



Comment Suppers

Winter 2023

How Not to Be a Schismatic

BY JEFF REIMER

How Not to Be a Schismatic

WAYFARING THROUGH A BROKEN ECCLESIAL LANDSCAPE

BY JEFF REIMER

Congratulations! You're a Christian in the twenty-first century. You must choose from three stories.

A. The church existed glorious and undivided for the first millennium after Christ. Through the achievement of the church fathers, the church's central doctrines of Trinity and incarnation slowly got sorted out through the teachings promulgated in the seven ecumenical councils, the teachings of which are distilled in the Nicene Creed. Things in the West started to go south with Augustine, whose doctrines of original sin and predestination began a theological freefall that hit terminal velocity at the Reformation. In the meantime, the Western churches tampered with the creed (also Augustine's fault), a theological judgment that might have been resolvable had the Roman patriarch not for centuries been arrogating to himself more and more unwarranted authority. The


bishop of Rome is held in high esteem—maybe even the highest—but by his unilaterally executed authority he alienated himself from the other patriarchs of the church. What's more, theology in the West got increasingly mired in scholastic categories and distinctions, losing itself in arcane canon law and jettisoning in the process the liturgically grounded mystical theology of Holy Tradition. Rome eventually, in heresy and in error, made this de facto alienation official and separated itself from communion with the true church. The Byzantine church meanwhile held the true faith. After the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims, the centre of the church shifted to Russia, which held on to and refined the riches of the faith until the ideological and political catastrophes of the twentieth century. Since the rupture with Rome, the church has never since held an ecumenical council and never again will until the bishop

of Rome lays down the authority he has unrightfully claimed over the other churches. Until then they remain brothers in exile. Protestants are more or less bad Catholics.

B. The church has existed undivided since Christ gave unto Peter the keys of the kingdom in Matthew 16. Every bishop who has sat in the chair of Peter in Rome is the vicar of Christ, the church's true shepherd, and is in authority over all other bishops. The Eastern churches fell away slowly and, in the end, sadly refused to recognize the pope's authority. The theological and canonical synthesis achieved in the West throughout the Middle Ages witnesses to the fact that the gates of hell shall not prevail over the see of Peter in Rome. While by the sixteenth century some major ecclesiastical housecleaning was in order, the Reformers went too far, choosing rather than submission to the authority of the church the subjectivity of their own consciences under the guise of *sola Scriptura*, ushering in modernity, the Enlightenment, secularism, relativism, atheism, capitalism (if you're a Marxist), Marxism (if you're a capitalist), and all other forms of ungodliness. Despite their error, Protestants still occasionally, perhaps often, exhibit the work of the Holy Spirit in

their communities and are considered "separated brethren." Inasmuch as any other "churches" (not actually churches) are churches, they subsist, as Vatican II teaches, in the one true church governed by Christ with the pope his vicar on earth. The Orthodox are more or less bad Catholics.

C. All the church needs for doctrine, practice, organization, and structure is found in Scripture; what is found in Scripture is the gospel, Christ's saving work on the cross; and what is found in the gospel is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Not long after the New Testament era, trends culminating early in the fourth century caused the church to fall away from scriptural truth, seek worldly power, embrace man-made traditions, and generally get mucked up in pagan superstition. At the Reformation Martin Luther rightly broke away from the Roman Catholic Church, hopelessly corrupt, and Scripture was restored to its proper place as the primary authority governing all matters of church doctrine and practice. The universal spiritual church may be manifest here or there throughout history, but it is the local church that has logical priority over visible denominational structures. What matters is that lives are being



transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of individuals. The visible, small-*c* church is part of the invisible, capital-*C* Church. The Orthodox are more or less Catholics.

Please circle one, A, B, or C, keeping in mind the following stipulations: you may choose only one; no mixing and matching is allowed; your commitment is binding for life; and the consequences are eternal. Failure to choose is an indication of moral inadequacy.

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I failed to choose.

