

The Church as a Creation of the Gospel

BILLY KRISTANTO

Abstract

There have been many discussions about the nature of the church—what makes a church a church. Drawing from Reformational insights, this article engages with this question from a soteriological perspective. The Reformed soteriological story begins with creation. Creation was, however, disturbed by the fall. God offers the story of redemption for the whole creation. Finally, God’s work of redemption culminates in the beatific vision of his glory, which can already be beheld and tasted here and now. I will follow this framework (creation, fall, redemption, glorification) to present a proposal for a Reformed ecclesiology developed from Reformed soteriology. Though written from an Indonesian perspective, this article tries to bring together voices from both global hemispheres in an irenic dialogue.

Keywords

Soteriological ecclesiology, evangelical ecclesiology, Gospel-centered ecclesiology, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Stephen Tong

The ancient church taught that the church has four attributes: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The Reformation expounded on the true marks of the church, namely, the pure preaching of the gospel, the right administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. This article focuses on the

inseparable relationship between the church and the gospel as a distinctive mark drawn from the Reformational understanding of the church. In the same tenor, after starting with the work of the Triune God, the World Reformed Fellowship Statement on Ecclesiology declares that the church “is established as a result of the gospel and follows necessarily as an implication of the gospel.”¹ The church does not establish herself; she is created by the Triune God through the power of the word. Without the word, a church can hardly be considered a true church. The word not only creates the church, it also reveals the sinfulness of the present church through the preaching of the law. However, the demand of the law is not the last word. The church lives in the power of the comfort of the gospel. Finally, a gospel-centered church brings her members to see the glory of God.

Within this classical framework, this article addresses the following questions. What does it mean for the church to be a creation of the word? Can we talk not only about the sinfulness of humankind but also about the sinfulness of the church? What is the church’s only comfort in the midst of the world’s fallenness? What ought to be the *telos* of the church in her eschatological hope?

I. A Creation of the Word

The notion that the church is a creation of the word comes from Martin Luther, who said, “For since the church owes its birth to the Word, is nourished, aided and strengthened by it, it is obvious that it cannot be without the Word. If it is without the Word it ceases to be a church.”² The church does not create herself; she is created by God by his word. The humble confession of the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible,” should include the creation of the church. When the author of Colossians wrote that by Christ “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (Col 1:16), he made a distinction between the visible and invisible realms.

We want to argue that this realm includes the church in both her visible and invisible aspects, the earthly and the heavenly. Regarding the structure of the hymn in Colossians 1:15–20, one of the proposals is to divide it into

¹ “The World Reformed Fellowship Statement on Ecclesiology,” World Reformed Fellowship, Orlando, October 28, 2022, 1, <https://wrf.global/assembly/ga-2022-promotional-material-2>.

² Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 40, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 37.

two stanzas: verses 15–17 and verses 18–20.³ With this reading, one can notice the shift from creation to the church.⁴ By Christ all things, visible and invisible, were created (v. 16), whereas Christ is also the head of the body, the church (v. 18). This division permits us to extend the creation of all visible and invisible things to the creation of the earthly and heavenly church. Christians already partake of the heavenly realm while here on earth. Their lives are “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). Consistent with this, we can say that the life of the earthly church is also hidden above in the heavenly, where Christ is.

The creation of the church is described in the story of the calling of Abram, the forefather of the people of God (Gen 12:1–9). Unlike the story of the Tower of Babel, the genesis of the people of Israel was not self-initiated (cf. Gen 11:3–4) but a calling by God (cf. Gen 12:1–3). In the beginning of the universe, “God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1); in the beginning of Israel, God created “a great nation” (12:2) out of nothing by calling Abram out of the sinful descendants of Shem. The existence of the people of God is contingent on God’s calling. When the church tried to “make a name” for herself (Gen 11:4), rather than her name being made great by God (12:2), she failed to live up to the story of Abram’s calling. A self-created “church” (an oxymoron!) will be dispersed by God (11:9), while the church created by God will be a blessing for all the families of the earth (12:2–3).

