2. Recovering Theological Foundations

Any faithful paradigm for the church's life in our time must be fully grounded in the timeless truths of the church's theological identity. The theological identity of the church universal rests in both its canonical revelation and its creedal formulations, while the theological identity of each of the many sub-traditions of the church is shaped by deeply held confessional distinctives. Each of these—canon, creed, and confession—must be faithfully embraced, proclaimed, and embodied in their entirety by churches around the world. And yet, in our time, there are five theological foundations that must be recovered—across traditions—if the incarnational paradigm of faithful presence is to take shape among us.

i. The Enduring Goodness of Creation

The Scriptural account of God's work begins with creation (Gen. 1). Out of no compulsion other than the greatness of His loving heart and the joy of His creative power, God made the world. And not only did God make the world, He also delighted in it. Seven times in the earliest pages of Scripture, God celebrated the world, rejoicing in its goodness. And then, as the final act of creation, God made human beings, not only as emblems of this goodness, but also as stewards of it—bearing the noble calling to nurture the world's native goodness unto fullness. These things—God's creation of the world, His seven-fold benediction over its goodness, and His call to nurture this goodness—suggest that the world God made is not only worthy of His delight, but also central to His purposes.

And yet in much of the Christian church, the goodness of the world and its importance in God's purposes has been diminished.

One source of this diminishment is a long-standing inclination towards anti-materialism. While it has many forms and varies in degree, its basic perspective about the nature of the world is both widespread and consistent: there are two parts to creation, the “spiritual” and the “material.” The spiritual part of creation is the “higher,” the home of wisdom and virtue. The material parts of creation—the earth, the body, and the artifacts of our lives—are the lower parts. In the anti-material perspective, these lower parts are variously portrayed as (at best) a backdrop to the cultivation of higher spiritual goods or (at worst) as a hostile obstruction to them. And while this broadly held anti-materialism must be commended for maintaining an extraordinary devotion to the goodness of God's spiritual creation—the beauty of the virtues and the glory of the soul—it is nonetheless the case that in renouncing the material parts of creation, the Scriptural picture of the overall goodness of God's world is diminished.
Another (related) source of this diminishment is **pietism**. While anti-materialism is a claim about the nature of creation, pietism is a claim about the nature of redemption and its relationship to the created order. Built upon an anti-material foundation, pietism suggests not only that the spiritual realm is higher in the order of creation, but also that it is more important—perhaps exclusively important—in the order of redemption. In this account, God's fundamental concern is with the spiritual aspects of a person's life—the heart or "the life of the soul." And while in the pietist perspective the meaning of the material aspects of creation is variously interpreted—ranging from a useful backdrop to redemption to an obstacle to it—it remains universally the case that these material aspects have no **fundamental** role in God's larger redemptive purposes. That this is so may be seen in several widespread expressions of pietism. First, we see it in **pietistic preaching**, which fails to **positively** address larger social or material concerns. Second, we see it in **pietistic ethics**, in which renunciation of the world functions as the animating conviction. And third—and perhaps most clearly—we see it in **pietistic eschatology** in which the actual trajectory of salvation is to be **literally** taken out of—or raptured from—the world. And while the emphasis on spiritual vibrancy and a certain form of detachment from the world is biblical, it is nonetheless the case that the pietist vision radicalizes this detachment and in so doing diminishes the goodness of creation, robbing it of its role in God's larger purposes.

