative pastors, associate pastors, assistant pastors. Directors of music, of education, of family life, of assimilation. Just as society does, people are separated by generations and into groups with youth groups, adult groups, children’s church, adult daycare, etc. Specialized workers are hired to plan, manage, organize, and execute effective evangelizing methods, learning styles and attractive programs.

Institutionalization is also seen in how congregations have business models they follow, attending to the business side of keeping their budget in the black, their schools open, their

facilities running. Many congregations have a designated communications person or social media coordinator. These departments and persons are trained to make the Church look good, attractive, worth the precious time of otherwise busy or preoccupied people and families. As a business, congregations need business managers, administrative assistants, governing boards, committees, panels, strategic plans, and opportunities for professional development.

Unsurprisingly institutionalization explains the understanding and responsibilities of the pastor. George Barna describes this explicitly in his 1988 publication, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth*:

The average pastor has been trained in religious matters. Yet, upon assuming church leadership, he is asked to run a business! Granted, that business is a not-for-profit organization, but it is still a business. The Church is in the business of ministry: searching out people who need the gift of acceptance, forgiveness, and eternal life that is available in knowing Jesus Christ. For the local church to be a successful business, it must impact a growing share of its market area. Ultimately, many people do judge the pastor not on his ability to preach, teach, or counsel, but on his capacity to make the church run smoothly and efficiently. In essence, he is judged as a businessman...⁵

The Barna Group has developed over the years and now conducts research that “reveals the cultural and religious trends affecting your life everyday.”⁶

In these ways, the congregation lives and identifies as just another organization in the community, and its language makes it difficult to differentiate from a social club or business. And that seems to be the point.

I am not wanting to argue these things have no place within the life of a congregation. Of course, a congregation should know who is a part of their body of believers. Of course, the pastor should know who was not there on a particular Sunday. It is what is done with that information

⁵ George Barna, *Marketing the Church: What They Never Taught You About Church Growth* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 14.

⁶ Barna Group, “About,” Barna Group Inc., 2020, <https://www.barna.com/about/>.

that makes a difference, as well as how that information is discussed, disbursed, and divulged to congregation leaders and members. I am also not wanting to argue congregations should not provide clear job descriptions and roles within their ministries. When a congregation has a school, a sanctuary, buildings that need to be maintained, all of those facilities must be cared for and all of the employees must be cared for appropriately. The titles and descriptions of roles chosen for each director or overseer must be considered towards how it will be heard and interpreted, and what it will communicate to the congregation about the identity of that individual, but also about the identity of the congregation itself.

The danger lies in the reinforcement of social and cultural identities in the minds of the people. Society defines the Christian and the Church. Sociologists read the symptoms and diagnose the ailment. They give commentary to societal destruction and everyone listens, agrees, believes, and lives what they hear. The truth for daily life and living comes from the culture, and after that ‘truth’ has been internalized, *then* the implications for being a Christian are considered. More often than not, those implications are merely a supplication for an already full life. An American ‘Christian’ looks at her options, weighs the cost and reward, and decides how Christianity best enhances her life according to her American identity.

In her true identity, the Church is different from a social club, different from an organization with a cultural agenda. Other organizations prioritize profit, using the consumer as a means to an end. Some organizations do value the consumer, but in either case, the consumer has a weakness, a fault, a problem. This could be physical weakness, it could be loneliness, lack of skill, lack of job, lack of status. The organization can fix the problem. Or, the consumer *has* the status or the skill and can fix or elevate the organization. Every organization has a bottom line, a ledger that must be kept, and an appearance that must be maintained.

Where is the Church as the Christian is daily evaluating and adjusting her life, her choices, her values? The Church is reinforcing this mentality in acting as that other institution the society has labeled it for so many years. The language and the rhetoric the Church decides to use sends its own message, even if it is unintentional or subconscious. She is at risk of replacing her true identity. In other words, the problem facing many American Protestants is an “identity crisis.”

Analyzing the Problem

I have illustrated ways in which American congregations reflect a problem. But there are different ways to explain it, and those different ways would mean different answers. I want to put forward a specific answer to this problem—to revive the language and thought of “family” for the Church. It is understandable that someone else would propose that the answer lies in dealing with cultural influences like individualism or consumerism. This answer is one that addresses an external problem. The answer I will propose addresses an *internal* problem. These answers are not opposed to each other, but they are different. If the problem comes from the outside, then the task is to identify it and take action against it. One can imagine denouncing individualism and consumerism as selfishness and greed. One can imagine giving congregants fewer choices or making life stricter. But if the problem comes from within, then perhaps a different course of action is needed. In any case, since these problems are different and lead to different responses, it will be helpful to explain further why the Church has a problem internal to herself.

To do this, I offer two sociological reasons that are necessarily external, and have been *internally* imbibed by the Church as its primary ways of viewing itself in North America.

The first reason comes from sociologist Peter Berger in his book *The Sacred Canopy*.⁷ He

⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967).

explained in detail a fundamental shift in the *identity* of religious institutions in modern Western societies, especially the United States. He began with the historical fact of religious pluralism, which simply meant the existence and viability of multiple faiths (not the theological position that different religions are roughly equally valid). The result had been: “The religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be *marketed*. It must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy.’ The pluralistic situation is, above all, a *market situation*. In it, the religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities.”⁸ Just like everyone else, Christians are entitled to be catered to by their institutions, even the religious ones.

Berger went on to explain how this shift required bureaucratic structures for the organizations stating, “All at once, the question of “results” becomes important.”⁹ Results drive their polity, their methodology, their ecumenicity. Both internally and externally, the religious institutions must accommodate for the consumer preference, “their day-to-day operations [being] dominated by the typical problems and “logic” of bureaucracy.”¹⁰ Because of this, they must have a certain psychological profile for their professionals internally, which are fulfilled through both selection and formation. These professionals with an aptitude for their bureaucratic and social-psychological role can hold any number of religious titles, using tradition to validate the modified structure.¹¹ Externally, Berger described the religious institutions’ ways to deal with competitors as “cartelization” or “ecumenicity.” In this system, competitors deal with each other

⁸ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 138.

⁹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 138–39.

¹⁰ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 140.

¹¹ Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 140–41.

either through mergers, which reduce the number of individual institutions vying for consumer attention, or through mutual agreements regarding ‘territory,’ solely for the purpose of rationalizing competition.¹² These indicators betray how deeply the identity of religious institutions have shifted. All of these changes require resources of every kind—time, money, skills, etc. The religious institution, including the congregation, needs to be an expert at marketing and business. It needs to be able to draw the people in, especially to pay for these resources they now need.¹³

The Sacred Canopy was published in 1967. Since then, it is easy to see that Berger’s analysis has been vindicated. The most evident signs are George Barna and the “Church Marketing” movement who are doing all they can to equip, modify, and prepare for the new life of the Church: consumer satisfaction. The terminology is rampant, a second language (or perhaps for many, the first language) of ‘church workers’ and developers, training all those who hear it and speak it to *see* it as well. The words we use shape our view.

To be sure, there has been a reaction against this. There has been a tendency to stress the traditional and the old. The labels themselves are suggestive: “confessional Lutheranism,” “new Calvinism,” and the “Benedict Option.” But Berger predicted this, too. This prediction further vindicates his analysis:

The pluralistic situation presents the religious institutions with two ideal-typical options. They can either accommodate themselves to the situation, play the pluralistic game of religious free enterprise, and come to terms as best they can with the plausibility problem by modifying their product in accordance with consumer demands. Or they can refuse to accommodate themselves, entrench themselves behind whatever socio-religious structures they can maintain or construct, and

¹² Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 143–44.

¹³ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 142.

continue to profess the old objectivities as much as possible as if nothing had happened.¹⁴

Berger helps to explain the form and structure of many American Protestant congregations. This form and structure definitely play down the congregation as a distinct and close-knit community. But with this change in form and structure, sociologists have also shown a definite change in the content of many American religious communities.

This second sociological reason was predicted by Philip Rieff shortly before Berger published *The Sacred Canopy*, and has been studied at length by Christian Smith. This is the “triumph of the therapeutic.”¹⁵ Rieff was trying to describe the shift in religion that was then emerging. He described the contrast between “religious man” and “psychological man.” Most simply, the contrast was: “Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased.”¹⁶ “Religious man” belonged to a culture that required commitment and obligation. This meant that a key problem was guilt, and a key question was “How might I be saved?” “Psychological man” was emerging, according to Rieff, in a culture that no longer required the traditional commitments and obligations. Accordingly, guilt was no longer a religious problem and salvation no longer needed. But in Rieff’s view, this did not spell the end of religion. He predicted an “emergent culture” where

a wider range of people will have “spiritual” concerns and engage in “spiritual” pursuits. There will be more singing and more listening. People will continue to genuflect and read the Bible, which has long achieved the status of great literature; but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing. There will be more theater, not less, and no Puritan will denounce the stage and draw its curtains.¹⁷

¹⁴ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 153.

¹⁵ Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1966, 1987).

¹⁶ Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 24–25.

¹⁷ Rieff, *Triumph of the Therapeutic*, 26.

Forty years later, Christian Smith published *Soul Searching*, a sociological study of the religious and spiritual lives of American youth. In it he coined a term that has gained widespread use: “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” This is his term for the “de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers” and their parents.¹⁸ “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” refers to certain widely held convictions about “God” and “religion.” As the term suggests, this “faith” or “religious viewpoint” has three basic components:

First, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one’s health, and doing one’s best to be successful...

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, second, about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one’s prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God’s love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to solve problems, and getting along amiably with other people...

Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance.¹⁹

This is not itself a religious institution or movement. It has no creed, official or unofficial, and nothing corresponding to a scripture. Instead it is promoted and passed on informally and unofficially, and often in Christian congregations. “[T]he therapeutic has become parasitic on the sacred liturgy of the church and by means of the church’s practice is passed down and

¹⁸ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 162 and 120–22.

¹⁹ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 163–64.

perpetuated. Millennials who confess that they have received their faith of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism from their parents are indeed telling the truth, for the church embodies that faith within its own life.”²⁰

This kind of faith does not require or encourage one to become a member of a community. Instead, it readily lends itself to being *marketed* as a *consumer commodity* and in this way goes along with the congregation seen as a *marketing agency*, as Berger’s analysis calls for. This is not the primary identity Christ gave his Church.

²⁰ Chad Lakies, “Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church Without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith,” *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013): 23, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rh&AN=ATLA0001942304&site=eds-live>.

See also sociologist Robert Wuthnow’s more general observation about this shift:

Despite evidence that churches and synagogues are, on the surface, faring well, the deeper meaning of spirituality seems to be moving in a new direction in response to changes in U.S. culture. Indeed, the foundations of religious tradition seem to be less secure than in the past. Insisting that old phrases are cant, many Americans struggle to invent new languages to describe their faith. As they do, their beliefs are becoming more eclectic, and their commitments are often becoming more private.

Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1.

CHAPTER THREE

WHY THE 'FAMILY OF GOD?'

Language Shaping the Life of the Church

Many different metaphors and images have been and are being used to describe, teach, and inform the Church about herself. Many of these images and metaphors are helpful, communicating specific aspects of the life of the Church in vivid ways. The Church is described in scripture as branches on a vine, the vine being Christ. The branches must be connected to the vine in order to bear fruit. The Church is described in scripture as a flock of sheep, their shepherd being Christ. The sheep know and follow the voice of their shepherd. The Church is described in scripture as a building, the foundation and cornerstone being Christ. Without a strong foundation or cornerstone, the building will fall.

Another important metaphor for teaching in the Church has been 'family of God.' Congregations use the 'Family of God' as a push for the congregation to *act like* a family (not necessarily to *be* a family). Members of the Church are divided by age and station in life. Subsequently, people who are members of a particular congregation can become tight-knit, cliquy, and often times exclusive. Sometimes, the 'Family of God' is employed as a model for family unit structure. The Church is *like* a household, the head being Christ. Therefore, the household must be like the Church. To function well, each member must do their part, submitting to Christ. Christians must have healthy, successful family units because they are members of the Church. As this is applied to the congregation, the hope is that the congregation will function well and successfully, following biblical standards.

For the Church to limit its usage of familial language to congregational or familial structure and the feel-good relations between members is to undercut the fullness of the familial

language's meaning. There are four reasons and ways to understand and use familial language more fully in the life of the Church: First, scripture gives familial language to the Church. Jesus uses family language in a way that bestows a new identity on his followers. He claims the work of the Holy Spirit is directly related to the Church's identity as the Father's children. The apostles also use familial language and continue to regard the Church as the Father's children and continue to reinforce that identity.

Second, the Book of Concord, the collection of the Lutheran confessional writings, reinforces familial language. In the Apology and the Large Catechism, the Reformers were distinct in their description and definition of the Church. Not only is their account of the Church's identity in alignment with the biblical usage of familial language, but it is a testament to the enduring value of familial language. They show how familial language has constantly been forming the Church's identity throughout the Church's history and still today. Below we will see that a Christian receives guidance, comfort, and assurance for his life from his familial identity as described in the Lutheran Confessions.

Third, the Family of God is *concretely* tied to Christian identity. The language and imagery of family have never faded in the life of the true Church, and they are not the only language and imagery to shape Christian identity. In this respect, the problem does not exist. The Church has the language. The problem, however, manifests in the shaping of Christian identity for the Church in North America. The Christian does not live the language she is using, as was described in the previous chapters.

Fourth, correct understanding of the Family of God and correct usage of familial language in the congregation show the *inclusivity* of God's family. This inclusivity is an important distinction from the expected exclusivity often criticized by those who oppose the use of familial

language. Exclusive groups require one to fit a certain criteria or requires one to change themselves before they receive admittance. The important inclusivity of the family of God is that a person, any person—no matter their background or history—is fully changed by something outside themselves, and that change brings them in and grants them belonging in the family. Not by their own decision or effort, nor by the decision or effort of other men and women, but by the decision and effort of God himself: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12–13).