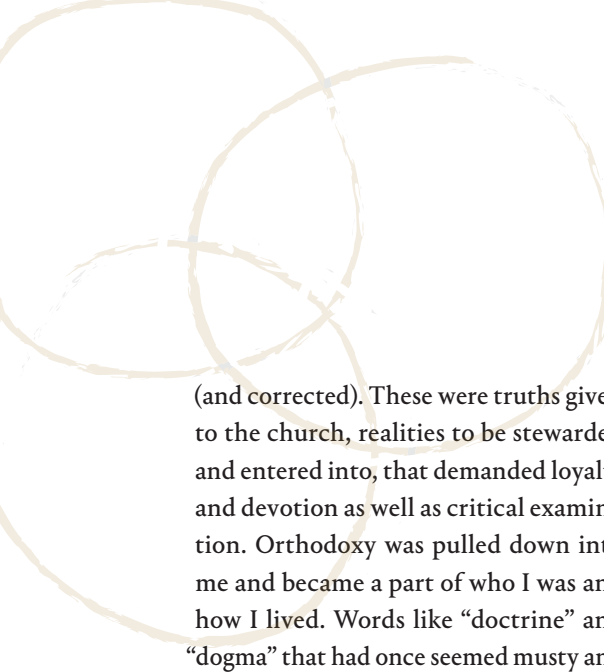
It is all too easy for us poor lost souls of the modern world to slip through the cracks of these stories. You can seek refuge in a particular notion of the church only to find yourself in the wilderness, looking in from the outside, wondering how you got there and how to get back in. These things happen for all kinds of reasons, and with textures all but invisible to pollsters and wonks and pundits. In my case I painted myself into an intellectual corner that isolated me from the very things I thought I was seeking. Nothing so intense or even traumatizing as what many experience. Yet even so, here I am in the wilderness.

I grew up in the third, Protestant evangelical story. I became dimly aware as I

got older that there were other stories, but they remained inconsequential. My unselfconsciousness remained untroubled until college, when as an undergraduate I encountered elements of church history that didn't fit the narrative I had grown up with. It was studying theology in graduate school, however, that reoriented my entire approach to ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. My studies afforded me the opportunity to rethink the whole spectrum of theological positions—Trinity, incarnation, soteriology, eschatology; pretty much everything was on the table. This process stretched itself out over a long period, but to simplify, let's just say that I came to hold three priorities about the nature of the church: orthodoxy, unity, and visibility. These priorities have guided me ever since. I did not expect that they would guide me into the wilderness.

ORTHODOXY, UNITY, AND VISIBILITY; or, STAND BACK, I'M GOING TO DO A THEOLOGY!

By orthodoxy I mean a fidelity to the truths of divine revelation in a deeply traditional, historical sense. When I say I was rethinking things like the Trinity and the incarnation, what I mean is that my understanding of these doctrines was expanded and deepened and enriched



(and corrected). These were truths given to the church, realities to be stewarded and entered into, that demanded loyalty and devotion as well as critical examination. Orthodoxy was pulled down into me and became a part of who I was and how I lived. Words like “doctrine” and “dogma” that had once seemed musty and stultifying now pulsed with energy. Trinity and incarnation were no longer intellectual boxes to be ticked but the primary sites of prayer and contemplation, the consuming fire at the heart of the liturgy. My commitment to orthodoxy didn’t change dramatically, but the way I conceived of its relation to my life and to the body of Christ did.

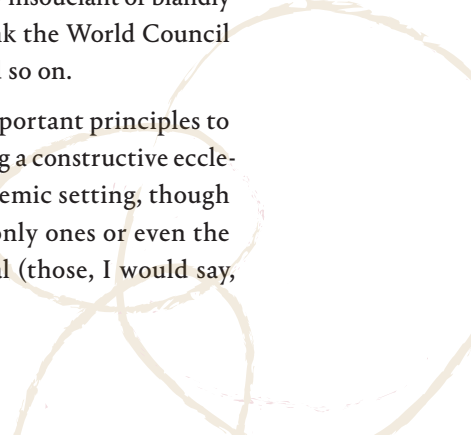
By unity I mean an unshakable commitment to the church’s oneness and a sense of sorrow and repentance at the church’s many divisions. A commitment to unity is a commitment to the ecumenical project. Since this project has a checkered past (and present), “ecumenism” is a word that signals trouble in some circles, so I hasten to add that the ecumenical project must not paper over or dispose of deep theological difference with platitudes and sentiment. Unity cannot preclude orthodoxy, and so deep commitment to unity should not preclude deep commitment to one “story”—and vice versa.

