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## The Catholicity of the Church:

An Interdenominational Exploration

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# Catholicity in Presbyterian Perspective

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As a member of the reformed tradition, Presbyterianism draws from a distinct theological well in its articulation of catholicity. As a connectional polity, Presbyterianism gives distinct expression to its catholicity. Both theology and polity contribute to a Presbyterian confession of the church's catholicity. In this article, I will explore both of these manifestations of catholicity within a presbyterian perspective.

By far, the most space will be given to the theological distinctives that shape a presbyterian catholicity. I will demonstrate that the two classically understood ways of understanding the church's catholicity—extensive and intensive—mark a presbyterian understanding. This will be preeminently seen in the confessional expression of Presbyterianism found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (hereafter WCF). There are other ways, however, that the theological heritage of Presbyterianism inflects catholicity. I will focus on election and covenant, the mediation of Christ, and an eschatology where covenantal blessings are bestowed presently yet not fully until Christ returns. Before concluding with some thoughts on the proper pursuit of catholicity within a presbyterian perspective, I will argue that the polity of the Presbyterian church facilitates a conciliar character that provides a compelling expression of catholicity.

## A Reformed Foundation

### Introduction

While Presbyterianism is within the reformed tradition, the tradition gladly inherits the broader classical Christian tradition of the attributes of the church. What is confessed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) serves as the basis for what the reformed tradition, broadly speaking, predicates of the church: she *is* one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.<sup>1</sup> Together these predicates identify the essence of the church of Jesus Christ. In other words, these are the constituent materials Christ uses to build his church (Matt 16:18).

1. Naturally, standard reformed theological texts on the church from the Reformation era to present touch on these attributes to one degree or another. "Holiness" and "catholicity" are also present in the Apostles' Creed.

These materials are not only constitutive, and thus *gifts* of the builder—they are also a calling. That is, Christ’s people are obligated to pursue unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity in the church. Blessedly, that obligation is fueled by Christ’s greatest gift, the Holy Spirit, who causes what the church is as a body to grow up into its head, Christ. As the Spirit leads and empowers, then the church becomes more of what it is in Christ as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. To the point of this article, catholicity is both a gift and calling of the church.<sup>2</sup>

But what, precisely, is the gift and the calling? This is to ask, what is the catholicity given to the church that it is to pursue? Scripture provides no immediate answer.<sup>3</sup> The Greek word for “catholic” is utilized very early in extrabiblical literature, but not always with clear meaning beyond a generic universality.<sup>4</sup> As G. C. Berkouwer noted, “The word seems too general—i.e., it does not seem to be concrete enough to be of service to us.”<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, its historical usage and conceptuality have two general emphases germane to this article.<sup>6</sup>

First, catholicity has been understood to refer to the universality of the church as it extends throughout space and time, “comprehending all the diversities of places, times, persons, and states, and as denoting the whole family of God, whether now

2. J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema have a helpful discussion of the church’s attributes as gift and obligation in their 2008 work on the topic. G. C. Berkouwer uses the language of “gift and task.” That is, the church is called to be what it is. Like the Apostle Paul’s ethic outlined in his epistles, there is an imperative that follows the indicative. van Genderen and Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2008), 707-25; Berkouwer, *The Church: Studies in Dogmatics*, trans. James E Davison (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 120-25. On the imperatives that follow a confession of the church’s catholicity, see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 261-67.

3. The adverb καθόλου occurs in Acts 4:18 but not in relation to the church. In this verse Peter and John are commanded by the Sanhedrin not to speak or teach “at all” in the name of Jesus. While on the word level catholicity is absent from Scripture, the substance of it is found in both the Old and New Testaments. This is especially the case in the New Testament as the church distinguishes herself from Judaism in obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This obedience was repeatedly put to the test and culminated at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Herman Bavinck judged that the church’s catholicity was “saved” at the Council of Jerusalem, which upheld the mystery that Gentiles are “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph 3:6). Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 225. See pages 222-28 for an insightful investigation of catholicity in Scripture.

4. The earliest extant usage was AD 110 in Ignatius of Antioch’s “To the Smyrnaeans” 8.1.2: “Let the congregation be wherever the bishop is; just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there also is the catholic church (ὅπου ἂν φανῇ ὁ ἐπίσκοπος, ἐκεῖ τὸ πλῆθος ἔστω, ὥσπερ ὅπου ἂν ᾖ Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς, ἐκεῖ ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία).” Bart D. Ehrman, ed. and trans., *Letters*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1:304. The fact that Ignatius does not qualify his use of the term, and assumes general reader familiarity, suggests it was already known prior to his use.

