

Chapter 1

The Nature of the Church

If we are going to develop a theological framework within which we can think about and assess proposals for church renewal, then the most natural place to begin is with the theological discipline known as *ecclesiology*.¹ Having said this, we will not be constructing a full-blown ecclesiology, as such a task would require us to think critically about an entire host of things, including the various offices or orders of ministry and church discipline or canon law.² Our goal is more modest. We are setting out to provide a *framework* for thinking about renewal.

By definition, frameworks are not exhaustive or full-blown accounts. They are conceptual schemes or rubrics that can help to guide and to stimulate our thinking about a topic. The construction of a framework therefore typically involves identifying and exploring the concepts or categories in a given area of inquiry that we deem most essential for thinking about more specific matters. Thus, in what follows, we will identify and explore three vital concepts within ecclesiology that are especially crucial for thinking about church renewal, including (1) the nature of the church, (2) the mission of the church, and (3) the sacramental life of the church.

In this chapter, we will be reflecting on the *nature* of the church. We will explore the mission of the church and the sacramental life of

the church in the chapters that follow. We will conclude each chapter by showing how and why these concepts are crucial for our thinking about church renewal.

Doing Ecclesiology in an Age of Anxiety

In setting out to think theologically about the church, one of the biggest challenges that we must confront is the fact that we are dealing with a topic about which there is no shortage of assumptions and expectations. People within and outside the church have an endless array of assumptions about what the church is, and an equally endless array of expectations about what the church ought to be doing in the world. For example, when people outside the church accuse the church of hypocrisy, they are giving voice to assumptions and expectations concerning what the church ought to be or not to be and what the church ought to do or not do. Similarly, when local congregations become deeply divided over whether to use their resources to build new schools for children in predominantly Islamic countries or to renovate and expand their own sanctuaries, they are, more often than not, dealing with conflicting assumptions and expectations concerning what the church ought to be and to do in the world.

While the reality of conflicting assumptions and expectations about the church is one that clergy and other church leaders must face in every age, ages of anxiety have a way of exacerbating the situation. When we Christians are deeply worried about the current state and future of the church, we naturally begin thinking and talking about what is wrong with the church and about how to put things right. Unfortunately, our sense of urgency often causes our conversations to become accusatory and inflammatory. Before we know it, we are having bitter disagreements about who is to blame for the decline of the church.

At one level, we can view our disagreements about what is wrong with the church and about how to put things right as a self-critical mechanism within the life of the church that is worthy of celebration. Indeed, a positive way to think about deep disagreements in the church is to see them as an indicator that a significant number of people care enough about the church to argue over what the church should be or what the church should do in the world. In other words,

deep disagreements are a better problem to have than apathy or indifference.³

At another level, however, the problem with many of our disagreements over what is wrong with the church and over how to put things right is that they often amount to a declaring of our assumptions and expectations about the church in a loud voice. On all sides, there is a regrettable lack of sober theological reflection about the church. We criticize the church and her leaders, we make demands of the church, and in a few cases we even threaten to leave the church. For instance, any pastor who has journeyed with a church through a time of deep disagreement is likely to have experienced people on both sides threatening to leave if x happens or doesn't happen. Similarly, denominations that are deeply divided over an issue routinely have clergy and lay members on both sides threatening to "pull out" if the issue is not resolved in a way that satisfies them.

In an age of anxiety, we need to be particularly wary of doing ecclesiology through a megaphone. It is bad enough that we are deeply worried about the church—that we are afraid for the church's future. When we begin shouting our assumptions and expectations about the church at one another, we only make matters worse.

Amid our growing anxiety about the church, we ought to be doing ecclesiology on our knees.⁴ Far from shouting at one another, we need to enter into a round of prayerful reflection on what the church is called by God to be and to do in the world. The proper way to begin this prayerful reflection is not by naming what is wrong with the church or by making a case for how to put things right, and we certainly shouldn't begin by deciding who is to blame. Rather, we should begin by reflecting prayerfully on what sort of community the church is. In other words, the proper place to begin is with *the nature of the church*.

Before we turn our attention to the nature of the church, we should take a moment to justify our claim that this is the proper place to begin our reflections. We can do so by noting two problems that tend to arise when we begin elsewhere, most commonly with the mission of the church. First, while the nature and mission of the church cannot be entirely separated from one another, it is now increasingly common to conflate or confuse the two. Indeed, many churches are so focused on a particular aspect of the church's mission that they

rarely take time to think about the sort of community the church is. One of the most prevalent examples of this tendency can be seen in churches that preach and teach that the church is Christ's only hands and feet in the world. Consider the following statement from Mike Slaughter, a leader in the missional church movement and the senior pastor of Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio:

What does it mean to be Christ's body in the world? We as the church are the only hands that Jesus has to rebuild in broken places. Our feet are his only feet to march in the war against poverty and injustice. Our voices are his voice to share the good news of eternal life and offer hope to the hopeless. Our bank accounts are the only fiscal resources he has to carry out the Father's mission.⁵

If this is intended as a statement about the nature of the church, then it is a highly problematic one, tending as it does to blur the line between the church and Jesus Christ or between ecclesiology and Christology. For now, let us give church leaders who make this kind of statement the benefit of the doubt by assuming that they are making a statement about the *mission* of the church. If this is the case, then such a statement will eventually lead to despair and exhaustion if it is not carefully situated against a robust and healthy understanding of the *nature* of the church. Churches will either develop a messiah complex and fall into despair when their best efforts do not solve the world's problems, or staving off despair, they will exhaust themselves financially, spiritually, emotionally, and personally.

The second problem that can arise when we do not begin our reflections with the nature of the church is in the immediate neighborhood. Most proposals for church renewal are really proposals about the mission of the church. When claims about the mission of the church are not carefully rooted in a theological account of the nature of the church, we can quickly forget that the church is not simply a collection of hardworking, self-reliant individuals. We can forget that, while the church is clearly a human institution, it is also divine, which means among other things that her most important resources are the ones that she receives from God. In other words, we can fail to see that our hope ultimately lies not in our own ingenuity and effort but in the

presence and power of the Holy Spirit who animates and empowers the church, incorporating her into the Trinitarian life of God.⁶

We could easily identify other problems that can occur when we do not begin with the nature of the church. In lieu of this, we need to begin developing a theological vision of the nature of the church. When we have done so, we will return to the two problems that we have just outlined, indicating how this vision can help to prevent these problems from arising in the first place.

