

**Acting our Way Forward:**  
**The Hope of the Ascension for the Leadership of the Church**

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Submitted to the faculty of Western Theological Seminary  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Ministry

Holland, MI  
2022



## Abstract

Christian congregations today live under the reign of the ascended Lord Jesus, who has been exalted to right hand of God the Father, lives to intercede for us, pours out his Spirit, and promises to return. Yet the reality of Jesus' ascension is often dramatically undercelebrated, distorted, or dismissed. When this happens, congregations not only lose a key part of the Biblical witness, but also a key way of understanding their identity, calling, and hope. If the church today relates to Jesus as the ascended Lord, pastors and Christian leaders should be asking, what are the implications of the ascension for leading congregations to participate in the mission of God? In response to that question, this project places the doctrine and story of Jesus' ascension in conversation with pastoral ethnography and the organizational theories of sensemaking and innovation as defined by Karl Weick and Clayton Christensen. Through this conversation, and by focusing particularly on the congregation of Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church, I propose that the reality of the ascension – particularly Jesus' incarnate exaltation, his intercession and gifting of the Spirit, and his promised return – gives small to average-sized mainline congregations stability in the present and resources to act and improvise hopefully into the future as they participate faithfully and contextually in the mission of God.

## Acknowledgements

In the summer of 2014, Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church – a 175-year-old congregation in semi-rural Virginia – called an inexperienced 25-year-old from metro-Detroit to be their pastor. That 25-year-old was me. I’m not sure what they were thinking, but I am so grateful for that call and the providence of the Lord that put us together. This project only exists because of the seven years of walking with Mt. Horeb as their pastor. It was during that time questions began to surface in me about what it meant to be engaged in ministry if Jesus’ ascension is reality. It was then and there also that I was given the time and resources necessary to begin this Doctor of Ministry journey, for which I am so grateful. In addition, I am grateful to Timnath Presbyterian Church for giving me space to complete this project in my first year of walking with them as pastor. The work contained here comes from my life with these congregations.

I am also grateful for the cohort that I had the privilege of walking this journey with. David, Eric, Henry, Jon, JP, Miriam, Steve – your presence in this process, your encouragement of one another, and your love of Christ, his Church, and the world, have been an encouragement to me. This project wouldn’t have been the same without your camaraderie and diverse insights. And to our advisor, the Rev. Dr. Kyle Small, I am especially thankful. His encouragement and testing of my theological assumptions have not only made this project better but have helped me to become a better pastor.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife Annie and our two curious, creative, and beautiful children, Lila and Ephraim. For all the late nights, trips away, and times I had to say, “just give me ten more minutes to work on this,” I thank you. For your

encouragement and help in creating a space in our life for me to do this, I thank you. I offer this project with gratitude and hope in the Lord who ever lives, and reigns, and will return.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

If someone asked you to narrate the central acts of Jesus, the most elemental parts of his life and mission, what would you include? You might think about his birth and incarnation that the church celebrates every Christmas, or his adult life and ministry – his healing, teaching, and the signs he gave pointing to the Kingdom of God. You may think of his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, and his trial, torture, and death on the cross. It is likely you would tell of easter and the resurrection – death swallowed up in God’s victory and the promise of new creation. If you were to narrate the central acts of Jesus’ life and mission, you might include all these things. But would you think to include this?

Then [Jesus] led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy...<sup>1</sup>

How important is Jesus’ ascension as a central act in the drama of salvation?

This was the question I posed to a small group of folks meeting for worship and study at Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church in Grottoes, Virginia on a warm August night in 2019. Mt. Horeb is the congregation that I pastored for seven years. The response I received is what I expected: Very few “Yes’s”, several hesitant nods, and a lot of raised eye-brows and blank stares.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:50-52 (NRSV). Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from the NRSV.

## The Problem

To be clear, I don't retell this story to shame the folks of Mt. Horeb in any way for not thinking of Jesus' ascension. If anyone was at fault it was their pastor! Rather, I retell this because I think that their response to Jesus' ascension is typical of most Christians worshipping in average to small-sized congregations in my denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and perhaps more broadly in most mainline congregations.<sup>2</sup> I've never heard of a church in the United States holding an ascension sunrise service. Folks aren't having family over to celebrate the Feast of the Ascension. As Eugene Peterson wrote, "Ascension may be one of the most under-celebrated events in the church's life."<sup>3</sup> For most mainline protestant Christians in the U.S., Jesus' saving story has just four main acts: Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

According to the New Testament witness and much of church history, however, there is this fifth and important act: Jesus' ascension. In fact, one might say the whole of the New Testament really operates with an understanding of Jesus' ascension as a critical reality. Peter preaches about the ascension in the first recorded Christian sermon.<sup>4</sup> Ephesians and Hebrews carry theological themes founded largely on the ascension and on-going incarnate ministry of

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<sup>2</sup> The median weekly attendance of congregations in North America is 76 people. Mark Chaves and Alison Eagle, "Changing American Congregations: Findings from the Third Wave of the National Congregations Study," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53: 676–686. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12151>.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 43.

<sup>4</sup> See Acts 2:22-36.

Jesus.<sup>5</sup> And when Revelation opens, where is Jesus found but in heaven where he has ascended and is “with [his] Father on his throne”<sup>6</sup> as the “firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth”<sup>7</sup>, the *conqueror* and “living one”, who is “coming soon.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, scripture not only lays emphasis upon who Jesus *was* and what he *has* done but also on who Jesus *is*, what he *is* doing, and who we – his church and all humanity – are in relation to him, the living, reigning, ascended king. In short, the New Testament declares with the psalmist that, “The Lord *is* king!” Presently! And the king is Jesus. Thus, it is with the ascended, reigning king Jesus that the church deals today through the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to the crux of the matter. When the church forgets Jesus’ *fifth act*, his ascension and all it entails, we certainly lose a key part of the Biblical story. But it also seems that the church loses much more in the way we understand our identity and role as the people of God who participate in the life of the Father and the Son through the Spirit. If the way we relate to Jesus now, through the Spirit, is as our ascended Lord – the incarnate Word who was crucified, risen and reigns – we should ask, what are the implications of the ascension for leading congregations like Mt. Horeb Presbyterian to participate in the mission of God? Put another way, how can pastors and congregational leaders lead more faithfully in the light of Jesus’ ascension, reign, and return?

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<sup>5</sup> Though this is not an exhaustive list, one could look at Ephesians 1:20-23, 2:4-7, 3:11-12, 4:8-16, 5:29-30; also Hebrews 1:3-4, 2:17-18, 4:14-16, 5:7-10, 6:19-20, 7:26-28, 8:1-7, 9:11-14, 28, 10:11-25, and 12:2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 3:21.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 1:5.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 5:5, 1:18, 22:20.

## Research Question

The thesis of this project is that the doctrine of the ascension and *parousia* roots the church's missional identity in the sovereign Lordship of Jesus Christ, offering average to small-sized mainline congregations a proper identity and purpose, a true source of power and perseverance, and a greater hope for participating contextually in the mission of God. Placing the doctrine and narrative of Jesus' ascension in conversation with pastoral ethnography and the organizational theories of *sensemaking* and *innovation* as defined by Weick and Christensen, this project proposes that Jesus' ascension gives smaller mainline congregations stability in the present and a push to improvise hopefully into the future as they seek to participate faithfully and contextually in the mission of God.

## Context

The context of this project, broadly speaking, is average to small-sized mainline congregations. Specifically, however, much of this work was done while pastoring Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church in Grottoes, VA., a 165-year-old congregation in the Presbyterian Church (USA), part of the Presbytery of Shenandoah.

In 1855, a group of farmers and other intrepid folks living along the South and Middle rivers of Virginia, around a crossroads in the Shenandoah Valley called Mt. Meridian, decided that the trip they were making to church was too long, too inconvenient, and, in inclement weather, downright too difficult. With no ill feelings toward their home congregation – Augusta Stone Presbyterian Church, in Fort Defiance – they wanted a sanctuary on their own soil. Particularly, a presbyterian congregation, “to meet an urgent and increasing demand for inure Presbyterian preaching in our neighborhood...” as the petition to

the presbytery read.<sup>9</sup> So, between 1855 and 1856 they built their own space of worship. In two years, it was officially organized by the, then, Lexington Presbytery with ten members being received by transfer. By the third year, the first member was received by profession of faith and the first child baptized. After ten years, the congregation had grown from ten to fifty members.<sup>10</sup> A sustainable congregation offering *presbyterian preaching* in that neighborhood of the Shenandoah Valley.

In the one-hundred and fifty years that followed, Mt. Horeb became an important center in this agricultural community for fellowship and religious activity. They had a thriving children's Sunday school, active women's groups, and regular Sunday worship.<sup>11</sup> Overall, the congregation grew steadily for its first one hundred years, growing to over three-hundred members by the early 1950s, with a strong missionary emphasis accompanying their growth from the 1890s to the 1920s.<sup>12</sup> Though population movements from rural to surrounding urban centers did affect the congregation over the years, it was after 1964 that the congregation began to see a decline in attendance and membership which only had slight relief in the early 1990s under a steady seven year pastorate.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sue Patterson and Charles Quick, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church, 1857-2007*, n.p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Patterson and Quick, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church*, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Patterson and Quick, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church*, 12, 17-18.

<sup>12</sup> Patterson and Quick, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church*, 14, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church Annual Reports.

Today, Mt. Horeb is a congregation with a rich history of family-like belonging and service, but also facing an uncertain future as it grapples with a tremendous amount of organizational stress and a decline in energy and membership. The changing and aging community within Mt. Horeb, and the shifting socio-cultural landscape around it, offers a case study for pastors and elders of small to average-sized mainline congregations like them.

It should be noted that since beginning this project, I received a call in May of 2021 to serve a different congregation, the Timnath Presbyterian Church, in Timnath, CO. Like Mt. Horeb, Timnath Presbyterian is also an average-sized congregation in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and over 130 years old. Timnath Presbyterian is also like Mt. Horeb in that it is located in what has historically been an agricultural and farming community that is now becoming a bedroom community for the Fort Collins area. Overall, in fact, much of the discontinuous change and organizational stress that Mt. Horeb has experienced is also being felt in Timnath Presbyterian, if only in a slightly different way. Thus, the questions I asked at Mt. Horeb and the work for this project that I began there are still just as applicable as I engage in ministry in Timnath, and the congregation has in many ways become a place to test my work.

### **Project Scope**

This project puts theology, ethnography, and organizational theory in conversation. It is meant to help pastors and church leaders think about how they live with the hope of Jesus' ascension and all its implications and how they embody or actualize that hope in the context of leading small to average-size mainline congregations. While there will be stories and practical examples given throughout the project, the ultimate outcome is not a manual or

curriculum, but a renewed way of thinking about leadership that is grounded in the specifics of the living Christ's sovereign activity and embodied with the aid of social sciences.

The project loosely follows Richard Osmer's framework for practical theology in *Practical Theology: An Introduction*.<sup>14</sup> Osmer offers a 4-fold framework for practical theology: The *Descriptive-Empirical Task* (what's going on here?), the *Interpretive Task* (why is this going on?), the *Normative Task* (what should be going on if all was right?), and the *Pragmatic Task* (how will we respond to this?).<sup>15</sup> Following John Calvin's lead, however, that true wisdom begins with knowledge of God and then moves to knowledge of self,<sup>16</sup> this project will begin with the *Normative Task*, move to the *Descriptive* and *Interpretive* tasks, and finally land in the *Pragmatic Task*. All of this is introduced by a chapter on my *methodology*, describing how and why I put theology, ethnography, and organizational leadership into conversation for the good of the Church and the glory of God.

Chapter Two unfolds the methodology of this project. In this chapter I begin by acknowledging my desire to move from the knowledge of Jesus Christ and his ascension to considering the implications of his ascension for the life and leadership of the congregation, specifically Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church. I then describe how I explored the *reality of the ascension* in the life of Mt. Horeb through the work of theological ethnography. I define theological ethnography, offer a reasoning for its use, and then narrate how I conducted my

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<sup>14</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), I.1.ii.

ethnographic research and how the data will be presented in Chapter Four. Finally, this chapter concludes by naming my biases in the ethnographic work.

Chapter Three will lay out the normative task for my project, particularly considering the place and importance of Jesus' ascension for the mission and ministry of the Church. The chapter first lays out the place of the ascension in the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ. The emphasis is on Jesus' exaltation and Lordship, his continuing intercession and gift of the Spirit, and his promised return. This chapter then explores some problems which arise for congregational belief and mission when the ascension is forgotten. Finally, the chapter offers several *ascension-shaped* correctives for congregational identity, understanding, and mission and briefly narrates several practical implications in the areas of preaching, eucharist, and pastoral leadership as a form of discipleship.

Chapter Four focuses on the ethnographic findings from Mt. Horeb Presbyterian. In this chapter, reflecting on the data from congregational interviews I did at Mt. Horeb, I offer a snapshot of Mt. Horeb's self-understanding as a household of *belonging*, *service*, and *uncertainty*. The congregational data is put in conversation with the ascension to show how the reality of the ascension is alive at Mt. Horeb and how it tests some of their self-understanding. If Chapter Three proposes the importance of the ascension in the life and mission of small to average-sized mainline congregations, Chapter Four gives a picture of what is actually alive in the mind and heart of *one* congregation – Mt. Horeb.

Considering the normative chapter and the ethnographic snapshot of Chapter Four, Chapter Five offers a proposal for how a congregation like Mt. Horeb can be organized and led to live out some of the implications of the Lord's ascension. To do this, I put the theology

and narrative of the ascension and a congregation like Mt. Horeb into conversation with Karl Weick and Clayton Christensen and their work in *sensemaking* and *innovation*. The final argument will be that the ascension can help stabilize a congregation like Mt. Horeb while also pushing them to improvise forward in faithfulness and hope in the ascended Lord.

## Definitions

### Ascension

The actual act of Jesus' ascension is singular and it is described briefly and sparsely in Scripture. "[H]e withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven," writes Luke in his gospel.<sup>17</sup> Or again in Acts, "He was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."<sup>18</sup> The *implications* of Jesus' ascension are manifold, however, and ripple throughout the whole of the New Testament. In this project, the ascension holds three points of significance.

First, Jesus' ascension is his incarnate exaltation at the right hand of God. The Word of God who became human and suffered on the cross for us has now been raised in his *selfsame body*<sup>19</sup> and exalted "above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."<sup>20</sup> Second, Jesus' ascension implies his heavenly intercession and the gifting of the Holy Spirit. In his ascension Jesus continues to be our one Mediator between God and humanity, advocating on

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<sup>17</sup> Luke 24:51.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 1:9.

<sup>19</sup> *The Scots Confession*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 3.11.

<sup>20</sup> Ephesians 1:21.

our behalf. Because of his heavenly session he sends down *The Advocate* and Promise of our redemption, the Holy Spirit, who imparts all of Jesus' power, advocacy, and victory. Finally, Jesus' ascension implies his promised return. Jesus who ascended will return as Lord and King. This reality sets a stage of patient hope and purpose for the church.

Lastly, it should be noted that in this discussion of Jesus' ascension, the theological and scientific questions concerning *where* Jesus is physically located will mostly not be addressed. There is certainly much to say about this, and many have. But for the purposes of this project, I understand Jesus' ascension as an embodied movement from our creaturely realm to the realm, or space, of God. Therefore, the realms of heaven and earth which are made to be intimately connected in and by God – a vision of which we see both in Genesis 3 (“...the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze”<sup>21</sup>) and Revelation 21 (““See, the home of God is among mortals...”<sup>22</sup>) – are brought together and reconciled in and by God-the-Son, Jesus, as he enters heaven bearing our humanity.

### Vicarious Humanity

By *vicarious* humanity, or vicarious ministry, I mean that what Jesus did and does, he did and does for all of us. Because of Jesus' complete union with our humanity, he is not only God's grace and love to us incarnate, but also our faithful human response to the Father. St. Athanasius put this beautifully:

Since then the Word, being the image of the Father and immortal, took the form of the servant, and as man underwent for us death in His flesh, that thereby He might offer Himself for us through death to the Father; therefore also, as man, He is said

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<sup>21</sup> Genesis 3:8.

<sup>22</sup> Revelation 21:3.

because of us and for us to be highly exalted, that as by His death we all died in Christ, so again in the Christ Himself we might all be highly exalted, being raised from the dead and ascending into heaven.”<sup>23</sup>

Jesus vicarious humanity is his ministry and action for us and in our place.

### Continuing Incarnation

Jesus’ continuing incarnation is the affirmation that when Jesus ascended, he did not cease his incarnation. This One Word of God who became an incarnate human for us did not remove his humanity like a coat, as it were, in his heavenly exaltation. Rather, he continues to reign in his humanity. Thus, he has made a way for our humanity to be in the presence of God, he has exalted and dignified humanity to its proper place as beloved and beside the Father, and he is a faithful human king on the throne.

### Witness

In Acts 1:8, just before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit and will then be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>24</sup> In Greek, the word here for witnesses is μάρτυς, from which we get the word martyr. To be a witness to Jesus Christ, then, is to offer more than a verbal testimony. The witness of the apostles and of the whole church is a *living testimony*. As 1 Peter says, the church is made up of “living stones,” who are being “built

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<sup>23</sup> Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians* 1.41, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2d ser., vol. 4 (reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), cited in Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 1:8.

into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."<sup>25</sup> Thus, the church exists *by* the Word who has called and built it through the power of his Spirit. But it also exists *for Him*, to declare his praises, as the instrument through which his gospel is announced and his kingdom represented. Sharing in the suffering and glory of the ascended Lord through the Spirit, the church testifies to his life, demonstrates his mercy, and represents his reign in the world as his witness.

### Sensemaking

*Sensemaking*, a term coined by Karl Weick, has to do with how people and organizations structure and make sense of reality through actions and commitments.<sup>26</sup> According to Weick, it is not the case that people know what is real and act on their knowing. Rather in the face of ambiguity people act and can then make sense of their actions. Thus, when I speak of sensemaking in this project I will speak of it, as Karl Weick does, as the work of interpreting actions to name reality.

### Sustaining Technologies

This is a business-theory term used by Clayton M. Christensen to describe technologies that “foster improved produce performance.”<sup>27</sup> Sustaining technologies are

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<sup>25</sup> 1 Peter 2:5, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Marking Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 9.

<sup>27</sup> Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: Why New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997), xviii.

basically *upgrades* of existing technologies. Upgrades which keep buyers or consumers interested. An example of this might be smartphone upgrades.

### Disruptive Technologies

*Disruptive technology* is another term used by Clayton Christensen. As opposed to sustaining technologies, it describes innovative technologies that may perform worse than other established products in more mainstream markets or that may not currently fit market trends, but which offer other features that buyers may value. If valued, these innovations can *disrupt* the market and lead to the demise of seemingly well-established products and companies. The main example Christensen gives of this in *The Innovator's Dilemma* is the introduction of 8-inch computer disk drives at a time when 14-inch disk drives were the standard size.<sup>28</sup> The introduction of these drives in new technologies disrupted the market at the time.

### **Bridle and Comfort; Direction and Strength**

In its wonderful chapter on the ascension, the *Scots' Confession* testifies that remembrance of the ascended Lord's return,

is not only a bridle by which our carnal lusts are restrained but also such inestimable comfort that neither the threatening of worldly princes, nor the fear of present danger or of temporal death, may move us to renounce and forsake that blessed society which we, the members, have with our Head and only Mediator, Christ Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 16-18.

<sup>29</sup> *The Scots Confession*, 3.11.

The language of *bridle* and *comfort*, as it is used here, emphasizes the way that the knowledge of Jesus' consummate *parousia* and judgement can constrain Christians to act rightly as well as console Christians in the face of trials with the promise that Christ will set things right. But can this not also be read more broadly?

A bridle not only restrains but also controls or governs the actions of a creature like a horse. Might the reality of Jesus' ascension and *parousia* – and not only his consummate *parousia*, but also his current presence by the Spirit and incarnate reign at the right hand of the Father – be like a bridle that restrains, yes, but also controls and directs his creatures, his household, the church? And might the knowledge of his ascension bring comfort to the church for the future, yes, but also *confortāre* (strength!)<sup>30</sup> for faithfulness in the present? Can and does Jesus' ascension give direction, strength, and hope to congregations like Mt. Horeb Presbyterian as they seek to faithfully witness to, and participate in, his life and mission? These are questions that this project seeks to engage. But first we turn to review the methods used for research and discovery.

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<sup>30</sup> See also Karl Barth, *Learning Jesus Christ Through the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 28-29. “Comfort means generally a provisional but effective and promising help given to man in a difficult situation.”

## Chapter Two: Methodology

John Calvin opens *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* proposing, “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>1</sup> Put another way, real wisdom and understanding is found in an intimate acquaintance with and understanding of God and ourselves. Now, one might be tempted to hold these two parts of wisdom equally, hand-in-hand. But hold these hand-in-hand Calvin does not. Or at least not quite. Rather, Calvin goes on to say that, while all true wisdom consists in knowledge of God and ourselves, “It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, there is a particular movement necessary. A movement from setting our minds “on things above,” contemplating Christ where he is “seated at the right hand of God,”<sup>3</sup> to examining ourselves *in him*.

That is the order of research and approach for this project. A movement from discerning the mission of God revealed in Scripture – particularly as it relates to the person and work of Jesus Christ and his ascension – to then examining the reality and implications of Jesus’ ascension in and for the life of the local congregation, particularly Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), I.1.i.

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.1.ii.

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:2, 1.

## The Key to the Whole

In a way that somewhat follows Calvin's lead, Lesslie Newbigin writes about the importance of *plausibility structures*. Newbigin defines plausibility structures as "patterns of belief and practice accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not."<sup>4</sup> Part of Newbigin's point in discussing plausibility structures is to insist that *reason* is not a faculty that can be exercised independent of a traditioned way of understanding – an accepted pattern of *belief* and *practice*. Our knowing and seeing is shaped by the plausibility structures we inhabit. Thus, Newbigin goes on to say that,

If God exists and he is capable of revealing his purpose to human beings, then the human reason will be summoned to understand and respond to this revelation and to relate it to all other experience. It will necessarily do this within a tradition which determines whether not any belief is plausible – in this case the tradition of a community which cherishes and lives by the story of God's saving acts.<sup>5</sup>

This traditioned community is called the Church. And the story of God's saving acts which the Church indwells and through which it is summoned to see, know, and understand the world and all experience, is the biblical story of Scripture.<sup>6</sup> At the heart of that story (what Newbigin calls the "key to the whole"<sup>7</sup>) is the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Thus, as a pastor, and more fundamentally as a Christian, my

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<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 98-99.

<sup>7</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 99.

reasoning and research for this Doctor of Ministry project have been “summoned to understand and respond to this revelation”<sup>8</sup> – particularly that of Jesus’ ascension – and to relate it to the experience of leading a congregation like Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church. Newbigin names Jesus as the “key to the whole” of the biblical story.<sup>9</sup> The biblical witness to Jesus’ ascension, reign, and return is the key to this whole project.

Following Calvin’s lead and Newbigin’s proposition, this project is first a brief Biblical and theological exploration of Jesus’ ascension, including his exaltation, intercession, bestowment of the Spirit, and return. This research is explored primarily in Chapter Three, suggesting God’s mission of salvation in Jesus – the crucified, risen, and ascended one – as the normative story around which congregational life, witness and understanding are measured. These biblical and theological foundations provide a frame, however, within which the rest of the research and argumentation of this project is done. The project relies fundamentally on the narrative of the gospels and the New Testament epistles, but is also heavily informed by the writings of Gerrit Scott Dawson, Douglas Farrow, Andrew Purves, and T.F. Torrance.<sup>10</sup>

Secondarily, but specifically in Chapter Five, this project engages the organizational theories of *sensemaking* and *innovation*, as defined by Karl Weick and Clayton

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<sup>8</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 99.

<sup>10</sup> The primary texts from these authors include: Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ’s Continuing Incarnation* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004); Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018); Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); T.F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd ed. (London: T & T Clark LTD, 1993).

Christensen.<sup>11</sup> The goal of this synthesis between theology and organizational theory is to propose a way of stabilizing and leading the congregation to live like the ascension is true. That is to say, the tools of organizational theory are offered to aid the congregation in bearing faithful witness to the gospel in light of Jesus' exaltation, reign and return. Weick's collection of essays, *Making Sense of the Organization*, and particularly his analysis of the Mann Gulch fire, and Christensen's book, *The Innovator's Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* are central to the concluding argument.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, however, this whole project engages and is dependent upon pastoral ethnography, specifically in the context of Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church. The result is an attempt to put the context of the congregation in conversation with theology and theory, working out the implications of leading a congregation like this faithfully in the mission of the Father, under the reign of the ascended Son and Lord, and in the power of the Spirit.

### **Why Ethnography?**

The primary way that human subjects were engaged for this project was through the practice of pastoral ethnography. It may be asked, what place does ethnography have in the work of pastoral ministry and why was it used for this project?

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<sup>11</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: Why New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Karl E. Weick, "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster," in Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001); Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*.

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves paying attention to people, organizations, and their surrounding environments to produce what Clifford Geertz describes as a *thick description* of the culture.<sup>13</sup> By culture, Geertz and others mean a system of shared symbolic actions in a particular society through which people make sense of their life.<sup>14</sup> As Geertz writes,

Once human behavior is seen as *symbolic action* — action which, like phonation in speech, pigment in painting, line in writing, or sonance in music, *signifies* — the question as to whether culture is patterned conduct or a frame of mind, or even the two somehow mixed together, loses sense...The thing to ask is *what...is getting said* (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup>

Culture is the webs of meaning-making that a community entangles itself in. It is symbolic action; *said* action. Thus, the culture of a congregation is the symbolic actions and rituals the congregation engages in in their life together in their particular place. The work of pastoral ethnography, then, is to interpret the meaning of these actions and offer an analysis of what is being *said* – about God, one another, the community, the congregation.

