IS CLOSE GOOD ENOUGH?
AN ANSWER TO WAYNE GRUDEM
AND AN INQUEST INTO
THE IDENTITY, PURITY AND UNITY OF THE CHURCH

A Research Paper For:
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I. Introduction

The title to this research is a deliberate take off on certain remarks written by Dr. Wayne Grudem in a chapter concerning “The Nature of the Church” in his volume Biblical Doctrine, published by Zondervan in 1999 with the editorship of Jeff Purswell.¹ Under the subheading, “The ‘Marks’ of the church (Distinguishing Characteristics),” Dr. Grudem frankly affirms, “There are true churches and false churches.”² He observes that a vital question during the Reformation era was, “How can we recognize a true church?” To answer this, believers had to “decide what were the marks of a true church, the distinguishing characteristics that lead us to recognize it as a true church.”³

Dr. Grudem explains how Luther and Calvin had reduced the characteristics of the true church to two essential marks: First, was the “right preaching of the Word.”⁴ According to Dr. Grudem, this test would imply that Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses today do not constitute a true church because of their false Christologies and false soteriologies.⁵ Second, was the “right administration of the sacraments” (i.e., baptism and Lord’s Supper).⁶

² Ibid., 369
³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid. Grudem goes so far as to say that those who believe the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses “simply will not be saved.” He does not elaborate, however, on a list of other possible aberrant religious groups whose beliefs similarly could condemn the soul.
⁵ Ibid., 370.
⁶ Ibid.
But these two tests lead the Protestant immediately to ask, What about the Roman Catholic Church today? Is it a true church? Dr. Grudem replies that Catholics are “far too diverse” in their beliefs to make any blanket statement one way or the other.\(^1\) He holds further that if a certain Catholic parish were to subscribe to *sola fide*, then “yes.” But, if it does not subscribe to this tenet, then “no.” He explains that despite our differences with Catholics,

> …it would seem that such a church would have a close enough approximation to the two marks of the church that it would be hard to deny that it is in fact a true church. It would seem to be a genuine congregation of believers in which the gospel is taught (though not purely) and the sacraments are administered more rightly than wrongly.\(^2\)

At the bottom of the same page Dr. Grudem posits the existence of “more pure and less pure churches.”\(^3\) It seems then that for Dr. Grudem it is a matter of gradations or degrees, some kind of sliding scale of acceptability before God.

Yet the question for this study is, to what extent can the sacraments be administered “wrongly” before they cease being a vehicle for God’s grace? Contrary to Dr. Grudem’s own cherished beliefs (which he ably defends in this volume), Catholics practice affusion rather than immersion for baptism, and the baptizing of babies with a view to “baptismal regeneration” in the very sense in which Grudem elsewhere decries the practice.\(^4\) More to the point, Catholics do not even allow congregants to partake of one element of the Supper, the fruit of the vine. In their observance of the Lord’s Supper, Catholics still believe in the unbiblical doctrine of transubstantiation. In what way,

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\(^1\) Ibid.
\(^2\) Ibid., 371.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^4\) Grudem, 379-384.
therefore, is their administering of this sacrament done “more rightly than wrongly?”

What are the essential criteria?

Dr. Grudem seems to take a very pluralistic and wide angle approach indeed!

For him, it appears that the *sine qua non* for being in grace and for identifying a true church is simply concurrence with the Protestant doctrine of *sola fide* or “justification by faith alone”—regardless of any other aberrant belief or practice.

Is it really as simple as Dr. Grudem here outlines the issue? Of other possible vital areas of Biblical doctrine, why make *sola fide* the sole and essential test? Klaus Nürnberger asks our question in his own way,

But now comes the trap. If justification was nothing but a doctrine, arbitrarily placed by Protestants at the center of the theological system and elevated to the sole criterion of acceptance, one could ask, why this doctrine and not the doctrine of papal authority?¹

Nürnberger goes on to show how “when *justificatio sola gratia sola fide* became a doctrine, endless quarrels about the correct formulation of the gospel ensued.”² Although we can be sure that Grudem does not believe the doctrine to have been “arbitrarily placed by Protestants at the center,” we would ask him just exactly how we must understand the doctrine of *sola fide*, which he sees as the essence of the gospel. How avoid such “endless quarrels?” It appears that Dr. Grudem’s sanguine view is greatly overblown and ignores some crucial areas of concern for ecclesiology and soteriology.

How close is close? Is close good enough? What really constitutes the true church? This is after all Grudem’s cogent line of questioning. We seek simply to refine

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² Ibid., 18.
the answers in light of scriptural teaching that has been overlooked or mishandled in his discussion of it.

Grudem was not the first, of course, to make such an inquest. For instance, William Steuart McBirnie had inquired a number of years ago, “The question is, “How much can today’s church add to or take away from the original belief and practice without being distorted out of the shape that Jesus and the Apostles intended it to have?”¹

We will be asking the same question. In doing so, we will try to accomplish two aims: First, to set forth a thematic analysis of the salient Scriptural doctrines about the church; second, to engage in a polemical but friendly dialogue with Grudem and his discussion of the issues of the identity, purity and unity of the church.

It is here that we define our initial premise and major hermeneutical presupposition. We defend the concept of Sola Scriptura. We hold to the all-sufficiency of the written words of Scripture (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). But we believe that we can put this proposition into practice more consistently, more conscientiously, and more closely than Dr. Grudem does. Grudem himself had provided up front a good definition of this concept:

The sufficiency of Scripture means that Scripture contained all the words of God he intended his people to have at each stage of redemptive history, and that it now contains everything we need God to tell us for salvation, for trusting him perfectly, and for obeying him perfectly.²

²Grudem, 58.
Moreover, he explains that this doctrine (*Sola Scriptura*) means that we do not search for truth in the writings from church history, or in the teaching of the church, or “through all the subjective feelings and impressions that come to our minds from day to day.”¹

But, sadly, he later vitiates this premise. For, in dealing with the gift of prophecy and concluding that it probably continues in the church today, Grudem confesses (as is said in the vernacular) that God may “just lay it on his heart from time to time!”² Like some other Baptists, Grudem pays lip service to the noble principle, but in the end adopts another belief which effectively nullifies this all-important starting point!

It is unfortunate that Dr. Grudem allows his non-cessationist view of prophecy to weaken his commitment to the Bible alone. But, sadly, he is not alone in this tendency. H. Leon McBeth, Professor of Church History at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, reminds us that early on in the Baptist movement there had arisen an intense debate about the use of the Bible plus an “inner light” (as the Quakers also believed).³ Even John Smyth, whom McBeth describes as the “founder of the earliest Baptist church,” said later on that a Christian “needeth not the outward scriptures creatures or ordinances of the church.”⁴ In context, it was the idea of the “directly inner light illumination of the Spirit.”⁵

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¹ Ibid., 59.
² Ibid., 412-415. For all his protests to the contrary, Grudem’s view of the continued prophetic gift amounts to at least this: We can know God’s will “through [at least some of] the subjective feelings and impressions that come to our minds from day to day.” In contrast, our research seeks to eliminate as far as possible every vestige of the subjective element in exegeting the texts and in determining the contours of the true church.
⁴ Ibid., 91.
⁵ Ibid.
However, in later traditions McBeth mentions that Baptists would eventually codify their belief that the Bible alone is sufficient, including both the Old and New Testaments.\(^1\) Again the problem is, not that Grudem rejects the Reformed doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, but that his other view opens the door for an extra-Scriptural authority not subject to the constraints of careful Biblical interpretation.

We here reiterate the necessity for determining divine authority in our understanding of the church. Surprisingly, even a Marxist theologian of the ilk of Jürgen Moltmann is aware of this basic obligation. He writes,

> If the church sees itself as an institution established by Jesus, and the Christian religion as a religion devised by a particular individual, then it was called into life by a legal act. At the same time it was given an unalterable testamentary definition. This is fixed by the founder’s intention and determines the form of the institution’s administration. The church then does not derive from the free ‘coming together of individuals who have been born again.’ It lives according to the intention of its founder, who has preceded it, established it and determined its form.\(^2\)

Though Moltmann may not have fully appreciated the implications of this statement, by it we are still reminded of Heb 9:15-17 which explains Christ’s authoritative rule over the redeemed by means of his New Testament. It is imperative that we seek to implement the plan for the church just as Christ would have it in Scripture.

The case can be made for the existence of a singular and uniform rule of faith and practice during the lifetime of the apostles of Jesus in the First Century church. We are exhorted to “contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).\(^3\) We are admonished to learn “not to exceed what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6). Warnings are

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\(^1\) Ibid., 91-92.


\(^3\) All Scripture references are taken from the NASB of 1977, unless otherwise noted.
sounded against preaching, believing or practicing “another gospel” (Gal. 1:8-9). The very apostles who had accompanied Christ in his earthly ministry were promised to remember all things told them by Jesus and to be guided into all truth by a miraculous gift of the Spirit (Jno. 14:26; 16:13). “Therefore, despite differences of detail, there can exist not only the one faith but beyond that common rules and even ordinances (1 Cor. 7:17; 11:16; 16:1), laid down and enforced by the authority of the apostle.”\(^1\) It is in quest of this one rule of faith for the church that we conduct this inquiry and debate with Dr. Grudem.

But it is not sufficient simply to say that Bible authority is needed to justify our ecclesiology and praxis. How exactly is such authority established for any given issue? Our cursory answer here is that, given the general nature of Scripture,\(^2\) we must carefully view the specifics of how apostolic Christianity was practiced as discerned from the New Testament documents themselves.

Popular author, F. LaGaard Smith, put it this way: “It’s no good acknowledging the revelation itself if we refuse to acknowledge the specific avenues by which that revelation comes to us.”\(^3\) He mentioned these “specific avenues” in context of a summation of his previous discussion of the need to establish Bible authority for our practices on the basis of the Biblical imperatives, Biblical examples (precedents), and logical inferences.