And by visibility I mean adherence to the institutional church as an observable,

identifiable structure that Christ established and that exists in the world. And since the different stories told by different traditions make incompatible claims to the truth, no amount of facile hand-waving toward the “invisible,” universal church any time unity comes up constitutes a solution to the problem of schism. If two churches disagree on a doctrinal matter, both can’t be right. Either one is right or they are both wrong.

Orthodoxy, visibility, and unity form a Venn diagram. At the centre, where all three overlap, is the church, held together by the integrating, centripetal force of the Holy Spirit. But the three can also pull away from each other under the centrifugal influence of sin, disintegrating the structure of the church by reducing the space of mutual overlap and throwing the circles out of shape and proportion. A church body, for example, may focus on orthodoxy at the expense of unity and become harsh and sectarian (think fundamentalism). Or it may focus on unity at the expense of orthodoxy and become doctrinally insouciant or blandly bureaucratic (think the World Council of Churches). And so on.

Now, these are important principles to hold for developing a constructive ecclesiology in an academic setting, though they are not the only ones or even the most foundational (those, I would say,



are one, holy, catholic, and apostolic). But for someone looking for a church—an idealistic young man, say, married, with one child and a recently minted master of arts degree in theological studies—they create a formidable set of problems. Because if you believe with the first principle that the church must maintain fidelity to the revealed truths central to its proclamation, then you will want to find a church that takes seriously those truths and its stewarding of them through the centuries. And if you believe with the second principle that the church is fundamentally one and that schism is a scandal and a sin, then you will want to find a church that not only believes itself to be a part of the one true church but also prays for and works toward the unity Christ claims for the church in John 17. And if you believe with the third principle that the church is not a purely spiritual entity but both supernatural in origin and an institution existing in the physical world that you must attach yourself to and incorporate yourself into in tangible ways, then you will want to find a church that claims to have maintained some kind of continuous institutional presence in the world both now and throughout history.

That, dear reader, is a tall order for one church to fill.

CHURCHGOING; IN WHICH A LITTLE EDUCATION CAN BE A DANGEROUS THING

I wound up at an Anglican church (“oh wow, an evangelical Christian who studied theology became Anglican, I’ve never heard of such a thing”—hey shut up, I never said my story was unique), one of those that had left the Episcopal Church to join what would eventually become the Anglican Church in North America. The Episcopal Church argued that the unity preserved by the nascent denomination was schismatic and invalid, and the Anglicans shot back that the Episcopal Church had forfeited its status as a church by abandoning a historic, recognizably Christian orthodoxy. It was a mess, and still is. The orthodoxy principle and the unity principle that were straining against each other had in fact broken apart. But the mess didn’t bother me. Attending that church was like taking ecclesiological heroin. The liturgy was so beautiful, and the parishioners so warm and inviting and thoughtful, that it commandeered my theological opioid receptors and bathed them in spiritual dopamine. The life of the liturgy was enough. My heart, I think, became Anglican in that time.

Churches adjacent to a college campus in a metropolitan area, as this one was, have the privilege of self-selecting toward



First Council of Nicaea by Michael Damaskinos, 1591.

niche populations. Experiencing such a congregation can skew your expectations for church life pretty much anywhere in North America outside these enclaves. When, after two years, I moved with my growing family home to small-town central Kansas, the lack of appealing choices came as a shock. There were many churches around, but none had the dynamism, intellectual depth, or aesthetic excellence I had become accustomed to, even demanded.

For this and other, more complicated reasons we decided to attend the evangelical church I had grown up in. I thought that by tethering myself to this community and to this tradition, my own worst impulses might be restrained: I could not act on my individualistic, subjective whims. If I were to find common ground with another tradition and work toward unity, I would do it as a part of and from within my own church. After all, that's how the Spirit works: through

the constraints and structures of the visible church.

