
**TO THE ONE OUTSIDE THE GATE:
A MISSIONAL APPROACH TO POLITY**

DAVID FORNEY

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (Heb. 13:12-16)¹

In thinking about polity for this edition of the *JRL*, the above passage from Hebrews has captured my imagination. With the root of word *polity* developing from the Greek word for city, *polis*, Hebrews 13 offers us an intriguing metaphor from which to explore what a missional approach to polity might be. Given the contextual nature of polity and the varied ways in which we anticipate and participate in God's mission, this exploration is intentionally suggestive. The aim here is to provide denominational and congregational leaders a substantive metaphor by which to think about their respective polities missionally. Given its direct connection to the word *polity*, I begin with a survey of the Greek root for city. In the second section, the liturgical understanding of the city in the Epistle to the Hebrews (hereafter, Hebrews) guides the conversation for thinking about polity theologically. In light of this exegesis of Hebrews, I suggest some implications of the city metaphor for polity today.

David Forney is the Associate Dean of Faculty at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

¹ All biblical references are from *The New Revised Standard Version*.

A Survey of the Meaning of City

Greek Meaning of Polis

Polis translates as “city,” hence the English use in proper city names like *Minneapolis*. In Greek, *polis* also means “city-state,” “capital city,” or “main city”—in contrast to the desert (e.g., Mk. 1:45).² As a root, we derive from *polis* such words as “politic” (c. 1420), “political,” “policy,” “politician,” and “polity” (meaning civil organization or civil order, c. 1538). In 1594, Richard Hooker connected polity with church governance.

The necessitie of Politie, and Regiment in all Church my bee held, without holding any one certayne forme of politie, much less politie ecclesiasticall should be good, vnlesse God himself bee authour of it.³

From Hooker’s ecclesial connection, polity has subsequently referred to the particular forms or systems of church government (e.g., congregational, Presbyterian, episcopal).⁴ Because of this historical connection between *polis* and polity, this article focuses on the city as an instructive metaphor for approaching polity.

Structured human communities, such as cities, municipalities, towns, villages, camps, etc., obviously play an instrumental role in its members’ lives. Fundamentally, the city is the embodiment of human community—both righteous and sinful. For some, the city is place of excitement and prosperity; for others, the city is place of dislocation, hardship, and violence. And there are many

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979): 685.

³ Richard Hooker, *Ecl. Ol.* III. ii. § I, in *The Oxford English Dictionary, Volume 11*, J. A. Simpson (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1989): 36.

⁴ These four elementary forms of government place authority in different locations. Theoretically, congregational polity places the authority in the congregation; Presbyterian polity places the authority in a group of elders (or presbyters from *presbuteros*); and Episcopal polity places the authority in the highest-ranking bishop (*episkopos*).

experiences of the city between these two. Yet whether we enjoy or loathe the city our local centers of community impact our lives regularly. Therefore, each of us brings to the metaphor our varied experiences of the city. And it is these particular experiences, both the encouraging and discouraging ones that bring richness and complexity to the metaphor.

Historical and Biblical Understandings of Polis

A biblical understanding begins with a Hebraic conception of city.⁵ In 1 Kings 8, we learn about Zion,⁶ the city of God where Solomon dedicates the temple. “Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion” (v. 1). While biblical scholars are not certain about the precise Hebrew meaning of “Zion,” we know it clearly refers to Jerusalem, the city of David (see 2 Sam. 5: 6-10) and that an important tradition, or theology, developed for Zion.

Four basic motifs constitute the “Zion tradition” in the Old Testament. “(1) Zion is the peak of Zaphon, i.e., the highest mountain; (2) the river of paradise flows out of it; (3) God has defeated the assault of the waters of chaos there; and (4) God has defeated the kings and their peoples there.”⁷ The Zion tradition, or Zion theology, is marked consequently by (among other things) God dwelling on earth, a fidelity to the covenant, and the blessings that are afforded those who trust in God. From

⁵ In this article, there are two types of cities. The first type is the provisional (or the historical and contemporary cities, municipalities, towns, villages, and camps) in which we live. The second type is the city, which is the city of God, Zion, New Jerusalem.

⁶ In this article, various names (such as New Jerusalem, Zion) are used for the city of God that arrives with consummation. While there are important historical and theological differences between these names, they are here used synonymously.

⁷ J. J. M. Roberts, “The Davidic of the Zion Tradition,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 92/3, (1973): 329.

these, we see that God is deeply concerned about public policy and practice. J.J.M. Roberts states:

Faced with such a public policy with its inevitable social dislocations and hardships, which Judah's leadership probably justified as necessary evils to achieve security, peace, and well-being for Jerusalem, Isaiah responded with a prophetic critique of both poetic and theological depth. Metaphorically drawing on the ancient temple ideology of the Zion tradition, Isaiah contrasted the solid foundation Yahweh was laying to the government's flimsy fortifications, hastily built on inadequate foundations. Those fortifications would be measured for alignment with Yahweh's foundation, and, found wanting, they would be swept away, clearing the ground for Yahweh's new structure.⁸

From Isaiah 28:16, then, we learn about Yahweh's new structure and the foundation that will not shake for those who trust.

Therefore, thus says the Lord Yahweh:
Look, I am about to lay in Zion a stone,
A massive stone,
 a cornerstone valuable for a foundation,
A foundation which will not shake
 for the one who trusts.⁹

The old is swept away precisely because the city's rulers do not bring righteousness and justice.

Following Isaiah, the centrality of Zion to Judaism (and later for early Christianity) is echoed repeatedly in the Psalms. Zion is God's "holy hill" (Ps. 2:6), or "the holy habitation of the Most High" (Ps. 46:4), where we "sing praises to the LORD" (Ps. 9:11). "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Ps. 50:2). Jerusalem is "Mount Zion, which he loves. God built his

⁸ J. J. M. Roberts, "Yahweh's Foundation in Zion (Isa 28:16)," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 106/1, (1987): 43-4.

⁹ Translation by J. J. M. Roberts, "Yahweh's Foundation in Zion (Isa 28:16)," 37.

sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth, which he has founded forever” (Ps. 78:68-69).

