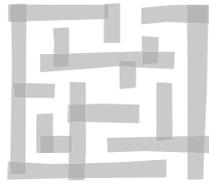


FINDING THE CHURCH

A PERSONAL MEMOIR



Clyde J. Steckel



THE PILGRIM PRESS
CLEVELAND

To

ELEANOR,

*my life companion of sixty-eight years,
and to our sons,*

JIM, DAVID, AND MARK.

The Pilgrim Press, 700 Prospect Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44115
thepilgrimpress.com

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

19 18 17 16 15 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-0-8298-2041-6

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INTRODUCTION

Finding the Church . . . a Journey

This memoir tells of my journey in the church, how I found the church, and how the church found me. I also tell of my growing love of the church, in spite of all its failings. These are not popular views today, especially among the learned and sophisticated, among whom I count myself. It is more fashionable to be an atheist, since God cannot be unequivocally proven and since extreme religiosity destroys everything in its way that does not submit to its rule. Or if one wishes a less rigorous dismissal of religion, one can claim to be spiritual but not religious, where “religious” means organized religion.

I agree with atheists that it is just about impossible to find words, sentences, images, or symbols that ring true for speaking about a god or gods. And I can agree with the spiritual that organized religion is often its own worst enemy. But my experiences in the church led me to other conclusions concerning my

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beliefs about the church and what I feel about the church—feelings of love, wonder, and awe.

How I came to such beliefs and love is the theme of this memoir. You may, of course, think it quite unremarkable that a man in his late eighties, an ordained minister and retired professor of theology, would end up so church-affirming. What else would you expect? But I hope you will read on and discover that for me the path was not that smooth. There was one particular bump in the road that got my attention, leading me to write this book. That “bump” was the way my book on United Church of Christ (my denomination) ecclesiology and polity was received after it was published in 2009. I was both pleased and puzzled by written comments or remarks from those who heard me speak about my book. I was happy to see and hear those vague, general, unspecific words of appreciation, like those a pastor hears following what may also have been a vague, general, and unspecific sermon. I was also pleased, though slightly bemused, by words of appreciation for my chapter on postmodernity. “I’ve heard that phrase, postmodernity, used a lot but I never understood what it meant. Your chapter cleared up my confusion,” was a typical remark. I was bemused because I thought that chapter the weakest chapter in the whole book, since I have made only a cursory study of postmodern literature, and I hoped the strength of my book would be found in the chapters on ecclesiology and polity.

I was puzzled by the many disagreements my polity recommendations evoked and puzzled about a nearly complete silence on ecclesiology. My polity recommendations were not

all that controversial, I thought, since I argued that we should amend our national UCC Constitution and Bylaws so that they would more accurately describe how the polity actually works. But that was judged to be either too idealistic or too politically controversial. Old arguments would be revived; old wounds would be reopened. And time and energy would be wasted on institutional repairs when mission in the world should be uppermost.

What to make of such ecclesiological silence? “Ecclesiology” means what is believed about the church. Silence could mean that we think we know what the church is, and that we should just go ahead being the church, not talking or thinking about it. Or silence could mean that defining the church seems so complicated and forbidding, with all those disputes in church history, that it would not be worth the effort. Whatever this silence means, I concluded that I still wanted to say something more about the church and perhaps I should try a different approach, not so much that of a scholarly essay but of a personal memoir, my story of how I found the church and how the church found me.

Memoir writing was not a literary genre I knew well or even particularly liked. Well, that’s not quite true. In my years of preaching and seminary teaching I told stories about my faith, about my doubts and struggles, about the personal joys and sorrows attending my attempts to be a Christian. Perhaps I revealed too much of myself, but back then we had not yet learned to avoid boundary crossing. No doubt I also violated the theological imperative in vogue when I was in seminary, that preaching and

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teaching were to present the objective gospel message with its biblical and confessional integrity. The preacher or teacher should not be openly personal or emotional. I sensed then, and realize more fully now, that this objectivist imperative is absurd. One cannot preach or teach honestly and with spiritual authority without plumbing the depths of one's own being and then allowing discoveries there to empower what is said. Writers of fiction and poetry have known this all along. But the cult of academic objectivity, an inheritance from modernity, is hard to escape.

Moving beyond objectivist preaching and teaching was a key dynamic in my own theological evolution. I claim the heritage of liberal Protestantism, chastened by mid-twentieth-century Neo-orthodoxy, enriched by the Protestant and Catholic ecumenical movements, and then cracked open by liberation theological movements later in that same century. More than that, I have come to understand that my whole being—my feelings, my passions, my horrors, what I love and care about most deeply—must be woven into my theological understanding. It's the whole self, not just the mind, and it is self-in-community that must always be taken into account when faith is formed and expressed. So that is how a personal memoir seemed a better way to say what else I needed to say about the church.

