

The Subverted Tertiary Church

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In light of the historic storming of the Capitol of the United States to disrupt the counting of electoral college votes, I want to offer church leaders a word of encouragement and hopefully a helpful way of thinking about this moment and what the church can wrestle with this moment. I want to offer a way of answering the question, "How did we get here?" I don't mean, "How did America get here?" But "How did a significant portion of self-styled Evangelicalism come to ally itself with a movement that ultimately led to the storming of America's Capitol?" Many of you pastor churches that were or are still enthusiastic supporters of the Republican Party and Donald Trump. I myself pastored just such a church from 2014–2017. I live in a town where I regularly see a black flag flown from flagpoles saying, "Jesus is my savior, Trump is my president."

But instead of diving into modern politics, let's dive deeper, down into the deep currents of human society. Because, I think this is not a right-wing problem alone, nor is it a modern issue. At the heart of the matter lies the very understanding of what we believe the gospel is. Let's think about church history and the relation of the church and the state throughout it. I want to offer a new way of thinking about it beyond categories like *Christendom*, *Post-Christian*, or *Secularism*. Those terms are proving rather unhelpful because they have concentrated on superficial symptoms of a changing social landscape. Let's work through three categories of community that it seems to me nearly all peoples of all times have had: primary, secondary, and tertiary communities. And let's try to identify where the church falls at various times, and what the Bible has to say about it.

Primary Community

Primary communities are the overarching institutions that determine the widest grouping of a people who consider themselves to be united in some way. The primary community demands life and death allegiance. Primary communities go to war, have patriots and traitors. This could be the extended family as the Capulets and Montagues of *Romeo and Juliet*, or in the famous Hatfield vs. McCoy vendetta. This could be a more extended tribe of a large number of loosely related people. Here we can think of the tribes of Israel in the Bible, particularly as they sometimes war against each other, demonstrating that their tribal loyalty was more important, or *primary* than Israel. This is especially evident in the civil war that divided Israel into two nations.

At various points in human history there have been conscious efforts or movements to reorganize and collect small primary communities into larger ones, often called "empires." Though these empires could be as small as a single city. In Ancient Greece and Rome various tribes were integrated, not always peacefully, into a city-state, like Athens, Sparta, or Rome. Shrewd politicians, such as Pericles, the "father of democracy" knew the importance of re-aligning community allegiance and identity. He revised the historical tribal affiliations of Athens, thus breaking up ancient power holding groups and increasing unity for Athens. He effectively turned real tribes into invented ones

that existed only as a convenient political subgroup. Pericles, like many emperors, effectively transformed primary communities into secondary communities that made up constituencies of the new and larger primary community.

Primary communities are those who deal out justice. They are the highest courts. So, again, family disputes may be settled in the family, but sometimes they require involvement of the state. This is why retribution is no longer a valid form of justice, because the primary community is above the family. All crime (as opposed to civil litigation) is against the order of the state, and it is to the primary community of the state that a person must pay reparation in fines or incarceration. Ultimately, the family of a murder victim has no say in the prosecution and conviction of the murderer.

Primary communities are rarely engaged as a whole. National leaders only occasionally make grand speeches addressed to an entire nation. These are often saved for declarations of war, peace, or in the wake of a national disaster. In the same way, individual people or even relatively large groups cannot address the whole primary community. They must do so channelled through secondary communities. This means that primary communities, especially as nations grow larger and larger, are systematically incapable of representing their constituency with any real accuracy. The constituency must be highly simplified into representational coalitions, like political parties, which are secondary communities.

We might imagine a pirate ship with a crew of a few dozen as an example of a primary community without secondary or tertiary communities. However, when the desire for mutiny grows, secondary communities develop as loyalists and mutineers vie for control. So, even here we see the need for the formation of coalitions to engage the primary community. This need for coalitions is exponentially greater in a large nation-state.