The intersection of Judaism’s Zion with the Graeco-Roman *polis* produces the New Testament imagery of the Holy City, Jerusalem, as (1) “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:22), (2) the gospel message of Jesus Christ, the “living stone” (1 Pet. 2:1-6), and (3) the dwelling place of the Lamb (Rev. 14:1). Compared with Western cities (e.g., Paris, Berlin, New York), Jerusalem’s history is unparalleled, and it continues to be an important political and religious focal point.¹⁰ Jerusalem began relatively obscure but under the monarchies of David and Solomon, it became the unifier of the nation and the place God lifted up in Israel’s theological life (Ps. 68:15-16). In 587 B.C.E., however, Jerusalem was leveled by Babylon (2 Kings 25:10). Later, it welcomed the return of exiles (Ezra 1), became the center for preserving Judean purity (Neh. 13:28-30), came under Roman rule (63 B.C.E.) and, again, was devastated (70 A.D.).¹¹

In the Graeco-Roman world, the cultural significance of the city was highly important. *Polis* was the government, the city-state. Of course from city to city the government varied but, as a rule, a city’s *citizens* had the right to engage in its government. Residing in the city, however, did not confer citizenship. In fact, citizens only constituted a minority of a city’s population with women and slaves as non-citizens comprising the largest part

¹⁰ A significant example is the diverse population of today’s Jerusalem and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. From the Jewish/Muslim reality within its walls today, Jerusalem is a place like no other. “THINK of Jerusalem as a holy place, and at least two images spring to mind. One is the towering slab of yellow-white, pockmarked stone, at the foot of which Hebrew prayers are softly uttered. The other is the dazzling golden dome that commands the skyline. These images are different views of the same structure: the western wall, a focal point for Jewish prayer and pilgrimage, is one of the supports for the elevated stone platform that is known to Jews as Temple Mount and to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary.” *The Economist*, “The Heart of Holy War: Jerusalem’s Holy Places,” April 12, 2006.

¹¹ “Jerusalem,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985): 463-73.

(a small remainder of a city's population was typically foreigners). Citizenship meant power, wealth, and education. Consequently, after Alexander the Great would conquer an area, he would establish the citizenry from his Macedonian veterans and their families. "A city was built, with a gymnasium, and land was confiscated and assigned to the veterans; however, it was not farmed directly by them but by slaves or, as was often the case in Asia, by serfs who were bound to the land."¹² In this way, citizenship was the identifier for those in power.

The function of the city in the Graeco-Roman world provided its citizens their sense of identity in a much large extent than our cities do today. A citizen's identity was tied directly to his city. Both Graeco-Roman and Jewish literature attest to the importance of the city to provide its citizens their "primary reference group."¹³ Additionally, the city extended its reputation to its citizens if they sojourned.

For instance, when Paul makes his defense for his life in Jerusalem, he persuades the tribune to let him speak to the angry mob, saying, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people" (Acts 21:39). Tarsus, one of the great ports of the Mediterranean, was the terminus of a road that crossed the length of Asia Minor. Tarsus also claimed one of greatest gymnasiums, thus Paul boasts of being brought up "at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3) and, at his first opportunity to speak to the tribune, he states his citizenship to gain legitimacy. Paul is a citizen of a great city. For the ancients, the city's reputation conferred upon its citizenry their identity. Paul's mistaken identity is corrected by his citizenship. As a citizen of Tarsus, he could not be one of the "...Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand

¹² Lester L. Grabbe, "The Hellenistic City of Jerusalem," in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, edited by John R. Bartlett (Routledge: London and New York, 2002), 9.

¹³ David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 394.

assassins out into the wilderness” (Acts 21:39). The tribune, therefore, lets Paul speak to the mob and, again, he begins by telling them his identity. ”I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia...” (Acts 22:3). Paul’s struggle in Acts is an example of the important function of the city for structuring life and community in the Hellenistic world.

The New Testament writers and the early church knew well the powerful social realities of the city and appropriated this image in their writings.¹⁴ The authors of Galatians, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and Revelation presume that their readers understood the significance of “Jerusalem” as both a contemporary city and an analogy precisely because it carried a multitude of associations. According to Paul Minear, the three associations of city in these New Testament books are *genealogical*, *geographical*, and *liturgical*.¹⁵ Minear ascribes the genealogical association to Galatians where the image of the city follows Paul’s allegory between free (Sarah) and slave (Hagar).¹⁶ Revelation uses the geographical association

¹⁴ It should also be noted that in the Bible, the cities are both places of holiness (e.g., the City of David) and wickedness (e.g., Sodom, Gomorrah, Nineveh, or Babylon).

¹⁵ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004): 96.

¹⁶ An example of genealogical association is in Galatians where Paul harkens to Genesis to illustrate the needlessness of circumcision by lifting up the freedom provided by Christ. Specifically in Galatians 3:6-29, Paul draws on the Old Testament narrative of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar to answer his opponents who, evidently, have argued that only the circumcised are truly Abraham’s heirs to the promise of salvation. In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul returns to the Genesis narrative with the allegory of Sarah and Hagar. This passage is part of a larger argument about freedom in Christ (vv. 4:8-6:10). In typical rabbinical fashion, Paul interprets the account of Sarah and Hagar allegorically and presents it as evidence to support the importance of freedom (see Gen. 16:15; 21:1-21). In 4:24-27, Paul identifies the two women with two different covenants, presumably an “old” and a “new,” and with two different Jerusalems in parallel—one present and earthly, the other above and heavenly. The one Jerusalem is the realm of bondage; the other is the realm of freedom. In verse 27, Paul quotes from Isaiah 54:1, which speaks of Jerusalem before and after the exile. With her people gone into captivity, New Jerusalem (Sarah) has more cause for rejoicing than before, since after the ordeal her prosperity will exceed that of former times. Thus, Paul insists

for the city where the physical manifestation of the New Jerusalem is to come.¹⁷ An example of the liturgical association for *polis* is found in Hebrews where readers are called to an approach,¹⁸ or way, created by the One who is crucified outside the gate.

Hebrews as Our Guide

Our polity discussions would benefit from a thorough examination of each of the three city associations—genealogical, geographical, and liturgical. I find the liturgical association from Hebrews to be a particularly pertinent guide because it contains four important components for thinking about polity missionally.¹⁹ The

that the New Jerusalem (freedom) offers far more than the old (slavery), the gospel far more than the law. For an excellent discussion on God's promise and Christian freedom in Galatians 4, see Charlie B. Cousar, *Galatians*, (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 102-110.

¹⁷ One example of geographical is John's apocalypse, which is sent to the churches geographically located in seven large cities, several which constituted a who's who in Asia Minor. Beyond the geography of the present cities of Asia Minor, Revelation maps the important geographical contours of the city which is to come. The New Jerusalem is holy and will come from out of heaven from God. This city will be the home of God among us and will be the place where God wipes every tear from our eyes. Here crying, mourning, and even death will be no more, "for the first things [will] have passed away" (Rev. 21:1-4). Absent in this city's skyline, though, is the temple (Rev. 13:6). New Jerusalem does not have a temple because the city itself is filled with God and God's people, the twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of the church (Rev. 21: 15-17). See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989).