5. Berkouwer, *Church*, 105.

6. Several works can be consulted for a history of its usage and understanding. See especially Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 13-29, 181-86. Hans Küng notes that there was an early apologetic use of “catholic” in order to distinguish what was orthodox from various heresies. This was codified into law under Theodosius in 380. Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968), 298.

or formerly sojourning on the earth, and dispersed through all ages and quarters of the world.”<sup>7</sup> This is the external and quantitative manifestation of catholicity, which speaks to the breadth of the Gospel mission and reception: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The central confessional document of Presbyterians, the WCF, twenty-fifth chapter is on the church, and articulates this dimension of catholicity in 25.2:

The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

Second, catholicity has been understood as having reference to the church’s wholeness, which has to do with the depth and completeness of its parts.<sup>9</sup> This is

7. Herman Witsius, *The Apostles’ Creed*, trans., Donald Fraser (Glasgow: Knull, Blackie, 1823), 2:359. It was tempting to distinguish one aspect of this dimension of catholicity: its extension in time. During the Donatist controversy Augustine wielded the church’s geographic extension against the African provinciality of the Donatists. Serge Lancel, *St. Augustine* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 162-73, 287-305; Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

Roman Catholic writers of the sixteenth century re-appropriated this charge against the Protestant Reformers. The Reformers responded by stressing the church’s extension throughout time and demonstrating continuity between their teachings, the apostolic witness, and the theology of the early church. Esther Chung-Kim has recently explored this polemical appeal to the Church Fathers through the Reformation’s eucharist debates. Though less polemical in motivation, today’s Reformed Catholicity movement is keen to reflect upon threads of continuity between the reformed tradition and the catholic consensus of the patristic era (as well as other eras in the Christian tradition). However, this is less motivated by polemics against Roman Catholicism than it is a methodological ethos and theological sensibility contributing to spiritual and theological renewal. Chung-Kim, *Inventing Authority: The Use of the Church Fathers in Reformation Debates over the Eucharist* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); also see Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015).

8. J. T. Dennison, Jr., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: 1523–1693* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 4:264. Also, the Westminster Larger Catechism (hereafter WLC) question 62 asks, “What is the visible Church? A. The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children.” *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 209.

9. The first extant articulation of this dimension of catholicity was in the fourth century by Cyril of Jerusalem in his “Catechetical Lectures,” XVIII, 23. *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa*, ed. William Telfer, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 4:186:

The Church, then, is called Catholic because it is spread through the whole world, from one end of the earth to the other, and because it never stops teaching in all its fulness every doctrine that men ought to be brought to know: and that regarding things visible and invisible, in heaven and on earth. It is called Catholic also because it brings into religious obedience every sort of men, rulers and ruled, learned and simple, and because it is a universal treatment and cure

the internal and qualitative manifestation of catholicity. It is not mutually exclusive from its external manifestation. Indeed, depth should follow breadth: “Go therefore and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). The WCF articulates this dimension of catholicity in 25.3:

Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the church’s catholicity is classically understood to possess interrelated dimensions of external breadth and internal depth. These are both good gifts bestowed by the ascended Christ as he builds his church. As much as they are constitutive gifts, they are also callings—the external breadth manifest in the church’s gospel imperative, and the internal depth manifest in its discipleship imperative. In its chapter on the church, Presbyterianism’s confessional standard articulates both of these classical dimensions as distinguishing the “visible” church.

The authors of WCF 25.1 further write of the “invisible” church as catholic. While the invisible/visible distinction arguably goes back to Augustine,<sup>11</sup> it was an emphasis of the Protestant Reformation as it sought to distinguish the true church in the midst of the dominant visibility of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>12</sup> Presbyterianism’s “grandfather” John Calvin described the invisible church as “that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. . . . [The invisible church] includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world.”<sup>13</sup> That the visible and

for every kind of sin whether perpetrated by soul or body, and possesses within it every form of virtue that is named, whether it expresses itself in deeds or works or in spiritual graces of every description.

10. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:264. Admittedly, catholicity as “wholeness” is not as clearly spelled out in 25.3 as catholicity as “universality” is in 25.2. Nonetheless, the emphasis here on the perfecting of the saints by Christ and the Holy Spirit through the church’s ministry speaks to the dimension of depth and maturity that is an internal manifestation of catholicity.

11. According to Augustine and the Reformers, the visible and invisible church are not two separate churches but two aspects of the one church. For a helpful study of Augustine’s evolving thought on the church, see James K. Lee, *Augustine and the Mystery of the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017).

12. Roman Catholic theology continues to assert catholicity is manifest in a dominant visibility when churches are united to a visible head, the pope. See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 75-82.

13. Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1021 (4.1.7). On Calvin’s teaching on the

invisible church are described in the WCF as catholic is a reminder that, while the confession draws on classical dimensions of catholicity, its overall presentation of the doctrine is in the context of a series of emphases drawn from the reformed theological tradition. For example, the invisible and visible aspects highlight, respectively, two doctrines which have received significant attention among reformed theologians: election and covenant.

### **Election and Covenant**

The opening paragraph of the chapter in WCF on the church connects the catholic invisible church with the “whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all” (25.1).<sup>14</sup> The catholicity of the church, thus understood, is ultimately located in election and is seen only by the eyes of faith (Eph 1: 4, 9, 11; Rom 8:30; 2 Tim 1:9).<sup>15</sup> This effectively disorients the north star of catholicity from the human will or any human institution and orients it supremely to God. Furthermore, theologically it maps catholicity onto Christ.<sup>16</sup> This latter point will be further explored in the next section on the mediation of Christ. At present, it is enough to highlight that in WCF 25.1 there are the lineaments of a distinctly Reformed understanding of the covenant (though admittedly disputed),<sup>17</sup> that is, the covenant of redemption (or *pactum salutis*).