Pastors and ministry leaders today are walking with congregations and members of the church through a season of great change. There is a deep need to pay attention to the culture of the congregation and the surrounding interlocking communities in which it is situated. If one is going to pray for as well as with a community of believers, be attentive to Scripture for and with them, and seek to give attention to what God may be doing in their

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Jo Hatch, *Organizational Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 12, 42. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description,” 10.

<sup>15</sup> Geertz, “Thick Description,” 10.

lives,<sup>16</sup> a pastor or ministry leader must be listening with her eyes and ears to the ways people are practicing their faith and paying attention to what Mary Clark Moschella calls the “undercurrents in the life of the community.”<sup>17</sup>

More specifically, however, and of importance to this project is the reality that when Jesus commissions his disciples prior to his ascension he tells them that they will be his witnesses, “in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”<sup>18</sup> This is a promise of the centrifugal movement their witness will have, but also, importantly, of the way the gospel will be carried and witnessed to in *particular* places (like Jerusalem) and regions (like Samaria) that it may be received and responded to in these places and ultimately in every corner, community, and culture on the earth. In a sense, the gospel doesn’t go global without going local and becoming implanted in particular cultures and contexts.

Thus, the task of congregations is not simply to believe a bland, generalized version of the gospel but to hear the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Lord addressing us through his Word and Spirit in *our place* and to embody the implications of the gospel *here*. The gospel comes into contact and conversation with our culture. Therefore, there is a certain need for ethnographic work to be part of pastoral work in order to interpret the practices of the people which will illuminate the lived theology of the people and open a window to see

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<sup>16</sup> Part of what Eugene Peterson called, “working the angles.” See Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 3-4.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Acts 1:8.

and show how the gospel is blessing our actions, rebuking them, or in either case calling us in a new direction of faithfulness to the Lord, through the power of the Spirit.

For this project, the ethnographic work offered insight not only to the culture of Mt. Horeb but more specifically to the ways that themes of the ascension – which is to say themes of the gospel – were present in the congregation. It amplified places where the reality of the ascension is possibly testing Mt. Horeb’s operative theology and self-understanding.

### **Data Collection**

#### Written Documents

In my pastoral ethnography, I was paying attention to the congregation of Mt. Horeb and their surrounding community as a *pastor-participant*, sifting through congregational documents and sorting through scenes of their life together – worship, meetings, covered-dish meals. The goal was to notice the symbolic actions and rituals the congregation engages and to interpret the meaning of these actions. The first step involved investigating written and photographed documentation from the congregation that is kept in the church building.

Some of these documents were Annual Reports and Session minutes which are stored in the church office. Other documents included hand-written historical records, minutes, scrapbooks, and financial records kept in both a fire-safe and in cabinets in the church parlor. Many of these documents have been saved since the 1920s-1940s. Some of them dated back to the 1860s. Mt. Horeb also has an official history book, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church: 1857-2007*, written in two parts by two long time members, Charles Quick and the late Sue Patterson. Aside from these documents from Mt. Horeb, the history of

the congregation and the surrounding community was explored by accessing data from the Association of Religion Data Archives, City-Data, New American Economy, Poverty USA, the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, the Waynesboro Heritage Society, and a book titled, *Shenandoah Presbytery: A Heritage of Service*.<sup>19</sup>

While doing this research I took extensive notes and wrote thirty pages of commentary and evaluation which were submitted for this project in May of 2020. I shared some of this evaluation of history with the Session and members of the congregation, even in occasional sermons. I was surprised to discover that even most long-time members did not know much of the early history of the congregation. The congregational consciousness seemed to go back only to the 1960s, when many current members were growing up in the church. They appreciated learning of their beginnings. I appreciated the research because it settled me in a larger story of the congregation than the one I'd known only through observation; it allowed me to discover themes in the congregation's history. It prepared me for the interviews that I conducted in the fall of 2020.

### Interviews

Between October 1 and November 24, 2020, I conducted eleven interviews with members of Mt. Horeb. The respondents were selected by snowball sampling, with the initial four being members of a Listening Team that was being formed at the church. Seven of the respondents were women and four were men. Of the eleven interviewed, one person was in

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<sup>19</sup> Dorothy A. Boyd-Bragg, Katherine L. Brown, and Nancy T. Sorrells, *Shenandoah Presbytery: A Heritage of Service* (Staunton, VA: Lot's Wife Publishing, 2012), 206.

her forties, two in their fifties, one in her sixties, and seven were in their 70s. Only one of the respondents had been at Mt. Horeb for less than twenty years.

I entered these interviews wanting to discover if and how narrative echoes and implications of the ascension live in the imagination of Mt. Horeb. The reality of the ascension is vital for a congregation like Mt. Horeb's self-understanding and participation in God's mission, and to tease this out, I asked seven questions (see Appendix A) that in some way relate to dominant themes in the New Testament ascension narrative(s) and their possible implications.

The ascension is about Jesus Christ, his exaltation, intercession, and reign, and our participation in his life and mission through the Spirit. Therefore, all of my questions moved at the intersection of our experience and God's action through the ascension. Again, the ascension is about Jesus, so I asked my respondents about their *faith in Jesus* and how they brought that faith to Mt. Horeb. The ascension sparked both *worship* and *joy* for the disciples, and I wanted to hear about experiences of joy. The ascension is also a time of confusion for Jesus' friends, so I asked questions related to confusion and doubt. Fellowship with Jesus in the Spirit means life as his *body*, or *household*, and I wanted to know about feelings of connection to others at Mt. Horeb and to God. The Church is commissioned to be Christ's witness, so I wanted to get a sense of the impactful ways the respondent's faith had been practiced. Finally, the promise of Jesus' ascension is the hope of his return, and I wanted to hear about their expectations and hopes for Mt. Horeb.

All but one of the interviews were conducted in-person, either in the narthex of the church building or at the respondent's home. The one interview that was not conducted in-

person was conducted via Zoom. All the interviews were slotted for a thirty-minute time frame; several were slightly longer. Written permission was given by each respondent via a signed consent form to record the interviews and to use the material from these interviews for this doctoral project and whatever may be produced from it (see Appendix B). The consent form also notes the time required, that their participation was voluntary, any benefits to their participation, and the option of keeping their name and information confidential. None of the respondents asked to remain anonymous.

Aside from taking notes, the audio from these interviews was recorded digitally on my personal iPhone using the Voice Memos app. Each of the interviews began with a scripted statement reviewing the nature of the interview as part of my Doctor of Ministry project and reiterated my intent to record the audio of the interview. I also asked for verbal consent of their willingness to proceed with the interview.

### Data Analysis

After completing all the planned interviews, the data analysis began. Some of the interviews were transcribed for the purpose of seeing, and not only hearing, the respondent's answers. All notes and transcripts were reviewed multiple times as a way of practicing what Moschella calls *immersion*.<sup>20</sup> While reviewing the interviews, the initial data collected from congregational documents was also reviewed. Through this immersive process, I began the work of coding and sorting the data – both by organizing the data in Microsoft Word files and on newsprint paper sheets – until several key themes began to emerge around which I

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<sup>20</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 168.

constructed a description of the congregation as a *household*. The results of this work are explored in Chapter Four.

### **Limitations and Biases**

There are several limitations and biases to this research, particularly involving the ethnography.

First, one key piece of ethnography is the work of limiting research to a particular (or, bracketed) time frame in order to offer up a snapshot of the congregation from one moment in history. This, in part, acknowledges that the ethnographer is not omniscient. It also allows the ethnographer the possibility of offering a deep, or *thick description*, rather than a wide one.<sup>21</sup> While my interviews were limited to current and active members of Mt. Horeb in 2020, the written data I reviewed spanned all the way back to the 1860s. This wide-ranging historical backdrop provided a sense of the patterns throughout history (culture) yet also has the possibility of coloring my story in particular ways that may have been different if I had only focused on more recent history from the life of the congregation.

Second, the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted and affected not only customary ways of gathering and acting in the congregation, but also emotions and perspectives. Thus, while I did not form any interview questions that were related to the pandemic, several of the respondents gave answers that were deeply influenced by the pandemic. How the pandemic fully shaped their answers and outlook as participant-members of Mt. Horeb is unknown.

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<sup>21</sup> Geertz, "Thick Description," 10.

Third, a word about ethnography. In his work, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology: Volume 1*, the late John Webster writes,

The church is not simply social nature but created and fallen social nature recreated by the saving missions of the Son of God and the Holy Spirit and so reconciled to God and on the way to its perfection. This already means that the ethnography of such a society will be irregular, even aberrant, utterly enigmatic if we restrict the matter of ethnography to purely natural motion. The church is a society which moves itself as it is moved by God. Without talk of this divine movement, of the electing, calling, gathering, and sanctifying works of God, an ethnography of the church does not attain its object, misperceiving the motion to which its attention is to be directed, and so inhibited in understanding the creaturely movements of the communion of saints.<sup>22</sup>

Part of Webster's argument seems to be that a congregation is not an autonomous agent in relationship to the Triune God or to one another as members. It is a creature of the Word,<sup>23</sup> brought into redeemed existence through the Son and Spirit. It is a company drawn to God, by God, and sent under the authority of the Son. My understanding of the usefulness of ethnography is ultimately shaped by such convictions. I do not understand Mt. Horeb to be a *society* of Christians who have moved themselves, individually or collectively, closer to or further from God and faithfulness to God *on their own*. There, the Spirit of the ascended One who is their cornerstone is at work. Therefore, I understand the pastor-ethnographer's role as also being attentive to the action of the Spirit of the Lord and not just the actions of the community. This bias suggests, or clarifies, that I ultimately believe it is not just ethnography that is helpful in ministry, but what may be considered *theological ethnography*.

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<sup>22</sup> John Webster, *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology*, vol. 1, *God and the Works of God* (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 193.

<sup>23</sup> John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2006), 195-196.

Finally, one major bias in this research is that I served as the pastor of Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church from May 2014 through July 2021. This was my first pastorate and the community in which I was significantly shaped as a young minister. In all, I loved this congregation and the people in it. Although during this project I discerned a call to serve a different congregation, the substance of this work comes out of seven years of engagement at Mt. Horeb. And though in all things as their pastor I sought to speak the truth in love, I recognize that the *truth* may be tinted here by my place in the community as pastor-participant, as opposed to just participant, or observer. In other words, my perspective in this work toward Mt. Horeb is neither fully emic (a view from within) nor etic (looking in from outside).

### **A Final Note**

What follows is not a theological study on the ascension, an ethnographic report, or a new leadership guide for congregations facing decline or change-fatigue. There are wise experts in each of those fields who can write much more knowledgably and beneficially than I on their area of calling. Rather, this is a synthesis of theology, qualitative research, and organizational science, written by a pastor in a prayerful attempt to see and say what *God's saving acts*, and particularly the ascension, reign, and return, of Jesus Christ, mean for leading a congregation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be faithful in witness and in hope.

Since, as Calvin writes, “[i]t is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face,”<sup>24</sup> we turn first to the saving story of God revealed in Jesus Christ and his ascension.

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<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.1.ii.

## Chapter Three: The Hope of the Ascension for Congregational Mission and Ministry

### The Normative Story

“The triune God is a missionary God,” write Van Gelder and Zscheile.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, from the very opening chapters of Scripture, the God of the Bible is revealed as the One whose desire is to seek, find, and save, all in order to be with, God’s beloved creation. The story begins with God graciously giving life to the world by Word and Spirit. Speaking and breathing a superabundant creation into existence to share communion with God’s-self and communion as creatures. Despite this prodigal gift, humanity turns from trusting God as the giver of life and seeks to grab life on its own, pushing God to the margins. Nevertheless, in steadfast love, God draws near. Amidst a spiral of broken relationships (between humans, humanity and creation, humanity and God), God reveals God’s promise in seeking to heal and reconcile the broken world.<sup>2</sup> All through the Old Testament, God draws close to humanity, particularly through Israel, that they may know God and be the bearer of God’s blessing and promise for the whole world. Ultimately, however, God’s missionary story culminates in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *Participating in God’s Mission: A Theological Missiology for the Church in America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 36.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1 ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 212. Here Barth asks why Jesus took the form of a servant, and answers that he did so to reveal the heart of the Father, “for the sake of his own glory in the world, to confirm and proclaim His will not to be without the world, not to be God in isolation. ...in being *pro se* He is also *pro nobis*, and therefore *pro me*.” See also, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 754-755.

In the fullness of time, God the Father sent the Son, Jesus, in the power of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup> And as the New Testament accounts witness, Jesus' saving story has five key acts: His *incarnation* by which he assumes our humanity forever; his *life* which he lives vicariously as the faithful human in response to the Father, and as God's gracious love toward us; his *death* on the cross, by which he reveals the depths of God's love, reconciles us to God through his blood and transfers us into the kingdom of his redemption; his *resurrection* which is his vindication and the glorious showing forth of God's victory over sin and death; and his *ascension* in which he enters into heaven and promises to return in glory. In short, Jesus is revealed as Emmanuel. He *is* the promise of God.<sup>4</sup> And thus, in his acts he is God healing and reconciling humanity and creation in the power of the Holy Spirit. This, we might say, is the normative, Biblical, Christian story. Yet, as we noted in Chapter One, this fifth act of Jesus, his ascension, is not always given emphasis today.

The actual story of Jesus' ascension in scripture is fairly sparse. The fullest narrative comes from Luke-Acts, describing the event 40 days after Jesus' resurrection. According to Luke, Jesus was with his disciples near Bethany. He blessed them and, while blessing, "withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven."<sup>5</sup> And that's it! Sure, Luke adds a bit

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<sup>3</sup> Throughout this paper I refer to the Trinitarian relationship of God as Father, Son and Spirit. I use the language of Father for three reasons: 1. Jesus calls God Father; 2. To call God Father as a Christian, rightly understood, is not to employ metaphorical language about God (i.e. God's like a dad) but theological language (God is the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus who is the Son, eternally begotten by the Father); 3. This is the historic language of the Church, including the presbyterian tradition that I am a part of.

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 47. See also, Barth, *CD*, IV.1, 755.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:51.

more detail in Acts 1, and Mark mentions the ascension at the end of his gospel,<sup>6</sup> but the actual narrative of the event is quite brief. Yet, the significance of the event ripples out like shock waves through the rest of the New Testament! Jesus' farewell discourse in John points heavily to Jesus' ascension, the whole book of Acts seems to depend upon it, and nearly every chapter in Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 Thessalonians makes an explicit reference to his ascension or return.<sup>7</sup> To downplay Jesus' ascension, pass over it, or simply dismiss it, is to lose a key part of the Biblical story. Moreover, as this chapter will suggest, in dismissing the ascension congregations and leaders lose the key to their full participation in God's mission.

The thesis of this chapter is that a reengagement on a congregational level with a theology of the ascension could lead to a more faithful missiology, giving average to small-sized mainline congregations, like Mt. Horeb Presbyterian, a proper *starting place and identity*, a true source of *power and perseverance*, and a *greater hope* for participating in the mission of God. To make these arguments, this chapter will first outline the normative story of the ascension as a part of God's mission by looking at three significant pieces, before then turning to two misconceptions that misdirect congregations when the ascension is distorted or dismissed. Finally, the chapter will return to the normative story to see how it offers correctives and significant implications for congregational life and mission.

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<sup>6</sup> Mark 16:19.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see: John 14:25-28, 15:26, 16:5-15; Acts 1:3-11, 2:1-36, 3:21; Ephesians 1:20-23, 2:4-6, 3:11-12, 4:7-10, 5:23; Philippians 2:9, 3:20; Colossians 1:17-18, 3:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:10, 3:13, 4:14-16, 5:23.

To begin, we turn to three significant factors of Jesus' ascension: His incarnate exaltation, his heavenly intercession and gifting of the Holy Spirit, and his impending return.

### Jesus' Incarnate Exaltation

The first point that the New Testament emphasizes about Jesus' ascension is that it is his incarnate exaltation to the right hand of God. In Peter's sermon on Pentecost, he proclaims that the risen Jesus has been "exalted at the right hand of God," and "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in Ephesians, Paul writes that God's power is seen at work in Christ whom he raised from the dead and seated "at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come."<sup>9</sup> Again, in Philippians 2, Paul speaks of Jesus now being "highly exalted," and every tongue confessing him Lord.<sup>10</sup> And in 1 Peter, Peter writes that the risen Jesus "has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers made subject to him."<sup>11</sup> Over and over what is affirmed is that Jesus is the long-expected Messiah of Israel, and that his ascension is his ultimate enthronement as Lord of all.<sup>12</sup> As Gerrit Scott Dawson

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<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:33a, 34-36.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Philippians 2:9.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Peter 3:21b-22.

<sup>12</sup> I say that his ascension is the "ultimate enthronement" because there is a real sense in which the cross is the throne of Christ. He is none other than the crucified king. Yet, it is only in the light of his resurrection and ascension that we ultimately see the passion as coronation, the cross as throne.

writes, “The ascension climaxes in enthronement. Jesus, the triumphant Word made flesh, takes his place as the regent at the Father’s right hand.”<sup>13</sup>

Three things might be said about this. First, when Jesus ascends he ascends as the Word and Son of God. Jesus who ascends is the same One who descended.<sup>14</sup> Second, however, Jesus also ascends as a man. Just as Jesus descended and became incarnate, lived faithfully and died for us, so too, he has been raised and ascended in his “selfsame body,” as John Knox puts it.<sup>15</sup> In the ascension, the incarnation does not cease but continues, meaning that Jesus’ vicarious ministry for us also continues.<sup>16</sup> But third, it is vital to affirm that to focus on Jesus’ ascension and exaltation is not to forget his humiliation. The ascension does not create a theology of glory but testifies to the crucified Lord who emptied himself for us and now has been raised and exalted as king.<sup>17</sup> The ascension affirms Jesus as the One who has been given all power from the Father and is enthroned as *the lion* of Judah, but only also because he is *the lamb* that was slaughtered for our sake.<sup>18</sup> His regal way is none other than the way of the cross.

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<sup>13</sup> Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ’s Continuing Incarnation* (London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 53. Tim Chester and Jonny Woodrow, *The Ascension: Humanity in the Presence of God* (UK: Christian Focus Publishing, 2013), 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ephesians 4:10.

<sup>15</sup> The *Scots Confession*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 3.11.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 109.

<sup>17</sup> Philippians 2:6-9.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 270. Revelation 5:5, 12.

## Jesus' Heavenly Intercession and the Blessing of the Spirit

The second significance of the ascension that the New Testament affirms is Jesus' heavenly intercession and his gifting, alongside the Father, of the Holy Spirit. In his vicarious humanity Jesus' whole life was one of intercession, bearing the blessing and grace of God upon our humanity and faithfully fulfilling our human response to God, all of which was summed up at the cross.<sup>19</sup> In his ascension, however, Jesus continues to be the mediator between God and humanity. He continues to intercede for us. This is what the New Testament, and particularly the book of Hebrews, portrays as the *priestly ministry* of Jesus Christ.

Just as the High Priest of Israel would enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, bearing the names of all the tribes of Israel in order to intercede on their behalf and offer the blood of sacrifice for the sins of the whole people, so Jesus appropriates and fulfills this priestly ministry himself.<sup>20</sup> In our flesh, with our names written “on the palms of [his] hands,”<sup>21</sup> he has made intercession for us through the faithfulness of his life and, ultimately, by offering his blood as sacrifice for sin. Having made this sacrifice, in his ascension he has now entered the true Holy of Holies,<sup>22</sup> heaven, where he presents his life for humanity. As we are united with him, we too are offered to the Father as “holy and blameless

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<sup>19</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Atonement*, 274.

<sup>20</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 120-122.

<sup>21</sup> Isaiah 49:16.

<sup>22</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 122-123.

before him in love.”<sup>23</sup> This is what is affirmed in Hebrews when it says that Jesus “is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”<sup>24</sup> This also is why the apostles consistently affirm that we live and offer ourselves to God the Father *through* Christ, are told we have confidence in God *through* Christ, and have victory *through* Christ.<sup>25</sup> All our offering to God in life, prayer, and worship is offered in and accepted through him, our Mediator.

Another way the New Testament affirms Jesus’ heavenly intercession is through his *advocacy* on our behalf — that is, his praying and pleading for us. Just as we see Jesus praying for his disciples in John 17, so Jesus continues to do this in his heavenly session.<sup>26</sup> As Romans 8:34 affirms, Jesus is at the right hand of God *interceding* for us. And in 1 John we hear, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”<sup>27</sup> The One who can sympathize with us in our weakness and trials, since he was tested like we are, now sits on the throne of grace pleading on our behalf.<sup>28</sup>

But how does Christ carry out his intercession for us? How is he our mediator? How do we share in his life? He does this through the great gift of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>23</sup> Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 117. Ephesians 1:4.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrew 7:25.

<sup>25</sup> 1 Peter 2:5; 2 Corinthians 3:4; 1 Corinthians 15:57.

<sup>26</sup> John 17:6-26.

<sup>27</sup> 1 John 2:1.

<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 4:14-16. Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 122.

At the time of Jesus' ascension he was blessing his disciples.<sup>29</sup> The fulfillment of that blessing is the gift of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> As Jesus promised to his disciples before his death, and again before his ascension, so Peter declares on Pentecost that Jesus, "exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit...has poured out this that you both see and hear."<sup>31</sup> The Holy Spirit, poured out by Christ and the Father, is the one who incorporates believers into Christ's life so that even though he is absent in body we are with him, belong to him, and his victory and perfect offering belong to us.<sup>32</sup> The Spirit is the "Advocate" who imparts Jesus' advocacy, power and pleading to us.<sup>33</sup> The Spirit is the pledge of redemption; the foretaste of God's kingdom in which we know Christ as reigning king.<sup>34</sup> In short, the Spirit is the *great Gift*, sent from the Father through the Son, by whom we receive Christ and know him with us, and through whom we are received by him. And the Spirit is poured out fully because Jesus ascends.

### Jesus' Impending Return

The third major significance of the ascension is named on the day of ascension itself. In Acts 1, Jesus tells his disciples that they are going to "receive power" when the Spirit

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 24:50-51.

<sup>30</sup> Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 122.

<sup>31</sup> John 14:26. Acts 1:5, 8. Acts 2:33.

<sup>32</sup> Romans 8:9-17.

<sup>33</sup> John 14:16, 26. Ephesians 3:16-18.

<sup>34</sup> Ephesians 1:13-14. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 134.

comes to them so that they may witness his life “to the ends of the earth.”<sup>35</sup> After saying this, however, he ascends.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps understandably, the disciples don’t know what to do at this point. So, they stand there staring up at heaven. But suddenly, two men in white appear, saying, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, this Jesus you know – crucified, risen, and ascended – *will return*. This is the third point of significance. The ascended Lord’s return.

Jesus’ return, his *parousia* (being present), is named and looked forward to in various ways. It is the “day of Christ,” the “day of the Lord,” the *end* when he “hands over the kingdom” to the Father, the hope of “glory,” “the coming,” the day of resurrection, the descent of the new Jerusalem, and the return of the king who is “making all things new.”<sup>38</sup> In all these descriptions, the central reality is that Jesus who ascended will return as the regnant Lord.<sup>39</sup> This reality sets a stage of active, but patient hope for the church. The end upon which the church sets its eyes is not an apocalyptic nightmare, nor a purely spiritual existence, but a return of the King who is God and man, and the full establishment of the Father’s kingdom through him. Indeed, it could be argued that this is the reason for all the New Testament epistles: to ground the church in the reality of their crucified, risen,

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<sup>35</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>36</sup> Acts 1:9.

<sup>37</sup> Acts 1:11.

<sup>38</sup> Colossians 2:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:2; 1 Corinthians 15:24; 2 Corinthians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:13; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28; Revelation 21:1-5.

<sup>39</sup> See Psalm 96.

ascended, and returning Lord, that they may live faithfully, witnessing to his life in the power of the Spirit, until his return.

Jesus' incarnate exaltation, heavenly intercession and the gifting of the Spirit, and promised return are three significant parts of his ascension act. And these three parts of the ascension story carry great implications for how congregations like Mt. Horeb not only know their redemption and share communion with God, but also participate in God's mission through the Son to reconcile and renew the world. But what happens if these elements are forgotten? In this next section, I will consider two misconceptions that seem to be at work in congregations. Misconceptions about the church's identity, role, and mission that stem in part from a distortion or dismissal of the ascension.

## **Misconceptions**

### First Misconception: It's Up to Us

There is a prayer attributed to St. Teresa of Avila that has been recently reworked as a song by The Porter's Gate. Both the song and prayer begin: "Christ has no body now but yours." The song goes on:

No hands, no feet on earth but yours;  
Yours are the eyes with which He sees,  
Yours are the feet with which He walks,  
Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world;  
Yours are the hands.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The Porter's Gate, Josh Garrels, "Christ Has No Body Now But Yours," track 5 on *The Porter's Gate: Work Songs*, Fair Trade Music Publishing, 2017, digital download.

It is a true statement that Jesus has, at the moment, no hands or feet *on earth* but that of his Spirit-filled church. So, as far as both the prayer and song encourage the participation of the church in the Lord's mission to bless the world, they are commendable. What is concerning, however, is the suggestion that Jesus now actually has *no* body but *ours*, and no way of blessing the world but through us. This is the first misconception: that the ascension means God's mission is left *completely* in the hands of the church. To come to this conclusion, one must confuse Scripture's witness to the bodily resurrection and ascension or, as has more often been the case, spiritualize the whole matter.

