Three Ways of Being Church
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Abstract
This article proposes a theological re-appraisal of three images of the Church: institution, servant and community. The defining characteristics of an institution can be applied positively to the Church when it is seen to have been instituted by Jesus Christ. But what is instituted is a continuing relationship grounded in Christ’s own presence. The servant Church is characterized by its commitment to the purposes of God in ‘secular’ society and the promise of God’s kingdom. The community model of the Church has two common expressions, one emphasizing social relationships, one stressing mystical communion, but these are grounded in the trinitarian community itself. While each model has its own contribution and integrity, taken together they suggest mutual inter-dependence, itself reflecting the divine community and expressed in the mutually affirming virtues of faith, hope and love.

Several decades ago, in his extensive outline of Roman Catholic theology, Richard McBrien suggested that there were three central images or models of the Church: institution, servant and community. This article offers a re-consideration of these models, with particular reference to their biblical and theological foundations. These three models are not simply three options for understanding the life of the Church; they present three inter-related and indeed inter-dependent ways of seeing and being the Church, each contributing something to a comprehensive vision of the life of the Church and in turn reflecting something of the life of God. Just as trinitarian theology speaks of three ‘persons’, who are inter-dependent and mutually indwelling, so too the life of the Church can be understood through three specific models: institution, servant and community.

The Church as Institution of Salvation
The image of the Church as the vehicle of God’s salvation for the world intentionally conflates several ideas which are sometimes presented as distinct models of the Church: the idea of the Church as an institution, the image of the Church as a herald of the Gospel and the idea of the Church as a sacrament or means of God’s saving grace. My contention is that these ideas properly belong
together, within an appropriate understanding of the life of the Church as an institution.

In the vanguard of the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic theologians have sought to re-assess the concept of the Church as a perfect society, standing over-against all other human societies and institutions as the exclusive means by which human beings may enter and enjoy a saving relationship with God. Avery Dulles provides a succinct summation of this concept, noting that it came to its clearest definition in the papers prepared for the First Vatican Council (in 1869–70). These ideas were highly influential in the first half of the twentieth century. The Second Vatican Council sought to shift its emphasis to an understanding of the Church as a pilgrim people of God, allowing for much greater diversity, change and openness to the experiences of human society in general and other Christians in particular.

As presented by Dulles, the Church as an institution is characterized by defined structures, recognized ministries, accepted confessional formulae and prescribed forms of public worship. These elements have always been part of the life of the Church; without some such organizational forms it could not fulfill its fundamental reasons for being. Dulles distinguishes the idea of an institution as such from institutionalism, by which he means ‘a system in which the institutional element is treated as primary’. This he regards as a deformation of the Church, where the institutional life of the Church seems to focus all the activities of the Church in its hierarchy. ‘A characteristic of the institutional model of the Church, in the forms we are considering, is the hierarchical conception of authority’. Teaching, sanctifying and governing all become focused in hierarchical offices. From this assertion, Dulles quickly moves on to his critique, arguing that the institutional model of the Church is *clericalist*, seeing the clergy as the source of all power and initiative, *juridicist*, amplifying the place of law and penalties, and *triumphalist*, claiming a position of dominance in a world assumed to be static and centred upon Church. The beneficiaries of this perspective are those who belong to the institution and especially those who hold office.

Positively, the Church as institution provides to its people clear teaching, the offering of healing, shelter from opposition and the promise of eternal life. The model also provides a strong sense of corporate identity and motivation for mission. On the other hand, Dulles considers that it has ‘comparatively meager basis in Scripture and in early Church tradition’, as well as leading to unfortunate consequences in the life of the people, in particular ‘reducing the laity to a condition of passivity’ and creating many obstacles to fruitful scholarship and change. Similar descriptions and evaluative comments are made by Richard McBrien and John Fuellenbach.

This largely negative representation of the institutional model of the Church needs, however, to be re-assessed, though not (one hastens to add) in order to advocate a return to any ‘golden era’ of the institutional Church. While we must remain constantly alert to the dangers of institutionalism, it seems possible to present a more
positive, yet humble and Gospel-centred appraisal of the idea of the Church as institution.

What exactly do we mean by the term 'institution'? The word has many uses, both as a verb and a noun, many of which carry emotive connotations. The principal meanings of the term offered in the Oxford English Reference Dictionary indicate first the act of instituting something and then the idea of a society or organization founded especially for charitable, religious, educational or social purposes. More generally, I would suggest that four features are common to those bodies we might call institutions. First, institutions have an organized structure, which may be set out in a constitution, laws or rules. Second, institutions have a clearly identified historical focus and place a value upon that history and tradition. Third, institutions generally have a formulated body of teaching, such as a philosophy, code of ethics or indeed a theology. The practice, preservation and promulgation of this teaching are among the reasons for the institution's existence. Finally, an institution exists because it has a coherent purpose, which defines it as a body or organization and helps to distinguish it from other bodies that may be similarly structured or have similar teachings. However, all of these elements, when taken in relation to the Church, derive from a fifth feature. This may be true of many other institutions as well, but in the case of the Church this element is crucial: the Church is an institution because of its having been instituted.

