The Space Between: Considering the Church as Relational Subject

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Much of our reflection on the nature of the concrete church has rightly been focused upon the people, practices, and contexts that shape ecclesial realities. Largely missing from our considerations is a substantial engagement with the relationships that connect and animate the church as a social and theological system. How are we to proceed in filling this gap in ecclesiology? On what grounds can we claim to observe relationships and not the points that they connect? How are we to gain acccess to the testimony of a relationship? And if this is possible, how might this information contribute to our understanding of local ecclesiology? In an attempt to clear the way forward, this article will examine the vision for relational sociology presented by Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer in their book *The Relational Subject*, present a theological argument for applying their insights to congregational studies, and consider the implications of examining ecclesial relationships as an ontological subject in their own right.

Keywords

Congregational studies; relational sociology; relationship

Introduction

Worship begins on this average Sunday morning at 11:06 am. The congregation has been slowly filing in, shaking hands, and finding their familiar places. Most people seem to know one another and know their way around the space, though a few figures sit alone with small moleskin notepads in hand and look a bit startled when someone comes to greet them. A group of musicians takes the stage and the ambient noise begins to quieten when a young woman taps the microphone a few times and lifts it to her chin:

> Good morning and welcome to worship here at Average Community Church. We are gathered this morning in the name of Jesus Christ, who promises that where two or three are gathered in his name he is there among them. Jesus Christ is indeed the reason that we gather. In his life, death, and resurrection we have found freedom from sin, hope for the future, and restored relationship with the Creator of the universe: reasons for worship! But before we begin worship this morning, I want to introduce our friends from the Department of Theology. These specialists in the theology of the church have combined their considerable skill and wisdom to observe our congregation and provide us with a glance into the

> theological and social significance of this worship event. Feel free to join all of us after the service today for coffee and a brief presentation of their findings. And now, let's calm our hearts and lift our voices in worship.

In this caricatured scene I want to consider the extent to which the moleskinned visitors' combined powers of observation and analysis might reflect the ecclesial realities experienced by those who have gathered to worship. My question is motivated not by a critique of our efforts to date but by a sense that, even with the impressive array of scholarship we can provide, we are still missing something essential to the life of the congregation and the event of gathered worship. I submit that a significant part of what remains unaccounted for in concrete ecclesiology is the relational reality which exists between ecclesial events, practices, and persons.

The difficulty with this proposal is that relational space, however we might define it, is an abstraction until it bears upon its predicate persons, processes, and systems. Unlike relational space, persons and processes can be observed and investigated with the aid of our senses. Consequently, we may easily attribute causality for relational goods to the realities our eyes tell us are real, as opposed to less visible relational realities. And yet, a growing number of social scholars are unconvinced that observable social realities can provide an accurate account for complex phenomena like cultural or even personal transformation. There is *something* happening between us that must be accounted for. My hunch is that the content and behaviour of the relational web connecting the persons of the church and bearing upon both its sublime and mundane practices has secrets to reveal. In much the same way that so-called *dark matter* – invisible and undetectable – is said to compose the majority of the mass in the observable universe, so also the reality of the church may not be fully appreciated without accounting to some degree for what is taking place in the gaps we call *relationship*.

What is happening in the relational space between us, to what or whom can it be attributed, and to what extent can these 'happenings' be described as a reality? In this article I advance a claim that relationships between ecclesial persons constitute a level of reality bearing unique features and powers not reduceable to social agents or structures. After a brief introduction to the theory of 'being in relation' advocated by sociologists Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer,[1] I will sketch a preliminary theological framework derived from Jesus' high priestly prayer in which these claims might be appropriated for a relational ontology of ecclesial persons. I will then engage with some of the outworkings of Donati and Archer's theory to illustrate ways in which a relational ontology may assist our study of congregations.