The spiritualization of Jesus' ascension began early in the church. In the third century the Alexandrian theologian Origen proposed that we understand Jesus' resurrected body only as a *spiritual*, or *heavenly* body.<sup>41</sup> Of Christ, Origen wrote:

He himself is everywhere and passes swiftly through all things; nor are we any longer to understand Him as existing in those narrow limits in which He was once confined for our sakes, i.e., not in that circumscribed body which He occupied on earth, when dwelling among men...<sup>42</sup>

For Origen, Jesus' ascension was not a movement from one place to another, but a change in his state of being. As though after doing the dirty work of saving humanity, Jesus sloughed off his human nature and returned to a true, higher form. As Douglass Farrow notes,

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<sup>41</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Origen, *De Principiis*. in *Early Christian Writings: New Testament, Apocrypha, Gnostics, Church Fathers*, trans. Robert Donaldson, accessed November 14, 2019, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/origen123.html>.

According to Origen, Jesus is the human embodiment of the one soul that did *not* fall away, a soul eternally united to the divine Logos, a soul who descended freely in pursuit of the fallen in order to show them a way back home.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in the midst of the cultural waters of *gnosticism* and *platonism* which wanted little to do with the earthly Jesus, Origen *did* affirm that Christians must follow this Jesus who descended and was incarnate for our redemption. Ultimately, however, Origen argued for this only because Jesus could show us the way home; because he blazes a path for us to follow and can lead us on our own spiritual ascension.<sup>44</sup> Origen's spiritualizing of the ascension would continue to be influential in the church through the centuries and still is today, both in conservative PCUSA congregations who sometimes overemphasize Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity, but also in more liberal congregations who stress his exemplary human life. Indeed, it is that idea of Jesus laying a path for our own spiritual ascension that became particularly important in the protestant liberal tradition.

While folks like Friedrich Schleiermacher would not view Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and return "as properly constituent parts of the doctrine of his person," they did accept that these stories pointed to Jesus' special relationship with God.<sup>45</sup> Thus, what emerged in the liberal tradition was not a flat out rejection of Christological doctrines like the ascension, but rather an attempt to interpret these things, as Farrow writes, "in terms of the

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<sup>43</sup> Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 20.

<sup>44</sup> Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 20. Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 98.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* §99, Cited in Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 26.

*effect Jesus has on us*, rather than in terms of events which belong to his own personal history.”<sup>46</sup> Therefore, for many in the mainline tradition, Farrow notes,

What matters about Jesus is what he represents, not who or what he is. What matters is his abiding effect on us, his profound influence on our culture, not his own person or what he himself has accomplished.”<sup>47</sup>

And when this happens, what is the church left with? Not a savior, but a *really* good guy. A disembodied ideal whose cause we may take up.<sup>48</sup>

If Jesus has not ascended in the flesh, then he has not made a way for our humanity to be with God and there is no place he’s returning from as the Lord to make “all things new.”<sup>49</sup> Even more precisely, if we think of the ascension only on spiritual terms – only as a story of Jesus’ return back to some true state of being, or which tells us about the special nature of Jesus’ relationship with God, a relationship we too should desire – the church is left with a notion that Jesus has in effect left *us* to fulfill his dreams and desires. The church, then, must take his place. The church must establish the kingdom. It’s up to us, alone.<sup>50</sup> So, we find church scholars like Graham Ward saying things like, “God in Christ dies and the Church is

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<sup>46</sup> Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 26-27.

<sup>47</sup> Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> There is often a move made at this point to emphasize the importance of the church because of the importance of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has left, but he sends his Spirit. Though a proper relationship between the ascension and the gift of the Spirit is not always taken into account at this point, this is an appropriate move and one we shall affirm later in the chapter. The great exception, however, is when the Holy Spirit becomes detached from the person and work of Jesus and the Father. When this happens it’s far too easy to end up with some vague notion of the Spirit as an experience with *the sacred*, as Marcus Borg proposes, but not the “Advocate” (John 16:7), the Promise of the Father (Luke 24:49), the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9). See, Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 32-33, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>50</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 149.

born. One gives way to the other, *without remainder*.”<sup>51</sup> We read church mission statements that speak of *celebrating* Jesus, the same way one might celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>52</sup> And we hear pastors famously saying things like, “[t]he local church is the hope of the world.”<sup>53</sup> The church, and individual Christians are all that’s left.

On one occasion, a congregant in a friend’s Presbyterian congregation came and confessed to her pastor how every time she hears a sermon or engages in a Bible-study on mission, she feels guilty and overwhelmed. Guilty because what she hears and what she interprets is what she *should* be doing but isn’t. She is overwhelmed because it feels like a call to add one more thing to her plate. Her starting point is herself, and she is left wondering: Is my body really the only body that Jesus now has to bless the world? When God’s mission to bless and reconcile is left up to us alone – with no awareness of Christ’s victory, powerful Spirit, and regnant return – it is a daunting task with no end in sight.

### Second Misconception: Retreat

A second misconception one may see operating in congregations is the idea that the church’s mission is primarily spiritual in nature.<sup>54</sup> Lesslie Newbigin describes this:

[T]here are those who place exclusive emphasis on the winning of individuals to conversion, baptism, and church membership. The numerical growth of the Church

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<sup>51</sup> Graham Ward, ‘Bodies: The Displaced Body of Jesus Christ,’ in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. J. Milbank, C. Pickstock and G. Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 176-177, quoted in Peter C. Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens: The Risen and Ascended Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 64.

<sup>52</sup> The mission statement of a PCUSA congregation in Colorado.

<sup>53</sup> Bill Hybells, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 12.

<sup>54</sup> By *spiritual*, I do not mean *pneumatological*, but a privatized faith or one which is divorced from the whole of life.

becomes the central goal of mission. Action for justice and peace in the world is a secondary matter. It is not the heart of mission. The gospel, it is said, is about changing people, not about changing structures... The emphasis here is exclusively on the salvation of the individual soul and the growth of the Church. The primary task is evangelism, the direct preaching of the gospel in words - spoken or written. Action for social justice and peace may be a way of drawing people to hear the gospel, but it is not an intrinsic part of the gospel itself. The preaching of the gospel of salvation from sin and of the offer of eternal life is the primary business of the Church.<sup>55</sup>

Newbigin goes on to note that there is something true about this conviction. What every Christian is invited into in the church is a relationship with the Lord in which they may stand sure of their forgiveness and salvation. But the rightness of this conviction breaks down, he notes, if the proclamation of the gospel somehow leaves congregations “indifferent to the situation of the hungry, the sick, the victims of human inhumanity.”<sup>56</sup>

A question was posed at a session meeting at Mt. Horeb: *What is our fundamental purpose as a congregation?* Almost immediately, one of the elders answered, “To worship God.” One wouldn’t want to argue with that! In fact, it really is the right answer. At the same time, however, the answer felt divorced from an idea that our worship might be the place where God shapes us to live as a distinct people in the community, or that our living (outside of the church building) may be a part of our worship. What might cause this divorce?

On the one hand, at least since the enlightenment there has been a privatization of faith, casting it as the *spiritual* part of life but not that which gives shape to all of life.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Gerrit Dawson proposes that congregations withdraw, or at least focus their

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<sup>55</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 135.

<sup>56</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 136.

<sup>57</sup> Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 4-5.

attention inward, because the world is a difficult place. There is violence, pain, persecution, and political drama. The church itself is divided. In the face of this, Dawson writes, Christians may think, ““Let us just wait it out, keeping ourselves as unstained as possible, until we get to the kingdom of God.””<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, these conceptions are bolstered by a downplaying of Jesus’ incarnate ascension.

If we believe that Jesus was only temporarily incarnate and has now gone back to heaven as a purely *spiritual being*, as Origen proposed, we may end up emphasizing his divinity but downplaying his humanity and, thus, downplaying God’s valuing of humanity and creation. Unlike the first misconception which emphasized Jesus’ ascension as an upward path metaphor, here congregations live with a notion that Jesus descended for a time only to save us and get us out of this world. Stress is then laid upon individual salvation and responsibility, but often an engagement with the pains and sufferings of the world fade to the background.<sup>59</sup> Here then, we see a right longing to be with the Lord and lamenting over a world awaiting full redemption, but also a failure to take up the cross and move toward the difficult places, toward the darkness in the world, following our Lord whose “rich wounds” from his mission to redeem are “yet visible above.”<sup>60</sup>

In either case, as we’ve seen above, when the ascension of Jesus loses importance, or is misunderstood, congregations like Mt. Horeb are often left feeling either like everything is

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<sup>58</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 148.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew Bridges, “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 151. See also, Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson, *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 72-73.

left in their hands alone, or like they should raise their hands in retreat. Their participation in the God's mission is left on unstable foundations. And when seismic shifts, and what Karl Weick calls *ecological changes*, face them they are often seized with uncertainty about what to do, rather than seizing the hope they've been given from our risen, ascended Lord.<sup>61</sup> Having seen this, let us now redirect our attention to Jesus' ascension itself to see how the good news of his exaltation and reign meets these challenges.

### **Ascension-Shaped Correctives: Basic Implications of the Ascension for Congregational Mission**

What we are wanting to do at this point is see how the narrative and theology of Jesus' ascension give shape to a faithful missiology for congregations like Mt. Horeb, correcting the misconceptions we saw above. To do this, we will focus on the three factors of the ascension named earlier: *Jesus' incarnate exaltation*, his *intercession and gifting of the Spirit*, and his *return*. Each of these offer congregations like Mt. Horeb a proper starting place and identity for participating in God's mission, a source of provision and power, and a foundation of hope. We turn first to Jesus' incarnate exaltation.

#### Jesus' Reign Gives Missional Place and Identity

The first point we want to consider is the starting place from which congregations view their missional call and engage in the mission of God. The scriptural texts often cited

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<sup>61</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 109-110.

here like the Great Commandment,<sup>62</sup> the Great Commission,<sup>63</sup> Jesus' pre-ascension instruction,<sup>64</sup> or even God's promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abram,<sup>65</sup> are incredibly important for an understanding of congregational engagement in mission. However, a reengagement with Jesus' ascension may help us to see a different starting place, one which could be particularly beneficial in this time of denominational upheaval, societal tension, and congregational anxiety. That is, when we remember the ascension we see first that Jesus is enthroned at the right hand of the Father – the Lord *is* king!<sup>66</sup> – and because he is the incarnate king, bearing our humanity, we have been exalted with him.<sup>67</sup>

Remarkably, the starting place for congregations like Mt. Horeb is *seated with Christ*. The apostle Paul names this reality clearly in Ephesians when he says that God raised Jesus from the dead and “seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named...” and, by grace, God, “even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...and *raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*” (emphasis mine).<sup>68</sup> In Jesus, humanity has been taken up and drawn into communion

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<sup>62</sup> Matthew 22:36-40.

<sup>63</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>64</sup> Acts 1:7-8.

<sup>65</sup> Genesis 12:3.

<sup>66</sup> Psalm 96:10.

<sup>67</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 125.

<sup>68</sup> Ephesians 1:20-21, 2:5-6.

with God.<sup>69</sup> Just as we have died with Christ and been raised with him, so too in some way we are also already exalted with him who reigns. This means the starting place for congregational mission is not mustering up the troops or running out the doors, but rather resting with the king and reveling in what he has already accomplished.

The late Chinese pastor and evangelist, Watchman Nee, makes this point beautifully.

He writes,

Christianity begins not with a big DO, but with a big DONE. Thus Ephesians opens with the statement that God has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (1:3) and we are invited at the very outset to sit down and enjoy what God has done for us...the work is not initially ours at all, but his. It is not that we work for God, but that he works for us. God gives us our position of rest. He brings his Son’s finished work and presents it to us, and then he says to us, “Please sit” (*ch’eng tso*).<sup>70</sup>

Just as Jesus invited his disciples to live out a ministry of lay-down-your-life love by first abiding in him, so too, congregations like Mt. Horeb are invited to see their missional starting place as a posture of rest and trust in him, their ascended Lord.

From the vantage point of being seated with Christ, congregations look first not at what they’re missing (a common refrain of missing young leadership, children, resources, etc.), nor at what they must accomplish, but rather at what Christ has already accomplished in his atonement, resurrection, and ascension. As Joseph Sherrard writes, “The church’s identity is constituted by Christ and his substitutionary life, leading the church to look away from itself and to its Lord.”<sup>71</sup> When congregations do this, they discover the many riches already

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<sup>69</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 52.

<sup>70</sup> Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1957), 2, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Joseph H. Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian: The Ascended Christ and the Ministry of the Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021), 111.

lavished upon them.<sup>72</sup> As Jesus proclaimed from the cross, the work actually “is finished.”<sup>73</sup> And now he who was lifted up on the cross has been lifted up to his heavenly throne, to reign until he puts all his enemies – the enemies of God’s justice and mercy, chief being death itself – “under his feet,” and hands the kingdom over to the Father.<sup>74</sup>

What’s more, because he is the incarnate king, Jesus’ completed work and reign are directly related to earthly rulers wielding power. Gerrit Dawson notes,

There is a real human king who reigns over the world from heaven. A man who once walked among us is on the throne, and he is not aloof from the affairs of his realm below... This, then, is truly a threatening message to any who make claims of their own sovereignty.<sup>75</sup>

The ascension is a threatening message to any who rule in ways antithetical to the true king, because one day his reign will be revealed. Thus, congregations may have to remind leaders whom they are truly responsible to. But this message is also a comfort for congregations as they remember, amidst the world’s strife, that the true king is the One whose might is mercy and whose justice will one day roll down from his throne.

P.T. Forsyth stated, “The weakness of much current mission work and much current preaching is that they betray the sense that what is yet to be done is greater than what has already been done... The world’s gravest need is less than Christ’s great victory.”<sup>76</sup> For those

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<sup>72</sup> Ephesians 1:4-7; 2:14-16; 1:13-14.

<sup>73</sup> John 19:30.

<sup>74</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:25-28.

<sup>75</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 56.

<sup>76</sup> P.T. Forsyth, *Mission in State and Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 10, 16-18. cited in, Tim Dearborn, “From Pragmatism to Participation: The Impact of Trinitarian Faith on Missiology” in *Trinity*

thinking it is up to them to finish the work of Jesus, the ascension is first a call to see the great accomplishment of Christ. For the woman mentioned above who felt guilty and overwhelmed when hearing about mission and discipleship, here is an invitation to begin with rest and assurance, and to discover that the church does not exist by mission, nor by her efforts, but by the grace of her Lord who summons her to participate in his mission. Yet, also for those who want to withdraw, this is the reminder that the king wears our humanity and reigns over earth and his rule must be followed and testified to against all earthly powers. Resting in Christ's finished work, then, is not reason to simply relax and disengage, but rather to engage out of this assurance.

But how does the church engage as those resting in the ascended Savior? Seated with Christ, we learn to see that he is the reigning king and we, surely, are not. The New Testament affirms, however, that we *are* ambassadors of the king.<sup>77</sup> His *witness*, filled with the Spirit to bear his life in the world.<sup>78</sup> And the way the church embodies this action and identity of ambassador and witness is as *the body of Christ*.

The church as body is one of the chief ways the New Testament speaks of the reality of our identity in Christ. Therefore, it is one of the main ways a congregation might understand their missional calling as his witnesses. As we shall see in Chapter Four, this is not always the ecclesial image congregations grasp in their own self-understanding. But it

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*and Transformation: J.B. Torrance's Vision of Worship, Mission and Society*, ed. Todd Speidell (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 67.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>78</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20; Acts 1:6-8. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2 ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 59-60.

does seem to take primacy in scripture as a way of articulating who and what the whole church is.<sup>79</sup> Thus, it is worth asking here, how is the church as a whole Christ's body and how does this relate to the ascension?

In one of his central works on ecclesiology and ministry, *Royal Priesthood*, T. F. Torrance lays out four aspects of the relationship between Christ and the body of Christ, the church.<sup>80</sup> First, Torrance notes that to speak of the church as Jesus' body is not a mere metaphor. Rather, Torrance says, when we speak of the church this way,

We are certainly using analogical language, but we are speaking nevertheless of an ontological fact, that is, of a relation of *being* between the church and Christ. That is very apparent in the use of *agape* to describe the nature of the Church. When we speak of the church as the Body of Christ we are saying that it is given such union with Christ that it becomes a communion filled and overflowing with the divine love. This love is not to be understood simply in terms of quality but as ontological reality. "God *is* love. And he that dwells in love, dwells in God, and God in him...As he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4.16, 17)...Through faith the Church is brought into a relation of being with Christ, so that beyond faith there is an ontological reality upon which the being of the Church is grounded.<sup>81</sup>

In some ways, Torrance is pushing us toward what we've already seen. That is, that we are with Christ not just metaphorically but *ontologically*, because of his vicarious humanity. Through the Spirit, we are united with our ascended Lord and participate in his life. Thus, without losing his incarnate and ascended personhood, Jesus now shares his identity with all believers.<sup>82</sup> This means, congregations like Mt. Horeb have a share in Jesus' real life.

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<sup>79</sup> T.F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry*, 2nd ed. (London: T & T Clark LTD, 1993), 29. Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian*, 103.

<sup>80</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 29.

<sup>82</sup> Orr, *Exalted Above the Heavens*, 75.

Yet, if the first aspect of being Christ's body means we have real union with Christ, the second that Torrance affirms is that the church is to be *distinguished* from him. He writes,

[W]hile the Church is one Body with Christ it is in no sense an extension of His Personality (surely an un-Biblical conception) or an extension of His Incarnation, not to speak of a reincarnation of the Risen Lord...She is not Christ continued, the Incarnation continued. One cannot pass without interruption from Christ to the Church. The Cross stands between. In being the Body of Christ, the Church meets her Lord; she does not prolong Him, but she expresses Him here and now. She does not replace Him, but makes Him visible, demonstrates Him without being confounded with Him.<sup>83</sup>

To be the body of Christ does not mean Christ himself fades from the picture and congregations take his place. Congregations made up of bodies, and congregational bodies, are not the *only* body Christ now has. He is enfleshed and enthroned in heaven. Yet, he does in fact make the church his earthly body, Torrance says, to know and make visible his love, glory, and reign.<sup>84</sup> The church, therefore, does not *extend* Jesus' mission, but shares in it as it participates in his life and becomes an instrument in his mission.<sup>85</sup>

The third and fourth aspects Torrance lays out are more quickly summarized. Thirdly, Torrance says that the church as the body of Christ is the church "governed by the atonement."<sup>86</sup> That is to say, our union with Christ is on the *basis* of his atoning work, and the way, he exchanges places with us – taking the place of sinful humanity, that humanity

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<sup>83</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 31.

<sup>84</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 32.

<sup>85</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 150. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 37.

<sup>86</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 32.

may take its place with God.<sup>87</sup> The church, therefore, is his body as it points away from itself and toward him. As it yields to him. As it bears his name.<sup>88</sup>

Fourthly, Torrance says that the relationship between the church and Christ is that of *conformity* of the body to the head.<sup>89</sup> As congregations seek to make visible his rule they live as his body as they are conformed to and shaped by his historical narrative. As we shall note below, through the Spirit the ascended Jesus is truly present. Yet, we have no account of his ongoing ministry apart from his historical, pre-ascension life.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the church's ministry as his body is, Torrance says, "*correlative* to the ministry of Christ" before his ascension (emphasis mine).<sup>91</sup> The body *inhabits* the same sorts of situations that Jesus did in his earthly ministry.<sup>92</sup> It is directed by its heavenly head, Christ, and shares completely in his story, taking on a *crucified mind*, to use Kosuke Koyama's phrase.<sup>93</sup>

To summarize, to be Christ's witness as *the body* does not mean congregations and congregants must *be Christ*, nor that they are the only Jesus someone may meet. It is not up to congregations by themselves. To be the body of Christ means that congregations like Mt. Horeb are united and rest with the ascended Lord, may stand confident of his finished work

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<sup>87</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 33.

<sup>88</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 33.

<sup>89</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 34.

<sup>90</sup> Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian*, 95-96. Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 51.

<sup>91</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian*, 119.

<sup>93</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, 25th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1999), 159.

and reign, and are called now to demonstrate his reign where they are as they share his life and story.

This demonstration is key, however. As missiologist Andrew Walls points out, in the incarnation Jesus did not take on a generalized form of humanity but became a man in a specific time and place. Likewise, he says, Scripture can only be truly received when it is translated into the language of a particular culture.<sup>94</sup> So too, then, congregations who live as members of the body of Christ declare and demonstrate his reign in ways suitable to their locales. Not because they must make the incarnate, ascended king present in these places, but because they share in his actual life and ministry through the mediation of the Spirit.

In short, churches like Mt. Horeb are invited to participate in a ministry none other than Christ's and witness his character and kingdom to the community around them. They do so not by spiritualizing Jesus, looking to themselves to be Jesus, collapsing his mission into the work of the Spirit, or turning his mission, as Purves puts it, into "abstract nouns that function as ethical norms or wisdom maxims."<sup>95</sup> Mt. Horeb lives as a witness to him by continually looking *to him*, and letting their life as his body be conformed to his story. At the end of Chapter Five we will note particular ways congregational leaders can seek to share the mind and character of Christ and be conformed to his story. Here it is enough to say that congregations are not "the resurrection and the life,"<sup>96</sup> but they do indeed share in the life of

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<sup>94</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 47.

<sup>95</sup> Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 106.

<sup>96</sup> John 11:25.

the One who is and are summoned to represent his reign. This is the starting point and central calling of congregations as they engage in the mission of God.

### Jesus' Intercession and Spirit Give Missional Power

We begin in a place of resting with Christ, in his accomplishment, and only then go to witness his reign as his body. Yet, the witnessing can be wearying. We can feel pressed down, scorned at times, and can even desire a retreat from the world and our purpose. Smaller to average-sized congregations like Mt. Horeb are especially vulnerable at this point. While their resting in Christ may be preached and their role as witness held out as a joyful invitation to participation, congregations can feel overwhelmed, tired (financially, spiritually, or because of physical weariness and age), or uncertain of what to do. It is at this point they need to know of the ascended Lord's intercession and gifting of the Spirit.

If we look away from Jesus' ascension, a congregation may either muster up optimism, or back away. They must positively believe that their work might help advance God's kingdom, or retreat in the face the darkness in the world and the feebleness of their own faith.<sup>97</sup> But looking to Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God," we may "not grow weary or lose heart," because Jesus is living and reigning now for our benefit and to our advantage.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Farrow, *Ascension Theology*, 61. Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 148.

<sup>98</sup> Hebrews 12:2, 3. John 16:7. John Calvin, *Instruction in the Faith (1537)* trans. Paul T. Fuhrmann (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 50.

John Calvin writes that Jesus, having entered heaven in our humanity and on our behalf,

is there with great advantage to us, for, having as eternal priest entered God's sanctuary not made by man's hand, he stands there as perpetual advocate and mediator in our behalf...[B]y his power he keeps and maintains us so that his reign and his glory is our strength, virtue, and glory against hell.<sup>99</sup>

Jesus Christ is now our *advocate*, praying for us even as we groan in expectation with all creation for the world's full redemption.<sup>100</sup> He is our priest and mediator, interceding for us and understanding us in our weakness, as he himself was tired, tested and tried in worse ways than we.<sup>101</sup> He now blesses and maintains us in his power with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places," as Paul writes, and has ascended "far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things."<sup>102</sup> Filling even smaller congregations who make up his body with witness-enabling gifts so they may be equipped for the work he calls them to. Taking confidence not in our own strength, nor shrinking back because of congregational incompetence or the weight of the world, we look to the Lord and Head who "gives strength to his people".<sup>103</sup> And who does so, solely, through the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>99</sup> John Calvin, *Instruction in the Faith*, 50, 51.

<sup>100</sup> Romans 8:23, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Hebrews 4:14-15.

<sup>102</sup> Ephesians 1:3, 4:10-13.

<sup>103</sup> Psalm 29:11. In a remarkable sermon on the ascension, John Calvin gives an example of what it might look like to preach this reality in our congregations: "[S]ince He has gone up there, and is in heaven for us, let us note that we need not fear to be in this world. It is true that we are subject to so much misery that our condition is pitiable, but at that we need neither be astonished nor confine our attention to ourselves. Thus, we look to our Head who is already in heaven, and say, Although I am weak, there is Jesus Christ who is powerful enough to make me stand upright. Although I am feeble, there is Jesus Christ who is my strength. Although I am full of miseries, Jesus Christ is in immortal glory and what He has will some time be given to me and I shall partake of all His benefits. Yes, the devil is called the prince of this world. But what of it? Jesus Christ holds

Because Jesus ascends, the Holy Spirit descends. This is not because Jesus switches back to some primary state of being as spirit or soul, nor because Jesus' ministry is now subsumed and taken over by the Spirit. Rather, the Father and Son pour out the Spirit as a pledge of our redemption and adoption and a seal of our union with Christ himself.<sup>104</sup> Thus, Barth could be so bold to say that the Spirit is the “stretched out arm of Jesus himself,”<sup>105</sup> because the Spirit is the way that Jesus, though absent in body, is truly present in the body of his church. The Spirit is the reason that Jesus could say to his disciples, “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.”<sup>106</sup> The Spirit is the One by whom we have an actual encounter with the ascended Christ.<sup>107</sup>

Without the Spirit there is no sharing and being shaped in Jesus's life. Without the Spirit there is no incorporation into his body. Without the Spirit there is no share in his atoning work. Without the Spirit, there is no being filled with all the fullness of his love and grace.<sup>108</sup> Congregations like Mt. Horeb may seek to imitate Christ, but apart from the Spirit

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him in check for He is King of heaven and earth. There are devils above us in the air who make war against us. But what of it? Jesus Christ rules above, having entire control of the battle. Thus, we need not doubt that He gives us the victory. I am here subject to many changes, which may cause me to lose courage. But what of it? The Son of God is my Head, who is exempt from all change. I must, then, take confidence in Him. This is how we must look at His Ascension, applying the benefit to ourselves.” John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons* (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1997), 238-239. Cited in, Garrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 181-182.