The Marks of the Church

As with any other topic in theology, how we think about the nature of the church will depend on two things. First, it will depend on the kinds of questions we ask at the outset. Second, it will depend on the sources to which we turn in an effort to answer those questions.

With this in mind, one way to begin thinking about the nature of the church is to inquire after its characteristic features or attributes. In other words, we can simply inquire about what the church is like. An analogy will help to show how entirely natural it is to proceed this way. If we want to know about the nature of a particular breed of dog, then we can do worse than to pay attention to what the dog is like by inquiring after its distinguishing features. We will want to know whether the breed is typically energetic or docile, whether it is generally good with children or aggressive and unpredictable, and so on.⁷ Suffice it to say, we can take a similar approach when inquiring after the nature of the church. To do so, we need only to acquire a list of the church's distinguishing features.

In order to pursue this strategy, we must decide where we should look to acquire a list of the distinguishing features of the church. Initially, we might wish to proceed empirically, identifying and listing the characteristic features of the particular churches to which each of us belongs. Unfortunately, if we go this way, we will have to build a massive database to store the list of features that each church will generate. Such a list will quickly become unmanageable. We will have so many distinguishing features that it will be virtually impossible to assimilate or coordinate them into a coherent vision of the nature of the church. If we are to make progress on this front, then we are

going to need a more manageable source from which to begin our reflections.

Fortunately, we do not have to invent a list of the church's distinguishing features from scratch. On the contrary, we can rely on two sources that reveal to us what our ancestors in the faith identified as the distinguishing features of the church. On the one hand, we can turn to the official dogmatic and doctrinal statements contained in the Nicene Creed and in classical Protestant confessions of faith and/or articles of religion.⁸ On the other hand, we can turn to the New Testament.⁹ Let us see what these sources have to say about the distinguishing features of the church. Once we have identified the distinguishing features of the church in each of the sources, we will inquire about whether they really capture and convey the true nature of the church.

At first glance, the Nicene Creed appears ready-made for our purposes, containing as it does a short list of notes or marks of the church. According to the Nicene Creed, the church is "one holy catholic and apostolic."¹⁰ When we turn to the classical Protestant confessions of faith and articles of religion, the list is even shorter, consisting of two distinguishing features. According to most Protestant confessions of faith and articles of religion, the church is the place where (1) the pure word of God is preached and (2) the sacraments are duly administered.

When we turn from Protestant confessions of faith and from the Nicene Creed to the New Testament, things immediately get messier. In lieu of tidy lists of distinguishing features, the Scriptures offer a range of vivid images and metaphors for the church.¹¹ For example, the New Testament depicts the church as the body of Christ, a city on a hill, a light to the world, the branches of the true vine, and the spotless bride of Christ to name just a few. To be sure, these Scriptural images are striking and highly suggestive. For example, they suggest that the church is the sort of community that helps the world to find its way out of darkness, that offers a place of safe haven for weary travelers, and that maintains spiritual and moral purity. At the same time, the New Testament metaphors for the church are not as straightforward as the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed or in Protestant confessions of faith and articles of religion. As with all metaphors, there is the problem of interpretive elasticity.¹² We can easily bend these biblical metaphors in any number of directions.¹³

For the time being, let us grant that there is a range of interpretive possibilities for the metaphors in the New Testament and even for the terms used in the Creed and Protestant confessions. Moreover, let us grant that, in what follows, we will be making some assumptions concerning the meaning of the relevant terms and metaphors. We can readily grant these things because what really matters for the sake of the argument is that both our initial and concluding judgments concerning the *adequacy* of these metaphors and terms will hold even if we allow for a range of meanings.¹⁴

Having identified the lists of distinguishing features of the church in the Nicene Creed and in Protestant confessions of faith, we now need to discern whether these lists adequately or truly describe the church in its many manifestations across space and time. Likewise, we need to ascertain whether the images and metaphors for the church in the New Testament really capture what the church is like throughout the history of the church and in the present day. In other words, we need to know whether the church, then or now, really is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Alternatively, we need to know whether the church, then or now, truly is a city on a hill, the branches of the true vine, and the body of Christ. If it turns out that the descriptions of the church in the Creed, in Protestant confessions, and in the New Testament do not match what we actually see and experience of the church throughout space and time, then we will have no choice but to conclude initially that these descriptions do not adequately describe the church's true nature.¹⁵

Before we evaluate the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed, the Protestant confessions, and the New Testament for their adequacy, a brief word of warning is in order. Our initial judgment will strike many readers as unduly negative. Here we can only ask for patience. As we will note in a moment, there are good reasons to acknowledge the church's many failings across the years. More importantly, our *initial* judgment concerning the adequacy of the descriptions will not be our *final* judgment. On the contrary, we will in due course maintain that, when viewed from a particular theological angle of vision, the descriptions are indeed adequate or true. For now, the time has come to offer an initial judgment concerning whether the descriptions appear at first glance adequately or truly to describe the nature of the church across space and time.

Those who love the church deeply will want to insist that, whatever her imperfections, the church really is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We will maintain that, whatever her shortcomings might be, the church really is a light to the world, the spotless bride of Christ, and a royal priesthood descended from David. We will insist that someone is always preaching the pure word of God and duly administering the sacraments. After all, we will say, God will not be without a witness in the world.