The primary community leader often takes on the mythical role of a father or mother, or uncle in the case of “Uncle Joe” Stalin. The king, president, emperor, or patriarch becomes a hero or villain, and their office is bound up with their person.¹ This is necessary because no such individual is able to be accessed without mediation. The commoner cannot approach or speak with the leader, and must treat such a leader and his or her office with a holy reverence.²

Every primary community has a founding father or fathers (still few examples of founding mothers at this point). This founding father figure is often a semi-mythical figure who is said to hand down wise laws and ways of ordering society. Examples in history abound: Lycurgus of Sparta, Draco and Solon of Athens, Romulus and Numa Pompilius of Rome, and more. Many of these historical figures were real, of course, but the stories that surround them raise them to a heroic or semi-divine level. Modern examples are secularized, but still glorified (or demonized) to differing degrees: George Washington, Vladimir Lenin, Napoleon, Haile Selassie of Ethiopia (venerated by Rastafarianism as the messiah returned), Mao Tse-Tung, etc.

¹ See Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* for an in-depth study of the mystical union of the physical body of a king and the body politic.

² Hence why killing a king or president is a sacred act in itself, often accompanied by ceremonial execution in order to preserve the reverence for the office even while removing its occupant. This is seen most clearly in the ancient practice of king-killing as classically explored by people like Frazer in *The Golden Bough*.

Primary communities today are mostly nation-states. Although internationalists or globalists perhaps would like to see the primary community become a global humanity.

Secondary Community

Secondary communities are those that are essential and contribute to the wholeness of the primary community. They are the means by which one engages with the primary community. For many of us, this is where the family lies. Although we spend a great deal of time with family, few now see family loyalty and honor something worth dying or killing over.³ Secondary communities are the bread-and-butter of the primary community. In our own time, this has become the realm of identity politics in gender, sexual, religious, racial, and political identities combine in coalitions to form power-holding groups that make up the primary community. We see a community affection and sometimes “fictive kinship” relationships form in such groups. Here are brothers and sisters in lifestyle choice, belief, and practice. Often these groups live and move into proximity to form geographical enclaves. Consider San Francisco as opposed to Provo, Utah, Missoula, MT vs. Miami, FL. It is well-nigh impossible to not be part of one of these secondary communities. Here we should also observe urban vs. rural peoples, socioeconomic classes, gun-owners, and more.

Secondary communities are coalitions that serve as the foremost voices in the public square. They are the places of real political power, and it is the job of a savvy politician to craft the narrative and identity of a secondary community so to gain a maximum amount of passion and numerical power. This is a balance, of course. The more diverse groups are included in a secondary community, the less passion there will be, as there will be few shared values. The more narrow a secondary community is defined, the more passionate its members will be, but the less broad impact it will have.

Tertiary Community

Tertiary communities are fully optional. They are groups that are entered by choice and often for recreational purposes. These are voluntary associations. People join these communities in their “free time.” Examples of these are breast cancer survivors, motorcycle groups, choirs, non-profits, veterans associations, video gaming subcultures, online chatgroups, and many more. These tertiary communities can make suggestions about how people should live their lives, but they can never command (nor usually ask) a great deal of loyalty or sacrifice. These groups are extras and they exist to add value to the lives of individuals. Now, some people devote their whole lives to these tertiary communities and treat them as secondary. A motorcycle gang that demands full loyalty might perceive itself as very important. But their political voice is minimal, and the rest of society views such a gang as a voluntary association, and accords them no real political clout.

Tertiary communities are narrow and focused. Because they are not much of a coalition, they are able to focus on specific definitions of identity or interest. They also therefore are systematically

³ It's a separate conversation, but it appears that family has moved from secondary to tertiary community. Thus, it is optional, a voluntary association (noted by divorce law, sexual orientation diversity in legal family structures). This goes some good distance toward understanding also abortion, transgenderism, and other newer beliefs about the family.

incapable of holding political power or exercising a great deal of influence. Their narrowness and focus does not appeal to outsiders who have their own areas of passion and personal investment.

Tertiary communities turn to violence and terror to advance an agenda that does not fit neatly into any secondary community. For, the only way that tertiary communities can directly impact the primary community without coalitions, is through bare power. Tertiary communities that take themselves too seriously and whose agendas cannot be well-integrated into the primary community are seen by the wider primary community as “extremist” or “fundamentalist.”

The Church: Secondary Community

So, where does the church and its history fit into this schema? For the vast majority of its history, the church was a secondary community. This is the period often called “Christendom.” During the high middle ages, the church was a major power player, and in some lands was indeed the primary community (i.e. the Papal States). But more often than not, the church worked as one aspect of a larger society for the good of the whole society. The church promoted the “common good” or the common-wealth of the commonwealth, i.e. the primary community. This was the essence of the turn that Constantine introduced, probably unwittingly. When the state recognizes a certain religious institution, or mixture of institutions as valid, it implicitly states that it has the authority to judge which religions are valid and which are not. Only a primary community has this power and authority. It was Theodosius I (379–395) who made a particular institution, the church, into the only allowable religious secondary community of Rome. This act established the church as a secondary institution within the primary community of the Roman Empire.