Reason One: Familial Language is Scriptural

That the Church should understand and promote Christian identity in family terms is clear from the New Testament. The Old Testament people of God knew him as Yahweh, God of Hosts, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament people of God, through Jesus Christ and the presence and power of the Spirit, call him “Father” and regard themselves as his children. In the following examples from scripture, I am not supposing, suggesting, or supporting any ideas that Jesus and the Holy Spirit work independently from each other, but as God has chosen to reveal himself to us, we do see specific persons of the Trinity more prominently at work. These scripture passages record the source of understanding from which the New Testament people of God derived their identity. This is how they knew their relation to God the Father. They were able to regard Christ the Son of God as their Brother. And in the Spirit they were able to know each other as brothers and sisters, together with Christ, in the family of God.

God the Father calls people and makes them his own, wholly and completely his children through the work of his Son and his Spirit who create faith within a person. Outside of that family, there is no salvation. John writes in his first letter, “See what kind of love the Father has

given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1), and “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him” (1 John 5:1). The Holy Spirit has not only given gifts to the Christian, but he has given himself also. Christians have heard the message of Jesus Christ, they have the narrative, and yet the Church in North America is drifting away. The Church must be reminded of what it is, *who* it is. The New Testament does this, and we can summarize this witness under three headings: Through the testimony of Jesus himself; through the New Testament’s witness to the presence and power of the Spirit; and through the instruction of the Apostles.

Through Jesus

The accounts from the Gospel writers and the Apostles give us direct knowledge of what Jesus himself said to his original audiences and those who would hear afterwards (such as 21st century Christians). Their testimonies concretely tie familial language to justification through Jesus’ life giving, life changing words. Why are Jesus’ words so important for the Christian life? Why is it so pressing that the Christian should understand Christ’s authority over his life? Saint John writes,

So Jesus said to them, “Truly truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement but has passed from death to life” (John 5:19–24).

In this text, Jesus testifies regarding the specific authority, the Father’s authority working

alongside that of the Son, that gives his words meaning and power over an individual's salvation and identity. In the state of sinfulness, humankind cannot change themselves. They cannot change their identities to be favorable to God. They cannot elbow their way into the family of God. The only person who has the authority to change a person is Christ himself. Through his life-giving word, the sinful person will pass from death to life. Through his life-giving word, a person passes from outside the family to inside the family.

In short, familial language is tied to justification. Christ calls those who believe in and call upon his name "brother" and "sister," "sons" and "co-heirs." This is recorded throughout the Gospels, in the life, words, and work of Jesus. This is recorded throughout the Epistles, as God's narrative is passed from apostle to apostle, congregation to congregation, Christian to Christian. They are God's children, members of God's family. That is their new identity.

In the gospel accounts, Matthew records Jesus' instructions on how to pray, beginning with "Our Father" (Matt. 6:9). This invitation and instruction on conversation with the Almighty God tells Jesus' disciples, and the generations of disciples to follow, that they are not only followers, students, servants—they are participants in the *family*. They are God's children. Today, 21st century Protestant North American Christians are also God's children. The way they are to approach the Almighty God is as his *children*. When the disciples asked how they should pray, *Jesus* said to begin with "Our Father." Christians are to call God "Father."

Mark records Jesus saying, "For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35). Here, Jesus declares that flesh and blood do not dictate who is or who is not in his family. The person who does the will of God the Father is considered brother or sister of Jesus Christ. The physical bonds of family are created through the common participation in the will of God. Jesus does not say that those who do the will of God are *like* his brother and

sister. Jesus says they *are* his brother and sister.

In Luke, we read these words of Jesus, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Though ‘family’ language is not specifically seen, the new identity in Christ is clear. God’s family is so encompassing that a denial of your previous identity is essential. For some, this is a welcome requirement, a new freedom and a new life totally apart from their old selves. For others, this is a difficult request, a ‘sacrifice’ to give up their status, their name, or their success for the sake of Christ. Either way, the denial of self is a must, according to the word of Christ. Jesus continues to say, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:24). Life and salvation belong to those who lose their former identity for their new identity as God’s family.

John records the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in which Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Jesus makes the ‘born again’ identity very concrete when Nicodemus asks a follow-up question fixated on the impossibility of going back inside the mother. Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). In order to enter the kingdom of God, a person must become a new kind of child. They must be born into a new identity—one that is given to them. It is a gift of the Spirit, and it is the way to new life. Birth has a strong association with children. Rebirth also has a strong association with children, but *new* children. Re-children. God’s children. Jesus situates salvation as entering a new family.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul writes, “we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one

will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). And this justification we receive in Christ is specifically linked to our sonship. Paul states this in other words in his letter to the Galatians, saying, “God sent forth his Son ... so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5).

Jacob A. O. Preus discusses this important situation of salvation as entering a new family in *Just Words*,¹ in which he uses the familial, adoptive image as a metaphor for “justification.” In chapter three, entitled “Birth,” Preus focuses on ‘birth’ and ‘rebirth’ as frameworks for the Gospel, referencing 1 Peter 1:3, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”² This new birth is explicitly tied to our justification, as Preus comments in reflection on John 3 and Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, “Jesus announces simply and without hesitation that a person enters the kingdom of God by being born again by water and the Spirit. God causes us to be reborn. He “rebirths” us or gives birth to us.”³ Preus’s reflections are helpful in understanding through a familial lens the Church’s identity as a *justified* people.

Through the Presence and Power of the Spirit

Justification alone is not tied concretely to familial language but sanctification also. Jesus’ disciples received from him this promise: I will not leave you as orphans. Jesus promised to send his Spirit to the disciples. Jesus said,

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father,

¹ Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000).

² Preus, *Just Words*, 43.

³ Preus, *Just Words*, 45.

and you in me, and I in you. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him (John 14:15–21).

Modern readers of the New Testament know that that Spirit has come. The Holy Spirit is in the Christian, uniting all Christians, and giving them the identity of children. Without the Spirit, all are still orphans. With the Spirit, no longer are they orphans. They are rebirthed as sons. Jesus describes to Nicodemus: “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). Without the Spirit means without a Father, without a family—without the Church.

Paul relates a similar idea, writing to the Church in Rome,

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:11–17).

Paul taught the Roman Christians what Jesus taught his disciples: The Spirit makes you sons! It is by the Holy Spirit that you cry to God, “Abba! Father!” Paul specifically says that the Spirit received is the Spirit of adoption as sons. The language is specific and strong, binding tightly the kingdom of God and the sonship of those who enter it. God’s adoption brings people who were one hundred percent outside of the bloodline of God’s chosen people, one hundred percent into his family as sons. Sons receive the Father’s inheritance. If a person is a son, then he or she is an heir, and if an heir, recipients of the inheritance. For the sons of God, that inheritance is entrance

into the kingdom of God.⁴

This gift of the Spirit that brings adoption into God’s family is for *all* who believe the word of God. “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:44–45). There is no partiality regarding bloodline or background. The gift of the Holy Spirit is for all who hear the Word and do it. The family of God goes beyond the Jews and throughout the Gentiles. The Spirit has no bias toward certain ethnicity, wealth, or even length of time being a Christian.

Paul makes a note of this when writing to the Church in Ephesus, “[Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.” (Eph. 2:17–19). There is only one Spirit, and in that Spirit Christians have access to God the Father *because* they are of his household. He counts them as a part of his family because of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit grants access to the Father, giving people their new identities. The Holy Spirit unites across time and across geography, making *one* family.

The actions and work of the Holy Spirit are important to note here. In his book *Sculptor*

⁴ Michael P. Middendorf describes the particular nuance of the term ‘son’ and Paul’s application of it to all believers, male and female. He writes,

Sandy and Headlam propose: “Whereas [*teknon*] denotes the natural relationship of child to parent, [*vios*] implies, in addition to this, the recognized *status* and legal privileges reserved for sons.” This nuance of [*vios*], “son,” clearly is present in Gal 4:5–7. In Romans 8, Paul indicates that redemption comes only through Jesus Christ, whom he exclusively calls God’s [*vios*], “Son” (8:3, 29, 32). At the same time, all baptized believers in Christ (whether male or female) are to be included in either of the two terms, [*viōi*], “sons” (8:14, 19), or [*teknon*], “children” (8:16, 17, 21).

Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2013), 635.

Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology, Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. provides several different frameworks for understanding the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christians. At the beginning of his book, Sánchez asks, “[W]hat is the Christological pattern of a life shaped by the Spirit of God? ... And what difference does it make to pursue this question for ourselves in general and in our North American context in particular?”⁵ While he is seeking to help North American Christians in their understanding of spirituality, sanctification, and the Christian life through Spirit Christology, I find Sánchez’s work to be helpful in understanding these things through the lens of the Church’s identity as the family of God.

In chapter three, “Baptized into Death and Life: The Renewal Model,” Christians are described as a people who have been baptized into new life, given over from death to life, a life received only by the Holy Spirit: “Living in Christ, believers strive to no longer idolatrously worship their own sinful selves and its desires, but rather honor with their bodies the God and Father who created us all (cf. Col. 3:5).”⁶ This God-honoring life is that which the family of God seeks to embody. Believers can better strive against the idolatrous temptations when they know and understand themselves as children in relationship with their Father, which Sánchez iterates as “living in Christ.” The Christian’s identity as a member of God’s family brings the truth of new life, of the death of the old self, of the daily renewal, into a concrete tangible framework. This new life is theirs because they have been adopted by God the Father. And it is a life that members of the Church are ever growing in, the sanctification that Sánchez describes at length in different models.

At the end of the fifth chapter, “Sharing Life Together: The Sacrificial Model,” Sánchez

⁵ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 2.

⁶ Sánchez, *Sculptor Spirit*, 70.

remarks, “Upon his glorification, seated at the Father’s right hand, the Son also gives us the fruits of his redemptive work, including the gift of his Spirit. In short, when seen from a Spirit-oriented angle, the Son is both receiver and giver of divine generosity. And so are the adopted sons and daughters.”⁷ This real, concrete, absolute aspect of Christian identity is so important for understanding what God the Father gives through the Son and the Spirit. A Christian’s attitude towards and care of his neighbors is informed and changed and developed by the Spirit he has received because he is a *son of God*. The Christian’s tasks, lived out by the power of the Spirit and by his gifts, are assigned to Christians (receivers of divine generosity) and carried out by Christians (givers of divine generosity) *because of who they are*.

The Apostles’ Instruction

In their writings to the Church, to the congregations and Christians in Jerusalem and in the diaspora, the apostles use familial language. At times, they use it as direct instruction, such as in the case of Paul writing to Philemon. When Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, he appealed to Philemon that he would receive Onesimus back “no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 16). Paul is asking Philemon to regard Onesimus as his brother, which considering Onesimus’s status as a slave would have been counter-cultural and unbelievable. Paul’s distinct inclusion of “both in the flesh and in the Lord” is perhaps a way of saying that to be a brother in the Lord is to be a brother in the flesh. Paul has several other instances where he appeals to the Church, to the congregations, to care for the brothers, to look specifically to the needs of the brothers. There is an expectation here, that you know who your

⁷ Sánchez, *Sculptor Spirit*, 143.

brothers are, you treat them as such, and you care for them according to their needs.

Another apostolic instruction that uses family language is that of the writer to the Hebrews describing the hardships and difficulties that arise in the life of a Christian. He writes,

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness (Heb. 12:7–10).

God purposes to *change* his children, to transform them. Transformation comes through discipline. For a person to disregard God’s ways, to reject his sovereignty over all things and to distrust his purposes, all of that is to be ‘illegitimate children and not sons.’ God’s work in a Christian’s life is to *change* that person, not necessarily change his circumstances, so that they ‘may share his holiness.’

Another call and apostolic instruction to obedience comes from Peter. He writes to the diaspora using familial language, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile” (1 Peter 1:14–17). He also says, “[I]f anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God” (1 Peter 4:16–17)? Peter is using familial language to create a distinction between who is in and who is out, who is a Christian and who is not. And, if you *are* a Christian, a part of the “household of God”—God’s child—there are serious instructions for you to obey, things for which and by which you will be judged. The family of God has a new way of life. The

former way of life—the life disobedient to the gospel of God—must be left behind.

Finally, in his first letter, the Apostle John gives an example of the power of God’s word to create something new. John writes, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:1–2). God has called *sinners* his children, and so they are! In his love, he sent his own Son Jesus to die on the cross, dying the death that was theirs because of their sin, because of their separation from the Almighty God. God raised him from the dead, and in him the separation is no more. Sinners are now able to call him “God the Father Almighty.”

Reason Two: Familial Language is used in the Confessions

Wholly grounded in scripture, the Lutheran Confessions reflect the truths and characteristics of the Church as declared by our Lord and taught by the Spirit. Although in possession of these confessions, definitions, and explanations, the Lutheran Church and other church bodies who recognize these documents are not exempt from the identity crisis the Protestant Church in North America is experiencing. As stated before, the Lutheran Church has the family words. For example, in his Baptismal Booklet, Luther writes, “He himself calls it a ‘new birth,’ through which we, being freed from the devil’s tyranny and loosed from sin, death, and hell, become children of life, heirs of all God’s possessions, God’s own children, and brothers and sisters of Christ.”⁸ But these words are taken for granted. The Church’s identity as the family of God is taken for granted. The natural way familial language is used throughout the

⁸ Baptismal Booklet, 8 in Kolb and Wengert, 373.

Confessions may often be overlooked or un-noted in congregational practice. Though the familial language is not specifically defended or explained under its own heading or article in the Book of Concord, it is simply the natural result of the doctrines derived from the scriptures.

Where familial language might first be accused of being absent is in the Augsburg Confession, the primary confession of the Lutheran Church. This does not undercut my argument, though, because of the purpose of the document. First, the Augsburg Confession showed that the reformers' teaching was in accord with scripture and with the tradition of the Church,⁹ and second, it explained the abuses they corrected.¹⁰ With this ecumenical purpose in mind, it is unsurprising that the language is focused in a certain direction and is sparing in metaphor and imagery. It was an official proposal for church unity.¹¹

One place we do see familial language specifically and strongly is in the Solid Declaration, Article eleven, concerning election. "That he wills to make righteous all those who in true repentance accept Christ by faith, and he wills to receive them into grace as children and heirs of eternal life."¹² This part of the Confessions brings to light that truth that the family of God is not a hateful exclusive community, but that it is a family of adopted children whose identity lies in being elected by grace. There is comfort in knowing that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

This doctrine also gives us wonderful comfort in crosses and trials, that in his counsel before time began God determined and decreed that he would stand by us in every trouble, grant us patience, give us comfort, create hope, and provide a way out of all things so that we may be saved [cf. 1 Cor. 10:13*]. [49] Likewise, Paul treats this matter in such a comforting way in Romans 8[:28–39*], pointing out that in his

⁹ AC Conclusion of Part One, 1 in Kolb and Wengert, 58.

