

Capitalizing Church: On Finding Catholicism Inevitable

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Writers have a problem, editors have a problem, and theologians have a problem. But it is a problem to which Mennonite thinkers and others in “Free Church,” Pentecostal, as well as many Protestant traditions generally have not paid much attention. The problem is how and when to capitalize the word “church.”¹ This problem may seem small to the point of trivial—the sort of question over which only an English teacher who has never been to a party would obsess. But even if small, it is only so in the way that a map is small in comparison to the land it represents. As a writer, editor, and theologian who has been trying all my life to identify with all that God is doing to form a global pilgrim people, the search to learn how to capitalize “church” turns out to map with much of my spiritual and intellectual journey.

Capitalization

To be sure, the most basic editorial guidelines are clear enough. If one is providing a proper name for the Community Bible Church down the road, or the Presbyterian Church USA, one must render “Church” in upper case. If one is referring to a congregation or even a denomination, but not for the moment by its proper name, one writes of it as a lower-case “church.” But what if one is writing about Christ’s c/Church, which the Holy Spirit has been nurturing down through the centuries and that is now at work—however incomplete or beset by sin—as flesh-and-blood Christians who are gathered and spread throughout the world? After all, this church, *the Church*, has a theological significance calling forth capitalization in much the same way that theologians distinguish *the* Holy Spirit from any *other* spirit however holy, or affirm that Jesus is *the* Christ truly and unlike some messianic pretender, or when they praise the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

¹ An abridged version of this paper was first presented at a conference entitled “Ex-Mennonite, Near Mennonite: Liturgical, Non-denominational, Secular,” hosted by the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, October 3-4, 2014.

Jacob as the one God. In fact, the honor that we give to the three persons of the Trinity through capitalization is not uniquely theirs. One also finds capitalized the Incarnation, the Resurrection, the Cross or Crucifixion, the Eucharist, the Annunciation, Scripture, and so on.

If a theologian only ever needed to write of “the Church without spot or wrinkle” which Christ will present to himself at the end of days (Ephesians 5: 27), that would be clear enough. But part of the Church’s theological significance is precisely that God is already at work among those “flesh-and-blood” Christian human beings—among *us* in our still wrinkled and spotted lives, amid our very unfinished pilgrim journeys. Or so we pray. Such a reality cannot be merely abstract or angelic. It must have some identifiable empirical sociological reality. This identifiable reality will not be the ultimate fullness of that reality called Church, but it must be one in which—to use a very technical Roman Catholic term—this fullness “subsists.”²

Admittedly, Christians have fought wars and, even short of physical violence, have caused much pain by fighting over the institutional identity of “the one true Church.” Thus we all have good reason to exercise reserve lest we press the question too hard. But the editorial problem of when to capitalize *c*/Church is not the only thing that should warn us not to refuse the question. Even if we humbly and rightly defer any *ultimate* judgment about the exact borders of the Church and leave it to God, the very effort to participate faithfully in the life of *a* church requires us to account for what we think we are doing. Christians who seek to follow Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, after all, have a responsibility to let our “yea be yea and [our] nay nay.”

Map as Memoir

What follows is my own incomplete map from a journey. Formed in the Mennonite tradition but baptized in a nondenominational Charismatic church with a strong commitment to world mission, my Christian life has been marked by a desire to identify with the global people called Church. When fundamentalist (more than Charismatic or Pentecostal) theology proved unconvincing, and I began to recognize ways that institutions and

² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* [The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church] (1964), §8. Conciliar and papal documents cited in this article are available at www.vatican.va.

traditions can actually contribute to God's work, I made what in hindsight was my first step toward Catholicism: I joined a Mennonite congregation at last. It would take more than twenty-five years, collaboration with Catholics in peacebuilding work in Latin America, a fuller sense of all twenty centuries of church history, and a growing appreciation for the Second Vatican Council as a world-historical event for all Christians before I would enter into communion with the Roman Catholic Church, at Pentecost 2004. But seeking on every leg of this journey to affirm all God is doing to form a global people of service to all peoples and honor to God's name, I have not wanted to renounce my Mennonite identity or debts to Charismatics and Pentecostals either. Thus I helped to found and lead the grassroots movement of Mennonites and Catholics for dialogue and unity called Bridgefolk, and I continue to identify as a "Mennonite Catholic."