\(^{2}\text{As a propositional and timeless revelation of God, verbally and plenary inspired, authoritative, complete, all-sufficient, perspicuous, final and exclusive.}\)

\(^{3}\text{F. LaGaard Smith, The Cultural Church: Winds of Change and the Call for a “New Hermeneutic” (Nashville: 20\textsuperscript{th} Century Christian, 1992), 44.}\)
Technically, however, all we have today are logical inferences, since the books of the Bible were not specifically addressed to any of us now living. We infer that certain imperatives in Scripture and certain precedents are also applicable to us today. We draw this inference on the basis of: 1) the nature of the Bible itself, 2) along with a proper differentiation between Biblical dispensations and covenants (cf. Gal. 3:23-25; 2 Cor. 3:6-16; Heb. 7:12). We are then better able to determine which imperatives and precedents are applicable to us today, and which are not.

For instance, the command to build an ark is not applicable to us today (Gen. 6:14). The command to “go and make disciples” is (Matt. 28:18-20). The example of

1 After discovering that God’s revelation of his will for us has been made, as Smith says, through “specific avenues” (viz., 1. imperatives or explicit commands, 2. approved examples or binding precedents, and 3. logical inferences), we then realize that the Biblical imperatives themselves are of two basic types: generic and specific. For instance, the command to “make disciples of all nations” in Matthew 28:18-20 is generic with respect to the mode of going to the nations. On the other hand, when Christ took bread while instituting the Lord’s Supper in Luke 22:19, he said, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” “Do this” is a specific command with respect to the element to be used, i.e., unleavened bread (cf. Luke 22:1; 1 Cor. 5:8; 10:17).

Concerning apostolic examples, these can only become binding precedents insofar as the apostles were acting under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, as they had been promised (cf. Jno. 14:26). In such instances, the words of Jesus in Luke 10:16 would apply, “The one who listens to you listens to Me, and the one who rejects you rejects Me...” along with the admonition of Paul in Philippians 4:9, “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things...” We deduce, however, that the apostles were not guided by inspiration in every account of action recorded about them, since they were not promised perfectionism. Certain tests need be applied to specific examples to determine their candidacy status as possible precedents. First, if there had been an antecedent imperative which the specific example shows them to be complying with, the account of action may be binding. Second, if their actions do not contradict other clear principles or commandments (as in the case of Peter mentioned in Galatians 2:11-15), they may be binding. Third, if more than one apostle practiced the same thing and especially if it were practiced in more than one locale, the example would appear binding as a precedent by which we too establish divine authority for the same practice today. A combination of these three tests would yield virtual certainty as to the character of the account of action as a precedent.

The question of logical inferences has provoked much discussion in the Church throughout the ages. Suffice it to say at this point that without inferences, nothing in Scripture could be normative for us living now, 2000 years removed from the days of the apostles. We must make a correct deduction, of course, but we cannot avoid using some type of deduction. Even those who denigrate in principle the drawing of deductions themselves draw their own, since no explicit statement in Scripture ever denounces the drawing of deductions.
meeting in an upper room is not binding today (cf. Mark 14:15; Acts 20:8).\(^1\) The example of the Lord’s Supper on the First Day of the week is (Acts 20:7).\(^2\)

The desire to go back to the precedents and follow them more closely has lain at the core of any and all restoration pleas throughout church history. The current restoration plea (which this research will defend) is not the cause but the byproduct of this particular hermeneutic and understanding of the Scriptures. When and if contemporary Christendom is compared and contrasted with the New Testament norm, something very much like—if not identical with—this hermeneutic will naturally follow.

We again ask Dr. Grudem, How close is close? Is close good enough? If the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is not a close enough approximation to the true church to qualify, then what about, \textit{inter alia}, the Seventh Day Adventists, or Christian Scientists, or the World Wide Church of God (Armstrong)? Dr. Grudem is not in principle opposed to drawing lines. The question is, just \textit{where} are the lines to be drawn? Or better yet, where does Scripture itself draw the line? Is it merely at the point of acceptance of the doctrine of \textit{sola fide} from a Reformational understanding?

Why be confined merely to two “marks” of the true church? Why not ferret out of the total New Testament teaching \textit{other} marks or characteristics? Why not find out if administering the “sacraments” more or less wrongly may itself be a form of rebellion and disobedience? And how may we determine when the word has been rightly proclaimed? To these questions we turn specifically in the analysis that follows.

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\(^1\) See the above explanation for deciding which accounts of action are binding in nature. See also the old, but as yet unsurpassed, little monograph by Thomas B. Warren, \textit{When Is An “Example” Binding?} (Jonesboro, Ark.: National Christian Press, 1975). With regard to the upper room, simply observing that this was not the only kind of place where the disciples gathered should be sufficient to refute the notion that the above-mentioned instances are not exclusively binding, cf. Acts 2:46; 12:12; 13:14, 44; 16:13.

\(^2\) In contrast to the mere \textit{incidental} detail of the upper room, the case can be made that the example of meeting on the first day of the week at Troas “to break bread” (in Acts 20:7) is binding and represents an \textit{essential} element in our compliance with this imperative (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18, 33; 16:1-2).
II. The Identity of the Church

Definitions. S. M Hutchens declares that the “decisive ecumenical question” is “what is the church?”¹ This study seeks to explore comprehensively that decisive question. Of course, the basic meaning of the term translated “church” in the standard English versions (from the Greek εκκλησία) is an “assembly, assemblage, gathering, meeting...of the Christian church or congregation.”²

Secular usage. First understood according to its etymology and secular usage, εκκλησία signified a “called-out” assembly. “The original calling out is simply the calling of the citizens of a Greek town out of their homes by the herald’s trumpet to summon them to the assembly...”³ Its etymology is suggestive, though not decisive, for grasping the inherent idea in the εκκλησία as used in Hellenistic Greek. It was “derived via ek-kaleo, which was used for the summons to the army to assemble, from kaleo, to call...and denotes in the usage of antiquity the popular assembly of the competent full citizens of the polis, city.”⁴ J. C. Lambert adds,

Throughout the Gr world and right down to NT times (cf Acts 19:39), ekklēsia was the designation of the regular assembly of the whole body of citizens in a free city-state, ‘called out’ (Gr ek, ‘out,’ and kalein, ‘to call’) by the herald for the discussion and decision of public business.⁵

In the Old Testament. Its Biblical usage is of more relevance. First, its Old Testament background is of primary importance in understanding the later New Testament.

Testament concept. It was a common word in classical Greek employed by the Septuagint translators for rendering the Hebrew qahal, at least for Deuteronomy and subsequent books. Clowney concurs with Hort and adds that, “qahal views the congregation as actually assembled with…” while the Hebrew “’edhah refers to the congregation whether assembled or not.” Hort points out how that Numbers chapter 10 narrates a calling out to assembly by a herald’s trumpet in a similar way to the Greek usage.

Interestingly, εκκλεσία does not translate the latter term in the LXX. While συναγωγή (synagogue) could represent both ideas in the Hebrew, εκκλεσία was used only in the specific sense of a gathered assembly. The essential idea inhering in the term, therefore, is of a group called out into a public place of meeting. Hort reminds us that, “there is no foundation for the widely spread notion that εκκλεσία means a people or a number of individual men called out of the world of mankind.” The basic meaning, then, is “assembly.”

In the New Testament. Lambert, quotes Lindsay (Church and Ministry in the Early Cents.) to the effect that, the pre-Christian history of the word had a direct bearing upon its Christian meaning, for the ekklēsia of the NT is a ‘theocratic democracy’ (Lindsay, 4), a society of those who are free, but are always conscious that their freedom springs from obedience to their King.

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2 Hort says that it was not used in the earlier books of the Pentateuch, in Hort, 3-4.
4 Hort, 5-6.
5 NIDNT, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen.
6 Hort, 3. Obviously, the concept of a “calling” or being “called out of the world” into consecrated Christian service is Biblical (cf. 2 Thess. 2:14), but it is doubtful that this nuance was actually conveyed by the term εκκλεσία itself.
7 ISBE, “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.
This concept of a “theocratic democracy” will later be invoked in this paper under the heading of “church polity.” But, here it is noted that the word’s association with the gathering of free citizens is not entirely absent even its theological usage in the New Testament. To be sure, Christ and his apostles will give the term a more technical, spiritual significance. But, the original connotation is not lost even when it is used in its newer and more technical sense of a Christian assembly.

P. S. Minear elaborates its meaning:

In the NT. a. An assembly of persons which has been summoned for a particular purpose….b. A community of believers which has been gathered from the inhabitants of a specific area…. c. A community gathered by God through Christ….d. The eschatological people of God.¹

With but two exceptions, the word is not found in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 16:18; 18:17).² Yet this paucity of usage was accurate for the time period. The church was not yet established during Christ’s earthly ministry, as will be demonstrated below.

The term is used properly “only for those fellowships which come into being after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus” (cf. O. Cullmann, The Early Church, 1956, 118 ff.).”³ Coenen continues,

In all probability Jesus himself called together the Twelve, but did not found the ekklesia as such in his own lifetime, not even through the institution of the Lord’s Supper…This by itself would not settle the question whether he intended the church to come into being.⁴

It is helpful to distinguish between “two distinct senses” (numerical in nature) in which the term is used in the New Testament. First, εκκλησία bears the local sense “to denote the body of Christians in a particular place or district, as in Jerus (5 11; 8 1), in

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¹In Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, ed. 1962, s.v. “Church, Idea of,” by P. S. Minear.
²NIDNT, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
Antioch, etc.”

Second, it has a universal sense. As Coenen says, “It is one throughout the whole world and yet is at the same time fully present in every individual assembly.”

Oddly, D. W. B. Robinson denies that εκκλησία has the universal sense in the New Testament, but is apparently mistaken about this in light of passages as 1 Corinthians 10:32, Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 3:10, and others.