¹⁰ AC Introduction to the Disputed Articles in Kolb and Wengert, 60.

¹¹ AC Preface, 3 in Kolb and Wengert, 30.

¹² FC SD XI, 18 in Kolb and Wengert, 644.

intention before time began God preordained what sort of crosses and sufferings he would use to conform each one of his elect to “the image of his Son,” and that the cross of each should and must “work together for the good” of that person, because they are “called according to his purpose.” On this basis Paul concluded with certainty and without doubt that neither “hardship nor distress ... neither death nor life ... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”¹³

According to this doctrine, the Triune God is at work in the Christian, revealing himself as the Father who calls his children through his Son Jesus Christ and through his Holy Spirit. Example after example is given of the comfort and assurance the Christian should have in her identity as a child of God, a member of his family. And not only comfort and assurance, but she also is given guidance and direction on how her new life should be, should look, and should be lived out.

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, we find this definition of the Church: “[T]he church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons.”¹⁴ This resonates with what Hauerwas and Willimon discuss regarding the American citizenship trumping the heavenly citizenship of a Christian. While the term ‘family’ is not explicitly used here, the point that the Church is *not* principally an external association, an institution functioning within a society as another civic organization, is very important. The Church is *primarily* “an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons.” *Primarily*. First and foremost. Above all else. A people bound together by the Holy Spirit is what makes up the Church. By the Holy Spirit, that people is called the children of God. The “Christian Family” is the Family of God.

This pushes against the presupposition that the Church is a club or a society that, with membership, brings certain societal benefits. It pushes against the presupposition that the Church is another entity to make friends with, shake hands with, and make deals with. It pushes against

¹³ FC SD XI, 48–49 in Kolb and Wengert, 648–49.

¹⁴ Ap VII and VIII.5 in Kolb and Wengert, 174.

the presupposition that the Church is a pawn in a political game or societal morality rescue mission. “Moreover, it says ‘church catholic’ so that we not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations. It consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions.”¹⁵ The Church is the people who are associated by faith, a faith that comes in and through Jesus Christ, and is worked in their hearts by the Spirit of God.

Therefore, if a person does not have faith, does not have the Spirit, does not know Christ, that person is not a child of God. “Certainly the ungodly are not a holy church! Moreover, what follows, ‘the communion of saints,’ appears to have been added in order to explain what ‘church’ means, namely, the assembly of holy people [saints] who share in common the association of the same gospel or doctrine and the same Holy Spirit, who renews, sanctifies, and governs their hearts.”¹⁶ The Holy Spirit is very active in the life of the Church, in the lives of God’s children. The renewing, sanctifying, and governing of our hearts is dependent on the Spirit. To reject the Spirit and his work is to put oneself outside of the family.

More importantly, Luther presses upon the revealing of God as our Father through Christ his Son and through his Spirit. He uses this familial language throughout his Catechisms. Of all the Confessional documents, the Catechisms are the most clear about family. They were written for use in the churches and for the lives of all Christians. By stressing “family” imagery, they reflect how preaching and teaching and spiritual care was intended in the Church.

In the Small Catechism, we teach our children that God made us and takes care of us “out

¹⁵ Ap VII and VIII, 10 in Kolb and Wengert, 175.

¹⁶ Ap VII and VIII, 8 in Kolb and Wengert, 175.

of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy,”¹⁷ and that God himself “wants to entice us to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children”¹⁸ when we learn to pray, “our Father who art in heaven.” The fuller development of such theology comes in the Large Catechism. In his explanation of the Creed, Luther says,

[H]ere you have everything in richest measure. For in all three articles God himself has revealed and opened to us the most profound depths of his fatherly heart and his pure, unutterable love. For this very purpose he created us, so that he might redeem us and make us holy, and, moreover, having granted and bestowed upon us everything in heaven and on earth, he has also given us his Son and his Holy Spirit, through whom he brings us to himself. For, as explained above, we could never come to recognize the Father’s favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is a mirror of the Father’s heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge. But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Outside of the Church, the Creed has no purpose or meaning. The world does not know God. They do not know him as a merciful, loving Father. They do not know the gifts, blessings, and life that comes from being called his child. The Church *knows* him. The Church knows him as Father. The Church knows him through his Son, their Brother Jesus. The Church has community through his Spirit who instructs them.

In his explanation of the third article of the Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther describes the Church:

Just as the Son obtains dominion by purchasing us through his birth, death, and resurrection, etc., so the Holy Spirit effects our being made holy through the following: the community of saints or Christian church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. That is, he first leads us into his holy community, placing us in the church’s lap, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ.²⁰

¹⁷ SC II, 2 in Kolb and Wengert, 354.

¹⁸ SC III, 2 in Kolb and Wengert, 356.

¹⁹ LC II, 64–65 in Kolb and Wengert, 439–40.

²⁰ LC II, 37 in Kolb and Wengert, 435–36.

The Church is where people are holy, where people are with Christ and come to know Christ ²¹
The Christian's place is in the Church. That is his family, his home, his people. It is where his
nourishment comes from, his understanding, his faith. To see and view the world rightly, a
Christian must be instructed by the Holy Spirit, and that instruction comes from where the Holy
Spirit has been promised to us: in the hearts of God's people, in the community of saints.

Reason Three: Familial Language is Concretely Tied to Identity

The language and imagery of family have never faded in the life of the true Church.
Teaching and praying the Lord's Prayer, adoption as God's child through baptism, awareness
and action regarding brothers and sisters in the Family of God—these are just a few ways in
which the familial language has not been lost. Yet 'family' is not the only language and imagery
to shape Christian identity. The languages of "polis," "culture," etc. are current with the post-
Constantinians.

In *Body Politics*, John Howard Yoder writes,

The Christian community, like any community held together by commitment to
important values, *is* a political reality. That is, the church has the character of a *polis*
(the Greek word from which we get the adjective political), namely, a structured
social body. It has its ways of making decisions, defining membership, and carrying
out common tasks. That makes the Christian community a political entity in the
simplest meaning of the term.²²

While Yoder may be correct in that the Church's vision of "membership" mirrors that of the
original idea of the *polis*, "membership" has since been twisted into a consumer-focused,
purchasable position as a unit. *Polis* and 'political' and 'politics' reinforce the entanglement of
American ideas and ideals and the life of the Church. The Church may be 'a political entity in

²¹ LC II, 42 in Kolb and Wengert, 436.

²² Yoder, *Body Politics*, viii.

the simplest meaning of the term,' and it seems to be stuck there, continuing the 'Church as institution' mantra of our North American Protestantism and reinforcing human commitment rather than a divine transformation of the person's identity.

Although reinforcing the institutional language is not helpful and adds to the confusion of Christian identity, Yoder is very helpful with his insight about the Church's place in the world:

Stated very formally, the pattern we shall discover is that the will of God for human socialness as a whole is prefigured by the shape to which the Body of Christ is called. Church and world are not two compartments under separate legislation or two institutions with contradictory assignments, but two levels of the pertinence of the same Lordship. The people of God is called to be today what the world is called to be ultimately.²³

Yoder's intention is to show how the Church, understood as a separate body from the world but functioning in it with politics of its own, is a witness through its practices. The practices given to the Church, executed within its own political reach, within its own body, according to its head, Jesus, shows the world another politic.

Perhaps Yoder takes his work too far, as we see his life play out and learn of incredible wrongs he committed against those within his own community, in the Body of Christ. But we can learn a lot from his willingness to apply scripture to the Church today and call her to a life of obedience to the real commands given by our Lord for our lives. His insights throughout *Body Politics* into the practices of the Church will be helpful and informative as I discuss four practices of the Church in the next chapter, though I will be applying his insights to the Church as family, using family language instead of Body or *Polis*.

Clapp's solution is to rebuild the Christian community, to remind the Church it *has* a history, a culture, a language. He brings up an important distinction:

²³ Yoder, *Body Politics*, ix.

In the end, Christians do not need a nation-state for the public, cultural and historical life of their faith. We do not so need a nation-state because we already have the church. Thus for Christians the more urgent political question is not “Will America (or some other nation-state) survive?” but “Will Christians from all over the world, in various communions, be able someday to eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus Christ together and in peace?”²⁴

The Church is not some abstract ideology attached to a group whose object and purpose is in the current culture, in its positive contributions to society. Familial language helps to advance the characteristic of the Church that crosses all sorts of boundaries and geographical (and chronological) borders. The Church is not limited to a certain earthly citizenship or allegiance, and yet we carry on Constantinian values by the linguistical choices we make in the life of the Church in America.

It could be argued that “citizenship” in itself is a linguistical approach the Church can take in correcting the American Christian identity crisis. Hauerwas and Willimon take this up in their work and build a very compelling argument that Christians need to understand that their citizenship is not ultimately of this world. “Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ.”²⁵ Their solution is to remind Christians of their identity as *aliens*. The Church is a part of the culture and society it resides in, yet at the same time, the Church is comprised of people with a higher, more primary citizenship.

There is much to be valued in the work of Hauerwas and Willimon, especially in the way they hold the Church to account. But I propose that *family* language might be a stronger proponent for change in the Church’s life, because of how closely tied familial language is to the

²⁴ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 57.

²⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, exp. 25th ann. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014), 24.

Church's practices. The Church as "body" or "polis" or "culture" are not insignificant terms or ideals for changing the current approach to the life and identity of the Church. This thesis will show, though, how they are insufficient, as they fall under the 'abstract' category Avery Dulles outlines in his work, *Models of the Church*. Dulles says,

When an image is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one's theoretical understanding of a reality it becomes what is today called a "model." Some models are also images—that is, those that can be readily imagined. Other models are of a more abstract nature, and are not precisely images. In the former class one might put temple, vine, and flock; in the latter, institution, society, community.²⁶

Dulles' observation about abstract versus concrete images is important here. The Body of Christ, a heavenly citizenship, a *polis*—these remain in the abstract realm and are more difficult for people of the Church to grasp and understand as part of their primary identity. Family, on the other hand, is a more concrete image, tied to concrete language, tied to biblical truths, and tied to the Church's practices that administer and maintain membership. "The challenge of Jesus is the political dilemma of how to be faithful to a strange community which is shaped by a story of how God is with us."²⁷ This strange community is the family of God! And by teaching and communicating and *living* that identity, the people belonging to that community will find themselves faithful, regardless of whatever political dilemma may be at hand.

Reason Four: It is Inclusive, Tied to Salvation

To some, exclusivity must be avoided, and the rhetoric of "God's family" risks too much of the hard-earned welcoming image Protestant North America illusions itself to have achieved. This distorted way of understanding the Church as a family is one of the causes of opposition to my proposed use of familial language in the Church. Marva Dawn's criticism is one example of

²⁶ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, exp. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 15.

²⁷ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 30.

such opposition. In both *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down* and *A Royal “Waste” of Time*, Dawn completely refrains from using the term ‘family of God’ and strictly calls the Church an ‘alternative community’ or a ‘genuine’ community. Her reasoning is understandable, especially in light of an essay by C.S. Lewis entitled “The Inner Ring.”

C.S. Lewis describes the essence of this criticized view of the Christian family. He describes the ‘inner ring’ as a mindset that harms people in general, but the Christian especially. People desire to be ‘in.’ They want to be on the inside, friends with the elite, regarded and respected with the best and the popular. Yet, people soon discover that even if you *do* get in, there is another ring within the ring, the ascent never ending. Lewis assures the reader that the inner ring in and of itself is not evil, but he explains, “Let Inner Rings be an unavoidable and even an innocent feature of life, though certainly not a beautiful one; but what of our longing to enter them, our anguish when we are excluded, and the kind of pleasure we feel when we get in?”²⁸

These unwelcome feelings and temptations to sin are the reason Marva Dawn cautions against using familial language and referring to the Church as the family of God. She purposes,

[T]oo often the concept of community is perceived merely in terms of a feeling of coziness with God or compatibility with other members of the congregation. To reduce the importance of genuine community on the part of God’s people to such emotions or sentiments is terribly destructive. Often the result is the formation of an elitist “in” group or a narcissism that takes the focus off God. In *Christian Ethics Today* (June 1996), Molly T. Marshall wrote about the dangers of thinking about the church as a family—for that can inhibit our ability to welcome strangers or cause us to squeeze out people with whom we cannot attain intimacy.²⁹

When the familial language is inappropriately used, Dawn is correct in her analysis of what the

²⁸ Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, 149.

²⁹ Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshipping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 179.

congregation can become and how it can shut itself off to outsiders. But fear of this is not reason enough to discard familial language in the Church. There needs to be a correction in its use so that the people of God can rightly know and act according to their identity.

The ‘family of God’ has also been used as an example, or as lingo, for individual Christian households. Healthy households equal healthy congregations. An emphasis is put on making *families* Christian—as Christian as possible. As good as possible. As healthy as possible. This pursuit of improvement is not a bad thing. Of course Christians are to run their households well, develop godly relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, etc. But taken too far, this sends the message that to be a part of the Church, “you must get your act together at home, first.” Eventually, the implication becomes something that sounds like this, “Brokenness? No room for that here. If you bring it, we’ll fix it. You’ll be a ‘Christian family’ in no time.” It would seem that the Church only wants happy healthy homes. This attitude disregards the transforming power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It disregards the *new* identity within *the* Christian family. ‘Christian’ becomes an adjective instead of a noun. ‘A Christian family’ has different implications than ‘The Christian family’—the family of Christians.