No map is ever complete.³ No typology does justice to reality in all its complexity.⁴ No memoir chronicles every detail of a life. What follows partakes in each of these genres as a kind of theological memoir of my attempt to capitalize c/Church, thus mapping encounters with six different types of church life. The implicit typology that is the result comes with no claim that I have surveyed all the scholarly terrain or detailed all the debates regarding the ecclesiologies I have encountered. Nor would I claim to have encountered all major ecclesiologies.⁵ It simply explains why my search for

³ A famous one-paragraph short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "Del rigor en la ciencia," humorously demonstrates why. An empire bent on perfecting the art of cartography eventually produced a map so detailed that it corresponded, inch-by-inch, with the territory itself and was thus completely useless.

⁴ Cf. Talcott Parsons's summary definition of Max Weber's ideal types in his introduction to Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), 13. Also see Rolf E. Rogers, *Max Weber's Ideal Type Theory* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 90.

⁵ A thorough treatise on ecclesiology would need to attend to the largest gap in this paper, Eastern Orthodoxy. Now teaching a class on Global Christianity, I have come to recognize my acute need to learn more about ancient non-Western forms of Christianity, especially Eastern Orthodoxy. But since encounter with these has not played a role in my own journey, it would seem artificial or even disingenuous to try to work Eastern Orthodoxy into my story or typology. As a Mennonite whose path to greater Christian unity led to Catholicism, my eastward-looking assumptions have been two: (1) my own obligation to work for healing should take me above all to the fissure where we as Anabaptists broke off; (2) having come into communion with the Roman Catholic Church, I can leave it to that church to do the

capital-C Church has led, with a certain sense of inevitability, to Catholicism.

Church Widened

The problem of how to capitalize *c*/Church is not simply my own, however. Notice what has happened again and again as church workers like those in Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) have gone to work in regions of the world in which their denominations had no official presence. Or notice what already was happening to traditional missionaries of previous generations as they have worked in places where Christians were a small and struggling minority. Back at home they might have avoided those strangely named Foursquare Gospel churches or wondered whether Catholics were Christians at all. But now in a rural outpost where they were just glad to find another Christian believer, or in a teeming urban neighborhood where international Christian agencies needed grassroots partners if they were to do their work well, suddenly Christians became ready to recognize one another as members of the same body.

John Lapp, former executive secretary of MCC, often stated as a matter of settled policy: “We work with the church.” He did not mean that MCC *only* partners with other Christians in a sectarian or exclusivist manner, but that even in places where no churches of his denomination were present, MCC would seek out partnerships with those Christian churches it found. It would work with Chaldean-rite Roman Catholics in Iraq, with Anglicans in South Africa, with Pentecostals in Guatemala, and so on. Sometimes MCC might also work with Buddhists or Marxists or Mormons, of course, but these have been coalitions that were not quite what Lapp meant by “we work with the church.” Sometimes such coalitions have actually been easier to arrange and involved more comfortable working relationships, thanks to the clarity that comes with limited operational objectives. Lapp often needed to tell MCC representatives that “we work with the church” precisely because those church relations were not coming easily. Yet something about the bond between Christians in the worldwide body of Christ that we call the *c*/Church has elicited the commitment and required the extra effort.

So, how to name that bond? How have MCC workers recognized *the* Church in that phrase “we work with the church?” To evade this question

is to evade the call to let our yea be yea, our nay nay, and our church Church. Indeed, to recognize one another as fellow Christians only in “the mission field” but then to avoid the hard work of seeking full Christian unity wherever “back home” may be, is even more problematic. For then we are doing what Peter was doing when Paul had to rebuke him harshly for eating with gentile Christians, but only until his critics showed up (Galatians 2:11-14). For formerly persecuted or dissenting church groups, ecumenical yearning need not be a matter of wanting to gain acceptance from “mainline,” “established,” “Constantinian” Christians at all. It is quite as easily, and far more authentically, a response to growing awareness among followers of Jesus that they are first of all citizens in a global peoplehood that crosses the borders of every nation-state and bears the name Church.