Even those of us who love the church and who give the whole of our hearts and lives in her service know better. Whatever our ideal and ethereal visions of the church might be, the historical and present realities of the church's life are extremely difficult to ignore. No one knows this better or is pained by it more than those who truly love and faithfully serve the church. For example, concerning present realities in the church, Hughes Oliphant Old laments, "That the church is the bride of Christ, without spot or wrinkle, seems to be a faded vision. The purity of the church is an increasing problem. Many of us find ourselves belonging to churches that countenance practices quite contrary to historic Christian teaching."¹⁶

Consider the ways in which the church has failed to live up to the marks of the church in the Creed. We know that the church is not truly one.¹⁷ On the contrary, we know only too well that the church has been deeply divided and disunited across space and time. To be sure, some representatives of the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches will want to maintain that church unity has persisted across space and time within their respective communions. Yet, for this argument to hold, they will eventually need to deny the legitimacy of other churches. Orthodox Christians will have to deny the legitimacy of Catholic and Protestant churches, and Catholic Christians will have to deny the legitimacy of Orthodox and Protestant churches.¹⁸

Short of such denials, we simply cannot ignore the disunity that exists among the various churches of the world. For us Protestant types, the problem of disunity is especially bad, as our various communions are notorious for internal division and schism, not to mention for their lack of unity with either Catholic or Orthodox churches. For example, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist and Methodist communions have fragmented and splintered repeatedly across the years. Indeed, despite the recent ecumenical dialogue between Protestant churches on the one hand and the Catholic and Orthodox churches on the

other, Protestant families themselves often remain bitterly divided. Thus we are more likely to witness ecumenical dialogue between the United Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutheran Church than between the United Methodist Church and the wider Wesleyan and pan-Methodist family of churches of which it is purportedly a part. Blood may be thicker than water, but the division that results from family feuds may be deeper and more difficult to overcome than division between altogether different families.

We also know that the church is not holy. However we finesse the definition of holiness, we cannot ignore the church's failings on this front. If holiness has to do with being set apart, we can readily think of numerous occasions on which the church failed adequately to distinguish itself from the wider culture.¹⁹ Similarly, if holiness has to do with keeping the moral law of God, then we can readily think of occasions when the church (or at least the church's members) has broken God's laws.²⁰

We know too that the church is not catholic. Across space and time, the church has on more than one occasion failed to be welcoming and hospitable to all persons. In the worst instances, the church has deliberately excluded persons from her services on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class, and the like.

Finally, with regard to the marks of the church in the Nicene Creed, we know the church is not apostolic. For example, there are at least two major ways to understand the meaning of apostolic. On the one hand, we can think of apostolicity in a literal way, having to do with an unbroken line of bishops and ordination stretching from Peter to the present pope. On the other hand, we can think of apostolicity in terms of continuity of teaching or doctrine, having to do with handing on the teaching of the apostles from generation to generation. Either way, any claim to apostolic succession or continuity across space and time is bound to run into numerous problems. Showing an unbroken line of bishops and ordination is notoriously problematic, and any notion of word-for-word continuity of teaching and doctrine across the centuries is highly presumptive at best.²¹

The problem does not go away when we turn to the description of the church on offer in Protestant confessions of faith and articles of religion. The history of preaching is full of examples of the life-giving power of the word of God. It is also full of manipulation and abuse. Moreover, if we take the classical Protestant confessions in their

historical context seriously, then we must recall that, from the perspective of the Reformers, the Reformation was necessary precisely because there was a widespread failure on the part of the late-medieval Catholic Church to preach the pure word of God and to administer the sacraments duly.

The church does not fare better when her life is compared to the metaphors and images of the church in the New Testament. Across space and time, the church's record is checkered at best. As often as not, the church has failed to be light and salt in the world. As often as not, the church has hidden the light of Christ under a bushel rather than holding it high on a hill for all to see. As often as not, the church's branches have withered and died rather than bearing fruit worthy of the true vine.

The list of the church's spiritual and moral failings across the centuries is well-known, and I have deliberately avoided rehearsing it here.²² My intention is to encourage *realism* about the nature of the church, not skepticism, suspicion, and sarcasm. In the present age, there is more than enough of the latter to go around. If we encourage radical skepticism about the church or embrace a hermeneutics of suspicion that goes all the way down, then we will set the bar too low in our quest for church renewal. We will expect next to nothing from the church, and we will get next to nothing in return. Yet realism is desperately needed in our thinking about the church. Without a healthy dose of realism, we will set the bar too high, developing visions of the church that no congregation can realize.

If the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed, the Protestant confessions of faith, and the New Testament are historically problematic, then there is also a significant *practical* problem. Indeed, to claim that the church today is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic or that the church is the spotless bride of Christ is to risk one of two problematic responses. On the one hand, we will embrace the claim and ignore the church's present shortcomings and failings, however grotesque. Such a response entails being willfully dishonest about our life together and refusing to confess our collective sins. Let us call this response *denial*.

On the other hand, we will acknowledge the claim, but we will become cynical and bitter about the church as we actually experience it. The discrepancies between the marks of the church and the reality

of the church as we know it will drive us to adopt an unholy trinity of skepticism, suspicion, and sarcasm. Let us call this response *despair*.

It would be a great mistake to think that these are not real problems in the church today. Sadly, many clergy and laity alike readily succumb either to denial or despair. In the worst cases of denial, clergy and laity ignore or even cover up horrific forms of evil in the church, including financial, emotional, and even sexual abuse.²³ In the worst cases of despair, clergy and laity give up on a gospel according to which genuine redemption and change is possible here and now in favor of a gospel of radical pessimism and skepticism about human persons and communities.²⁴ Thus we either ignore our sins entirely or wallow in them like filthy swine.

Given the historical and practical problems that emerge when we compare the church with the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed, the Protestant confessions, and the New Testament, perhaps we should try another approach. After all, the process so far has led us to say more about what the church is *not* than about what the church *is*. If we are to get around this problem, then we are going to have to think about the nature of the church from a different angle, namely, *in light of the church's origins*. Once we consider the nature of the church in light of the church's origins, we will make a case that we can truly ascribe to the churches that we know and love all that is said of the church in the Nicene Creed, in Protestant confessions of faith and articles of religion, and in the New Testament.

The Pentecostal Origins of the Church

The question of the origins of the church is not an uncontested one. Some locate the origins of the church with the first disciples of Jesus or with Jesus himself, taking seriously, if not literally, the notion that the church is the body of Christ. Others push the origins of the church back even further, taking seriously, if not literally, the metaphor of the church as the new Israel. If the church is the new Israel, then in some sense the church must be said to originate with ancient Israel.