<sup>104</sup> Ephesians 1:5-7, 13-14.

<sup>105</sup> Barth, *CD*, IV.2, 323.

<sup>106</sup> John 14:18.

<sup>107</sup> Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian*, 96. Andrew Purves actually remarks that the Spirit's chief work “is to bind us to Christ and thereby to form the living Christ within us so that we share in his actual life. See Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 123.

<sup>108</sup> Calvin, *The Faith of the Church*, 51.

there is no participation in his life, no adoption as God's children, and thus no participation in God's mission for the world. But Jesus *has ascended* and *does send* the Spirit for the Church to receive as gift, and thus to receive Jesus himself and participate in his life, power, and mission as it is attested by the Apostolic witness.<sup>109</sup>

How might this implication play out in a congregation like Mt. Horeb? First, talk of the Spirit will become less vague and mysterious as the Spirit's identity is properly rooted in the triune relationship.<sup>110</sup> Second, by the gift of the Spirit, congregations are directed back to Christ's *historical* life to be shaped by the Spirit in his pattern and directed forward in active anticipation of his return. That is, congregations can come to understand a certain analogy between their life and Christ's through the Spirit. As Jesus, "came not to be served, but to serve," so the church bears this same mind and character.<sup>111</sup> As Jesus loved with the all-encompassing *agape* love, the church in the Spirit becomes, as Torrance said, "a communion filled and overflowing with the divine love."<sup>112</sup> It is living under this pattern, set by the history of Jesus' earthly ministry, that congregations live under his authority and in the power of his Spirit today. Lastly, congregations can be encouraged that the Spirit doesn't just *empower* them to imitate or celebrate Christ's example, but rather fills them with the fullness

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<sup>109</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 58.

<sup>110</sup> Acts 2:33. I recall here a pillar of my congregation confessing to me that she never really understood what the Holy Spirit is all about (after 80-some years). This confusion has come not only from a downplay of pneumatology in some mainline churches but also from a misrepresentation of the Spirit. The Spirit becomes divorced from the Father and Son and is described as either God's power or God's lackey but not God the Spirit, who lives and reigns in the unity of the Godhead. Tying the ascension narrative to the giving of the Spirit, as Peter himself does on Pentecost, is one helpful way to bring clarity.

<sup>111</sup> Sherrard, *T.F. Torrance as Missional Theologian*, 117-120.

<sup>112</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 29.

of Christ and makes them to share in the actual life and mission of the Father and the Son. This last point is extremely crucial. What leading hundreds of Bible studies has revealed is that many American mainline Christians view the Spirit as a *boost* to help them do what God wants, rather than “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”<sup>113</sup> In all, an emphasis on Jesus’ heavenly intercession and gift of the Spirit directs congregations to see their true source of power and perseverance for ministry and mission is the living and ascended Lord who gives “gifts to his people”, the chief being the person of the Spirit.<sup>114</sup>

### Jesus’ Promised Return Gives Missional Hope

The final implication of Jesus’ ascension for congregational mission is his return. The promise is that he who ascended into heaven will come again “in the same way” as he left.<sup>115</sup> The Church waits for the *parousia* of the ascended king. This waiting and his promised return ground the mission of the church in a firm foundation of hope.

But how? The answer may seem obvious. Jesus will come back to “make all things new.”<sup>116</sup> The ascended Lord will come with his kingdom “to judge the quick and the dead,” as the creed confesses.<sup>117</sup> Held out as serious promises, these answers may help spur a

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<sup>113</sup> Colossians 1:27.

<sup>114</sup> Ephesians 4:8.

<sup>115</sup> Acts 1:11.

<sup>116</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>117</sup> The *Apostles’ Creed* in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 2.2.

congregation like Mt. Horeb on with a good deal of hope. But the answer and the hope go deeper. Again, Torrance is helpful:

The ascension means that the Church is sent to live its life and to exercise its ministry within the limitations of history, but here through the Spirit the limitations in history cease to be mere limitations for their finality is taken away; they now become doors or windows opening up toward the new divine order of the Church's life in Christ, signs pointing beyond themselves to the reality of the New Creation... This does not mean that the church must live and carry out its mission in history as *Ecclesia Triumphans*. Far from it, for that would be to seek to force the hand of the Coming King, and to live and work now as if the *parousia* had already taken place... The ascension means the establishment of the Church in history with historical structure and form, in which the time of the Church is the time of faith, not yet the time of sight.<sup>118</sup>

Here one can feel a tension. Because by the Spirit we are united with our *Coming King*, his kingdom already pierces into the present. Because the church participates in the life of Jesus, they also participate now in his promised new creation. Yet, as Torrance indicates, this does not mean a congregation like Mt. Horeb may try to *force* the King's hand, nor may they act as though everything were rosy and right in the world. We are still waiting for the day when our faith will become sight. Yet, in the face of what is still broken a door has been opened to "the new divine order," the "kingdom that cannot be shaken."<sup>119</sup> And so congregations participate in God's mission in this place of hopeful tension.

We long for Christ, yet we are with him by the Spirit. We follow his cross-shaped path and suffer with him, yet know our crucified Lord reigns, wounds and all. We groan for the fullness of his kingdom and the day of resurrection, yet know he strengthens us and intercedes as we await that day, and trust we have already been raised with him in eternal

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<sup>118</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 56, 59.

<sup>119</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 56. Hebrews 12:28.

life.<sup>120</sup> God's kingdom has broken into this world, Lesslie Newbigin proclaims, "its powers and standards have begun already to work," through Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.<sup>121</sup> The ascension, therefore, means that congregations look ahead to Jesus' return *and* live in the hope of his return right now. Even as we follow the shape of his historical life, Jesus is not a mere memory or example, he reigns. And while he is enthroned in heaven and we long to be with him fully, our expectation is his return.

This is the hope that congregations like Mt. Horeb need set before them. Feeling the light of the *parousia* through the church windows, as it were, the congregation is placed in a larger narrative where their ultimate end is not dependent upon their successes or failures, nor even the congregation's renewal or demise, but rather on the ascended Lord's return and redemption. And this conviction, far from making congregations lackadaisical, can spur them on to give signs of the kingdom as they know that their embodied action and witness, and even their suffering, is not in vain but is rather an active anticipation of his coming. Thus, their hope is with Christ *in heaven*, yet, because he will return, their hope is lived out *here*.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Romans 8:26, 34. Ephesians 2:6.

<sup>121</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Good Shepherd: Meditations on Christian Ministry in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 133.

<sup>122</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 153-156. Moltman also puts this notion wonderfully: "Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present." Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1967), 12, cited in Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 133.

## A Few Pastoral and Congregational Implications

Jesus' ascension sets and defines the stage for the church's current participation in the mission of God. The church now lives *between the times*. Between the time of his ascension and his return. In this liminal space, there is no script for congregational action, but there is the sure and certain hope of ascension. Jesus' exaltation, intercession and empowerment, and *parousia* can become the elemental pieces of the story that gives shape to the missional imagination of the people of God. People like the congregants of Mt. Horeb who need to know that they are not on their own. That the mission is the Lord's. That their life and witness flow from a participation in his life and ministry and point toward his return.

In Chapters Four and Five I will begin to probe how the story of the ascension is alive in a congregation like Mt. Horeb and what organizational leadership may be needed to live like this story is truly true. Yet, here we might just briefly note some implications of the ascension for pastoral leadership by looking at three of the fundamental acts in ministry: preaching, sacraments, and discipleship.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> In the presbyterian tradition that Mt. Horeb is a part of, the historic vision of pastoral leadership is directed toward three broad tasks which correspond with what are called the *Marks of the Church*: the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline (which we might understand more broadly as discipleship). See, *The Scots Confession*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part I, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 3.18. Here Knox expounds on the notes of the *true Kirk* and also explicitly defines ecclesial discipline as the work "whereby vice is repressed *and virtue nourished*" (emphasis added). It seems the emphasis in church discipline is often on the former point of Knox (*vice repressed*). Yet that is ultimately unhelpful outside of a larger vision of discipleship in which the people of God are trained, directed, and nourished. See also "Minister of the Word and Sacrament Defined," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part II, *The Book of Order* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), G-2.0501.

## The Ascension and Preaching: Proclaiming and Participating in the Reign of Christ

In the event of preaching, the congregation is laid open before the open Word of God. What the reality of the ascension affirms, however, is that this open Word is not only scripture, but the living and reigning Word, Jesus Christ, present by his Spirit. Outside of scripture, perhaps no one has articulated this truth more succinctly and powerfully than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer asserts,

The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One...He is the access to the historical Jesus. Therefore, the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through his congregation as the word.<sup>124</sup>

The ascension means that Christ is alive today and reigning now. The incarnate Word is not a memory or a moral, but a man at the right hand of the Father. This means when a pastor opens the written word for preaching (or teaching) it is a potential moment for encounter with the living Christ, “walking through his congregation as the word.”<sup>125</sup> In this encounter, Jesus pushes the congregation’s attention back to his historical life as witnessed in the gospels, and in the history of his actions with the prophets and apostles. But only also so that the congregation may discern Jesus’ present reign and their place in his life as his body on earth today.

This means something negatively and positively for pastors as they prepare for and engage in preaching. Negatively speaking, preaching will not be a biography of Jesus’ life that inspires, offers moral encouragement, or ushers a call to *be Jesus* in the world. Only

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<sup>124</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Proclaimed Word,” in *The Company of Preachers: Wisdom on Preaching, Augustine to the Present*, ed. Richard Lischer (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 34.

<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer, “The Proclaimed Word,” 34.

Jesus gets to be Jesus. To proclaim Jesus only a great example, or the come-and-gone God whose story will inspire and hold us until we've passed through this world, fails to realize the reality of the Lord's present reign and proximity through the Spirit. Positively, therefore, preaching can actually invite congregations and members to know their participation in the life and ministry Jesus. Preaching becomes a summons to hear and meet the Lord who encounters the congregation through his Word, an invitation to fellowship with him,<sup>126</sup> and instruction in what it means to walk with him as his body, his witness.<sup>127</sup> Positively, the ascension also affects the identity of the preacher herself. The ascension should ground her preaching in her union with the ascended King and his ongoing ministry. As Trygve Johnson writes,

In all our preaching, we come before God in such a way as to let Jesus Christ take our place, replacing our words with his own self-offering as the Word made flesh, for he *is* the sermon through or in which we respond to the love of the Father...In other words, truly human preaching is proclamation in the name of Jesus Christ that rests in his ongoing ministry before his Father and God.<sup>128</sup>

As Johnson goes on to say, this replacing and rest can take place only because this same Jesus sends down his own Holy Spirit to dwell in us.<sup>129</sup> Because the preacher begins her task from the point of resting in Christ and his accomplishment and sharing his life in the membership of the body through the Spirit, the proclamation and the One proclaimed are

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<sup>126</sup> 1 John 1:1-3.

<sup>127</sup> In my preaching, one of the ways I regularly seek to create this expectation of encounter and invitation is through a prayer before the sermon in worship. In this prayer, I will often conclude with a line like, "...let this be a way we hear the voice of your Living Word, Jesus, and know his presence here in our midst. We ask this in his name; Amen."

<sup>128</sup> Trygve Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist: Metaphor, Identity, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 138, 139.

<sup>129</sup> Johnson, *The Preacher as Liturgical Artist*, 142.

ultimately one in the same, not because preaching or the preacher replaces Jesus but because there his presence and action are mediated through the word and Spirit.

#### The Ascension and Sacraments: Receiving the Care and Power of Christ

Like the summons of preaching, the congregation's celebration of the sacraments is a visible participation in the life of the ascended Christ. One's baptism is an incorporation into the life of Jesus, into *his body*, and therefore into the reality of his accomplished and ongoing ministry.<sup>130</sup> The Lord's Supper, too, is an act of participation. As many have reiterated,<sup>131</sup> when Jesus says, "Do this in remembrance of me," that word for remembrance, *anamnesis*, means more than recalling an event. It is rather a summons to indwell the saving story, to participate in it. As the congregation is invited to lift up their hearts, they "lift them up to Lord" to participate in his communion with the Father and the Spirit. They share real communion with their ascended Lord who is, indeed, absent in body and yet present in the power of the Spirit.<sup>132</sup>

Astonishingly, however, in this act of communion the congregation is also being invited to taste and see a picture of their ascended Lord's ongoing intercession, care, and

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<sup>130</sup> James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & The Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1996), 79.

<sup>131</sup> For example, see, James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & The Triune God of Grace*, 84-85, or J. Todd Billings, *Remembrance, Communion, and Hope: Rediscovering the Gospel at the Lord's Table* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2018), 136.

<sup>132</sup> J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 87.

empowering through the Spirit as he invites them to *take and eat*.<sup>133</sup> As Gerrit Dawson writes,

Jesus, who is still actually embodied, feeds us with the power, the energy and the virtue of his glorified life through the sacrament... We lift up our hearts in faith and believe that the Spirit is lifting us up to the ascended Christ to be fed with his very life. This is the visible enacting and strengthening of the work of the Spirit in joining us to Christ in salvation.<sup>134</sup>

Here, the body of Christ is invited to embody the invisible reality of their being *seated with him*, of their resting in him, of their receiving his strength, blessing, and benefits. J.B.

Torrance describes Jesus' mediatorial care in even more dramatic terms, writing,

The same Christ, who is our eternal offering in the heavens, now comes to us in an act of self-giving and says: "Take, eat, this is my body which is for you." He lifts us with our self-offering of praise and thanksgiving into communion with himself. He gives back our life to us, converted and regenerated in him.<sup>135</sup>

From this table where the congregation has been lifted up into the hands of Christ, the people are then sent fed and powerfully cared for to be his body in the community.

If the sacraments are the place where the ascended Lord is giving us back our life, renewed as it is taken up in his care, nourished, and participates in his perfect self-offering, one implication for pastors also is to help their congregations faithfully celebrate the sacraments. As I have found at Mt. Horeb and other similar congregations, many in the presbyterian tradition functionally receive the Lord's Supper solely as an act of remembrance (and not in the sense of *anamnesis*). And no amount of the pastor saying something like,

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<sup>133</sup> Matthew 26:26.

<sup>134</sup> Dawson, *Jesus Ascended*, 179-180.

<sup>135</sup> J.B. Torrance, *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*, 91.

“This is a meal of real communion with our ascended Lord” will necessarily change that. The pastoring question in part becomes, then, what visible and embodied cues can we invite people to see or take to help them experience the joy and care their Priestly King is offering?

### The Ascension and Congregational Discipleship: Leading in Hope

Preaching and the sacraments are vital to the life of all congregations, including Mt. Horeb. But as Chapter Four will reveal, they are not the only (or even the primary) spaces where congregants experience or wrestle with the presence of the Lord. What’s more, folks spend most of their week outside of corporate worship. Pastoral leadership, of course, therefore requires not just worship leadership but discipling leadership. The nurturing of eyes and ears to be attentive to the Spirit and the grace of the gospel.

Discipleship is certainly something that can happen on an individual basis. In that sense, it is partly the joy of the pastor to help people place their hope in the God who has not thrown them back upon themselves but rather given them Jesus Christ, “who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.”<sup>136</sup> In another sense, however, one crucial path for discipleship is through church leadership. That is to say, congregational leadership can be an act of congregational discipleship.

Leaders, the elders and deacons ordained to serve, of course need to be discipled themselves. However, these leaders are also able to disciple the people they serve through the ways they lead. The kind of leadership practiced has the potential to influence congregational culture. And the kind of leadership that the ascension encourages is *patiently hopeful*. This is

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<sup>136</sup> Romans 8:34.

not always the *modus operandi* for congregational leaders, however. Sometimes leadership seems to become solely about keeping the ship running. Or worse, keeping the ship afloat! What's more, leaders can also feel a pressure to see *results* quickly and can be discouraged when congregational participation is sluggish, or when a ministry action doesn't immediately produce new enthusiasm, new relationships, or any seeable sign of the new creation. Yet, as we have seen above, the great hope of Jesus' ascension is not only that he reigns, intercedes, and empowers, but that he will also return. That promise needs to be the hope leaders hold to and the future which directs planning and acting in the present. This will mean operating with a "patient endurance"<sup>137</sup> and leading the organization with perseverance as they continually look to Jesus who "endured the cross...has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne God,"<sup>138</sup> and will return.

If all congregations have are the resources in front them, jaded or scarcity-styled leadership (at least for smaller congregations) can be a tempting. But the promise of the gospel, and more particularly of the ascension, is that all is not in front of us. History as we know it has a grand finale, and in the face of confusion congregations may look back at God's deeds of power, rests presently in the ascended Christ, but must also act and walk forward as the body of Christ toward that finale. As we heard Torrance say, the ascension means a door has been opened to "the new divine order," and the limitations of history are

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<sup>137</sup> This is a theme in Revelation, particularly in Jesus' messages to the seven churches, indicating that this is also a theme and quality of ecclesial life for the whole church today, living between the times under the reign of Christ. See Revelation 1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10.

<sup>138</sup> Hebrews 12:2.

now “signs pointing beyond themselves to the reality of the New Creation.”<sup>139</sup> So too, the church is invited to be like a sign pointing beyond itself to the One whose life it shares, and offering a foretaste of his coming heavenly kingdom.<sup>140</sup> Leadership that is obsessed with organizational survival, therefore, is uncalled for. If the congregation shares and bears the life of the ascended Christ, what is needed is patient hope. There is no one map for how to practice patient hope as leaders, and as we’ll see in later chapters, no blueprint for what new actions may need to be taken in faithfulness. At the very least, leaders should keep before them the great Christian hope of Christ’s return and creation’s renewal. This could happen through a regular corporate practice of meditation on Scripture,<sup>141</sup> or by driving decisions with a vision statement that keeps the *parousia* (Jesus’ *presence* now and when he returns) central. All a congregation’s faithful work, begun and continued in Christ, will find its completion in him as well. This hope can encourage congregations to patient faithful action in the present.

## Conclusion

Interpreting congregational life and mission and pastoral leadership through the ascension could help congregations start from a place of resting in Christ’s accomplished work, guide congregations in their role of witnessing as the body of Christ in their locales, remind them of the persevering power offered through Jesus’ perfect offering, intercession

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<sup>139</sup> Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 56.

<sup>140</sup> Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 110.

<sup>141</sup> I give an example of a practice like this in Chapter Five.

and gifting of the Spirit, and set their sights on his return. By distorting or dismissing Jesus' ascension, wittingly or unwittingly, much of this gets lost or confused. Worse, by keeping ascension theology out of our congregation's regular diet our missiology gets confused and we step out of our sanctuary doors on Sunday or our homes on Monday with less than what Jesus is giving us, less than what he calls us to, and sometimes more than we can carry.

In his song, "Who is Like the Lord Our God?" Wendell Kimbrough sings:

O Saints, fix your eyes on the Savior / And count all your righteousness lost.  
Be found in his love and his favor, / And share in his death on the cross.  
That all of his power in victory, / Imparted to you, may abound;  
And sharing the sufferings of Jesus, / You share in his glory and crown  
Who is like the Lord our God? Who with glory fills the sky?  
But humbles himself with the broken to dwell / Who is like our God?<sup>142</sup>

A reengagement with the ascension invites congregations to fix their eyes on the Savior. The one who "humbles himself with the broken to dwell" in his incarnation and who died on the cross, but who has been raised in glory and ascended as King. This is the reality that congregations like Mt. Horeb live in and under as the people of God today.

If, however, this truly is reality – if our congregations share in the life of the ascended Jesus, are members of his body, are sustained and empowered by him, and walk toward the light of his return – then whether we regularly speak of his ascension or not, his life and story will be present, though like echoes, in their life and story. Put another way, if the ascended Lord is living and active in the life at Mt. Horeb then we must pay attention to the congregation. We must look at and listen to them, as a living text in whom the living,

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<sup>142</sup> Wendell Kimbrough, "Who Is Like the Lord Our God?" track 9 on *Hymns & Friends*, Wendell Kimbrough, 2013, digital download.

reigning Christ is present and through whom he is being revealed. The congregation, therefore, is the focus of the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: “Members of the Household”

### Ethnographic Interviews from Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church

#### Introduction: “Kind of like home”

“I mean, you would *hope* to see all these benches full,” Larry said. He was referring to the church pews in the sanctuary at Mt. Horeb which we were sitting next to. I asked him to imagine that he could take a time-machine ten years into the future and describe what he *expected* to find at Mt. Horeb and what he *hoped* to find. Larry asked if his expectations would be different than his hopes. I let him know that this was really up to him to answer. He replied, “Okay. *My hopes* would be a lot different than probably what I would say *my reality* of what I’m afraid will be. They would be, maybe, different answers. I mean, you would *hope* to see all these benches full.” Then he added, “I’m *afraid* that that’s not going to happen.” Larry was speaking about filling church pews. But there’s a sense in which Larry was talking about something deeper than church numbers and attendance. What he really seemed to be talking about was the congregation’s vitality and viability.

Larry is a good example of a member-participant at Mt. Horeb Presbyterian. He has been active in the congregation for over twenty years (actually, since before his baptism in 1948). Larry has taught Sunday school, served as an Elder on and off for 30 years, acts as Financial Secretary overseeing the financial pledges of Mt. Horeb, and will show up to help with a church property issue nearly whenever he thinks he can be of service. Of his life at Mt. Horeb, Larry said, “When events happened, I was always here.”

*Always here* being the key. Like so many at Mt. Horeb, Larry has been a faithful presence in the congregation, helping to sustain its life, even as the congregation has been a faithful presence in his own, to the point of him calling it, “kind of like home.” Mt. Horeb has been like an extension of Larry’s home – his household. A place of belonging. Yet now, with less benches full (from around 300 members when Larry was baptized in 1948 to just over 100 active members today) and a less central place in the life of the greater community, Larry is worried about how long this house can stand.

Paul writes, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.”<sup>1</sup> Paul has already described in this letter the Church as the *body of Christ*, with the risen and ascended Lord himself as its *head*. Now Paul speaks of the Church as a *household* – the church as both a family and living structure – that has Christ as its cornerstone.<sup>2</sup> Both of these ecclesial images are, of course, more than metaphors. As we noted in the previous chapter concerning *body* language, these are descriptions of an ontological reality. That is, they have to do with who and what the church is in its *very being*. The church is not a self-referential community, but Christ-referential. And neither does it merely point to a memory of Christ, carrying on today the ideals he announced. Rather, the church finds its life, identity, being, and mission through the Spirit in actual relationship with the living

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:19 speaks of the church as a living structure, but other New Testament passages also reveal the familial sense that may be implied here. See, Galatians 1:2, 6:10, and 1 Peter 2:17.

Jesus himself – crucified, raised, ascended and now reigning at the right hand of the Father. In the previous chapter we laid emphasis upon the church as the *body of Christ*. This was probably the clearest picture in the New Testament of the church’s relationship with our ascended Lord. However, the understanding of church as *household* may actually ring truer today for a congregation like Mt. Horeb, and for someone like Larry who calls Mt. Horeb, “kind of like home.”

Three images of the church as a household seem to be operating at Mt. Horeb: a *household of belonging*, a *household of service* and a *household of uncertainty*. These images arose from the eleven interviews that I conducted with members of Mt. Horeb between October 1 and November 24, 2020. Believing that a reengagement with the reality of the ascension could be vital for a congregation like Mt. Horeb’s life and participation in God’s mission, I entered these interviews wanting to discover how echoes of the ascension live in the imagination of Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church. I asked seven questions that relate to dominant themes in the New Testament ascension narrative(s) and their implications. These interviews produced an overwhelming amount of insight into Mt. Horeb’s self-understanding, unveiling the overarching themes of *house*, *belonging*, *service*, and *uncertainty*, and revealing how implications of the ascension are both present (though hidden) in their lived understanding, and absent.

As these themes are unpacked for Mt. Horeb, one question to ask is, *Is this, in fact, a household for whom the ascended Christ is cornerstone?*

## A Household of Belonging

### “Carried in”

“Well, I was carried in church,” Doris said, “and the faith and Christianity and the church has been a part of my life...I’ve never known anything else.” I loved this phrase, *carried in church* and asked Doris to clarify exactly what that meant for her. She answered, “Oh, my parents just; we always were in church on Sundays. Anything going on, we were there.” This memory of being *always in church* was one I heard in most of the interviews I conducted. Whether folks “grew up from day one” in the church, were “raised to always go to church,” or were “*drug* to church,” participation in the life of the congregation was a constant for many of the respondents and an important piece of family life. In fact, one respondent, Kathy, made this connection between her family household and church very explicit, saying, “I feel like I was born into the faith, in my family and in my church family growing up. Just learning about Jesus at home and then at church, too.” Like Larry, who thought of Mt. Horeb “kind of like home,” there is a shared sense that the congregation was and continues to be an extension of the household. A people and place you belong to.