Perhaps a little more controversial is Lambert’s postulation of a third sense, the “ideal sense” of εκκλησία. He argues this especially for Paul’s writings, in which it means the body of which Christ is head, the bride of Christ (especially in Ephesians). But he adds, “This church clearly is not the actual church as we know it on earth, with its divisions, its blemishes, its shortcomings in faith and love and obedience.”

To this writer, such a putative third sense of the term is problematic. It appears that Lambert confuses this notion with the universal usage of the term itself. For, most often in Scripture when employed in its universal sense, it is also understood ideally (cf. Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 10:32). So, in effect, both the “ideal” and “universal” sense are one and the same.

Yet, with a glance back to Grudem’s polemics on the subject and in anticipation of our subsequent treatment, we must add that according to Lambert’s definition, “the actual church as we know it on earth” today must therefore not be the true church! The church today needs correction! It needs to strive toward the ideal. And that ideal is not an unattainable goal. To this writer one could just as well use “pattern” or “model”

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1 ISBE, s.v. “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.
2 NIDNT, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen.
4 Lambert agrees. After mentioning the local sense, he follows with, “then in a wider and what may be called a universal sense, to denote the sum total of existing local churches (9 31 RV), which are thus regarded as forming one body.” In ISBE, s.v. “Church,” by J. C. Lambert. (He lists later 1 Cor. 10:32 and 12:28 as instances of the universal sense.)
5 ISBE, s.v. “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.
instead of “ideal” to describe the goal for the church. Lambert’s putative ideal sense of εκκλεσία implies a standard or norm by which the church is constantly reformed.

After mentioning the universal and local senses of the term, the well-respected A. H. Strong demurs, “Besides these two significations of the term ‘church,’ there are properly in the New Testament no others.”¹ He goes on to show that with respect to the various congregations described in a given area (cf. Acts 9:31), the term denotes:

simply the body of independent local churches existing in a given region or at a given epoch. But since there is no evidence that these churches were bound together in any outward organization, this use of the term εκκλεσία cannot be regarded as adding any new sense to those of the ‘the universal church’ and the local church’ already mentioned.²

Origin of the NT Church (and its Relation to Israel). First, we will note the plan and circumstances of the church’s establishment. If space permitted, the Old Testament prophetic background would here be helpful in understanding the New Testament’s description of its founding (cf. Isa. 2:2-3; Micah 4:1-2; Daniel 2:31-35, relative to the Kingdom of God concept; see the subsequent discussion). Certainly, the many predictions of the Coming Kingdom would also be relevant in an extended development of the theme (in John’s and Jesus’ Ministry, cf. Matthew 3:1-2, “the kingdom of heaven is at hand;” Luke 10:9, “the kingdom of God has come near to you”).

The church was built by Christ and upon Christ. This is clear in Matthew 16:18, the locus classicus on the establishment of the church and the subject of countless controversies. With respect to its promised founding in Matthew 16:18, Leon Morris mentions, “It is possible to understand the Greek to mean that the rock is not so much the man as the confession he has just made. It is on the basis of confessing Jesus as the

¹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology (Valley Forge, P.A.: Judson Press, 1907), 891.
² Ibid.
Christ, the Son of God, that the church is to be built.”¹ (In a footnote, Morris points out that even if there had been an original Aramaic text, the Greek still found it necessary to render the sense in context by two different Greek words.)

From the above considerations, certain valid inferences may be drawn re: the chronology of the church’s establishment. Its founding is yet spoken of as being in the future in the following passages: Matthew 3:1-2, Luke 10:9 (c. A.D. 27), Matthew 6:9-10 (A.D. 28), Matt. 16:18-19, cf. Mark 9:1 (A.D. 29), and in Acts 1:8 (A.D. 30). The church is later represented as a present reality in such passages as these: Acts 2:47² (A.D. 30); 8:1 (A.D. 37), Col. 1:13³ (A.D. 60), 1 Tim. 3:15 (A.D. 65) and Rev. 2:1 (A.D. 96).

From these and other considerations, it is clear that the church was not yet established in Jesus’ lifetime, despite his promise to build it in the future (Matt. 16:18). Coenen writes,

…there is a good deal in favour of the view that the fut. refers to the period after Jesus’ death, and very little in favour of idea of the foundation of a church before this. It is clearly impossible to interpret this saying in Matt. as meaning that Jesus spoke of a church coming into being at that moment.⁴

The best case to be made is for the church’s beginning point in time on Pentecost in Jerusalem (Mark 9:1; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:47). This requires a set of inferences, but inferences which seemed justified when the pertinent passages are viewed in context. For

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² This text concludes the narrative about the persons redeemed on Pentecost by saying they were, “praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” At this point, the *Textus Receptus* includes the words ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ. This was a gloss that may have crept into the text by a scribe who felt it was needed to complete the sense. Yet, the actual wording ἐπὶ τὸ σότο probably is sufficient as a technical phrase, as used in classical Greek and the LXX, to suggest the same idea, i.e., “in church fellowship.” See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. 3rd Ed. (United Bible Societies, 1971), 304-305.
³ This evidence depends on the identification of the “church” with the “kingdom.” See discussion below.
⁴ *NIDNT*, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen.
instance, in Mark 9:1 Christ declared that, in that very generation, the kingdom of God would “come with power.” Likewise, in Acts 1:5-8, Christ said that the anticipated kingdom (and its associated power) would come “not many days from now” (v. 5) “with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8). Obviously, such power with the Spirit was soon outpoured on the apostles on that first Pentecost following the resurrection (Acts 2:1-21). Thus, something wonderfully new was introduced into the world on that stupendous day, a New-Covenant people to whom Christ had referred in expectation as “my church!”

The church was a new entity, yet it nevertheless retained a special relation to Israel (cf. Rom. 2:28-29; 11:5-24). Christ had envisioned both Jew and Gentile as one people under the New Covenant (Jno. 10:16; Eph. 2:11-16). Clowney’s monograph contains an excellent summary of the data showing how the gentiles are now the people (laos) of God as corresponding to the Jewish assembly of old.¹ On the other hand, his discussion also establishes that, while the church is the New Covenant people of God, it is not coeval with the people of God under the Old Covenant.² Grudem argues that “the church includes both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers in one church or one body of Christ.”³ But this is an overstatement to which the evidence does not really attest. Though conceptually connected in some aspects, the New Testament εκκλεσία and the Old Testament people of God are not really the same, since the church of Christ did not come into being until Pentecost after the resurrection.

Composition of the Church. By definition, the “church” in the proper New Testament sense is made up only of the redeemed. This is not really a radical concept as it may first appear. Even Luther and Calvin had recognized no salvation outside the

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¹ Clowney, Doctrine of the Church, 16.
² Ibid.
³ Grudem, 168.
This recognition is but a simple New Testament *tautology*. It is true analytically, given the totality of New Testament ecclesiology.

The “church” is coextensive with “all the saved.” “All the saved” are the “church” (Acts 2:47, *TR*; Eph. 2:16, cf. 1:21-22; 5:23-25; Acts 20:28). Shillington elucidates in,

> moreover, membership in the ekklesia was not an option about which the individual could decide one way or the other. Membership was a logical necessity, and the new disciple was simply baptized into the body of Christ as the logical sequel to conversion (I Cor. 12:13).

Thus, by definition, all the redeemed of God under the New Covenant are “the church.”

Who are the redeemed? This question is the crux for our understanding of the contours of the church, and is perhaps the most decisive issue of this study. Yet, it is not within the purview of this paper to expound extensively upon soteriology. Suffice it to say that the limits, boundaries or contours of the church are coextensive with the margin of the number of the redeemed. The redeemed are those who have truly complied with the conditions of pardon as set forth under the New Testament. Only those who have so complied with such conditions are rightly called members of the church (Christians).

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3 Given time and space, we would attempt to demonstrate biblically that, while Christ’s sacrifice is the *ground* for our redemption (Eph. 1:7), the *means* for reaching that redemption and for accepting God’s gracious gift of salvation is compliance with the *conditions* of pardon, both faith and obedience. (For the necessity of faith, see *inter alia* Jno. 8:24, Rom. 5:1-2 and 10:9-10; for the condition of repentance, see Acts 11:18, 17:30; for the condition of confession of Christ’s deity, see Rom. 10:9-10; and for the condition and therefore essentiality of baptism, see *Acts* 2:37-38, 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Pet. 3:21.)