I do not mean to devalue the role of Christian parents and godly households. There is great value to teaching good household practices, giving lessons and instruction on Christian parenting. Of course we must encourage Christian families and households and conduct ourselves in a godly manner, but that is not my focus for this paper. I am not focusing on the individual families, the mom, the dad, the kids and the dog. I’m focusing on the whole family, the Christian family, the family of God, the Church. The family that includes all families, nuclear, blended, and broken alike.

CHAPTER FOUR

LANGUAGE IN PRACTICE

In the life of the Church, it is important that she pay attention to her practice. In his introduction to *Body Politics*, Yoder explains the effort put into his own study of the Church. He writes, “[T]his study will pick up the topic of the church as body, for its own sake, from the beginning. The Christian community, like any community held together by commitment to important values, *is* a political reality.”¹ In the same way, but in a concrete fashion, I am putting effort into the topic of the Church as family, for its own sake, from the beginning. To help in this, I reach to more “abstract” resources for the theological reflection needed with the post-Constantinians such as Hauerwas. I am working to adapt or co-opt them into these concrete practices through the use of familial language.

Patrick R. Keifert describes and defends a theology that “holds that the logic of worship is grounded neither in tradition nor in practical novelty but rather in God and the presence and actions of God in worship.”² I propose that the presence and action of God in worship are grounded in the *paradosis* that has been taught to the Church, but that the Church must reclaim it. The Church has abandoned the gift of familial language that encompasses the Christian's identity. The use of that familial language—which has been given as a gift through the *paradosis*—in worship and in practice defines Christians as children of God, giving them that “public identification with the triune God.”

Keifert goes on to say, “Through such liturgical evangelism, conversion grows beyond a

¹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, viii.

² Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 6.

private experience to a public event by which individuals gain a public Christian identity.”³ “Public” here does not mean “out in the open” but “as a matter of being” Christian. This is like “public ministry,” which is ministry done on behalf of the Church, not a description of welcoming a large group of people, or ‘the general public.’ Therefore, a pastor hearing personal confession or administering communion to a shut-in is still conducting the public ministry, even though in both cases he is working one-on-one. A public Christian identity is an identity of a Christian as a member of the Church. And this happens in “public worship,” which is public in the same way as public ministry. This truth welcomes with the gospel, promises salvation, and prescribes the Christian life.

It is also important to note here that in “public worship,” practices and worship are not merely contained in an hour on Sunday morning. If that were so, the identity of the Church would only be applicable for an hour on Sunday morning, and God would not be the true God we believe and profess him to be. If He truly is the one true God, the God of the universe, the Almighty from everlasting to everlasting, and if the Church truly is *his* people, then the Church’s identity runs deeper than an hour on a Sunday morning once a month.

A Christian’s life is her worship. The Confessions testify to this clearly in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, “In summary, the worship of the New Testament is spiritual, that is, it is the righteousness of faith in the heart and the fruits of faith.”⁴ A Christian’s heart and his works are inseparable from him, therefore he does not leave his heart or his works in one ‘place’ of worship, rather the entire life of the Christian is worship, including the receiving of forgiveness and the life of good works. The Apology also makes clear not only that faith is

³ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 12.

⁴ Ap XXIV, 27 in Kolb and Wengert, 263.

worship, but that worship is faith and also the “acts and signs of faith,” and that “love, confession, and other good fruits ought to follow.”⁵ Now, where is forgiveness found? In public worship, of course.

In his essay “The Liturgical Shape of the Christian Life: Teaching Christian Ethics as Worship,” Hauerwas focuses on the perceptions of Church and worship in our culture today, and the lack of understanding of true worship. He says,

Under the influence of Troeltsch and Niebuhr, Christians can lose any sense that the way they think about the world is different than how others may think about the world. In particular, Troeltsch and Niebuhr underwrote the assumption that Christian ethics should be an ethics for anyone, since such an ethic was a necessary correlative to the presumption that Christianity is a civilizational religion. In contrast, I argue that the very fact that Christians must be gathered to worship suggests that the audience for Christian ethics must be those who have been shaped by the whip of God.⁶

As Hauerwas describes, the Christian who is a member of the Church in North America today struggles to understand and view their life in that way and in those terms. This struggle persists because of the break between “going to church” and “every day life.”

How Christians are shaped and formed directly impacts how they live and how they understand their identity. The apostle’s writings exemplify this as they continually reminded the recipients of their letters *who* they were and *what* they were supposed to *do*—*as children of God*. This identity comes through a transformation, a transformation accomplished only by the Triune God, as discussed in the previous chapter. In worship of the one true God, the Christian gains this identity. He learns this identity and lives this identity. But this worship where gifts are received, lives changed, and family members welcomed is not confined to the hour a month

⁵ Ap IV, 155 in Kolb and Wengert, 144.

⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 157–58.

many Christians have appropriated it to. Hauerwas puts it well,

I have no interest in teaching students about theology and/or ethics. Rather, I hope to transform my own and their lives that we all might live the life of praise more faithfully. Such transformation is an ongoing task, for our very familiarity with the language of faith becomes a mode of domestication of God. Yet it turns out that God will not be domesticated, forcing us to see what we had looked at far too long and not seen at all.⁷

The Church's familiarity with "worship" and "church" and "family language" has caused Christians to put God in a box, to categorize Christianity in its institutional way, and to lose sight of the continual transformation, the need for continual understanding, and the precious identity of being the Church. The language of the Church in her public worship and in her practices need to align with the identity and life that the Church aims to promote. This also applies specifically to the language and identity of family.

Familial language in the Church is not merely for the general unification of a group of people. It is not to make them function better as an organization or to make them more efficient or friendly towards outsiders. This language is the very language used by God himself for his people. Marva Dawn, in her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, spends significant time arguing and illustrating "the God-centeredness of worship."⁸ I think her strong emphasis here is important. The familial language is specifically *God's* familial language. The language that reminds us of our identity as family is reminding us of our place in *God's* family. It is God-centered.

When Christians gather, God is the main actor. When Christians leave the house of worship and disperse to the biological family units and vocations they have been given, God is still the

⁷ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 163.

⁸ Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 78.

main actor. God's familial language, as it is used in gathered worship, will inform the Christian's dispersed worship. As Christians use it in gathered worship, it will inform their understanding of themselves and of each other. It will remind them of who the main actor in the Christian story is, whose story they belong to, and where in the story they are headed.

In the following sections of this chapter, I will be doing a brief study of four Church practices: Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and visitation. In these brief studies, I show how a renewed understanding of familial language in the context of these practices can help Christians understand their identity, their life of faith, and their place in God's narrative. As I attend to each practice, I show concretely what these practices are, as understood and done under a family conception. The family conception of the Church is faithful and helpful. While the previous chapters have shown this in general, this chapter shows it in concrete, specific practices. Familial language within these four practices helps to teach Christian identity and further Christian practice within the Church.

Baptism

Baptism has a significant place in the life of a believer of Jesus Christ. From John's Gospel we read the account of Jesus' midnight conversation with Nicodemus,

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:3–6).

The baptized person, in his rebirth, receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit and he receives new life. His 'old Adam'—his old life of sin—is drowned and he is raised to life in Christ Jesus. The water combined with the Word of God has the power to cleanse that person

from his sin—his original condition which bars him from God’s presence, from God’s family—and justify him, to make him righteous, to count him as a member of the family of God. Paul reminds the Christians in Galatia of this as well when he says in his letter, “for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26–27). Through our baptism, Christ’s righteousness is our righteousness. In his own baptism, Jesus was called God’s Son and was given the Holy Spirit. As we are bound to Christ in his baptism, we are bound to that God-given identity of “Son” and bound with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The teaching of baptism from Luther’s Small Catechism instructs:

How can water do such great things? Answer:

Clearly the water does not do it, but the Word of God, which is with and alongside the water, and faith, which trusts this Word of God in the water. For without the Word of God the water is plain water and not a baptism, but with the Word of God it is a baptism, that is, a grace-filled water of life and a “bath of the new birth in the Holy Spirit,” as St. Paul says to Titus in chapter 3[:5–8], “through the bath of rebirth and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he richly poured out over us through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that through that very grace we may be righteous and heirs in hope of eternal life. This is surely most certainly true.”⁹

This rebirth is not a moment that exists in past tense and brings serenity upon remembrance. It is a reality that encompasses the entire person, their whole life, past and future. Past sins, future sins, even the coming judgement when Christ returns is determined and secured for the baptized.¹⁰

These baptized people are, because of their baptism, members of God’s family. God is their Father. Jesus is their Brother. They are brothers and sisters of one another. This act of God upon their life unites them with all others who have also been joined to Jesus through the waters of

⁹ SC IV, 9–10 in Kolb and Wengert, 359.

¹⁰ Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 45.

Holy Baptism. They are bound together by their common identity, their common transformation, their common adoption into God's family. Schlink comments on this unity gained through baptism,

On the one hand, there is a new awareness of Baptism as a bond of fellowship. Aroused to a sense of shame because of its disunity, Christendom has taken note of the fact that nearly all churches acknowledge each other's Baptism as valid. The question is being raised concerning the implications of this fact for the unity of the churches. If the words of Paul, "we were all baptized into *one* body" (1 Cor. 12:13), are taken seriously, does it then not follow from the reciprocal recognition of Baptism that all the baptized who believe in Christ are members of the one body of Christ in spite of the separation of the churches?¹¹

While I am not speaking on any sense of shame that may be affecting the Protestant Church in North America, I think it is important to note the acknowledgment of baptism across denominational lines. Christ is not divided into and among different denominations, therefore to be baptized into his body is to have unity with those who are also in his body. Schlink then describes this unity in Christendom in terms of 'the church,'

Through Baptism in the name of Christ the believer becomes a member of the church. Just as the church did not come into being because men joined together and founded the church, so it is at no time within man's power to become a member of the church. The church is called "church of God," not because at the time of their alliance men gave themselves this label, but because God has here gathered men and joined them together. Just as the origin of the church was God's deed, so every subsequent membership in the church results from God's deed. Man does not make himself a member of the church, but he is made a member. He does not join the church, but he is received into the church.¹²

To be baptized into the family of faith is not to be baptized into one single congregation or denomination. It is not only a small local family, biological family, "church family" as some call it—it is a global, catholic family. Christians are adopted into the family of God.

Baptisms are happening in congregations across Protestant North America. From infants to

¹¹ Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, 7.

¹² Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, 72.

adults, it cannot be denied that people are being baptized into the Church on a regular basis. If these are happening, then how is it that the practice of baptism is neglected? A Christian's understanding of baptism can be skewed and misconstrued—and this misunderstanding of baptism leads to a misunderstanding of what it means to be Christian. While there are more examples of the neglect of baptism than what I discuss here, I have chosen to discuss: (1) An understanding that views baptism as a birthright as opposed to a rebirth, and (2) A treatment of baptism as a remembrance rather than a reality. These examples of neglect showcase the identity crisis Christians continue to face in North America.

Birthright Versus Rebirth

The practice of baptism is not merely an induction to a congregation, though it is often treated as such. Even within Lutheran congregations where baptism is taught as a sacrament, as a holy act of God that marks a person with the cross of Christ, baptism is set as the first step on the conveyer belt of 'confirmation graduation.' A baby gets baptized, then at his pre-teen age he 'gets confirmed'—the congregation celebrates! He has a party, receives gifts and money from family and friends, and then his baptism or confirmation is rarely thought of from that moment on. William Willimon describes the relationship between baptism and confirmation this way in 1978,

Too many of those who practice infant baptism speak of it euphemistically as "christening/" "infant dedication," as a little educative exercise to remind the parents to get the child to Sunday school, or as an insipid, cute, rosebud of an affair all full of kisses and talk that "God loves you and we love you," hoping that the church can get its real business with the child done later in confirmation class or through an adult conversion experience.¹³

Over forty years later, his observation remains applicable. It is especially true for Christians who

¹³ William H. Willimon, "A Liberating Word in Water," *The Christian Century* 95, no. (1978), 303.

come from generations of Christianity in the United States. There can be an attitude of entitlement to the ‘benefits’ of being a Christian. Willimon makes an interesting point when he says, “God has no grandchildren.”¹⁴

The Christian’s place in the household of God is not a birthright, but a rebirth. Unfortunately, because of the Church’s problem in North America of taking its identity as God’s family for granted, the Church treats baptism as a birthright and Christians are losing their sense of their identity or growing up without any sense of it at all. People fall into patterns of “I’m a Christian because my parents are Christian,” or “My family has always gone to this church,” or “I was baptized. That’s all I needed right? I can go now?” People are baptized and perhaps are reminded of that once a month when they attend a ‘church service’, but once that hour is over, they ‘go back’ to their ‘every day life’—their job, their biological families, their status, their success (or search for status), their community, their culture. In this way, baptism is treated as a birthright, a certificate to receive and then to file away with other accomplishments and achievements.

John Howard Yoder challenges that understanding of baptism in *Body Politics*. He writes concerning Paul’s teaching to the Corinthians that in Christ all things are made new (2 Cor. 5:17), “The concrete, social functional meaning of that statement is the inherited social definitions of who each of us is by class and category are no longer basic. Baptism introduces or initiates persons into a new people. The distinguishing mark of this people is that all prior given or chosen identity definitions are transcended.”¹⁵ A child has her mother, and that mother her daughter, but in their baptisms, both mother and daughter are sisters in Christ. The prior roles

¹⁴ William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 147.

¹⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 28.

and identities do not disappear, but as Yoder says, they are transcended. A mother has God as her Father through baptism, as does her daughter. They are both children, daughters, of God. They both have a new identity and a new relationship to each other.