¹⁸ In Hebrews, the notion of "approach" is an important theme and is used specifically six times in reference to our approach to God. An important distinction the Preacher argues for is that, in the new reality of Jesus Christ, all are able to approach God; whereas, in the former covenant, the regulations for worship prevented all but the priests from approaching the holy place and only the high priest himself could approach the holy of holies. With Christ as the forerunner, the Preacher encourages us to "approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

¹⁹ These components are found, of course, throughout the Bible. In Hebrews, they are focused to address an audience that is anxious, apathetic, and expressing bitterness (Heb. 12:15). I believe these three adjectives are increasing in our context and that we would significantly benefit from attentively listening again to the Preacher.

first component is Hebrews' picture of Christian hope that is inextricably connected to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered" (Heb. 6:19-20a). The author of Hebrews, or the Preacher,²⁰ understands that long ago "God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets" (Heb. 1:1) and that God's last messenger is the Son (Heb. 1:2). Christian hope, therefore, is rooted in God's promise—in the life, death, resurrection, and coming again of the Forerunner. This promise governs our vision. The Preacher calls us to a Godward orientation by the promise's "once-for-all-ness"²¹ that is the final word—then, now, and forever.

The second component is that Hebrews redirects our attention to see our relationship to and participation in the biblical narrative. Hebrews 11:4-40 traces the people of God, from Abel to the desert and mountain wanderers, through their sufferings—torture, mockery, imprisonment, destitution, persecution, torment, and being killed by stoning and the sword. This is our community; these are our people who surround us as "so great a cloud of witnesses" to encourage us to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1). The Preacher exhorts us to take a longer view to see the ways God's mission creates, redeems, and sustains. Even if we do not see God's mission presently, the Preacher urges us to have faith, which is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1) even if we are anxious, apathetic, and/or bitter. The

²⁰ Following the convention that Thomas Long incorporates in his commentary, *Hebrews*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), I will be referring to the author of Hebrews as the Preacher because the epistle is a "word of exhortation" (Heb. 13:22) and "bears all the marks of an early Christian sermon." Long, 2.

²¹ Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, translated by Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 27.

sermon preached in Hebrews is a hopeful one²² in which we live in the city and are sent outside the camp to actively “bear the abuse he endured” (Heb. 13:13).²³

Third, Hebrews takes sin seriously for both unbeliever and believer. Each of us has a real possibility of possessing an “evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). We are in danger of neglecting the message spoken by Jesus and attested by God (Heb. 2:3) and can even fall away after tasting “the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Heb. 6:5-6). Few of us live up to what the Preacher expects from mature believers (Heb. 5:12). Sin clings closely; it easily distracts us (Heb. 12:1). We grow weary and lose heart (Heb. 12:3). The Preacher knows full well what the human condition is and what is at stake. This realism is important for rethinking polity given humanity’s propensity for idolatry and tyranny, both within and beyond the Church because it dispels the illusion that we can predict, control, and command the mission of God’s.

Finally, Hebrews uses the city as a liturgical metaphor to help us persevere in this in-between time—the time between Christ’s first and second appearance (Heb. 9:28). The Preacher uses *polis* as a powerful ecclesial image on three different occasions toward the end of the sermon (in articles 11, 12, and 13). Indeed, the one sentence that applies to the entire letter of Hebrews, according to Ernst Käsemann, is 13:13. “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”²⁴ Consequently, grappling with the city metaphor brings us to the heart of the Preacher’s approach.

²² See Hebrews 3:1-6, 6:11-19, 7:18-19, 10:19-23, and 11:1-3.

²³ One liturgical example of actively bearing the abuse Christ endured is the Eucharist. A central refrain in many traditions—from 1 Corinthians 11:26—is that “every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of the risen Lord, until he comes.”

²⁴ Käsemann, 23.

Some Complexities of the In-between Time

Before focusing on the Preacher's approach, though, a short discussion of two complexities for thinking about polity and role of authority is needed. Polity from a missional perspective takes seriously the two important complexities of this in-between time. The first complexity is one that is central to the Christian life—both corporately and individually—that is, the Holy Spirit's ongoing work in our processes of discernment and decision-making. This work is both harder and richer than we might like or expect. Culturally, we prefer the instantaneous and disposable. We prefer sending short emails and leaving voice messages, rather than hand writing a letter. And we would like our church work and polity to follow suit. Yet, salvation history narrates forty-year-wilderness journeys and forty days in the wilderness. The work of the Holy Spirit is deeper and more substantive than any pager, fax machine, or email can deliver. In the Nicene Creed, we read "we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father (and the Son), who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets."²⁵ From this creed, we affirm that the Holy Spirit gives life, acts in creation, and continues the work of God the Creator and God the Redeemer. The Holy Spirit is our guide and advocate in all facets of life, including polity issues. Therefore, while we might desire a polity prescription, we are lead to a life together that is more substantive and complex because our life in the Spirit is relational.

²⁵ The Council of Constantinople, 381. The Nicene Creed is the most ecumenical of creeds with Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and most Protestant churches affirming it. Nevertheless, in contrast to Eastern Orthodox churches, the western churches state that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but from the Father and the Son (Latin, *filioque*). To the eastern churches, saying that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son threatens the distinctiveness of the person of the Holy Spirit; to the western churches, the *filioque* guards the unity of the triune God. This issue remains unresolved in the ecumenical dialogue.

The second complexity is the contextual character of church governance and God's mission. Church governance is created out of and for specific contexts. Salvation history is replete with examples of different forms and functions of governance, given their specific contexts: from Moses' need for judges (Exod. 18:13-27) to Israel's desire for a King (1 Sam. 8:1-18); from the casting of lots to decide who would replace Judas (Acts 1:26) to the selection of the seven to serve food to the widows (Acts 6:1-6); from the appointment of elders in every town (Titus 1:5-9) to the church fathers' selections of bishops (e.g., Bishop of Rome); from the convening of church councils (e.g., Council of Nicaea in 325) to Pope Gregory's manual on the duties of the clergy (c. 600); from papal decrees (e.g., the Papal decree in 1059 establishing papal elections by cardinals only) to the writing of confessions (e.g., Confession of Augsburg in 1530); from the development of denominations²⁶ to our present-day practices of governance.