Neither of these ways of understanding the origins of the church is without problems. For example, if we draw too intimate a connection between the church and Jesus Christ, then we will constantly run the risk of overlooking the utter uniqueness of the person and work

of Jesus. We will be prone to confuse the work of the church with the saving work of Christ, regarding ourselves in a wooden and all too literal way as the hands and feet of Christ. In doing so, we will constantly risk forgetting that it is Christ's body that is broken and Christ's blood that is shed for the salvation of the world. However we may wish to understand the church as the body of Christ, we must be careful not to confuse the church with the body broken once and for all as an atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. Directly to equate the origins of the church with the coming of Christ or even with the life of Christ is to risk the development of a messiah complex on the part of the church. The church bears witness to and celebrates the coming of the Messiah, but she is not the Messiah.

Similarly, to suggest that the church originates with Israel is to overlook the uniqueness of Israel both historically and presently. How exactly to understand the relationship between the church and ancient Israel is a thorny issue, and we will not be able to resolve it here.²⁵ Suffice it to say that equating the origins of the church with ancient Israel may very well be unjust both to ancient Israel and to the church. From the standpoint of ancient Israel, such a move is anachronistic at best. From the standpoint of the church, such a move distracts from the unique circumstances in which the church as such originated.

In lieu of the foregoing ways of thinking about the origins of the church, I suggest that we take seriously the notion that the church as such began at Pentecost.²⁶ To that end, what follows is a historical-theological retelling of the pentecostal origins of the church. It is historically oriented insofar as it has to do with the events that took place at a particular date and time and in a particular location, namely, nine in the morning on the day of the Jewish pilgrimage and harvest festival known as *Shavuot* in the city of Jerusalem. It is theologically oriented insofar as it provides a constructive and imaginative understanding of what took place just before, during, and immediately after that day.

The story of Pentecost is a familiar one. For children and adults not baptized in the waters of modern skepticism and doubt, Pentecost readily captures and fires the imagination. Out of nowhere comes a violent rushing wind accompanied by tongues of fire that come to rest on many persons in the crowd. The crowd itself is a culturally and ethnically mixed group of folks who, under normal circumstances,

do not speak the same language or associate freely with one another. Yet, on this morning, they hear one another as though they were hearing what was said in their own languages. Indeed, the whole thing was enough of a spectacle that onlookers thought the disciples and the growing crowd had been drinking too much wine.

The trouble with the story of Pentecost may very well be that it is so spectacular. We find ourselves wondering what the whole thing must have looked like. We readily think about and debate the most eccentric aspects of the story. We want to know whether the tongues of fire were visible to the naked eye. We want to know whether the people gathered there that morning could actually feel the wind blowing.

Our fascination with the eccentricities of Pentecost is hardly surprising. We are naturally curious about such extraordinary things. The problem is not so much that we are curious, but that we are often unable to look beyond the more exotic aspects of the story. What happens to us when we encounter the story of Pentecost is not altogether unlike what happens when we encounter a movie with extraordinary special effects. We are so mesmerized and energized by the special effects that we often miss the more subtle and substantial points the movie is trying to make. It is only upon subsequent reflection and conversation with our friends that we realize what the movie was actually about.

For those who have been initiated into various forms of modern skepticism and doubt, the problem is even worse. We do not simply find the rushing wind and tongues of fire fascinating in a way that is analogous to extraordinary special effects in movies. Rather, we find the whole thing highly doubtful, if not downright preposterous. Consequently, we get so sidetracked by inquiries into the metaphysics of the person and work of the Holy Spirit that we miss the theological points that the story wants to make.²⁷

If we want to see the more subtle and substantial theological points embedded in the story of Pentecost, then we need temporarily to set aside the more eccentric and exotic aspects of the story. Moving beyond the eccentric and exotic, we need to pay close attention to what happens in the days leading up to Pentecost all the way through the days and weeks that follow. When we do so, the following five features of the story are theologically significant for our understanding of the nature of the church.

(1) If the days following Jesus' crucifixion were filled with doubt and despair, then the days following his resurrection were filled with wonder and deep delight. The disciples witnessed the resurrected Lord with their own eyes, they shared meals with him, and they learned directly from him about the kingdom of God now breaking in upon them. All of this happened for approximately forty days (Acts 1:3). Amid all of the excitement, however, their Lord was once again taken from them, returning to his Father in heaven (Acts 1:9).

With the ascension, the disciples literally lost sight of Jesus. They could no longer hear or see their beloved teacher and Lord. They were, we might say, sheep who could no longer see or hear their shepherd; they were servants who could no longer hear their master. To be sure, they were more confident now than they had been after the crucifixion. Yet the ascension must surely have triggered a measure of anxiety in Jesus' followers.

The truth is that very little is known about the disciples' lives from the time of Jesus' ascension to the day of Pentecost. We do not have diaries or other firsthand accounts of what the disciples were thinking and feeling at this strange time in their journey. Yet what we know is instructive. Having lost sight of their beloved Lord, the disciples held fast to Jesus' promise that his Father would send another to teach them all things and to empower them for mission and witness throughout the world (John 14:26; Acts 1:8). Indeed, the fact that the disciples were doing exactly what Jesus commanded them to do is evidence that they continued to trust Jesus. On the day of Pentecost, they were tarrying together in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4).

We should note something important about the logic of tarrying in this particular case. Initially, we might imagine that the disciples were waiting aimlessly for the next big thing to happen. The truth is that Peter and the others did not pass the time staring absentmindedly at the four walls of the upper room. Rather, Jesus' earliest followers were engaged in a more active form of tarrying or waiting. More specifically, the disciples were keen to do two things during this time of tarrying. On the one hand, they were keen to tarry together in prayer. And while we have no record of the content of their prayers at this time, it is reasonable to assume the disciples were praying in the manner in which Jesus had previously instructed them. After all, the

Lord's Prayer is about inviting God's kingdom to come, which was the very thing Jesus was discussing on the eve of his ascension (Acts 1:3).

On the other hand, the disciples at no point lost sight of the extraordinary event they had just witnessed. Put simply, they could not stop thinking and talking about the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, during this time of tarrying together in prayer, Peter addressed the disciples concerning Judas' fate and the need to replace him. Unfortunately, we tend to get so hung up on questions about whether Judas freely betrayed Jesus or whether Judas is now in heaven that we miss the point of this part of the story entirely. For Peter and the others, it was imperative to replace Judas with someone who could assist them in the work of bearing witness to Jesus' resurrection (Acts 1:15-26).