The idea of the Church as having been instituted by God, in Jesus Christ, is a central element in the image of the Church as an institution. This idea, quite problematical for many contemporary theologians, is nonetheless an important feature of the broad tradition of Christian thinking over twenty centuries. In brief, our faith has been that God came to us in the person of Jesus and that God continues to relate to us through a community that continues his mission, for which he set down some fundamental teachings and practices. As such, the Church through all its history has seen itself as founded upon the mission, purpose and teaching of Jesus. This broad conviction is nicely summarized in the words of the Second Vatican Council's Lumen Gentium, 'Rising from the dead Christ sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through them set up his body which is the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation'.

The question of whether Jesus intended the Church as we know it, or indeed any church, as opposed to a mission to renew the faith of Israel and call it to engagement with God's promised reign, is a complex one. There are many difficulties in seeking to represent Jesus' expectation regarding what might continue after his death. Scholarly representations of his teachings and mission abound, some expressing considerable assurance about what Jesus intended, others convinced that we simply cannot know. Appraisal of this issue is inevitably bound up with issues relating to the destiny of God's people Israel, with matters of inter-faith dialogue and with fundamental methodological issues in the area now called 'Jesus studies'. Clearly we are not able to rehearse any of these issues here. What we can assert, however, is the clear consensus of the canonical texts that during his earthly ministry Jesus sought to
gather together a group of disciples and that he taught them with at least some expectation that they would continue to follow his way after his death. We can also agree that the canonical Gospels are written from the perspective of that fledgling community, which saw these teachings and actions of Jesus as providing the foundations of their life as a gathering, an ‘ecclesia’. As such they saw some of the actions of Jesus as instituting their present communal experience. On this basis, the writer to the Ephesians speaks of their life together as members of the household of God ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ himself as the cornerstone’ (Eph. 2.20). It is from this broad, scriptural image of a community for which Christ and the apostles laid the foundations that the image of the Church as an institution derives its basis. The Church of the New Testament sees itself arising from this ‘institution’ by God, through the saving events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. On this basis, it can be asserted that the heart of the institutional model of the Church is the mission of God for the salvation of the world.

Here we must address immediately one of the difficulties accompanying this and many images of the Church, that is the inclusive and exclusive potentials of these images. The term ‘institution of salvation’ has the potential to suggest, as indeed many have asserted, that outside the Church there is no salvation. On the other hand, it is possible to allow that the Church is one institution of salvation, leaving open the question of whether God is bringing people to salvation in ways we do not presently recognize as the Church. While we cannot expect to resolve this question here, I suggest that those who wish to say there may be salvation in other ways do not need to deny that the Church is a medium of God’s salvation.

The idea of the Church as an institution of salvation is Christologically grounded. Here we make the claim that Christ came to bring God’s salvation and that the Church is called to participate in this saving mission. To this extent, at least, the Church has been instituted by God, through Jesus, towards the salvation of the world. This idea is well illustrated through three crucial passages in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 16.13–20 we read the account of what is called Peter’s great confession of faith. When Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus declares: ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven …’. There has been debate among exegetes about the ‘rock’ here: is it the person of Peter or the confession of faith Peter makes? The saying is clearly addressed to Peter by name and the immediate next saying refers to him as having the keys to the kingdom of heaven. What is central in these verses is the idea of Jesus building a church for the purposes of God’s reign. This is what Jesus intends when people (such as Peter) confess him as ‘Messiah’. The crucial idea is that Jesus wills to gather a community of God’s people, ‘a church’; it will be built upon Peter and his faithful witness, and this community and witness will prevail against all the powers of sin and death. The central point, then, is not about the status of Peter, nor an institutional form centred upon him, but upon the institution by Jesus of a ‘church’, grounded upon the rock of Peter’s faithful witness and the power of that gospel to free people and to preserve them in God’s
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grace. Peter is here given a place of special significance and this should not be denied. So the foundational ‘structure’ evident in this passage and inherent in Jesus’ institution of a ‘church’ is not a formal structure of offices but a relationship in which the disciples, led by Peter, articulate their faith in Jesus and orientate themselves to his mission of salvation.

