

## DO CHURCHES HAVE DNA?

For several years now, news reports have been full of startling breakthroughs in genetic research. Scientists are mapping the human genome, seeking answers to the mystery of life. Some kinds of cloning have become a reality. Specific disease-causing genes have been isolated. We are in the first stages of a history-shaking genetic revolution.

What does this mean for the church—for its nature and mission? Thinking of the church genetically raises fascinating and fruitful questions about the nature of the church—the church as a living organism with its own genetic structure, its unique DNA.

What is the church's DNA? Can it be decoded? Can it help us better understand what the church is essentially—how it lives, grows, reproduces, and fulfills God's purposes?

Understanding the church genetically is *not* the way it has been understood for many generations. In this chapter we examine the genetic traits of the DNA we have inherited from Christ and what these inherited traits mean for the church. This is one way of viewing the church genetically. In later chapters we will explore other dimensions of the church's rich and complex genetic inheritance.<sup>1</sup>

Theology can be thought of as a kind of genetic typing. Creeds are declarations about the church's perceived DNA. The Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) was an especially seminal declaration that shaped the way Christians have thought of the church ever since.

The Council of Nicea declared that the church is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*. This classic Nicene formula (*una, sancta, catholica, apostolica*) continues to shape the way we think about the church today.

Christians of varied traditions accept these four classic characteristics of the church as fundamental components of its DNA. Whatever else we may say about the church, it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, or it is not the true church of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

These four classic characteristics, often referred to as the “marks” of the church, have been almost universally accepted through the centuries. “Within the Reformation there was much difference of opinion about the number of *notae*,” or marks, G. C. Berkouwer wrote, and yet

the four words themselves were never disputed, since the Reformers did not opt for other “attributes.” There is a common attachment everywhere to the description of the Church in the Nicene Creed: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Even after the Reformation, in spite of all the differences in interpretation which appeared with respect to the four words, this usage remained the same. . . . The striking thing here is that the general question about whether the Church is truly one and catholic, apostolic and holy, is not asked; rather, a number of [additional] marks are mentioned [such as] the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline.<sup>3</sup>

## The Marks as the Church’s DNA

Two things stand out when we examine the classic marks in the light of history. First, they arose in a particular context and were in fact used as a test to exclude Christians who understood the church differently. Second, at various points in history, earnest Christians have argued plausibly that *other* traits more truly define the essence of the church.

Consider an example from the nineteenth century. Benjamin T. Roberts (1823–93), principal founder of the Free Methodist Church, took a different route in describing the essential character of the church. Writing in 1860, Roberts affirmed that the “provisions of the gospel are for all.” He then asked,

*But for whose benefit are special efforts to be put forth? Who must be particularly cared for? Jesus settles this question. . . . When John sent to know who he was, Christ charged the messengers to return and show John the things which they had seen and heard. “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up,” and as if all this would be insufficient to satisfy John of the validity of his claims, he adds, “and the poor have the gospel preached to them.” This was the crowning proof that He was the One that should come. . . . He that thus cared for the poor must be from God. In this respect the Church must follow in the footsteps of Jesus. She must see to it, that the*

gospel is preached to the poor. . . . This was the view taken by the first heralds of the cross.<sup>4</sup>

Roberts then quotes the apostle Paul:

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

Roberts notes, “Similar statements in regard to the rich are not to be found in the Bible.” He concludes, “Thus the duty of preaching the gospel to the poor is enjoined, by the plainest precepts and examples. This is the standing proof of the Divine mission of the Church.”<sup>5</sup>

Roberts is making a claim about the nature of the church itself, about its DNA, not just about evangelism. This is even clearer as he goes on to quote Stephen Olin (1797–1851), president of Wesleyan University and one of Roberts’ theological mentors. In his sermon “The Adaptation of the Gospel to the Poor,” Olin said:

There are hot controversies about the true Church. What constitutes it—what is essential to it—what vitiates it? These may be important questions, but there are more important ones. It may be that there can not be a Church without a bishop, or that there can. There can be none without a Gospel, and a Gospel for the poor. Does a Church preach the Gospel to the poor—preach it effectively? Does it convert and sanctify the people? Are its preaching, its forms, its doctrines adapted *especially* to these results? If not, we need not take the trouble of asking any more questions about it. It has missed the main matter. It does not do what Jesus did—what the apostles did. Is there a Church—a ministry—that converts, reforms, sanctifies the people? Do the poor really learn to love Christ? Do they live purely and die happy? I hope that Church conforms to the New Testament in its government and forms as far as may be. . . . I wish its ministers may be men of the best training, and eloquent. I hope they worship in goodly temples, and all that; but [much more important:] They preach a saving Gospel to the poor, and that is enough. It is an apostolic Church. Christ is the corner-stone. The main thing is secured, thank God.<sup>6</sup>