(2) Another feature of the Pentecost event with which we need to come to grips is the fact that something truly extraordinary happened on the day of Pentecost. We can do this without fixing on the mechanics, say, of speaking in tongues. Indeed, to debate how the tongues of fire worked can be a serious distraction from the real point of the story. The point of the story is that, on the day of Pentecost, something decidedly new took place. Jesus' followers encountered the Holy Spirit in a way that surpassed their indirect encounters with the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus.²⁸ There could be no doubt about what was happening. The one whom Jesus promised his Father would send was now here. As a result, things would never be the same. Thus when Peter stood up to speak, he could not help himself, declaring that Joel's prophecy was being fulfilled before their eyes (Acts 2:15-21). The Spirit was now being poured out on all humankind. The kingdom of God was now coming in power. The disciples' encounter with the Holy Spirit was now as tangible and undeniable as their encounter with the resurrected Lord had been a few days earlier.

(3) Yet another crucial feature of the Pentecost event has to do with the way in which Peter understood the significance of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. Once again, we readily focus our attention on peripheral matters, raising questions about whether the special gifts that accompanied the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost continue in the church to this day. To be sure, there is a place and time to discuss such matters, but we need to be careful not to miss what is most significant about the coming of the Holy Spirit for the disciples. For Peter and the others, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit

is the ultimate validation of the resurrection and lordship of Jesus. Thus Peter tells the crowd that what they see and hear is the direct result of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus. The coming of the Spirit should leave no doubt that "God has made Him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Just as the Spirit had borne witness to Jesus throughout his life and ministry, the Spirit was now bearing witness to Jesus on the day of Pentecost.

(4) The fourth significant feature of the Pentecost event concerns what the disciples and the larger crowd began to do in the days and weeks immediately following the outpouring of the Spirit. Initially, they were engaged in the work of repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins, but they did not stop there. Following the baptisms of thousands of persons, the earliest followers of Jesus were continually eating together, praying, devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles, selling their goods in order to share resources, and worshipping God. Thus their life together consisted of both a vertical and a horizontal dimension, the vertical dimension having to do with attentiveness to God and the horizontal dimension having to do with attentiveness to one another and to those around them.

(5) Finally, we need to note that, despite all they had seen and experienced, the earliest followers of Jesus remained an altogether human lot. As both the remainder of the book of Acts and the Pauline and pseudo-Pauline letters make clear, the post-Pentecost church was anything but an ecclesiastical utopia. Serving as a priest or pastor to one of the earliest Christian churches would have been no less challenging than serving as the priest or pastor of a church today. The members of the earliest churches often disagreed with one another, failed to differentiate between the true gospel and false gospels, took one another to court, hoarded their resources, struggled with a lack of courage in the face of persecution, considered returning to Judaism, dabbled in pagan rituals, mismanaged funds, and wrestled with all manner of sin and corruption. Nevertheless, they somehow banded together and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, worshipped the Holy Trinity and bore witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in word and deed throughout the world. Indeed, when we consider the many failings of the earliest churches, it is exceedingly hard to account for the survival and gradual spread of Christianity in the first

and second centuries apart from the ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

When we stand back and review the wider narrative of the pentecostal origins of the church, a range of activities are prominent, including tarrying, praying, welcoming and celebrating the Holy Spirit, repenting, baptizing, learning from the apostles, breaking bread together, combining and sharing resources, worshipping together, and, most importantly, bearing witness to Christ crucified, resurrected, and exalted. Whatever else the church may have been or done in the originating womb of Pentecost, these are among the most prominent and pronounced actions and activities. To the extent the church is what the church does, the church is a community given over to waiting upon the Lord in prayer, the reception and celebration of the Holy Spirit, humble repentance and baptism, the study of doctrine, the praise and worship of the Holy Trinity in a spirit of thanksgiving, a deep concern for one another's welfare, and a vital and vibrant witness to Jesus Christ.

We would be remiss, however, if we did not accentuate the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the origination of the church. Prior to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the earliest followers of Jesus were limited to the work of tarrying together in prayer and remembering the resurrection amongst themselves. The point here is not to downplay that work. On the contrary, as we will see in a moment, there is much to be said for tarrying in prayer when the church is struggling through a period of deep fear and anxiety. Yet when the Spirit comes at Pentecost, the Spirit empowers and emboldens the earliest followers of Jesus to repent, to baptize and to catechize new converts, to share their resources with one another, and to bear witness to Jesus with power and effectiveness across the face of the earth. Moreover, through the ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit, the church continued faithfully to worship the Holy Trinity and courageously to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus even as she struggled to overcome her many failings and sins and to be courageous in the face of martyrdom. As NMC puts it,

just as in the life of Christ the Holy Spirit was active from the very conception of Jesus through the paschal mystery and remains even now the Spirit of the risen Lord, so also in the life of the Church

the Spirit forms Christ in believers and in their community. The Spirit incorporates human beings into the body of Christ through faith and baptism, enlivens and strengthens them as the body of Christ nourished and sustained in the Lord's Supper, and leads them to the full accomplishment of their vocation.²⁹

In the light of the pentecostal origins of the church, we can now venture a preliminary definition of the nature of the church. From its inception, the church has been and is a charismatic community whose life depends entirely on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, through whom and by whom the church does everything that she does, including proclaiming the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; assisting persons in repentance for sin; catechizing and baptizing new converts; praying and worshipping together; freely sharing resources within and without the community; and breaking bread together.³⁰ All the church is and all the church does in both its vertical and horizontal dimensions is a matter of divine gratuity and generosity. The church receives her life originally and continually from the Holy Spirit who, sent by the Father, enables the church effectively to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to be incorporated into his body in every aspect of her life.

The Church as Icon of the Trinity

One of the advantages of thinking about the nature of the church in light of the pentecostal origins of the church is that doing so allows us to reappropriate the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed, in Protestant confessions of faith, and in the New Testament in a way that does not lead either to denial of or despair over the church's collective sins and failures. Indeed, understanding the nature of the church in light of the church's pentecostal origins puts these descriptions of the church into proper theological perspective in at least two very important ways.