Remembrance Versus Reality

The practice of baptism also is not merely a testimony of newfound faith or renewal of new beginnings after a major sinful relapse. Baptism makes a person a child. When an adult is baptized, he is made a child. He has the same level of participation as a newborn baby—he does not act in baptism. God is the actor in this practice. Yet, in adult baptism, the step towards self-declaration is easy to make. People are baptized when they are ‘ready’ or when they have succeeded in a big turnaround of their life. Baptism is used as a re-affirmation of faith once lost or a token by which to remember promises made to God. Willimon describes this as an “Enlightenment” understanding of baptism. He says,

For too long we Protestants have been in the grip of ... an “Enlightenment” view of the sacraments that regards such events as baptism and the Lord’s Supper as human actions we perform in order to help us remember God’s actions in the past. Distrusting the ability of the material to be a bearer of the Holy, we have reduced the sacraments to stimulants to sentiment, occasions for self-commitment, memory exercises that aid us in making ethical decisions or theological insights. The Enlightenment view of the sacraments puts primary stress upon the necessity of our worthiness (stated all too often in terms of our *unworthiness*) to participate in the sacraments, of our cerebral understanding of what is going on with the sacraments, and of certain priori commitments and experiences we should have in order to bring sufficient faith to the sacraments. Primary responsibility in most Protestant sacramental worship is thus placed upon *me*—my worthiness, my understanding, my commitments, my experiences. Little wonder that, when viewed from this perspective, participation in the sacraments elicits guilt, doubt despair, or avoidance from Christians who see the sacraments as simply one more reminder of their continuing confusion, unworthiness, impotency, and unfaithfulness.¹⁶

Where the birthright view of baptism allows an individual to essentially walk away from

¹⁶ Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 150.

his baptism, giving it no thought or bearing on his life, the Enlightenment view takes the misuse of baptism in the other direction. This person will have to earn their baptism, and then that event will be the mark of approval for them to show they are worthy of the title Christian. Their baptism sets them above others, even other believers. Baptism is a type of pedestal that lifts them up and points to them. This abuse of baptism can create a hierarchy of believers, which strips God of his power and action in making a sinful people his children and bestowing on them an inheritance they do not deserve except by the death and resurrection of his own Son, Jesus Christ, who has called them his brothers, giving them his Spirit, and establishing that identity in them through the waters of baptism.

How does the Church stop neglecting baptism, stop taking its true purpose and action for granted, and change its current trajectory? A part of that process, a process that is too extensive to cover in its entirety in this paper (if that were even possible), is having a working understanding of what baptism actually does and why it is a practice of the Church. A familial lens helps to enhance that understanding and is important in the language the Church uses in this practice of baptism. I have two reasons for how familial language enhances our understanding and practice of baptism: (1) Familial language helps Christians to understand the history they gain through their new family. They become part of a new people, and that new people has a story—the story of Jesus Christ. (2) Familial language helps Christians to understand that family they gain: the community of all believers. A single person, a divorcee, an empty-nester—each has a place in the family.

A History Gained

Currently, the Church in North America has done a great disservice to many people in its congregations. The Church has adopted the “You do you” mentality, seen in the practice of

baptism and the life of a baptized Christian. ‘In-house’ accountability is rare, if it is there at all. It is almost as if the Church is saying, “Church is here, if you want it, when you want. Go live your life. Make your mistakes. When you need comfort, come back. We’re here for you. When you start to feel guilty, when life gets you down, when you do not know what to do, remember your baptism. Remember you were baptized. That should help.” Yet, who is to teach the Christian what their baptism means, why they should “remember” it, besides the Church? When a person is received into the family of God, when they are baptized and claimed by God, declared his child, this “you do you” attitude is contradictory to the very nature of what baptism is and what it does. At baptism, it is the Church’s job to teach the individual the ‘family handbook,’ to teach them their place in the narrative of Jesus Christ. They are called ‘Christians’ after all. Christians do not merely follow Christ’s example, nor exalt him as a great teacher and humanitarian. Christians are joined to him in his life, death, and resurrection. Christians become a part of his story, as Schlink describes,

Christian Baptism can no more be separated from the history of Jesus Christ than the Gospel can. The Gospel proclaims the history of Jesus Christ, and Baptism assigns the baptized into that account. Jesus Christ is not only the One who sends people to proclaim the message, but with His history He is the ground of the Gospel and Baptism, and at the same time the One who gives Himself and is active through Gospel and Baptism. Jesus Christ, His death and His resurrection, belong necessarily to the institution of Baptism.¹⁷

Willimon also expounds on the identity-giving properties of baptism:

Thus, to the perplexing question, Who am I? baptism responds: “You are the sum of your relationships. You are not a self-made man as if you existed in isolation from the web of life, the events of the past, and the claims of others. You are not parentless. The discovery of your identity is group product. You have a history that will take you the rest of time to unravel. You are who you are in great part because of the way you

¹⁷ Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism*, 11.

were conceived, nurtured, birthed, and loved by the household of faith. This is who you are.”¹⁸

Identity does not have to be a big, ambiguous unknown—a dark void with angst and uncertainty. It does not have to be a journey that involves going off on your own, sowing your seeds, burning bridges, or cutting ties—something North American culture says is a normal rite of passage into adulthood. No, as a Christian, identity is a gift, a community, and something that does not require unhinged self-discovery. Schlink and Willimon are here describing who a Christian is as she *relates to* the whole family of God: The Father, the Son and Brother Jesus Christ, the uniting Spirit, the community of saints gone before, still to come, and currently surrounding.

A Family Gained

What does this look like? How does a familial conception of Baptism play out in the life of a congregation? Congregational life is too complicated for more than illustrations and suggestions, but at least this much should be done. We can do this with the help of a sermon by Terry Hamilton that illustrates the familial reality of baptism and the power of that identity as the family of God, a community of brothers and sisters. She writes,

According to the Presbyterian Church's Book of Order, when a person is baptized, the congregation answers this question: 'Do you, the members of this congregation, in the name of the whole Church of Christ, undertake the responsibility for the continued Christian nurture of this person, promising to be an example of the new life in Christ and to pray for him or her in this new life?' We make this promise because we know that no adult belongs to himself or herself, and that no child belongs to his or her parents, but that every person is a child of God. Because of that, every young one is our child, the church's child to care for. This is not an option. It is a responsibility.¹⁹

The Presbyterian Church is not the only denomination to make this kind of congregational

¹⁸ Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 155.

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, “Abortion, Theologically Understood.” Paper presented at North Carolina Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, Fayetteville, NC, June 14, 1990. https://courses.csl.edu/webapps/blackboard/execute/content/file?cmd=view&content_id=_83514_1&course_id=_4942_1.

promise at the baptism of an individual. And the Presbyterian Church is not the only denomination to have congregations neglect the promises that it has made. In this particular sermon, the minister expresses the congregation's understanding of the promise they make—yet more and more often, a congregation is more likely to make those promises not because they know the meaning of baptism, but because it is what they have always done. It is merely a part of the baptismal liturgy. The words have no meaning: They have no follow through, no practice from the congregation to show that they understand their new relation to the newly baptized, nor are they being enriched in their identity as they better understand themselves through their relationship to the other baptized. Families often choose sponsors or godparents for newly baptized children, but how often are those sponsors from the congregation to which that family belongs? How often will that child see her sponsors?

Hauerwas also makes an important point regarding marriage and singleness in the Church, and how baptism has a role in those aspects of the Christian life as well—that *singleness* is the primary identity of the Christian within the context of the Church:

It may seem odd to treat matters of marriage and sex in the context of baptism, but if baptism constitutes our true family then the question of what marriage means as well as why Christians marry must be considered. One of the most distinguishing aspects of the early church was the discovery of singleness as a necessary way of life among Christians. Christians do not “need” to marry, since their true family is the church. It is only against the background of such presumptions that marriage becomes a calling that must be tested by the community.²⁰

Many congregations across North America have put a stress on building up the “Christian family,” encouraging family units to achieve the ideal. Single people are overlooked and often left out of life application and teaching. Our identity as the family of God, gained through baptism, leaves no room for that kind of practice within congregations. A mom and dad with two

²⁰ Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 161.

healthy kids and a dog do not have a higher status of Christian than a single mom or dad or a couple of kids who ‘come to church’ on their own because their parents are not interested in ‘going to church.’ Singleness has a place in the Church, as Paul himself discusses in 1 Corinthians chapter 7(:8). Baptism makes everyone a part of the family, everyone a child, everyone a brother or sister, everyone a responsible, accountable part of raising new children in the faith, no matter what age they are when they are baptized, or who their sponsors may be. The following sections describe what this new responsibility and accountability looks like for the members of God’s family.

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is that holy meal, hosted by Christ himself, where he himself *is* the host, that which is given for the eating and drinking of those gathered around his table. The real presence of Christ, in, with, and under the bread and wine gives the forgiveness of sins to those who receive in faith. It is at this table that the body of Christ receives the body of Christ into their bodies. Luther’s Small Catechism teaches through this question,

What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer:

The words “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” show us that forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.²¹

Here at this table, the gathered Christians remember Christ and his passion, his sacrifice for them, they receive the forgiveness of sins, and they look forward to the feast to come, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The Family of God gathers together for the breaking of bread.

While the New Testament and the Confessions do not give a clear indication of familial

²¹ SC V, 5–6 in Kolb and Wengert, 362.

thinking being tied to the Lord's Supper, they do provide more suggestive (rather than explicit) familial contexts for the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul uses "my brothers" as an admonition for the Corinthians to wait for each other when they come together to eat, connotating a familial approach to gathering together for the Lord's Supper. In the Upper Room in Luke 22, after Jesus has explained he will not eat of this meal again "until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" (Luke 22:14), he says to his disciples, "You are those who have stayed with me in my trials, and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Luke 22:28–29). This evokes a familial imagery for the feast to come, the feast to which the Lord's Supper points us forward. Looking to the background of the Lord's Supper, we see familial themes and the notion of the Passover being a family meal, "It shall be eaten in one house ... All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land." (Exod. 12:46–48).

It cannot be disputed, though, that the Lord's Supper makes Christians one. Paul explains in 1 Cor. 10:16–17, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." What kind of "one" are we? One family, of course, is fitting. And if we think this, then "communion" can be understood in that familial way that is not quite explicit in the scriptures or Confessions.

The Lord's Supper, also called "Communion" or "Eucharist," is one of those great mysteries given to the Church. The Lord's Supper creates communion among those who participate in and partake of it, and it creates communion between the Church and God. Each of these aspects of the Lord's Supper (a list that is by no means all-encompassing) is important,

essential, and it is worth discussing how its meaning is lost or obscured by different unhelpful practices. For the purpose of this paper, though, I will focus primarily on the aspect of communion between those who partake of the Lord's Supper together, the communion of saints—the family.

The Lord's Supper is described as a communal event, but practically is exercised as an individual experience. This individual experience diminishes some of the benefits of the Lord's Supper as a family practice and can diminish the Christian's understanding of himself and his identity. In this section, I discuss two examples of how the practice of the Lord's Supper is neglected: (1) Shaking hands instead of sharing the peace of Christ between brothers and sisters in reconciliation, and (2) A consumeristic grab-and-go meal instead of the family table the Church has been invited to. Willimon describes the Church's use of the meal in light of the Corinthians' selfish abuse, that today we have a selfish "me and Jesus" attitude that disregards the community and social aspect of this meal that is incorporated into our life of worship and our identity.²² North America is a society in which individualism has taken root—deep root—and that individualism is not absent from Protestantism's use of the Lord's table.

Shaking Hands Versus Sharing the Peace

Reconciliation. To be at peace with one another. This is a characteristic of the people of God. It is an admonition given by Paul repeatedly throughout his letters, given to the brothers and sisters in the faith who had division among themselves. Jesus himself gives the command of reconciliation in Matthew 18. Paul taught that before a Christian could come to the table, before he could share in the meal and partake of the breaking of the bread, he must make peace with

²² Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 172.

anyone in the congregation with whom he may be in conflict or withholding forgiveness. The expectation for those within the congregations was reconciliation, that a Christian could come to the Lord's table united with his brothers and sisters, filled with the same spirit: the spirit of Christ, the spirit of forgiveness. In this Spirit—the Holy Spirit—the Christian can receive the forgiveness of his sins through the Body and Blood of Jesus, can partake of the Cup of Thanksgiving, can break the bread, the body of Christ together with his brothers and sisters. In reconciliation, those in the congregation can be together equally fed, equally forgiven.

This practice of reconciliation before approaching the table has been lost. Its ghost is perhaps seen in the portion of an order of service that includes a “sharing of the peace” or a “greeting”—a moment of general welcome that includes shaking the hands of the people sitting next to you. Not every congregation has even this minimal remnant of reconciliation. For some, the practice has returned as a form of hospitality, a chance for members to practice being nice and welcoming, a chance for visitors to maybe meet people and ‘catch a name or two.’ Even this adjusted sharing of the peace often falls short of the welcoming gesture it is hoped to be. What if the Church was able to return to its call to *reconciliation*? Willimon discusses the liturgy of the Service of the Sacrament, the eucharistic liturgy, and the peace that is shared between the pastor and the congregation,

Can the primitive awareness of Christ's presence in the community be recovered? ... [E]very time the Peace is shared, it represents an act of faith that we can overcome our differences, that the hearing of the Word and celebration of the sacrament will bring faith that enables us to leap over our self-imposed boundaries. People are invited to risk and reach out and touch. A congregation's ability to participate in this gesture of peace may be an indication of the quality of its life together...²³

Yoder poses this “indication of the quality of [the Church's] life together” as the gospel:

²³ Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 179–80.

In sum: To be human is to be in conflict, to offend and to be offended. To be human in the light of the gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it. When we do that, we demonstrate that to process conflict is not merely a palliative strategy for tolerable survival or psychic hygiene, but a mode of truth-finding and community-building. That is true in the gospel; it is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, in the world.²⁴

What kind of “redemptive dialogue” is happening in congregations? Are there any good indications of a high quality of life together? Have the people of the Church lost their identity so deeply that they are able to gather for worship without talking to a single person, without engaging in any sharing of the peace or reconciliation, and yet still partake in the Lord’s Supper, leave the table, and move on from that event without any regard for the community that they just broke bread with? This is a great neglect the Church finds herself participating in here in North America. Yoder describes it this way:

[T]he most destructive [abuses] are probably those that arise from the loss of the community’s voluntariness... We can pursue reconciling confrontation because we trust one another and because we asked to be placed under this kind of loving guidance. To do the same things in a nonvoluntary community gives them a quite different meaning; this is where in our culture the word *puritan* got its bad taste.²⁵

In regard to the Lord’s Supper, “loving guidance” seems to disappear after confirmation instruction and is acceptably replaced with a corporate confession and absolution that, once again, allows for little to no interaction between the actual people of God, the real Church. Members do not have to trust each other nor do they have to receive guidance as long as they show up and mark their attendance—even more so if they mark their participation in communion.