The net result of these twin afflictions—anti-materialism and pietism—is a widespread and enduring **dualism**, a separation between God's work of creation and His work of redemption. This dualism has come to profoundly shape the Christian understanding of God's world. But this dualism is false. Creation and redemption are not opposed—they are **wed** (Rm. 8). The same God who made the world in creation entered into the world in incarnation (1 Jn. 1), and began the process of healing the world in resurrection—the first-fruits of the coming renewal of all things (1 Cor. 15). Thus if the scriptural witness and theological confession of the Christian church are to be fully embraced, we must set this dualism aside and once again embrace the goodness of God's creation and its role in God's redemptive purposes. Only as we do this will we begin to meaningfully move toward the world as bearers of faithful presence.

ii. The Pervasive Nature of Sin

Attending the Christian delight in the goodness of creation must be an equivalent sorrow over the pervasive horror of sin. In the Christian view of the world, human beings, though made with and for an original divine goodness, have rejected that goodness and replaced it with our own lesser good. Through this act of sin we have become **sinners**—people marked both in our selves and in our lives with the wound of sin—bearing both its **guilt** and **corruption**.
In Christian theology, the language of guilt is fundamental to the doctrine of sin (Ps. 51). Human beings, clean and innocent by nature, are now, because of sin, unclean—marred with the shameful stain of guilt. This stain manifests itself first, in the status of guilt, the fact that we now stand justly accused as sinners before God, before our selves, before others, and before the world. And secondly, it manifests itself in the experience of guilt. That is, not only has sin burdened us with the actual status of guilt, it has also burdened us with the existential trial of it. Thus because of sin, we who were made to be clean and innocent now find ourselves plagued by both the terrible status and the shameful experience of guilt.

And yet in Christian theology, guilt is not the only consequence of sin. Added to it is what has historically been called corruption. Corruption refers neither to the status of guilt nor to the experience of it, but rather to the disintegration of the world that sin has wrought (Gen. 3). Though God intended creation to reflect the state of peaceful wholeness between God, humans, and the world—a state the Bible calls shalom—sin has broken this wholeness, splintering it into the ruin of corruption. Unlike guilt, which is both a status and an experience unique to human beings, corruption extends its sorrows to all of creation: embracing not only our broken inner lives, but also our broken bodies, our broken relationships, our broken cities, and our broken world. Thus in Christian theology, because of sin, a world that was made for the wholeness of shalom, now languishes under the grief of corruption (Rm. 8).

This view of sin—that it stems from a rejection of God's goodness and results in both pervasive guilt and corruption—is fundamental to the Christian understanding of what is wrong with both our selves and our world.

And yet in much of the Christian church this view of the pervasive nature of sin is truncated.

On the one hand are those who take a merely spiritual view of sin. In this account, which identifies sin largely with guilt, the human fall from grace is rendered primarily as a breach of the human relationship with God. Because of sin, human beings—made for loving relationship with God—have been exiled from His presence and stand in deep need of the redemptive cleansing secured by Jesus' crucifixion. The strength of this view is that it is deeply faithful to one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin. Because of sin, humanity is in fact exiled from intimacy with God and in absolute need of His cleansing redemption.

And yet the weakness of this view is the corollary to its strength—it is faithful to only one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin—guilt. And because of this, it tends to ignore (often with cruel consequence) the deep and equally biblical significance of corruption. The result of this curtailed faithfulness is an inclination toward an individualistic notion of iniquity, focusing on the presence of sin in the chambers of the heart, and yet ignoring the presence of sin in the structures of the world. Because of this, we must recognize that
in spite of its very real strengths, the merely spiritual view of sin is unfaithful to the pervasive view of sin presented in the Bible.

On the other hand are those who take a merely systemic view of sin. In this account, which identifies sin largely with corruption, the human fall from grace is rendered primarily as a breach in human relationships, with one another and with the world. Because of sin, human beings—made for love, justice, and the peaceful stewardship of the creation—have been corrupted into selfishness, injustice, and violent exploitation of God's world. As a result, humanity groans—with all creation—for the redemptive healing secured by Jesus' resurrection.

Like the merely spiritual view of sin, the strength of this view is that it is deeply faithful to one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin. Because of sin, God's creation does in fact groan under selfishness, injustice, and violence and stands in deep need of God's healing power of resurrection. And yet once again, the weakness of this view is the twin of its strength. In being faithful to the Biblical vision of corruption, it fails to take guilt seriously. As a result, the brokenness of the world stands at center stage while the guilty heart from which this brokenness springs recedes from view.