B. T. Roberts wrote similarly in an 1864 article, “Gospel to the Poor”:

*The preaching of the Gospel to the poor is the standing miracle which attests to its Divine origin.* It is placed by our Saviour in the same class

with raising the dead, and cleansing lepers—something which no man acting from the mere promptings of nature ever did, or ever will do. . . . To go out, without purse or scrip, among the poor and the outcast, and proclaim the Gospel of God in all fidelity, having no dependence for support but the promise, “Lo, I am with you always,” is a course of life, which one will not be very likely to pursue until the end of his days, unless he has been sent by God. He who does this, is in the true succession. He walks as Christ walked.<sup>7</sup>

Roberts makes both a sociological and a theological argument about the priority of the poor—or perhaps more accurately, a sociotheological argument. “Wesley and Whitefield, going to the collieries and commons, and into the streets and lanes of the cities, proclaiming the Gospel to the neglected masses, . . . did more to rescue England from infidelity than all the learned divines who wrote essays upon ‘the evidences of Christianity,’”<sup>8</sup> he said. Roberts believed that “in all ages” the poor are most ready to respond to the gospel. He added,

If it is the duty of the Church of Jesus Christ to preach the Gospel to the poor, then all the arrangements of the Church must be made with a view to the accomplishment of this end. . . . It must be aimed at directly. Every thing . . . that has a tendency . . . to defeat this, must be thrown out. If the Gospel is placed within the reach of the poor it is placed within the reach of all. . . . Preaching that awakens the attention of the poor, and leads them to Jesus, will interest all classes.<sup>9</sup>

Roberts concluded his article with a Jubilee appeal to Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:

Let us come back to the spirit of the Gospel. Let us get down so low at the feet of Jesus as to forget all our pride and dignity, and be willing to worship with the lowest of our kind, remembering that we are the followers of Him “who had not where to lay his head.” “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HATH ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR; *he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.*”<sup>10</sup>

Two fundamental claims about the nature of the true church are made here: First, that preaching the gospel to the poor is an identifying mark of the church—part of its essential DNA. Second, that this mark is a test of whether the church is genuinely *apostolic*—is the church walking in the steps of Jesus? Whoever ministers the gospel among the poor “is in the true succession. He walks as Christ walked,” Roberts observed. The

church that preaches the gospel to the poor “is an apostolic Church,” Olin said. Note that these authors appeal to Scripture, particularly to the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, not to particular creeds. They are digging deep, looking for the church’s real DNA.

## A Broader Perspective

If we go back to Scripture in search of the church’s DNA, we discover that preaching the gospel to the poor as an essential mark of the church has at least as much biblical support as do the four classic marks.<sup>11</sup> There is actually more direct biblical basis for ministry to and among the poor than for universality or catholicity, for example, as a mark of the church.

In fact, Jesus’ example of and teaching about the gospel for the poor raises pointed questions about the four classic marks. How biblical are they? How *comprehensive* are they, in terms of the full mystery of the body of Christ? How completely do they reflect the church’s DNA?

The four classic marks are, in fact, highly ambiguous. They don’t give a clear enough picture of the church’s DNA. Through the centuries, theologians have debated just what these marks mean and how to read them. Frequently the marks have been interpreted, or reinterpreted, to harmonize with some other schema. For example, someone concerned about the spiritual vitality and evangelistic vigor of the church will interpret these marks in a way consistent with that concern—as did John Wesley.<sup>12</sup> Someone concerned with authority in the church might emphasize unity in doctrinal teaching and apostolic authority and succession, as in classic (pre-Vatican II) Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Someone concerned primarily with church growth may reinterpret these marks to undergird a theology of church growth, as does Charles Van Engen in his book *God’s Missionary People*.<sup>13</sup>

Often, Ephesians 4:3–6 is assumed to be the key text for the classic marks:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This important passage highlights particularly the unity (and by implication, catholicity) of the church—“one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” A number of other New Testament passages—especially John 17—also speak of the unity of the church. Other passages in Ephesians point to the church’s holiness (especially 5:25–27) and apostolicity (note 2:20,

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” and 3:5, “revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets”; cf. 4:11).

But is this approach inductive or deductive? Discerning the church’s true DNA requires an inductive approach, starting with all the biblical evidence. Ephesians 4:7, for example—the very next verse after the key declaration of the church’s unity—says, “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” This clearly introduces the contrasting element of charismatic diversity.