The gathering in worship is a glimpse—or should be a glimpse—of what the world could be. A glimpse into the heavenly reality. A glimpse of the whole family. A characteristic of this

²⁴ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 13.

²⁵ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 5.

family, God's family, is being at peace with one another. Saint Paul writes, "[L]et the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom... And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:15–17). The world is being invited to join this peace-making family, to receive this identity. Yoder describes the Christian practice of binding and loosing as the world practices it:

the way God wants believers to live together should be a model as well for other social relationships. Conflict resolution is today a soc[i]al science and a profession. One can study it; one can be accredited as a practitioner. One can use its theory to analyze successes and failures. One can describe and teach the skills that foster its success. Its rules are not very different from binding and loosing in the New Testament or from "the Rule of Christ" in the Reformation.²⁶

This "tool," as the world may call it, of conflict resolution, making peace, has been a part of the *Church's* identity from the very beginning. In Protestant North America, the practice of binding and loosing is marginally used and much less understood. A recapturing of this practice, especially as it ties together with coming to the Lord's Table at peace with the brothers and the sisters, with a repentant heart and spirit of unity, could help Christians more fully understand their identity and role within the family of God.

Grab-n-Go Versus The Family Table

The Church is perpetuating North America's individualistic society. The Church does not silently watch individualistic members enter and exit unchanged and unmoved in their isolation and individualism. The Church enables them to remain that way by adjusting and tweaking and accommodating for what may seem to be 'uncomfortable' in her practices. The sacraments and

²⁶ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 11.

holy things remain mysterious in an inaccessible way, taken for granted, and in the case of the Lord's Supper (perhaps for more people than the Church would currently recognize) taken for harm.

When individual, minute, "fish food" wafers are used in place of a hearty loaf of bread and when (as in my own Methodist tradition—since the 1920s) watery grape juice replaces blood-red wine, one need not wonder why our popular eucharistic theology is weak and meaningless and Communion within our community is a dry, lifeless nonevent. How could it be otherwise?²⁷

Willimon's critique here may come across as blunt and harsh, yet it strikes a chord and stirs up contemplation within the theologian, the faithful minister, or the pious Christian. To hear the words "weak," "meaningless," "dry," "lifeless," and "nonevent" associated with one of the pillars of doctrine and life in the Church must serve as a wake-up call. Instead of individual isolation, the Lord's Supper exists within the context of the community of believers. Christians do not consecrate and administer this meal to themselves. It is not administered in secret, in the privacy of one's home, a meal between the believer and his God.

Even while hundreds to thousands of people may commune at the same time, a private, hushed, individual meal is often what is reflected in our congregations. A person could question the difference between the way the Lord's Supper is administered in the Service of the Sacrament and how it could be administered at home. Home-bound members often receive the Lord's Supper in private visitations because they are unable to attend the worship service. What do they miss by not attending? Of course, the homebound child of God receives the forgiveness of sins, salvation unto life everlasting, the peace of the Lord, etc. These gifts are not to be made light of. These are real gifts and important gifts that are promised through this sacrament.

Yet, the question remains: While the homebound communicant is receiving these effects of

²⁷ Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 184.

this sacrament, why does anyone gather to receive the sacrament? What is the difference? What is missed by the one who does not gather? The answer could be fellowship with other believers, the family, the breaking of bread in the presence of and with the brothers and the sisters. How often, though, this is not the answer. Many times, the only difference between a home-bound service and a sanctuary service is the number of pews. They miss nothing—highlighting a problem not only regarding the administration of the Sacrament in gathered worship, but a problem also in how we bring gathered worship and administration of the Sacrament to those in separation or isolation.

The individual Christian is missing a depth to his identity and his community that could be recovered through the understanding and practice of the Lord's Supper as a family meal with Christ the head and the host. I have two reasons for how familial language can help the Christian understand his identity better through the Lord's Supper: (1) Familial language in this practice reminds Christians of their responsibility to and for each other as a *community*. (2) Familial language in this practice reinforces for the Christian the unity he has with his brothers and his sisters, across chronological lines and geographical lines.

Responsibility Regained

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, an aspect of the Lord's Supper—the people of God breaking bread together and receiving the forgiveness of sins together—is the gathered Christians being at peace with one another. When the Church is understood to be another institution in a community, another neighborhood organization, the responsibility of one member to another does not really exist. The member's responsibility goes no further than paying his or her dues to keep things running smoothly. Nor does the responsibility of one member for another exist, except that each one does not offend the other. In fact, many congregations hire specific

professional staff to ensure that the spiritual, psychological, and physical needs of Christians within the congregation are met. Thus, a member is free to attend and engage with others as he sees fit. He can enter and partake and leave with full confidence that whatever accountability is needed for his pew-mates, a paid worker is taking care of it.

While institutional language leaves room for this kind of thought and interpretation of the Christian life, familial language does not. In the first chapter of his book *Body Politics*, Yoder recalls the Christian to Matthew 18 where Jesus gives a specific activity to be carried out among brothers and sisters, an activity that while done by humans is also God at work. This activity is binding and loosing, the practice of “moral discernment and reconciliation” between Christians.²⁸ When Christians refuse to engage in this practice with their fellow brothers and sisters, they are in a sense refusing God’s work through them in their brother or their sister. They are rejecting a responsibility they have been given, a gift that is theirs to give and receive when they are reconciled to those they offend or have been offended by. They are rejecting God’s order for his creation and his Church, the order established for them in their baptism, as discussed in the previous section.

When Christians *do* engage in reconciliation, they are participating in God’s mission. the command from Christ himself. When sinners are called as God’s children, they are entrusted with carrying out his work, entrusted with partnering with him in acts of reconciliation. In other words, the responsibility of the Church as God’s children, then, is to bind and loose. “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault ... Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”

²⁸ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 1–2.

(Matt. 18:15, 18). Yoder says, “The community’s action is God’s action,” emphasizing the individual’s need for the community to enact God’s action in their own life.²⁹ In the community God has created, in his order for it, each member needs the others—as God has ordained it.

Unity Gained

Christian unity comes from the things shared in, the things that are gifted to the family, the experiences and realities that are given by the Father. Werner Elert describes the connection between the members of the Church in this way,

What links those who partake of the Lord’s Supper is not that they have something to do with one another, their human relationship with each other, *but that which they share together*. This fellowship not only embraces still another ingredient besides the human participants but this other ingredient is not even produced by an act of man ... [Luther] denied that fellowship means “to have something to do with a person.”³⁰

What Christians are is what makes them a community, not what they do. In Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, however it is titled, the congregation is in union. The Church experiences a common unity through the receiving of Christ’s body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine. The Church, in common unity throughout time and geography, participates in the foretaste of the feast to come. The Church, in common unity and of no act on any individual’s part, yet individually and in unity, receives and experiences the forgiveness of sins and the promise of life everlasting. This unity comes from God’s action. The meal is God’s, the gift is God’s. The choice of who receives it is God’s. A Christian does not decide who will break bread with him, who is his brother or his sister. God decides.³¹ This is clearly expressed in

²⁹ Yoder, *Body Politics*, 3.

³⁰ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1966), 4. Emphasis mine.

³¹ In saying this, I am not referring to the practice of “church discipline” when the clergy of a congregation does decide who may or may not approach the table pending the individual Christian’s repentance or lack thereof. I mean to point out the reality of God calling those who were once ‘outside’ the family, into his presence and into worship. As God’s children participate in gathered worship, still they bind and loose

John's account of Christ's coming to the world, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12–13).

To enhance the Church's understanding of this common unity, in the practice of and participation in the Lord's Supper, familial language could be used to counter the individualistic mentality that causes individuals to lose the "common union" aspect of communion. What the Christian receives at the Lord's table is not dependent on what she does as an individual person, nor is it a "me and Jesus" moment solely for her. It is a meal shared in community, shared with her brothers and sisters, hosted by her Brother Jesus, pointing her forward to the day all Christians are reunited with their Father in the eschaton.

The Lord's Supper is about the Gospel, and the Gospel is meant for a people, not solely a person. As gathered Christians begin to see and understand the people sitting in front of and behind them in the pews of their congregations as their brothers and sisters, as the people they are accountable to and accountable for, even as *the people they will be entering into the New Jerusalem with*, the Church will see and understand the meal they are sharing as truly a glimpse of what the "feast to come" will be like.

Willimon describes it,

In its common rites such as the Eucharist, the Christian community not only speaks about its values in abstract ideas and concepts, it attempts to embody these meanings in the mind, heart, and behavior of its people. Meanings become concrete, alive, intense, and compelling through the drama of ritual, and they are given a sense of permanence through repetition. Every time the congregation gathers it acts out the essential features of how the world is supposed to be.³²

according to God's will, not human. They approach the table together, and experience the unity of a family only God can create.

³² Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 175.

I take what Willimon describes a little further. Not only does the Church act out what the world is *supposed* to be, the Church is acting out—perhaps even experiencing—what the world *is going to* look like. It’s not just an ideal that the Church is aiming for as a temporal goal. It is a reality that the family of God is celebrating in as a sure hope for what they know is to come. The concrete Christian identity as the family of God is directly tied to the concrete reality of the life Christians have in Christ that gives eternal salvation and new life in the new heavens and the new earth. The family seen in congregations today is the same family that is going to be the multitude of saints, God’s people, “holy brothers”³³ gathered before his throne, participating in the wedding feast of the lamb, a feast reserved for those called by the Gospel.

Prayer

When prompted to think of where Christians are taught that God is their Father, one of the most obvious teachings that comes to mind is the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven...” If we were to ask, how is Christian prayer familial, this same teaching comes most obviously to mind. The Small Catechism teaches from the Lord’s Prayer,

Our Father, you who are in heaven.

What is this? Answer:

*With these words God wants to entice us, so that we come to believe he is truly our Father and we are truly his children, in order that we may ask him boldly and with complete confidence, just as loving Children ask their loving father.*³⁴

We—the children—are to boldly and confidently *ask* our loving father. And for what do we ask

³³ Through baptism we become not only saints but also “holy brothers” (Heb. 3:1). All Christians share the same sonship, and Christ is “the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29). Both the common bond of the ethos of an organized congregation, by which the church separates itself from its unholy surroundings, and specifically also its brotherhood rest on the fact that its *koinonia* is a baptismal fellowship. The *koinonia* of Baptism is undeniably bound up with the *koinonia* of the Holy Communion. Elert, 78.

³⁴ SC III, 1–2 in Kolb and Wengert, 356.

him? We should ask—in other words, we should pray—for our fellow sisters and brothers.

As discussed in the previous section, the members of God’s family are responsible to and accountable for each other. As members of one family, Christians have a duty to confront, to reprimand and to reconcile with each other. But the family of God's involvement with one another is not limited to these previously discussed displays of familial accountability. Rather, some of the Christian’s most important involvement with their fellow brothers and sisters is with their prayers: prayers on behalf of their brother or sister and intercessions for their benefit. In boldness, Christians approach their Father on behalf of their brothers and sisters.

In his discussion of what it costs an individual to follow the call of Christ, Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the Christian’s “breach” with the world. The Christian’s identity as Christ’s brother—as God’s child—is the relationship he has to fellow Christians. Without Christ, individuals have no relationship to their neighbor except what the world would teach, relationships which feign fulfillment, permit apathy, and ultimately fall outside of the creative, saving work of God.³⁵ Personal interaction with God the Father on behalf of a brother or sister is one of the most genuinely intimate acts a Christian can participate in as a member of the family of God. “That is why intercession is the most promising way to reach our neighbors, and corporate prayer, offered in the name of Christ, the purest form of fellowship.”³⁶

Prayer is a serious matter in the life of the Church. Luther stresses this especially in the third part of the Large Catechism, “[T]he most necessary thing is to exhort and encourage people to pray, as Christ and the apostles also did.”³⁷ Without this encouragement and instruction in

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1967), 106–7.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 110.

³⁷ LC III, 4 in Kolb and Wengert, 441.

prayer in the gathered worship of God's children, "[People] fall into the habit of never praying..."³⁸ They have reasons and excuses to remain silent before their God who speaks, and this mindset as rampant now as it was during Luther's time, often stands uncorrected.

When the world looks for prayer, they look to the Church. Prayer is a 'church' thing, and, as anyone would expect, prayer is happening in the Church. However, in the life of a Christian—in the lives of the members of God's family—there seems to be a gap between prayers *in* the Church, *by* the Church, and *for* the Church. This practice is one that, whether through teaching or through learned behavior, has been ignored—has been institutionalized. Two examples of this institutionalization include: 1) The attitude of gathering information rather than submitting a petition, and 2) the individualistic indifference towards others rather than an invested intimacy. The Christian individual is permitted to ignore her identity because of, among others, these two examples of neglect. To ignore the familial aspect of prayer is to offer another chance for the Christian to ignore her identity. In this case, prayer becomes a vestige of a time long passed, something done "because it's what we do."

Information Versus Petition

Marva Dawn describes the impact of informational consumerism on people's ability to inwardly digest preaching. People crave information. They are conditioned to seek it, need it, and consume it. And just as quickly as the information comes at them, the information leaves. They take it in, process it, comprehend that it has no impact or bearing on them, and they let it go. Dawn argues this is what is happening in congregations. During gathered worship, people are accumulating, or believe they are accumulating, useless information. They believe they are

³⁸ LC III, 6 in Kolb and Wengert, 441.

learning about people or events or things about which they cannot do anything.³⁹

This is an apt description of what prayers have become during worship services. Christians do not view prayer as their job, because it is the clergy's job to pray. It is what they are paid to do. This can be observed during the liturgy, as the prayers of the Church are spoken only by the pastor. At community events or potlucks, it is the pastor's job to pray. Should someone have a medical emergency at the hospital or even during worship, it is the pastor's job to pray. It is not the job for the 'members of the church' if the 'church' is indeed an institution. The pastor has his role to play, and those who pay their dues get access to the pastor's efficacious prayers. This sounds patently like a Reformation era problem, yet it continues to rear its head, still needing to be addressed in the Church today.