Later, Abram failed to be a blessing in Egypt, even though this occasion was an opportunity to bless another family of the earth. His failure was caused by his forgetfulness regarding his calling. Instead of remembering God’s creation of the new nation, Abram was concerned with self-preservation. John Calvin aptly comments,

But while he reflected that the hope of salvation was centered in *himself*, that *he* was the fountain of the Church of Gods that unless *he* lived, the benediction promised to him, and to his seed, was vain; he did not estimate his own life according to the private affection of the flesh; but inasmuch as he did not wish the effect of the divine vocation to perish through his death, he was so affected with concern for the preservation of his own life, that he overlooked everything besides.⁵

³ Cf. Christian Stettler, *Der Kolosserhymnus: Untersuchungen zu Form, traditionsgeschichtlichen Hintergrund und Aussage von Kol 1,15–20*, WUNT 2.131 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 86–94.

⁴ Cf. Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 115.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, Calvin’s Commentaries 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 359 (on Gen 12:11).

The church can be faithful to the story of her calling or, like Abram in Egypt, concerned with her own self-preservation. The people of God are called not to preserve their own lives but to receive, enjoy, and reflect “the benediction promised” to them. The promised benediction is no other than the true treasure of the church, namely, the gospel. “In order that the preaching of the gospel might flourish, he [God] deposited this treasure in the church.”⁶ Here, Calvin is in full agreement with Luther, who insisted, “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.”⁷ Confessing the gospel as the most valuable treasure of the church for the Reformation meant rejecting the “treasury of the saints.”⁸ In our contemporary context, this could mean relativizing the importance of charismatic or celebrity preachers, wealthy church members, church assets, or the church’s accommodation to the state.

Living up to the story of her divine creation through the power of the gospel, the church is called to unleash her creative power. The gospel is not controlled by the church; rather, the church is a result and implication of the gospel.⁹ Paul’s gospel message was not so much in words of wisdom as in the demonstration of the power of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2:4). For Calvin, it is this gospel power that protects church ministers from both exaggerated dignity and a lack of it.¹⁰ On the one hand, there are those who do not adequately distinguish between God and external help and on the other, those who do not adequately emphasize the real benefits from the ministry of preaching. Church ministers should preach the gospel authoritatively, “for it is the power of God for salvation” (Rom 1:16). At the same time, they should do it humbly, for “we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

II. Addressing Falleness

Reformed ecclesiology is characterized by the courage to exercise healthy self-criticism, for it presupposes the imperfection of the earthly church. Far from advocating a low view of the church, it offers theological realism in its

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 2:1011–12 (4.1.1).

⁷ Martin Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses*, 62, www.Luther.de, KDG Wittenberg, 1997, <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

⁸ In Luther’s time, the “treasury of the church” was described by Catholic theology as the spiritual goods both established through the redeeming work of Christ and made accessible in the communion of the saints, whose treasury included the prayers and good works of the blessed virgin Mary and all the saints.

⁹ Cf. “World Reformed Fellowship Statement on Ecclesiology,” 1.

¹⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 4.1.6.

understanding of the church. Its high view of the church is determined not by the confession of her infallibility or sinlessness but by her confession of the power of the gospel as her most glorious treasure. One of the most difficult issues in ecumenical dialogue lies in the relation between the church's holiness and human sin: Is the church sinless since, "being the body of the sinless Christ, it cannot sin," or is it "appropriate to refer to the Church as sinning, since sin may become systemic so as to affect the institution of the Church itself"?¹¹ The Reformed ecclesiological tradition advocates an affirmative answer to the latter.

Avoiding the discussion of the sinfulness of the church runs contrary to the theological reality that while on earth, the church is still imperfect and in a growing process. The "already" aspect should not cancel the "not yet" aspect. Ecclesiology is inseparable not only from Christology but also from anthropology—that is, the doctrine of humanity *and sin*. Unlike Eastern Orthodox teachings, Reformed ecclesiology carefully distinguishes between the two wills of Christ and the two wills of the church, between the will or operation of church office-bearers and the will of God, thus rejecting the concept of the infallibility of the church.¹² If the church is not infallible, for she consists of *simul iustus et peccator*, then we need to engage with constructive religious critique (*Religionskritik*) for the sanctification of the church.

