



# Current Thoughts

*From Dwight's Corner*

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## **And just what is a church?**

I am startled by how many times, and in how many different ways I am confronted by this question.

From local congregations, the questions arise out of concerns for organization, defining membership, purity of fellowship, etc. As your regional servant, it confronts me as I struggle with church planting and church discipline. At the national level, it arises as we grapple with what it means to live together "in association."

At times I believe I am getting a small taste of the angst that seized the Reformers as they pursued an unsatisfied quest for an undefiled church.

With no pretense for theological depth, please allow me to lay a few thoughts about "church" on the table over the next few months.

Growing up Baptist, I learned an easy definition of a church: A body of baptized believers. Like most bumper-sticker theology, it was not so much wrong as it was inadequate. In particular, it seems to me that there are some needs peculiar to the American church in the 21st Century that should be addressed. Indeed, they may be peculiar to us as Baptists.

The Reformers were preoccupied with two related questions. First, "How do I find a gracious God?" Second, "Where can I find the true church?"

While convinced that a "true church" could only be known to God, they were also confident that there would be signs, or "marks," which give a reasonable indication that a church is present.

Though definitions varied, the traditional marks were apostolicity, catholicity, unity, and holiness. The Reformers did not dispute these, but liked to talk about Word, sacrament, and discipline. Our Baptist forebears added the notion of congregationalism.

Congregationalism placed the spotlight squarely on the visible fellowship of believers gathered in a specific location. It brought with it implications for church organization, the role of clergy, and church hierarchy.

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It also was a dramatic move away from a church defined by genetics, politics, or geography. A congregation was composed of individual believers who had been elected/called by God. They came together by an act of covenant.

Calling by God is intrinsic to the Greek word for church—ekklesia—which means “called out.” It is also evident that this is God’s calling, not our aspiration. An important part of this divine calling was the calling to covenanted life together.

Let me suggest a definition of “church”: Individuals committed to life together under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I will “unravel” this over the next few months.

This time every year your regional staff spends time reviewing and evaluating the last year and planning for the new year. Part of that review and evaluation includes holding one another accountable for the last year. One aspect of my accountability is reporting what I have read.

From that list of 32 books, I recommend the following six as books you should consider reading in the coming year:

Everett Goodwin Down by the Riverside: A Brief History of Baptist Faith Judson: Valley Forge, 2002.

Stanley Grenz Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era Baker: Grand Rapids, 2000.

Brennan Manning Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin’s Path to God HarperCollins: New York, 2000.

Gil Rendle The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge Alban: Bethesda, 2000.

Mary Sellon, Daniel Smith & Gail Grossman Redeveloping the Congregation: A How To for Lasting Change Alban: Bethesda, 2002.

N.T. Wright The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1999.

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