First and foremost, understanding the nature of the church in light of the church's pentecostal origins enables us truly to attribute holiness, unity, catholicity, and apostolicity to the church. Similarly, it enables us rightly to attribute to the church the exemplary qualities suggested by the New Testament metaphors for the church. We can do these things because Pentecost reminds us that the church

came into existence originally and has existed continuously ever since because the Spirit is present in and to the church. As Irenaeus put it, "Where the Church is, there is also the Spirit of God and where the Spirit of God is, there are also the Church and all grace."³¹

We can attribute to the church then and now all that the descriptions of the church in the Nicene Creed, in the Protestant confessions, and in the New Testament signify precisely because *the Holy Trinity is present in and to the church*. For example, we can rightly say that the church is holy because the Holy Trinity present in and to the church is holy. Likewise, if the pure word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments duly administered, then it is not because the priest or the pastor is homiletically sound or because he or she flawlessly pronounces the words over the Eucharist. Rather, the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments duly administered in the church precisely because the Holy Spirit is present and at work in the church's liturgical services, bearing witness to Jesus Christ crucified, resurrected, and exalted over all the earth. In saying these things, we do not intend to minimize the importance of homiletics or due care in the administration of the sacraments. Rather, we are simply observing that it is ultimately the Holy Spirit's presence that transforms our feeble attempts at proclamation into the pure word of God, and that it is Holy Spirit who enables us to discern the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and to be transformed by it.

In this sense, the descriptions of the church in the Creed, in Protestant confessions, and in the New Testament can rightly be applied to the church regardless of whether they can be applied directly to the clergy and laity who make up the churches. For example, despite the visible disunity of the church throughout the world, we can rightly attribute unity to the church insofar as it is the same Holy Spirit who enables the church in all of its manifestations to bear witness to Jesus Christ and to worship the Holy Trinity in truth and love. Even more profoundly, we can attribute unity to the church insofar as the Holy Spirit who animates the churches throughout the world is ever drawing them into the fullness of the unity of the Holy Trinity, whom the church worships in joyous thanksgiving and praise.

To see this clearly, we need only to recall that, on the working definition of the church given above, everything the church is and everything the church has she is and has *derivatively*. Alternatively,

the church has nothing that she has not received, and she is nothing apart from the continual presence and power of the Holy Spirit and therefore of the Holy Trinity in and to her life. We can apply all that the Creed, the confessions, and the New Testament says about the church to the church precisely because the Holy Trinity is present in and to the church in her worship, her sacraments, her prayers, her proclamation, and in every other aspect of her life. As NMC says,

The Church is not merely the sum of individual believers in communion with God, nor primarily the mutual communion of individual believers among themselves. It is their common partaking in the life of God (2 Pet 1:4), who as Trinity is the source and focus of all communion. Thus the Church is both a divine and a human reality.³²

This really is a momentous statement about the nature of the church. It is momentous because it helps to correct our thinking about what it means to say that the church is a communion or fellowship (*koinonia*). All too often, when we use the language of communion or fellowship, we have in mind relationships among believers. Thus we routinely refer to the "fellowship of believers" or the "communion of saints." To be sure, the church is a fellowship of believers and a communion of saints, but the church is also more than that. Thus when the Apostle Paul uses the word *koinonia*, he has in mind not merely a fellowship of believers but "the communion of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:13). In other words, "the source and focus of all communion" is not ourselves; it is the Holy Trinity. Indeed, we have genuine communion with one another when our communion with one another only is grounded in and revolves around our communion with the Holy Trinity. To put the matter somewhat differently, we have genuine communion with one another only because we are being incorporated into the Trinitarian life of God.

When we understand the church as a fellowship or communion this way, there are important implications for how we think about the nature of the church. At least one theologian has attempted to capture these implications by describing the church as an "icon of the Holy Trinity."³³ And while there may be some limitations to this way of describing the nature of the church,³⁴ there is also at least one major advantage. The notion that the church is an icon of the Holy Trinity

reminds us that, in and through the sacramental life of the church, the Holy Trinity really is present to the world—that in and through the church the Holy Spirit is ever at work redeeming the creation and incorporating it into the Trinitarian life of God.

A second consideration is in the immediate vicinity. Given the presence of the Holy Spirit and therefore of the Holy Trinity in and to the life of the church, surely there is a sense in which we can truly apply what is said of the church in the Creed, confessions, and New Testament not only to God but also to the church's members. We can do so because the presence of the Holy Trinity in and to the church sanctifies us, making us one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, enabling us to preach the pure word of God and duly to administer the sacraments, and making us a city on a hill, a light to the nations, the spotless bride of Christ, and the branches of the true vine. We can apply all that is said of the church not only to God but also to the church's members because the Holy Spirit enables us to mirror the same image of God mirrored with exactness by Jesus Christ, to whom the Spirit is ever and always bearing witness in the church. Put simply, the church's members share in the unity and holiness of the Trinity who is ever present and at work in every aspect of her life (John 17).

What we need here is a way to take seriously two realities which, on the surface, appear to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand, we have the undeniable reality of the many sins and failings of the churches across the centuries. We have the reality of disunity, a lack of holiness, a lack of apostolicity and catholicity, and so on. On the other hand, we have the reality that is the originating and ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit and therefore of the Holy Trinity in and through the sacramental life of the church on behalf of the world.

We can reconcile these conflicting realities by recalling that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was not to establish the church for the church's sake. Rather, the Spirit establishes the church as the primary means of witness to the kingdom of God here and now. Thus the church is intimately related to the rule and reign of God in history, but the church is not simply to be equated with the kingdom of God. At her best, the church bears witness in her life to what the kingdom of God will be like when it comes in fullness. The church is among the first fruits of the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God

is itself an eschatological reality whose complete fulfillment yet lies in the future. Thus NMC is exactly right when it says,

The Church is an *eschatological reality*, already anticipating the Kingdom. However, the Church on earth is not yet the full visible realization of the Kingdom. Being also an historical reality, it is exposed to the ambiguities of all human history and therefore needs constant repentance and renewal in order to respond fully to its vocation.³⁵

Because the rule and reign of God to which the church bears witness in her life is not yet fully realized, the church struggles fully to embody what is ascribed to her in the Creed, in Protestant confessions of faith, and in the New Testament. Otherwise put, what is ascribed to the church in these sources is, like the kingdom of God itself, an eschatological reality to which the church bears witness and toward which the church lives and strains, however imperfectly. Thus it is entirely fitting that the marks of the church in the Nicene Creed are situated between the confession of faith in the Holy Spirit and the eschatological confession with which the Creed concludes.