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[1] Pierpaolo Donati and Margaret Archer, *The Relational Subject* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Proposing a Relational Ontology

I want to first consider the claim put forward by relational sociologists Donati and Archer that human relationship should be considered an ontological category, with its own attributes and contributing to the morphogenesis of both systems and persons. Donati and Archer trace the development of this relational perspective, setting it over against the debate emerging in late modernity between agential and structural approaches to sociology. As both approaches developed, it became clear that the relationship between agency and structure had to be clarified without negating either or conflating the two into an undefined middle ground.[2] The inability to do so has been exposed in the era of globalisation as either an undervaluation of individual action within complex systems or an ignorance of the ethical impact of structural machinations on social reality. Both shortcomings have profound implications for human society in an increasingly connected world. Donati and Archer argue that missing in both structural and agential approaches is a thoroughgoing examination of the role played by human relationships, including not only the comfort, motivation, and utility they provide to persons participating in a relationship, but also the genesis of the relationship itself, as well as its emergent effects and their ability to impact upon social reality. Distinguishing themselves from 'relationist' scholars – particularly those in North America – Donati and Archer insist that social relations cannot be reduced to the interactions or ties (Durkheim's *religo*[3]) between participating individuals (Weber's *refero*) but compose a distinct ontological category. Donati and Archer argue,

> 'B*eing in relation*' is an ontological expression that has three analytical meanings: (i) it says that, between two (or more) entities there is a *certain distance* which, at the same time, distinguishes *and* connects them; (ii) it says that any such relation *exists*, that is, it is real in itself, irreducible to its progenitors, and possesses its own properties and causal powers; and (iii) it says that such a reality has its own *modus essendi* (the modality of *the* beings who are *inside* the relation which refers to the internal structure of the social relation and its dynamics) and is responsible for its emergent properties, that is, relational goods and evils.[4]

This proposal is worked out in a detailed explanation of both the nature of relational reality as well as its implications for understanding the social world and its morphogenesis.[5] The resulting taxonomy of relational subjects and goods is particularly tantalising for ethnographic ecclesiology because it suggests that the distance between ecclesial persons might be observed in

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[2] Ibid., pp. 8-12.
[3] Ibid., pp. 26-27.
[4] Ibid., p. 18 (italics original).
[5] It must be said that Donati and Archer's project is largely a demonstration of the descriptive and explanatory potential of a relational ontology and not so much a philosophical apologetic. Archer does, however, address the objection of *relationist* critics who would argue against attributing ontological status to ideas apart from reference to a *knowing subject* (pp. 155-179).

some way and its contribution to our understanding of the nature and function of the church reflected upon. I will return to some of the promising contributions I believe a relational approach might offer. But in order to avoid making a hasty appropriation, we must first consider theological grounds on which this claim might be considered.

A Preliminary Theological Framework for Considering Relational Ontology

Here I would like to outline a cautious and preliminary theological argument for entertaining the possibility of a relational ontology in congregational settings. It is beyond the scope of this introductory article to develop these ideas in detail, but I hope at this point simply to indicate a potential path by which a relational ontology might be considered.

Some might argue that this effort is only an exercise in ontological speculation and indeed the danger does exist. But I maintain that it is both appropriate as well as deeply practical. This is particularly true in the theological context of Free Church ecclesiology which places great emphasis on the local gathering of believers as the setting in which the ecclesial call is expressed. Consequently, the convictions and conduct of the Free Church congregation invites a certain theological scrutiny that episcopal traditions might redirect in clerical or sacramental directions. In his comparative study of trinitarian implications for ecclesiology, Miroslav Volf demonstrates that Free Church ecclesiology differs significantly from Orthodox and Catholic traditions in that it locates the presence of Christ in the believers' gathering rather than in the person of the bishop or the substance of the sacraments.[6] This appropriation of Christ's promise to his disicples in Matthew 18:20 for ecclesiological purposes deeply informs the freedom of conscience and personal devotion to Christ that so marks the baptistic identity. But it also shifts the responsbility of locating Christ's action in the ecclesial setting firmly onto the congregation. And so we are required to ask with Volf not only 'what is the church?' (answer: the place where Christ is present among his people) but also 'when and where is the church?' (that is, in what circumstances can the gathering be said to be 'in his name'?). Volf advocates a 'policentric-participative' model of Free Church ecclesiology in which the presence and ministry of Christ becomes 'enjoined on all believers' in the congregation as they make his presence manifest in their worship and service.[7] All of this is to suggest that, particularly in a Free Church setting, it is encumbent upon the congregation not simply to reflect on what they *do* when they come together, but also on what they *are* when they are gathered

[6] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 137-145.
[7] Ibid., p. 227.

in the name of Christ. But on what basis then should relational realities be included (alongside individual, environmental, or practical realities) in that consideration?