When we look carefully at the New Testament, we discover that the four classic marks really tell only half the story. They highlight but one side of the church’s DNA. We need a fuller picture. It would be more biblically accurate to say that the church is:

DIVERSE as well as ONE  
 CHARISMATIC as well as HOLY  
 LOCAL as well as CATHOLIC or UNIVERSAL  
 PROPHETIC as well as APOSTOLIC

Classic theology has tended to speak of *one holy catholic and apostolic* church. Less frequently has it spoken of the church as *diverse, charismatic, local, and prophetic*. Yet if we take our ecclesiological cues from the Book of Acts, or even the Gospels, we see it is the second set of qualities that often is emphasized. In Acts, for example, the *diversity* of the church is clear in the stories of the early Christian communities, such as those at Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, and Corinth. The *charismatic* nature of the early church is obvious in the many “miraculous signs and wonders” that the apostles performed (Acts 4:30; 5:12; 14:3; and 15:12; for example). The *local* nature of the church is evident precisely in the fact that the church had to be planted and contextualized in specific local social environments. The *prophetic* character of the early church is seen in the church’s formation of a contrast society (note Acts 2:42–47) whose values and worldview clashed with those of the dominant society (Acts 19). Of course, one can also find evidence in Acts of the unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity of the church.

How do we reconcile these two sets of contrasting marks? Genetics can help us find the balance. DNA is always made up of four base pairs of compounds. The components of each pair are not opposites but are complementary. Likewise, the contrasting sets of marks of the church that we have discussed are not in opposition to each other but are instead *complementary*. They are essential truths that are at some level in tension with yet necessary to each other. The genetic counterpart of *unity* is not division but *diversity*. The genetic match of *holiness* is not sinfulness but *charismatic giftedness*. The counterpart of *catholic* is not locally

confined but *contextual*. And *apostolic* pairs not with heretical but with *prophetic*, a characteristic that focuses on justice as well as truth and on being an alternative society as well as a winsome evangelistic community. No one under biblical authority would claim that the true church is divided, sinful, heretical, and locally confined! But many sincere Christians have in fact denied that the true church is essentially diverse, charismatic, contextual, and prophetic.

The genetic pairing of these sets of traits comes into sharp relief when we see how they imply differing models of the church. When the church is a dynamic movement, it tends to be prophetic, charismatically empowered, diverse (perhaps contrasting with the larger church), and contextualized to its immediate social environment.<sup>14</sup> But when the church transitions into a more settled institution or organization, it tends to celebrate (and perhaps enforce) its oneness, holiness (that is, sacredness as institution!), universality, and apostolic authority.<sup>15</sup>

In chart form, we see two contrasting models:

<b>Organic Movement</b>	<b>Organized Institution</b>
Diverse, Varied	One, Uniform
Charismatic	Holy (sacred)
Local, Contextual	Catholic, Universal
Prophetic Word	Apostolic Authority

## Completing the Church's DNA

Have our churches been operating with only half of their DNA? Have we reduced the mystery of the church to a neat but incomplete package, thus setting the stage for splits and new movements that sense intuitively that something is missing? For example, this dynamic helps explain the emergence in the second century of the New Prophecy Movement (so-called Montanism), which emphasized charismatic gifts that the larger church was beginning to ignore.<sup>16</sup>

As we have seen, the contrasting marks of the church are not in opposition to each other. They are like the left and right sides of the human brain; they balance each other. Faithful churches live in dynamic tension with these pairs of character traits, or genetic predispositions. The church is the multifaceted emblem of the kingdom of God, and these contrasting qualities present complementary, corollary truths about the complex mystery that is the body of Christ. When churches operate with their full DNA, they become, in effect, stem cells of the kingdom of God.

If we view this second set of marks as the missing half of the church's DNA, a more complete yet complex picture of the true church emerges. The church is *simultaneously* one and diverse, holy and charismatic, catholic and local, apostolic and prophetic.

We may ask some pointed questions about this contrasting, often neglected second set of marks—questions that in fact reach beyond ecclesiology to the whole Christian theological enterprise.

- Is there not at least as much biblical basis for the second set as for the first?
- Would not a proper Trinitarian ecclesiology stress both sets in mutual interdependence, like genetic pairs?
- Is the first set (taken alone) biased against the proper work of the Holy Spirit?

If we base our churches on the full range of biblical revelation rather than only on particular creeds, we have a fuller, more potent, and truer image of the mystery that is the body of Christ. These two contrasting sets of characteristics *together* make up the complex reality of the church. Each pair represents complementary facets of the church's life that are essential to its genetic makeup.

## The Biblical Roots of the Missing Half

Scripture shows that the “missing half” of the church's genetic code is just as firmly grounded in divine revelation as are the traditional marks.

1. *The church is not only one; it is also many.* It is manifold and diverse. Consider the diversity of the first Christian congregations (Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, for example). Note the biblical passages celebrating the ethnic, socioeconomic, and class diversity of the church (for example, 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:23–29; Col. 3:11). The New Testament highlights not only the unity we have in Christ but also the diversity that makes this unity so miraculous. Unity in spite of great diversity is one of the most amazing things about the early church.