Christians are not praying when it comes to that point of the liturgy when the prayers are traditionally read. Some may argue that people are actually praying during the 'Prayers of the Church' in the liturgy, and this may be, and only God can know the heart of each individual Christian. Yet, inaction and lack of intimacy are observed within the congregation—perhaps a result of the general attitude towards prayer as information that can be—and often is—ignored.

I contend that Dawn's observation is a way of expressing the attitudes of the people not only towards preaching, as she goes on to critique in her book, but also to prayer. Information in, information out. The people experience little to no disruption to their life. The one hour on Sunday is checked off their monthly to-do list and they go on with their daily living, unhindered and unimpacted by one of the most intimate acts in which the brothers and sisters of Christ can participate in. This way of "Christian living" has been allowed to persist and has been reinforced by its unchallenged existence. Information can be useful when it is put into action, thus

³⁹ Dawn, *A Royal Waste*, 245–46.

enhancing a relationship and bringing benefit to someone. Left to itself, though, information is non-relational. As Christians continue to view and understand prayer as merely information, either information dispersed to the congregation or information given as a reminder to God, it will continue to be “information in, information out” with no action and no investment. No relationship.

A practice that re-enforces this ‘information in, information out’ attitude is that of the pastor treating the prayers as the congregational bulletin announcements. People expect recent news, announcements of deaths, the latest on tragedies, the gossip on other congregation members. Often, they get what they expect. The prayer of the Church becomes a moment of shocked inhales, quiet whispers, and conspicuous glancing around while the pastor reads from the sheet in front of him. Then, in the ‘information in, information out’ fashion, people take what they want from what they’ve heard, discuss it over Sunday brunch, and then let it go from their minds. Their brothers and sisters’ business is no longer their business.

Indifference Versus Intimacy

Currently, this family practice of prayer is not the intimate practice it could be or should be within most congregations across the protestant Church in North America. Often, prayer is the act of the pastor, and any participation of the congregation is either a quick “Amen,” or it is a collect clearly printed in bold identified by a “C:”—thus giving clear indication as to what the congregants should or should not say. This can give the impression that there is a specific way to pray, a right way, or even an only way.

This way of practicing prayer within the worship hour may give members permission to shirk their responsibility or desire to pray their own prayers. Everything is covered on Sundays by the pastors—he knows what’s best to pray for, right? He knows who is sick, who is dead, who

got married, who got baptized, who needs help, where the latest crisis or tragedy was, and where God should be sending his mercy and strength and peace. When addressing the practice of prayer in the Reformation era Church, Luther wrote, “It is quite true that the kind of babbling and bellowing that used to pass for prayers in the church was not really prayer. Such external repetition, when properly used, may serve as an exercise for young children, pupils, and simple folk; while it may be useful in singing or reading, it is not actually prayer.”⁴⁰ Now, I am not saying the Church should do away with corporate prayers. These prayers *are* important to the life of the Church. But, when this is the *only* form of prayer experienced, congregational leaders are doing a large disservice to those entrusted in their care. Congregation members’ non-committal experience of life is left un-challenged and perhaps even reinforced by the leadership and clergy of the congregation.

In his attempt to address this un-challenged, non-committal experience of ‘Christian community’ by the congregant, Andrew Root describes the social phenomena of “the immanent frame.”⁴¹ Root calls the immanent frame “the socially constructed framework that imposes levels of attention that make divine action questionable even for those of us who do not define ourselves as atheists or unbelievers.”⁴² Based on an experiment developed by Daniel Simons, a psychology researcher at the University of Illinois, the theory states that most people when focused on a particular subject—in the case of Simon’s experiment, people in white t-shirts passing a basketball—will miss something that is right in front of them—in this case, a man in a

⁴⁰ LC III, 7 in Kolb and Wengert, 441.

⁴¹ The “immanent frame” is a concept developed by Charles Taylor in his work, *A Secular Age*, then used by Root in his own argument concerning prayer.

⁴² Andrew Root, “Forming a People wWho Pray.” *The Christian Century* 136, no. 14 (July 2019), 20–21.

gorilla costume. Root uses the example of this experiment and its terminology to describe what he sees happening to prayer in the Church—at the fault of the clergy. He says,

Prayer is something few people in the immanent frame have been taught. Therefore a major part of a pastor’s vocation in a secular age is to teach people to pray, individually and corporately... To be a pastor is not to be an entrepreneur, community organizer, or podcast celebrity. It is to be a person of prayer... Since people are passionately attentive to things like youth sports, financial investments, the craft of brewing beer, and the practice of yoga, pastors try to divert attention to the church by bringing those activities inside the church... But that won’t enable people to see the action of the divine. To say that the pastor is the one who prays and teaches others to pray is to say that the pastor leads people into addressing and being addressed by a speaking God, thereby sharing in the person of Jesus, who prays for the world and teaches his disciples to do the same through the Spirit (Luke 11:1–13). Jesus invites his disciples to pray using the intimate name for God: Abba (Mark 14). In prayer, we come to see that this God shares in our lives by caring for us.⁴³

Pastors are praying, yes—but are they teaching to pray? The symptoms we see in the Church across America would lend one to the conclusion: No.

People are “zoned out” when it comes to worship, particularly prayer. Prayer has become a moment for people to check out in worship (unless they hear something that might be fodder for gossip later). Root summarizes it well when he says, “What we are prepared to focus on determines what we see.”⁴⁴ Prayer—something focused on God’s divine control of the world—is seen as peripheral, whereas community events are seen to be central. Without intimacy in this practice of prayer, people have the permission and the space to be indifferent. They are missing out on the extraordinary participation of God engaging with his people, working in his people, acting in and through his people.

The prayer of the family is not a mere utilization of four minutes on a Sunday morning. Root describes pastors who try to create and build community and membership investment

⁴³ Root, “Forming a People Who Pray,” 21.

⁴⁴ Root, “Forming a People Who Pray,” 21.

through secular activity while true community is cultivated through prayer. The prayer of the Church is something enduring that can be traced over time—it is an ongoing conversation with the Father and with each other. The pastor’s job is to lead the congregation in the practice of prayer, together. And yet, this intimacy and connectedness continues to be pushed to the wayside.

As familial language helps the Christian understand and participate in the practice of prayer, the practice of prayer will help the Christian understand his identity and purpose. I have two reasons for this: (1) Familial language reinforces for the Christian his relationship to the Father through the Son and the Spirit. The Christian has access to God the Father because of who the Christian is, access that is experienced through prayer. (2) Familial language cultivates for the Christian a compassion for his brother and sister, as discussed in chapter three. This compassion is part of the new way of life for a Christian once he has been called into God’s family.

Relationship Gained

The identity of the Christian as God’s child gives him a unique, intimate relationship with the Father. Daniel Paavola describes this relationship well when he says,

We’re children running for home when we pray. We may not know every detail of heaven’s blue-print, but we know that our Father is there. We pray because of His command and also because, astonishingly, our Father hears us in heaven. Prayer reminds us that the home we have never seen is being filled with our voices every time we pray. Our words break into the heavenly court, and we enter His presence at that very moment. As distant as heaven seems from us today, we don’t have to wait a lifetime for our voices to come alongside our Father.⁴⁵

Through his brother Jesus and the Spirit by whom Jesus prays, a Christian has complete access to

⁴⁵ Daniel E. Paavola, *Our Way Home: A Journey Through the Lord’s Prayer* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2017), 12.

God. Through Christ's prayer, Christians pray. Prayer is not just repetitious petitions or magic words. Prayer has an important function in the life of the believer. As they better understand the practice of prayer through familial language, they can enhance their understanding of themselves and of God—their sonship and relationship to God through his Son Jesus. Sánchez describes prayer as part of our identity or sonship, as it is a filial trust. He writes,

Prayer is ultimately a Trinitarian event that is centered in the mystery of filiation or sonship. In the Spirit, the Son prays Abba. Prayer, therefore, is an expression in the economy of salvation of the Son's eternal 'I-Thou' relation to the Father in the Spirit. Because we pray in and by the same Spirit, in the Spirit of the Son, our prayer must not be seen as something *external* to ourselves—that is, as something that we do but tells us nothing about who we *are*. Rather, prayer is for the church a Trinitarian event into which she is brought to share by the indwelling of the Spirit of the Son (and his Father) in her. Practically speaking, this means that our prayer life must be seen as a *gift* from God. It is a dimension of sonship, central to who God has made us to be, *intrinsic* to our human identity as his children.⁴⁶

In the following excerpt from an article in *Modern Theology*, James A. Andrews discusses the implication of Jesus' high priestly prayer for the Church:

Jesus prays, "I am not only praying for these but also for those who believe in me through their word, so they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, so may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me" (17:20–21). ... [T]he disciples and those who believe through their word stand in an odd relationship to time. In some way, one must say that they are already glorified though they have yet to believe. And, if this is the case, the temporal disruption that accompanies the incarnation of the Word also somehow sets apart the community that is formed by Jesus. As the Father can say to the Son that he "has glorified and will glorify" his name, implying a problematized temporality, there is a sense in which one can say the church is already glorified and that the church is not yet glorified. That is, just as John 17 suggests that the glorified Christ prays that he might be glorified, so also the church can be said already to be glorified while that glory has yet to be worked out in time. That is the crucial point: there is a working-out-through time. We might say that the church, precisely by its intimate connection with the logos, occupies a "peculiar historical situation".⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., *Receiver, Bearer, and Giver of God's Spirit: Jesus' Life in the Spirit as a Lens for Theology and Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 216.

⁴⁷ James A. Andrews, "'That the world may know': A Christological Ecclesiology of Prayer," *Modern Theology* 30, no. 4 (October 2014): 486–87, doi:10.1111/moth.12095.

As the Church in North America seems to be functioning now, there is no “other time” or “working-out-through time” as Andrews describes. The Church is functioning with the consumeristic mindset that says to make the most of the now, for today is all we have. Christians do not see that Jesus, in his prayer, is offering them direct access to God, pulling them into direct access—a direct relationship—with the Father. The Church’s prayers often reflect this lack of understanding as prayer becomes a means to an end or a spiritual vending machine.

Andrews points out that the Church is indeed, by the very nature of prayer and the way the Church accesses the Father through Christ his Son, in the *now* and the *not yet*—glorified, yet still awaiting final glorification. Sánchez also encapsulates this eschatological nature of prayer, as it is “a *proleptic eschatological groaning* of trust in the God who raises the dead to life precisely because he raised his Son to life by the power of the same Spirit. As in the case of the Son, the sons’ prayer life in and by the Spirit will be joined to the mystery of suffering and final trust in God’s eschatological deliverance.”⁴⁸ The Church *is* the family of God, yet she must still wait to see the Father face to face. She must still wait to be reunited with the brothers and sisters who have died and gone before. She must still wait to be ushered into the throne room of God by her Brother Jesus Christ. Yet, through prayer, God’s children have direct access to the throne room, joining in the voice of the multitudes, mediated by Jesus Christ himself.

Compassion Gained

Prayer was given to the Church just for that very purpose: to pray—to be in communication and dialogue with Almighty God. However, praying for others inclines the one praying toward others, as well. So, in praying for their brothers and sisters in the faith, a Christian’s own praying

⁴⁸ Sánchez, *Receiver, Bearer, and Giver*, 218.

not only is praying for those brothers and sisters, but also making an investment in them. That is why the practice of individuals praying for the sisters and brothers in the Church, as opposed to someone appointed to pray for all individuals, can matter. The Church can do something when her public worship does this, and when she encourages and facilitates individuals praying for others. Therefore, when an individual prays a petition, they become invested. They become a part of it. They become part of “God’s will be done,” a phrase too often used as an excuse to keep hands clean and out of the mess.

Marva Dawn describes this investment as “putting legs on our prayers.”⁴⁹ In an article entitled “Private Prayer and Civic Involvement,” a connection is made between the prayer lives of Christians and their motivation and involvement in the public and civic realm. The authors state that their research “would lead us to expect that prayer increases the involvement of religious individuals in political voluntary associations.”⁵⁰ While this article focuses on the research showing this connection between religiosity and community participation, I am not interested in discussing how prayer develops better Christians who in turn make better citizens who then make our communities better functioning systems. I *am* interested in the attention given to the correlation between prayer and action.

Christians who pray privately tend to be people of action. The authors contend,

[I]ndividual prayer should influence civic involvement because it enhances sympathy with the needs of others... We can expect that those who pray frequently sometimes pray for others’ troubles to be alleviated. It is our contention that this cognitive experience becomes manifest in the voluntary association behavior of those who pray. The effect of prayer is to increase participation in organizations providing direct relief of suffering and in meeting human needs. However, we expect that prayer will

⁴⁹ Dawn, *A “Royal” Waste of Time*, 184.

⁵⁰ Matthew T. Loveland, *et al*, “Private Prayer and Civic Involvement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, no. 1 (2005): 1, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.3590515&site=eds-live>.

not have an impact on involvement in associations organized for broader social and political purposes because the voluntary association activity of those who pray is directed toward the types of organizations outlined above and, as such, away from other types.⁵¹

If those who pray are noticeably more active in their communities on the civic and public front, why would they not be more active within their own congregation, within the family of God? After all, prayer is not solely an individual act on behalf of another person and their needs, bringing them to the forefront of a person's mind and heart. No, prayer is the intimately divine act of engaging with the all-powerful God of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who has the power to heal, to change hearts, to act in innumerable and unimaginable ways.

Christians converse with the God who has promised to use them as his instruments. His Spirit works in and through the Christian, his Word is living and active in their mouths and in their hearts. The almighty God moves his people toward compassion for his people when they pray for his people. The above excerpt states, “[I]ndividual prayer should influence civic involvement because it *enhances sympathy* with the needs of others.”⁵² Perhaps the word *compassion* sums up or restates what the authors meant with “enhances sympathy” and is thus my suggested expression for how prayer moves people. Prayer for one another moves God's people to *compassion for one another*. Taken in the context of family language, then, Christians should have compassion for one another, for their relationships as brothers and sisters grant the permission and possibility for intimacy that the world cannot produce or provide.