The Old Testament prophets were, first, and foremost, critics of religion. They were sent by God to rebuke the sins of God's people. We are referring to the major and minor prophets' criticisms of the cult and society. The underlying assumption of such religious critiques is the imperfection and even sinfulness of the people of God. In contrast to false prophets, true prophets are characterized by the courage to rebuke the sins of God's people (cf. Ezek 13:8–16). Jesus himself was a critic of religion par excellence. For instance, Jesus told a self-justifying lawyer the parable of the good Samaritan (cf. Luke 10:25–37) and the Pharisees and the scribes the three parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son (cf. Luke 15:1–32) and the parable of the laborers in the vineyard (cf. Matt 20:1–16); he cleansed the temple as a sign of judgment (cf. Matt 21:12–17; Luke 19:45–48); he told the parable of the wicked tenants against the chief priests and the scribes (cf. Matt 21:33–46; Luke 20:9–18); he pronounced seven woes against the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Matt 23:1–36).

¹¹ *The Church towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper No. 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), III.35, 22.

¹² Cf. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), 187; see also Billy Kristanto, *Ecclesiology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), 22.

Unless her sinfulness is addressed, the church will fall into complacency or self-righteousness. The true purpose of God's critique of religion is to express not hatred but God's loving care for his church. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline," says the Son of God, who wants his church to "be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19). The church should not "be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives" (Heb 12:5–6). Within the context of divine discipline and chastisement, the church should welcome and be grateful that God sends religious critics. The failure to receive humbly God's corrections and warnings through such prophetic ministers only further confirms the sinfulness of a church. As long as she is on earth, the church is always in need of a healthy religious critique against her own sinfulness.

In a similar tone, Nicholas Healy also proposes a practical-prophetic ecclesiology against what he calls "blueprint ecclesiologies."¹³ A blueprint ecclesiology dismisses a church's concrete sinfulness by presenting the church as an idealized model. A practical-prophetic ecclesiology, on the contrary, will allow a church to critique itself so it can maintain its faithfulness to the gospel:

The church is a body that must struggle to understand its role, in part because Christianity is an essentially contested concept, and in part because it must continually purge itself of anti-Christ elements and appropriate, modify or reject non-church elements as it seeks to witness faithfully to the gospel. Such intraecclesial conflict should not be avoided by enforcing unity, for it may frequently be fruitful.¹⁴

Conflict is sometimes necessary for the flourishing of the church according to the will of God. On the other hand, false unity, a mere human gathering that suppresses self-critique, can hinder the church's fruitfulness.

Instead of avoiding the discussion of the church's problems in Corinth, Paul addressed her concrete sinfulness in practical ways. He proclaimed prophetically Christ crucified against the Corinthians' boasting in human wisdom (cf. 1 Cor 2:1–5). He instructed the right administration of the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:17–34), and despite his warning about their divisions (cf. 1 Cor 1:10–13), Paul saw factions among the Corinthians as intended by God to show who is genuine and who is not (cf. 1 Cor 11:18–19). In his letter to the churches of Galatia, Paul fought against the false teachers who taught a different gospel and rebuked the Galatians for their deviation from the

¹³ Cf. Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25–51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

doctrine of grace (cf. Gal 1:6–9). In his letter to the churches in Asia Minor, John sharply criticized those who denied the true humanity of Christ (cf. 1 John 2:22; 2 John 7). Far from presenting an idealized model of the church, Paul and John chose to address the concrete sinfulness or danger in the church of God.

In the light of the gospel, the church of God is invited again and again to depart from her sinfulness. Along with this invitation, God sends his prophetic messengers to rebuke the sinfulness of the church. The church under the gospel has the courage to confess her sins and keeps repenting and returning to the way of the Lord.

III. *The Church Redeemed*

Addressing the sinfulness of the church is surely not the last word in Reformed ecclesiology. The church lives under the power of the gospel, which offers comfort and forgiveness for repentant sinners. The portrayal of concrete sinfulness is not to embarrass the church but rather to invite to always come and return to the most holy gospel of grace and glory. Through the preaching of the law, the church comes to the knowledge of her sinfulness (cf. Rom 3:20). Through the preaching of the gospel, the church finds her true comfort in the reality that she belongs to Jesus Christ. Luther's dialectic between law and gospel is true not only for an individual believer but also for every church. In his *Heidelberg Disputation*, he postulates:

For this reason we are so instructed—for this reason the law makes us aware of sin so that, having recognized our sin, we may seek and receive grace. Thus God “gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5), and “whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12). The law humbles, grace exalts. The law effects fear and wrath, grace effects hope and mercy. Through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20), through knowledge of sin, however, comes humility, and through humility grace is acquired.¹⁵