But the church long struggled with this status. There were, of course, the desert monks who saw this as blasphemy and left society altogether. But even established church authorities regularly butted heads with secular authorities for primacy. Take, for example, Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket was famously murdered in the cathedral of Canterbury (1170) by some of King Henry II’s knights who were carrying out his wishes (if not perhaps his expressed commands). The king of England who was tired of dealing with a priest who was seen to be meddling in the affairs of state. Becket, he thought, was to rule over the spiritual matters of the people of England only. Becket, however, believed that he and the church alone had the authority to judge priests accused of crimes (to oversimplify the situation). Becket excommunicated the king during their fights. This political war that ended in Becket’s murder showed a battle between beliefs about what community standing the church had, particularly of its own priesthood.

But now let’s consider Martin Luther. When Luther was brought to trial to answer for his alleged heresies at the Diet of Worms (1521), he sought the protection of Frederick III of Saxony. In this matter we see that Luther, unlike Becket, appealed to civil authorities to intervene in ecclesiastical court matters. Luther hereby solidified the church’s secondary status to the state and this was the birth of state churches. To this day, for example, the official head of the Church of England is Queen Elizabeth II, not the Archbishop of Canterbury. Luther and the Reformation unwittingly finalized what Theodosius began over a millennium earlier—the primacy of the crown over the church. It was fitting that King Henry VIII, the king who brought the Reformation to England, destroyed the tomb of Thomas Becket. The break in power brought on by the

Reformation led even the Roman Catholic Church to lose much of its former status as an independent power from the kings (again a simplification of a complex history).

There seem to be some examples when the church operated as a primary community during the Medieval period, like in the Crusades or “Wars of Religion” when people killed and died for the church. But we here have to introduce an important qualification—*the church as a secondary community is not the same as Christianity being a state religion!* The actual community of the church, including its institution, leaders, parishioners, buildings, etc., were distinct from the religious commitments and assertions of the leaders of primary communities. Armies in many of the crusades were still led by national leaders, like the famous Frederick Barbarossa, not by priests.

Although Luther and the Reformation sealed the move toward a secularism in which multiple competing religious institutions were tolerated, it took centuries for this consequence to unfold. During that time, from the 1500's through the early 20th century, the church remained the established religious secondary community of European nations and their colonies.

The church as secondary community is still remembered by living generations in the United States, although it experienced a sharp decline from the 1960's–1990's. For Europe, the church as secondary community largely disappeared in the WWI generation, who all fought and died with God on their sides. Post-WWI Europe was then sunk into the Great Depression, out of which new nationalist movements emerged that replaced the spiritual component offered by state churches with secular religions and identity politics. Whereas German Jews fought in WWI, shortly thereafter the Jews were seen as the problem to be purged so that Germany could be pure. Germany transformed from a Christian nation that included Jews (more or less) into a race-based nation. Race replaced religion. Religious institutions were forced to accept racialized laws or face dissolution.

For America, WWI did not cause nearly the same impact. For the USA, the era of the Vietnam War era was the catalyst of a very similar transformation that saw the decline of the church and the rise of identity politics. Civil Rights activists like Martin Luther King, Jr. appealed to an America in which the church was indeed still a secondary community. MLK was able to appeal to shared Christian values and language in ways that would be impossible even twenty years later, let alone today.

The Baby Boomer generation saw the church replaced with various other identity-based secondary communities. Youth culture, going back to the Beatniks but continuing through Hippies and into Punks explored alternative everything: religion, sexuality, drug use, artistic expression. The Boomers and Gen X sought to define themselves by the fact of alternative, of being not-*that*. And for the American culture at large one of the major “not-that” things was the church. The church, without realizing it, was becoming a tertiary community.

Yes, this is another way of talking about secularization. But I think it is helpful because it's not really about what government believes, but about which secondary groups comprise the power-brokers in the larger primary community. We merely need to observe the movement of people's understanding of community to see this trend. Numerical church decline in the 2nd half of the 20th century was dramatic. This shows the demise of the church as secondary community.