For many of these folks, the church is a place of belonging first in the sense that they’ve always had a place in it and been a part of it, like a human on earth. There was either not a time, or very little time, when participation in a congregation was not a regular facet of life. They were “carried in,” until they could walk in. Because of this, even those who weren’t “born into” Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church, like Kathy and Larry, but were born into some local congregation like it, have carried this sense of

belonging with them. Mt. Horeb is now the extension of home in which they have a place. In fact, even the 1856 petition asking the presbytery to recognize Mt. Horeb as a congregation describes the church building as a “commodious and comfortable house of worship in a situation convenient to us.”<sup>3</sup> From the very beginnings of the congregation, participants were thinking of their church as a house of their own. What was interesting to discover, however, is that this same sentiment also seemed to be carried by members who either did not grow up in the church or did not participate in the church for many years.

Gail is one of those members. Gail did not grow up regularly participating in church life like many others at Mt. Horeb. The Lutheran church she and her family went to on occasion was not described like an extension of home. In fact, Gail recalled begging her parents to stop sending her there. It wasn't until she was married with children that she became interested in church and took up a friend's invitation to Mt. Horeb. What's interesting, however, is that she describes joining the church like filling a gap or supplying a missing piece in her life. “I think it added that extra layer we needed as a family,” Gail said, “and it added a village. You know that old saying, ‘It takes a village’? That was to me the completion of the village.” Gail didn't grow up in the church and yet, like those who did, she has come to find at Mt. Horeb an extension of home – a sense of “a village” in which she and her family found a place of belonging.

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<sup>3</sup> Patterson and Quick, *The History of Mount Horeb Presbyterian Church*. n.p., 6.

There is something simple and beautiful in all this. In a time when, despite all our social media connection (and most of Mt. Horeb is definitely connected on social media in some way), we're actually more disconnected from one another, member-participants at Mt. Horeb offer a picture of people who have found a *third space* that is incredibly influential in their lives, giving meaning and purpose. And this is, for some at least, very close in importance to their *first space* – their home.

There is also something here that carries a faint echo of Jesus' ascension. Namely, that in the ascension our humanity is carried into heaven where we are, as Paul says, "seated...in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."<sup>4</sup> With the ascension we've inherited a place of belonging with God in Christ. Though we on earth are made to be the household of God through our union with Jesus by the Spirit, Jesus has also gone and prepared a place for us with the Father.<sup>5</sup> In fact, he's brought our flesh and blood into that place. Like Doris who was "carried into church," in Jesus we are carried into heaven and learn that this is now where we belong. Which is to say, we belong right now, body and soul, with and to God. We don't fully experience this reality yet, but it is a promise we are assured of through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. And perhaps what Gail and others were noting is that this is a promise we faintly see and experience in our belonging to one another as church.

We desire a household to belong to because, Paul says, "we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens," and "[f]or this tent we

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 2:6.

<sup>5</sup> John 14:2-3.

groan.”<sup>6</sup> We have been raised up with Christ and seated with him. But this reality has not yet been fully revealed. However, we can sit with one another on Sunday morning in worship, or at a mid-week meal. When we are carried into church, then, it can become a place where our heavenly belonging and our place “with Christ in God”<sup>7</sup> is faintly echoed.

Many of these statements of belonging came in response to a question I asked about coming to faith in Jesus. Little, however, was actually said about God, or Jesus himself. There were of course exceptions, like Sam who described how “God worked in [his] life” when he became a Roman Catholic and who carries that same conviction for his now being a Presbyterian. There were also more general statements of having *always* believed “in God and Jesus and all that.” But a sense of encounter, of fellowship with Christ, was not precisely articulated. Instead, what was obviously present – what the respondents said a lot about – was this belonging and fellowship in the organizational life of the congregation. My respondents said less explicitly about life in Christ and more about life in Mt. Horeb, or more broadly life in church.<sup>8</sup> And, perhaps, the main reason that these descriptions of life in Mt. Horeb seemed to carry so much prominence and

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<sup>6</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:1, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Colossians 3:3.

<sup>8</sup> It could be that the way my questions were framed led to this emphasis on life in the congregation.

energy is because the congregation is a living, breathing community of persons. A tangible experience, even if a faint one, of the fellowship we have in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

### The Fellowship

If there's one word that was used the most to describe what people find life-giving at Mt. Horeb, it's *fellowship*. In fact, when asked to name a highlight of his time at Mt. Horeb, Bob's answer was, "The fellowship and being around good people." Aside from a brief stint away, Bob has been at Mt. Horeb since his late childhood years and this sense of *fellowship* with *good people* is where Bob has come to experience joy and connection in the congregation. At first glance, this may sound like an average and uninteresting answer. What makes Bob's response stand out, however, is that he did not stop at a mere generalization of fellowship. Bob began naming names: The Van Lear's. Jim and Doris. Jerry. Names of individuals he considers friends. Names of folks whom he's known for a long time but has grown to know better in recent years. Names of people who were friends of he and his late wife, Helen, and whom he's continued to remain connected with now as a widower. The highlight, joy, connection, and impact of Mt. Horeb for Bob center around the relationships – "the friendships and fellowships," as he put it – he has there. It is *to* this fellowship and *through* this fellowship that he feels that he belongs. And Bob is not alone in this, nor alone in being able to put flesh and bone illustration to this sometimes amorphous idea of fellowship.

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<sup>9</sup> A question to be asked here is, Do we also believe Jesus is (still) a living, breathing person who draws us into community, fellowship (*perichoresis*) with himself and the Father through the Spirit?

A key factor in making Mt. Horeb a house of belonging for these member-participants – both life-time members and those who have joined in the last 10-20 years; those who were raised in the church, and those who weren't – is the sense of relational connection; the “friendships and fellowship” Bob described above. While not every one of the eleven respondents who were interviewed spoke in depth about corporate worship, every one of them did speak about the importance of relational experiences at Mt. Horeb. This sense of relational welcome is also a comment that has been made by many people outside of these interviews, including visitors to Mt. Horeb.

For some, it was the invitation or influence of other people that became the bridge to full fellowship and engagement in the congregation. Gail for example, who did not grow up in the church, spoke of the importance of being invited to Mt. Horeb by her friend, Patsy, who was a member there. After finally accepting the invitation, Gail was amazed to discover how she felt the church “treated you like family.” This was especially important for her as she and her husband were raising a family, and all her biological family lived in another state. Mt. Horeb became for her an extended family in which she experienced joy “through the friendships and relationships in a Christian setting,” as she put it. Much of this was true for June, too, who married into Mt. Horeb. Her husband is a lifetime member, but she was from a whole different state. Yet, she described first coming to Mt. Horeb like being adopted. “The people at Mt. Horeb were *so* warm,” she added, and described how the women of the church threw her a wedding shower even though they hardly knew her.

Kevin, on the other hand, grew up and was baptized at Mt. Horeb. The congregation was always in his life in some way. Yet, after some years of spotty attendance, he too named how important it was to have an older, long-time member of the congregation, named Dawn Bulle, “pressure” him to become more active. Dawn’s *pressure* was taken by Kevin as interest in his life and an encouragement. And apparently it worked because Kevin began attending more and came to experience joy at Mt. Horeb through “community activities” like annual apple-butter making, and group service projects. After some years of this greater engagement, it was Dawn Bulle again who nominated Kevin to become an Elder. He and his wife Lora are now viewed by many as committed members in the congregation.

Beyond influential individuals though, small group settings also operate as key relational experiences for bridging belonging. One small group setting that was consistently referenced were the Presbyterian Women (PW) circles.<sup>10</sup> Nearly all the women interviewed spoke of their participation in PW as a highlight of Mt. Horeb and a source of connection and joy. In fact, June spoke of PW as a chief place for experiencing joy, particularly because it was a place where she got to know people in a different and deeper way through monthly meetings, picnics, special dinners, and social projects. Sylvia echoed these sentiments when she spoke of the trust and closeness with other women that she has experienced through PW. And while both women are in their 70s, it should be noted that Lora, who is two decades their minor, also described her

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<sup>10</sup> Presbyterian Women, Inc. is the official women’s organization of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Congregations often have Presbyterian Women (PW) “circles”, which are women’s small groups centered around Bible study and service.

participation in PW as a highlight and a space for coming to know and walk with other women whom she might not have gotten to know well otherwise.

In a similar way to PW, several of the respondents spoke of the importance of their Sunday school class. These respondents were all speaking of a particular Sunday school class that they have been a part of for some time, facilitated by one or two members. This class has come to function more like a *small group*, especially because it is mostly the same 8-12 class members who have been participating over many years. Patsy described this class as a *supportive* group where, "we would reveal things...that we wouldn't reveal to other people. And we'd have this trust that it wouldn't go further than the Sunday school class." It's a place, she said, where people wouldn't offer easy solutions to life's trials, saying, "This is what you should do!" but instead would empathize with your pains and acknowledge, "we're there for you." This Sunday school group, like PW, was a bridge to belonging and engagement in the church.

Add to these the picnic-basketful of other group activities Mt. Horeb usually engages in, like annual apple-butter making, covered-dish suppers after church, collecting Church World Service school-kits and...well, picnics, and it is clear how and where people feel connected at Mt. Horeb. Even someone like Kathy, who stood out from the group in her expressed love for study and finding joy in knowledge, named studying deeply *together* as a particular place of connection to the congregation and as a way she feels connected to God. This last remark was an interesting discovery for me: That connection to God at Mt. Horeb, if named, was more often experienced outside of worship in some form of fellowship with others.

While some certainly did name worship services as a point of connection with God, and one person even named solitude as the place where she really feels close to God, several spoke of experiencing God through fellowship with other people.

Patsy described God's love and acceptance *transcending* to the PW circle, Sunday school and members of the congregation. Similarly, Lora said, "God presents himself through other people." She went on describe how she feels God has brought her to Mt. Horeb to have relationships with others, and that she's closest to God when helping others. Even Larry, who first named feeling closest to God when reading the Bible, added *fellowship with other believers* to his answer because he didn't think he'd feel the same if he only read the Bible alone at home, as opposed to reading it with other Christians.

For many, the corporate nature of church was key to their sense of belonging. They weren't coming to Mt. Horeb for personal, transcendent spiritual experiences, at least not in the way often described. They weren't coming expecting finely tuned liturgy and music that would help usher them into the worship of God. They were expecting to worship God in the presence of other people whose names and stories they would know. To work out questions and conflicts in a community to which they sense they belong — a household of belonging. It makes sense then that when asked to describe a time of confusion or doubt, over half of the respondents mentioned a time in the congregation from the early 2000s when there was friction between individual members and between the congregation and their pastor. Of course this was a time of confusion! The relationships which hold central importance were being fractured. The household was in conflict.

The question that perhaps needs to be asked at Mt. Horeb is, to whom does this community chiefly belong? To one another, or to God? Of course, the answer may be *to both!* As we have noted above, Jesus' ascension means our humanity has been “carried to church,” so to speak, if church (the community of God’s people) is where God is. Mt. Horeb’s starting point for congregational life is, in reality, their belonging to God in Christ – union through the Spirit with the ascended Lord. But that heavenly belonging, made sure by our forerunner and Lord, is rightly mirrored in their earthly belonging to the congregation. Put another way, the belonging experienced at Mt. Horeb is a sign and taste of their belonging to Christ, and humanity’s reconciliation and fellowship to one another in him. The forgiveness, resurrection joy, and glorious acceptance received from the Father through Christ, is reflected in the community that forgives, rejoices together, and glories in one another. But, in missing or downplaying the first part in all this – that is, if “fellowship in Christ” is merely the *churchy* answer but not the one really believed; if belonging to one another does not overflow out of belonging to God – a congregation like Mt. Horeb faces risks.

One risk is that we can come to know and see all the things in the congregation that we love (the friendships, the meals, the Presbyterian Women circle meetings) and that we’re afraid we lack (not enough young people, or money), but fail to see “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” with which we’ve been blessed in Christ Jesus.<sup>11</sup> We may see who we’re seated next to in worship or at Sunday school, but not remember we’re the community who’s been raised up with Christ and seated with him. In

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<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 1:3.

short, we may miss all that Christ has already accomplished for us and given to us in his vicarious humanity and sending of the Spirit. And if we don't see this, we may then miss how we already have all we need, as the fellowship rests in Christ, to be a faithful congregation giving witness to Jesus' lordship and participating in his mission as we represent his reign.

Furthermore, if we miss that our ascended Lord now ever stands to intercede for us, ever lives as our Mediator between us and the Father and us and one another, *then all that's left is us with one another*. And in the face of conflict, forgetting that Christ stands between us and that our primary union is in him — and not our opinions, family name, or political views — the consequences can be dire. It was heartening, therefore, to discover that a mediator was brought into Mt. Horeb during the time of church conflict because it was acknowledged they needed help from outside. What a fitting picture for a congregation who's life flows from our one Mediator and Lord, Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

Mt. Horeb sees itself as a household of belonging, and it can name the *local* apostles whom it's been built on. But does the congregation need help explicitly remembering that the ascended Jesus is the cornerstone upon whom their whole structure

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted, perhaps, that there could be risks on the opposite side of all this. That is, there is a risk of a congregation and its members being so focused on *spiritual matters* that they neglect their earthly fellowship. Or, to put it more starkly, the congregation could be so focused on their fellowship with Christ that they neglect their fellowship with one another (though this is hardly a true focus on Christ!). 2 Corinthians 12 comes to mind, where it seems the Corinthian Christians were excited about "spiritual gifts" but needed help seeing how those gifts were meant for "the common good" (2 Cor. 12:7). Or, as Paul said to the Ephesians, the gifts given to the church are "for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). Focus on Christ, our incorporation into his body, and the gifting and power of his Spirit, far from distracting us from or detracting from life together as church, is meant to be the solid foundation on which that life is built and grows. This risk, however, is not one that seemed to be facing Mt. Horeb Presbyterian.

hangs? The sense of belonging and love of fellowship offer rich images for directing the congregation to see how their fellowship echoes the true grounded fellowship they have with God in Christ and which they have with one another in him.

### **A Household of Service**

#### Our Community in the Community

“Serving at Valley Mission.” “Visiting at Cardinal House and telling the Christmas story there.” “The Backpack Program.” “Summerlee.”

These are the places where the respondents experience joy at Mt. Horeb; as Kevin put it, “our church community going out *into* the community.” For all the respondents, *service* came out as an important part of their belonging to Mt. Horeb and an identity marker for the kind of congregation Mt. Horeb is. Mt. Horeb was not just described as a community of faith you can belong to, but one in which joy and meaning are found in service.

The first and most obvious kind of service Mt. Horeb is engaged in is the outward service described by Kevin. And as the above examples show, examples repeated by most of the respondents, Mt. Horeb does most of its outward service in cooperation with other preexisting organizations or ministries. The Valley Mission is a homeless shelter in Staunton, VA. where Mt. Horeb members serve a meal on a bi-monthly basis.<sup>13</sup> The Cardinal House is an assisted living facility in Waynesboro where the Presbyterian

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<sup>13</sup> All but one of the respondents interviewed have participated in making, delivering, or serving a meal at the Valley Mission.

Women's circle throws parties for the residents several times a year, the most popular usually being near Christmas. Mt. Horeb members lead a service of Lessons and Carols and someone dressed as Santa Claus comes to deliver presents. The Backpack Program is a food assistance program at South River Elementary in Grottoes that Mt. Horeb participates in with another Presbyterian church in the area. They send backpacks of food home with children who are food insecure. Summerlee is an annual service trip to West Virginia done in cooperation with several other Presbyterian churches in the Shenandoah Presbytery. Mt. Horeb has participated in the Summerlee trip for over 20 years and will often send 12-20 members each July for a week of work.

Bob admitted that for him the opportunities to serve a meal at Valley Mission or fix up homes on the annual service trip were places he felt connected to God more than on Sunday morning in worship. "You know, Sunday morning is fine," Bob said, "but I guess I feel...I don't know, I get things out of that kind of stuff [acts of service] too." Then he added, "Faith without works is...' *what?*" "Dead," I said. He laughed and said, "Yep."

Not everyone quoted the Letter of James, like Bob, but everyone did give witness to the sense of service they feel called to. Doris said "Whether it's a meal at Valley Mission, or something for South River [Elementary] or something. It makes you joyful for sure. It's a good feeling when you deliver a meal, and you know it's appreciated." These members are aware of needs that are not just far away but near, and they have found that they have means, gifts, and passions to meet some of those needs.

What was evident from the interviews is that these avenues of service were not thought of as addendums to an otherwise comfortable Christian life, or burdensome obligations that one had to do in order to be a good Christian. They were not simply busy work for the household to go out and do. Rather, when these examples of service were spoken of there was an almost palpable sense of joy, accomplishment and even pride.

Behind this joy and sense of outward service there are again echoes of the ascension. Jesus commissions his church to act as his witness in the world.<sup>14</sup> As we noted in the previous chapter, this witness is more than a verbal recognition. The witness of the church is a living testimony. Or, as 1 Peter puts it, the church is made up of “living stones,” who are being “built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood...God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”<sup>15</sup> The household of God, whose cornerstone is Christ, is a community who has His life and love within and overflowing for the sake of the world. So, when members of Mt. Horeb speak happily and joyfully of going to serve at Valley Mission, fill backpacks for school children, or throw parties for residents of a group home, there is a parallel to the story of the disciples after Jesus' ascension returning to Jerusalem with “great joy,” and then on the day of Pentecost going out filled with his Spirit. Yet it seems we must be adamant about making this connection. That is, the connection between Christ's reign and a church like Mt. Horeb's participation in his mission.

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<sup>14</sup> Acts 1:8.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Peter 2:5, 9 (NIV).

Serving others because it feels good or because we have the means may be fine, yet the church is not called simply to be a household of charity but the household of God. Mt. Horeb's work is not just to represent what good people do but to represent the reign of Christ. We may get to do that at a homeless shelter, elementary school, or group home, but *that* is what we get to do. Furthermore, that work can be wearying, especially when you are a small to average-sized congregation, at times feeling tired (financially, or because of physical weariness, or age). Looking away from Jesus and his ascension we may at best have optimism, good will, and a desire to do something for God. But looking *to* Jesus, and at others through Jesus, who now lives and reigns for our benefit, we connect our joy to the one who is our joy, our service to his reign, and find strength in his intercession and Spirit-enabled gifts that equip us for the service he calls us to.

#### Time Given, Not "Time Served"

Interestingly, while service in the greater community was often cited as an act of joy or even connection with God, when respondents spoke of their connection to Mt. Horeb or the impact they've had on it they spoke of service *within* the structures of the congregation. Lora, for example, mentioned her "time served as an elder and on different committees" as a main way she's contributed to the life of the congregation. In fact, nine respondents spoke of the times they've served as an elder on the Session and *all* the respondents spoke of leading or participating in committee work. But Session and committee work, though mentioned a lot, was not all that was mentioned. Kathy spoke more generally of stepping into leadership roles when asked, and Sam talked about his

sense of obligation to the choir. Several people mentioned regular tithing and attendance as main ways they've faithfully contributed to the life of Mt. Horeb.

Central in all of this seems to be the understanding that service *in* the congregation means fulfilling an official role of leadership or followership, be that serving as an elder, chairing a search committee, staying in the choir, or just contributing faithfully with your finances. When described, these things felt like the necessary components to a working operation called "church". But listening to respondents talk about these roles of service felt very different than when they were describing serving the community. Lora's "time served" felt like an appropriate descriptor. There was almost a sense at moments that these in-house areas of service were dues to be paid more than anything else.

This wasn't always the case. Patsy, for example, talked about "tackling issues" on the Session with pride. She spoke at length about the cost of leadership, describing a time when she was tasked to help hire an Interim Pastor, presented a candidate that was okayed by Session, and then got backlash from both Session members and congregants who did not like the choice. But while Patsy spoke of this as a confusing and difficult episode, she has also served on the Session and Personnel Committee many times afterward and considers the role an honor.

But while others also may have spoken about serving as an Elder as an honor, it didn't seem to carry the same sense of joy that other roles of service did. In fact, interestingly, when respondents were asked how the congregation has *contributed to their life*, no one spoke of the Session or a committee. Doris talked about a special meal the

Presbyterian Women threw for she and her husband Jim when they were married, Kevin of the support he received from the congregation after his home burned down, Kathy of having her children nurtured by others, but no one talked about committee work. They only began speaking about this when asked how *they had contributed something*. It may be that this is an area for exploration at Mt. Horeb: Why is joy experienced when serving others outside the church and when *served* by fellow members of the church — especially in times of nurture or need — but not experienced in the same way when serving in a leadership role within the church? And why is ones' contribution almost necessarily a role of defined leadership?

Could it be, as congregants participate in the life of the ascended Lord, they experience more joy in giving themselves away to others in love, as Jesus gave himself for all, and that official roles of leadership in a congregation like Mt. Horeb don't carry the same feeling of *kenosis* (self-emptying)? An underlying issue here may simply be a need to appreciate positions of leadership in smaller churches as worthy and lovely acts of self-giving. But the question is worth asking.

Whatever the answer may be, one thing respondents had in common – whether their service was expressed as duty or delight – was a sense that their contribution was an embodied act of being *present* in and to the congregation. And this act of being present reflects the importance of Mt. Horeb's presence, and by vicarious action, Christ, in their own lives. Larry, for example, when asked how Mt. Horeb had contributed to his life, answered, "Just being here. That it's here." Similarly, Lora spoke of the presence of the congregation in her life both when her mother died and more recently when she was

diagnosed with cancer. In a way that mirrors the congregation's presence, these inside roles of service were a way people were describing their contribution of presence to the congregation. Their way of saying, *Even if it's challenging, or tedious, or sometimes like paying dues, we're here.*

One of the startling implications of Jesus' incarnation and ascension is God's presence among us. Jesus comes as *Emmanuel*, God with us. And not just in a stop-by-for-a-visit way. He has come to be truly *with us*. As he inhabited the womb of Mary and was born to her as a child, so he inhabits a place amid his people, dwelling among us by the Spirit. Yet, further still, in becoming "flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone,"<sup>16</sup> as the Scots Confession says, his presence is not only one of proximity *to* but also solidarity *with*. He is fully with us in his full humanity, assuming responsibility for our redemption as our Lord and King, *Deus pro nobis*,<sup>17</sup> by assuming our flesh as our brother. And it is this same solidarity, this same presence, which Jesus continues in his ascension and gifting of the Spirit. Jesus does not slough off his mortal coil when he ascends, but was raised and ascended in his "selfsame body."<sup>18</sup> This means that his full union with us has not ceased. His solidarity with us does not cease. He continues to be the one Mediator

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<sup>16</sup> *The Scots Confession*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019), 3.08.

<sup>17</sup> Barth, *CD*, IV.1 ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 629-630.

<sup>18</sup> *The Scots Confession*, in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part 1, *The Book of Confessions*, 3.11.

through whose scarred but now glorified body we have fellowship with he and the Father through the Spirit.

Mt. Horeb mirrors this same ministry of presence and solidarity as they seek to participate in Christ's mission in The Valley through self-giving service. This means, on the one hand, that when members of Mt. Horeb go to serve at Valley Mission or Cardinal House there needs to be an effort to dismantle any *us and them* mentality.<sup>19</sup> It can of course be a fine thing to feel good about serving others. But if the consistent approach to ministry in the community is *we have something, you need something*, not only do invisible walls ascend that have already been torn down through our crucified and ascended Lord, but we fail to witness the solidarity he has shown with us and the royal treatment he has given us by embracing and exalting our flesh in his incarnation and now heavenly session. As Fr. Greg Boyle writes, "Serving others is good. It's a start. But it's just the hallway that leads to the Grand Ballroom. Kinship – not serving the other, but being one with the other."<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, Mt. Horeb *is* already giving signs and tastes of Jesus' ministry of presence as they seek to witness his love through concrete acts of service in the

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<sup>19</sup> At one point in my interview with Kevin, he described a personal home fire through which he lost nearly everything. Kevin described the outpouring from the community and church as "overwhelming." When I asked him to describe the outpouring, he went on to answer, "Well, I mean just phone calls, and cards, and donations of clothes and money and, uh, yeah it was incredible. And difficult to be in a place where people felt like they wanted to give you charity. It was hard to accept." Kevin describes here a situation in which he was the one in need, and that obviously felt abnormal to him. It is likely that most of Mt. Horeb's members would feel similarly to Kevin, emphasizing the fact that they are usually in a position of assuming they're the ones who can give when they serve in the community but not necessarily receive.

<sup>20</sup> Greg Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010), 188.

community, in their concern for one another, in their dutiful desire to intercede on behalf of the congregation as elders and committee members, and by being a fellowship of believers who is, as Larry put it, “Just...here.” Present.

### That’s Been *My* Impact

There was one other area of service which became apparent in my interviews with members from Mt. Horeb. This was where members described contributions or acts of service that were unique to themselves. That is, they gave descriptions of service that went beyond generalizations of *committee work* or *getting your hands dirty*. They witnesses to moments when they felt they had offered something that, perhaps, no one else could have.

Gail offers a good example of this. Gail was an outlier in not being much of a committee person. But Gail *is* a budding artist and art lover, and on several occasions Gail has helped to facilitate a community art show at Mt. Horeb. This was a show that hosted art and craft vendors from the surrounding area in the church fellowship hall and offered live music and food. It drew crowds of folks from the community that are not affiliated with Mt. Horeb or even any church. When Gail talked about starting this she spoke with surprise and delight for how well it has been received. She also made clear that her concern was never actually the art itself. Gail said,

I don’t care if nobody bought a thing. But to come and listen to the music, and eat the food, and have them come to the church. Because, I have sat there at lunch time talking with people that *used to* come years ago. In fact, I met one lady. She lived in the manse for a little while as a twenty-year-old! I think I was trying to get you introduced. I don’t know if it ever worked out that day. But yeah, so it’s like *opening it up to the community*. And that isn’t anything I could tell that was going to happen. You know what I mean? At the beginning of these art things I

could not see how it was evolving. But now I see it's a big fundraiser for women of the church. And, like I said, it brings the community in to where they're coming and just reminiscing. Some of the people that don't belong to our church have been exposed to the church in some way.