Unfortunately, putting the descriptions of the church into their proper eschatological context actually gives rise to a third danger. In addition to denial and despair, the church that emphasizes the eschatological nature of its life will be tempted to *resignation*. To say that the marks of the church are eschatological is to invite people to underestimate the extent to which the Holy Spirit sanctifies the church here and now, truly making her one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We will be tempted to interpret the eschatological nature of the marks of the church in a way that makes confession, true repentance, and the genuine quest for unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity unnecessary. We will come to accept disunity, a lack of holiness and catholicity, and infidelity to apostolic teaching as simply the given features of our eschatological situation. To expect more would be tantamount to expecting the impossible.³⁶

At this crucial juncture, we must ask ourselves whether or not we believe in the transforming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. To sidestep this matter is functionally to embrace a doctrine of the Holy Spirit in which the Spirit is not a Spirit of power but an impotent Spirit incapable of doing anything truly to restore us to newness of life;

to knit us together in one body that is holy, catholic, and apostolic; to enable us to proclaim the pure word of God and to administer the sacraments rightly; and to incorporate us into the Trinitarian life of God. Either we will believe the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of life and power and of all unity and holiness, or we will live as though the Spirit is incapable of making a real difference in our lives. Either we will seek the Spirit in true repentance and humble expectation, or we will ignore to our own peril the very source of our ongoing life together.

If the churches that we know and love fall short of all that is ascribed to the church in the Nicene Creed, in Protestant confessions and articles, and in the New Testament, this may say more about their need for renewal than about the Spirit's ability to sanctify and to immerse the church in the fullness of the Trinitarian life of God.³⁷ Indeed, as we will see in chapter 3 up ahead, the renewal the church needs most is precisely a renewal in oneness, holiness, apostolicity, and catholicity. For now, we need to explore the significance of our theological reflections on the nature of the church for our anxiety, for our thinking about the various visions for renewal that prophetic leaders and movements are offering the church today, and for our need to navigate the tensions that can emerge between those visions and ecclesial structures.

The Nature of the Church and the Quest for Renewal

At the outset of this chapter, we observed that, when we do not begin our reflections on the church with the nature of the church, we perpetually run into two problems. First, we tend to develop visions of the mission of the church and then proceed to fall into despair when we cannot meet the demands of those visions by the sheer force of our collective will. Second, we have a tendency to forget that our best resources are neither the ones that we invent nor the ones that we purchase, but the resources that we receive from the Holy Spirit, the most important of which is the presence of the Holy Spirit among us.

Even when we have spent considerable time thinking about the nature of the church, the two foregoing tendencies have a way of getting the best of us. This is especially true in an age of fear and anxiety. For example, our tendency to go straight for the mission of the church can cause us to skip past the deep insights that have surfaced in our

thinking on the nature of the church. We quickly discern in the pentecostal origins of the church a vision for the mission of the church. We tell ourselves that, to fix the church today, we need simply to set about *doing* all the things that we see the church doing immediately before, during, and after Pentecost. In other words, in an age of anxiety, we want above all else to take action. We want to take control of the situation by putting together and implementing a plan. To be sure, a plan that calls the church to imitate the church in and around Pentecost would not strike many Christians as particularly objectionable. However, if such a plan is not carefully located within a wider vision of the nature of the church, then it will be just as likely to result in despair or denial as any other plan that we might hatch to save the church.

Similarly, fear and anxiety often cause us to put our faith and hope in resources other than the Holy Spirit. For example, many clergy and church leaders are currently looking to prophetic leaders and movements to save the church. We see in the missional church or the emerging church nothing less than our salvation. We tell ourselves that, if we would only become more purpose-driven, then we would see the kind of dramatic turnaround that we are longing for. Thus we devote ourselves to a favored prophetic leader or movement. We attend their conferences, buy their books, and bookmark their blogs. We pull out all the stops to adopt and to implement their visions for mission and ministry. We may even go so far as to integrate the name of the movement into the name of our local church. Thus we become "Grace United Methodist Church . . . an emerging community."³⁸

As we said in the introduction, prophetic leaders and movements can be and often are gifts of the Holy Spirit in and through which the Spirit works to correct the church as she goes on her way. Yet they are not themselves the Holy Spirit. In and of themselves, they do not have the power to breathe new life into the church. This does not mean that we should not listen carefully and prayerfully to what they have to say or, better yet, to what the Spirit may be saying to the churches *through* them. It simply means that we must be on guard against our tendency to forget that the ultimate resource for church renewal is the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

At the other extreme, fear and anxiety can cause us to eschew and to dismiss the prophetic in favor of clinging for all we are worth to ecclesial structures. Thus many clergy and church leaders insist

that, if we will simply recommit ourselves to the system, then the system will save us. For example, when fear and anxiety take hold, United Methodist Church dignitaries invariably begin talking about renewing the "connection." Connection or connectionalism is simply an umbrella term for the various structures around which the Methodist system revolves, e.g., annual and general conferences, *The Book of Discipline*, the appointment system, and the like. Unfortunately, when we listen closely, our talk about renewing the connection often boils down to an urging of Methodist clergy and lay leaders to be more committed to the structures that make up the system. In short, we are really saying, "If we will only work a little harder, the system will save us."³⁹

As we noted in the introduction, ecclesial structures are gifts of the Holy Spirit in and through which the Spirit works to incorporate us into the Trinitarian life of God.⁴⁰ Yet ecclesial structures are not themselves the Holy Spirit. In and of themselves, they do not have the power to breathe new life into the church. This does not mean that the Spirit cannot work through ecclesial structures to renew the church. Rather, it simply means that we need to be on guard against our tendency to forget that the ultimate resource for renewal is not our structures, but the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our midst.