The Reformed theology teaching on election flows from its doctrine of God.<sup>18</sup> God, out of his loving and gracious character, elected before the foundation of the

church, see Benjamin Charles Milner Jr., *Calvin's Doctrine of the Church*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1970); and David Foxgrover, ed., *Calvin and the Church: Papers Presented at the 13th Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society, May 24-26, 2001* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Product Services, 2002).

14. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:264. Also, the question is posed in the WLC 64, “What is the invisible Church? A. The invisible Church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are; or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head.”

15. Calvin recognized that in order to embrace catholicity, “We need not (as we have said) see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands. Rather, the fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were clearly visible.” *Institutes*, 2:1015 (4.1.3).

16. On the importance of these foundational theological elements of catholicity expressed in the WCF, see Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 170-71.

17. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Readings its Theology in Historical Context*, The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 235-36.

18. After confessing Scripture in chapter 1, the WCF goes on to God in chapter 2 and then God's Eternal Decree in chapter 3. Paragraphs 5 and 6 of chapter 3 get to the heart of election:

5. Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to His eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will, hath chosen, in Christ, unto everlasting glory out of His mere free grace and love, without any



world all those whom he will savingly unite to his Son, Jesus Christ (Eph 1:4-5). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Reformed theologians increasingly brought together in theological reflection God's electing purposes with his triune nature. The result was what is known as the covenant of redemption. There is an eternal agreement between God the Father and God the Son in which the Son agrees to be the head of a people for whom he will accomplish salvation. This doctrine is not explicitly labeled in WCF, but its substance is alluded to in 25.1 and, more clearly, in 8.1 on the mediation of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

The covenant of redemption ensures that the vicissitudes of the visible manifestation of the covenant of grace within the mixed body of the church do not ultimately determine her sense of catholicity; God does. What is more, the source of the covenant of redemption in God's trinitarian electing love shapes our practice of catholicity within the church:

The church of Jesus Christ is a 'chosen race' (1 Pet 2:9). It exists by virtue of the declaration of the Son in which the eternal resolve of the Father is realized: 'You did not choose me; I chose you' (John 15:16). This being the case, the church is characterized by a particular dynamic or movement. This dynamic is its origin in the determination of God the Father, whose purpose is set forth

foresight of faith, or good works, or perseverance in either of them, or any other thing in the creature, as conditions, or causes moving Him thereunto: and all to the praise of His glorious grace.

6. As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath He, by the eternal and most free purpose of His will, foreordained all the means thereunto. Wherefore, they who are elected, being fallen in Adam, are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by His Spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by His power, through faith, unto salvation. Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 238-239.

19. While not explicitly stated the WCF or the catechisms, many divines held to the doctrine. WCF 8.1 offers its clearest exposition in the Westminster Standards: "It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest, and king, the head, and savior of his church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: unto whom he did from all eternity give a people, to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified" (343). J. V. Fesko notes, "From the earliest days of the reception and interpretation of the Confession, the covenant of redemption was viewed as compatible with it" (165-66). Evidence for this claim appears in *The Summe of Saving Knowledge*, written by David Dickson and appended to the Westminster Standards by the Scottish Church, which explicitly articulates the covenant of redemption. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*; Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); David Dickson, *The Summe of Saving Knowledge with Practical Use Thereof* (Glasgow: Robert Sanders, 1669), head 2, in *The Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms . . . Appointed by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland* (Glasgow: Robert Sanders, 1669). For more context on the covenant of redemption and Westminster, see my "Post-Reformation Developments" in *Covenant Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming). For insight on the critical issue of the Holy Spirit's role in the covenant of redemption, see J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception*, Reformed Historical Theology 35 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 61-68.



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in the Son and brought to human fruition in the work of the Holy Spirit. Its origin in the divine resolve is what gives the church its specific character and dynamic of *being chosen*. Divine election must not be thought of simply as a background or preliminary reality, perhaps the church's ultimate ground or origin but not an operative factor in giving an account of what the church actually does. Quite the contrary: the dynamic of being chosen determines the modes of common life and activity in which the church is visible. Its forms of life, its principal activities—all the ways in which it disposes of itself in time and space—have to be such that they testify to God.<sup>20</sup>

The object of theological reflection is God and all things in relation to God. Reformed theology ultimately traces the catholicity of the church to the triune God and his eternal covenantal purposes. If reformed thinking on the matter stopped there, however, catholicity would be rendered too abstract. After all, the elect are ultimately unknowable by his people until Christ consummates his kingdom. In the present, there is a historical manifestation of the covenant in the covenant of grace observed visibly in the church. A reformed understanding of catholicity must attend to both the eternal root and the historical fruit.<sup>21</sup> The eternal root of catholicity ensures a divine shape and encourages a focus on “a kingdom that we are receiving rather than one that we are building or approximating through our own discipleship as we seek to mirror the Trinity.”<sup>22</sup> Catholicity is a gift.