Church in the West Today: Tertiary Community

In our own time, church has become a tertiary community in America. It's important to note that this does not happen evenly across the nation. Rural communities always hold on to ideas and ways of life longer than cities and are slower to adapt. And geography matters. The Pacific Northwest is very different from the Bible Belt. Many Christians in the South and more rural areas lived with the church as the secondary community until very recently, or even still do. My own small town and county in rural Colorado ask our ministerial alliance to send a pastor to pray to the Christian God before their monthly meetings! Imagine that in Boulder... unthinkable!

As we continue, it is vital to remember that we're talking about *church institutions* and not Christian beliefs. This is a major point of confusion. The two go hand-in-hand, of course. But it is precisely because the church has become a tertiary community that we have "spiritual but not religious" people who can freely pick and choose beliefs that historically belonged to various institutions without any sense of loyalty to these institutions. In a sense, religious beliefs are no longer controlled by institutions, because churches no longer command allegiance as secondary communities. Now they have no power to redirect belief, they form a wide diversity of narrow and focused church organizations that appeal to a diverse spectrum of beliefs.

Consider some of the evidences that the church is a tertiary community:

- Church is a voluntary association:
 - Almost no possibility of accountability/discipline
 - Church hopping/shopping
- Church is seen as a means of fulfilling personal spiritual needs, rather than an allegiance to a core identity group.
 - Consider name changes of older churches and names of new churches. They no longer focus on group-identity or belonging based on theological standing, or even geographical location (First Presbyterian, Mountain View Baptist, Willow Creek). Church naming conventions have largely turned ephemeral marketing words that evoke a sense of the potential benefit of attendance or membership: Catalyst (i.e. church will increase the rate of change in your life), Elevation (come here to get a high), Connect (come here to make friends), etc.
- Churches are structured based on models of other tertiary community success: i.e. business/product
 - Church "networks" are akin to franchise business models
 - Evangelism as sales pitch
 - Pastor as CEO of non-profit
 - Fundraising (especially through sales) vs. tithing
- Churches provide a value-addition to individual consumers
 - So discipleship is neglected or turned into a consumer product
 - Need to adapt to consumer trends
 - Baptism as celebration of individual life-choice

- Self-serve communion
- Christianity as “your best life now”
- Spiritual healing, health
- Personal spirituality, training in spiritual practices, e.g. centering prayer
- The gospel is about a “personal relationship with Jesus” and not about institutional affiliation or loyalty to a community.
- Worship services as performance, experience-creation (as opposed to duty)
- Worship services compete with other tertiary communities for consumer’s time and attention, e.g.:
 - “Dirt church” (outdoors people describe a beautiful outdoor experience on a Sunday)
 - Football games see decline in church attendance
 - Children’s activities
 - Work and careers. Compare this to the days of “blue laws” when most work and sales were legally forbidden on Sunday.
- Political alliances with heretical groups, a reconfiguration of loyalties. E.g.
 - Mormonism as now seen as mainstream evangelical by sociologists and mainstream media, since they tend to vote almost equivalently.
 - Progressive churches form alliances in interfaith groups, pursuing similar political agendas.

Consider a simple example of this. One church I’ve seen uses symbols to express their corporate/institutional values. To express evangelism they’ve used a coffee cup. What does this tell us? The location and character of evangelism has dramatically shifted. Instead of a big-tent frontier revival meeting, a whistle-stop speech tour, or a Billy Graham style crusade, evangelism is now an eminently casual and intimate affair. Evangelism was formerly public and serious with the fear of hell and calls to repentance preached in public spaces. This fit a secondary community in which this was a shared language. People of various denominations would attend a revival or crusade. Now evangelism is a private affair. This doesn’t mean it’s less serious, but the coffee shop location does suggest that the good news being shared fits the coffee shop’s environment—casual, consumerist, simple luxury. That isn’t a comment on the good news of Jesus Christ, of course! It’s just an observation about what social context seems most appropriate for that good news to be shared. It’s not out loud in public, but quietly in private.

To me, at least, the factual evidence is incontrovertible. Like it or not, church has become a tertiary community in America (and Europe and beyond). But what does that mean? Let’s think through some implications.