In all these places and times, God's mission has taken numerous forms. God's mission is, paradoxically, changeless *and* ever changing.

And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true. Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 21:5-6)

It is changeless as Jesus Christ is the Alpha and Omega; it is also ever changing because it meets us precisely in our particular contexts for, in Jesus Christ, God makes all things new.

These two complexities, discernment and context, encourage us to abandon our solution-oriented drive and to embrace the dynamic relationality of a life of faith. We are not called to a solution but to an approach.

²⁶ See Craig Van Gelder, "Understanding Polity in Relationship to the DNA of Denominations," *Journal of Religious Leadership*, 5/1-2, (2006).

Another reason a polity prescription is not tenable concerns *authority*.²⁷ Congregations, denominations, and other ecclesial groupings experience, struggle, and work with a tapestry of authorities—e.g., the Bible, tradition, church governance, and the pastoral office. With the ending of functional Christendom in the United States, we are becoming aware of Christianity's *volunteer* aspect, where people are culturally freer to take it or leave it. Therefore, we are beginning to function similar to the Roman law's notion of *auctoritas*, which is "the capacity to produce consequential speech, quelling doubts and winning the trust of the audiences whom they engage."²⁸ In other words, protestant churches in United States are no longer granted general authority but increasingly hold only the authority that particular audiences (congregations, denominations, consortia) agree upon.

Our polities are provisional systems where we intend to use authority responsibly to help us navigate our way to the city of God where the Authority is the triune God. On Mount Zion, God is builder, host, and resident. On our way to Zion, we encounter many authorities that are prophets and pretenders, sages and fools. Some authorities are the principalities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness or the spiritual forces of evil (Eph. 6:12). Other authorities are messengers of God, even entertaining angels without knowing it (Heb. 13:2). The discernment and proper use of authority ought to be a fundamental concern of our provisional polities since polity details what the congregation is, what its mission is, what it believes, who its members and leaders are, how decisions are made, and what proper liturgy is. In large

²⁷ Authority is a broad concept that is difficult to fully develop, especially in such a short space. The literature on authority is enormous; philosophy, sociology, ethics, history, political science, theology, and psychology provide conceptualizations of authority, each offering a wide array of specific definitions. In this work, the helpful analysis of Bruce Lincoln was used. See Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 4.

part, polity concretizes our values and sets our expectations when we gather. And here in lies the issue. Authority is the intersection of (1) a particular effect *and* (2) our capacity to create that effect *and* (3) the commonly shared opinion that a person or group of people has the capacity for producing that effect.²⁹ When these three converge, authority is then exercised in that particular time and place.

Hebrews and a Missional Approach

In both the Old and New Testaments, Mount Zion is the desired and ultimate destination for humanity. As Isaiah testifies concerning Zion:

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (Isa. 2:2-4)

As fellow sojourners, we long for the city that shall not be moved, from Abraham to today, says the Preacher.

Abraham was able to endure as a foreigner, "willingly embraced a lower status in terms of the world's estimation"³⁰, because of the hope for the city of God. Abraham "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb.

²⁹ Ibid., 10-11.

³⁰ deSilva, 394.

11:10); Abraham's faith was steadfast because of the unshakable foundations of that city.³¹ Yet, that city is not fully here and now. We continue to struggle, hurt, and die. We, like Abraham, "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:15). Until then, we create contextually driven, provisional polities in which to live in the city and journey outside the gate.

I remember vividly the first time I heard that the church is *not* the reign of God because it fundamentally re-oriented my ecclesiology. This simple statement broke open for me an internal struggle that had been churning within me. The people I knew and loved in the church were often petty, insincere, and hurtful to one another and themselves. Moreover, from my perspective the church's organizational structures were (are) flawed and, at times, terribly misguided. Nevertheless, it is among these gathered people, that I experienced God's mission. Therefore, learning about the now-and-not-yet reality of God's reign within the Church, freed me to live with the provisional realities of this in-between time. Until the Day (Heb. 10:25), we need provisional dwelling places, temporal governances, so that we might "provoke one another to love and good deeds" and not neglect to worship together (Heb. 10:24, 25). And since these dwelling places are provisional, we should expect them to change, grow, retract, and even discontinue. Our polities are not the New Jerusalem, they cannot encapsulate God's reign but are here to help us navigate this in-between time.

To help the hearers better understand the liturgical approach, the Preacher juxtaposes Mount Sinai with

³¹ This is similar to Isaiah's vision of the city. "The nature of [Zion's] measurements, however, is the real key to Isaiah's meaning. His identification of the divine builder's line and plummet as justice and righteousness shows that Isaiah was not referring to the foundation of an actual physical temple, whether contemporary or future. The temple symbolized Yahweh's presence in Jerusalem, and, according to the Zion tradition, it was Yahweh's presence that provided the city's security, that constituted its real walls and towers (Pss 48:2, 6, 8, 12; 48:4)." Roberts, "Yahweh's Foundation in Zion (Isa 28:16)," 44.

Mount Zion. In Hebrews 12:18-29, we learn that we have not come to something tangible but to God. The route we take is no longer that of the spoken law issued from a blazing fire, a tempest, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another utterance would come to them (vv. 18, 19). We come to Mount Zion by a more joyful way; our approach to the heavenly Jerusalem is with the firstborn and the spirits of righteousness, with the mediator of the new covenant through blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (vv. 23, 24). The Preacher uses the former approach of Mount Sinai as a negative image to juxtapose a religious establishment that is severed from those who are suffering and, consequently, longing for a word of comfort. The new approach radically removes the religious barriers to the Holy of Holies through Jesus Christ, whose sacrifice tore the curtain from top to bottom. In this new approach, everyone is given access to worship God directly, to sing with angels to the Ruler of the unshakeable kingdom (Heb. 12:18-29). Worshipping the One crucified outside the gate is the approach the Preacher commends to us and is the association of *polis* that ought to command our attention.

The city is our place of residence. We live, work, and dwell in the city. Of course the geographic and demographic make up of our communities vary widely. But unless we find ourselves solitary on the desert island, we are part of a community where we benefit (usually) from one another. From law enforcement and fire fighters, to merchants and hospitals, we live in communities where we share similar values of how to live together. In other words, the structures of the city provide for us a place to practice our livelihoods (again, usually this is the case). In the case of the church, its structures (rituals, governance, practices)—both formal and informal ones—help shape what the community believes and what are its expectations and values. Consequently, our cities are ever changing; they are at best provisional.