These reductionistic perspectives on sin are widely held and deeply embedded in the contemporary Christian imagination. But they are mistaken. This is because each, when taken in isolation, underestimates the pervasive nature of sin. If the church is to take sin seriously, and truly labor against it as a faithful presence in this world, we must rejoin these perspectives, insisting on the reality of both guilt and corruption.

iii. The Expansive Scope of the Gospel

The gospel—the good news that in Jesus Christ, God has graciously acted to bring salvation to a sin-marred world—is the redemptive hope of the Christian church. Throughout history and across the world this deeply held conviction is personally embraced, liturgically celebrated, and ethically embodied. Even so, there is confusion about the breadth of this gospel and its meaning for the world. All Christian churches confess that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. But to save them from what? And to what? What is the scope of this saving work? To properly grasp the answer to this question, we must remember the Scriptural story.

We begin with creation. The Scriptures begin with a vision of the creation that is tantalizing in its beauty. We see God in a posture of unqualified delight towards His creatures. We see human beings, bearing the very dignity of heaven in their selves and extending the purposes of heaven into the world. We see human relationships marked by mutual delight and freedom from shame. We see a material world, celebrated in beauty and nurtured by loving hands. This—the loving co-existence of God, our selves, others, and the world—is God's original vision for creation (Gen. 2).
And yet in the Scriptural story, the glory of creation is shadowed by the sorrow of the fall. According to the Scriptures, God’s people turned away from God’s created intention—with all of its goodness—and plunged both themselves and the world into the shadow of sin. As a result of this sin, the loving co-existence of God, our selves, others, and the world has been broken, and the world in which we now live is—for all of its undeniable glory—none other than the barest image of this original vision. God’s relationship with His creatures—once marked solely by loving delight—is now marked by grief, holy anger, and the justice of judgment. Our own selves—once shining with the full glory of God’s image and the deep dignity of His purpose—have been diminished into a shadow of our former selves. Human relationships—once a source of freedom and mutual delight—have become a source of violence, shame, and fear. And the material world—which once promised such glorious fruitfulness—now groans under the curse of exploitation and futility. Because of sin, God’s original creative intention—with all of its manifold beauty—has fallen into the tragedy of ruin (Gen. 3).

But this ruin is not the end of the Scriptural story. As it unfolds, we find that the sorrow of the fall gives way to the promise of redemption. God, rather than abandoning His intentions for creation, has—in Jesus—entered into creation for the redemptive purpose of restoring creation from the ravages of the fall. How does He bring about this restoration?

• First, by restoring human beings to God. Because of the crucifixion of Jesus, humanity—made for God in creation, and alienated from Him by the fall—may now be restored to God (2 Cor. 5). Through faith, all who have become enemies of God and exiles from His kingdom may now become children of God and friends of the very King of heaven.

• Second, by restoring human beings to themselves. At creation humanity was graced with the glorious dignity of bearing the image of God. At the fall, this image—though still irrepresibly present—was diminished and obscured by sin. But through faith-wrought union with Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, all who trust in Him may—by the renewal of their minds, the reordering of their affections, the reshaping of their habits, and the redirecting of their vocations—be restored again into the glory of the image of Christ (Col. 3), the second Adam (Rm. 5).

