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Your Church Is Too Small

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Foreword by J. I. Packer</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	13

past

THE BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

1. The Road to the Future	17
2. My Journey to Catholicity Begins	26
3. Searching for the Elusive Truth	34
4. The Jesus Prayer for Our Unity	41
5. Our Greatest Apologetic	50
6. Christ the Center	59
7. The Four Classical Marks of the Church	66

present

RESTORING UNITY IN THE CHURCH TODAY

8. How Can We Restore Unity?	77
9. The Cause of Our Disunity	86
10. Sectarianism: Our Enemy	92
11. Thinking Rightly about the Church	102
12. The Servant Church and the Kingdom	114
13. What Place Should We Give to Tradition?	123

future

THE MISSIONAL-ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

14. Searching for the True Church	135
15. Who is a Real Christian?	146
16. The Missional-Ecumenical Church	153
17. A New Paradigm	165
18. What Does the Missional-Ecumenical Paradigm Look Like?	175
19. Disturb Us, Lord!	191
<i>Glossary</i>	201
<i>Recommended Resources</i>	206
<i>Notes</i>	207

The Road to the Future

You can best think about the future of the faith after you have gone back to the classical tradition.

Robert E. Webber

When all is said (and truly said) about the divisions of Christendom, there remains, by God's mercy, an enormous common ground.

C. S. Lewis

No one dare do contemporary theology until they have mastered classical Christian thought.

Karl Barth

THE CHURCH TODAY IS MOVING through a significant time of transition. Some Christians have referred to this as a second Reformation or perhaps a fourth Great Awakening. What we know for sure is that cultural megashifts are rapidly occurring as globalization becomes more than simply an economic reality.

THE PAST CAN LEAD US TO THE FUTURE

New patterns of Christian faith and life are emerging in the church. I welcome these patterns, but I believe they desperately need to be rooted in the past—the creeds, the Word of God understood as the story of grace, life as a sacramental mystery, and deeply rooted **spiritual formation**. My thesis is simple: *The road to the future must run through the past*. My friend, the late Robert

Webber, called it “ancient-future faith.” I share his perspective because the church must be rooted in the past and the future.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ in human history is *our* story. All Christians are spiritually united with the glorified Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This results in a collective story that we live together in the present—yet also a story that has been powerfully shaped by the historical events and traditions of nearly two thousand years. Our modern story confuses us at times. The church gives mixed signals. Our historical past sometimes embarrasses us, especially if we know our profound inconsistencies. Nevertheless, as people of faith this is “our” story. Why?

True Christian faith is not found in personal religious feelings but in the historical and incarnational reality of a confessing church. Therefore, if we refuse to come to grips with our past, our future will not be distinctively Christian. The result will be new forms of man-made religion that embrace recycled heresies.

For almost two thousand years, Christians have lived the mystery of the apostolic faith and passed it on through personal stories, sermons, creeds, and common practices. But American Christians have a unique predilection to approach the Christian faith as if what we know is vastly more relevant than what previous generations knew. To do so is naive at best and dangerous at worst. It has led a generation of Christians to assume that they know perfectly well who Jesus is, apart from any instruction in ancient Christian tradition. America has, in fact, become a breeding ground for new religions and **sects**. Now we export these to Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which results in thousands of new denominations and splinter groups and an unimaginable number of cults. Something about all this tribalism rightly disturbs younger Christians.

Building one’s faith and life on various passages in the Bible understood through private experience results in nothing less than a confusing cacophony of Christian noise. This situation is precisely what this book will challenge. I will make a case for how the one church of Jesus Christ, ministering out of its spiritual unity in Christ and rooted in core **orthodoxy**, can best serve Christ’s mission.

SCRIPTURE IS GOD'S SUPREME WITNESS TO CHRIST

My foundational premise is that Scripture bears the supreme witness to the living Christ, the final revelation of God. Christ has promised to build his church (Matthew 16:18). The visible church must be rooted in Scripture. But the great traditions of historical, incarnational, and confessional Christianity all flow from Scripture and the life of the church. Scripture alone, without human life and community consensus, is subject to every human whim and fancy. History demonstrates the danger of such an approach.

We must learn to listen to the witness of the whole church through Scripture. The Scriptures are “the word of God [and thus] alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates . . .” (Hebrews 4:12). The Scriptures illumine the minds of God’s people in every culture and context. By them, we freshly perceive truth as the Holy Spirit reveals Christ. The whole church comes to know God’s wisdom and character through the Holy Scriptures. Christians believe that Scripture is perfect in all it affirms and authoritative for all people and cultures.

But the Christian church is flawed, sometimes profoundly so. After all, the church is a worldwide fellowship of human persons with all their personal and collective flaws. But we remain Christ’s church. He promised to build his church, and he has kept his promise—a promise he will continue to keep until he comes again.

THE CHURCH: UNIFIED AND DIVERSE

During the first 1,800 years of Christian history almost no one understood the church as a myriad of independent and unrelated congregations and movements that interpreted the Bible as each saw fit. Even the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers, especially magisterial men like Martin Luther and John Calvin, understood that there was an established historical foundation deeply rooted in the Scripture. The creeds and the doctrines taught by a consensus of the early church fathers were continually appealed to by all the great Protestant Reformers. For them, common faith was expressed in the earliest **ecumenical** creeds. The Reformers

never encouraged people to pick through the Bible and concoct a better version of Christianity.

Growing evidence indicates the church is coming together in a new expression of unity and diversity. This is happening through the work of the Holy Spirit, reminding us that the church is the creation of God. This new expression is shaped by mission and **ecumenism**.

HOW THE AMERICAN MEGASHIFT WENT BAD

I have no doubt that the church in the West will undergo significant shifts in the coming decades, shifts that are already underway and incline some to radically rethink the church. The outcome could be widespread confusion. A diluted understanding of the once-and-for-all nature of faith could lead many to change virtually everything about the nature and form of the church. There are scores of books that take this approach, arguing intensely that the postmodern condition requires a complete revolt against historic Christianity. I see a much better solution.

Much rethinking about the church is confused precisely because it seeks an ideal church while denying the actual reality of the historical church. I advocate what is often called **critical realism**, which involves a positive yet critical response to the past and allows the past to be properly linked with a biblically hopeful view about what God will do in the age to come. My critical realism is rooted in several places: the study of Scripture, the story of the historical church, the foundation laid down by the earliest Christian leaders in the ecumenical creeds, and the various movements of the Holy Spirit that have renewed the church through the years. The Christian church is not a perfect community but is comprised of a redeemed people called to continual repentance in the gospel.

As a community, we must embody the gospel for the sake of the world. Having done this imperfectly in the past is never an excuse that should hinder us from praying for God to grant us more grace-given reality. Critical-realism holds before us the priority of the kingdom of God and the commitment of Christ himself