Yet, while we live in our cities, the Preacher pushes us outside the gate to the One crucified. Drawing on an Old Testament understanding of outside the gate (or camp), the Preacher points to our justification and sanctification outside the walls of the city. “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood” (Heb. 13:11-12). Like Moses, we go to the tent of meeting that is located outside of the camp. “Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp” (Exod. 33:7, cf. Num. 11:16-30). When we leave our camps to go to the Holy, we venture to the place where unclean persons were cast, such as lepers, those with discharge, or someone who had touched a corpse (Num. 5:2-4); where all those requiring purification waited (Num. 12:14-15; 31:1-20); and where lawbreakers were put to death (Num. 15:32-36). This is the place that the Preacher pushes us, for this is the place where Jesus was crucified and, consequently, it is the place we go to worship God.

One observation about the role of the city and the importance of going to the crucified outside the gate is their *proximity*. The city and the trash heap are connected; Jerusalem and Golgotha are inextricably linked. Jesus is condemned in the city by the powers and principalities and, subsequently, marched outside Jerusalem’s gates to be crucified (see Matt. 27:11-54; Jn. 18:28-19:19). This close proximity points to the important relationship between the city and the crucified. Our journey to the crucified is within walking distance; we readily offer our praise to God through Christ (Heb. 13:15) within hearing distance of the city. Moreover, from Golgotha we have a clear vantage point with which to view our provisional cities with all their vigor and indolence. The Preacher, in fact, urges us to pass regularly through the gate to

strengthen our buckling knees and make straight our paths “so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (Heb. 12:12).

The close proximity of the gate and Golgotha also guards us against unqualified power and authority. “Unqualified power is *per se* the power of negation, destruction, and dissolution. The [one] who is obedient to the command of God self-evidently cannot and will not desire this power.”³² Our provisional cities help qualify our exercise of authority while the city’s authority is qualified by the One hung at Golgotha. With only the city, we destroy ourselves with rampant idolatry; with no city in sight, we destroy ourselves with uncontrolled tyranny. In both cases, gates closed for travel or no gates at all, we perish when we have lost sight of Golgotha.

Living in the city and journeying outside the gate to Golgotha can be described as a “permanent liminality,” where we “inhabit the fringes and interstices of the social structure.”³³ This is what Victor Turner believes Saint Francis urged the friars to do. He wanted to keep them “in a permanent liminal state, where, so the argument of this [Turner’s] book would suggest, the optimal conditions inhere for the realization of *communitas*.”³⁴ It is this urging to liminality that the Preacher advocates. We are encouraged to live liminally by living in the city *and* journeying outside the gate.

In initially thinking about the metaphor, I related the city with polity. In this conceptualization, polity is consigned to the city’s governance and is detached from our journeys outside the gate. Of course metaphors collapse when they are pushed to the extreme. But I wonder if the metaphor can function broader than this simple representation. What if polity serves to guide both our city living *and* our journeys outside the gate? In this

³² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, III.4*, G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990): 391.

³³ Victor W. Turner, *Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969): 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

way, polity would promote the cooperation (rather than competition) required for both city living in and our journeying outside the gate by establishing a faith community's expectations, values, and role demands in both places.

Examples of this broader view of polity are actually found in many denominational standards for worship. For instance, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the *Book of Order* is divided into three parts—the Form of Government, the Directory for Worship, and the Rules for Discipline. When considered metaphorically by this extended view, the first part sets the standards for city living, the second part presents norms for journeying outside the gate, and the third part provides the process for discipline (with its restorative intent) when correctives are needed. This broadened view of the metaphor, though, does not encapsulate the One we worship but rather points us toward the dynamic approach the Preacher advocates.

Worship as the Approach

The Preacher urges us to worship, to “continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name [and to] not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb. 13:15-16). Worship is the approach advocated by the Preacher; it is the central location for offering praise, confessing Christ, learning what is good, and practicing generosity. These are the sacrifices that are pleasing to God and which help us navigate our way faithfully to Zion in this in-between time.

The theme of sacrifice runs throughout the Preacher's sermon (used nineteen times in the NRSV) and is central to understanding Jesus as the High Priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:6). The Preacher points to the fact that “every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb. 5:1). He then

goes on to show us that Jesus' main gift is that he affords everyone unrestricted access to God.³⁵ Jesus' self-sacrifice (Heb. 2:17) affords us face-to-face access to God (cf. Heb. 8:1-13). Consequently, the Preacher urges us (the hearers) to take advantage of this access to God by drawing near in assembling ourselves together for worship. "He establishes the Christian assembly as the hub or center of their lives in this world. Motion away from this hub (i.e., defection or 'shrinking back') signals motion away from the divine center of the cosmos."³⁶

Not only does the Preacher directly encourage us to praise God, but he also uses a sermon to communicate this message. Throughout this paper, I have called the author of Hebrews "Preacher" because the "epistle to the Hebrews" functions more as sermon than a letter. Most commentators understand the book as a sermon and even believe the book is "unfortunately named" a letter.³⁷ As a sermon, the Preacher models proclamation while encouraging us to offer to God our praise.

The dramatic 'representation' of this heavenly and unrepeatable liturgy will have a profound effect on the addressees. They will be reminded of the holiness that has been conferred on them by the water of baptism and the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:22), and of the access to God, which they have been able to enjoy in congregational worship and private prayer. They have been consecrated, perfected in terms of the conscience. Thus, their impulse will be to preserve what is holy from desecration (which comes through the 'willful sin' of apostasy, distrust, shrinking back).³⁸

The space from which we are made holy (sanctified) is both living in the city *and* journeying outside the gate. This holy space is worship. In worship, we learn what is

³⁵ I use the masculine for the Preacher following deSilva. "The author's use of a masculine ending for the self-referential participle [in 11:32] would rule out Prisca or another female author" (25).

³⁶ DeSilva, 333.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

good; we are consecrated and perfected in terms of the conscience. Worship creates the space where the city's orderly (seemingly) walls and the messiness of Golgotha meet and, in this space, we learn to do good and to share what we have (Heb. 13:16).

Jesus' selfless act at Golgotha calls and leads us directly to generosity. Our gratitude for the sacrifice of the One outside the gate is fully expressed in practicing generosity. Throughout the sermon, the Preacher urges us to draw near to God's presence through the pioneer and perfecter and then to go out and serve. From our encounter with the One crucified, we are sent to "let mutual love continue" (Heb. 13:1), "to show hospitality to strangers" (Heb. 13:2), and to "remember those who are in prison" and "those who are being tortured" (Heb. 13:3). Generosity is a vital expression of the love of the believers for one another; generosity provides the basis for our life together. "The author of Hebrews reinforces this connection between showing gratitude to God and giving assistance to one's sisters and brothers, between honoring God and serving others."³⁹ When we journey to Jesus outside the gate in worship, the encounter sends us back to our cities to serve all in need. Therefore, we dare to approach the throne of grace with boldness (Heb. 4:16, 10:22), to hold fast to our confession (Heb. 4:14, 10:23), and to imitate the generosity of those who, through perseverance, have inherited the promises of God (Heb. 6:12).