The obvious answer to this question is to look to the ethical teaching of Jesus that his disciples should love one another. The love expressed between disciples will confirm to the watching world that they do, in fact, belong to him (John 13.35). However, the disciples' love for one another is not simply an exercise of will but rather a reflection of the loving relational reality they have themselves participated in by virtue of their identification with Jesus. John declares in his first epistle that we love because He first loved us (I John 4.19). Having witnessed the love which flows unceasingly from the Triune communion in the ministry of their Lord, the disciples are not only enjoined to continue the practice, but also enabled. So I submit that Jesus' ethical command to love is rooted in a deeper calling – an ecclesial vision in which the disciples (and, by extension, the congregation) are meant to participate communally with God in the ecclesial mystery and so to appropriate in their human relationships some measure of the divine communion of mutual indwelling. This is, admittedly, a radical claim and fraught with both promise and peril and as such must be well grounded and substantiated.

It seems to me that an appropriate place to begin is with Jesus' prayer in John 17.21 that his disciples would be unified amongst themselves, just as he is unified with the Father. This request for unity is concluded with a curious construction: 'I in You, You in me, and *them in us*.' I would argue that this final clause demonstrates Jesus' intention that something of the communal mystery defining his relationship with the Father (John 10.38 and 14.10,11) be extended into the ecclesial setting not only as an eschatological hope but, indeed, as a vocational pursuit.[8] The nature of this extension rests upon the association of ecclesial communion (them) with divine communion (us) in a relationship characterised in its trinitarian state by what theologians have called mutual interpenetration. The nature of that extension must be carefully delineated in order to avoid error and this is the task to which I will turn in a moment. But if this is true, then two things must be concluded: first, we cannot consider ecclesiology rightly, particularly in a Free Church context, without also treating the relational realities between believers; and second, the relational realities under consideration must include not only those on the human plane between gathered worshippers, but also the relationships between these persons and the triune persons of the Godhead.

[8] The subjunctive *kai osin en hemin* ('that they would be in us') points to an objective reality enjoyed between Father and Son requested for the disciples. In 14.20 we see the same construction directed as a promise to the disciples that 'on that day you will see that I am in the Father, the Father is in me and you are in us'. So, while finally realisable only in an eschatological sense, Jesus is indicating a calling meant to be intentionally pursued and indwelt in the present.

Relational space in an ecclesial setting is composed of the divine *us*, the human *them*, and an essential relational reality existing in the space between them.

Clearly at this point it is essential to clarify what is meant by each of these terms if we are to arrive at any cohesive understanding of ecclesial relationships and to have any hope of observing and reflecting on these realities for the edification of the church. Consideration must first be made for the perichoretic reality I am arguing is envisioned by Jesus for his disciples when he prays that 'they would be *in* us'. The use of the Greek word perichoresis was first employed by Gregory of Nazianzus in his treatment of the relationship between the divine and human nature of Christ. It was subsequently expanded upon in the same context by Maximus the Confessor and finally applied to the relationships within the Trinity by John of Damascus. Jürgen Moltmann explains that in early trinitarian developments relative agreement was reached on the notion that three *hypostases* (personal realities) could exist in one *ousia* (substance) and that this reality was intrinsically relational. However, it remained unresolved between the Eastern and Western Churches whether this reality constituted or was manifested by the divine hypostases. The concept of *perichoresis* served to resolve this debate by emphasising the circulation of love between the persons of the Trinity, which resulted in a personal and perfectly mutual affirmation of divine being.[9]

Contemporary trinitarian theologians have worked out the implications of this perichoretic unity and its contribution to trinitarian personhood for a variety of confessional and disciplinary ends.[10] But Paul Fiddes is unique in the field in his understanding of the perichoretic life as an invitation extended to the church to participate in the circulation of divine love demonstrated in a variety of ecclesial practices.