In the history of revival, the church always comes to a deeper awareness of her sinfulness before a holy God and deeper amazement at the sweetness of divine grace. Not satisfied with external confession, Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen insisted on the importance of the Spirit's conviction of a sinner's sinful state so that the sinner “is driven out of himself to the sovereign grace of God in Christ for reconciliation, pardon, sanctification, and

¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), 16, BookOfConcord.Org, 1998–2023, <https://bookofconcord.org/other-resources/sources-and-context/heidelberg-disputation/#16>.

salvation.¹⁶ True spiritual revival does not change but heightens normal Christianity.¹⁷ There is nothing new when the church is revived by the Holy Spirit. What the Spirit bestows are deeper conviction of sin and deeper comfort in the gospel of grace. When the Spirit revives, the church does not merely assent intellectually to the gospel but lives in the power of the gospel. The Spirit's work of redemption will be clearly manifested in the harvest of spiritual regeneration and spiritual growth in greater measure.

The church under the power of the gospel devotes herself to apostolic teaching, table fellowship, frequent administration of sacraments, prayers, awesome wonder, generosity, joy, and worship (cf. Acts 2:42–47). Only then does God give and add new believers to the church. The problem with our contemporary church is that she is obsessed with numbers and influence but cares little or not at all for walking in the power of the gospel.¹⁸ The spiritual substance of the church redeemed is her faithfulness to the story of the gospel amid the stories of worldly empires. When God revives his church, he will empower the church to be courageous in her confession before the world.

Regarding how one can be said to truly receive the Holy Spirit, Stephen Tong teaches that the gift of the Holy Spirit is related to the preaching of the gospel:

The Holy Spirit, which is given to obedient people, also bears witness about the gospel. The Holy Spirit is given to those who are obedient to the preaching of the gospel. The word that is heard, the word that is preached demands obedience. Whoever obeys, and preaches the gospel, he will be accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

This is not to say that the Spirit's empowerment is initiated by human obedience. Rather, it is a warning that when the Spirit moves the church to share the gospel, the church ought not quench his movement. For Tong, the importance of the office of evangelists in the church cannot be

¹⁶ Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, "The Poor and Contrite God's Temple," in *Forerunner of the Great Awakening: Sermons by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, 1691–1747*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 16.

¹⁷ Cf. Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750–1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 23; see also Joel R. Beeke, "The Age of the Spirit and Revival," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 2.2 (2010): 37.

¹⁸ Commenting on the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, Grant Osborne aptly warns our modern church, "The current preoccupation of the modern church with numbers and influence must be reexamined. It is more important to be faithful than to be powerful." Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 129.

¹⁹ Stephen Tong, *Roh Kudus, Doa, dan Kebangunan* (Surabaya: Momentum, 2013), 68.

overemphasized. He bemoans the condition in which many churches are not concerned with evangelism. He emphatically writes,

Even sadder, many young people who give themselves up to preach the gospel, after finishing theological study, do not want to evangelize anymore. Many theological schools are factories that extinguish the spirit of evangelism. This is a great sin of theological schools.²⁰

Churches are willing to allocate much money and facilities for pastors, but not for evangelists; Tong considers this the reason for the lack of evangelists in the church. In the end, the church does not have enough evangelists who faithfully preach the gospel. Far from separating from each other the offices of evangelist, pastor, and teacher (cf. Eph 4:11), Tong also emphasizes the importance of a servant of God to do all three, although one may have a certain emphasis in one's calling.

When Calvin wrote that, along with the offices of apostle and prophet, the office of evangelist was not established permanently, he understood the office of evangelist as a very particular calling for certain people who were responsible for the establishment of the church "where none existed before."²¹ Therefore, Calvin also wrote in his Ephesians commentary, "Where religion has fallen into decay ... evangelists are raised up in an extraordinary manner, to restore the pure doctrine which had been lost."²² This is not an inconsistency or a shift within Calvin's thought; rather, he understood the office of evangelist differently from how it is understood today. By no means did Calvin discourage the importance of the preaching of the gospel, for it is the Lord's own arrangement "to govern his church, to maintain its existence, and ultimately to secure its highest perfection."²³

IV. *The Gospel and the Glory of God*

Finally, the church as a creation of the gospel shall find her *telos* in the glory of God. The belief of the church in free justification through the gospel of Christ should find her application in doxology. The glory of God "should stand undiminished" through the church's testimony to the power of the gospel.²⁴ As long as the church glories in herself by forgetting that Christ is

²⁰ Stephen Tong, *Kerajaan Allah, Gereja, dan Pelayanan* (Surabaya: Momentum, 2014), 86.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes* 4.3.4 (2:1057).

²² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 280 (on Eph 4:11).

²³ *Ibid.*, 277 (on Eph 4:11–14).

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.13.1 (1:763).

our righteousness and redemption, she fails to glory in the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 1:30–31). A church that is truly satisfied by the gospel of grace truly and restfully glories in the Lord.²⁵

The church will be glorified with Christ, provided the church also suffers with him (cf. Rom 8:17). Just as the origin of the church was not by her own self-creative power, the *telos* of the church is not achieved by her self-glorification. The church will *be glorified*. Just as the danger exists of a church falling into self-preservation, so can she also fall into self-glorification.²⁶ A self-glorifying church fails to maintain the distinction between herself and Christ.

Although the church should wait for her final glorification with Christ, that does not mean that she cannot be glorified at all here and now, while still on earth. While Luke understood the relation between suffering and glory in sequential order—that is, suffering should precede (eschatological) glory (cf. Luke 24:26; Acts 14:22)—John viewed suffering and glory in a paradoxical tension: when Jesus was crucified, he was lifted up (cf. John 3:14; 12:32, 34). Following John’s theological profile, we can say that the church, while still here on earth, may already be glorified with Christ when she is persecuted for Christ’s sake.

Calling the Holy Spirit the Spirit of glory, Tong writes:

This attribute is particularly associated with the persecution the church faces. When the church is persecuted, they manifest the Spirit of the glory of the Lord God; meaning that when they are humiliated, God glorifies those who are being humiliated. When the church is persecuted, when Christians are persecuted, when their right to believe is taken away by others, when they are tortured, that is when God’s glory is upon them.²⁷

Note that here the church is glorified not when she appears in all her splendor, but under persecution. Asserting the glory of the church without suffering and persecution will lead to a triumphalist ecclesiology opposed to the theology of the cross.

²⁵ On glorying in the Lord, Calvin comments, “If therefore a man has his mind regulated in such a manner that, claiming no merit to himself, he desires that God alone be exalted; if he rests with satisfaction on his grace, and places his entire happiness in his fatherly love, and, in fine, is satisfied with God alone, that man *truly* ‘glories in the Lord.’” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, Calvin’s Commentaries 20 [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005], 95 [on 1 Cor 1:31]).

²⁶ Cf. Edmund Schlink, *Der kommende Christus und die kirchlichen Traditionen. Nach dem Konzil*, vol. 1 of *Schriften zu Ökumene und Bekenntnis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 103.

²⁷ Tong, *Roh Kudus, Doa, dan Kebangunan*, 18–19.

In his *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther argues for the theology of the cross—that is, true knowledge of God should be based not on the “glorious” invisible attributes of God but rather on the manifest and visible things of God, which are humanity, weakness, and foolishness.²⁸ True knowledge of God is based not on the theology of glory but on the theology of shame: “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross.”²⁹ An evangelical ecclesiology may apply Luther’s theology of the cross to the glory of the church. The true glory of the church is not to be witnessed in a visible glory that can be recognized and admired by the world; rather, her true glory lies in her fellowship with Christ’s sufferings, in her humility and shame for Christ’s sake.

The church is glorious when, because of her faithfulness to the gospel of Christ, she suffers in this world. We should not glorify suffering; rather, true union with Christ, who “suffered . . . , was crucified, died, and [was] buried” (cf. the Apostles’ Creed), surely includes fellowship with his sufferings (cf. Phil 3:10). Suffering is not accidental for those in union with Christ. The suffering church (*ecclesia dolens*) is not a church that grieves for her sins in purgatory while expecting the redemptive effect of suffering, for the church is redeemed not by her suffering but by the suffering Christ. On the contrary, suffering on earth is a mark of the true church, for she is in union with Christ. Those who suffer with Christ will be glorified with Christ. The suffering church will be the glorified church.