Moving Toward a Missional Polity

In Ernst Käsemann's *The Wandering People of God*, we read from an imprisoned biblical scholar in 1937 Nazi Germany about how Hebrews "intends to show the Christian community the greatness of the promise given it and the seriousness of the temptation threatening it."⁴⁰ That is to say, the church has been, is, and will face serious temptations until Zion's consummation by God.

³⁹ Ibid., 506.

⁴⁰ Käsemann, 17.

In Hebrews, the Preacher encourages a liturgical association for city living and journeying outside the gate as essential for our life until consummation, and I believe that this liturgical association helps us to avoid two temptations we face in the denominational church, *institutional idolatry* and *antinomianism*. Encouraged by the Preacher, the metaphor of the city affords us a constructive approach (living in the city, journeying outside the gate) in the face of our tendencies to either entrench ourselves in our respective cities or to pack up our bags and evacuate.

Institutional Idolatry

In 1989, the year I began the ordination process in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), my home church's governing body presented me with a copy of the denomination's constitution. The congregation that I grew up in provided me with this ordination guide. And this guide, part two of the constitution called the *Book of Order*, was a rather thin volume at that time. Today as candidates for ministry begin their ordination journeys in the PCUSA, their guidebook is nearly twice as thick.

There are many reasons for this tremendous expansion of the *Book of Order*, one of which is a response to our increasingly litigious climate. United States law, such as compliance with the American Disability Act, necessitates some of the increases in church polity. Other increases, though, are the result of harmful motivations, such as a false understanding of polity's role. At times, denominations believe that if they solidify a policy or procedure by vote (or other decision-making process), then their problems, issues, or struggles will be resolved. Rarely, though, is this in fact the case, especially for deeply divided issues. Yet, sometime we act and expect our polities to deliver such deliverance. When our hope is principally placed in a polity rather than in God, then we are in danger of practicing institutional idolatry.

This misplaced allegiance comes, in part, from a legacy of Christendom. Darrell Guder states:

Neither the structures nor the theology of our established Western traditional churches is missional. They are shaped by the legacy of Christendom. That is, they have been formed by centuries in which Western civilization considered itself formally and officially Christian. ...Even when the legal structures of Christendom have been removed (as in North America), the legacy continues as a pattern of powerful traditions, attitudes, and social structures...⁴¹

These traditions, attitudes, and social structures are so systemic that many members of the Western traditional churches believed that their specific ecclesiologies are *the* right or only faithful ones.

When Christendom's legacy is coupled with modernity's scientific management, the idol becomes all the more alluring. Fundamentally, scientific management at the start of the twentieth century postulated that there is an optimal way (measured by efficiency) for operating organizations.⁴² The premier twentieth-century example of this scientific management comes from the distinguished German social theorist Max Weber, who made the term "bureaucracy" famous by advocating it as a means of rationally managing organizations.⁴³ Weber's bureaucratic model prescribed detailed rules, regulations, and procedures; job specialization that connects a job's function with the worker's skill base; selection and

⁴¹ Darrell L. Guder, "Missional Vocation: Called and Sent to Represent the Reign of God," in Darrell L. Guder (ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 6.

⁴² Scientific management is the classical organizational theory that advocated using research to determine the optimal way to standardize work tasks and specialization. It began in the early 1900s with Frederick Taylor, who was primarily concerned with job design and the manufacturing flow. See Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, New York: Norton, (1967). For a summary of earlier scientific management theorists and relevant references, see Daniel A. Wren, *The Evolution of Management Thought*, 4th ed., (New York: Wiley, 1993).

⁴³ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Management*, A. M. Henderson and T. Parsons, Tran., (New York: Free Press, 1974).

promotion based on objectively measured criteria (rather than subjective favoritism); a strict chain of command; and the consolidation of power at the top of the organization. The confluence of the scientific management philosophy with Christendom's legacy of powerful traditions, attitudes, and social structures creates a ripe environment for institutional idolatry to flourish. Many religious leaders came to believe that the correct management of the church's mission would resolve many of the problems that afflict us.

David Bartlett calls our attention to the danger of this rationalized institutional structure in his book *Ministry in the New Testament*.

More than the facing of eschatological hope or the recurrent threat of heresy, the movement toward rationalized institutional structures in a complex world causes the church legitimately to call some people to provide leadership in teaching, administering, enabling care, and preaching. ...The danger is that those of us who are paid for churchly jobs will so lose touch with other Christians that we will think ecclesiastical issues are the main issues and the bright new paraments a sign of redemption for the pain of the world.⁴⁴

In response to this misplaced focus, Bartlett provides a thoughtful analysis of church structures as understood in the New Testament and believes these ought to shake "us from our careful institutional rigidity lest we miss the moving of the Spirit and the reality of our fellow Christians."⁴⁵

Of course institutions are necessary to provide the structures for our life together. But when we put our central trust and primary focus in the maintenance of our polity, and/or the denomination's survival, then we will lack the time, energy, and resources to anticipate and

⁴⁴ David Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 188.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 188-9.

participate in God's mission or that we simply neglect God's activity all together.

Antinomianism

One helpful corrective to our temptation to place our ultimate trust in institutions is remembering and celebrating the freedom given us in Christ Jesus. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). If, however, we understand this freedom as a rejection of the law, then we are in danger of practicing, what Martin Luther termed, antinomianism. In Greek, antinomianism literally means *anti*, "against" and *nomos*, "law." Historically, Christians who dismissed obedience (because it was legalistic) were branded antinomians. They believed Christians are freed from the strictures of the Mosaic Law and are, through grace, guided by the inner workings of the Holy Spirit. Following this line of thought, some believed that grace was freedom from the law and, therefore, freedom to licentious behavior. A formal decree was issued by the Roman Catholic Church in 1312 denouncing antinomianism with chiefly three heretical doctrines, namely, that we: (1) can attain sinlessness, (2) can dispense with all the rituals and structures of religion, and (3) are no longer subject to the law of God or the church.⁴⁶ This decree by the Council of Vienne, however, did not end the use of the brand or practice of antinomianism.