> The notion of 'subsistent relations', properly understood … proposes that relations in God are as real and 'beingful' as anything which is created or uncreated, and that their ground of existence is in themselves. If we use the term hypostasis as the early theologians did for a 'distinct reality' which has being, then the relations *are* hypostases. There are no persons 'at the end of a relation', but the 'persons' are simply the relations.[11]

There is in this assertion a danger that relation defined as beingful becomes conflated with divine essence washing out any helpful distinctions between

[9] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 172-175.
[10] Along with Moltmann, major contributions include Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991); Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*; John Zizioulas, *Being in Communion* (New York: Saint Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).
[11] Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd., 2000), p. 34.

the two. Fiddes notes that Aquinas' otherwise helpful identification of the relationships between the trinitarian persons becomes limited at this very point when his commitment to divine simplicity leads him to identify divine nature with divine properties.[12] Fiddes seeks to mitigate this danger and still maintain the ontological status of relationship by emphasising the dynamic nature of relationship and describing God as 'three movements subsisting in one event'.[13] This approach allows not only for a combined association with the divine communion and simultaneous distinction from divine essence, but also creates a space in which the church can be said to participate in God's relational activity in the world.

We should recognise that, on this basis, the trinitarian vocabulary provides us with a theological lexicon for conceiving of relationship as a hypostatic and therefore ontological category. The question remains, in what way is this reality made accessible to or pursuable by humanity? We may agree with Fiddes that relationship is a hypostatic reality within the Godhead and with Donati and Archer that relationship may be an ontological category with explanatory power in the social realm. But is there a correspondence between the two? In the terms provided by Jesus' high priestly prayer, in what way does the *in-ness* of divine hypostatic union relate to the *in-ness* of human relational reality?[14]

The key to locating a correspondence between the divine *us* and the human *them* lies in the fact that Jesus the Christ is functioning here in anticipation of his role as high priest and mediator between God and man. His explicit request is that the two societies with which he is now intimately associated be related between themselves such that, in the fulness of time, the human reality will come to reflect the divine. This request for supernatural unity on the human plane is issued in the context of a prayer seeking protection for the disciples from a world limited to the jagged contours of imperfect human relations. The explicit purpose of the unity Jesus requests for his disciples is that the world would know that he was sent by God. The unity of the disciples transformed by participation in the perfect perichoresis of the Godhead is a relational beacon to a broken world aching for perfection. It is highly unlikely that Jesus, in his use of *them*, has in mind a simple assemblage of disciples, like loose coins jangling against each other in a common purse. His *them* points toward a society of persons connected in some intrinsic way and, as such, capable of being invited to share in an

[12] Ibid., p. 35.
[13] Ibid., p. 36.
[14] The *in-ness* referred to here and in the passages I have mentioned previously has been the topic of much debate in theological and philosophical circles. I am here proposing that *in* is referencing not a particular kind of mutual inhabitation but rather 'participation in'.

ecclesial mystery of which he alone can be the mediator. Miroslav Volf points to this conclusion when he writes,

> The future of the church in God's new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people … Present participation in the trinitarian *communio* through faith in Jesus Christ anticipates in history the eschatological communion of the church with the triune God.[15]

From this line of thought, I am optimistic that an examination of the concrete church through the lens of relational ontology is entirely possible on the provisional grounds I have supplied. Moreover, a relational ecclesiology combining both theological and sociological insights would be a unique and particularly fitting application since it would by necessity need to take into consideration both the *in-ness* of the ecclesial *them* as well as the eschatological invitation to participate in the divine perichoresis through faith in Christ.

Relational Sociology for Ethnographic Ecclesiology

Having sketched the outlines of a theological framework for employing relational sociology, I will now highlight some of the outworkings of Donati and Archer's construction and briefly propose ways in which they might prove useful for consideration of the concrete church.