• Third, by restoring human beings to one another. In creation, God declared that it was not good for human beings to be alone, that we were somehow not fully ourselves until we were ourselves with another. And yet at the fall, human relationships—made with such glorious promise—began to disintegrate, collapsing into the misery of loneliness. In Jesus this loneliness may be healed. This is because all who trust in Him are joined—really and truly—not only to Christ Himself, but also to one another, as members of His body. It is in this Christ-shaped community of love, constituted by the Spirit, that God’s relational intentions for humanity—so broken by sin—may be realized anew (Jn. 17).
Finally, by *restoring the world itself*. The material world matters deeply to God. That this is so is seen in the creation account, in both God’s seven-fold affirmation of its goodness and in His twice-repeated command for human beings to nurture the earth, and multiply its glories. God's intention for this material world was an endless future of creative care. And yet because of sin, this world—in spite of its overwhelming beauty—has become a place of futility and exploitation. But in Jesus, the material ravages of sin, so clearly evident in the world in which we live, will be washed away. The prophets who anticipated Jesus’ salvation spoke not only of a coming sacrifice for sin, of the renewal of sinners, and the restoration of God’s people, but also of the healing of deserts, the fruitfulness of fields, and the joy of trees (Ezek. 47, Rev. 22). And so it came to be. Jesus’ ministry was deeply marked not only by words of spiritual forgiveness, but also by works of material restoration: the healing of illness, the creation of wine, the calming of storms, and—most dramatically—the resurrection of the material body. And these actions—rather than being mere signs of a deeper spiritual meaning—are *themselves* witnesses to the material aspects of God’s redemptive intentions, foretastes of the healing of all things (Rom. 8). Because of this, Christians confess that the material order—now groaning deeply under the curse of sin—will one day be itself liberated, washed clean, and made new.

And yet even the glories of redemption do not exhaust God’s restorative intentions. For one day, those intentions take the beatific shape of *consummation*. If creation may be understood as establishing the *trajectory* of God’s intentions; the fall, the *deformation* of God’s intentions; and redemption, the process of *rewinding* God’s intentions; the scriptural vision of consummation may be understood as the *realization* of God’s intentions. A day will come, the Scriptures promise, when Jesus will return and will bring the longed awaited “reconciliation of all things” (Col. 1) In this day, at long last, God will be fully restored to His creation—His posture towards His creatures only and always one of joyful delight. Human beings will be restored to themselves—the twin follies of pride and shame graciously replaced with the thrilling dignity of the very image of Christ. Human beings will be restored to one another. The long shadows of loneliness and violence finally set aside in the warm relief of embrace. And the world itself will be fully and finally restored: no more sorrow, no more pain, no more tears—only unabated fruitfulness giving rise to a perpetual orchard of joy. And in this consummate moment, the good news of the gospel of Jesus—so long proclaimed, and in such bitter darkness—will be fully realized and beheld in the radiant face of Christ Himself (Rev. 21).

What then is the Scriptural vision of the gospel? *That in Jesus Christ, God is taking his good creation—which has, because of sin, fallen into ruin—and redemptively restoring it in every way, until the time of consummation, in which all things will at last be made new*. It is *this* Christ-centered, comprehensive, and restorative gospel that should animate the life and witness of the Christian church.

And yet it remains the case that in the contemporary church, the expansive scope of the Scriptural gospel has been sadly reduced. On the one hand, one encounters what may be referred to as the *merely personal gospel*. In this widely embraced understanding of the Christian gospel, God's redeeming work is understood to be primarily—if not exclusively—
about personal human restoration to God through the sin-atoning work of Jesus. Jesus came into a sinful world to die for our sins, and through this death, to secure our forgiveness, deliver us from the just judgment of God, and to bring us back into that state for which we were made: fellowship with God. The obvious good of this perspective is that it faithfully represents part of what Jesus came to do. He did come into the world to die for our sins, to secure our forgiveness, to deliver us from condemnation, and to reconcile us to God. This is a foundational, unequivocal, and enduring teaching of the Christian Scriptures and is the joyful confession of the Christian church. And it is wonderfully evident that through the proclamation of this message, countless men, women, and children, have been restored to God.

And yet the weakness of this perspective is that it tends to ignore other things that Jesus came to do, which are also part of the gospel. Restoration of our own selves, restoration of our communities, restoration of the material world—these are seen as (at best) secondary “entailments” of the gospel, rather than the gospel itself or (at worst) as distractions from the pure gospel of Jesus. But restoration of our humanity, our relationships, and our world are not secondary to Jesus’ purposes, and they are certainly not distractions from them. They are an intrinsic part of the good news of Jesus’ redemptive work in the world. And the faithful gospel is the one that will proclaim them as such.