Six Options

Now, because we cannot avoid the continuing effects of Christian dis-unity, there admittedly may be no perfectly satisfying answer to the question of how to capitalize church, even when we are resolved to face it without evasion. But there are some worse and better options. I have encountered at least six:⁶

(1) *Thoroughgoing congregationalism* Anyone who cares about c/Church at all is likely to agree on this much: One cannot really participate in the big-C church without participating in a small-c church. The original Greek word for church is *ekklesia*—a gathering or assembly. The habit of gathering our voices and our bodies together at specific times and locales in the name of Jesus Christ is basic and essential to all else that constitutes church as a “flesh-and-blood reality.” Thus, one possible answer to the question of when to capitalize c/Church is to claim this: Not only is there no Church without churches, in the sense that there is no beach without grains of sand, there is no such thing as “The Church” at all, no whole greater than

⁶ Again, the options that follow are in effect “ideal types.” Those who construct typologies should recognize that their usefulness and their limitation comes as they isolate realities, abstract them, and sometimes take them to their logical extremes. If I am right in my critique of some options, no one *can* in fact espouse them in their pure forms, because to do so either is incoherent or requires mixture with other options in order to be coherent. Yet no option appears here simply to round out my typology. They may not all enjoy the footnotable backing of a John Calvin or H. Richard Niebuhr, much less a church council, but all are lively enough that I have heard serious theologians and church leaders entertain each.

the sum of its parts. According to this view, what we call “The Church” is simply an abstraction, a projection of our minds or a linguistic convenience. Philosophers will recognize here a kind of nominalism. If we cannot say precisely where the Church starts and stops, this is because it is indeed very much like a beach, really just a mental zone whose border is perpetually shifting with every wave.

The problem with this view is that it does not account well for Jesus’ own words. Jesus promised to build something singular against which the gates of hell cannot prevail (Matthew 16:18). For Roman Catholic apologists to claim that Jesus had the whole grand architecture of the Roman church in mind here certainly risks anachronism; communities like the Matthean one which first received these words could not have understood Jesus that way, for they needed centuries to formalize and institutionalize the network by which they loosely related. The necessary point here does not require an apologetically Roman ahistorical claim, however. For the implication of the biblical text is clear enough. What prevails against those infernal gates is substantive and singular. It must cohere as a real and unified *something*, not lots of little things.

Unsurprisingly, then, even those who emphasize the priority of actual gathered Christian community cannot really follow through by speaking only of churches. They must soon begin to name the patterns by which churches relate to each other—conferences, synods, dioceses. Unless they want to argue that such patterns and relationships have no reality but are mere mental projections, they must name some whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. The purely congregationalist answer to the question of when and how to capitalize c/Church is not really an answer at all. Rather, it is simply a way to avoid the question.

(2) *Go it alone* In a faith with the cross and resurrection at its center, with a Lord who expects his followers to take up their own crosses, there is something right about a refusal to answer any other call or to buckle under social pressure. Jesus never promised his followers popular acclaim or majority support. To be sure, persecution in and of itself is not an automatic indicator of faithfulness to Christ. After all, other causes have provoked persecution, and so have divergent flavors of Christianity. Thus the claims of the persecuted cannot all be equally valid, nor their practices equally faithful

to Christ. Still, there is something right about resisting prominent voices *just because* they are prominent or claim the names Christian or Church.

The nonviolent follower of Jesus certainly must be humble and nonviolent toward the truth, whatever its source, so that a stubborn commitment to the way of Christ cannot be an obnoxious sectarianism. But if Christians are going to know when to listen humbly to the counsel of others and thus perhaps to bend—and when to refuse to be moved—they will have to be like trees that put strong roots down through the rich soil of Christian faith, reaching all the way down to the bedrock of Christ himself. They will need, in other words, a clear sense of identity rooted in Christ. So too with churches, who must know who they are, and be well rooted in the soil of their own faith traditions in order to keep their loyalty to Christ primary, even when faithfulness to him requires them to reach out in relationships with others as part of his loving, reconciling way.

Reinforced no doubt by memories of persecution and models of costly unswayed discipleship in the past, some Mennonite thinkers have thus endeavored to write Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and shape the life of their churches without any obligation to align that theology with even the most core doctrines of other Christians, as expressed for example in ancient creeds.⁷ The key word here is “obligation.” The competent Mennonite theologian or church leader these days must be familiar with other theological traditions and ready to learn from their ideas. Mennonite theology will often coincide with that of other church traditions on many or even most doctrinal points. But according to the go-it-alone approach for capitalizing *c*/Church, it does not *have* to do so, and when it does it will always be coincidental, on the basis of purely Anabaptist-Mennonite reasons and historical precedents. The goal and standard is that Mennonite theology and church practice always be “*sui generis*”—its own thing, springing up from its own sources alone, accountable to none but Jesus as encountered and understood within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition of which living communities are the discerning edge.