The historical fruit of catholicity helps us discern the mixed context in which catholicity is manifest in the visible church. As we will see later, the eschaton is

20. John Webster, “On Evangelical Ecclesiology,” *Ecclesiology* 1, no. 1 (January 2004): 28-29 (emphasis his).

21. One area where root and fruit are brought together in considering catholicity is in the sacraments, which, due to limitations of space, this article will not explore. It is worth mentioning here, though, that it is the holy name of the Trinity invoked in the covenant of redemption that is applied to the subjects of baptism. Baptism thus serves as sort of bridge between eternal root and historical fruit as members of the covenant of grace receive the triune sign of covenantal union. Historically, an indication of the scope of presbyterian catholicity is whether in receiving members the church is willing to accept another church's baptism. For example, American Presbyterians by and large accepted Roman Catholic baptism up until a controversy in the mid-nineteenth century with Charles Hodge on one side and James Henley Thornwell on the other. Since that time, the majority position of conservative Presbyterianism has been to accept Roman Catholic baptism, though a vocal minority favoring rebaptism has persisted. For a detailed account of the historical roots of this debate, see Peter J. Wallace, “The Bond of Union: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861” (PhD Diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004), 189-258, <http://www.peterwallace.org/bond-union/>.

Likewise, catholicity is demonstrated through the invitation to the Lord's Supper. The reformed do not invite only the reformed to the Table; Christians are invited to the Table. Like baptism, the Lord's Supper bridges the gap between the visible and the invisible in that during communion participants are transported by the Holy Spirit to feed on Christ. This is a transportation of the visible community of the church into the invisible realm, where God and the saints who have passed into glory reside.

22. Michael S. Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 203.

yet to be fully realized, and not until Christ's return will the catholicity of the invisible church be made entirely visible. In the meantime, God administers his covenant of grace through the ministry of the visible church. She imperfectly yet confidently stewards the means of grace—gathering and perfecting the saints—while acknowledging there will be “false sons in her pale.”<sup>23</sup> It is within the mixed body of the visible church revealed in space and time that God is manifesting the catholicity of the church both quantitatively and qualitatively in the midst of the particular churches (1 Cor 13:12; Rev 2-3; Matt 13:24-30, 47).<sup>24</sup> This manifestation is not a different church than the invisible one. It is, rather, what is known to us and, therefore, answerable to the imperatives revealed in the New Testament. It is within the historical manifestation of the visible church that we can actually pursue catholicity. Catholicity is a calling.

According to WCF 25, the catholicity of the church embraces both the eternal and invisible as well as the historical and visible. The latter is the sign to the former's reality: “[The visible] truly participates in the signified [invisible], but not yet identical with it as one day it will be. ‘For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God’ (Rom 8:19).”<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of the confession of Presbyterianism, the covenant ensures that both the invisible and visible church are equally real.<sup>26</sup> Yet, the dimensions of the eternal root provide the scope for what should be pursued in the historical present, both with regard to the breadth and depth of catholicity. Earlier, the point was made that in the WCF catholicity is ultimately located in election. While true, this is mapped onto Christ. Again, 25.1 reads, “The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, *under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in*

23. S. J. Stone, “The Church's One Foundation” in *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), hymn 347.

24. WCF 25.4 brings this home: “This catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 264.

25. Horton, *People and Place*, 202-3.

26. In the history of reformed writing on the church, there has been a fear that an emphasis on God's sovereignty and election “can lead to a diminution of the [visible] church's importance in the Christian life.” Henry S. Kuo, “A New Reformed Catholicity: Catholicity and Confessing in Reformed Ecclesiology,” *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 3, no. 1-2 (2019): 173. This fear was at the center of friction in the nineteenth century between Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary and John Williamson Nevin of Mercersburg Seminary. At risk of oversimplifying the debate, Nevin (and Mercersburg Theology more broadly) emphasized the visible church and Hodge the invisible church. I have sought to make the case that WCF 25 gives due attention to both aspects of the church. See discussion in E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 384-87, 467-81. For a decidedly pro-Nevin take on the debate, see W. Bradford Littlejohn, *The Mercersburg Theology and the Quest for Reformed Catholicity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009).

all.”<sup>27</sup> The covenant of redemption stipulates a Christological focus to salvation as the Son agrees to be head of a people he joins to himself and makes covenant partners. Life-giving participation in Christ signals the theological source of the church’s catholicity, both with regard to its universality and its wholeness.

### **The Mediation of Christ**

Locating the elect in Christ in WCF pulls together several New Testament themes.<sup>28</sup> The refrain in Ephesians 1 of “in Christ (ἐν Χριστῷ)” and “in him (ἐν αὐτῷ)” highlights the people of God’s new home on the cosmic map, a home planned from all of eternity and built in space and time as the Spirit places the Father’s sons and daughters in his Son (Eph 1:5). According to WCF 25.1, the church’s union with Christ entails having Christ as head and, through a series of intimate biblical metaphors: being his spouse, body, and even his fullness. As described, the church’s relationship with Christ is multifaceted. I will follow two facets in understanding the importance of this relationship for the church’s catholicity: Christ as head and ruler of the church, and the church as the fullness of Christ.