She also added later that some of the art vendors would see how members of the church treated one another like family and they would ask if they'd be welcome at Mt. Horeb. Gail said, "I didn't plan that. But I like the way it's turning out..." Gail's concern was to create a space of hospitality for the community, and she did it by using something she loves — art. In the process, however, she was surprised to see how, through her service, windows were being opened to witness life in the household of God to others.

In a similar way, Sam talked about his inquisitive personality impacting Mt. Horeb. "Most of 'em would probably say I talk too much," Sam said. But then he added, "I think that's been my impact in a way. Not that I talk too much, but that I ask questions. If I don't understand, I'm not shy about asking people; asking for answers. I think that that's been one impact in working with the Session." Sam was noting how his contribution to the church wasn't just that he served on the Session but that *he* — inquisitive Sam, who isn't afraid to ask questions and seek clarification — has served. Sam was describing his passions and personality being offered in service to Mt. Horeb.

These sort of individualized acts of service came up several times in interviews. Whether it was a description of adding their voice to the choir, personally writing cards to shut-ins, committing to property work they had the skills to do, or Gail planning an annual art show, there were times when members were able to name specific contributions they've made to Mt. Horeb, peculiar to their personality, passions, or skills. This was not only exciting to recognize and see how the Spirit was using these

individuals but also again relates to Jesus' commissioning of the disciples prior to his ascension.

When Jesus tells his disciples that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit and would be his “witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,”<sup>21</sup> it is certainly a promise of the centrifugal movement their witness will have. Yet, this also seems to be a promise of the way the gospel will be carried and witnessed to in *particular* places (like Jerusalem) and regions (like Samaria) that it may be received and responded to in these places and ultimately in every corner, community, and culture on the earth. Similarly, the task of congregations is not simply to believe a bland, generalized version of the gospel but to hear the incarnate, crucified, risen and ascended Lord addressing us through his Word and Spirit in *our place*; to embody the implications of the gospel *here*. And to then become witnesses of this gospel not in general but in *our* Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria... our Grottoes, Augusta County, Shenandoah Valley, and to the ends of Interstate 81. Gail, Sam, and others were living into this vision in their concrete and specific acts at Mt. Horeb. They were also giving a vision for what Mt. Horeb as a congregation might continue to do.

As Jesus shares his Spirit with Mt. Horeb and fills them with all his fullness, he makes Mt. Horeb a community who shares in the actual life and mission of the Father and himself right where there are. And so, as Gail and Sam didn't say "We serve on committees", but *I help host an art show, or, I make sure we all understand by asking questions*, Mt. Horeb is learning, and has room to learn, how to say as a congregation not

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<sup>21</sup> Acts 1:8

just, “We serve the community,” but rather, “As Jesus cared for the least and as we participate in his life, so we care about elementary students at South River,” or, “Jesus has richly blessed and valued us and all humanity, and in him we recognize the value of residents at the Cardinal House,” or, “As Christ has given us his body to share as food, and as we love sharing food, so we make food for friends who eat at Valley Mission.” Mt. Horeb is learning, and has room to learn, how to say, “We are open to serving in new ways that reflect who we are in Christ and the gifts we have together.” In this way Mt. Horeb may continue to build a household of service — a fellowship who is called to care for the community around it as it gives witness to the reigning Lord who cares for them.

### **A Household of Uncertainty**

There is one other household image that arose from my interviews, the household of *uncertainty*. Like a family who is dealing with an uncertain future because of sickness or change, the respondents in my interviews carried a sense of uncertainty about the future of the congregation they call home or of the greater Church in general. That is to say that Larry was no exception in thinking of Mt. Horeb “kind of like home” but also believing his hopes for this home are different from the *reality of what will be*. Larry’s uncertainty about the next ten to twenty years for his household of faith was joined by a chorus of others.

“The future of this church is not really great”

“What I would hope to find would be a growing, thriving congregation,” said Kevin. “Bigger and better than we are now.” Then he went on:

What I *expect* to find is *not that*, so much. And being involved with the Session, and with the body of the church for a good number of years now, we have spent a lot of time and effort in thinking about what we might do to make that hope come true. But I feel like we've hit a lot of walls — and not for lack of brainstorming and effort on our part. But it just seems like — I don't know if it's our culture and the non-affiliated members of our community, people that don't have any church connection, which seems to be a growing number, and our aging congregation certainly; and again we've talked this over for hours on end and I don't know the answers — but to be quite honest my outlook for the future of the church, of this church, is not really great ten years down the road. I hope I'm wrong. I *pray* I'm wrong. But to be honest that's kind of how I feel.

This was the first way uncertainty was voiced — a feeling of complete dismay about what the congregation might look like in the next ten years. Kevin gave voice to the possibility of a very bleak future for Mt. Horeb. Like so many small to mid-sized congregations, he has seen church attendance dwindle over the years even as he put in efforts to curb decline and create a healthy and growing congregation. In his mind it has not done much good.

Gail felt similarly. She said, “What I expect and hope are two different things.” She doesn't expect to see much, namely because the congregation is *literally* dying – in the sense that more members are passing away than joining. Kevin and Gail see the old members of the church, who were raised in a culture of going to church and always attended, dying. They see the percentage of *nones* in the community rising. And for all the good they see and know in Mt. Horeb, they fear for the household's sustainability. The average age of members and the number of active members are a main concern here. Gail and others just can't see how the congregation will continue for very long if something doesn't change.

“Mt. Horeb will be in existence”

The second way uncertainty was voiced was in a milder tone. Patsy expressed this when she envisioned a future for Mt. Horeb that was thriving with young families and children coming in, but then added her concern about people moving away from established religion:

You know, *realistically*, I think given the time we are in, I feel like the future...is moving away from established religion. And it concerns me. I think Mt. Horeb will be in existence. I think we will struggle. And beyond that, you just — and I do this when I’m totally befuddled — *It’ll just be God’s will*. Will there be a turn around and people will realize they need religion? Or will it be, “I can get it over the t.v.; I can get it over my phone”? Or will religion as we know it be entirely different? And I don’t know Jonathan, I really don’t.

Patsy can see a future for Mt. Horeb, but also believes it will be one of struggle as the congregation copes with the changing religious landscape in America.

Sylvia also voiced hope that Mt. Horeb would continue to be this community where people enjoy being together and that more families might come in, but also noted the “trend” of younger families not participating in church as much as when her kids were growing up. “That’s hard,” she said.

For June, the current pandemic has changed the landscape of the future. She said that if she’d have answered the question in March of 2020 the answer would be different than it is now because so much is uncertain.

None of these respondents named a future *without* Mt. Horeb (though they did note they might not be around because of their age). All of them expected to find the same congregational spirit of belonging and service. However, what the congregation and

its life in the community will look like remains uncertain in their minds given cultural and historical changes the church is living through.

### Changing and Adapting

In the face of both dismay and concern about Mt. Horeb's future there was then, however, a third way that uncertainty was voiced and that was through a concern for adaptation. That is, several members saw an uncertain future for Mt. Horeb and therefore were concerned that the congregation find ways to adapt as a household in order to meet this future.

For some, like Bob, adaptation seemed to mean a willingness to change the way we worship and the songs we sing to be hospitable or attract new people. But Kathy offered the most open expression of what adaptation could mean. After noting that she would like the church to still exist ten years in the future, she began to describe possibilities of what that existence might look like. Kathy said,

I guess I would hope to see that we had been able to evolve into a different space. I don't know if that would mean combining with another congregation perhaps, or just going all in on being the really small close-knit community or trying to do something that folds in another church looking for a home, or something like that. So, I guess that we'd have found a way to adapt is what I would hope to see somehow. But I guess I would say that even though I'm really tied to the building and the physical space, if changing and adapting meant that worship looked different somehow, or existed in a different space, I think that'd be okay; if there could still be relationships with people and relationship with God somehow.

For Kathy, the future of Mt. Horeb was uncertain, but that uncertainty could be met with congregational evolution, or adaptation, in the form of joining another congregation, changing how they operate, sharing space, or even gathering in a different space. The thing that was obviously important for Kathy, and for all those who spoke of

adaptation, was that the *relationships* would continue – the household would remain intact. Just as the COVID-19 pandemic forced adaptation upon small businesses and congregations, Mt. Horeb is starting to awaken to the possibility of adapting in a broader sense in order to be a faithful congregation in a post-Christendom world.

All this uncertainty evokes “*Now what?*” for Mt. Horeb and other congregations like it. Similar to the disciples staring up at the sky in Acts 1 when Jesus ascends, congregations seem to be looking at one another and looking up toward the Lord wondering *now what do we do?*

Part of the answer to this question should be to return to the space between ascension and Pentecost — that space where we can do nothing but wait upon the Lord together, like a child in the womb awaiting new birth. We can become people who rest in what the Lord has already accomplished, who know the mission is the Lord’s, and who therefore then can wait to see how the Lord may equip us to walk into the future as his witnesses. But in this space of waiting we may also learn to heed the promise of Christ and the proclamation of the angels at his ascension.

The promise of Jesus pre-ascension is that his disciples would receive the promised gift of the Father, the “power from on high,” the Holy Spirit. Because Jesus ascends as Lord, he is able to send down his Holy Spirit who is the down payment of the kingdom, the bearer of Christ’s power and presence, and the one through whom we share in Christ’s life and mission today. As Pentecost, and really the whole New Testament, reveals, it is only by the power of the Spirit that we participate in Jesus’ suffering and glory and are built together on him who is our cornerstone to become a part of the living

household of God in the world. What this means for a congregation like Mt. Horeb on the edge of uncertainty is unclear, yet the Spirit empowers us right now to participate in Jesus' actual life and mission in our community. We are not left hopelessly alone, relying on our own brainstorming and effort, but have the Spirit nurturing in us the life of the Lord, and therefore nurturing in us all we need to faithfully *adapt* to the present and the future in order to witness to his reign and be an instrument in his hand.

Along with the promised gift, however, there is a proclamation. A proclamation made by the two men in white robes who appeared at Jesus' ascension according to Acts 1: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."<sup>22</sup> In other words, the King will return. The crucified One who now reigns in glory will come in glory "to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end,"<sup>23</sup> to quote the creed. It is toward this horizon that Mt. Horeb is ever moving and for this horizon they are waiting.

### **Conclusion**

"It's kind of like home," Larry said, describing Mt. Horeb. And in this chapter, we have seen how Mt. Horeb may indeed understand itself in some ways as a home, or household — a household of belonging, of service, and of uncertainty as it looks to the

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<sup>22</sup> Acts 1:11.

<sup>23</sup> *The Nicene Creed* in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)*, part I, *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2019) 1.2.

future. These three household motifs present Mt. Horeb as a community that seeks to be a fellowship of believers where belonging and mutual support are experienced, where compassionate service is extended — including the service of presence to one another — and where an uncertain future is met with both fear and creative optimism. These motifs also open questions to whom this household really belongs to, what mindset the congregation has when service is sometimes seen as something extended to others or a duty to fulfill in the church, and where sights are set as Mt. Horeb walks into the future. But beyond this, these household motifs reveal echoes of the ascension hidden in the life of the congregation and flowing from their life “hidden with Christ in God.”<sup>24</sup>

The question remains how these hidden echoes of Christ’s ascension are helpful to Mt. Horeb; how they aid in shaping its household life for faithful participation in the mission of God in the Shenandoah Valley. Put another way, how does the reality of Jesus’ ascension assist Mt. Horeb in faithfully organizing and practicing their belonging to him? It is to this question that we turn in the final chapter.

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<sup>24</sup> Colossians 3:3.

## Chapter Five: Sensemaking, Innovation and Ascension

Like the sun coming up over the Blue Ridge Mountains that lie behind Mt. Horeb's building, a new day has dawned in the resurrection and ascension of the Son, and one day his light will brighten everything. The hope of this day is not merely one Mt. Horeb moves toward and awaits, however, but is also a hope that pierces the present. Mt. Horeb participates in the life of king Jesus by the Spirit, and yet need reminding that they participate in his kingdom and the hope of his return now. The reminder is necessary in the face of uncertainty. The congregation lives by faith *toward* his hoped for return. Eschatologically speaking, the future is not bleak because the future belongs to God and rests in the hands of his incarnate, ascended Son who will come again. The one thing needed right now, therefore, is not survival tactics but faithful witness to his reign spurred on by Spirit-fostered hope of his return.

What might this look like for Mt. Horeb? It might look like finding ways to enter that space between ascension and Pentecost, a space of waiting and prayer. This could mean creating intentional times of reflection on congregational life and intentional times of prayer, seeking from God understanding for how they should live and witnesses in the present. It could also mean looking for signs of the Spirit's life in their midst, even in the face of dying members and membership — learning what it means to be a people who fully share in Christ's life and mission and so whose hope is wholly built upon his effort and not theirs. It might also look like learning to notice and value the gifts of individual members or creating avenues and an openness to using those gifts, as Gail's testimony

exemplified. Finally, in the face of a changing religious climate in the country,<sup>1</sup> changing culture in the Shenandoah Valley,<sup>2</sup> and a changing congregation, moving forward in the hope of the Lord's reign and return could mean adapting – or as we will go on to note, *innovating* or *improvising* – in ways that Kathy and others described.

If the Spirit is with us, Jesus is not simply a memory whom we talk about. He is the living Lord who loves us, died for us, was raised, and now ever lives to intercede for us at the right hand of the Father. Therefore, Mt. Horeb has what it needs, in the gifting of its members and in union with Christ, to faithfully participate in his mission of redemption. There is no great need to look elsewhere, but to remain present to his presence in their life together and to witness his reign in Augusta and Rockingham counties. This doesn't mean that Mt. Horeb will live forever. It does mean, however, that in its life and death Mt. Horeb is a household who can bear the life of the living Lord.

How can Mt. Horeb live now knowing and enacting this Spirit-fostered hope? What kind of leadership is required to spur on a faithful witness?

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory A. Smith, "About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated," Pew Research Center, December 14, 2021, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

<sup>2</sup> The changes in the Shenandoah Valley that I am referring to – particularly the geographical region around Harrisonburg, Staunton, and Waynesboro – are those that have been described to me by long-time residents who remember closer-knit communities in smaller towns with a greater population farming. Today, a city like Harrisonburg which is remembered by many as an agricultural town with a college, is now more of a university town, with James Madison University reportedly being one of the fastest growing four-year public institutions in the state of Virginia. Harrisonburg Economic Development cited an 84 percent growth of enrollment from 1994 to 2014. "The Economic Impact of James Madison University on the Harrisonburg Metropolitan Area and the Commonwealth of Virginia," Harrisonburg Economic Development, accessed March 30, 2022, <https://harrisonburgdevelopment.com/jmu-economic-impact-study/>.

## Looking Back, Acting Forward

The apostle Peter closes what might be called the first ever Christian sermon, given on the day of Pentecost, with these words:

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”’ Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus had already ascended, and the disciples had been waiting for the “promise of the Father.”<sup>4</sup> But on Pentecost the *Promise* arrived, “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages as the Spirit gave them ability...speaking about God’s deeds of power.”<sup>5</sup> To help the bewildered crowd make sense of what they were seeing and hearing, and to tie it all to the person and work of Jesus, Peter stands and begins to preach. And like every good preacher, Peter has a text.

Actually, Peter recites several texts from the Old Testament. But one of them is this verse from Psalm 110, “The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”<sup>6</sup> Psalm 110 is a messianic psalm of David. It is a psalm written in expectation of a day when an ideal priest-king from David’s own lineage would be enthroned.<sup>7</sup> This is how the psalm likely functioned for centuries in Israel’s life,

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:34-36.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:4.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:4, 11b.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:35.

<sup>7</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, eds. James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, Jr., and Paul J. Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 350-351.

memory, and worship. Peter's appropriation of Psalm 110 on Pentecost therefore is important for at least two reasons.

First, Peter uses this old messianic text to make sense of *the present*. Peter stabilizes his listener's understanding of what is happening by referring them back to a narrative they knew and were expecting — the Messiah enthroned and sending “out from Zion [his] mighty scepter.”<sup>8</sup> Secondly, Peter uses the psalm to introduce something new. Peter unambiguously claims that the Messiah *is* Jesus of the Nazareth, the crucified one whom the Father has raised up and exalted to his right hand. The long-expected king is now on his throne, sharing his Spirit. So, the “house of Israel” can no longer merely look back and wait but must live and act forward under the implications of Jesus' lordship.<sup>9</sup>

This declaration creates an urgent question for the listeners: “Brothers, what should we do?”<sup>10</sup> And while Peter gives a direct answer, “Repent, and be baptized”<sup>11</sup>, there is a sense in which the answer to this question is actually being worked out in the whole of Acts and the New Testament. Throughout the narratives and epistles the Church wrestles with the implications of what it means to live faithfully as the people of God in light of Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and return. Likewise, Peter's sermon, and particularly his riff on Psalm 110, moves his hearers to look back in order to make sense of the present and live faithfully into the future.

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 110:2.

<sup>9</sup> Acts 2:36.

<sup>10</sup> Acts 2:37.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2:38.

## A Paradigm for Stability and Innovation

This may be a helpful paradigm of leadership for a congregation like Mt. Horeb who sees itself as a household with a rich history and gifts to share but who is also facing a great deal of uncertainty as they peer into the future.

Mt. Horeb is in a moment where they need resources that both *stabilize* their household and make space for adaptation, or *innovation*. Working through the organizational theory of *sensemaking* as defined by Karl Weick, I suggest Mt. Horeb is facing ecological change<sup>12</sup> and may find stability through narrative, reflection on past and ongoing actions, and what Weick calls *doubt*.<sup>13</sup> Turning also to the work of Clayton M. Christensen and his theory of *disruptive technologies*, both Weick and Christensen may provide resources for congregational innovation, or what Weick calls *improvisation*, encouraging Mt. Horeb to adaptively face the future as some of their own members think wise. Finally, all of this will be rooted in the reality of Jesus' ascension, a narrative of reality which offers the Church stability for the present and a push to innovate into the future under Jesus' Lordship.

### Finding Stability in Sensemaking

Imagine for a moment being trained as a cartographer. After several years of schooling, you've finally landed a job. What is your job? Is it to find some preexisting

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<sup>12</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 97.

<sup>13</sup> Weick describes *doubt* as the ability of an organization to both believe and question what it knows. He writes, "You have to act as if what you retain is both true and false, both plausible and implausible, a combination of knowledge and ignorance." Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 357-358.

map that may somehow serve a purpose? Of course not. Your job as a mapmaker is to *make* a map. More than that, it is to make a map that represents a certain terrain — a terrain for which “there will be an indefinite number of useful maps” given that the terrain could be described in innumerable ways and that different kinds of maps serve different purposes.<sup>14</sup> The job of a cartographer is to make sense of the terrain from one particular angle that serves a particular purpose. Karl Weick suggests that this idea of mapmaking is an apt description of organizational *sensemaking*.<sup>15</sup>

According to Weick, sensemaking is the task of constructing cognitive maps that make sense of the *terrain* of experiences.<sup>16</sup> Put another way, it is the work of interpreting actions to name reality. As Weick writes, “[P]eople act their way into meaning... Action is decision-*interpreted*, not decision-driven.”<sup>17</sup> That is the opposite, or at least quite different, from what is often assumed in congregations and theology. What is often assumed by individuals and organizations – especially Presbyterian and Reformed congregations, perhaps – is that they know what is real and true and then therefore act on that knowing. Weick, however, suggests that this is not the case. Life, he says, is actually equivocal (ambiguous). People *want* to make sense of reality and find meaning, but the way that happens is through action *and then* reflection on that action.

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<sup>14</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 75.

We are not given a Master Map to make sense of everything in life. We live and make maps to understand the landscape we're living through. It may well be the case, then, that a congregation like Mt. Horeb can be given no great plan or design to follow that will create stability by acts of intention. However, the congregation may produce greater stability by making plans (plural) based on attention (instead of *intentions*) to past actions. Paying attention to past and on-going action – the work of sensemaking – could help Mt. Horeb interpret and understand who they are, where they are, and where they're going.

### The Parts of Paying Attention

In his collection of essays, *Making Sense of the Organization*, Karl Weick describes five main components of sensemaking: ecological change, enactment, selection, retention, and doubt.<sup>18</sup> It will be important to briefly define each of these components before seeing how they may apply to the life and story of a congregation like Mt. Horeb.

Ecology is the study of relationships between living organisms, including the relationship between humans and their surrounding environments. *Ecological change* in organizational theory then has to do with an organization's relationship to its *environment* and what happens when there is surprise, interruption or change in that environment. When organizational structure is disrupted, people are asked to fulfill roles they are unfamiliar with or unprepared for, important routines are interrupted or overlooked, a key

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<sup>18</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 96.

role (pastor, prominent family, financial contributor) is suddenly left unfilled.<sup>19</sup> These are ecological changes, and these changes affect the way people in an organization relate to one another and, Weick says, intensify “the activity of sensemaking” as actions are taken in response to the change in attempts to bring back stability.<sup>20</sup>

These actions taken in the face of ecological change, or in efforts of routine maintenance, are what characterize *enactment*. “The term ‘enactment’”, writes Weick, “is used to preserve the central point that when people act, they bring events and structures into existence and set them in motion.”<sup>21</sup> It is not the case, Weick believes, that people know what to do in a situation and then act accordingly. Rather, people and organizations act, and the actions have impact. It is, he says, the “doing that produces knowing” and also creates structures or new opportunities that were not previously there.<sup>22</sup> The enactment process involves acting in response to a particular experience, usually according to preconceived beliefs. That action produces an *enacted environment* — the results, artifacts, and social construction that is both externally visible (in that others can see the outcomes) and internally revelatory to organizations and individuals, producing what Weick calls “if- then assertions” (*if we do this, then that will happen*) which portray

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<sup>19</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 109-110, 125.

<sup>20</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 99, 97.

<sup>21</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 225.

<sup>22</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 177, 225.

how actions are related to outcomes.<sup>23</sup> How are these actions and environments to be understood and ultimately interpreted? That is the work of *selection* and *retention*.

Weick calls *selection* the “retrospective interpretation of enacted cues.”<sup>24</sup>

Interpretation is the key word there. Selection is about sifting through the sea of actions within and around organizations to interpret meaning and find answers.<sup>25</sup> Answers to marketing questions or, in our case, to the causes of church stability or decline. One of the key features of Weick’s understanding of selection is that an organization’s assumptions about their environment will directly affect their interpretations and their ability to deal with ambiguity. If an organization believes that *the right* answers or plans are out there waiting to be discovered, the organization is assuming their environment is concrete and analyzable. Established patterns and routines of understanding and acting will be used, sometimes limiting interpretation to predetermined boundaries.<sup>26</sup> If, however, an organization assumes there is no *right* answer to their questions, no perfect plan to be found, and that their environment is ultimately unanalyzable, the organization will be more inclined to try new things and to learn through trials.<sup>27</sup> Rather than passively seeking the right answer to what’s going on around them, one that fits their

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<sup>23</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 226.

<sup>24</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 238.

<sup>25</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 244.

<sup>26</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 248-249.

<sup>27</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 248.

predetermined understanding, the organization will seek to improvise toward an answer that works for them, lowering dividing walls and creating a new environment.

When enactment and selection happen in the face of ecological change, significant results can be produced. *Retention* is the organizational act of holding those results.<sup>28</sup> The results in themselves are a meaningful outcome because something has been learned. But the retained results also shape an organization's present understanding and future action, and so they serve, Weick says, as "an input to subsequent sensemaking."<sup>29</sup> What is retained creates a cognitive map, to use the image noted above, which both gives definition to an organization and determines how the organization may act.<sup>30</sup> Weick also notes, importantly, that stories and narrative can be key to the retention process because stories coordinate people and centralize them around common beliefs and goals. Stories create a culture, shaping the meanings an organization can interpret from data and the decisions they will make.<sup>31</sup>

At this point it seems the sensemaking circle is complete. Environments change, and actions are taken in response producing data for which interpretations can be made and retained, making sense of what's happened and offering definition for what's to

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<sup>28</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 305.

<sup>29</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 305.

<sup>30</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 327.

<sup>31</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 340-341.

come. But Weick names one more integral part of sensemaking: *doubt*.<sup>32</sup> When Weick speaks of doubt, he means that people and organizations must be able to both remember and believe what they have come to know *and* doubt what they know lest their perceived knowledge makes them stumble through what's actually going on around them. Weick writes,

In a changing world that is difficult to know and difficult to predict, it is important to hold retained meanings lightly...you have to act as if what you retain is both true and false, both plausible and implausible, a combination of knowledge and ignorance.<sup>33</sup>

This act of doubt can lead to wise action as opposed to overconfidence in the face of what's unknown.<sup>34</sup>

### When Sensemaking is Missing

To illustrate sensemaking, Weick employs numerous case-studies. But perhaps the most powerful and illuminative is of the 1949 Mann Gulch fire in Montana in which thirteen members of a sixteen-member *smokejumper* crew died.<sup>35</sup> Weick turns to the

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<sup>32</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 358. Weick also uses the term *remembering* to designate two sides to the importance of memory – the retained knowledge and the need to doubt what you know.