However, absent an honest and forthright theology to name the

⁷The Mennonite theologian who has articulated this view most deliberately is J. Denny Weaver. See for example his article, “The General Versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th Century Mennonite Theologizing,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 28-51.

relation of Anabaptist-Mennonite and other “free churches” to a wider, capital-C Church, the implication is that one’s own church alone is *the* Church. The logic is frankly sectarian after all. Of course no modern university-trained Mennonite theologians will be so impolite as to say this. Some of their Anabaptist heroes would have said that only adult-baptized, sword-renouncing, firm-yet-harmless lambs were members of Christ’s true flock. And the implication of some Mennonite theology is that only pacifist Christians are true Christians. But few will actually say this and fewer still—as they either cite other Christian thinkers or draw upon other models of church life or form working relationships with other Christians—will in fact act this way.

Maybe they *should* say this! Maybe they should in fact treat all Christians who kill or support killing as excommunicated, false, or unfaithful Christians. Maybe they should treat churches that support such practices as sold-out devious “whores of Babylon.” Obviously I hope not; I am simply pointing out the disconnect that keeps Mennonites implying but not saying or consistently acting like their church—or perhaps some collective of historical and new emerging peace churches—constitutes the one true Church. That disconnect requires attention. For to follow Jesus’ teachings by letting our yea be yea and our nay be nay means Christians in this tradition must either frankly embrace a go-it-alone approach to capitalizing c/Church or look elsewhere for an ecclesiology that allows them to maintain their nonviolent rigor without ex-communicating everyone else.

(3) *Invisible Church* By now, many readers will instinctively be making a theological move explicit at least since John Calvin,⁸ and implicit at least since Augustine wrote of that part of the “heavenly city” still on pilgrimage, intermixed within the “earthly city.”⁹ The true church, they will be concluding, can only be known to God alone.

Ultimately, who can argue with that? The Church belongs to God not to us, so it is God’s to recognize, even as God creates and nurtures it through

⁸ For a careful discussion of the relationship between the visible and invisible Church in John Calvin, see Klauspeter Blaser, “Calvin’s Vision of the Church,” *Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 3 (July 1993): 316-27.

⁹ Augustine elaborates throughout his massive *De civitate Dei* [The City of God], but for summaries of his schema see 1.35, 11.1, and 19.17, also noting 12.9 and 18.49.

the work of the Holy Spirit. The unfinished character of the church means that any definitional boundaries are properly subject to flux, as God woos the hearts of some at the edges, and continues to convert the lives even of those who seem long and firmly centered in church life. Longtime churchgoers, after all, may be the ones most subject to pride and complacency. In contrast, the struggling young Christian, or even the weak Christian who seems prone to backslide out of Christian commitment, may know a grateful trust in God's grace that the stalwarts take for granted. To attempt to sort these matters out ourselves in any conclusive way would thus be to risk the worst sort of self-righteousness. This is the kind Jesus warned against in Luke 18, when he recounted a tax collector beating his breast in the temple while a self-satisfied religious leader arrogantly looked on.

Again, Christians have already inflicted all kinds of pain and even violence upon one another by trying to definitively identify the visible church. For many, therefore, Christian charity should oblige us to call a truce. According to this approach we should abandon not only the impossible task of judging hearts that only God can see, but also the attempt to see the Church in any one institution—or in any human institutions at all. Even Catholics, for all that they seek and emphasize the “visible unity of the church,” blur that vision a little by also speaking of “the mystical body of Christ.”¹⁰ They blur it further in a more practical yet complicated way by recognizing the trinitarian baptisms of other Christians, and since Vatican II by recognizing them as “separated brethren.” Indeed, the more we think globally and identify the church with the communion of true Christians through the centuries, spread through many lands, the more difficulty we will have identifying the Church as neatly coterminous with any institution at all.

Why not admit, therefore, the wisdom of the invisible c/Church approach? Because visibility is so much of what God's project has been about at least since Abraham! *How much should I hide from Abraham*, God debates in Genesis 18 (my paraphrase), *seeing that I have chosen him in order to create a “great and mighty” people whose greatness will be to bless other nations rather than hoard my blessings?* Abraham and his children are to do this by keeping

¹⁰ See Pope Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi* [Encyclical Letter on the Mystical Body of Christ] (1943).

the Lord's way, doing righteousness and justice. The Lord draws Abraham into divine counsel because all of this assumes the visible witness of a visible people. So Abraham had better learn that way of the Lord as intimately as possible. Hidden mystical intimacy alone is not the purpose of God's work, but rather its seal and confirmation. God wants to do something visible in the world through the people God raises up and forms.¹¹