At the heart of Donati and Archer's programme is a unique development of the notion of relational reflexivity. We will recall that reflexivity literally refers to a *bending back* and reflection upon influences on an individual's point of view. Applying the practice of reflexivity to the task of research, John Swinton states, 'reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher throughout the research process that enables her to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings'.[16] Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's development of reflexivity in the context of the researcher's *habitus*, Christian Scharen delineates three types of researcher reflexivity: the social location of the researcher, the social space represented by the academic field, and finally the tendency of the researcher to assume the ability to make objective observations and conclusions regarding the subject of study.[17] Elizabeth Jordan has perceptively applied this research reflexivity to her study of diverse lay and clergy perceptions of a congregation by noting that only by virtue of being embedded in the congregational network of relationships and accounting for

[15] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 128-129.
[16] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 59.
[17] Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), p. 79.

the resulting 'relational epistemology' was she able to gain access to insider knowledge, aiding her interpretation of respondent data.[18] Reflexivity in these contexts is a concern in particular for the researcher as she reflects upon her location and bias in relation to her subject of study. The intended result is a combination of personal awareness on the part of the researcher, as well as a stated distinction between the researcher's conclusions and their subject.

But Donati and Archer see a further value to reflexivity when the reflection of persons in relation is focused back upon the relationships they share. Donati's concept of 'relational reflexivity'

> consists in orientating the subjects to the reality emergent from their interactions by their taking into consideration how this reality is able (by virtue of its own powers) to feed back onto the subjects … since it exceeds their individual as well as their aggregated personal powers.[19]

Employed in social settings, this relational reflexivity is shown to produce by emergent effect real (though immaterial) relational goods and ills. It also contributes to the morphogenesis of societal culture and the development of mature social beings able to consider not only their own identity, but also that which they share with others by virtue of their relationships.[20]

This conceptual combination of relational reflexivity, emergent relational effects, and relational morphogenesis offers a wealth of possibility to the study of concrete ecclesiology. As I bring this examination to a close, I want to highlight two areas of study in which these concepts might be applied to great effect: the assessment of relational goods and evils and their effect on congregational life and effectiveness and a relational understanding of the morphogenesis of ecclesial practice.

1. Collective Orientation to Relational Goods and Evils

First-time visitors to a church service will often report a good or bad 'vibe' which they can pick up, sometimes even within the span of their first few interactions. Perhaps the presence (or absence) of a greeter at the door and the manner in which they are welcomed will be the first tip-off. But more than this, there is often a sense – and I have experienced this myself – that the congregation is not only participating in worship but that there is a 'good spirit' among them. This may be what the Apostle Paul is refering to when he speaks of maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace (Ephesians 4.3). In my experience, this is not just a question of people enjoying one another's company. There is a sense of 'something in the air' which is not only widely enjoyed but also engendered. Some will attribute

[18] Elizabeth Jordan, 'Knowing as We Are Known: Relational Epistemology in Practice', *Ecclesial Practices* 5 (2018): 214-230.
[19] Taken from the preface to his *Relational Sociology: a New Paradigm for the Social Science* (London: Routledge, 2011) quoted in *The Relational Subject*, p. 153.
[20] Donati and Archer, *The Relational Subject*, p. 30.

this sense to the presence of the Holy Spirit (and its lack to the Spirit's absence), though this conclusion is not only highly subjective but also theologically problematic. Part of the problem is that, in addition to whatever the Spirit might be up to, there is an undeniable human element to the vibe: some combination of sincerity, mutuality, goodwill, and vulnerability.

Donati and Archer describe this sort of situation in terms of relational goods and evils, which are products of relational reflexivity practised in a given social setting. The application of relational goods and ills to congregational life is particularly appropriate when we consider that what takes place in the congregational setting is seldom simply a practice in bare liturgy, sacrament, service, or proclamation. In all that the congregation sets out to do together in its *we-ness* (the relational reflexive form of Jesus' *them*), the worshippers are reflexively engaged to a greater or lesser degree in what Archer refers to as a 'collective orientation to a collective 'output',' which is to say that 'the group is oriented to the relational goods it produces, to maintaining or improving upon them – and to eradicating any relational evils detected in their collective performance'.[21]

Professional and academic assessment of congregations focuses attention on opinions, doctrines, practices, and outputs. What is largely neglected, to the detriment of both pursuits, is the 'collective relational orientation' that employs, sustains, and develops these practices, as is the 'doubly reflexive' effect these outcomes have on those engaged in them.[22] This is not to say, of course, that relationships are relegated to secondary status. On the contrary, we are fond of saying with a hint of resignation that "it all comes down to relationships". But without a precise understanding of what relationships are, and what effects they produce within a society, it is nearly impossible to be specific about just what is 'coming down' or how.