*On the so-called “causal” versus instrumental use of *eि* in Acts 2:38, see the celebrated exchange between J. R. Mantey and Ralph Marcus. First, Mantey defended the alleged causal use in J. R. Mantey, “The Causal Use of *Eis* in the New Testament,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (March 1951):45-48; second, Marcus refuted the argument in Ralph Marcus, “On the Causal *Eis*,” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (June 1951): 129-130; third, Mantey responded to Marcus’ refutation in J. R. Mantey, “On Causal *Eis* Again,” in *JBL* (70 1951):309-311; and finally Marcus rebutted Mantey in Ralph Marcus, “The Elusive Causal *Eis*,” in *JBL* (71 1952):43-44. Marcus carried the point that *eि* must therefore be instrumental in Acts 2:38. Thus, Peter in effect was putting down two conditions “for” (or “in order to obtain”) the remission of sins, repentance and baptism.*
On the culminating act of compliance within the plan of pardon, Lambert clarifies that baptism “from the first was the condition of entrance into the apostolic church and the seal of membership in it.”\textsuperscript{1} One could almost say that this fact has long been a matter of common knowledge among church historians. Even Hiscox’s, \textit{Standard Manual for Baptist Churches} concedes,

It is most likely in the Apostolic age when there was but ‘one Lord, one faith, and one baptism,’ and no differing denominations existed, the baptism of a convert by that very act constituted him a member of the church, and at once endowed him with all the rights and privileges of full membership. In that sense, ‘baptism was the door into the church.’ Now, it is different…and while they cannot become members without baptism, yet it is the vote of the body which admits them to its fellowship on receiving baptism.\textsuperscript{2}

Obviously, the point about baptism and its relation to church membership is still hotly contested.\textsuperscript{3} Yet as observed earlier, scholarship has long been aware of this relation. For example, “baptism in water continued to be the visible sign by which those who believed the gospel, repented of their sins, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord were publicly incorporated into the Spirit-baptized fellowship of the new people of God.”\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{1}ISBE, s.v. “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.
\textsuperscript{3}Grudem, 384. Here Grudem denies that baptism is necessary for salvation. He admits that it is a command of Christ, but posits it to be an unessential command for salvation. In a moment of unusual weakness in his argument, he attempts to blunt the force of Mark 16:16 by saying that the verse mentions “nothing about those who believe and \textit{are not} baptized.” But, his logic is fallacious. The verse sets forth two conditions for salvation, both belief and baptism. Obviously, the one who does not believe will not be baptized. Thus, it would have been unnecessary for Christ to have stated the blatantly obvious in the second clause. We agree with Grudem in one respect when he writes, “The verse is simply talking about general cases without making a pedantic qualification for the unusual case of someone who believes and is not baptized,” (384). But, Grudem seems confused, for he himself is the one who had just made such a “pedantic qualification.” Incidentally, does Grudem here implicitly concede that the general rule for salvation involves both belief and baptism?
F. F. Bruce continues, “the idea of an unbaptized believer does not seem to be entertained in the New Testament.”

To reiterate, the church is coextensive with the number of the redeemed (saved). The saved are those who have believed and complied with the conditions of Christ’s grace, including water baptism. Baptism is the point at which one enters the fellowship (cf. Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 12:13). As G. R. Beasley-Murray shows in his magisterial study of baptism (according to passages like Acts 22:16), from the earliest, baptism was the point of final submission to Jesus as Lord and King. One calls on the name of the Lord in the act of baptism. He continues:

...baptism as a means of prayer for acceptance with God and for full salvation from God, an ‘instrument of surrender’ of a man formerly at enmity with God but who has learned of the great Reconciliation, lays down his arms in total capitulation and enters into peace.

In contrast to the allegation often hurled at the doctrine of the necessity of baptism, it is hardly a work of merit! Baptism is really the supreme act of submission through faith (though baptism is passive—one is baptized by another). “The loss of this element in baptism is grievous and it needs to be regained if baptism is to mean to the modern Church what it did to the earliest Church.”

Thus, the question of baptism (and the ordo salutis) is of fundamental importance in deciding the actual composition of the church. We conclude that only those who have from the heart believed in Christ (Rom. 6:17-18), repented of sins (Acts 3:19), confessed

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1 Ibid.
3 Ibid., 102.
4 As for example, Grudem on pages 381 and 384.
5 Beasely-Murray, *Baptism*, 102. See also his incisive discussion of the steps that need to be taken in order to rectify present problems in Christendom relative to baptism, 393-395,
Christ (Rom. 10:9-10), and been immersed for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38) are by definition members of the true church.

But, do such baptized believers compose the invisible Church or the visible Church? Grudem, true to his Calvinist convictions, makes much ado over this question. Shillington, shows how such a distinction goes back to Augustine in the fifth century. Calvin and Zwingli later took up the idea and developed it more thoroughly in Reformed Theology. “The visible Church, according to Calvin, is merely the externum subsidium fidei, the external means of individual salvation….The only church that really matters is the invisible Church, the number of the elect in heaven.” Shillington describes the twin concepts as “unbiblical ideas” that have simply created confusion. He continues,

> While the ekklesia of Matt. 16 is universal, it is not invisible any more than the Old Testament ekklesia was invisible. Central to the meaning of Matt. 16 is the ekklesia as the goal of the gospel. Whatever else the ekklesia may involve, one thing is clear: the ekklesia is not a means to an end. It is itself that end towards which Jesus is working….Jesus Christ planned the ekklesia as a new humanity standing alongside the old….Membership in the ekklesia was not an optional fringe benefit of the gospel; it was the goal of the gospel.

We would add, these unbiblical ideas also play into the Calvinist concept of redemption and election. The visible vs. invisible church distinction is unhelpful at best, and at worst conveys an unscriptural concept of salvation.

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1 Grudem, 364-365.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Shillington, 328.
6 Because, the Calvinist considers the invisible church to be composed of those who are truly elect by the Sovereign and irrevocable act of God while the visible church is composed of both the elect and the non-elect (the latter of whom may happen to be self-deceived into thinking themselves as elected). See Grudem, 364-365. In one sense, however, this distinction is an innocuous tautology saying nothing more than that those who are saved are the true church, and that the true church are those who are saved, without taking a stand one way or the other on the issue of election, whether conceived in Calvinist or Arminian terms.
Biblical metaphors for the “church” reiterate the point about its actual composition. These would include the following: a. family/house of God (Eph. 2:19; 3:15; 1 Tim. 3:15); b. bride of Christ (Eph. 5:23-32; Rev. 1:21:9); c. branches? (Jno. 15:5); d. olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24); e. field (1 Cor. 3:6-9); f. flock (1 Pet. 5:2; Jno. 10:16); g. building/temple/stones (1 Pet. 2:5; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16); h. priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9); i. body (Eph. 1:22, 23; Col. 1:18, 24); j. kingdom (Matt. 16:19), etc.

The above identification of the kingdom with the church has been disputed. But, scholars have long recognized a close relation between the concepts. For instance, L. Coenen concurs, “From the point of view of the soma-idea, ekklesia and basileia are practically identical.” With reference to Matthew 16:18-19, the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is “employed in a manner which, if it does not make the two expressions church and kingdom perfectly synonymous, at least compels us to regard them as closely correlative and as capable of translation into each other’s terms.” Obviously, the selection of the term “kingdom” places emphasis on the relationship of its citizens to King Jesus. The selection of the term “body” stresses their relationship of the members to Christ the Head. The metaphors are not mutually exclusive. And while the concept of the Kingdom or rule of God may be somewhat wider in New Testament theology than the church only, it seems at least to include the rule of God over his people, the church.

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1This possible metaphor for the church is sometimes misused in an effort to justify denominational distinctions. Grudem says, for example, “Scripture compares the church to branches on a vine…” (366). But the case can be made that the branches are not exactly a metaphor for the church, but for individual followers of Christ (i.e., individual members). See the discussion of Jno. 15:1-16 in R. V. G. Tasker, The Gospel According to St. John. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960, 1976), 174, where he writes, “believers in Jesus are ‘limbs’ of His body, and share in the life which results from the sacrifice of that body on the cross….” Since there is nothing in the text to indicate a cooperate understanding of “branches,” we would say that it is better to leave it as it stands as a mere metaphor for believers or individual members. To see the branches as various denominations of the Church Universal is a stretch beyond the confines of the immediate context in John and an egregious instance of careless “proof-texting.”

2NIDNT, s.v. “Church, Synagogue,” by L. Coenen.

3ISBE, “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.
Resistance to seeing this natural identification of the church and kingdom may simply be a symptom of misunderstanding the nature of the church itself.¹

**Organization and Polity of the Church.** The Church Universal in the New Testament era was under the authority of Christ and his apostles as a kind of “theocratic democracy.”² Now the apostolic office has ceased, and no authority exists for governance in the Church Universal as such, as Ladd explains:

The churches at large were bound together by no ties of organization or appointed officials, but stood under the spiritual authority of the apostles…The apostles were originally appointed by Jesus when he chose twelve to be with him and to share his ministry (Mk. 3:14ff.).…Thereafter, the circle of apostles was closed so far as human appointment was concerned….Once the church was successfully founded, and the apostolic word of interpretation of the meaning of Christ deposited in written form, no further need existed for the continuation of the apostolic office.³

Early church historian Steuart McBirnie, observes that each NT congregation was “autonomous in government.”⁴ Even an historian of the English Bible, David Daniell, notes that in the early church congregations were organized simply.⁵ Later on he speaks glibly of the early “self-governing churches of the New Testament.”⁶ In another words,

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¹At least ten reasons may be adduced in support of making this identification: 1. Both the church and the kingdom are for all the nations, Jews and Gentiles (Dan. 7:13-14; Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 2:12-22; Isa. 2:2) 2. Neither the church nor the kingdom can be destroyed (Dan. 3:44; Lk. 1:33; Matt. 16:18; Heb. 12:23, 28). 3. Both the church and the kingdom are to be delivered up to God (1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 5:27; 1 Thess. 4:17). 4. Both the church and the King (Christ) are eternal (Eph. 3:10-11; 1 Tim. 1:17). 5. Both the church and the kingdom were made possible by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28; Col. 1:13-14). 6. The items of worship in both are the same (e.g., the Lord’s Supper, Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 11:26-29). 7. The time and circumstances for the establishment of the church and the kingdom coincide (Mark 9:1; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4, 38,41,47). 8. The requirements for membership in both the church and the kingdom are identical, i.e., by means of the water and the Spirit (John 3:5; Acts 2:38; 47; 1 Cor. 12:13). 9. The Bible mentions the church and the kingdom synonymously (Matt. 16:18-19; Heb. 12:23, 28). 10. Both the church and the kingdom are ruled by Christ as the head and king (Col. 1:18, 24; 1 Tim. 6:14-15; 1 Cor. 15:24-25).

²Lindsay, as cited in *ISBE*, “Church,” by J. C. Lambert.


⁶Ibid., 413.
we could say that this characteristic of the early church is fairly well common knowledge and is little contested among those who study the ecclesiastical history!