Visitation

The Christian practice of visitation aptly follows the discussion on Christian compassion.

⁵¹ Loveland, et al, “Private Prayer,” 3.

⁵² My emphasis added.

Before Jesus leaves his disciples, he leaves them with a new command: “Love each other” (John 13:34). Not only are the disciples to love each other, but Jesus says that their love *for each other* is how the world will know that they are his disciples. The world will recognize the Church by how she cares for her own members. What does this love look like?

In John chapter 15, Jesus says, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5). And as the Church abides in Christ, it will bear *much fruit*—fruit that will last (John 15:16)! A life in Christ, a life in the family of God is a life that *does something*—something that will last. At the end of that chapter, again Jesus commands, “Love each other” (John 15:12). In the simplest reading and interpretation of this, it is difficult to miss Jesus’ call for those who are connected to him, the branches connected to his vine. Love each other.

The Christian love for one another can be focused and heightened when considered in the context of familial imagery and language. Saint Paul follows Christ in this command, and he reminds the Church of its call to care for the brothers and the sisters, as seen in his letter to the congregation in Colossae. Kiefert argues that “It is central to Paul’s gospel that in these social settings, Christians welcome one another as Christ had welcomed them (Rom. 15:7).”⁵³ Kiefert’s observation that Paul puts an emphasis in his letters for the members of the Church to care for and encourage one another within individual congregations and between multiple congregations is important to note.

Christians are supposed to look different than those who are outside the Church. Visitation amongst the people of God is one of these unnatural practices that cue non-Christians to the Christian’s new identity. It requires *agape* love—self-sacrifice. Paul describes it this way in his letter to the Colossians: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate

⁵³ Kiefert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 68.

hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:12–14).

As explored earlier and throughout this paper, individualism is running rampant in North America, including within Protestant North America. Effects of this individualism are isolation and loneliness—effects that occur within the Church as well. A Christian is just as susceptible to isolation and loneliness regardless of the call upon the Church to engage in visitation. In this section, I discuss two examples of how visitation is neglected by the Church today: 1) by relegating visitation to professional personnel rather than assuming the personal responsibility that requires sacrifice of self, and 2) the attitude of regarding fellow members within the Church as strangers, as “other” rather than as brother and sister. Again, a misunderstanding is allowed to prevail and to be pervasive in the life and mind of the Christian as this and other practices are neglected.

Professional Versus Personal

In a society where efficiency is king, it is very natural to take on the attitude that says to double the man-power on a job that only takes one person is a waste of time and a waste of resources. This attitude is not absent in the Church, and Marva Dawn writes extensively on that reality.

My thesis is that the world needs us instead to waste our time royally in worship and, consequently, to be gifts of the extravagant splendor of God. Genuine worship of God will send us out for the sake of the neighbor. We cannot ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name (that is, his character) without imitating him in lavishly establishing

justice and peace in the world. We cannot keep our generous God as our Infinite Center without wanting our neighbors to be immersed in his opulent splendor, too.⁵⁴

What the world sees as a waste of time is really a calling of our true identity. The world—and many Christians within the Church—may see professional ‘church workers’ as the answer to “getting Church done” efficiently or effectively, and any others who get involved must have some incentive for putting in so many hours of volunteer work. Why else would a lay person “waste” their valuable time? This attitude results in a tendency to leave the ‘church work,’ most visibly visitation, to the professionals. ‘Professional church workers’, after all, are specifically trained, certified people who know the ‘right’ way to do things. They have the ‘right’ skills and know the ‘right’ thing to say to guarantee success.

Ironically, this leads to either a total hands-off approach that says, “not my business, not my problem, not my job,” or it leads to a paralyzing fear that says, “I am not knowledgeable enough, I am not skilled enough, I am not equipped enough, I am not Christian enough.” Both of these attitudes are not reflective of the true Christian identity and the way in which God cares for his people through other people. What is the result of this neglect? People are left isolated, alone, abandoned by their family members.

The Other Versus The Brother

The family of God is counter cultural—it is not a family that desires its members to remain strangers to each other. In fact, it is impossible for them to remain so, as Bonhoeffer reminds us in *The Cost of Discipleship*,

God will not be separated from our brother: he wants no honour for himself so long as our brother is dishonoured. God is the Father, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who became the Brother of us all. Here is the final reason why God will not be separated from our brother. His only-begotten Son bore the shame and insults for his Father’s glory. But the Father would not be separated from his Son, nor will he now

⁵⁴ Dawn, *A “Royal” Waste*, 323.

turn his face from those whose likeness the Son took upon him, and for whose sake he bore the same. The Incarnation is the ultimate reason why the service of God cannot be divorced from the service of man. He who says he loves God and hates his brother is a liar.⁵⁵

The family of God is not limited to the biological or nuclear units depicted under a membership roster with a designated head and main contributor. If the Church is to be faithful to the Word of God, to the narrative it has been given through Christ, and to the reality of who the Church is, then family is not a privatized imagery, but an invasive, intimate one that does not allow the brother to remain an ‘other.’ Keifert’s discussion of the Church’s obligation toward the ‘stranger’ and the ‘public’ has implications even within the Church, at least in North America. Keifert argues,

[T]he ideology of intimacy accepts the Victorian image of the public place as cold and empty, a place within which men are free to develop, but a place not suitable for morally sensitive creatures, such as women and children. It leaves individuals alone in their private bubbles rushing through this cold and empty public space. When it tries to overcome the coldness and emptiness of that fearful and shameful place, it does so by denial and projection. Following the irrationalists, the ideology denies the value of impersonal, public association, life among strangers; it projects upon the public the metaphor of home or family, a warm, private imagery...The biblical vision stands in sharp contrast to the ideology of intimacy...Rather than projecting the private onto the public, it opens the door for the stranger. The biblical vision affirms impersonal, public interaction through the command of hospitality to the stranger...Hospitality to the stranger implies wisdom, love, and justice—rather than intimacy, warmth, and familiarity—in our dealings with others in public. The impersonal justice and love required by the biblical command...specifically does not depend upon a personal history or ties between those interacting in the public, the exchange of one’s most intimate thoughts and feelings, or the physical intimacy common among family or friends. It treats interaction without a demand for friendship as a virtue.⁵⁶

Keifert describes the image of family to be conjoined to the image of “home,” a “warm, privatized imagery.” It seems he does not prefer the use of familial language for that reason

⁵⁵ Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 145.

⁵⁶ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 79–80.

stating, “[I]f we are to understand public life in general and the church’s work and worship as public, we will change our present theological emphasis from that of the intimate society.”⁵⁷ Yet, I believe it is crucial that the Church use the familial identity it has been given. Christian relationships are intimate because we have an intimate God. In Keifert’s framework, hospitality to the stranger (“stranger” here used in a positive, opportunistic manner by Keifert) does not require intimacy. It does not require friendship. But when the stranger becomes a brother or a sister in the family of God, this mantra of ‘no intimacy required’ remains when it should not (thus creating a negative connotation for “stranger,” which is a problem for the Church).

The public relationship between believers is an intimate one because of who they are. The “privatized” family imagery, rhetoric, and language must be reclaimed and reinstated as the “public” family of the Church. The congregational campus, the “church” property is then seen and utilized by the members as a public space. While I do not have the space here to analyze or contribute to the conversation Keifert enters on the Victorian concepts of public versus private life, I want to engage it on this level: the Protestant North American Church’s lack of intimacy and inability to see, treat, or engage the house of God as a “warm” place, a “home” or a “family,” is indicative of their lost identity as family amongst themselves.

Intimacy is the necessary framework from which brothers and sisters regard each other in the family of God. It is a duty for the office of brother and sister. Without the family language, the American Christian has the option to remain a stranger to his own brother or sister in Christ. He has the option to view his fellow Christians as strangers—here in the negative sense as opposed to Keifert’s positive sense—to engage them (or disengage from them) in the culturally acceptable Victorian manner that keeps intimacy contained within individual family units or

⁵⁷ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 81.

friend groups.

When a Christian thinks about and engages in the practice of visitation, familial language would provide a framework for understanding the practice as a whole. When using the lens of familial language, the purpose of the Christian's life comes into focus. This understanding has an impact on the life of the Christian, and in this section, I discuss one reason, mainly that the purpose of the Christian's life comes into focus through the lens of family. Through the understanding of his life in relationship with the whole family of God, the Christian better grasps his place in God's narrative, his place in relationship with his Father, his Brother, the Spirit, and the community of Saints. That is to say, visitation, while often neglected by the "average" Christian and delegated to professional staff, is an edifying practice for the Christian. Actually participating in the act of visitation teaches the Christian what her identity is. Christians are not islands unto themselves. Their identity is closely tied up with their relationship with their Father in Heaven and their brother and sister on Earth. They are who they are because of the people to whom they are connected.

A Purpose Gained

In Keifert's words: "Hospitality to the stranger ... treats interaction without a demand for friendship as a virtue."⁵⁸ Can the same be said of hospitality to the brother or hospitality to the sister? Much has been written regarding the missional aspects of discipleship and evangelism, the "sent-ness" of Christians. An outsider could ask, though, why they should enter such a community that continues the patterns he sees outside the Church? Why should he enter such a community that does not know or care for each other intimately—except for those known and

⁵⁸ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 80.

visited and cared for by the paid professionals? Why should he assume he would be anything more than another number to count, another offering to consume, another item on the assimilation coordinator's to-do list? While Christians study hospitality techniques and practice neighboring 'out there,' brothers and sisters remain strangers to each other within the Church.

In his book *Soulmates*, David Horn explores the aspects of Christian community that make a distinction between friendship and fellowship. Throughout his book, he makes the case for friendship being the closest metaphor the North American Church has to expressing what genuine Christian community looks like. His book is important because, along with the thesis I have been presenting, he first identifies that the most common experience of North American Christianity is what often seems to be institutional. The Church qua institution does not fit the bill for the creation of any type of community today. While his image of "friendship" is helpful, he acknowledges a shortcoming of this image.

Genuine Christian community requires more of us than friendship can give. Extended to the church in general, this means that the demands on us must go deeper than any friendly inclinations or expressions we have toward others, as honorable as they might be. Being a part of the community of Christ requires that we live under an altogether different set of relational guidelines.⁵⁹

From here, I depart from Horn, not because I disagree with the case he makes for fellowship to be the vernacular the Church reclaims—I believe he has a valid criticism of the image of friendship. He goes on to use the term "fellowship" to capture these other "relational guidelines." While his book makes an impressive contribution to the study of fellowship, I believe the actual identity of the Church as family best encapsulates the more radical commitment that is expected of the community of Christ. The Church's "relational guidelines"

⁵⁹ David Horn, *Soulmates: Friendship, Fellowship & the Making of Christian Community* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2017), 112.

stem from its identity as the family of God, and those guidelines, as Horn points out, help the Church to understand and define its purpose.

This purpose, as I agree with Keifert at the beginning of this section, does not demand friendship—yet it does demand familial intimacy. Because of the Christian’s identity as God’s child, the Church’s “relational guidelines” usher him into the homes of his brothers and sisters, into their hospital rooms, into their questions and into their mess. When a new person is welcomed into God’s family, transformed by the waters of baptism, her new brothers and sisters have a duty to her—no matter her age. She has provided purpose for those already in the family. The family’s work with her is not done once she is baptized. No, they have a new relation to each other because of baptism, because of what they share together at the table of their Brother, because of their intercessions for each other before their Father. As God’s children, they now have a purpose, a calling beyond themselves, beyond social boundaries.

Christians need not fear this purpose that pulls them outside of themselves, perhaps beyond their comfort zone. They need not fear this intimacy that pushes and pulls them towards people whom the world labels ‘strangers,’ for those people are not strangers. This thesis has argued and defended and explained up to this point: those who are in the family of God have a history together, a unity together, and a relationship together. As familial language enhances the Christian’s understanding of these things through the practices that reinforce them, the Christian better understands what he is to *do*. After all, the Christian life is not one of apathy and disengagement. Christ commands his Church to “Stay awake,” to keep watch, to keep the oil burning. The bridegroom will return for his bride. The children of God pray to their Father, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

CONCLUSION

'Family' leaves no room for optional obligations. Perhaps this is why many scholars and commentators are hesitant to use the term: When the bonds of family are broken, it is so atrocious, so harmful, so devastating. Refraining from commitment to such a broken image makes sense. It makes sense to refrain from committing to an identity that has such a high potential for misunderstanding, failure and harm. In a world of sin, family bonds *are* going to break. When he was sending his disciples out, Jesus said,

When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved (Matt. 10:19–22).

In the midst of brother turning against brother, earthly families tearing apart, Jesus gives the disciples comfort through knowing God as their Father. Their true family supersedes the brokenness of earthly families.

If we truly believe that the Church is the world made right, we come to a surprising conclusion: The true family is the Christian family. It is a community created by the Triune God. This community has the means to heal the broken relationships experienced and encountered in the world because of sin. The Church is a compassionate, missional people. When Christians act according to their familial identity, as they treat each other not as strangers but as a family, they will then act accordingly among those outside the Church. These external observers then might see how within the Church, they will no longer be strangers, but brothers and sisters in Christ. Through baptism, the Lord's Supper, reconciliation, prayer, and other Church practices, the people of God have the message of hope and salvation the world is desperate for.

Christians are stewards of God's creation, and as members of his family, as created children of God, recreated into brothers and sisters in and through Christ, they are stewards of each other.¹ As God's children, they receive identity, inheritance, righteousness, access, place. In that identity, sinners gain a new family that spans time and space, brothers and sisters to whom they pour into and from whom they receive the gifts God has reserved and promised for his children alone: Salvation and life everlasting.

¹ Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger*, 81.

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VITA

Rebekah Leigh Lukas

May 17, 1993

Wausau, WI

Collegiate Institutions Attended

Concordia University Wisconsin, Mequon, WI, Bachelor of Arts in Theology, Bachelor of Arts in Lay Ministry, 2014

Graduate Institutions Attended

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, Master of Arts in Spiritual Care, 2020