Others who have been labeled as antinomian are Luther's collaborator Johann Agricola, the left-wing Anabaptists for opposing cooperation of church and state, the Separatists in the seventeenth century, the Familists, the Ranters, and the Independents in England. In Massachusetts, Anne Hutchinson challenged church authorities by arguing (rather successfully) that a believer possessed the Holy Spirit is not bound subsequently by the requirements of the law. One reason this *heresy*

⁴⁶ See Williston Walker, et. al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985): 362.

continues to appear is because of the *now* and *not yet* reality of this age. We are, all at once, freed from and in need of the Decalogue. Therefore, we continue to grapple with the tension between the freedom we have in Christ and the necessity of the law. Taken to the extreme, a congregation that believes it is completely free from any governance structure is moving toward an *antinomian polity*.

The term antinomian polity is, of course, an oxymoron. The term intends to convey the reality that when people gather for sustained worship, service, and mutual encouragement a polity is formed, whether it is recognized or not. There is an increased need for structure and rules (for decision-making processes and the exercise of authority) as larger numbers of people gather, regardless of their stated purpose. Moreover, we need more structure as the complexity of the effort increases. Yet, even small, informal groups create structures and conventions for organizing themselves.

The danger of an antinomian polity is an idealism that stems from the mistaken idea that rules, regulations, or laws—especially those of organized religion—are antithetical to the freedom afforded in Christ. This idealism fails to take seriously the various ways (benevolent and malevolent) in which authority is used in all human interactions. “A confidence that a benevolent will can bring together love and the facts in each decision-making moment precludes the intrusion of moral laws”⁴⁷ is to disregard the fact that we have a propensity toward idolatry and tyranny. It seems that our foretaste of God’s reign gives us an anticipation of the freedom that is to come with Zion’s consummation. In Zion, we will not have need for church polity. But today, as we wait, we still practice the very things we hate. “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own

⁴⁷ Gabriel Fackre, “Antinomianism,” in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983): 27.

actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:14-15). Paul knows the goodness of God and of the banquet that is to come yet still does the very thing he hates. He is a forgiven sinner. Likewise, when we gather, we want to live in harmony, peace, and goodness but eventually become fearful, compete for seemingly scarce resources, and are violent to one another.

These two temptations—institutional idolatry and antinomian polity—are at the heart of the challenge, the *now* and *not yet*. As the writer of Hebrews states; “We have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14). In Jesus Christ, we know what Zion will be like, the city whose architect and builder is God (Heb. 11:10). Through faith (as expressed in Heb. 11:1), we come to know about this city because it is revealed to our minds and sealed upon our heart through the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ Yet, Zion has yet to be consummated.

The first temptation is institutional idolatry where we believe and act as if there is one correct polity for all people, places, and times.⁴⁹ This temptation, however, is not surprising since we have a foretaste of what the reign of God is. We know what justice, kindness, and humility are in Jesus Christ. And like Peter, James, and John on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured, we want to concretize our foretastes of God’s reign, of Zion. Yet, we are not called to build dwelling places on the mountain-top, but rather to travel with Christ back to the people in the valley (see Mark 9:2-13). The second temptation that clings closely to us is an antinomianism polity where we believe that our freedom in Christ means we are free from commonly agreed upon procedures. From an organizational-theory perspective, these two temptations stand on the opposite ends of the spectrum. From a theological perspective, however, they stem from the

⁴⁸ See John Calvin’s definition of faith, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.2.7.

⁴⁹ One Old Testament passage that exemplifies the futility of this idolatry is the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), which tells of our inability to build for ourselves a structure that is ultimately stable and intrinsically valuable.

same root cause—namely, our propensity to sin. If we lose sight of the Forerunner of our faith (either because our city walls are too high and rigid *or* because the city is no where in sight), then we will fall away.

Martin Luther, early in his teaching career, lectured that we are, at the same time, both righteous and sinners (*simul iustus et peccator*). To illustrate this point, he asked which is true (healthy or sick) when a physician declares that a sick man will recover.

Can one say that this sick man is healthy? No; but he is at the same time both sick and healthy. He is actually sick, but he is healthy by virtue of the sure prediction of the physician whom he believes. For the physician reckons him already healthy because he is certain that he can cure him, and does not reckon him his sickness as death.⁵⁰

With this same confidence, we ought to anticipate and participate in God's mission now, even as we recognize that the city of God is not yet fully revealed. Therefore, our provisional cities⁵¹ should not be confused with the main issue of *missio Dei*, where the "mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation."⁵² To illustrate the approach offered by the Preacher, let us consider an example from Germany in the 1930s.

Example of Living in the City, Journeying Outside the Gate

One example of this missional approach comes from the struggle for Germany in the 1930s and the Confessing Church. A group of church members, pastors, and theologians who lived in the city journeyed outside the gate when the "German Christians" proclaimed that

⁵⁰ Martin Luther, quoted by J. C. O'Neill, "*Simul iustus et peccator*," in Alan Richardson and John Bowden (eds.), *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 538.

⁵¹ I use the plural deliberately because the cities we live in are diverse and changing.

⁵² Guder, 4.

they did not believe a conflict existed between God's claim for us in Christ and Hitler's National Socialism. From their journey, the Theological Declaration of Barmen⁵³ (hereafter, Declaration) was offered to help all Christians in Germany persevere amidst the incredible challenges brought by Hitler and his government. Among this group were Hans Asmussen, Karl Barth, Karl Iraruer, Karl Koch, and Martin Niemoller.

Under the leadership of Hitler, Germany began operating as a totalitarian state in 1933. This included oppressive restrictions on assembly, political and human rights, and the insertion of Hitler's hand-picked judges into the entire court system. In the first six months of the National Socialist Government, the two largest church bodies in Germany were integrated into one (by the government) through the National Church for the Protestants meeting and the concordat with the Roman Catholic Church. Most German Christians were not alarmed by these rapid and dramatic changes precisely because they believed that the Christian faith and nationalism were in accord. In May 1934, however, 139 delegates met at Gemarke Church in Barmen, Germany to work for a faithful way forward. This group included ordained ministers, fifty-three church members, and six university professors from Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in German. From this work, they approved a six-proposition declaration, known as The Barmen Declaration of 1934.