A Christian tradition such as the Anabaptist-Mennonite one must therefore insist that God intends a visible church. To live a faithful Christian life is only possible through God's work of regeneration, not our own labors, of course. But such a life must indeed be *lived*—following Christ in life and in the reconciled healing of relationships. Discipleship both depends upon and issues in community, therefore. Communities that endure do so by ordering their relationships through ongoing, accountable social patterns—which is to say, identifiable institutions. When more radical Christians object to the “institutionalism” of some churches or traditions, they are really calling for *different*, more organic, more accessible, more accountable institutions. If they claim they can dispense with institutions entirely, all one must do is watch them for a generation or two. If their communities prove sustainable, they will soon be creating institutions to hold community life together. At every level, then—from the gathering of two or three Christian disciples, to the communities of reconciliation that grow from these gatherings, to the institutions that order, form, and allow for the discernment of these communities—if we want to speak truly of church we must speak of visible c/Church. That visible c/Church is still on pilgrimage, incomplete, and often sinful, to be sure. Its fullness is eschatological and in that sense, invisible. But to give up on the visibility of c/Church is to despair of God's purposes.

(4) *Denominationalism* It is easier to see visible, local, congregations or parish communities than it is to see the worldwide people of witness which God has been calling forth through Abraham and Jesus, in the people of Israel and the people named Church. So, if the theory of the invisible c/

¹¹ Indeed, even as Calvin articulated his theory of what we have come to label “the invisible church,” he remained “interested principally in its visibility” for which he needed to provide a basis and elaboration in the Reformation context. Protestants had broken with the visible institutions of the Roman church, and now had to work through internal debates about the Church's proper role in the economy of salvation. See Blaser, “Calvin's Vision of the Church,” 318.

Church does not quite work, we confront all the more forcefully the challenge of how to capitalize the *c*/Church as Christians form relationships not only *within* visible gathered communities but *between* communities. Christians in different traditions structure their trans-local relationships in different ways, and there are important theological nuances to each of the names they use—conferences, synods, meetings, dioceses, communions, and so on. The name that has come to apply most commonly to the institutional structures that are the result of relationships between local Christian communities (at least in English, and especially in North America) is “denominations.” More than local churches, but generally not claiming to be The Church, denominations exist in a strange and theologically unstable zone, however accustomed to them we have become.

Protestant theologian H. Richard Niebuhr offered what may be the best theological defense of this denominational system of mutual Christian recognition: Like all human phenomena, no one church tradition or institution ever captures the fullness of God’s will or Christ’s gospel. With their respective emphases and especially heart-felt convictions, each church tradition witnesses to all the others with its particular gift. None is complete or perfect, but Christ is at work in all of them together, bringing forth the fullness of the gospel amid the flux of history. What the apostle Paul said of individual Christians complementing one another with their ministries in any local Christian community thus holds for individual churches as they relate to *the* Church: There are many gifts, many members, making up the Body of Christ, and none dare think of itself as the Whole. Yet the One Lord is embodied and at work through their multiplicity.¹²

Niebuhr’s formulation comes naturally for Christians living in

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr expressed something of this approach in the opening pages of his book *Christ and Culture*: “The belief which lies back of this effort ... is the conviction that Christ as living Lord is answering the question in the totality of history and life in a fashion which transcends the wisdom of all his interpreters yet employs their partial insights and their necessary conflicts.” See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956), 2. This was with reference to the various “types” of Christian involvement in the world that Niebuhr was to lay out. With regard to denominations per se, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry: Reflections on the Aims of Theological Education*, in collaboration with Daniel Day Williams and James M. Gustafson (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 16-17.

pluralistic societies that enjoy a rough social consensus in which no difference seems important enough to risk impoliteness, much less die for. But that hints at two of its difficulties, at least.

For one thing, many of the differences between Christian denominations may appropriately be complementary matters of emphasis, but surely not all. Some truth-claims and doctrines are mutually exclusive. God either does predestine some of humanity to damnation or does not. Jesus either expected his followers to renounce all killing or did not. The Book of Mormon either is divinely inspired scripture or it is not. And there we see the problem. Niebuhr probably would not have considered Mormons to be among the recognizable “Christian denominations” he was accounting for. Or, if he would have found a way to include Mormons, then perhaps Jehovah’s Witnesses would have stretched him too far, or certainly Scientology, which calls itself a church but owes no allegiance to Jesus Christ at all. This suggests the limits of Niebuhr’s formulation: Its generous mutual recognition can only go so far before tougher identity questions become unavoidable.