The concept of reflexively generated relational goods and evils shines a light on these otherwise ethereal concerns, making them observable in the ongoing life of the congregation. This is essentially what Fiddes is proposing in the form of his reflections on ecclesial practices such as prayer and reconciliation, and relational experiences such as suffering and grief. But I contend that the same light can be focused on actual congregations as they orient and reorient themselves in pursuit of communal sanctification. This reality is, in essence, the relational substrate or lattice on which Healy's practical-prophetic ecclesiology is actually being played and upon which the church's brokenness (or success) can be assessed with any accuracy.[23]

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[21] Ibid., p. 61.

[22] Archer employs the term 'double reflexivity' to denote the reciprocal effect that relational goods and effects have on their subjects.

[23] Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 137.

2. Clarification of Ecclesial Practices on Relational Grounds

But the mention of practices raises another critique of Healy's that may be addressed by means of relational ontology. Healy argues that much of the treatment of ecclesial practices lacks definition and conceptual clarity. Using the example of the 'practice' of hospitality, Healy notes that what we refer to as a practice may be more accurately identified as a precept: an explicit teaching taking on a wide array of conceptual interpretations and social expressions. What do we mean when we identify a social phenomenon as a 'practice'? Healy demonstrates the point further by noting a number of competing definitions of 'practice', offering an overly wide semantic range.[24] What these definitions share in common is a rooting in social construction, though like relational goods and evils, the details of this construction are assumed and remain largely undefined. Take for example Alistair MacIntyre's widely applied definition of practice:

> Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[25]

For our purposes, the key clause is 'socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal … are realized'. This, I suggest, represents the soft underbelly of much consideration of practice. Until we can demonstrate in detail the way in which a practice is established socially, our definitions of practice will begin only at the point at which the practice manifests. What is missing is its morphogenesis, that is, the way in which the practice is developed and employed within the relational processes of a social reality and the effect the practice in turn has upon those who employ it.

This pursuit may inspire a fear that ecclesial practices will be disembowelled, in an effort to identify and observe their constituent anatomic parts. But my hunch is that instead the 'soft underbelly' will be strengthened by virtue of a clearer and more precise understanding of the way in which ecclesial practices function in and impinge upon congregational life. Additionally, the morphogenetic approach allows us to consider (and classify if need be) a wide range of practice-like exercises in the life of a congregation. This includes, of course, those explicitly ecclesial practices and precepts handed down from scripture and tradition. But it also involves more mundane practices which have perhaps been relegated to the

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[24] Nicholas M. Healy, 'Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 3 (November 1, 2003): 287–308.

[25] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, 3rd edn (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), p. 187.

realm of personal ethics. By this I mean all the rich content with which Paul sums up his letters in parenetic exhortation: family relationships, power dynamics, and interactions with a fallen world. Once we consider the congregation as a relational subject and are able to consider its actions and deliberations in the light of relational realities, our study of congregational dynamics and practices takes on entirely new promise.

Conclusion

Relationships are an essential part of what it means to be the church. On any given Sunday in any given congregation, worshippers will gather not only to worship their God, but to do this explicitly in the context of fellowship. Outside of an ascetic existence, it is very difficult to imagine a circumstance in which the admonition to not give up meeting together could be obeyed without also drawing upon relational realities in the performance of liturgy. Even in monastic orders where interaction is intentionally limited by various vows and rules, there is a palpable sense that love exists between the monastics.

In this article I have endeavoured to present briefly sociological and theological grounds for considering the church as a relational subject, defined by the unique relational realities at play within it. Identifying exactly what we mean by *relationship* can be an elusive task but an essential first step is to square with its ontological nature. Relationships cannot be captured or preserved in the way that a practice or an opinion might. Our access to relational realities will be based in testimony and observation of their effects. As such we may only ever light upon the places where a relationship left its scent and moved on. Be this as it may, relationships are no less real that the subjects we can apprehend and observe in physical or linguistic space. Learning to observe relational realities and their resulting goods and evils promises to open new vistas for exploration of embedded congregational ecclesiologies. My hope is that the insights gained from this brief exploration of a relational perspective will be of use to the church, wherever believers gather in faith that the glorified Christ has called them into fellowship.

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