The synod's aim was to encourage the evangelical churches not to accommodate National Socialism. Using Scripture as its base, the Declaration interprets the biblical passages for the present situation and, thereby, shows the false doctrines of the German Christians. So, for example, in proposition 1, using John 10:1, 9, and 14:6, the Declaration states:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have

⁵³ See Rolf Ahlers, *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934: The Archeology of a Confessional Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellan Press, 1986).

to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.⁵⁴

This extraordinary example offers several important, modern day acts of living out the approach the Preacher encourages. The first issue is to highlight that the synod was *not* fighting about the polity process employed at integration (*gleichschaltung*, literally "synchronizing"). Germany's two churches (the National Church for the Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church) were *proper* with respect to their polities. The two cities' structures allowed for such changes to be made. Given the imperfections of our cities, we make decisions that are in line with our prescribed processes but which can be actually contrary to the gospel. In this particular instance, members of the three denominations ventured outside their respective cities to the One outside the gate.

The journey of the synod's members was outside, *per se*, the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches but was not a departure (schism) from their respective traditions. Rather, it was an act of faith and obedience as encouraged by the Preacher. Their journey brought them together to do good and share what they had (Heb. 13:16). They deliberately did not gather to start a new church (or city) that stood against the new integrated church (German Christians) but, rather, gathered to listen to the One outside the gate and bears the abuse Jesus endured (Heb. 13:13). Well-known examples of those who endured abuse for standing against the Nazi tyranny include Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, and Ernst Käsemann.

⁵⁴ "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," Proposition 1, in Rolf Ahlers, *The Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934: The Archeology of a Confessional Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellan Press, 1986): 40.

One example, which shows their desire to not form a new city, comes from the synod's discussion of what the Declaration means in *quality* when compared with the Heidelberg Catechism or the Augsburg Confession. The synod agreed upon the presupposition that "the declaration did not have the quality of a confession such as the Heidelberg Catechism and the Augsburg Confession."⁵⁵ In other words, the primary focus of the synod was to learn how to serve all believers in Germany by solely following Christ. The outcome of this focus took the form of the Declaration.

Another aspect of how the synod's journey exemplifies the Preacher's approach is the return of the synod members to their respective denominations. They were sent back by God to serve the German Christians as brothers and sisters by encouraging them not to drift away (Heb. 2:1) through the corruption of the Nazi government. Hitler well understood that if he were to succeed in his quest, the church would need to be contained by, if not aligned with his government. Therefore, it is not surprising that he orchestrated *gleichschaltung* within the first six months of his newly formed government. Interestingly, it has been reported that he was surprised that the church followed along as willingly as they did with the integration. Yet, those in the synod recognized that *gleichschaltung* was not intended to help the church but was instigated by the government to help Hitler consolidate his authority. Therefore, the synod rejected the Nazi party's positions. The synod members understood God's mission to the churches, which is reflected in the Declaration's three-fold structure: "(1) ministering to the spiritual renewal of ministers; (2) development of the confessing congregation; and (3) the mission of the Confessing congregation."⁵⁶

The Declaration concludes with a closing passage from Matthew's gospel and a verse from 2 Timothy. The

⁵⁵ Ahlers, 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

sixth proposition, like the other five, first claims a truth and then declares the false doctrine to be rejected. This final proposition also adds an invitation for readers to join in the Declaration's "acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors" so that all may "return to the unity of faith, love, and hope."⁵⁷ This was their prayer then and continues to be a prayer for the church today.

6. "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20). "The word of God is not fettered" (II Tim. 2:9).

The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and Sacrament.

We reject the false doctrine, as though the church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.

The Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church declares that it sees in the acknowledgment of these truths and in the rejection of these errors the indispensable theological basis of the German Evangelical Church as a federation of Confessional churches. It invites all who are able to accept its declaration to be mindful of these theological principles in their decisions in church politics. It entreats all whom it concerns to return to the unity of faith, love, and hope.

*Verbum dei manet in aeternum*⁵⁸

[The Word of God abides forever]

⁵⁷ "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," Proposition 1, in Ahlers, 40.

⁵⁸ "The Theological Declaration of Barmen," Proposition 6, in Ahlers, 42.

Closing

The challenges we face as mainline denominations are extremely important. They are vital to address not because denominations need saving, but because they provide us with opportunities to participate in and anticipate God's mission. Sadly, though, we proceed as if there are really only two polity options to consider—entrenchment or evacuation. The entrenchment option typically rings of nostalgia whereby we somehow return to the golden days (typically thought of as the 1950s) through legislated revitalization programs. The evacuation option is typically expressed in a wholesale adoption of *culturally relevant* liturgical practices that all but remove the One we worship from the liturgy. I believe neither of these options, though, are trustworthy nor will either achieve their expressed outcomes. Rather, we need to take seriously the approach the Preacher advocates, namely, by enduring this present context by approaching the throne of grace with boldness (Heb. 4:16, 10:22), holding fast to our confession (Heb. 4:14, 10:23), and imitating the generosity of those who, through perseverance, have inherited the promises of God (Heb. 6:12).

The Preacher uses the city image to help us persevere in our present struggles until Zion comes. The Preacher is concerned with the anxiety, apathy, and the root of bitterness that springs up in Christian communities (Heb. 12:15) and so draws our attention to worship. In fact, we are implored to “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Worship is the approach that the Preacher believes will keep us in the race that is set before us (Heb. 12:1) and, thus, reach Mount Zion.

If we believe, however, that either evacuation or entrenchment is the way forward, then we in essence believe that Zion has already come (either inside or outside our cities). Often our anxieties are raised to new heights when the church does not act, live, and function like Zion and, thus, we look for polity solutions to fix it.

But this expectation of Zion is not what the Preacher imagines; he assumes that this in-between time is an endurance race to be run. The Preacher does *not* advocate living in the city and journeying outside the gate because Zion is to be found in either location; rather, he believes this is the way to be faithful until God consummates Zion. Therefore, the Preacher wants us to “consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as [we] see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). The Preacher shifts our focus away from our current provisional structures and “the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Particular to the Preacher’s approach is the liminal space that is created in worship. At Golgotha, our self-centered perspectives are changed to ones of gratitude. Jesus’ selfless act redirects our attention from ourselves to a call to render gratitude in equal measure (Heb. 13:13) for the other. “Gratitude should compel the hearers not to flinch from the cost of being loyal, reverent, grateful beneficiaries of Jesus’ benefits. ...in short, to make this response of gratitude the most important agenda for their lives, which no other consideration will mute or diminish.”⁵⁹ Indeed, we are summoned to “go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:13-14). We need to make a sacrifice of praise to God and, thereby, learn what is good and practice generosity. It is here in this liminal place of living in the city while journeying outside the gate that we can “run with perseverance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1) and, thereby, participate in and anticipate God’s mission till Zion comes.

⁵⁹ deSilva, 501.