While on earth, the church is called to reflect God’s glory, despite imperfection. First, in her constant testimony, the church is not self-created but created by God in the power of the gospel. Celebrating the givenness of the church reflects the glory of God. Second, the church reflects God’s glory in the humble confession of sinfulness and imperfection. For Calvin, confession of sin is a doxology, for by confessing our sins, we give glory to God that he alone is righteous (cf. Ps 51:4).³⁰ Third, the church reflects God’s glory when she gives embodied testimony to the redemptive power of the gospel. We refer here to the deliverance of the church from the bondage of the ideologies of worldly empires, table fellowship, acts of love, healing, devotion, acceptance, the search for righteousness and truth, and the realization of the presence of the risen Christ in her midst.³¹

²⁸ Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, 20.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.13.1–2; see also Billy Kristanto, *Sola Dei Gloria: The Glory of God in the Thought of John Calvin* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2011), 106, 118.

³¹ Cf. Michael Welker, “Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung,” in *Die Wirklichkeit der*

Finally, the eschatological glory of the church will be perfected when the church is in perfect union with Christ in his heavenly glory. Since the fullness of all good things is to be found in God alone, “nothing beyond him is to be sought by those who strive after the highest good and all the elements of happiness.”³² The eschatological hope of the church in the future glory should encourage the church to be satisfied with the dim vision in a mirror on the one hand and to long for the full knowledge of the face-to-face vision on the other (cf. 1 Cor 13:12).³³ An eschatology-based vision of the glory of God will help the church to avoid the dangers of an idealist ecclesiology that leads to disappointment and a pessimist ecclesiology that robs the church of her blessed hope.

Conclusion

As a creation of the word, the church should always remember that her true power belongs to God, who gives the treasure of the holy gospel in jars of clay (cf. 2 Cor 4:7). The church should always be critical of the temptation of self-creative power, which runs contrary to her origin. However, humbly confessing her createdness and limitedness does not mean we have a low view of the church. The church is the body of Christ, his fullness, because to the church God gave Christ as head over all things (cf. Eph 1:22–23). The church as a creation of the word is called to reflect and depend on the creative power of the word, which is always fresh and new every morning.

The preaching of the gospel presupposes the preaching of the law in the Reformation tradition. The preaching of both law and gospel is directed not only at the society “outside” but also internally to the church. When the preaching of the law and the gospel addresses the church, it will lead the church to true self-knowledge—that is, the knowledge of her own sinfulness. The church is *simul iustus et peccator*: eschatologically, “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3), yet still struggling against sinfulness in the progressive sanctification to become “holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:27). The church under grace has the courage to exercise healthy self-criticism while avoiding the danger of self-righteousness.

The only comfort of the church in the midst of the world’s fallenness is that the church is not her own but belongs to her faithful Savior, Jesus Christ (cf. Heidelberg Catechism 1). As the property of Christ, the church

Auferstehung, ed Hans-Joachim Eckstein and Michael Welker (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 320.

³² Calvin, *Institutes* 3.25.10 (2:1005).

³³ Cf. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.25.11.

enjoys and testifies to the story of redemption. The enjoyment and witness can differ in degree from time to time. At the time of revival, the Holy Spirit reveals awareness of the church's sinfulness and the true divine comfort in the gospel of grace in greater depth. Waiting for true revival, the church should faithfully use the ordinary means of grace, that is, to persevere in preaching the law and the gospel. If the church is not to quench the Holy Spirit, she will learn to esteem the importance of the office of evangelist. This commitment to evangelism faithfully continues one of the Reformation's marks of the church, namely, the pure preaching of the gospel.

Finally, the church as a creation of the gospel is the church glorifying Christ and will be the church being glorified with Christ. There is always a constant temptation to live an ecclesiology of glory rather than the ecclesiology of the cross. An ecclesiology of glory boasts in the visible glory of worldly kingdoms (cf. Matt 4:8), while the ecclesiology of the cross testifies to true glory through faithfully bearing humiliation and shame for Christ's sake. God glorifies the church in his Son especially when the church is humiliated and persecuted for righteousness's sake. Far from glorifying persecution, the church sees glory in persecution in the revelation of the glory of Christ, who first suffered before being glorified (cf. 1 Pet 4:13). The grieving church will be the rejoicing church (cf. John 16:20). The church's eschatological glory gives us contentment and hope in both the present dimness of our knowledge and the future perfection of the beatific vision face to face.