Tertiary Community Implications

1. Individual church organizations or denominations have no greater public voice than do other tertiary groups, like other religions, labor unions, industry interest groups. Churches

have no *unmediated* public authority. The church, in trying to be politically relevant, *must be channelled through secondary communities to influence the primary community*. So, the mere fact of trying to be politically relevant or speak the truth of Jesus Christ to power will inevitably be subverted by being filtered through secondary communities.

2. The imposition of belief will be seen as "fundamentalist" or "extremist" by the wider primary community. For, beliefs that are not widely accepted among a secondary community are extreme.
3. Identity politics is more important than theological faith statements.
Story: On the first day of my career in pastoral ministry I was boldly asked by a church member in our very first conversation, "Do you believe in abortion?" Theology was trumped by political affiliation.
4. Theology itself is devalued because it is seen as arcane, boring, out of touch, not leading to success or growth. Tertiary groups only grow by attracting like-minded people with some value-added benefit to their lives. Theology seems to get in the way.
5. The culture at large is mostly ignorant of who we are and what we're about. They don't know our lingo. As an interest-group it is only for people who are interested.
 - a. Thus, we can't preach secondary community gospels like Billy Graham once did. Our culture doesn't know what sin is and doesn't think it needs salvation.
 - b. The culture can't distinguish Presbyterians from Mormons or from Jehovah's Witnesses. They're all equally tertiary communities with some historical connection to Christianity. They have no special validity over Buddhist groups.
6. Churches, denominations, and networks find success in transforming secondary communities into tertiary communities:
 - a. Growth as metric of success vs. faithfulness
 - b. Pastor as CEO vs. pastor as community leader/care-giver
 - c. Church buildings repurposed as providing services to people rather than services to God. Sanctuaries are remodelled on patterns of theatres and concert halls, rather than formerly on judicial and temple models.
7. Denominations have divided based as secondary community commitments. These secondary community beliefs now eclipse any former unity in shared theological beliefs. So there are liberal and conservative branches of many denominations who otherwise share the same historical confessions.

We could go on, but let's keep it focused on politics, since that's why you're reading this.

So, what this means politically is that the tertiary church *is structurally disabled from having the kind of impact or rhetoric of a Martin Luther King, Jr., or William Wilberforce*. The notion that Christians can transform the wider culture is only possible if the church is a secondary community. The historically Reformed "Christ and Culture" model of "Christ Transforming Culture"⁴ expressed very clearly in Abraham Kuyper's notion of "sphere sovereignty" is a secondary community

⁴ See H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*.

construct. It is quixotic in our time. But among our older populations there remains a memory of a time when these models were operative and successful. Younger generations do not know such a time and tend to resist churches that continue in the model of secondary community.

This also means that churches become political battlegrounds where true allegiances to secondary communities eclipse theological convictions. Furthermore, it means that historically effective methods of church-based political action, like voting, campaigning, or protesting, are necessarily subverted. Our grand speeches have to be translated into the shared language of the larger community to be heard. We can't talk about sin, so we talk about structural injustices. Of course, the solution to sin is Jesus Christ, and the solution to structural injustices is structural reform. Something vital is lost in translation—Christianity. This is a textbook example of how progressive Christians with good intentions end up being subverted. And the same goes for conservatives. Calls for law and order, for respect for the Constitution also have little or nothing to do with the good news of Jesus Christ. That's nothing more than asking any nation to be true to its laws, a notion that predates even the Old Testament with law codes like Hammurabi's (1754 BC). So long as tertiary communities participate in secondary community rhetoric they must fall in line, and this eventually leads to a loss of the tertiary allegiance, for that's not where the power is. The power to make an impact, to make social change, is by alliances with secondary communities. If we set out to change the world and make an impact by political action, we will invest our allegiance to secondary communities, which in our day means identity politics. This allegiance will cost us our faith statements and faith-based objectives, for these are exactly what must be sacrificed to find common ground with those who don't share our faith statements.

Analysis

To my mind, this answers a lot of questions that I've been wondering for a number of years. Like, why do Evangelicals support Trump, especially when they could have Pence instead (by the 2019 impeachment)? If it were really about our faith and values, doesn't Pence represent that far better? The answer: the gospel of Jesus Christ has been subverted by having to travel through secondary communities to reach the primary public square. That secondary community includes a strong 2nd Amendment group, so that to be Evangelical, conservative, but against firearms is a non-starter position for making any kind of political impact. Trump played the political game of balancing passion with breadth on the right, and in this time, a more narrow passion beat a more broad appeal. Trump's brashness, a sign of a passion over breadth tactic, won out over his Republican competitors' broad but bland appeal.