That generosity is certainly welcome. We do need to practice ecumenical patience as we sort out which differences are complementary and which are non-negotiable on the way to greater Christian unity. And the civic truce that is the denominational system is entirely appropriate for modern, constitutionally agnostic, political orders; Mormons may participate as appropriately as anyone in the vague faith of American civil religion, in which a politician need not and dare not invoke any particular divinity in order to end a speech praying “God bless America.” But serious theologians such as Niebuhr eventually need greater precision if they are naming the people called Church.¹³

Otherwise, one’s Church actually defaults to America, or perhaps Western civilization, or perhaps the global march of Enlightened progress! This is the second difficulty in Niebuhr’s formulation, and it should be all the

¹³ John Howard Yoder’s judgment of the “lazy solution of pluralism, which we call ‘denominationalism’” thus applies even to H. Richard Niebuhr’s best-possible defense of the system: It “may be the best way to manage a civil polity, but it dodges the truth questions.” See John Howard Yoder, “On Christian Unity: The Way from Below,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 177.

more of a concern to radical or nonviolent Christians whom Anabaptism has trained to resist the idolatrous claims of nation-states and empires. The very word “denomination” has been hinting at this problem all along, for one meaning of the word is “portion” or “division” or “part.” “Denomination of what?” we can ask.

“Denomination of what?” we *must* ask, or else we are simply begging the question again. What is the whole of which any one denomination is a part? Even a rigorous Protestant thinker such as Niebuhr may not be able to answer the question without either relying on the invisible church theory or sounding uncomfortably open to a Catholic approach. But then, with no real option for naming a capitalized Church that is taking visible concrete shape in history, a Niebuhr not only defaults to America or the march of civilization as the greater whole to which denominations are contributing, he actually *needs* such a quasi-Church to *be* his Church. He knows, after all, that God’s work in history must be concrete and visible and transformative, even if it may never be complete until the fullness of Christ at the end of history. But he has nowhere else to posit his hope.

(5) *Pentecostal catholicity-from-below* There *is* a way to insist on the visibility of the Church, without insisting on more precision about exact boundaries than either human fallibility or Christian humility allows. There is a way to insist that the Church must always be finding expression in local congregations, without acting like one’s own genealogy or cluster of congregations has ever gone it alone or could go it alone. It is a small-c catholic approach to the problem of capitalizing c/Church that does not capitalize the word “catholic” itself, much less employ the adjective “Roman.” In fact, few of its proponents are likely to describe themselves as “catholic” at all.¹⁴ Yet, as Christianity enters its third millennium, it is this way of becoming and being Christian—this way of worshipping God in gathered communities—that is spreading around the world, crossing class divisions,

¹⁴ I thus depend, as Pentecostal theology itself often depends, on a sympathetic interpreter to make the connections between Pentecostalism, catholicity, “free church” ecclesiology, and indeed the Radical Reformation. In particular, I owe the notion of Pentecostal catholicity-from-below to Yoder, “On Christian Unity: The Way from Below.” Miroslav Volf, whose roots are in Pentecostalism, does take up the topic of Free Church catholicity in “Catholicity of ‘Two or Three’: Free Church Reflections on the Catholicity of the Local Church,” *The Jurist* 52 (1992): 525-46.

and reconciling ethnicities at a pace that no other form of Christianity matches. It is thus a surprisingly small-c catholic phenomenon, whether we use the word “catholic” or not. Spreading with little of the top-down institutional guidance that we associate with Roman catholicity-from-above, it deserves recognition as catholicity-from-below. It is Pentecostalism.

If a Pentecostal theologian were to propose an authoritative definition of the capital-C Church, it would probably go something like this: *The Church is present anywhere and everywhere that the Holy Spirit is at work gathering people to study and proclaim the Word of God together, respond with trusting gratitude, and worship the God and Father of their Lord Jesus Christ with all of the gifts and energy that the Holy Spirit gives them.* This definition might, like that of some other approaches, seem to be punting or begging the question of just where that “anywhere and everywhere” is happening—except that Pentecostals are nothing if not confident that the Holy Spirit is a visibly active agent in human affairs. So together with the invisible Church approach, they deliberately leave the work of capitalizing c/Church to God. The difference is that they expect God to do this work visibly in the here-and-now lives of Christians. In short, they expect signs and wonders.