Although every local congregation was autonomous and independent from the rest in terms of polity, each was nevertheless organized internally along the following lines: Each well developed congregation in the New Testament served under the leadership of a college of elders (presbuteroi).\(^1\) Church historian Everett Ferguson avers, the college or board of “elders” was always a plurality for each congregation, without exception.\(^2\) Von Campenhausen joins in with, “Luke plainly regards a board of elders as part of the normal equipment of a Christian congregation.”\(^3\)

Each congregation was autonomous in terms of church polity. D. W. B. Robinson points out that “there was no organizational link between Paul’s churches, though there were natural affinities between churches in the same province (Col. Iv.15,15: 1 Thes. Iv. 10).”\(^4\) Moreover, in Robinson’s analysis of the New Testament arrangement, “no church has superiority over any other….”\(^5\) In a study specifically about Church Government, E. J. Forrester finds that, “while each local church, according to the NT, is independent of every other in the sense that no other has jurisdiction over it, yet coöperative relations were entered into by NT churches.”\(^6\)

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\(^1\)The case can be made for identifying the presbuteroi with the “bishops” (episkopoi) and with the “pastors” as interchangeable terminology for one and the same office or function within each local assembly (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5 passim; Acts 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1-2). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23), and Titus was to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).


\(^4\)NDB, s.v. “Church,” by Robinson.

\(^5\)Ibid.

It seems beyond any serious question that the early church was characterized by autonomous congregations not organically connected to one another. With the exception of the apostolic office (limited and temporary), there is no evidence for the continuance of any office for the purpose of exercising an inter-congregational authority among a plurality of churches. It has long been recognized that an absence of evidence is, in this case, an evidence of its absence.

This recognition leads to the invocation of an important hermeneutical issue: in the absence of Biblical authority for forming an inter-congregational organization, we would be ill-advised to create such an arrangement today. The formation of such ecclesiastical authorities has itself been the source of endless controversy and even schism in the Body.

As an example of such schism, witness the struggle of the English Separatists of the 16th and 17th centuries over the issue of the silence of Scripture about such features. “The difficulty came in deciding on the lawfulness of religious behaviour and belief that were not mentioned in the Bible. If something wasn’t mentioned, did that mean God had no view on it? Or if it wasn’t mentioned, did that mean that God did not approve of it?”1 Nicolson continues with, “any ceremonies that were not explicitly authorized by scripture” the separatists considered “unlawful.” He mentions specifically, *inter alia*, “fasting, holy days, kneeling at communion, most church officials (certainly bishops and archbishops), the baptizing of infants….”2

Nicolson’s description of the Separatists vision of authority makes fascinating reading: “Listen to the words of the Bible and you will be saved. Nothing else is

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2 Ibid.
necessary. It is that singularity of conviction which drove the Puritan and pilgrim experience.”

This paper cares no brief in particular for the Puritans and pilgrims. These groups and their historic aspirations are mentioned simply as illustrations of the general principle of what can occur when the Bible alone is adopted on a consistent basis. They were a living example of the struggle to realize the noble dream of *Sola Scriptura* with its corollary of the authority of silence.

Again, in connection with the English Bible, Nicolson speaks of Tyndale’s struggle with certain translation issues, as with *presbyteros*, not a “priest” but a “senior” (elder), and *ecclesia*, not a “church” but a “congregation.” This Bible historian then summarizes profoundly:

> The entire meaning of the Reformation hinges on these differences….If presbyter is what the scripture says, what need is there of bishops and archbishops? And if *ecclesia* means not church but congregation, what relevance to God can there be in the elaborate and expensive superstructure of an established church and the grotesque indulgences of its offices?

**II. The Purity of the Church**

We have already noticed Grudem’s discussion of the marks or notes of the Church. He affirms plainly that there were false churches vis-à-vis true churches even in the Bible. For example, Paul alluded to pagan temples in 1 Corinthians 12:2 and John wrote of the “synagogue (assembly) of Satan” in Revelation 2:9 (cf. 3:9).

Grudem asks poignantly, “What makes a church a church?...Might a group of people who claim to be Christians become so unlike what a church should be that they

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1 Ibid., 175.
2 In the institutional and hierarchical sense as understood in Tyndale’s time.
3 Nicolson, 75.
4 Ibid.
5 Grudem, 369.
should no longer be called a church?"¹ We have already read how he believes Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses to be “so unlike what a church should be that they should not” be called a church. He lumps liberal protestant churches in with these cults. And it seems that Catholics who reject sola fide would also fall outside the fold of safety.²

Marxist theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes also of the notae ecclesiae (notes of the church).³ He reiterates Grudem’s point about the Reformation leaders emphasizing two principal notes: the right administration of the sacraments and the right preaching of the word.⁴

We would ask Dr. Grudem again, What about paedobaptists? And, what about those who practice baptism by affusion? Dr. Grudem will later present a long discussion demonstrating the unscriptural nature of the doctrines of such groups.⁵ In fact, they do not really baptize in any meaningful sense of the word.⁶ But, he commits himself to the following disclaimer: “the position advocated in this book is that baptism is not a ‘major’ doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians…”⁷

Yet in a footnote he admits that “not all Christians agree with my view that this is a minor doctrine.”⁸ Many have literally died over the doctrine of baptism. For them, it has not been a mere “minor doctrine.” Thus, “viewed in this light, the controversy over baptism involves a larger difference over the nature of the church: Does one become part of the church by birth into a believing family, or by voluntary profession of faith?”⁹ We

¹ Ibid.
² Ibid., 371.
³ Moltmann, 341.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Grudem, 377.
⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid., 376.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid., 377, n. 1.
finally have our answer when Grudem contends that the fact that paedobaptists baptize (sprinkle) babies “does not make a paedobaptist church a false church, but it would make it a less pure church….”¹

We believe these to be excellent questions that Grudem does not really take seriously. The role of baptism in pardon and the nature of the church are the crux of this debate. The whole issue of church membership lies precisely at this point.

Only the redeemed make up the true church. Only those who have been pardoned in the mind of the Almighty are the redeemed. And only those who have met the right conditions for that gracious pardon have yet received it, including faith, repentance, confession and baptism.

Have the paedobaptists actually been redeemed? And how “less pure” may a church be before it crosses the threshold of not being “Christian” in any meaningful sense of the word? (We here use “Christian” as one actually saved under the terms of the New Testament.) We remind the reader of our previous discussion of the question of the ordo salutis and we underscore the absolute necessity for identifying the correct conditions of pardon under the present dispensation of grace in order to discover the precise contours of the church of Christ.

**Purposes of the Church.** Categorization is fairly straightforward given the totality of New Testament teaching. The church exists for: 1. *evangelism* (Matt. 28:18-20); 2. *nurture* (edification) of its members (1 Cor. 14:12; 2 Cor. 12:19; Eph. 4:16, 29); 3. *mercy/benevolence* (Gal. 6:10; Rom. 12:13; 15:25-27; 2 Cor. 9:6-11; 2 Cor. 8:1-4); and 4. *corporate worship* (in the gathered assembly, Eph. 5:18-19; 1 Cor. 14:15; Act 2:42).

¹ Ibid., 384.
The latter constitutes a touchstone or test case category for isolating a true church from a false, since worship has always been regulated by God and is to be conducted according to a divine standard.\textsuperscript{1} The church, of course, is greatly divided over the question of what comprises acceptable worship. As Russell says, “worship is a locus of conflict for many contemporary Christians.”\textsuperscript{2}

The New Testament suggests that the early church assembled regularly in corporate worship upon the first day of the week (Heb. 10:25; 1 Cor. 11:23-33; 16:1-2; Acts 2:42; 20:7). In their assemblies, they engaged in the following activities: a. the breaking of bread or Lord’s Supper (Lk. 22:14-20; Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:23-34; Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23-33).

\textsuperscript{1} Our point here is that unauthorized worship, or activities performed as praise and formal adoration, may actually be counterproductive to one’s spiritual welfare to the point of causing one to cross the line into a sphere outside of God’s grace. Logically, this premise would \textbf{usually} be viewed from the non-Calvinist or Arminian standpoint of \textit{conditional} grace, reflecting belief in the possibility of even a Christian, once redeemed, so deviating from the divine standard as to “fall from grace” (cf. Gal. 5:4). For indications that God has always disdained worship rendered to him apart from his express instructions on how to do it, see Gen. 4:2-15; Lev. 10:1-4, esp. v. 3 in, “‘By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy…”’; 1 Sam. 13:8-14; 1 Chron. 13:1-14 and 15:1-15, esp. v. 13 in, “for we did not seek Him according to the ordinance”; Jno. 4:24; 1 Cor. 14:15; Col. 3:16-17.

Yet, the Calvinist who holds to unconditional salvation would not likely view such unauthorized worship as serious enough to rupture fellowship with God or other believers. On the other hand, a Calvinist might hold that a Christian’s engaging in egregious conduct, even in unauthorized worship actions, is itself indication that such a person was not really one of the “elect” after all. This would be a sheer tautology in the manner of Grudem, who explains circularly, “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again,” in Grudem, 336. The inference must therefore be that those who do not persevere until the have not been, after all, truly born again.

In the end, this attempted Calvinistic harmonization becomes mere speculation. From the mere fact of (apparently) beginning the Christian race (or thinking one to be born again), one cannot deduce that one is actually born again. According to Grudem’s criterion of actual perseverance until the end, this quality can only be known at the end, once one has actually completed the race without falling.

Better to say that one should strive to persevere until the end so as not to lose one’s standing before God. What harm is there in trying? If of the elect, one will. If of the non-elect, one won’t. But, in the end, either one will or one won’t. Again, better to strive for continued acceptance and better to view those who engage in egregious conduct, including unauthorized worship activities which are an effrontery to God, as falling outside the purview of God’s grace. Thus, while a given congregation may be composed of those who were actually redeemed and thus added to the church, such a group might later detour so far off the road of pleasing behavior to God that it ceases to be a (practicing) \textit{true} church any longer.