Why is the phrase "Black Lives Matter" so loaded? Well, because it represents a coalition defined in opposition to the coalitions that many Evangelicals have long supported. In order for the voices of an oppressed minority to be heard, it must band together with others, but in so doing, it risks creating or entrenching enemies.⁵

⁵ Cornell West some time ago realized the political necessity of Black people creating coalitions to advance their causes. See *Race Matters*.

As the church slipped from being a secondary community to being a tertiary one, it has fought back with strong rhetoric all along the way. The 1980's Moral Majority movement, anti-Abortion movements, and religious liberty groups are examples of working to recover a lost public position. Trumpism, for some, perhaps represented a final desperate attempt to regain social standing for the church.

Let's think about this in another way. Many in our flocks and churches do not have theological reasoning as a skill, because they never came to church with the intention of being formed theologically or as a disciple. They came to church to get something out of it, and they expect the church to serve them and their needs, and to get on board with their secondary community alignment. The starting assumptions of our "man on the street" entering a church building is that he would get something out of it, and that it would agree with his secondary community commitments. This has become much of the church's constituency. And, unfortunately, like all tertiary communities, it will only last as long as it provides a value-added benefit *and agrees with established secondary community positions*.

So, what's the solution? What's the good news?

Church as Primary Community

Indeed, I hope you anticipated this and recognized that I skipped talking about the Bible! Throughout the Bible, the people of God have been expected or assumed to be a primary community. This is what the exodus was all about. When the people of God gather as secondary or tertiary communities, they are subverted by "the present evil age."⁶ For, "We know that we are from God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."⁷ The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were a secondary community, trapped as a fearfully large minority by the Egyptians who knew that unity among these people would be disastrous to them.⁸

These people did not belong to Pharaoh. They belonged to God who commanded that they be released so that they could be a primary community. "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians."⁹

God objected to their desire for a king like the nations, because this was a rejection of God. This was a rejection of primary community life before the throne of God. It was a desire that Israel would ultimately become a secondary community among the nations, which of course is exactly what happens in the exile. The Old Testament prophets regularly inveigh against political alliances and foreign marriages. Both of these represent making the Israelite's identity as the people of God secondary to other needs, like political allies.

⁶ Galatians 1:4.

⁷ 1 John 5:19, ESV.

⁸ Exodus 1:8–10. Slave revolts were common in the ancient world, as slave populations often dwarfed free populations numerically.

⁹ Exodus 6:7, ESV.

Nevertheless, the Jewish people have survived numerous exiles, dispersions, pogroms, and purges, because the Jews learned in the 2nd Temple Period that their cultural survival depended upon their isolation. They had to be an outpost of a primary community and refuse to be brought into full citizenship in the (usually Christian) nations of the world.

When we turn to the New Testament, the picture is even more clear. Jesus himself makes a number of bold, primary-community claims of his people. He claims that he is forming a new family that requires his followers to leave and “hate” their biological parents.¹⁰ Jesus himself devalues his own mother and brothers by claiming that those who do obey God’s word are his mother and brothers.¹¹ Jesus didn’t come to bring peace and unity, but a sword and a fire that divides the world.¹² Paul in a similar spirit teaches that formerly important communities or identities must be submitted to the primary identity of “in Christ”, like gender, ethnicity, civilized or savage, and even economic structure.¹³ Paul’s old identity must be counted as “excrement” or “trash” in light of being in Christ.¹⁴ In other words: Jesus is more primary than work, career, property. The church is more primary than gender roles or identities. The church is more primary than race or other identity-politic.

And, if we compare what Paul says about judging among ourselves with the descriptions I gave for primary and secondary communities, we see that Paul is demanding that the church judge its own matters. Becket was closer to Paul on this than were Luther or Calvin. The church is supposed to be the primary community that judges the whole world, and the angels!¹⁵ The church is also the temple of God, the location of the union of heaven and earth. To willingly submit this living temple of the living God to the hands of identity politics or tertiary community attractional models of corporate success is shameful. We’re supposed to be preparing one another to inherit the kingdom of God, and to be skilled in wisdom and rulership as we practice it among ourselves.¹⁶

To this we can add the book of Revelation and its pictures of God’s rulership shared with his people in a reconciled heaven-on-earth. How can we let the world “taste and see that the Lord is good”¹⁷ if we do not have the ability to reveal this to the world together?