Christ as head of the church, which is his body, is drawn from Ephesians 1:22 and Colossians 1:18. Christ as head of the church, which is his spouse, is drawn from Ephesians 5:23-32. Both images address an intimate relationship yet an ordered one where Christ is the ultimate authority. As God and Creator, he is head over all things. As the one who mediates salvation to God’s people, Christ is especially head over the church, for he purchased her with his own blood (Acts 20:28) and lives as her royal head (Eph 1:22). The risen and ascended head now gives gifts to the visible church (recall WCF 25.3), gifts designed to gather and perfect the saints (Eph 4:10-13). These include the offices of the church which bear his authority: “Pastors must minister in *his* name . . . elders rule under his oversight . . . deacons serve under *his* care. Christ is the sole head of the church as much as he is its sole Saviour.”<sup>29</sup>

The sole headship of Christ over the church means its catholicity is determined, first and foremost, by him—both in what the church is (gift), and what the church is called to do (calling). Where Christ is, the church is as his body. At the same time, as the church and its officers minister in his name, they serve his purposes. The

27. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 4:264 (emphasis mine).

28. As stated earlier, WCF 8.1 decisively centers election in Christ: “Christ is presented here not only as elected man but as electing God, since the God who chooses and ordains has already been declared to be triune (WCF 2.3), and his decrees are made by all three persons indivisibly.” Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 237-38. The clarity on this note in WCF 8.1 complicates Karl Barth’s bold accusation that reformed theology lost a Christocentric doctrine of election. *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *The Doctrine of God*, ed., G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 1-506. See incisive discussion of Barth’s reading of reformed theology on election in Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

29. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 336-37 (emphasis mine).

church does not listen to the voice of another, including the compelling alternative catholicities of marketers, sociologists, and politicians that only produce sectarianism in the end. Her ears are tuned to hear her master in the Scriptures. As she follows his call in the Spirit, genuine catholicity will grow: “Catholicity means that the church is Christ’s. We cannot exclude those whom he welcomes, or welcome those whom he excludes.”<sup>30</sup>

The second facet of Christ’s mediation that has a bearing on the church’s catholicity is the description given to her as the “fullness of Christ.” Throughout the New Testament, there is a fullness attributed to the person of Christ (John 1:14; Luke 4:1; John 3:34; Col 1:19; 2:9). But as WCF 25.1 holds in quoting Ephesians 1:23, that fullness is, in part, communicated to the church. Like the previous facet, there is a gift and calling dimension to fullness. Or, as Berkouwer puts it, “In the fullness that the Church received, she is directed towards fullness.”<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, through our irrevocable union with Christ, his fullness is the church’s. We are whole because he is whole. On the other hand, we are not yet fully whole. The language of WCF 25.3 states the church is being gathered and perfected. The gifts Christ bestows are so the church is equipped and enabled to “attain to . . . mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). The fullness of Christ provides the depth—or height—for the dimension of catholic wholeness to flourish. That it is the fullness of *Christ* ensures qualitative catholicity “can never be abstracted from Christ himself.”<sup>32</sup>

The mediation of Christ is important for understanding catholicity in the presbyterian perspective because it consolidates where catholicity can be found and pursued. As head, Christ joined to himself a distinct people, the elect, and ensures all he has done for them will be efficacious for their salvation. Roman Catholic conceptions of catholicity, at least since Vatican II, have broadened Christ’s mediation to a universal measure and confused where genuine catholicity can be found. Pope John Paul II was emphatic on this point in his inaugural encyclical, affirming that “man—every man without exception whatever—has been redeemed by Christ . . . because with man—with each man without exception whatever—Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it.”<sup>33</sup> Whereas older Protestants feared the institutional dominance in Roman Catholic understandings of catholicity,<sup>34</sup> after

30. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 97. Clowney rightly emphasizes the complete absurdity of affirming catholicity while at the same time promoting any kind of racism.

31. Clowney, *The Church*, 113.

32. Clowney, *Church*, 114.

33. Catholic Church and John Paul, *Encyclical Redemptor Hominis* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1979), 14.3. In this and similar affirmations, Pope John Paul II is relying on *Gaudium et spes* 22.

34. Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 5, *Ecclesiology, the Means of Grace, Eschatology*, trans. and ed., Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 9, 22-23.

Vatican II, a candid pluralism has sprouted. Rooted in an understanding of a universal incarnational union, the fruits of salvation are now investigated beyond even the Christian church and irrespective of faith.<sup>35</sup> Christ mediating on behalf of the elect safeguards against catholicity transgressing the bounds of Christ. Furthermore, it upholds the distinction between head and members—Christ is Lord—at the same time as it orients members to their head as their source of vitality and growth. To put it differently, for the church to reach further into wholeness, it digs in the depths of Christ alone, for in him is the full catholicity to which the church is called. Yet, as has been previously suggested, this wholeness and universality will not be fully manifest until Christ returns.