In this memoir I describe how my life in the church and thinking about the church have evolved over the course of my eighty-nine-year life. Actually I have written a great deal about the church, as a seminary professor and dean, and as a denominational representative to ecumenical organizations. Some of those writings were directly related to my graduate studies in

pastoral theology and to my teaching in that field. I also wrote for my denomination, the United Church of Christ, documents setting forth a UCC understanding of the church. In my 2009 book on the church, I described the process of a mainline denomination like the UCC moving from modernity into post-modernity, and I stated my beliefs about the church. Why then say something more about the church?

When answering questions about my 2009 book I realized that even though I wrote it in a popular style for a general audience, it was still a piece of cultural analysis and theological argument. Something was missing. Explaining my views on UCC ecclesiology and polity, I realize now, depended too much on reasoned arguments and not enough on the stories about how I have lived in the church and how I love the church. This memoir presents a richer and more nuanced narrative about my life in the church, how I found the church, how the church found me, and how I came to love the church.

For readers unfamiliar with key terms I've used so far, these brief definitions: the United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 by the union of the Congregational and Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The Congregational and Christian denomination represented English and American Puritan, Separatist, and Free Church movements. The Evangelical and Reformed Church was, in turn, a denomination rooted in the German Reformed (Calvinist) and Lutheran traditions.

I should also explain ecclesiology. As I said earlier, that word "ecclesiology" refers to what one believes about the church. Is believing in the church a part of one's faith? Or is the church

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viewed as a useful adjunct to the spiritual life but not part of the faith of the church? If beliefs about the church are part of the faith, as I believe they are, and not an adjunct to the religious life, then the believer and the community engage in ecclesiological reflection. These reflections take the form of personal belief but are also formulated in creeds and confessions. Beginning with the ancient Apostles Creed (“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church . . .”) and continuing through creedal and confessional statements in Catholic and Protestant traditions, churches have declared that the church is part of the faith, not an adjunct to the religious life. These declarations and all the talk about them in theological writings and sermons comprise the theological discipline of ecclesiology. For reasons explained in this memoir, I became one of the leading ecclesologists in my own denomination. Actually it was not all that difficult to become a leading ecclesologist in a denomination that has neglected its ecclesiology, a neglect noted often in speeches and writings by denominational leaders. These laments, however, did not elicit sustained work on ecclesiology, or find resonance in local churches, where, characteristic of modernity, it was assumed that everyone knew what a church was and what it was for.

I also need to explain the meaning of that other word, “polity.” Polity refers to the form of governance practiced in churches and theological reasons for those practices. Three polity traditions emerged in Christian history: churches governed by bishops, called episcopal polity; churches governed by representative regional assemblies, sometimes called synodical

I n t r o d u c t i o n

or presbyterial polity, where elected lay and clergy delegates from churches make decisions that are binding for local churches and their members; and churches governed locally by congregations and other ministries, called congregational polity. In my denomination, the United Church of Christ, polity is more foundational than belief, more contended and more amended as we go along. Polity has been contentious because we have tried to maintain local church autonomy while living in covenant with the wider church, a balancing act not yet fully mastered.

I conclude this introduction with my convictions about the church so that the reader will know what those are. These convictions are briefly stated here, though their fuller meaning will become clearer as the memoir unfolds. I believe that the invitation to follow Jesus Christ means, if one decides to be a follower, that one gift of this new life in Christ is community, actual community with other followers, community with all humankind, and community with all creatures and everything in the created natural order. Undergirding these aspects of community is the foundational community with God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

I must also explain what this conviction about actual community does not mean. I do not mean that there is no salvation outside the church or outside belief in Jesus Christ. Such invidious doctrines are prominent in Christian history but they are theologically indefensible and pastorally inexcusable. God's saving work is not the property of the church or of any other religious tradition to define and dispense. It is real saving work but

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hidden in the mystery of a loving God. That is enough to claim. That is all I can claim.

By emphasizing actual community, contrasted with ideal or imagined community, I am not referring to Christian denominations past or present. Every historic and present-day Christian group has something of rich value to preserve and share. These gifts should not be slighted or lost. But actual communities of Christ's followers are radically free to create new ways to be sacramentally centered and mission oriented. Here I part company with the polity preoccupations of my own denomination. We are living in a time when denominational churches are declining while spiritual longing intensifies. We are also living in a time when new church models are being tried out, emergent churches and mega-churches, for example, often nondenominational but always bearing the stamp of their founders and how they understand the Christian faith. People like me in denominational churches should welcome these experiments and think creatively of other ways to become actual communities of Christ's followers in these perilous times.

Enough, then, for introducing my memoir. If you have read this far, I hope you read on, whether you agree with what I've said or not. As you follow my life path finding the church and being found by the church, I hope you will be encouraged to frame your own religious story in ways you might not have imagined before. Good reading!