At no point in Scripture is the intention of the people of God to be a secondary community subjected or subjugated to the rulers of the world. Of course the objection is Romans 13. Paul was well aware of his place in the Roman Empire and how Jews had been treated by the Gentiles over the past many centuries. Paul, like Jeremiah,¹⁸ knows how to be shrewd and wise and maintain an identity amidst hostile overlords. The command is to live among the world, to submit to authorities, to a point. But this is temporary while we live in exile. The good news of the Bible is exodus and the victory of God, not accommodation and appeasement of human powers. Jeremiah 29 is not a

¹⁰ Luke 14:26. “Hate” here refers to a disregard and devaluation in light of a stronger loyalty.

¹¹ Luke 8:19–21.

¹² Luke 12:49–53, Matthew 10:34–39.

¹³ Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11.

¹⁴ Philippians 3:1–11.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 6:1–6.

¹⁶ Ephesians 4.

¹⁷ Psalm 34:8.

¹⁸ Jeremiah 29:4–8.

passage, if read as a whole, that teaches that the people of God *ought* to be secondary or tertiary. It is temporary. Even while the Jews were to seek the good of Babylon while they lived there, Jeremiah goes on to explain that Babylon will be judged and destroyed. Seeking the common good of Babylon, or Rome, or the United States, or any other primary community is a survival and ingratiating tactic, not a kingdom ideal.

It is significant that the fundamental social divisions held up by the Bible are the people of God vs. the world. We can trace this either-or primary community identity from Genesis 4 with Cain vs. Abel and then Cain vs. Seth. We see Abraham as the patriarch, the founding father of Israel as one called out of a primary community with the promise that one would form from him. He would become a great nation. The Psalms and Proverbs continually uphold the distinction between the righteous and wicked, the wise and the fool. We see the pinnacle of this Israel vs. the world with the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon to witness the glory and wisdom of the people of God. And we see this amplified in the story of the Magi coming to Jesus. Foreign court astrologers come to pay homage to the king of the Jews. Jesus recomposes these lines and genealogy, opening the way to include Gentiles among descendants of Abraham, but he in no way is overturning this fundamental world division of Cain vs. Seth, only drawing new lines on the family tree based not on blood but faith and obedience. The book of Revelation even concludes with this distinction in its final chapter. There are those who are inside the heavenly Jerusalem, and those “dogs” who are outside of it. From Genesis 4 through Revelation 22 the Bible upholds a grand vision of warring primary communities. The question, then, is “whose side are you on?” Those who willingly uphold or justify the church as either a secondary or tertiary community, and who seek to make churches adapt Christianity to fit these contexts, seem to have misunderstood the basic political science of Scripture: “No one can serve two masters.”

Conclusion

So, the church is supposed to be a primary community according to Scripture. Sometimes it has to be this in exile. I believe the church has a choice today: continue to accommodate, acknowledge its status as tertiary, transition itself by obedience to the “necessities” of the current situation, and pursue adding value to personal spiritual lives; or choose exile as a primary community. On the one side lies the promise of access to power and social influence. The thought of making an impact on the wider culture in the name of Jesus inspires Christians to get socially active, and as they become socially active in secondary communities they learn how compromise is the route to gain some ground.

God in Jesus Christ founded a renewed primary community that he called “the church” or *ekklesia*. The founding father and founding “myth” of this primary community is summarized by Paul in Philippians 2. Jesus, although he was God, did not aim to become godlike¹⁹ but to be a servant. He didn’t come to “make an impact,” but to have his own native community impact his flesh with nails and spear. Jesus’ death shows us what happens when the people of God

¹⁹ In opposition to the temptation of the serpent in Genesis 3:5.

accommodate to the primary community. Indeed, like Luther, the Jews sought out Roman intervention in ecclesiastical court matters, thereby revealing their submission and transformation into a secondary community.²⁰ The people of God are not founded on political compromise and other tactics of this all too human game of power, but on the giving up of primary and secondary identities.²¹

²⁰ “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

²¹ Phil 3:7–8, Luke 9:23–26.