### **Eschatology**

This last section on how reformed theological emphases inflect catholicity briefly focuses on a category suggested in the foregoing—eschatology. In doing so, I will emphasize what is not explicitly present in the teaching of the WCF. WCF 32 and 33 touch on resurrection and life after death, as well as the last judgment, which are the traditional topics concerned with the end of the age. They do not, however, teach what has become known as “inaugurated eschatology.” Be that as it may, notions of inaugurated eschatology can be picked up in what the WCF says about salvation and the church. One way of viewing what I have traced thus far is that there is an eternal, pre-temporal dimension to the catholicity of the church that is stored up in the covenant of redemption centered on Christ (WCF 8.1; 25.1). This extends into space-time history as Christ mediates salvation to his elect as they are gathered and perfected in the visible manifestation of the covenant of grace, the church (WCF 8.1; 25.1-3). What awaits is the consummation of Christ building his church—the telos of his gathering and perfecting—where the full dimensions of the church’s catholicity will be on display (WCF 25.3).

Inaugurated eschatology attends to the historical development of redemption unfolding from Genesis through Revelation and is built on the Bible’s promise-and-fulfillment orientation. It was initially developed in conservative reformed circles in the nineteenth century, especially in the work of Geerhardus Vos.<sup>36</sup> At the heart of understanding inaugurated eschatology is discerning the tension between the

35. Miroslav Volf has noted the irony that, according to Vatican II, Protestant and Orthodox bodies are still considered noncatholic, yet Rome’s catholicity has seemingly moved beyond Christ to include non-Christian religions. Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, *Sacra Doctrina: Christian Theology for a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 263-64. Volf has in mind *Unitatis redintegratio* 13.17.

36. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948); Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972). Building on Vos have been Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), and Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study of Paul’s Soteriology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978).

“already” and the “not yet” in the fulfillment of the new covenant that was inaugurated with Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. The church presently lives in the time of “already” (Matt 12:28; 13:1-46; Mark 1:15; Luke 7:22-23; 11:20; Gal 1:4; Eph 1:13-14; Col 1:13) where it has a catholicity in Christ. Yet, in the dynamic of the “not yet,” it both pursues and awaits a fuller manifestation of catholicity in the visible church. The future, according to Vos, is always extending itself into the present as the “not yet” is realized in the “already” (Heb 2:5-9). Nonetheless, until Christ returns, the fullness of the future eludes our grasp.

In some ways, catholicity as gift and calling can be mapped onto “already” and “not yet”: the church has been given catholicity in her union with Christ, yet it is called to a fuller quantitative and qualitative manifestation of catholicity in the present visible church even as it waits for the world to come. The “already” and “not yet” contributes to a present dynamism and a hopeful realism in understanding catholicity. Catholicity is not static. The fullness of Christ is being communicated to his body and bride so that the church, in its catholicity, is increasingly being gathered (breadth) and perfected (depth). But, at the same time, it must be on guard against an over-realized eschatology and its unrealistic expectations. There is a fullness to catholicity that is hoped for—and prayed for (John 17:20-23)—but will not be fully seen until Christ returns. This means, insofar as catholicity is an expression of union, we should expect a measure of diversity in the church in this “already” and “not yet” time.

Herman Bavinck, who inherited and appropriated the perspective of inaugurated eschatology, criticized Roman Catholicism for pursuing an external but hollow unity, believing they sought “a mechanical and external unity that veils the real theological differences within the papal church.”<sup>37</sup> According to Gray Sutanto, in his pursuit of the catholicity of the church, Bavinck argues that “diversity is inevitable: diversity is the result of the church’s current location in various contexts, generations, and its finitude.”<sup>38</sup> Until faith becomes sight, we should not expect the full breadth and depth of catholicity which the church is promised in the covenant of redemption: “The one, holy, universal church that is presently an object of faith, will not come into being until the body of Christ reaches full maturity. Only then will the church achieve the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, and only then will she know as she is known.”<sup>39</sup>

37. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Confessional, International, and Cosmopolitan: Herman Bavinck’s Neo-Calvinistic and Protestant vision of the Catholicity of the Church,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 12 (April 2018): 34.

38. Sutanto, “Confessional,” 34. However, see page 39 for a trenchant critique of Bavinck’s vision of plurality that could steer in the direction of a proto-identity theology manifest in pluriform churches. Such a vision, Sutanto judges, “Mitigates against the greater catholicity of the kingdom of God that sees tribes and nations and tongues together singing the one song of redemption” (39).

39. Bavinck, “Catholicity of Christianity,” 251.

#### D. Blair Smith: *Catholicity in Presbyterian Perspective*

A common critique of reformed theology, especially in light of the topic at hand, is that a focus on election constricts Christian generosity. Accordingly, it would prove deleterious in encouraging a catholicity commensurate with the universal call of Christ (John 3:16; Matt 28:19-20). Of all the churches promoting catholicity, would not the Presbyterians, with their doctrine of election, be most inauthentic? But this is, of course, to misunderstand the reformed position. Unless one is promoting universal salvation, all theologies put some limit on who will be joined to Christ. The question is, whence the limit?