<sup>33</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 357-358.

<sup>34</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 376.

<sup>35</sup> *Smokejumper* is a term for wildland firefighters who are often parachuted into fire sites as a line of first attack against the fire. A summary of the Mann Gulch fire may also be helpful here. On August 5, 1949, sixteen smokejumpers were dispatched to fight a fire started by a lightning storm in the Mann Gulch area. The smokejumpers were dropped near the fire at 4:10pm along with their cargo, but in the drop their radio was destroyed. By 5:56pm, thirteen members of the crew had died. It wasn't until nearly 9:00pm that the remaining three survivors made it to a ranger station and rescue parties were sent out. What happened in that nearly two-hour time frame that led to the death of thirteen well-trained smokejumpers? Weick suggests several answers. First, and perhaps most importantly for Weick, the crew's experience was deadly because they were dropped expecting to find what is called a "10:00 fire", meaning they believed it could

Mann Gulch fire because, he says, it is an episode of “deficient sensemaking.”<sup>36</sup> Mann Gulch is a story of a trained and highly capable team who fail to sufficiently interpret the reality they were facing to their peril. As such, Mann Gulch exemplifies the importance of sensemaking for an organization, even one like Mt. Horeb, in the face of ecological change.

Weick summarizes the fatal events of Mann Gulch in a stark manner, but one which clearly demonstrates the importance of sensemaking in an organization. He writes, “organizations can be good at decision making and still falter.” Why?

They falter because of deficient sensemaking. The world of decision making is about strategic rationality. It is built from clear questions and clear answers that attempt to remove ignorance (Daft and Macintosh, 1981). *The world of sensemaking is different. Sensemaking is about contextual rationality.* It is built out of vague questions, muddy answers, and negotiated agreements that attempt to reduce confusion. People in Mann Gulch did not face questions like where should we go, when do we take a stand, or what should our strategy be? Instead, they faced the more basic, the more frightening feeling that their old labels were no longer working. They were outstripping their past experience and were not sure either what was up or who they were (emphasis mine).<sup>37</sup>

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be safely isolated by 10:00am the next day. For their entire experience with the fire, Weick argues that the smokejumpers lived with a belief in a *10:00 fire*. Even when the conditions changed dramatically and the fire became larger than expected, they continued to live *believing* it was a *10:00 fire* and acting accordingly. Secondly, the crew’s experience became deadly as their organization fell apart. Weick defines the smokejumpers as an *organization* because they have routines and patterns of action that draw them around a common purpose, because they fit a simple organizational structure as defined by Mintzberg, and because of their role structure (leader, second in command, crew member). This sense of organization unraveled when their purpose became unclear, their structure collapsed, and their roles were stressed. The disintegration of organization led most of the crew to act on their own behalf to their own peril, except for two members who fled the fire *together* (keeping a sense of team intact) and Wagner Dodge, the formal leader who continued to act out a leadership role on behalf of his team (or so he thought). Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 100-109.

<sup>36</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 107.

<sup>37</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 107-108.

Put another way, in the face of a turbulent change of circumstances (ecological change), the crew was unable to interpret (selection) what was happening around them in such a way that they could collectively doubt (doubt) what they thought they knew and improvise under the circumstances to create order. These tools of sensemaking could possibly have saved them and, in fact, the retained knowledge (retention) of this episode has changed Forest Service firefighter policy to save many lives.<sup>38</sup>

Mt. Horeb is a congregation facing their own fires of ecological change. As at Mann Gulch, sensemaking may be beneficial as they need new selective tools for stability and creating order in a new time.

#### Making Sense at Mt. Horeb

“You would hope to see all these benches full. I’m afraid that that’s not going to happen,” Larry said. “I feel like we’ve hit a lot of walls,” Kevin lamented. “I feel like the future is moving away from established religion. And it concerns me. I think Mt. Horeb will be in existence. I think we will struggle. And beyond that...” Beyond that, Patsy wasn’t sure.

These are voices of uncertainty from Mt. Horeb that we heard in Chapter Four. They have loved belonging to their *house*. They have learned to love the Lord and one another there. But now they are wondering how, and how long, the house can continue to be a lively place for belonging and service. Like the smokejumpers at Mann Gulch, the

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<sup>38</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 101.

assumed ways of operating are no longer working like they used to. Mt. Horeb is facing ecological change.

For years, Mt. Horeb's pews were filled with new generations of member's families and their friends. But now, the member's children have moved away. If they are part of a congregation, it's not Mt. Horeb. Characters who *always* filled certain roles have moved on, or passed on, and not all their shoes have been filled. Members who no longer want to drive at night to attend meetings or go to choir practice, no longer quite know what role they play. And in a culture – even in the Bible Belt – where “going to church” is not a given, the congregation is also wondering what role it plays in the community.

The broader culture has shifted, and the shift creates confusion for the congregation. As Weick writes,

The recipe for disorganization in Mann Gulch is not all that rare in everyday life. The recipe reads: Thrust people into unfamiliar roles, leave some key role unfilled, make the task more ambiguous, discredit the role system, and make all these changes in a context in which small events can combine into something monstrous.<sup>39</sup>

There is a sense in which this recipe for disorganization is being cooked up in many American congregations, including Mt. Horeb. Mt. Horeb is not facing a literal fire today (as they did 20 years ago), but the flames of tremendous change that have come in the past three decades, not to mention the past two years.

In the face of these flames, perhaps the worst thing Mt. Horeb could do is carry on believing they're facing their own *10:00 fire*.<sup>40</sup> That is, carry on acting and operating as

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<sup>39</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 110.

<sup>40</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 107.

they always have, believing they know what they're facing and that things will work out if they stick with it. This would be, to use Weick's terminology, remembrance without *doubt*. They are "outstripping their past experience",<sup>41</sup> which is frightening but necessary to name.

Of course, what the interviews in Chapter Four reveal is that Mt. Horeb seems to know they're not facing a *10:00 fire*. The question for them is not, *are things that different?* The question is *what do we do?* Mt. Horeb is asking *now what?* similar to the disciples in the days following the ascension. Mt. Horeb is a household with a rich history and gifts to share but one which is also facing a great deal of uncertainty as they peer into the future. In the absence of clear direction and well-defined roles, like at Mann Gulch, the organization – the house – can begin to unravel.

The community of disciples and early believers, however, did not unravel. Why? Two important things happened. First, the disciples are found "gazing up toward heaven" and witness two men in white robes announcing that Jesus will return.<sup>42</sup> This leads them to return to Jerusalem and wait for the promised Holy Spirit, who does indeed come and fill the believers with power, enabling them to be the witnesses Jesus promised they would be.<sup>43</sup> Second, in being filled with the Spirit they are also then given deeper participation in a story they've come to know. Remembering the story of "God's deeds of

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<sup>41</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Acts 1:10, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Acts 1:12-14; 2:1-11; 1:8.

power” gives them understanding and direction.<sup>44</sup> Peter’s Pentecost sermon demonstrates this story’s deeds and comes to culmination in the life of Jesus Christ, his death, his resurrection, and now ultimately his ascension and promised return. As Peter proclaims, “[L]et the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified,” and “of that all of us are witnesses.”<sup>45</sup>

The believers look back at “God’s deeds of power” and the deeds and acts of Jesus (*selection*), interpreting them together and discovering a new understanding (*retention*) of who Jesus is – “Lord and Messiah”<sup>46</sup> – and who they are – his “witnesses...to the ends of the earth”.<sup>47</sup> This story becomes the stabilizing plausibility structure by which they understand the past and present and which then guides their actions and interactions with others as they walk into the future.

This story continues and gives understanding and direction to Mt. Horeb. They are a congregation of witnesses who is promised the Holy Spirit and who share a story. The Spirit is the one who goes ahead of the Church, the whole household of God, and thus ahead of Mt. Horeb in life and witness to the ascended Lord and his kingdom. Thus, as we noted in Chapter Three, as Mt. Horeb shares in the life of the Spirit, they also therefore share in the life of the Lord who gives the Spirit and participate in his story.

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<sup>44</sup> Acts 2:11.

<sup>45</sup> Acts 2:36; 32.

<sup>46</sup> Acts 2:36b.

<sup>47</sup> Acts 2:32b.

They rest in his accomplishment, stand in his power, and walk under his reign and in the hope of his return.

But Mt. Horeb also has their own narrative, so to speak. Their own stories and acts of belonging and service which we heard in Chapter Four. This narrative is not separate from but related to their participation in the saving narrative of God. Like the disciples post-ascension, in that space of waiting, Mt. Horeb has a narrative of action they can look back on to find grounding and identity in the present and to live faithfully into the future as they both *remember* what they've come to know and humbly *doubt* what they know in ways that create flexibility and space for new action in a new time.

What this all might mean, firstly, is a continual catechizing in, and attentiveness to, the story of God's saving action in Jesus, his cruciform glory and power, and his present reign, intercession, and gifting of the Spirit. The congregation's relation to the Word will be primarily as storied-people who are being re-storied by the saving action of God. Worship, then, becomes the primary place where the congregation comes not as consumers but as participants, who need to hear, inhabit, and practice their part in the story. At a leadership level there are also ways of being attentive to this story – the past and present action of Lord – which I will illustrate below. Overall, however, in the face of ecological change, the congregation can live attentive to the narrative of God they know, interpret the present through it, and look for new ways to live faithfully in and out of that story.

Karl Weick writes that the “basic idea of sensemaking is that reality is an ongoing accomplishment that emerges from efforts to create order and make retrospective sense of what occurs.”<sup>48</sup> He then quotes Morgan, Frost, and Pondy, who say,

Individuals are not seen as living in, and acting out their lives in relation to, a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing. They realize their reality, by reading into their situation patterns of significant meaning.<sup>49</sup>

In this case, one might argue that the disciples did not *create* an image of wider reality. However, it could be said that this story – Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension; His present Lordship; his gift of the Spirit – becomes the “pattern of significant meaning” that allows them to realize reality. A reality they live into and out of as they speak, act, and embody their identity as the household whose cornerstone is the ascended Lord. If the congregation is to live as this household – if they are to be Christ-referential and not just self-referential – a continual attentiveness to this narrative is needed.

Secondly, however, Mt. Horeb also has their own stories that need attention. Mt. Horeb’s history and their continual actions (*enactment*) – their worship gatherings, meetings, meals, and processes for discipleship – produce raw data that, if retrospectively interpreted (*selection*), can provide *significant meanings (retention)*. Meanings that clue the congregation in on what they really believe about themselves, and God, and their role as members of God’s household. There are stories of belonging, of being *carried into church*, of finding a sense of family beyond the biological, of knowing God’s presence

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<sup>48</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 106.

<sup>49</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 106-107.

through other people. There are stories of service in the local elementary, in the company of other congregations, out of desire to give back, in the joy of being with. There is a rich history. Attentiveness to this history and the Spirit-honed gifts they have carried could help Mt. Horeb act forward into the future, remembering but interpreting those gifts for a new time, confident in Christ's ongoing intercession and enabling Spirit, and hopeful of his return. Again, I will give an illustration below of what this attentive leadership might look like.

Max De Pree once wrote, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."<sup>50</sup> The actions of sensemaking can help a pastor or ministry leader do this, offering up a story of the congregation, putting it in conversation with the redemptive story of God, and doing so in such a way that the story brings stability and meaning, and that familiarity with the story enables opportunities for new improvisational action. It is to this that we now turn.

### **A Household of Innovation**

In his book, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, Sam Wells proposes thinking of the Biblical story as a five-act play.<sup>51</sup> In his account, Act One is about God's creation, creation's turn away, and God's continual love; Act Two is about God's

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<sup>50</sup> Max De Pree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Currency, 2004), 11.

<sup>51</sup> Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 53. Wells admits in the preceding pages that he is riffing on and revising N.T. Wright's proposal of God's story as a five-act play which Wright is well known for. To read Wright's account, see: N.T. Wright, "How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?" [ntwrightpage.com](https://ntwrightpage.com), accessed March 26, 2021, <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/how-can-the-bible-be-authoritative/>. Originally published in *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.

covenant with Israel and their life in tension with God; Act Three is about Jesus and the fullness of God revealed in him; Act Four is about Jesus *inaugurating* the church as his body; and Act Five is “the end (or eschaton)”, which Wells describes as,

the drama of how God transforms the poverty of nature by the riches of grace, of how he turns fallenness and striving and pain into communion and gladness and joy by no other power but the power of the cross.<sup>52</sup>

Wells argues that the church today is living in Act Four, an act in which “the church has been given all it needs to continue to be [Jesus’] body in the world.”<sup>53</sup> And indeed, if what we have learned about the ascension is true, this statement is important for a congregation like Mt. Horeb.

In his ascension, Jesus has been given all authority in heaven and on earth and he has sent his Church in his authority – his name and the power of his own Spirit – to be the witness of his life, death, resurrection, and reconciling love, following the Spirit’s lead toward the horizon of his return. This is a task, however, which is largely unscripted. We have all the other *acts* (One through Four) to look back on to make sense of where and who we are today. We have words and story (Scripture), and interactions (the sacraments and prayer) that stabilize our life and witness. But we do not have *a* script, *a* design, *a* map, or *a* plan for living and organizing faithfully in our different contexts. This is an act which seems to require, as Wells and others suggest, *improvisation*.

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<sup>52</sup> Wells, *Improvisation*, 53-55.

<sup>53</sup> Wells, *Improvisation*, 54.

Improvisation means more than simply embellishing on past acts.<sup>54</sup> However, improvisation is also more than being “original, clever, witty, or spontaneous,” as Wells writes.<sup>55</sup> Speaking of improvisation in the context of Jazz, Karl Weick reminds, “improvisation does not materialize out of thin air. Instead, it materializes around a simple melody that provides the pretext for real-time composing.”<sup>56</sup> That melody is something the musicians already know. The melody is, so to speak, along with more basic musical scales, a language that the musicians have come to learn and know and can now innovatively riff on.<sup>57</sup>

Put in the context of congregational witness, improvisation means *riffing* on the known melody of the gospel to the point that new forms of faithful expression might arise, consistent with what has gone before yet radically different and fresh. Improvisation means we don’t just plan our way forward, hoping our actions will line up with our plans, but in commitment to Christ we do and design and redesign as an organization called Church, in the power of the Spirit, in order make disciples and give

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<sup>54</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 287. Weick argues that improvisation “lies on a continuum that ranges from ‘interpretation,’ through ‘embellishment’ and ‘variation’ ending in ‘improvisation.’” Whereas in music, interpretation and embellishment consist of taking liberties or imaginatively reinterpreting phrases of an original melody, improvisation *transforms* the melody into something new. Weick, “Improvisation as A Mindset,” in *Making Sense of the Organization*, 287.

<sup>55</sup> Samuel Wells, “Improvising Leadership,” *Faith and Leadership*, March 26, 2012, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/multimedia/samuel-wells-improvising-leadership>, quoted in L. Gregory Jones and Andrew P. Hogue, *Navigating the Future: Traditioned Innovation for Wilder Seas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 188.

<sup>56</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 290.

<sup>57</sup> Jones and Hogue, *Navigating the Future*, 187.

signs of the kingdom. Improvisation means, in ever changing environments, we may need to act our way forward toward the Lord's return, continuously interpreting our actions so that we become more flexible and able to faithfully fulfill our calling as Christ's witnesses until he comes again.

How might organizations actually do this? Mt. Horeb has previous knowledge and experience – their gifts of service and belonging – that they can riff on to improvise in the face of ecological change. They have tools for acting in ways faithful, but innovative. One voice that may be helpful in directing this innovative action is that of Clayton M. Christensen and his work on *sustaining* and *disruptive technologies*.

### Sustaining and Disruptive Technologies

In his internationally recognized book, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, Clayton M. Christensen extends the study of innovation. He argues that leading firms often fail not for lack of good management, hard work, or vision, but because they do not invest in *disruptive* technologies “until it is too late.”<sup>58</sup> To understand this theory, one needs to understand Christensen's distinction between what he calls *sustaining* and *disruptive* technologies.

*Sustaining* technologies are those which, Christensen writes, “foster improved product performance.”<sup>59</sup> They are basically upgrades of existing technologies — upgrades which keep buyers interested. *Disruptive* technologies on the other hand are,

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<sup>58</sup> Clayton M. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma: Why New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 1997), xxi.

<sup>59</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, xviii.

according to Christensen, "innovations that result in *worse* product performance, at least in the near term", that "underperform established products in the mainstream markets", but that, "have other features that a few fringe (and generally new) customers value. Products based on disruptive technologies are typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use."<sup>60</sup> To exemplify the differences between *sustaining* and *disruptive* technologies, Christensen focuses mainly on the particular product and history of disk drives.

Since their emergence in the 1950s through the 1990s, Christensen notes how many leading firms in the disk drive industry struggled or failed to sustain their lead.<sup>61</sup> His initial assumption for why this was the case was what he called the *technology mudslide hypothesis*. That is, trying to stay up to date with constant changes of technology was like, he writes, "trying to climb a mudslide raging down a hill."<sup>62</sup> But after analyzing nearly 20 years of data from "every model of disk drive introduced by every company in the world disk drive industry", Christensen found that his initial hypothesis was wrong.<sup>63</sup> Many of the leading firms in the disk drive industry actually worked to keep up with technology changes, developing *sustaining* technologies that improved their products over time. In fact, Christensen notes that,

In literally every case of sustaining technology change in the disk drive industry, established firms led in development and commercialization...When faced with sustaining technology change that gave existing customers something more and

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<sup>60</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, xix.

<sup>61</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 5-7.

<sup>62</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 8.

<sup>63</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 8.

better in what they wanted, the leading practitioners of the prior technology led the industry in the development and adoption of the new.<sup>64</sup>

Christensen says this reveals that these industry leaders did not lose their lead or fail over time due to mismanagement, passivity, risk-aversion, or because they couldn't keep up with the "mudslide" of changes in technology.<sup>65</sup> No, their eventual failure was due to an inability to predict, cope with, or invest in disruptive technologies. One example of this that Christensen gives is the 8-inch disk drive.<sup>66</sup>

Christensen's argument is that the case with disk drives is part of a noticeable pattern in many industries. Part of the problem Christensen notes is the constant push in established firms to continuously improve, striving for higher performance and higher margins.<sup>67</sup> Managers of leading firms that fail are, in fact, often doing what they've learned and been told to do. That is, Christensen writes, managers are "Listening carefully to customers; tracking competitors' actions carefully; and investing resources to design and build higher-performance, higher-quality products that will yield greater

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<sup>64</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 11, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 13.

<sup>66</sup> Until the mid to late 1970s, 14-inch disk drives were the standard disk drive size, accounting for most disk drive sales to mainframe computer manufacturing companies. However, in the late 1970s some smaller, entrant firms began manufacturing 8-inch disk drives. These smaller drives also had smaller MB capacity and were disregarded by the leading disk drive manufacturing firms who were primarily producing disk drives for mainframe computer manufacturers. The 8-inch disk drives were sold instead to companies putting them in a new technology: minicomputers. The buyers of the 8-inch disk drives did not produce mainframe computers and their customers needed technology different from that in mainframes. Once 8-inch drives found a place in the market, 8-inch drive manufacturers used sustaining technologies to improve the drives, ultimately leading them to outperform 14-inch drives in low-end mainframe computers, as well offering other advantages. The market for 8-inch disk drives eventually caused the long-established manufacturers of the 14-inch disk drive to fail. In fact, Christensen writes, "every 14-inch disk drive maker was driven from the industry." 8-inch disk drives were the disruptive technology that led to the failure of the leading firms. Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 16-18.

<sup>67</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 24.

profit.”<sup>68</sup> But, ironically, it is these very things that end up leading to the firm’s downfall. Smaller, entrant companies who have less to lose are often more likely to succeed by risking losses on *disruptive* technology. But, for managers of well-established, leading companies, Christensen notes, it is very difficult “to motivate competent people to energetically and persistently pursue a course of action that they think makes no sense.”<sup>69</sup> And, since customers and markets for future disruptive technologies don’t exist, it is impossible to analyze the data and offer it as an argument for investing in the disruptive.<sup>70</sup>

What then can managers and the companies they work for do? In the latter half of *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, Christensen addresses this question, offering several case studies to depict ways of handling the challenges of disruptive technologies. Two of the ideas he offers were particularly interesting, especially when considered in the context of Christian leadership under the authority of the ascended Lord.

The first idea Christensen suggests is for a company to create or utilize an independent organization that could focus on disruptive technology for emerging markets. He writes,

Rather than continually working to convince and remind everyone that the small, disruptive technology might someday be significant or that it is at least strategically important...large companies should seek to imbed the project in an organization that is small enough to be motivated by the opportunity offered by a disruptive technology in its early years.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, 98.

<sup>69</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, 84.

<sup>70</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, 143, 144.

<sup>71</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, 134-135.

The idea here is that the main organization could continue the work of sustaining while the newly created or acquired organization could commit to the risk-taking work of experimenting in emerging disruptive technologies. This isolates the risk, allows the big, driven organization to keep striving for an upward path, and the independent organization to work into emerging markets that could result in profit for the whole firm.

A second suggestion Christensen gives is for an organization to pay attention to its *processes* and *values*, or what we might call the organizational culture. Three factors affect what organizations can or cannot do, says Christensen: Resources, processes, and values.<sup>72</sup> Resources are the *things* of an organization. The assets: people, brands, money, equipment, etc. Resources are often one of the main things leaders look at when thinking about what their organizations can do or whether they can meet the challenges before them. However, Christensen argues that resources don't tell the whole story.<sup>73</sup>

If resources are the *what* used to produce technology, processes are the *how* and values are the *why*. Every organization has processes — some formal, some informal — by which it transforms the input of resources into *products*.<sup>74</sup> However, Christensen notes that when processes that have worked well for one thing get transferred to a different task it will likely be inefficient or fail (like the smokejumpers at Mann Gulch operating under the assumption of a *10:00 fire*).<sup>75</sup> Values, on the other hand, set the priorities of an

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<sup>72</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 162.

<sup>73</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 162-163.

<sup>74</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 163.

<sup>75</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 163.

organization. Values speak to what the organization is striving for. Thus, good managers learn ways to communicate the values of an organization so that every level of the organization is working toward them.<sup>76</sup> However, in a way similar to processes, an organization's values that historically allowed them to succeed and set higher priorities may become their "disability" that keeps them from entering lower markets of disruptive technologies.<sup>77</sup> Managers must, therefore, keep before them not just the resources of an organization, but its processes and values with a sense of *remembrance/doubt*, as Weick says. They must constantly ask whether the processes and values which have been effective for sustaining the organization will work when new challenges (or, *ecological changes*) arise, or when there is a desire to produce disruptive technology.<sup>78</sup> The answer to these managerial questions may be, "No," which Christensen says is okay. It means that a manager can then work to change the processes and values to fit the task at hand or create a separate entity with the processes and values needed to succeed.

Leaders can learn by reflecting back with *doubt*. This allows leaders to improvise and create innovative answers that will meet the current challenge, rather than trying, so to speak, to fit the square processes and values of an organization into a circle-shaped problem or technology. When considered in the context of a congregation like Mt. Horeb, these pathways for innovation may also prove to be fruitful as they seek innovative ways of being faithful to the ascended Lord in the face of change.

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<sup>76</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 164.

<sup>77</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 166.

<sup>78</sup> Christensen, *The Innovator's Dilemma*, 181.

## Leading People to Live Out the Disruptive Gospel this Side of the Ascension

The gospel is inherently disruptive. It is about a God whose regal sovereignty is expressed in relational vulnerability, a savior whose exaltation comes through humility and death, and a summons for all who want to save their life to lose it for the sake of Christ that they may be found with him. The gospel is disruptive.

In the hymn, “Christ of the Upward Way,” verse one reads, “Christ of the upward way, my Guide divine, where Thou has set Thy feet, may I place mine...”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Christ has gone *upward* in his ascension, and he calls the church to be his witnesses and representatives, walking in the world the way he walked. Yet, to follow Jesus, to place our feet on his upward way, often means moving downward in humility and the risky business of *agape* love. As we heard in Chapter Three, it means inhabiting the spaces he did in his earthly ministry. Our congregations and organizations know that in their heads and hearts. They want to trust that the risen Jesus reigns, intercedes for them, and empowers them to represent his reign as they walk his way. But could it be that our ministries are structured in ways that don’t allow them to take the risky steps necessary? What would it be to take up the cross and act forward, improvisationally, under the hope of the ascension?

Congregations and ministries are well managed in many (okay, maybe just some...) cases. They’re offered new research on why small groups are so necessary/unnecessary, the latest book that will help unleash the gifts of church officers,

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<sup>79</sup> Walter John Mathams, “Christ of the Upward Way,” 1915, in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), hymn 344.

a worship experience that fits the context and culture of a place just right. Yet, in a risk-averse-like desire to keep the congregation coming and contributing, we leaders don't necessarily know how to lead people further up and in to communion with the ascended Lord whose *wounds* are still visible above, due to his downward path. Leaders don't often know how to lead God's people further out and in to relationship with those whom Jesus associated himself with – the poor, the hungry, the sick, the traitor, the sinner, who will seemingly offer no profitable return – or how to risk everything on the hope of his reign and return. What Christensen's work suggests is that maybe we don't have processes and values embedded in our ministries that will allow us to live into our identity (*the household of God*), lean wholly on our true Source of power and perseverance, or step out in the risky business of developing disruptive signs of God's hope in our communities. Maybe we don't have systems for paying attention to and enacting the seemingly absurd technology of the kingdom of God that may only be revealed profitable to the world in the light of Christ's *parousia*.