Acts 20:7; b. the exposition of the written word (Acts 2:42; 20:7; 1 Tim. 4:13); c. the singing of praises or “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:19). e. the practice of public prayers (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:8); and f. the making of free will offerings (1 Cor. 16:1-2). Why should these vital actions of homage to the Deity not also be considered as “marks” of the true church? Has not Grudem become arbitrarily minimalist in his list of the notae ecclesiae of the true church?

IV. The Unity of the Church

Related to the issue of the church’s purity is its unity. Grudem’s concept is seen in the statement that follows: “The doctrinal matters that have divided evangelical Protestant denominations from one another have almost uniformly been matters on which

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1 With reference to the Lord’s Supper there exists much division in contemporary Christendom. The basic problem is to differentiate between the incidentals and the essentials. Again, Keith Russell writes, “I participated in a Baptist service not long ago that began with the Lord’s Supper and ended with the sermon. Can Christians situate the Lord’s Supper wherever they choose in the worship service, or is there some authority in our common inherited tradition that makes the celebration of the Eucharist the climax of Christians worship?” (Russell, “To Serve and to Adore,” Living Pulpit, 3.) At least he is asking the right category of questions in general, though perhaps on this specific point he has confused the incidentals with the essentials. Acts 2:42 has sometimes been appealed to as a precedent for the order of worship. But even if it were, it would justify neither of the orders Russell mentioned. Without supporting evidence elsewhere, it seems unlikely that the Holy Spirit would make the order in which the Supper is observed as a test case. Rather, the manner of observing it is most certainly such a case (cf. 1 Cor. 11:27, Grudem’s eccentric exegesis notwithstanding, in Grudem, 393. And the elements of unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine would seem to be non-negotiables. Few protestant churches today would dare alter the elements or substitute in their place other items never mentioned (therefore not authorized), as water for the fruit of the vine, or roasted lamb and bitter herbs for the unleavened bread, etc.


But in our respectful estimation, this remark merely reflects Baker’s ignorance, first, of the churches of Christ, and second, of other traditions which also reject the use of instrumental music in worship, as Eastern Orthodox and some conservative Mennonites, etc. See Everett Ferguson, A Capella Music in the Public Worship of the Church (Abilene, TX.: Biblical Research Press, 1972), 81-83. Ferguson had presented a thorough discussion of the issue, in Ferguson, The Church of Christ, 272-273. He also cites a dissertation by J. W. McKinnon, “The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments” (Dissertation, Columbia University, 1965), to the effect that instruments were absent “for approximately the first one thousand years of Christian history,” in Ferguson, 272, n. 102.
the Bible places relatively little emphasis and matters in which our conclusions must be
drawn from skillful inference much more than from direct biblical statements.”¹ He then
mentions as examples of such matters as “the ‘proper’ form of church government, the
exact nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper, and the exact sequence of the
events surrounding Christ’s return.”²

But, we are highly uncomfortable with Grudem’s confidence in such issues being
merely minor matters. Who are we to decide that the issue of church government is not
crucial? In fact, the differences in church polity have led to manifold other difference
over dogma itself (as monarchial authority residing in a Bishop).

Moreover, who are we to say that our own understanding of the theological
implications of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper while we are partaking is not vital
(cf. 1 Cor. 11:27-29)? In fact, the unbiblical concept of transubstantiation implies the
notion of the repeated sufferings of Christ in the mass, contrary to Scripture’s major point
about the sacrifice being “once for all” (cf. Heb. 9:28 and 10:10).

How can Grudem decide that questions of eschatology are not critical matters for
the church to get right? The empty chatter of Hymenaeus and Philetus had subverted the
faith of some over an eschatological question (2 Tim. 2:16-18; cf. 1 Cor. 15:15).

Furthermore, Grudem gingerly passes over some of the weightier issues that have
divided the church and seems to avoid focusing on the actual stress that Scripture does
place on such questions as the necessity of obedience to God’s plan, rather than another
gospel (cf. Gal. 1:6-9), the requirement for correct worship according to the divine
prescriptions, etc. It seems that Grudem has succumbed to the temptation of wishful

¹ Grudem, 61. Of course, if Grudem by that means that inferences are inherently uncertain, then
he has hoisted himself on his own petard, since Scripture nowhere explicitly condemns making inferences.
² Ibid.
thinking at this point and is exhibiting a commitment in principle to an ecumenical objective not itself encountered in the Scripture alone.

**Reality and Nature of the Contemporary Divisions.** Is the contemporary Church united in Christ? R. L. Omanson informs that there are an estimated 22,000 “church denominations” in the world today.¹ Is that good or bad? Grudem’s answer is clear. The “existence of different denominations” is “not necessarily a mark of disunity of the church.”²

What exactly is a “denomination” as such? Church historian, Winthrop Hudson, in the context of describing the views of such Great Awakening leaders as George Whitefield and Samuel Davies, defines the theory of *denominationalism* as follows:

Denominationalism, as these men used the term, was the opposite of sectarianism. A ‘sect’ regards itself alone as the true Church…. ‘Denomination,’ on the other hand, was adopted as a neutral and inclusive term. It implied that the group referred to is but one member, called or denominated by a particular name, of a larger group—the Church—to which other denominations belong.³

Simply stated, denominationalism conceives of the Church Universal as comprising all Christians, whereas a “denomination” is a subdivision of that unit, larger than a single local assembly, but not coextensive with the Church in the aggregate.

Grudem does not believe present denominational divisions to be tantamount to disunity. McBirnie reminds us, “Denominations were unknown to the Christians of the first century. There is a serious question as to whether a denomination can accurately be called a ‘church.’ The word church (*ekklesia*) to the Apostles mean a congregation.”⁴

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² Grudem, 372.
⁴ McBirnie, 11.
Is division bad? Christian apologist, John H. Gerstner’s makes a cogent observation, in view of denominational divisions, about something being fundamentally wrong with the churches. In a chapter entitled “Objections from the Shortcomings of the Church,” he says that the world faults Christendom for its denominationalism. He answers:

This again is a partly valid criticism. The existence of different denominations, especially so many of them, argues one of two things: either the Bible on which they are ostensibly based is not one but many and therefore not the Word of the one God, or there is something fundamentally wrong with the churches. We cannot entertain the first alternative if the Bible is the Word of God. We are, therefore, reluctantly driven to acknowledge that there is some serious fault in the churches themselves.¹

And, the Catholic philosopher of religion, Peter Kreeft, makes a similar comment:

“Christianity itself speaks with a tongue forked by the divisions of 1054 and 1517 and by the swords and fires of fratricidal wars.”² In speaking of John 20:20-21 and Jesus’ prayer for the unity of his followers, Anderson remarks, “The fragmentation and disunity of the church is a scandal that impedes the mission given by Jesus to his followers.”³ And in the words of John M. Buchanan, “The unity of the church is an evangelical imperative. If we can’t hang together through the disagreements we face, why would the world take our gospel of reconciliation seriously?”⁴

Despite John Gerstner’s keen insight as reflected in the earlier quote, he virtually retracts it a little later by falling into the same pluralist’s trap wherein Grudem is caught. Gerstner would make an apology for the church’s denominationalism by postulating that

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not all believers have the same level of sanctification.\footnote{Gerstner, *Reasons*, 219-220.} “Not being perfectly sanctified, they will see some things differently and act differently.”\footnote{Ibid., 220.} Gerstner even gives specific cases in point:

One person will think that God forbids him to use the organ in his public worship; another will not. They must unfortunately divide…One will think that the government of the Church should be Episcopal; another, Presbyterian; another, congregational. Unfortunately, they must divide.\footnote{Ibid.}

He then concludes with a draconian measure: “The only way to prevent differences is to prevent thinking.”\footnote{Ibid.}

But, this surely is a cop out! It does not really address the question. Gerstner has already admitted that there is “something fundamentally wrong with the churches.” So, why are we content to leave it at that? Why would we not seek to improve the situation? Why not correct what is wrong? The law of non-contradiction will not allow each of these views to be right. It devolves finally to the matter of finding out which issues are most important for the continued sanctification of the Christian.

Many try to minimize the detrimental nature of division. Most surprisingly, even Gerstner himself will even go on to say, “It is a good thing that denominations exist, as long as differences exist.”\footnote{Ibid., 221.} And we have already seen that Grudem feels the same.

So, are the differences really good? Omanson, answers, “Unity, however, does not demand uniformity.”\footnote{EDT, s.v. “Church, The,” by R. L. Omanson.} He adds, “…and the NT church had neither uniformity of worship nor structures, or even a uniform theology.”\footnote{Ibid.}
But, this appears to be an assertion without adequate justification. One can actually find an amazing uniformity of doctrine and practice, despite intermittent aberrations, in the overall New Testament portrayal of the early church (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17; 11:16; 14:33; 16:1; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 4:4-6; Phil. 3:16; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 2:13-14; 4:1; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:2; Titus 2:1, etc.).

Omanon continues, “The challenge for Christians today is to live in unity without insisting that our worship, structure, and theology be more uniform than that of the NT church.” But, would we not be forced to say that “our worship, structure and theology” must be at least as uniform as that of the NT church? We again challenge the premise that the New Testament church was divided significantly in terms of its “worship, structure, and theology.” The evidence reviewed above simply does not sustain the allegation.

**Actual Causes of Division.** Klaus Nürnberger defines the problem in this way:

The immediate cause for disunity in all its forms seems to be a lack of consensus. We do not agree on the contents of the biblical message, on the form of our liturgies, on what Christian obedience entails, on the causes of our predicaments in the world, nor on the steps needed to overcome them.

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1 Which are clearly labeled as such and are uniformly condemned in the very contexts in which they are mentioned, as the Corinthian divisions, 1 Cor. 1:10-13; the Colossian heresy, etc. The sheer fact of human weakness in the apostolic church does not argue for a diversity of doctrines or multiple norms that somehow met with divine approval!