Pentecostal catholicity-from-below, then, is probably the best Protestant, Free Church, answer to the question of how to capitalize c/Church. Historical marginalization and fundamentalist habits of biblical interpretation have often taken Pentecostals in a sectarian direction, but nothing about Pentecostalism *per se* requires this. In fact, much in Pentecostal theology requires its adherents to anticipate, open themselves to, and invite the Holy Spirit’s breaking out in unexpected ways.¹⁵ From the Spirit thrusting Peter into the Gentile arms of Cornelius to the 20th-century Charismatic Movement thrusting Pentecostals into fellowship with Christians from mainstream churches, Pentecostals simply narrate too many stories of God breaking out of the very boxes we thought God had made, to allow them to settle comfortably or perpetually into any anti-ecumenical, go-

¹⁵ Volf reflected this conviction when he wrote that “The minimal requirement for catholicity in regard to relations between churches is each church’s openness to all the others. If one church is closed to the other churches of God in the past or the present, it denies its own catholicity. In effect, a church cannot anticipate the eschatological catholicity of the totality of the people of God, and at the same time isolate itself from other churches.” See Volf, “Catholicity of ‘Two or Three,’” 539.

it-alone sectarianism. After all, this is what speaking in tongues is supposed to signify.

Pentecostals who are nervous about where this argument is leading will rightly object that both the Bible and their own experience have taught them to “test the spirits to see whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1).¹⁶ None less than the apostle Peter needed his experience with Cornelius tested through accountability with other church leaders. The Pentecostal outpouring of God’s Spirit on the household of Cornelius became God’s word to the entire Church only through the then church-wide Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15.

Precisely here we see Pentecostalism requiring more than Pentecostal ecclesiology to be true to itself, however. Catholicity-from-above and catholicity-from-below needed each other at the Council of Jerusalem—and still do now. Pentecostalism alone has no mechanism for accountability beyond the congregation, and that is finally why it cannot quite offer an adequate answer to the question of how to capitalize c/Church.

Pentecostal freedom to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit has no doubt issued in great vitality and worldwide growth; that is its great strength and the reason why catholicity-from-above needs it, sometimes desperately. But without accountability to the longer traditions and broader counsel of other Christian communities, that freedom is wide open to the tossing and turning of “every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14). Dispensationalist theories and speculation about end-time events is too recent an innovation to qualify as orthodoxy and is not particularly Pentecostal in its pseudo-rationalist 19th-century origins, but many Pentecostals embrace it as though it were orthodox Christian doctrine. The good news to the poor that Pentecostalism has offered to millions upon millions of marginalized people around the world—as it has offered healing, deliverance, community, and culturally embedded styles of worship—has often been hijacked by a Prosperity Doctrine that equates God’s blessing with upward mobility and consumer goods. Flashy church leaders have cashed in on all of these dynamics by making their flocks accountable to them, while remaining unaccountable themselves. For all of its promise and vitality, therefore, Pentecostalism ends up underscoring the need for an upper-case Church,

¹⁶ Also see 1 Corinthians 12:10 on the “discernment of spirits,” and 1 Corinthians 14:28 on how such testing was to take place in the early Church.

but cannot quite do the capitalization alone. And so we face the need for another option.

(6) *Rapprochement with Catholicism* Yes, the Roman kind. I have occasionally referred above to the historical records and limitations of other approaches to the problem of capitalizing c/Church. So I do not want to dismiss the reasons that Protestants have protested the Roman Church and found it wanting. My argument is therefore humble, not triumphalist: We are stuck with it. Once we see the need for Christ's Church to take form and shape in flesh and blood human lives among people who inevitably organize their lives through institutions in order to share any social life at all, the task of identifying with such a capitalized Church will drive us toward something like the Roman Catholic Church. But then the very recognition that we will not find the body of Christ anywhere except in real historical bodies pretty much rules out casting around for some other, more angelic, Church outside the history that we have. As Lutheran theologian Robert W. Jenson has remarked, if the Church of the ancient Christian creeds "subsists" anywhere, it is hard to see where else it subsists other than in the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁷

The very attempt to capitalize c/Church shows why. In order to work, every other approach either founders, or would need to move closer into communion with the only Catholic Church available to us in history. Yet moving into communion with the Roman Catholic Church need not mean losing the charism and identity of each tradition or approach. The Catholic Church does not go unchanged as it participates in an exchange of gifts with other Christian communities. It needs their gifts and indeed their fraternal admonition—aka prophetic critique—in order to review, reform, and most importantly grow in holiness. It also offers ways to preserve and integrate what is best about all the other approaches.