Soon after, in Matthew 18.15–20, we read of Jesus providing instructions for the resolution of disputes within this community, ‘the Church’. This section follows a passage of teaching about moral integrity and obligations towards those who are weaker or younger. The passage comes to its conclusion with the often-quoted saying that ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them’ (v.20). Here again Jesus speaks of a church, as a group of faithful disciples – and clearly not as an ideal, trouble-free and perfect institution – but amongst whom he is present. In this group there is healing power, to bind or loose. Jesus sets down directions for the community’s behaviour and also promises his continuing presence with them, even when they are just two or three.

Finally, Matthew ends his Gospel with the commissioning of the community of disciples to go into all the world to make new disciples. They are assured that Jesus – announced at the beginning of Matthew’s story as ‘Immanuel’ – will always be with them. Here, the life of the Church is instituted through the promise of ‘Immanuel’ continuing. The witness of Matthew is clear: this ‘church’ is given its commission and promise. It is grounded upon the teaching and mission of Jesus, clearly authorized by God, who has raised Jesus from death. Thus for Matthew the Church exists as a community of disciples, on the institution of Jesus and for the salvation of the world.

In this concept of the Church as an institution of salvation, it is clear that the core value of the institutional model of the Church is faith, understood as a continuing relationship with the risen Christ. By Jesus’ intention the Church is built upon the faith it has received from the apostles, which is to be practised and proclaimed, and engendered amongst new disciples. Thus we can say that this model of the Church as institution of salvation includes the central features of two other models that Dulles and other writers have described, the image of the Church as ‘herald’ of the gospel and as ‘sacrament’ of grace or salvation. The image of the Church as institution of salvation includes the idea that the Church is to be a community of gospel witness. Similarly, the model of the Church as sacrament of grace implies that through the Church’s activities, principally its sacramental ministries, people will receive and participate in God’s salvation. These two elements, witness to the Gospel and the administration of healing graces, whether through defined sacraments or other forms of pastoral care, are crucial parts of the life of the Church as institution of salvation.

Thus we can conclude that this model of the Church includes the four elements we defined earlier as characterizing institutions. We have seen an historical foundation, though crucially this historical foundation is centred not upon an organizational structure but upon a relationship of faithful trust between disciples and Jesus, beginning with Peter and the other apostles. The defining ‘structure’ of the Church as institution, then, is the continuing presence of Jesus with his disciples. We have
further described the content of the Church’s teachings, in terms of the specific witness to Jesus as the Christ, and finally described the Church’s purpose in terms of the promulgation of this faith. All this we have suggested has its foundation in the mission of Jesus himself, who in specific ways ‘instituted’ these elements of the community of disciples now called ‘the Church’. In addition, in biblical witness and Christian tradition, two specific activities of the Church, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, through which people come into real and continuing communion with Christ himself, are seen to have been instituted by Jesus’ example and instruction.

The image of the Church as institution of salvation draws its continuing inspiration from the promise of God, through Jesus, to remain with the Church to the end of time. This vision is crucial for the Church as institution of salvation, for without it the Church looks to other means of temporal security and power. All the criticisms of this model of the Church noted above seem to derive from the propensity of the Church to lose sight of its dependence upon the God who comes in the person of Jesus. The crucial factor here concerns the Church’s understanding of just what it is that has been ‘instituted’ by Jesus. If the Church sees itself as perpetually called into faithful relationship with Christ, then it will not see itself as self-sustaining or self-instituting, nor mistake its structures and ministries for the life of God. Rather, it will humbly bear witness to the grace of a God who chooses to be present with us and invites us to participate as children in God’s community.

Here we see the special vulnerability and weaknesses of this model of the Church. Whereas other critics have, for example, named the tendency towards clericalism and ‘juridicism’, I suggest that the institutional model of the Church is inherently tempted to see itself and its teachings in the place of Christ. It is constantly confusing its own teachings with the word of God, which does indeed come to us through the scriptural witness of the Church. But the word of God is also free, as the Spirit moves where it wills, and cannot be limited by the Church’s present or past understandings. Thus the institutional model of the Church must make room for that presence of Jesus who may well disturb the historic formulations and challenge its prevailing wisdom. This leads to a second weakness in this model. Insofar as the Church sees itself as instituted by Christ, through the earthly ministry of Jesus, it is tempted to see the presence of Christ only in the past and, as a result, to see itself as the present substitute for Christ’s presence. This is an inadequate Christology and results in an inadequate ecclesiology. What Christ instituted is an abiding relationship, through his promised presence with the community of disciples. The institutional model of the Church must therefore focus at least as much on being responsive to Christ’s presence now, both comforting and confronting, as on his actions ‘founding’ the Church in the past. Without an appropriate focus on Christ and his mission today, the Church is liable to see him only in the distant past and to see itself in his place. Nonetheless these weaknesses serve to show just what this model of the Church is about. The Church can only be the institution of God’s salvation when it knows these limitations and lives in responsive trust in its Lord.