2 Ibid.

3 David Neff, writing in *Christianity Today*, also tends to minimize the gravity of our present divisions. He says that despite differences “there is also a clear consensus.” David Neff, “Discovering Unity: Two Theologians are Bullish on Evangelical Futures,” in *Christianity Today* (Feb 2004):75.

4 But, our question is, Yes, but is a consensus on some issues sufficient? Do we really have a consensus on the essentials? Neff says that John R. W. Stott speaks of common commitment to “a vital personal faith, biblical authority, the scandal of the Cross, and the importance of helping others,” Ibid. Yes, but is this enough? Neff says, “Think of the evangelical movement as a nation with states or regions named Reformed, Methodist, Lutheran, Charismatic, Old-Line Pentecostal, Independent Bible Church, and so forth.” Ibid. Our view is that the better analogy is that churches are more like warring nations. The conditions of citizenship and naturalization differ so widely between them as to constitute, not a tenuous confederacy, but an out-and-out civil conflict!

However, we could reply respectfully that, in fact, we do know the “steps needed” to overcome the divisions among us. If a “lack of consensus” is the problem, then this is where we should first turn our attention. Based on the assumption that the Word of God is one and not many (as Gerstner noted earlier\(^1\)), we can plea for a return to the original source, i.e., Scripture only (2 Tim. 3:16-17). By implementing the plan found for the “worship, structure and theology” of the church of the New Testament, we can overcome the serious divisions which now afflict the Body.

**What Constitutes a Serious Division?** And what are the actual non-negotiables of the gospel upon which we must have consensus? As Gerstner had noted, the fact that we do not now have such consensus means that “something is fundamentally wrong with the churches.”

Dr. Grudem says the real non-negotiable of the gospel is the doctrine of *sola fide*. But, that may be far too *reductionist*. A careful study of the New Testament reveals the existence of other essential doctrines and practices that cannot be altered without serious consequences.

To be sure, there may be some practices that fall into the realm of matters of indifference (as the eating of meats, private observance of days, etc., cf. Rom. 14:1-23). Yet there are other areas that would seem to be *essentials* for maintaining unity. An example might be the selection of ecclesiastical terminology or sectarian descriptions which have the potential for doctrinal division, or which may already be a reflection of actual division (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10-13).

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\(^1\) Gerstner, 219.
Another example is the all-important issue of corporate worship. Unfortunately, there is a widespread tendency today to overlook the clear statements of Scripture which point to God’s plan for worship, as Harold O. J. Brown, who despite 2 Tim 3:16-17, asserts that Scripture is not sufficient to tell us how to worship. But an inductive analysis of the passages that do speak about worship in the New Testament does not really buttress Brown’s skepticism.

**How Achieve Unity?** Kreeft argues that in “our half-century there has been a remarkable upsurge and outcry of the longing for unity. Yet no one can say how to achieve it.” He perceives correctly that, “the problem is simple and obvious: religions contradict each other. And contradictions cannot both be true. And unity between the true and the false is false unity.” His sparring partner in the anthology, Theodore Pulcini, agrees: “Like Professor Kreeft, I am uncomfortable with the theological differences that separate the various religious traditions. (After all, how can such divisions be tolerated if one believes that truth is one?).”

In seeking consensus we are looking for unity in the truth. Even Nürnberger recognizes that, “consensus presupposes that there is only one truth which is eternally and universally valid.” (This seems to have been Gerstner’s point also.) But, then Nürnberger drops the bomb, “the assumption is illusory.”

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1 Brown, “Proclamation & Preservation: The Necessity and Temptations of Church Tradition,” in *Reclaiming the Great Tradition*, 82-83.
3 Ibid., 21.
7 Nürnberger, 11.
Here we see the Great Divide between liberal and conservative theologians. Given the premise that Scripture is one and the faith once delivered to the saints is one (Jude 3), the sanguine prospect for a possible rapprochement among the warning factions can reasonably be entertained. But, if the Bible is but a literary patchwork of human traditions, such a prospect would be as illusive as it is unnecessary.

Without doubt, unity is the ideal. Jesus prayed for it (John 17:20-21). Paul plead for it (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). And Paul laid down a working formula for achieving it (Ephesians 4:1-7, the seven “unities” of the Gospel).

Three Possible Approaches to Unity. Throughout church history, at least three methods have been proposed for bringing about the desired reunification of the Body of Christ. We will look ever so briefly at these methods and provide cursory evaluations.

First is the authoritarian approach (à la the Roman church). This approach may be described thus:

The dogma and the law of the church are laid down and deemed to be absolute. Unity is only possible if those currently outside join the Catholic Church and submit to the authority of the Pope….the Catholic Church as such is still built on these assumptions.1

Basically, this approach holds that if all the wandering “daughter churches” (Protestants) were to return to the “mother church” of Rome, unity would ipso facto occur. The bottom line for this approach is that, “unity requires consensus in the form of the surrender of one’s identity, integrity and autonomy, the integration into a given institution and the total submission to a given authority.”2

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1 Nürnberg, 12.
2 Ibid., 16. The Roman approach makes such a demand since “protestant communities are still not recognized as churches…,” Ibid.
Two major problems are immediately apparent from the Protestant’s point of view: First, he is already convinced that the Roman monolith needs major reforming. Thus he cannot in good conscience surrender to it in its present condition. Second, Roman theology and praxis itself are not really monolithic after all, but are characterized by a wide diversity respecting many fundamental issues. Even if the Holy See were granted the authority of being the final arbiter and interpreter of Scripture and Tradition (which the Protestant already does not accept), the individual nevertheless must rely on his own sense of rationality to comprehend the official pronouncements of the papacy, or to “interpret the official interpretation.” So, in the end we are back to square one in our quest for unity!

Second is the *ecumenical approach*. In the vernacular, this might be described as the “agreement to disagree.” Some might even dub this the “tossed salad” approach. It entails inherently compromise among believers. As Moltmann admits, the ecumenical methods’ motive is its seeking to go to the source which is Christ. But this requires seeing some things as matters of indifference.¹

Our response is that the requirement to minimize some things as matters of indifference is implemented only at the expense of truth. Going back to Christ the source should mean more than going back merely to some smarmy, nebulous “Christ concept.” It must mean going back to Christ’s revelation also, a revelation found with certainty only in Scripture.

The problem is, as Kreeft himself confesses, “true believers are not going to compromise or convert.”² However, Kreeft himself pursues a similar goal of making

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¹ Moltmann, 12-13.
² Kreeft, 21.
“tactical” alliances among believers (theists, including Muslims) for the sake of combating a common secular foe.¹ But Kreeft seems to forget that false religion is as much an enemy to truth as secularism.

In the end, the ecumenical approach shares the same problems of the genteel pluralism of evangelicals as advocated by Grudem. Its core problem is the diminishing of the crucial place of “sound doctrine” in salvation (cf. Tit. 2:1), especially its willingness to compromise that which should be the non-negotiables of the gospel.

Third, is the reformation approach in light of a fixed standard of truth.² Professor Kreeft’s sets forth an interesting syllogism about unity and submission to God’s will in connection with his tactical alliance for the time being. He holds that if all believers agree to lay aside factional differences and cease to press doctrinal distinctions, in time the right kind of unity may finally be realized. He writes:

The practice of this submission means letting God’s will be done.

God has told us that his will for us is unity (e.g., Jn 17).

Therefore submission to his will will lead to unity.³

Our response is, first, that such unity is ultimately our own responsibility to bring about in the world. Second, other ecumenical plans have not yet yielded anything like such a natural progression to unity over time. And, third, Professor Kreeft has apparently overlooked the need to establish the proper authority. As a Catholic, he has not completely divorced himself from adherence to ecclesiastical tradition. True submission means finding the right source of authority and understanding it correctly, therefore,

¹ Kreeft, 36.
² Also known as the “restoration” approach. In our estimation, restoration is a subcategory of reformation, the former perhaps being thought of as a more thoroughgoing return to the original standard than the latter. But this is not so much a qualitative as it is a quantitative distinction.
³ Kreeft, 38.
unanimously. The reformation/restoration approach seeks unity in truth. It presses for consensus on the essentials.

What are the potential problems with the restoration approach? Even in his quest for the early church, McBirnie critiques the restoration approach by observing that “…most reformations or restoration movements have been only partial in their return to the Source.”¹ While we would agree, we do not see this as an argument against the principle itself, but against its inconsistent application to this point. Furthermore, McBirnie may not be aware of any and every restoration attempt that has so far been put forth in ecclesiastical history. He therefore might be too quick here to make a generalization that ignores the possible exceptions.

McBirnie goes on to say that, “Most meaningful denominational differences today are to be found in a divergence of opinion as to what ‘pure’ Christianity is, or was.”² He then says that most believers do not in principle reject “pure” Christianity, but claim that their group has really returned (at least in the main) to “the pure substance of what Jesus intended” and that residual differences are peripheral or simply reflect the differing circumstances of our time.

McBirnie then follows with the query,

Is this a valid position? Those who say it is must face the question of whether they are merely rationalizing that which they find inconvenient to give up. Or they may not really know what New Testament era Christianity was. Indeed, can anyone really know what it was, and can the eternal principles Christ gave His Apostles be adapted to existing circumstances today without serious change or loss?³

¹ McBirnie, 17.
² Ibid.
³ Ibid.
In response, we can say three things. First, McBirnie has asked a cogent question about the possibility of merely rationalizing. Second, we believe that we can indeed “know what New Testament era Christianity was.” Third, the “eternal principles” which God has given to his people have always been capable of being reaffirmed and reapplied to new and divergent circumstances throughout revelatory history.