Consider the ones we have named while surveying ways to attempt to capitalize c/Church:

Congregationalism? Catholicism insists that the Church is more than the sum of all its congregations or parishes, yet as each local church community gathers to proclaim God's word

¹⁷ "God's Time, Our Time: An Interview with Robert W. Jenson," *Christian Century*, May 2, 2006, 35.

and celebrate the sacraments, each becomes the sacramental presence of the whole Church, as it were.

Invisibility? On the other hand, Catholicism recognizes the mystery of that larger whole, the “mystical body of Christ” that is still being realized as the Church proceeds through history in its pilgrim incompleteness, thus acknowledging the proper invisibility that even the visible Church must confess.

Denominationalism? Along the way, like any Christian community that reads what St. Paul had to say about the many members that make up the body of Christ, Catholicism recognizes what is true about denominationalism—that collectively, not just individually, the body lives and moves and thrives through a diversity of callings, gifts, and cultural expressions. Thus, its long experience with religious orders and recognized non-Roman rites gives it many ways to hold its own “denominations,” so to speak, together in communion.

“Go it alone”? Schism is obviously antithetical to Catholicism, insisting as it does that no local Christian community or historical strand of communities can “go it alone” vis-à-vis the Christian whole. Still, Catholicism does cherish, remember, and preserve what is right about even this approach—the resoluteness of the martyrs and the *ressourcement* that allows Christians to stay rooted in their core identity whenever other loyalties tempt them.

Pentecostalism? Perhaps the greatest challenge but also the most pressing need that Roman Catholicism faces is to open itself to the unpredictable vitality and surprising guidance that Pentecostalism represents, just as Peter needed Cornelius. Pope John XXIII invited a “new Pentecost” as he urged the Roman Catholic Church, its episcopal leaders, and its curial bureaucrats to throw open the windows to let the Holy Spirit blow in through

the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁸ But just as the early Church took longer to appropriate the first Jerusalem Council than Acts 15 suggests, the Church in the modern world is still coming to terms with Vatican II. Meanwhile, Pentecostalism spreads around the world, sometimes competing for the hearts of the Catholic faithful but sometimes invigorating Catholic piety and practice in unpredictable ways. Meanwhile, as we have seen, Pentecostalism needs catholic accountability as much as Roman Catholicism needs pentecostal vitality; simply to learn to talk and pray together across their cultural and theological divides is to begin exchanging gifts.

* * *

If there is another way to capitalize c/Church, I have not been able find it. Perhaps another theologian of Mennonite, Pentecostal, or ecumenical Protestant background can do better than I. But this has been my resolution—to work at sustaining the best charisms of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition that formed me, through a rapprochement with Catholicism.

It should not really be strange to be a “Mennonite Catholic.” That there are Benedictine or Franciscan Catholics is so ordinary that we do not even bother with such names. If we did, we would be naming the way that Benedictines and Franciscans live out a charism and clearly maintain their own communal identities while finding ways to be in, and stay in, relationship with the larger communion of the Church. Learning to do this is not and need not be every believer’s vocation to the same degree. What I ask of most Mennonites for now is not that they all become Catholics *en masse*, but two simpler things.

First, given that their emphasis on salvation-in-community lived out in active discipleship already makes them as much Catholic as Protestant in crucial ways, they should become as literate and even comfortable in the Catholic world as they have come to be in the Protestant world. Second, they should recognize that for some of us to take a Mennonite charism into

¹⁸ Pope John XXIII, “Gaudet mater ecclesia,” Opening speech to the Second Vatican Council (1962).

full communion with the Roman Catholic Church is itself a ministry of reconciliation and peacebuilding.¹⁹

It is because I am still very much a Mennonite formed in the Believers Church tradition that I am convinced that church must always take concrete, visible, identifiable form, even if its earthly pilgrimage remains necessarily incomplete and its fullness thus “invisible.” And because I am a Mennonite committed to placing bonds of brother/sisterhood above every national and ethnic border, I yearn to see that church take shape through just, global, and accountable relationships. The Roman Catholic Church is still on pilgrimage through history, as the Second Vatican Council insisted. But it is the way I have learned to capitalize Church.

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¹⁹ For fuller development of these themes, see Gerald W. Schlabach, “Catholic and Mennonite: A Journey of Healing” in *Sharing Peace: Mennonites and Catholics in Conversation*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach and Margaret Pfeil (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), 159–78, and Gerald W. Schlabach, “You Converted to What? One Mennonite’s Journey,” *Commonweal*, June 1, 2007, 14-17.