There is no perfect correlation, of course, between Christensen's work and congregational life. There is a difference between disk drives and *dikaiosyne* (justice and righteousness). Yet, for those leading congregations and ministries under the hope of the ascended Lord and in the power of his Spirit, seeking to bear witness to his disruptive gospel in a very disrupted world, Christensen's proposals for creating pathways to innovation may prove helpful.

First, Christensen's proposal to invest in disruptive technologies through a separate organization might be transferrable to ministries in the form of them creating a

new and separate team from the main leadership team to invest time, prayer and energy into experimenting in *risky* ministry moves. Rather than a pastor or CEO trying to convince a Session or board that they should try risking finances, possible property damage, or something else on a ministry endeavor, a separate team could be created with a budget and resources to pray, plan, and try ways of connecting in the community, ministering to a need, or demonstrating the gospel in some other way. The planning for such things will not eat at the time of the main board's meetings. There'd be no need to convince others. There would instead simply be space for this team to experiment, and then the possible subsequent joy of seeing their disruptive innovations bear fruit. All this frees the main leadership team to do their sustaining work and the new team to produce the processes needed to address the task at hand and create on-ramps for the whole congregation to participate in the freedom of gospel living and service. For a congregation like Mt. Horeb, this could mean enabling teams, separate from the Session, to reflect on their culture of belonging and service and to riff on those themes in new ways.

Second, Christensen's proposal for managers to pay attention to processes and values has substantial significance for ministry leaders. Congregations are constantly thinking about resources. Small to average-sized congregations are ever aware of their lack of cash flow, lack of young volunteers, lack of children, yet wealth of family-feel, rich history, and love of place. All this was clearly articulated in the voices we heard from Chapter Four. Larger congregations pay attention to the resources needed for program development (a sustaining technology), impact, and influence on the structures

surrounding them. But while resources are an important thing to consider, Christensen's urge to pay attention to the *processes* by which our ministries function and our *values*, the *why* we function, is essential.

As Mt. Horeb is discovering, their processes which once bore fruit are perhaps becoming road-blocks to innovation. And not only that, but their processes are draining energy from congregational leaders who feel alive *servicing* extrinsically but sense it's more of a duty to serve a church committee. As Kevin noted in his interview, the Session and congregational leadership have *talked* about how to have a "growing, thriving congregation... for hours on end," and he's worn out from talking about it and not seeing much change.

On the other hand, Gail's art show was an enacted moment when she seemed to feel that the congregation was thriving. The community was welcomed. Congregational members were active and serving. The hospitality of the household was extended by its own members, yet beyond itself to others. This was action that stemmed not from a reflection on resources, or hours of talking and planning, but from (Gail's and others) brief reflection, and then improvisation, on values. This also seems to be the kind of adaptive action that folks like Kathy think could be necessary to faithfully walk into the future.

Asking congregational leaders to consider the organization's values (*toward what end do we exist?*) and their processes could lead to more innovative and adaptive action. It may also be a way to open a discussion on the difference between service *out* and service *within*, and to consider how leadership roles can actually be an act of self-giving

as leaders are asked to focus on *the household* not simply for the sake of self-maintenance but toward the goal of self-giving. As the Spirit fills the Church with the life of the risen and ascended savior that it might be poured out for the life of the world, so congregation members can be asked to fill leadership roles that will help the congregation consider the processes by which their life could be shared with and for the community. Without their offering of leadership, the congregation may be limited in the ways they actualize their witness to the hope of Christ in loving, tangible ways.

Congregations and ministry-related organizations are trying to live in sometimes rapidly changing contexts, wanting to bear the disruptive yet good news of the gospel. But they are often operating with systems inadequate for the task at hand, sustaining processes that may ultimately prolong a congregation's life, but not in such a way that they're willing to risk substantially in order to really *live* faithfully and hopefully as *the body*, "the fullness of him who fills all in all," members the household with the ascended Christ himself as the cornerstone.<sup>80</sup> Weick's tools of sensemaking and Christensen's proposals for making inroads for innovation may be incredibly helpful resources for leading a congregation like Mt. Horeb to live and act faithfully forward, trusting in his sustaining power and hoping toward his redemptive return.

### **Sensemaking and Innovation in Practice: An Example**

Up to this point, this chapter has been somewhat theoretical. *Could* and *might* have been repeated words. It is perhaps necessary, therefore, to offer a picture of an

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<sup>80</sup> Ephesians 1:23; 2:19b, 20b.

attempt at an integration of ascension-hope, congregational attention, and organization theory. The geographical location for this project has largely been Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. That was where the seeds for this project were planted and where most of the preparation, study, and discovery were done. But the context in which this proposal is now being carried out and experimented is with the people of, and community around, Timnath Presbyterian Church in northern Colorado (hereinafter TPC).

Like Mt. Horeb, TPC is an average-sized congregation in the Presbyterian Church (USA) that is over one-hundred years old. TPC is also located in an area that was predominately rural until recent years, with proximity to a nearby university. Furthermore, like Mt. Horeb, it is obvious that TPC has faced, and is facing, ecological change as children of members have moved away, as the surrounding area is transitioning from rural to one of the fastest growing bedroom communities in northern Colorado,<sup>81</sup> and as the congregation must consider if and how they might faithfully minister in new ways to a new surrounding population. TPC is a congregation seeking stability in the present and direction for how to walk faithfully forward toward the redemptive horizon of the Lord's return. The following is a snapshot of several ways the leadership of TPC have begun walked together and working toward those ends.

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<sup>81</sup> "Larimer County Business Opportunities," Town of Timnath, accessed March 14, 2022, <https://timnath.org/economic-market-report/>.

## Stabilizing Stories

As we noted above, stories are an important part of the sensemaking process because stories can coordinate people around common beliefs and goals. Stories are also the way we capture what people *do* that leads to their knowing. As Weick writes,

Culture coordinates action at a distance by several symbolic means, and one that seems of particular importance is the use of stories. Stories remind people of key values on which they are centralized.”<sup>82</sup>

Shared stories can stabilize the organization and become the frame through which the organization sees and out of which it can learn to act innovatively. The stories we have spoken of in this project are the stories of Jesus’ ascension and congregational narratives. For this reason, leaders at TPC have begun reflecting on two stories.

First, TPC’s leadership is keeping before them the Biblical story of Jesus’ mission and action, and the invitation to share in it, by repeatedly reflecting on Philippians 2:1-13 (see Appendix C). In January of 2022, the Session decided to begin practicing Dwelling In the Word, a group listening practice in which members are invited to be attentive to what the Spirit is saying to the church through Scripture and through the voice of a neighbor. This was a new approach for the Session’s devotions at TPC. Previously the task of *leading devotion* had been assigned to a different elder for each stated meeting. The elders often came with something they had found online. Now, the Session is looking at the same Scripture passage at every meeting and interpreting it together, and in the context of all that has been brought to the meeting.

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<sup>82</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 341.

The passage's invitation, the poetic reiteration of Jesus' mission and action, and the reminder of God's ongoing redemptive work (and our participation in it) are important for the leadership at TPC for several reasons. First, the Scripture invites the Session to have *the mind of Christ* in their discernment and action. Second, and importantly, the Scripture keeps before the Session the central story of Jesus – his divinity and humanity, his humility and obedience, his cross, and finally, his present exaltation as the ascended Lord. Third, the Scripture encourages the Session in the working out of salvation, yet only in the context and comfort of knowing it is God who is at work in them. In this way, we also see how the ascension-related elements of *identity and purpose, power and perseverance, and hope*, are all here:

*Identity/Purpose:* The Church, called to share life together and look to others interests as they share in Christ's Spirit, mind, and ministry.

*Power:* An enabling to *will and work* because of God's work in them.

*Hope:* The crucified Christ is highly exalted. Jesus, the ascended one, is Lord.

For the foreseeable future, the Session will keep this scriptural story in front of them.

The second story that the TPC leadership has begun reflecting on, however, is their own. An example of this comes from a recent Session retreat where the elders were asked to *tell a story of when TPC was at its best*. The answers stretched back decades and generated numerous memories of past actions the congregation had taken together – housing refugees, hosting community dinner-theaters, supporting local businesses and employees after a disaster. Importantly, this selective reflection on congregational history and action also produced a retained meaning.

As Weick notes, retention is about more than organizational or individual memory – retention is *what matters* that has been held on to.<sup>83</sup> And, indeed, as the elders looked back at TPC’s enactment, they realized that what mattered to them – when they believed TPC was at its best – was an extrinsic orientation. Jim, one of new TPC elders, remarked how all the stories they’d told had an *outward focus*. All the history they highlighted were times when the congregation was working together, but for the sake of others around them. Or as Paul says, when they were looking “to the interests of others.”<sup>84</sup>

Like Peter on Pentecost, the retrospective interpretation of God’s action in Christ (from Philippians 2) and of TPC’s action as God’s people, helps to make sense and stabilize the congregation in the present, even in the face of ecological change. TPC’s leadership is learning to see that they are a congregation called and excited to seek the interests of others as they share in the Spirit, mind, and ministry of Christ who humbled himself for their sake, but is now highly exalted and will one day be confessed by all as Lord (*parousia*). They are a household invited to work out signs of salvation in the community around Timnath, but only as they also learn to trust that it is the Savior, God, enabling them “to will and to work for his good pleasure.”<sup>85</sup> And this sensemaking has become the impetus for new, faithful action.

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<sup>83</sup> Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 306.

<sup>84</sup> Philippians 2:4.

<sup>85</sup> Philippians 2:13.

## Innovative Actions

The TPC Session has begun designing new maps for acting forward in ways that are faithful to the values they've noted from their narratives but also flexible enough to be changed as needed. Clayton Christensen's proposals for innovation (disruptive technologies) have also guided the design process. In fact, as Christensen argues for managers to pay attention to *processes and values*, and not just resources, the Session's interpreted values for TPC were a spark for new actions.

*Values.* When the Session interpreted *extrinsic orientation* as a hallmark of TPC at its best, they began to ask what new outward actions needed to be taken to live into this perceived value. Actions for the sake of the community around Timnath but also for the sake up building up the congregation within. They named a need to foster connections with other organizations and businesses on Main Street and with the Town of Timnath leadership, put dates on the calendar for social events that would be open to the whole community (an Ice Cream Social, an Artisan Show, participation in the town's Holiday Lighting), and indicated a desire to expand TPC's relationship with the elementary school located across the street from the church's facilities. The ideas came as a result of reflecting on *values*. These actionable items were discerned collectively as ways of being and serving that made sense given the congregation's story. It is my hope that together we also learn to see how these actions can make sense given our place in the household of God and our sharing in the life of the ascended Savior who *emptied himself* and has now been exalted. These are hopeful actions that make sense if we value following Jesus'

cross-shaped path that leads us into the world, and trust we are walking in and toward the dawning light of the Lord's return.

One thing the Session did see immediately is that in desiring to enact these new value-driven ideas they would need to look again at some of TPC's organizational processes.

*Processes.* In the past, ideas for ministry at TPC would often be enacted either via committee channels or after long deliberation of the Session. Worse, ideas would be talked about and never acted upon. The Session could see, therefore, that the previous processes for organizing the household were not going to work well in the present moment. They wanted processes that would enable the congregation (and not just committees) to act faithfully and in new or renewed ways sooner, rather than later. Together, the Session designed two broad plans of action that relate to Christensen's proposal to use separate organizations to produce disruptive technologies.

First, three elders agreed to meet to re-design the committee structure at TPC in a way that would meet the current moment. This design will include merging current committees so that there are new conversations between teams previously separated and so that there are less meetings. Rather than the whole Session taking time to produce a design for committee/team structures, these elders were set apart for the task and will bring the proposal back to the Session. Second, the Session agreed to begin employing short-term teams to execute actionable items rather than pushing those items to committees. One team was almost immediately formed to plan and put on a gathering of local business and community leaders in Timnath to discuss mutual support, especially

since Timnath currently has no Chamber of Commerce. Another team is being formed to review Christian formation at TPC and the possible need for a Youth and Children's Director. These teams will be disbanded as soon as their work is accomplished, and it is hoped that their singular focus and short-term time span will allow for a different engagement from congregational members than was previously offered through the committee structures. There is no known outcome to these team's work. But by employing these separate teams, the Session is investing in possible *disruptive* signs of the kingdom with the hope that they may bear good *returns* for the congregation and community, to the glory of God.

I also hope and believe that these are ways TPC's leadership is heeding the invitation to be innovative this side of the ascension – riffing on the values of the kingdom and the congregation in order to witness signs of Christ's reign until he returns. Though they may be small steps, these are innovative solutions for acting out the values of TPC as they lean into their calling as members of the household of God and learn to improvise new ways of working out signs of salvation, trusting the One who is working in them and through them. One more concrete example of how these innovative solutions are unfolding is in the congregation's relationship with the local elementary school across the street.

*Timnath Elementary.* Several members at TPC sensed a need to expand the relationship between the congregation and the local elementary school. For some time, the congregation had given needed items to the school (snacks, headphones, gift cards), but there was a desire to not simply *give to*, but to *be with* the school in some way. This

idea hit a stand-still in TPC's *Mission Committee* and Session meetings but was carried forward by an elder and two interested members. A meeting was set up with the school's administration who looked favorably on the idea and proposed offering opportunities for mentoring.<sup>86</sup> A list of times and grade-levels were given to one of the members from TPC who then shared the opportunity at a *Mission Committee* meeting before announcing it to the whole congregation in worship the following Sunday. After worship, the elder and members spearheading this opportunity spoke with individuals during the fellowship hour and quickly filled seven of the eight openings. An opportunity for supporting elementary students that once was discussed only in committee meetings (and which would have died in committee) was instead taken up by a separate team of interested leaders who devoted time, prayer, and energy to the project. They then opened it to the whole congregation as a way of witnessing the love of Christ in the community. Something that previously would have taken months to plan, was set up in a matter of weeks.

These are ways the leadership at TPC is looking back, like Peter in Acts 2, to make sense of and stabilize the present, and walk faithfully into the future toward the hope of Jesus' return. Even more fundamentally, these are ways of acting as though the story we confess is true: Jesus Christ – crucified, risen, ascended – is Lord, and we are the household built on him. That is the reality congregations live under. It is the reality even echoed in congregations (as we saw in Chapter Four). But it is a reality that congregations like Mt. Horeb and Timnath Presbyterian may need helpful tools for

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<sup>86</sup> In this case, *mentoring* meant being a positive adult role-model in a child's life; showing up once a week at the school to talk with a child, play games, or help with homework.

organizing their households to act upon. Karl Weick's theory of sensemaking and Clayton Christensen's work on disruptive, innovative technologies, could be two of those tools, enabling the congregation to act as a household of innovation, improvising new paths for faithful action for the new moment they're in.

### **Conclusion**

“That we'd have found a way to adapt is what I would hope to see somehow.”

This is what we heard Kathy say in Chapter Four. When asked what she would *expect* to find and what she would *hope* to find at Mt. Horeb in ten years, she said she hoped the congregation would have “found a way to adapt.” A way of still inhabiting the household values of belonging and service, but in a new way. Different than before, yet faithful still. This kind of adaptation requires attention, which sensemaking assists with, and innovation, which is a necessary hallmark of *Act Four*, the current moment between Jesus' ascension and return.

If the church is not a self-referential community, but *Christ referential*, finding its identity, life, hope, and mission in actual relationship with the crucified and ascended Lord, it makes sense that congregations begin to come alive when they act in kenotic (self-giving) ways, rather than merely self-sustaining ways. Stability, especially in the face of ecological change, is necessary. But perhaps, as Acts and the New Testament show, only for the sake of acting forward in fellowship with and witness to the living Lord whose body Mt. Horeb and TPC are member of, whose blessing and power sustain, and whose promised glorious return pierces the present with hope. There is no map for how to act forward in these times, no blueprint to follow. But there is a story to inhabit:

the salvation history of the missionary Triune God. Even more specifically, the gospel accounts of Jesus which his ascension thrusts us back to so we may meet him there and, by retrospective interpretation, make sense of his present reign and the spaces he would have us work as his body. The places he would have us inhabit with hope as members of his house.

Making sense of their own narratives in which God has worked, congregations like Mt. Horeb and Timnath Presbyterian can then learn faithful and innovative ways of acting forward in their contexts, not *as Jesus*, or as those who merely appreciate his example, but as those who actually share his mind, character, and ministry because they share in his risen and ascended life and reign through the Spirit. They are those *seated* with him, blessed by him, hoping in him. With renewed organizational leadership, congregations can become more attentive to this reality, and innovative as they learn to act out and walk in this reality as witnesses to the ascended, reigning Lord.

## Epilogue: Walking Forward Attentively

In June of 2021, I walked with seven colleagues from my Doctor of Ministry cohort down the central coast of California. We were supposed to be walking as pilgrims on the *Camino Portugués* in Portugal and Spain, part of the Camino de Santiago. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic we were forced to stay state-side and ended up as pilgrims in California, following a section of the *Camino Real*, or *royal road*. This was a route created by the Spanish to connect the twenty-one Spanish missions dotting the California coastal landscape.<sup>1</sup> We had traded in the Way of Saint James for this *royal* way.

On that *Camino*, we walked. For roughly 130 miles, we walked. Sometimes alone, but often with at least one other person, we walked. When I told this to a congregant at Mt. Horeb, he quipped that I must have solved all the world's problems since I'd had so much time to think. Indeed, one might assume that with all that time walking you'd get a lot of thinking done. But when you don't move in a car for a week, when you don't sit in front of a computer for hours, when your main task each day is simply to walk for six to eight hours, everything begins to slow down. Instead of overthinking everything, I stopped thinking so much and instead became present to what was right in front of me: the road I was on, the landscape I was in, the people I was with, the strangers I encountered, myself, the Lord. The pilgrimage didn't present any sudden epiphany, but rather a serious attentiveness to the present. I can't help but wonder if

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<sup>1</sup> "El Camino Real," California Mission Walkers, accessed March 31, 2022, <https://missionwalk.org/elcamino-real/>.

that's also what is needed for congregations and leaders right now in light of Jesus' ascension.

In his essay, "Organizational Redesign As Improvisation," Karl Weick writes that "*attention* rather than *intention* drives the process of designing... Since the only things we can sense are enacted events that have already taken place, attention rather than intention becomes central to the design process."<sup>2</sup> Attention, not intention. That's quite a shift. As a pastor, it often feels like I am supposed to be guiding my congregation to be intentionally impactful, to be driven by a purpose, to lay a plan for growth or gospel-formation. The intention is the goal, and a plan is needed to get there. Not all planning is wrong, of course. But if my cohort's walk in California taught me anything about leadership, it is that getting to the end is not the only goal. Just as important is paying attention to the steps you took, and are taking, to get there.

Part of what this project has been suggesting is that as congregational leaders seek to lead faithfully, and as congregations design ways to walk forward participating in the life and mission of God for the world, attention is necessary. Attention to the past and present action of our ascended Lord, and to the actions of the household built on him. Congregations today don't need leaders to give them another intentional, strategic plan for ministry. They need pastors who can help them attend to the One in whose name they minister. They need leaders who help them know and remain mindful of the ministry Jesus has enacted and accomplished in their name and for their sake. They need to attend to their present calling as participants in his life through the Spirit. They need help

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization*, 61.

considering him “who endured such hostility against himself from sinners” so that they “may not grow weary or lose heart” but patiently endure toward the dawn of full redemption.<sup>3</sup>

Avenues for congregational attentiveness may be largely contextual. However, at Timnath Presbyterian Church we are experimenting in Session meetings with Dwelling On The Word, in worship with a more participatory liturgy,<sup>4</sup> and by gathering midweek to be present to Christ’s Presence as we also learn to be more present to one another around tables. Furthermore, as congregations like Mt. Horeb carry echoes of the ascended Christ’s life and reign, pastors and leaders can help congregations like them attend to those echoes as signs of how they share in Jesus’ life now and carry the hope of his return. This attention can also then facilitate organizational faithfulness, aiding a congregation to act and improvise on the melody of the gospel in ways attuned to their own gifts and values, in reliance on the Spirit, and in patient but purposeful anticipation of Christ’s coming again.

Sensemaking, ethnography, and even the task of narrating a congregation’s history in the light of the gospel can all be helpful tools and actions. At their core, however, they carry one objective: To guide the congregation at a pace and in a way that

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 12:3.

<sup>4</sup> In recent months, the worship committee and I have implemented participatory actions which were absent from the gathered worship experience at TPC. These actions include sung responses to the Prayer of Confession, a verbal response to the reading of Scripture (“The word of the Lord: **Thanks be to God**”), and interactive Prayers of the People where both prayer requests are offered and prayed for and the congregation prays together with a responsive refrain (“Lord in your mercy: **Hear our prayer**”). The congregation also has a long tradition of beginning service with silence and the ringing of the church bell, calling hearts and minds to attention. Building on this, periods of silence have also been incorporated elsewhere in the service.

they can remain attentive. Attentive to God's saving story in Jesus; attentive to his present reign at the right hand, his empowering Spirit, and his promised return; attentive to his household and the steps we take as we walk and act forward in patient hope.

## Appendix A

### Discovery Interview Invitation and Questions

Person Conducting Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Date and Time: \_\_\_\_\_ AM/PM

Person Interviewed: *Gender:* Male / Female

Age (estimate by decade): 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Years participating at Mt. Horeb: 0-2 3-5 6-10 11-15 15-20 20+

Research Question: *How does a theology of the ascension live in the imagination of Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church?*

#### Opening Invitation and Questions:

Thank you so much for your willingness to meet with me/us today and participate in this interview. This interview is part of my Doctor of Ministry research on the theology of Jesus' ascension and how that impacts congregations like Mt. Horeb in their ministry and participation in God's mission to redeem the world. But the questions that I/we ask you will really be about your experiences as a participant in the life of Mt. Horeb. There are no right or wrong answers. I just want to hear what you've experience. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will follow a designed set of questions.

As a reminder, I will also be recording our conversation. This is simply so that afterwards I can have a full record of what is said and so be more able to give my full attention to you right now. Any comments you make that are compiled in my data can remain anonymous. Are you still willing to have this interview? [Thank you].

## Interview Questions

*Question 1:* How did you come to faith in Jesus (how you came to know God)?

Q1a: How then did you come to be part of the life and ministry of Mt. Horeb?

*Question 2:* Can you tell me about a highlight of your time at Mt. Horeb?

Q2a: Would you say you've even experienced joy at Mt. Horeb? (If not at Mt.

Horeb *when* have you experienced joy?

*Question 3:* Share of time when you have experienced confusion or doubt or disappointment.

Q3a: Has this ever occurred in your experience at Mt. Horeb?

Q3a1: What was the outcome of that experience? (PROBE: feelings of the confusion, people or passages you turned to?)

*Question 4:* When have you felt most connected to others at Mt. Horeb (PROBE: Specific circumstance; person; place?)

Question 5: How has your connection at Mt. Horeb related to your connection with God? (If it hasn't; when *have* you felt connected to God?)

*Question 6:* When has Mt. Horeb made a significant contribution/impact to your life?

Q 5a: How have you made a contribution/impact on Mt. Horeb's life?

*Question 7:* If you could take a time machine 10 years into the future, what would you expect to find at Mt. Horeb? What would you hope to find?

## Appendix B

### Information and Consent Form for Interviews

As your pastor and as a student at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, MI. I am conducting an ethnographic<sup>1</sup> study as part of my Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) research. My research is on local congregations participating in God's mission to redeem the world. More specifically, I am trying to learn how Jesus' ascension may offer congregations a right starting place and purpose, a true source of power and perseverance, and a greater hope for participating in the mission of God in their context. Part of my research includes interviewing a set of members from Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church to engage their experiences as participants of the congregation.

**Procedure:** If you consent to being interviewed, you will be asked several questions in an oral interview that will take place on in October or November. I plan to record the interviews.

**Time Required:** The interview will take approximately 30 minutes and will follow a designed set of questions.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer.

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<sup>1</sup> \*Ethnography noun. eth·nog·ra·phy | \ eth- 'nā-grə-fē\ Definition of *ethnography*: A research method that is central to knowing the world from the lens of human relations. *also* : the work that is produced from such research.

**Risks/Benefits:** There are no known risks or benefits to participating in this interview. However, it is possible that you will find sharing your answers meaningful and that the final review and interpretation of answers will benefit the congregation of Mt. Horeb by helping us to see how we experience God and one another, where our hopes lie, and how Jesus' ascension lives in the imagination of the congregation.

**Confidentiality:** Your name can be kept confidential in all of the reporting and writing related to this study if you wish. Only myself (and possibly a person from the Mt. Horeb Listening Team) will be present for the interview and taking notes. If you wish your answers to remain anonymous please check the box below.

I would like my answers to remain anonymous

**Sharing the results:** My plan is to construct an ethnography — that is, a written account of what I learn — based on the interviews I conduct at Mt. Horeb along with my historical research of the congregation. This will be submitted to my D.Min advisor, Dr. Kyle Small, in December. I also hope to share what I learn from this study with our congregation. Portions of my research may be printed and made available to members.

**Signing:** By signing below you are agreeing to an audiotaped interview for this research study. If you agree to participate in this research a copy of this document will be given to you.

**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Print Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Print Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Philippians 2:1-13 and Dwelling In the Word Prompts

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

- What did *you* hear? (Listening to your neighbor)
- What did *we* hear? (Listening to the community)
- How was it to read this way? (Listening to our souls)

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