The concept of a continued and rigorous reformation is supported by Old Testament examples: 1) as witnessed in the reformations carried out under the good kings of Judah, Hezekiah (2 Chron. 29:1-31:21) and Josiah (2 Kings 22:1-23:25). (Despite the passage of centuries, the Law was still valid and capable of being adapted to the existing circumstances.); 2) in the post-exilic reformations of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah; 3) and as manifested even in Malachi’s prophetic call for purification, etc.

If God’s word is one, and if it will not pass away (cf. Matt. 24:35), then it is a priori plausible that we should effect contemporary restorations of its original principles whenever apostasy has occurred. Apostasy has occurred (cf. Matt. 24:5, 11, 23-25; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thess. 2:3-12; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-3). God’s word is one. It will not pass away. Thus, it is a priori plausible that we should be able to return to the original and timeless standard even today. To the extent that believers return to the original and timeless standard, then consensus becomes a reality and unity is thereby effected.

The Protestant Reformation must be carried forward and not allowed to fossilize at fixed points on “the road back to Jerusalem,” neither in London, nor Geneva nor
Rome. We must avoid “merely rationalizing that which we find inconvenient to give up,” as McBirnie warns.¹

William J. Abraham argues that the reformation failed because it had reduced canon to scripture, and then interpreted scripture epistemologically in the manner of Aquinus.² Our response is that the reformation did not reduce canon to scripture, it simply rediscovered this identification!³ Secondly, scripture as canon is the only sound epistemology for the Christian. Thirdly, we see no reason why we would be committed to using scripture as canon in exactly the same way that Aquinus did. And, fourthly, we question the premise that the reformation has in all respects failed.

In fact, the reformation is still being pursued by some religionists with astounding success! If Abraham means that it has failed to reach a consensus thus far, why yes, but that is not because of an inherent weakness in its starting point of Sola Scriptura but of the failure of some in the Church not to put it into practice more consistently. Abraham’s assessment is therefore unnecessarily reductionist.

If the believers of today are “merely rationalizing that which they find inconvenient to give up,”⁴ then there is still “something fundamentally wrong with the churches.”⁵ Disunity is the continued result of such rationalizations. We are to “all speak the same thing with no divisions among us” (1 Cor. 1:10). To speak the same

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¹ McBirnie, 17.
² William J. Abraham, “Trinitarian Theology & the Quest for Ecumenical Orthodoxy: A Response to Patrick Henry Reardon,” in Reclaiming the Great Tradition: 123.
³ Implications in Scripture are abundantly clear of the continuance of a divine and unalterable standard of authority (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:14-15, where these instructions were written, by apostolic authority, in a manner capable of being known, as a standard of right conduct in the church as against any form of deviation from it, the supported truth—singular—of abiding or timeless validity for as long as Paul would be delayed; cf. Jude 3, Gal. 1:8-9; Jno. 14:26; 16:13; Acts 1:5-8; 2:1-4; Jno. 12:48).
⁴ McBirnie, 17.
⁵ Gerstner, 219.
thing, we must agree upon the essentials of the gospel, the basic beliefs and practices that
do not drive wedges between the believers.¹

Practices That May Serve as Common Denominators. The restoration approach
to unity seeks a consensus upon the proper standard, *Sola Scriptura*. It has long been
recognized that certain practices in the church could easily be modified if not jettisoned
entirely in order to accommodate the consciences of the greatest number of believers.
Over the years, this method has sometimes been called in popular parlance “the way that
must be right and cannot be wrong.” Why does Grudem not see such a possibility and
opt for it instead of the maintenance of continued sectarian practices that still divide?

As an example of this approach, we reference a sermon preached by F. G. Allen
in the 19th Century entitled “Our position: Its Safeness and Strength.”² We here briefly
summarize his sermon as an illustration of the common denominators of practice that will
make unity again possible.

First, he dealt with theological Systems, as Calvinism versus Arminianism.
Allen’s conclusion was that regardless of whether the Calvinist or Arminian best explains

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¹ One of the serious problems with classical ecumenism, and its more genteel Protestant pluralist
cousin (à la Grudem), is its willingness to allow controversial practices upon which all cannot in good
conscience agree. This writer remembers being asked to preach in a small ecumenical church on Easter
Island a number of years ago where divisions existed along the previous denominational fault lines of the
original members who had been incorporated into the new group. Some were unhappy about observing the
Lord’s Supper less frequently than each first day of the week, but none believed it wrong to observe it
every first day of the week (some just thought it unnecessary). We logically proposed that they observe it
each week and thus avoid controversy. Similarly, some in attendance believed it wrong to sing in worship
with the accompaniment of mechanical instruments of music, but none believed it wrong to sing a capella.
We logically proposed that they sing a capella and thus avoid the controversy. Sadly, they too ended up
“merely rationalizing that which they find inconvenient to give up.” The divisions continued.
² Allen, F. G., *The Old-Path Pulpit: A Book of Original Doctrinal Sermons* (Nashville:
the working of the human will, the human who does in fact obey God is definitely safe. If not, why not?\(^1\)

With reference to formal creeds and confessions of faith, it is observed that the adoption of *Sola Scriptura* is a safe position. All can agree to the security of this posture. On the other hand, one group cannot accept the formal confessions and creeds of another. Such documents continue to be a source of sectarian division. If God in the end accepts the formal creeds, the Bible-only position is also safe. If God does not accept the creeds, the Bible-only position is still safe. Either way, this position is safe. Why can we not dispense with them and return to the Scriptures alone as the rule of faith and practice?\(^2\)

Ecclesiastical descriptions have been a source of factionalism. All agree that “Christian” is a scriptural appellation for a follower of Christ (or any other term actually found in the New Testament.)\(^3\) If God should accept extra-biblical descriptions, then “fine.” But if not, then at least the Biblical terms are safe and not inherently divisive.\(^4\)

We have already noticed that most historians doubt little that the early church was congregational in terms of organization. Each congregation was independent and enjoyed the leadership of a college of elders (bishops, pastors). If God were to accept other forms of polity, there will be rejoicing in heaven. But, if he does not, then we can all agree that at least the congregational form is Scriptural and safe. If we laid aside the

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\(^1\) Ibid., 328-330.  
\(^2\) Ibid., 330-331.  
\(^3\) See also Hudson, *Religion in America*, 80-81, where he quotes George Whitefield in saying there would be no denominational distinctions in heaven, “Then God help us to forget party names and to become Christians in deed and truth.”  
\(^4\) Allen, 331. This principle would include biblical terminology describing the body of Christ, i.e., “church of God,” “churches of Christ,” the “church,” etc.
other forms of polity about which Scripture is silent, then we could all at least agree upon
this one common denominator.¹

One of the more controversial areas concerns the plan of salvation. Allen argues
that he counseled (1) faith and (2) baptism (for the believer, based on repentance and
confession). This is the way that must be right. If God accepts anything less, as affusion
or paedobaptism, then his practice is nevertheless safe also. If God does not accept
anything less, then this practice is still safe.²

We here anticipate an objection: Is not baptism a “work” in the sense in which
works are condemned as means for justification? Grudem thinks so.³ We answer, No.

As British theologian, Michael Green, explains,

So far from being in some way antithetical to grace and faith, as much Protestant
thought has in the past imagined, baptism is the sacrament of justification by
faith. To say “In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” is
tantamount to saying ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on
Christ.”⁴

Green goes on to show that Romans 6 on baptism follows Romans 5 on justification by
faith, because “they belong together”…and further that “it was the mark of incorporation
within the Body of Christ….“⁵

Why would not Peter’s answer to the question, what must I do? (in Acts 2:37-38),
be just as appropriate today as in the First Century? To tell one to “repent and baptized”
cannot be inherently divisive.¹

¹ Ibid., 332. Allen also reminds us that denominational theory lacks firm support. He shows that
the Scriptures are silent re: forming an ecclesiastical body that is larger than the local congregation but
smaller than the church in the aggregate, 332-333. Thus, if such denominational bodies were dissolved, as
least one other source of disunity would be surmounted.
² Ibid., 333-334.
³ Grudem, 384.
⁴ Michael Green, Evangelism in the Early Church (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans
⁵ Ibid.
To Allen’s litany we could add worship activities, as the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week and a capella singing. If God accepts singing plus playing of instruments, then singing alone is nevertheless scriptural. If God does not accept the instruments, then singing alone is still safe. It is not divisive.

Why could the church today not simply adopt again such simple New Testament worship, practices, preaching and organizational structures? This move would surely be a sound start toward a complete theological rapprochement.

We conclude this section with the cogent words of Clowney:

The burning issues of church unity or division, apostolicity or apostasy, holiness or worldliness, universality or sectarianism—all hinge on an understanding of the biblical doctrine of the church. This doctrine is not an end in itself. It points to Christ the Head of the church, indeed to the triune God. But only as the church stands under the Word of God can it discover its own nature and calling.

V. Conclusion

In this research we have viewed Wayne Grudem’s apparent indifference to denominational divisions as they exist today and have asked the poignant question, How close is close? And, is close good enough? Grudem seems to think it is. But we have argued in favor of a complete return to the New Testament plan for the church in order to achieve a consensus and reunite as believers upon the singular and safe standard of Scripture only.

Consonant with the standard treatments of the subject, we have dealt with the identity of the church, the purity of the church, and the unity of the church. Under the last heading we concluded that there still exists a common denominator upon which all believers can yet unite, the indubitable practices of the early church as it functioned under

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1 Allen, 333-334.
2 Nicolson, 180, where he says that the English separatists sang psalms without accompaniment.
3 Clowney, 2.
the guidance of inspired apostles. This is the way that must be right and cannot be wrong.

A call for repentance and reunification is in order. Dr. Grudem seems to have been excessively minimalist in his isolation of the doctrine *sola fide* as the sine qua non of the true church. Rather than opine about more or less pure churches, why would we not simply strive to have the one pure church of Christ again without any admixture of human innovations and errant theological systems?
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