Out of God's free good pleasure, he elects, yes, but, as Augustine said, commenting on 1 Timothy 2:4, "The whole human race is in them" (*omnes genus hominum est in eis*).<sup>40</sup> Election does not envision an eternal holy huddle that the church anticipates through an overweening insularity. Paul, the great apostle of election, taught what Jonathan Gibson calls an "eschatological universalism."<sup>41</sup> R. B. Kuiper writes, "However few or many His people may be today or tomorrow, in the end His people will be the world."<sup>42</sup> Paul believed the ancient promise of the covenant of grace (Rom 4:13): Abraham will be "the heir of *the world*." So long as election is properly seen through covenantal and eschatological eyes, a hopeful catholicity follows where we pray and pursue "thy kingdom come" (Matt 6:10) until "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14).

Catholicity in the presbyterian perspective must be understood through the foundation of the church's reformed theology. As a confessional body, the signposts for understanding the nature of the church's catholicity are clearly marked in the WCF. The external dimension of quantitative catholicity is held together as a gift and calling with the internal dimension of qualitative catholicity. Together, these are discerned through the invisible-visible church distinction. Yet, these confessional signposts are placed among a number of theological emphases that shape a reformed theology of catholicity. I have highlighted election and covenant, the mediation of Christ, and eschatology. I turn now to what is perhaps the most obvious element of a presbyterian perspective: its polity. After all, the tradition's name is derived from the Greek word for elder (πρεσβύτερος).

40. The whole sentence reads, "*Omnes homines uult saluos fieri, ut intelligantur omnes praeordinati quia omne hominum in eis est.*" *De correptione et gratia* 14.44 (CSEL 92), 272.

41. Jonathan Gibson, "For Whom Did Christ Die? Particularism and Universalism in the Pauline Epistles," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 326-327.

42. R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom did Christ Die? A Study of the Divine Design of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 95-96, as quoted in Gibson, "For Whom Did Christ Die?" 327. B. B. Warfield held that reformed theologians have "as important a mission in preserving the true universalism of the gospel . . . as we do in preserving the true particularism of grace." Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1935), 125.



## **A Presbyterian Polity**

Presbyterianism is organized around the risen and ascended Christ's gift to his church of elders.<sup>43</sup> This mark of its ecclesiology informs how local churches, regional bodies, and national denominations are organized. That being said, it is understood that this polity is a temporary arrangement for this "already" but "not yet" time. If the church is ultimately composed of the full number of the elect, they are known in love in eternity by the Trinity (invisible church) and will not be fully manifest until Christ returns (when the invisible is made visible). Until then, Christ rules the visible church through a plurality of elders who represent the people of God.

Though they naturally have arguments for subsequent developments, both the Orthodox Metropolitan Zizioulas and Roman Catholic Pope Benedict essentially argue that the church's earliest form of polity was presbyterian.<sup>44</sup> Presbyterians naturally agree and continue to promote their elder-centric polity as not only what is described in but what is prescribed by the Scriptures (1 Tim 3:1-7; 1 Pet 5:1-2; compare with 1 Tim 5:17-19; Titus 1:5-7).<sup>45</sup> Every congregation should elect elders who rule the local church. Presbyterian polity does not stop at the local level, however. Church government is exercised at higher and wider levels where presbyteries (or synods) are made up of all the churches in a given region as represented through their elders. Presbyterians hold that the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 is a biblical example of regional Presbyterianism where a higher and broader assembly handles a local dispute. General assemblies cover national or even international areas. While there can be two or three levels to Presbyterianism, each is interlinked. Local church elders are accountable to their congregations and to other elders in the presbytery and at the general assembly.

Michael Horton believes a presbyterian polity is consistent with a covenantal ecclesiology, which eschews, on the one hand, the hierarchical unicity of a bishop-centric government, and, on the other hand, the independent plurality of congregational forms of government: "At the Jerusalem Council, the unity that the Spirit had established at Pentecost was preserved visibly not by the sacrifice of the one to the many or the many to the one but by the consent of the many as one. The covenant community *functioned covenantally* in its outward and interpersonal

43. According to T. M. Lindsay's classic study of presbyterian government, "elder" is a title of an office and "pastor" and "overseer" describe the kind of work done by holders of that office. *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1903), 154.

44. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 195; Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 122-23.

45. There are debates in the history of presbyterian polity over exactly how many offices are in the visible church. Are there four (Pastors, Doctors or Teachers, Elders, and Deacons)? Are there three (Ministers or Preachers, Elders, and Deacons)? Are there two and a half (Teaching and Ruling Elders, and Deacons)? Or are there two (Elders and Deacons)? See David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds., *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 140-48.

government, in mutual submission.”<sup>46</sup> What Horton notes about Presbyterianism as a polity is it promotes a conciliar character where no one person (or personality) or office has supremacy. While there is a hierarchy of church courts from local to regional to national and international, they are composed of representative elders who have equal power—there is always a plurality of elders.