It was not meant to be. I came to see that my changed view of ecclesiology meant that some things evangelical Christians (of my stripe at least) don't put in the orthodoxy bucket should be in the orthodoxy bucket anyway. Exhibit A: the Eucharist. Evangelical churches tend to be good at emphasizing "gospel truths" or "essentials" or "the majors"—things like the Trinity, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our sins, and Scripture's sufficiency/authority/inspiration/infallibility/inerancy (let's not get into that discussion). All good things. But I had long ago concluded that a church centred on orthodoxy, unity, and visibility requires a church grounded in the sacraments, and the dominoes fell from there: The sacraments are embedded in the liturgy, which in its turn is dependent on a clergy that acts as its custodian and celebrant and can draw an identifiable, visible, historical line from itself to Christ and the apostles. Which is to invoke a strong role for things like tradition and apostolic succession. In this reckoning, the Eucharist is one of the majors, a gospel truth if ever there was one. Which puts me pretty far outside the typical evangelical congregation. At least it put me outside mine. I did the best I could to collaborate with

the pastors, to be honest with them, to work with them rather than against them, but in the end I couldn't reconcile myself to doing things like teaching Sunday school while disagreeing with the pastoral staff on what I considered to be fundamental issues of theological truth. I worried that I was letting unity trump orthodoxy, that I was acting against my conscience by attending a church that did not hold what I now considered to be an orthodox view of the sacraments.

I was already at a time of significant upheaval in my life, and I somewhat frantically and unadvisedly decided that we needed to leave. First my intent was to start an Anglican church of my own. I quickly discovered that was an unrealistic and unwise plan for my family and for me, and what's more, in the process I determined that Anglicanism was an unworkable solution to the knot of orthodoxy, visibility, and unity (I was reading John Henry Newman), and I lurched toward Roman Catholicism.

In a way it made perfect sense. Most of my literary heroes are Catholic. I mean, most of my *theological* heroes are Catholic. I had been steeping in Catholic thought for a decade and a half. The Roman Catholic Church had become a sort of ecclesiological standard against which to measure my own commitments. Protestantism, in this way, was not so

much a positive theological identity as a negative one. It's in our name, after all: we are the ones who protest. If I ever stopped protesting, conversion would be like an escape pod I could jettison and take back to the mother ship should I run out of theological fuel. And I was out of theological fuel. I thought I would just throw myself on the bosom of the church and rest from my ecclesiological labours, hoping I would be received in good faith if I would offer to work on my remaining Protestant quibbles. But while my intellect was ready, the more I flogged the stubborn, recalcitrant mule of my will, the more intractable it became. In some deep place in my soul I was still wrapped up in the religious upbringing of my family, whose thick Anabaptist identity goes back over five hundred years, all the way to the Reformation. And though I had exchanged most of their theological judgments for more catholic ones, I found I was not convicted enough to exchange them for *Roman* Catholic ones. It felt like I'd be betraying my heritage for something I . . . maybe kind of believed? I simply could not bring myself to do the thing I had decided to do.

A good friend who had been on a parallel journey with me toward Catholicism swerved into Eastern Orthodoxy. Another traded his sacramentally rich but leftward-trending Episcopal congregation for an

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uncomfortably settled existence at a big-box evangelical church. Meanwhile I found myself alone and exhausted, out of resources, with no tradition any longer to call my own and none available to me to join, a wayfarer in the wilderness, with no destination to speak of, the most reluctant Protestant in North America.

WAYFARING; or, WHEN YOUR HOPES ARE CRUSHED AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT

I had neither visibility nor unity, and so my claim to orthodoxy seemed feeble at best, the private opinions of an idiosyncratic, rambling wannabe theologian. I didn't stop going to church. But I no longer had the spirit to strive after finding the "right" one, the right tradition, the right story. I swallowed my pride, turned the volume down to zero on my emotional-response capacity, and continued with my family to attend—one foot in, one foot out—our non-sacramental, non-liturgical, non-high-church evangelical church.