On the other hand, we find the merely social gospel. In this perspective, God’s redeeming work in Jesus is understood primarily in terms of personal and social renewal. Jesus came into a sin-sick world so that He—through His Easter resurrection and Pentecostal presence—might restore broken lives, lift up the poor, liberate the oppressed, and establish God’s justice over the whole of the earth. The strength of this perspective—and the reason it is so deeply motivating as a force for good in the world—is that it faithfully articulates part of what Jesus came to do in this world. He did come to heal the sin-sick world. He did come so that the kingdom of God—with its healing, deliverance, liberation, and justice (Lk. 4)—might come on earth, just as it is in heaven (Matt. 6). And it is manifestly the case that the proclamation and embodiment of this part of Jesus’ work has brought untold good to God’s people and their neighbors throughout the world.

The very serious weakness of this perspective is that it tends to ignore the personal reality of sin and therefore the need for the personal reconciliation with God found only in Jesus (2 Cor. 5). These things cannot be ignored, because the Christian gospel teaches us that before we move to address the sins of the world, we must take responsibility for our own sins. And before we participate in God’s reconciliation of all things, we must first—through Christ—be reconciled to God ourselves.

Because of these profound weaknesses, the tendency to both a merely personal and a merely social gospel must be strongly resisted in our time. Doing so will require us to self-consciously embrace the expansive scope of the gospel of Jesus, a gospel that contains within it the glorious promise that, in Jesus, God is reconciling all things. For if the church is to be
a presence that faithfully bears witness to the gospel, we must proclaim it, not just in part but in whole.

iv. The Complex Meaning of Union with Christ

Of the many glories of Christian confession the greatest, surely, is this: That in Jesus Christ, God makes His life with us. It is this confession that throughout the centuries has confounded the wise, cast down the proud, ennobled the suffering, enveloped the lonely, and liberated the tongues of a hundred thousand choirs.

And so it should. Human beings were made for God: He is our original desire, our deepest pleasure, and our truest home. And yet because of sin, we are estranged from Him and this estrangement is the sorrow at the heart of all our sorrows. But the Bible teaches that because of His great love for us, God came to us in Jesus Christ. And He did this so that those who are estranged from Him by sin might be once again united to Him by grace. Alleluia.

Because life with God is our original desire, and estrangement from Him is our enduring wound, it is hardly surprising that in Christian theology, union with Him in Jesus Christ is our abiding theme. And so it is. In Paul's early meditations on being hidden in Christ, Ignatius of Antioch's teachings on suffering in Christ, Athanasius' musings on the world's healing in Christ, Augustine's search to find rest in Christ, Benedict's labor to walk in Christ, Bernard's desire to be caught up in Christ, Luther's insistence on righteousness in Christ, Calvin's wonder at the mystery of life in Christ, Teresa of Avila's longing for the embrace of Christ, Owen's celebration of divine communion in Christ, Bavinck's insistence on the world's significance in Christ, Bonhoeffer's reflections on dying with Christ—and many, many more—we see that union with Christ is the central mystery to which Christian reflection is irrepressibly drawn.

And yet it remains the case that in much of the contemporary church, union with Christ—when it is considered at all—is often plagued by the tendency to reduce the depth of its meaning to one of its constituent themes. This tendency takes several shapes:

First, in the reduction of union with Christ to a merely legal reality. This rendering—animated by convictions of divine justice and articulated in the language of human courts—sees union with Christ primarily through the lens of the problem between human sin and divine righteousness. In union with Christ, the guilt of the sinner is transferred to Christ, and the righteousness of Christ is transferred to the sinner through faith. It is, in other words, an essentially judicial union. Secondly, in the reduction of union with Christ to a merely ethical reality. This rendering—animated by a conviction of human calling and articulated in the language of divine summons—sees union with Christ primarily as a Spirit-wrought life of imitatio Christi in which the believer takes on Christ's character, adopts His life-pattern, walks in His steps, and participates in His mission. It is, in other words, an essentially moral union. Thirdly, in the reduction of union with Christ to a
merely *experiential* reality. This rendering—animated by a vision of divine love and articulated in the language of matrimonial embrace—sees union with Christ primarily as deep mystical communion between the Divine groom and His beloved bride. It is, in other words, an essentially existential union.