If we are to overcome our tendency to put our trust in our own resources (whether they be prophetic or structural), then we must focus our minds and hearts on the nature of the church before we set out to think about or to work for renewal. Before we take any actions, devise any plans, or buy into any program (whether old or new), we need to take time to recall not simply *what* we are but *whose* we are. We need to remember that we are a charismatic community brought into being and sustained each day by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that we have nothing that we have not received. We need to remember that the Holy Spirit is ever present among us, incorporating us into the Trinitarian life of God.

The insight that we most need to take away from our account of the pentecostal origins of the church is one that is both simple and profound. When the earliest followers of Jesus literally lost sight of their Lord, they did not rush to attend a seminar on what to do next. Nor did they cling for all their worth to the time-tested structures of Judaism. To be sure, the disciples later organized themselves and

set out to spread the gospel throughout the known world, but they did not do this initially. Initially, they did one thing. They tarried together in prayer.

In many ways, the church in the postmodern West faces a similar situation. We have, metaphorically speaking, lost sight of our Lord. We are anxious and afraid. We are deeply concerned about the present state and future of our churches. Yet, if we take seriously the notion that the church is a charismatic community whose life depends entirely on the presence and work of the Holy Spirit, then it follows immediately that the best way to deal with our anxiety is to call upon the Holy Spirit in prayer. Indeed, we ought to regard with suspicion any and all proposals for renewal that turn initially to anything or anyone other than the Holy Spirit for direction. To be sure, the Holy Spirit works through prophetic leaders and movements as well as through ecclesial structures to breathe new life into the church. Nevertheless, all efforts at renewal should begin with the recognition that it is the Spirit who brought the church to life in the beginning and it is the Spirit who will rescue us when we are in trouble.

Once we recognize that the Holy Spirit is our only source and hope for church renewal, the first step in the quest for renewal is plain to see. Before we turn to prophetic leaders and movements or to existing structures for help, we need to commit ourselves to the hard work of tarrying together in prayer. To be sure, the suggestion that we should begin our quest for renewal by tarrying together in prayer will strike some as hopelessly mundane. Surely the importance of prayer is obvious to even the conventionally pious. Surely this is tantamount to saying we ought to put gas in the car before we set out on a trip. Yet it is precisely the widespread sense that prayer is a given that should give us pause. In many quarters today, it is not altogether clear that the church knows the difference between tarrying together in prayer and loitering together at a church bake sale. In the worst cases, one gets the impression that prayer is an obligatory preface to the real work that needs to be done. There is almost a palpable expectation that prayers be kept short so that we can get on with more important things.

The work of tarrying together in prayer is not something to be taken lightly. As Sarah Coakley says, the "faithful presence [of prayer] can be nothing short of electric."⁴¹ Indeed, to tarry together in prayer is to admit that we are out of answers, that we have lost confidence

in the ability of marketing schemes, new technology, and fund-raising campaigns to save us. It is to turn our attention heavenward and to ask God the Father once again to pour out the Spirit promised by the Son. In this sense, tarrying together in prayer really is simple work. We need only to invoke the Holy Spirit to come to our aid and then to wait attentively for the Holy Spirit to do so.⁴²

Here then is the first vital step toward church renewal in the light of our working definition of the nature of the church. The church that truly yearns for renewal will commit herself to one thing above all else. She will invite the Holy Spirit to come, and she will do so continuously until the Spirit shows up. She will do so at the outset of every worship service, staff meeting, educational offering, and in every other phase of her life. Her constant prayer will be "Come, Holy Spirit." Her life will be one continuous *epiclesis*. She may even want to schedule special weeknight prayer vigils in which prayers are limited to invoking the Holy Spirit to come, to the confession of sin, and to the expression of a ready willingness to cede all power and control to the Holy Spirit. Of course, we cannot know in advance when or how the Spirit will respond. All we can know is that, when the Spirit does respond, it is likely to be unmistakable for anything else. It may even be accompanied by things eccentric and exotic.

Finally, inviting the Holy Spirit to come and to renew the church is the easy part. Anyone can do this. The hard part is waiting. Waiting is not something persons living in the postmodern West like to do. Indeed, to live in the postmodern West is to take charge of our lives, to take action, to take ownership and responsibility, and to get on with things. We pride ourselves on being independent and self-sufficient, on not having to wait on anyone or anything—including God—to get the job done. We reside in a land of plenty, and we have come to trust above all in our own resources and our own resourcefulness. We so readily and easily forget that we have nothing that we have not received. Most of all, however, we forget that our resolve to be in control has devastating consequences. As Richard John Neuhaus once put it, "It is our determination to be independent by being in control that makes us unavailable to God."⁴³

Beginning the quest for renewal by reflecting theologically on the nature of the church has reminded us that the church is a charismatic community that is entirely dependent on the Holy Spirit for all she is and for all she has. Apart from prolonged reflection on the nature of

the church, we will continue to look to prophetic leaders and movements or to existing church structures for our salvation. By contrast, if in the light of our reflections on the nature of the church we will commit ourselves to the work of tarrying together in prayer, then we will prepare the way for the Holy Spirit to work *through* prophetic leaders and movements and through ecclesial structures to make us one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; to enable us to proclaim the pure word of God and rightly to administer the sacraments; and to make us a light to the nations, a city on a hill, the branches of the true vine, and the spotless bride of Christ. Even so, come Holy Spirit.

Chapter 2

The Mission of the Church

We began thinking theologically about church renewal by inquiring after the *nature* of the church. After identifying the marks of the church in the Nicene Creed and Protestant confessions, as well as some of the metaphors for the church in the New Testament, we grounded our vision of the nature of the church in the events that transpired at Pentecost, which is to say, in pneumatology and eschatology. We concluded that the church is above all a charismatic community whose life depends entirely on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. On the basis of this vision of the nature of the church, we stressed the importance of tarrying together in prayer as the first step on the journey to renewal.

In this chapter, we turn to a second fundamental issue in ecclesiology, namely, the *mission* of the church. We want to know why the Holy Spirit breathed life into the church at Pentecost in the first place, and we want to know why the Spirit continues to breathe life into the church today. In our reflections on the nature of the church we have already gained some initial insights into the church's mission. We should not be surprised by this, insofar as the mission of the church is intimately related to the church's nature. Thus we have already noted that the Holy Spirit works in and through the church to incorporate us into the *Trinitarian life* of God. In other words, the Spirit

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