I would argue that this defining characteristic of Presbyterianism facilitates catholicity. Rather than a person or institution arrogating determination of catholicity, or hopelessly determining catholicity through an endless multitude of independent and local churches, Presbyterianism is genuinely deliberative and conciliar. As members are joined to the church, they are not connected merely to a local body but to a church that extends through space and time. What is more, they are spiritually led by those who are accountable and called to steward the mysteries of the faith that they might grow in the wholeness of Christ. When disputes and questions arise, there is room for deliberation and a posture of submission, each to the other.<sup>47</sup> Catholicity is expressed in the midst of a genuine diversity with a posture toward unity. Unity does not seek to swallow up diversity, nor does diversity seek the status quo. Unity is sought through diversity. Presbyterianism’s connectional government ruled by a plurality of elders has unique ecclesiastical mechanisms in order to facilitate homegrown catholicity in the church. This polity is perhaps one of Presbyterianism’s richest treasures. It can offer other Christian traditions in pursuit of catholicity.

## Conclusion

“What is the proper pursuit of catholicity?” is a question each denomination must ask in the midst of its unique history and present challenges. If one were to examine the history of Presbyterianism in America, at least, he or she would be discouraged by the apparent splintering of this one denomination into many (“the split p’s”). There are, of course, many causes for division within various denominations in the modern world. Even among Presbyterians, there are positive reasons for existing denominational divisions.<sup>48</sup> More often than not, though, for confessional traditions like Presbyterianism, denominational splits occur not because the church is becoming more confessional. It is a liquidation of a confessional identity that washes away unity: “Building on a foundational commitment to the authority of Scripture, Calvin and the other Reformers tended to emphasize the core elements of the catholic faith. Creeds and confessions were of vital importance to Calvin. . . . Reformed churches

46. Horton, *People and Place*, 218 (emphasis his).

47. Kevin J. Vanhoozer commends this approach under the label of “strong denominationalism” in his *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2016), 189-90.

48. One thinks of the conviction of Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America (RPCNA) to sing only Psalms in worship. Such a conviction naturally divides them from bodies with a differing conviction on singing in worship.

have always believed that doctrinal truth matters, and Christian unity is founded in the truth.”<sup>49</sup>

The WCF is a robust confession that has, for centuries, brought unity in the truth for Presbyterians throughout the world. With its firm foundation, Presbyterians have had a place to stand together and with others. Because the presbyterian confessional identity is built on the broader catholic tradition, there are deep-down roots common to Christian churches that can be identified in places like the Apostles’ and Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds. These roots are likely not sufficient to bring full denominational alignment, but they are sufficiently sturdy in providing a discernable place to stand and talk and, perhaps, partner. As we think of catholicity, especially in terms of the extensive dimension of universality, Presbyterians should be ready and willing partners in gospel initiatives of prayer, evangelism, and mission. While a confession and creeds, such as Presbyterians hold dear, necessarily set limits,<sup>50</sup> they are not barriers but tools for pursuing authentic catholicity in the broader church.

If we are honest, though, the confession has served as a club used to clobber one another in churches, presbyteries, and general assemblies. And if it is used in such a way inside the Presbyterian church, particularly in America, it is likely to be used even more forcefully when facing other churches. Our practice of catholicity starts at home. Presbyterians would do well to scrutinize their native ethos as they seek to submit one to another as elders on local church sessions and in regional presbyteries. Their success at maintaining “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2) within these bodies will go a long way in shaping their capacity to pursue catholicity in the larger church. Perhaps the first step in this endeavor is to realize there is a measure of catholicity within a denomination that is both gift and calling. The confession can be seen as a uniting gift through which the church is called to maintain unity eagerly.

I close with what I consider, together with presbyterian polity, one of Presbyterianism’s choicest treasures in the pursuit of catholicity. As the broader church is regaining an appreciation for the intensive dimension of catholicity in pursuit of wholeness, there is an awareness that in the “religious life of the Christian, insofar as it is manifested in the church, an influence must proceed in every area of life, so that everything is Christianized in the noblest sense of the word.”<sup>51</sup> Catholicity can have no depth if the church only knows a Sunday religion.

49. S. Donald Fortson III, *The Presbyterian Story: Origins and Progress of a Reformed Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 207.

50. The limits of catholicity are defined by the internal and qualitative dimension: “The wholeness of catholicity . . . implies parameters of what constitutes truly Christian beliefs. Ancient catholicity has to do with the substance of our faith, as Augustine once cited in a sermon on the Trinity, ‘the true faith, the right faith, the catholic faith, which is not a bundle of opinions and prejudices . . . but founded on apostolic truth’ [Sermon 52.2].” D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 225-26.

51. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 5:23.

WCF 21 is concerned with Christian worship and the Sabbath:

Neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the Gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed: but God is to be worshipped everywhere, in spirit and truth; as, in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so, more solemnly in the public assemblies, which are not carelessly or wilfully to be neglected, or forsaken, when God, by His Word or providence, calleth thereunto.<sup>52</sup>

This gives confessional modulation to the common saying that “all of life is worship.” The confession is more specifically saying that all of life should be permeated by worship. As it is, the depth of catholicity will increasingly permeate the Christian’s soul. In the presbyterian tradition, this daily worship is often aided by Scripture study as well as catechesis. The Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms function as built-in ecclesial tools of discipleship based on the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. In other words, the catechisms provide for young and old regular training in Christian belief, practice, and ethics. Presbyterians would do well not to neglect these effective instruments of catholicity in the perfection of the saints.

52. Dennison, *Reformed Confessions*, 259.