My churchgoing troubles are spectacularly cerebral and eggheaded. Most

people who find themselves alienated from their churches do so for reasons more visceral and immediate than mine: abuse, dysfunction, disillusionment, drift. But the dynamics are often the same. At first it can be fun and exciting to be a wayfarer. The high of detached, ironic superiority is intoxicating. It's possible to fetishize wayfaring, to get a kick out of not-belonging, to always hold out for the best possible option to materialize. For me it felt edgy and a little rebellious, as a young grad student, to move outside the assumptions and strictures of my given evangelical Protestantism, to explore new ecclesiological territories, to shed old habits of thought and turns of phrase. I could remain above the fray, standing apart from the distasteful enthusiasms of partisan polemics. Bull sessions with friends about where we would "actually" end up someday or why we weren't becoming Catholic felt existentially loaded and meaningful.

But let me warn you: The ironic detachment wears thin. Hold out for something better long enough and eventually that's just what you *are*: a holdout. The view from above the fray turns out to be a view from nowhere. My bull sessions began to feel scripted, and the existentially loaded conversations always landed me back at the same spot and with the same

question: What to do now? And the same answer was always: I don't know.

I am no longer young, and my long-drawn-out thought experiment, I have come to realize, has in truth been an experiment on my own life—on my own family. My wife is (mostly) patient with my wanderings, my frustrations, my struggle sessions; but it hasn't been easy on her. Some of my kids are almost fully grown, and they have been obliged to come along for the ride whether they want to or not. My hope was to give them the gift of a coherent and robust theological upbringing, a rich liturgical, ritual, and symbolic context in which to grow into and practice their beliefs. Maybe they will come to see my wayfaring as a model for struggling honestly with difficult spiritual and theological problems. Another word for wayfarer, of course, is pilgrim, or in Latin *viator*: someone who is oriented to a destination and has not yet arrived, as Josef Pieper, one of my Catholic heroes, says. As long as somebody is a Christian—as long as somebody is a human being—they will find themselves in the *status viatoris*, "the state or condition of being on the way." But I am haunted by the fear that all I will have imparted to them is this idea that their dad has weird, neurotic fixations on various scraps of dogma. In any case, I find myself confronted with a bitter irony:

My journey started out with a commitment to orthodoxy, visibility, and unity, and it has left me with a viable claim to none of them. It's possible that your commitment to the church can become the mechanism of your alienation from it.

HOW NOT TO BE A SCHISMATIC

In canto 28 of the *Inferno*, Dante encounters a particularly gruesome scene: men who walk with their bodies torn, limbs severed, noses hacked off—those who “sowed scandal and schism while they lived.” “See how I rend myself,” says one as he grips the wound cleaving his torso and pulls it apart for the poet to see. The punishment of schismatics is to bear in their bodies the spiritual wounds of division they have caused the church to suffer. Dante's scene is a picture of the severity of schism—for those who perpetrate it and for those who are casualties of it. I often find myself wondering what my relation is to these men. I suffer from the effects of schism certainly; I am one of their casualties. But do I also in my indecision and isolation perpetrate the very sin for which they are punished, thus subjecting my soul to the punishment they undergo in their bodies?

Amid these darker ruminations a passage of Scripture often springs to mind. In John 6 many of Jesus's disciples have just abandoned him. He looks at the twelve

and says to them, “Do you want to go away as well?” To which Simon Peter replies, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

I can't read this passage without, as they say, feeling seen. Like Christ himself is looking at me, asking, “What are you going to do about all this, leave me?” I sense a slight reproach in his question. One that forces me to ask myself, What is my allegiance *to*? An idea? A story? A set of principles? Or is it to a person? I'm a little bit abashed to put it this way. It conjures all those evangelical habits of thought I have tried to purge from my vocabulary: Christianity is a relationship, not a religion; no creed but Christ; the church is not a building. What I sense in the question, though, is not a prompt to repent of my theology or choose between Christ and the church but a revelation about what I have been seeking: I want ecclesiological rest, but a quality of rest available only to the eschatologically reconciled body of Christ. What I have been searching for is a perfected church. I have been looking not so much for the wrong thing as for the right thing in the wrong way, and at the wrong time. To be sure, there are still myriad theological conundrums to sort out and corrections enough to undergo. A lifetime's worth. But what I have been yearning for is to pull a future cleansed of all error and wrongdoing

prematurely into the present and to claim it for myself. Every one of my failed attempts to convert to this or that tradition has thus been a failure by God's grace to find the "perfect" church, the right story, the all-encompassing ecclesiological narrative without remainder. The terms under which I was searching were setting me up for disappointment no matter where I landed. In a sense, then, my tethering myself to my community and to my tradition did just the work I intended it to do: it *did* restrain me from my own worst impulses. Sometimes God uses our best ideas against us.