There are great strengths to each of these perspectives.

On the one hand, they each represent something that is *deeply biblical*. The legal view faithfully attends to the judicial overtones of the Scriptures—the covenant ceremonies of Genesis, the cultic laws of Leviticus, the prophetic visions of Israel's exoneration, the tightly argued judicial metaphors of Paul, the sacrificial typologies of Hebrews, and—above all—the divine judgment displayed in the crucifixion of our Lord. The ethical view accurately reflects the biblical summons to bear God's image in the world—the original mandate given to Adam and Eve, the repeated call to love God's law, the sober summons of the Sermon on the Mount, the morally perfect life of Jesus, and Peter's call to follow in His steps. The experiential view accurately reflects the deeply relational imagery of the Bible in which God relates to His people as father, mother, shepherd, spouse, and friend. Each of these perspectives, in other words, faithfully reflects biblical themes of union with Christ.

On the other hand, each is *spiritually consoling*. The legal view—given the reality of our estrangement from a holy God, the judgment that flows from this estrangement, and the terrible shame that attends it—forever quiets our fears through its emphasis on a perfect righteousness given to us by faith. The ethical view—given our creational orientation towards holiness, the corruption of our holiness through sin, and the misery that attends this corruption—comforts us by reminding us that we can even now, by the power of the Spirit, take on the very character of Christ. The experiential view—given the depth of our yearning for God and the pain of our exile from His presence—enraptures us by reminding us that through Christ we may once again have sweet communion with the living God. For these reasons, each of these aspects of union with Christ must be proclaimed with joy.

But, when taken in isolation, each of these themes has weaknesses as well.

First, *each—in itself—is biblically simplistic*. The simple fact of the matter is that the Bible uses a variety of images in describing our union with Christ: familial, marital, military, legal, athletic, agricultural, ethical, etc. To emphasize one of these images—no matter how personally significant or pastorally effective—to the exclusion of the others is to simplify the glorious complexity of the Biblical witness to our life with God. If we are to speak of union with Christ in a way that reflects its deep meaning, we must labor to recover and proclaim the fullness of the Bible's vision.

Secondly, *each—in itself—is theologically inadequate*. The nature and meaning of union with God in Christ is the deep mystery and the great joy of theological inquiry. As such, attending to this union requires every theological resource at our disposal—no single tool will do. The legal theme for example, teaches us much about the way in which sinful
human beings can be rightly and justly related to a holy God. But it teaches us little about how God interacts with us on a daily basis, and little about what it means to follow Him and participate in His work in the world. The ethical theme tells us a great deal about the shape of holy moral action in the world, and about the virtues required for such action. But it teaches us little about the motivation for such action or about the power by which it is carried out. The experiential theme teaches us much about the beautiful and mysterious quality of inner communion with God—with all of its joys and travails. But it teaches us little about the basis upon which we come to commune with God in the first place or about the moral life to which communion obligates us. Thus each of these themes—in spite of their respective strengths—is inadequate to support the deep theological meaning of union with Christ, and to emphasize any one of them to the exclusion of the others is to inevitably truncate this meaning.

Thirdly, each—in itself—is spiritually limiting. Paul teaches us that God has called His people that they might be conformed to the image of His Son. This is the great calling and final goal of union with Christ. But faithfulness to this calling requires us to view this union in comprehensive terms. Viewing union with Christ only through the legal lens leads us to embrace his righteous record by faith, but it teaches us neither to follow Jesus in concrete ways in the world, nor to relate to Jesus as a living person who communes with us. Viewing union with Jesus through the ethical lens teaches us how to imitate His life in the world, but it does not teach us how to find forgiveness for our sins, or how to live with God in intimacy. To view union with Jesus through the experiential lens teaches us how to commune with God, but it does not teach on what basis this communion happens, nor what kind of life this communion creates. As such, each of these lenses, if taken by themselves, inevitably and sadly limit the spiritual life which they seek to nourish.

Because union with God through Jesus Christ is the central mystery, the animating power, and the ultimate goal of the Christian life, we must self-consciously labor to recover it as a theological foundation in our time. To fail to do so is to ensure the deformation of the church. But doing so will require us to attend to the deep meaning of union with Christ—not just to what He has done for us, or what He models to us, or what He shares with us—but to the glorious whole.

v. The Missional Vocation of the Church

The Scriptures teach that in Jesus Christ, God is taking his sin-marred creation and redemptively restoring it in every part, until at last all things are made new. This is the missio Dei, the redemptive mission of God to the world. But how does God extend these redemptive purposes? How does He accomplish this mission? The answer to this question—both mysterious and ennobling—is that God intends to accomplish this mission by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Christian church (Matt. 5). The church, that one, holy, catholic, and apostolic community—that is both global in its reach and local in its expression—is the intended instrument for the mission of God.
But how does the church participate in this missio Dei? How can such an ordinary community of men, women, and children take the mission of God and embrace that mission as its own? The answer to this question is manifold, consisting both of the endless series of ordinary decisions as well as the heroic acts of God's people in time. But in general, the church may be said to participate in the mission of God in three ways.

First, as a recipient of the mission of God. The calling of the church is not to originate the missio Dei, but to receive it: to bring our sin-marred lives to God by faith, and to open ourselves to the restorational power of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Rm. 5). The identity and work of the church are therefore received from God himself: from the Father, who has loved us before time (Eph. 1), from the Son, to whom we are united by faith (Philipp. 1), and from the Spirit, who indwells us with power (Acts 2). This is where the church's participation in the mission of God begins.

But this is not where it ends. For the church exists not only as a recipient of the mission of God, but also as a foretaste of it. That is to say, the church, in the ordinary work of its common life, becomes—in itself—an embodied anticipation of God's redemptive intentions for the world. How? First, in our restoration to God through faith in Christ, we become a foretaste of the coming day when at long last God and His people will dwell together, when He will be their God and they will be His people (Rev. 21). In our restoration to ourselves, we become a foretaste of the coming day when the image of God, so battered by sin and death, will be fully and finally restored. In our restoration to one another we become a foretaste of the coming union of the family of God, the day when loneliness and violence will be put away. And in the small and varied creation-restoring acts of our lives, we become foretastes of God's intentions for the creation itself. Thus the church is rightly understood only insofar as it not only receives the mission of God, but also embodies it in its own spiritual, liturgical, relational, and vocational life. Through these things, the church becomes an hors d'oeuvre of the coming banquet of the new world.

The final way in which the church participates in the mission of God is as a bearer of it. That is to say, the call of the church is not only to receive God's mission by faith, nor simply to pre-figure it in its own life, but also to extend that mission to its neighbors and to the whole of creation, in the very particular time in which it finds itself (Matt. 28). In the word we proclaim, our intention is not only to nurture the life of the church, but also to speak to the deepest questions of our time. This means that one of the central theological tasks of the church is to identify and understand the central questions of our own age. In the worship we enact, our intention is to bring joy to God, not only by making Him our highest good, but also by reminding our neighbors that He is their highest good as well. This means that one of the central liturgical tasks of the church is to hold the reality of God and His new kingdom before the eyes of our neighbors. In the welcome we extend, our purpose is not only to heal the loneliness of ourselves and of our brothers and sisters in the church, but also to bear God's hospitality to our neighbors. This means that one of the central communal tasks of the church is to invite and embrace its neighbors into its life. In the work that we do, our purpose is not only to care for
ourselves, but also to bring God’s restorational care to creation. This means that one of the central vocational tasks of the church is to labor to bring God’s redemptive purposes to bear in the callings that God has given us. Thus the calling of God is for the church—through the ordinariness of its life—to not only receive the mission of God, nor to become mere foretastes of it, but also, by the Spirit, to take it up and bear it into the heart of the world.