It turns out that the most hopeful thing for wayfarers of all kinds to do might be to deflate their expectations a little. The tidier one's story of the church is, the more likely it is that one has lost hope—whether from despair, losing sight of the destination, or from presumption, thinking one has already arrived. I don't say this to undermine the self-understanding of any given tradition but to insist that any account of the church, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox, must always in some sense be an account of a wayfaring church (even if they conceive of wayfaring differently—and they do). On a more mundane level, seeking a church that is free of all the things that one finds troubling is a futile endeavour. Want a church that confirms all your

theological priors? (That's me.) Tough shit. Want a church without kitschy art and sentimentality? Doesn't exist. Want a church without weirdo fringe theologians who say cringey things online? Sorry. Want a church without intransigent strands of fundamentalism and bigotry? Good luck. Want a church without abuse? Get in line. Want a church without sin? Look to the eschaton, my friend.

I'm not saying heresy or abuse ought to be tolerated, or that we should do nothing to prevent them or root them out. I'm saying that any church that is mixed up in the mess and the carnage of human existence is going to be, well, mixed up in the mess and the carnage of human existence. If the terms of your commitment to and participation in the church demand the absence of those failures, then what you'll be left with is yourself, a church of one, alone and still unhappy.

None of this is exactly a solution to navigating one's way through the labyrinth of church schism and dysfunction. I'm not exactly a solutions-oriented guy. It should be clear by now that I make a pretty poor guide, as I have yet to find my way out of the labyrinth myself. But much of what I have learned in my wandering is summed up in the poet Rainer Maria Rilke's maxim "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart." And what is unsolved in my heart is also unsolved in the church.

As harrowing as it is to read John 6 and under Christ's stern gaze have my own failures held up to me, I take comfort in the fact that I have no other answer to his question than Peter's: To whom shall I go? You have the words of eternal life. This almost knee-jerk response speaks of one evangelical habit of thought for which I am grateful and which I have never wanted to give up: I just want Jesus. Wherever he is, that is where I want to be. Because when Jesus looks at the twelve and asks them if they want to abandon him since, after all, many others just have, it is because he has said a number of things, among them "I am the bread of life" and "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." This is, as his disciples say, "a hard saying," and accordingly it is one of those passages that divides Christians to this day, and around which they spin their separate stories, some seeing in it no more than an elaborate metaphor, others (that's me again) seeing in it reassurance of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. More than that, the very configuration

of Jesus and his followers is an image of the church: the apostolic community gathered around Christ, clinging to him, feasting on his flesh and drinking his blood, unwilling to abandon him because he has the words of eternal life. My response to Christ—to whom shall I go?—is in effect to place myself within this community. If I can't yet claim to possess that reality in its fullness, I hope to one day, and I can't help but think that's the right answer, and that my Savior would be pleased with it.

I suppose all that just makes me a Protestant, though maybe a weird one. Another of my Catholic heroes, Walker Percy, says, "In the present age the survivor of theory and consumption becomes a wayfarer in the desert, like St. Anthony; which is to say, open to signs." So I remain alert, muddling through the in-between, bearing in myself the wounds of division—casualty, perpetrator, and penitent. Wounds that can be mended only by seeking the healing draft of Christ's blood and the nourishment of his restoring flesh. ☺



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SUPPER
QUESTIONS

How Not to Be a Schismatic

BY JEFF REIMER

Anchor Question

Have you ever changed churches or denominations? Why or why not?

Secondary Questions

1. Which of the three opening stories do you most identify with? What does it get right? What does it leave out?
2. What qualities do you believe are crucial for a church to possess?
3. What would you tell someone who you thought was mistakenly looking for the “perfect” church?