This vision of the missional vocation of the church helps us to guard against two tendencies that diminish both the meaning of the church and the integrity of its mission.

The first of these tendencies is a church-less mission. By God’s kindness there are many, many of His people in the world who have been enthralled with the beauty of His redemptive mission to the world. They rejoice in it in their hearts, practice it in their homes, instantiate it in their friendships, and pursue it in their vocations. And yet it remains the case that for many of these people—too many—this pursuit of the mission of God is fundamentally detached from the institution of the church. For some, this detachment from the church is rooted in the deeply sad but historically manifest experience that the church—rather than being an instrument of God’s mission—is, in fact, often an obstacle to it. For others, this detachment from the church is less experiential and more deeply ideological—growing out of both the individualism and anti-institutionalism of late modern culture. But for all, the net effect is that the work of the mission of God is understood as something fundamentally distinct from the life of the people of God. The strength of this perspective is that it prioritizes, in a general sense, the purposes of God, and rightly grows impatient with any person or institution that obstructs those purposes. But its weakness is that it fails to see that God’s purposes are inexorably bound to the church, that the church is neither an abstract idea, nor an aggregate of individual redemptive aims, nor a merely utilitarian instrument to be taken up or set aside at will, but the very body of God—united to Him by faith in Jesus Christ, indwelled by His Spirit, and on mission with Him together in the world. And by neglecting this reality, those who embrace a church-less mission inadvertently refuse from God the very gift He has given to bear His purposes into His world.

The second of these tendencies is a mission-less church. God has given the church to the world as a bearer of His mission of love. And by His grace, many churches have, for centuries, taken up this mission with faithfulness and joy. And yet it is now broadly understood that many, many Christian churches—too many—exhibit a life apparently unrelated to the restorational mission of God. They have simply and sadly come to define their lives in some other way. Some, influenced by the paradigm of fortification, have begun to see the work of their church not as mission to the world, but as purity from it. Others, influenced by the irrepressible rationale of the market, seem to see their work fundamentally as the purveyance of religious goods and services. And still others, tragically bereft of anything meaningful to say and of anyone to whom to say it, have come to define their work in the most self-interested manner possible: as the mere preservation of their own institutional past. These churches have forgotten that their identities consist—not in fleeing the culture, nor in satisfying consumers, nor in perpetuating institutional identity—but in participating in the great redemptive mission.
of God. And as a result, they not only deform the dignity of the church—which has been given such an extraordinary role in this mission—they also hinder the mission itself.

Over and against these reductive ecclesial visions, we must remember that it is by the church that God continues to extend himself through the Spirit to the world. Because of this, we must encourage both those who embrace the church-less mission and those who inhabit the mission-less church to recover the missional vocation of the church.

vi. In Sum

If the church in our time is to be a community of faithful presence, we must—in the midst of all of our various confessional commitments—recover these five theological foundations. Without them, the call to faithful presence will simply remain unintelligible to us. The enduring goodness of creation grounds us in the fact that our work is not elsewhere, but here—among both the spiritual and material dimensions of God's world in all its particularity at the start of the twenty-first century. The pervasive nature of sin reminds us that this creation has been broken in every respect—not only in the guilty heart, but also in the corrupted world—and that our redemptive responsibility is to engage both of these. The expansive scope of the gospel leads us to remember that Jesus' intentions for the world are comprehensive in breadth and restorational in nature, calling us to labor for the renewal of every part of creation. The deep meaning of union with Christ reminds us that because of the gospel, we now live in with Christ—sharing in His righteousness, participating in His work, and delighting in His presence. And the missional vocation of the church reminds us that is through the Spirit-shaped people of God that God extends His redemptive mission into the world—and not through some other means.