Further, it seems legitimate to apply the “one body, many members” teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 to the universal as well as the local church. The church, locally and globally, is *both* one and many.

2. *The church is charismatic as well as holy.* The same Holy Spirit who sanctifies the church invests it with diverse gifts (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:7–16; Heb. 2:4). It is the *Holy* Spirit who gives gifts. The church func-

tions best with both the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit, incarnating both the character and the charisma of Jesus. Several Scriptures directly link the holy (or sacred or set-apart) character of the church with its being a gift-endowed community of the Spirit (for example, Acts 1:8; 2:4–38; Heb. 2:4; 1 Peter 2:9). Also, the church is often described in Scripture as holy and charismatic, though in different passages.

Historically, however, the church has found it hard to hold these two characteristics together, both in theology and in practice. Church history offers varied examples of tensions at this point, including the early-twentieth-century split in the Holiness Movement that produced modern-day Pentecostalism.<sup>17</sup> Strangely, churches have difficulty holding the fruit and the gifts of the Spirit together in creative balance.

3. *The church is both **local** and **universal**.* It exists simultaneously as the worldwide body of Christ (in this world and beyond) and as very diverse, particular local communities, each with its own special flavor, style, and culture. The church both transcends culture and immerses itself in particular cultures.

Here again, the church has trouble maintaining a balance. In its mainline forms the church has tended to value uniformity over particularity, universality over locality, cultural transcendence over cultural incarnation, and stability and predictability over innovation. Sometimes it has gone to the opposite extreme.

Biblically, the church is both local and universal. The New Testament use of the word “church” shows this (for example, Matt. 16:18; 18:17; Acts 8:1; 9:31; 11:22–26; 13:1; 15:22; 20:17; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 5:29–32; Rev. 2–3). Further evidence is the history of early Christian communities (pictured especially in the Book of Acts) and apostolic teaching about adapting to local customs regarding food and dress (note Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:9–13).

The New Testament puts at least as much stress on the local character of the church as it does on its universality. We miss the richness of the church’s DNA if we fail to see this.

4. *The church is just as truly **prophetic** as it is **apostolic**.* The church is built, after all, “on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20; also note Eph. 3:4–5; Rev. 18:20). Jesus is both the Apostle and the Prophet who establishes the church (Luke 1:76; 13:33; 24:19; Heb. 3:1). The biblical pairing of “apostles and prophets” signals that the two belong together.<sup>18</sup>

The church is apostolic in the sense that it is sent into the world as the Father sent Jesus, sent to continue the works he began (John 14:12; 20:21). Jesus first commissioned his twelve apostles, then Paul and an expanding corps of apostolic witnesses (Rom. 16:7; Eph. 4:11). Faithfulness to both the words and the works of Jesus Christ—both his life

and his teaching—is necessary for true apostolicity. This is why B. T. Roberts and others are right to insist that genuine apostolicity means preaching the gospel to the poor. But apostolicity also means faithful witness to who Jesus really is in truth—fidelity to the gospel of Jesus and the gospel *about* Jesus. Faithfulness to the words, works, and life of Jesus Christ together define the real meaning of apostolic succession.

But the church is prophetic as well as apostolic. This is true in two ways. First, the church is an actual community that visibly incarnates the prophetic messages of justice, mercy, and truth found in the Old Testament prophetic books and in the life of Jesus. Second, the church is prophetic in proclaiming the good news of the reign of God within the present world. This will mean different things in different historical contexts, but it always means being salt and light in the present world (Matt. 5:13–14; John 8:12; Phil. 2:15). It always means holding up before people the joy, promise, and cost of the kingdom of God.

Being “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets” means the church is an apostolic *people*, not just a church with apostles; it means being a prophetic *people*, not just a church with prophets. There is the apostleship and prophethood of all believers as surely as there is the priesthood of all believers. Churches demonstrate this reality when all the gifts, functioning corporately, constitute the church a prophetic people (1 Cor. 12–14; Eph. 4:7–16; Rom. 12:4–10).

The full range of Scripture reveals that the church is *both* one and diverse, *both* holy and charismatic, *both* universal and local, *both* apostolic and prophetic.<sup>19</sup> The church becomes powerfully dynamic in any context when these paired marks become its experience. When they don’t, Christians are robbed of essential parts of their genetic endowment.

## The Gospel to the Poor

Where, then, does the gospel to the poor fit into the church’s DNA? Is it an essential mark of the church or only secondary? If it is essential, how does it connect with the eight marks discussed above?

The answer is found in Luke 4:16–21 and related passages.<sup>20</sup> The truly apostolic church continues in the world the works that Jesus began. This is why Jesus sent word to John the Baptist, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see” (Matt. 11:4). The key point: “Good news is preached to the poor.” Translation: Here is the true church! The gospel for the poor is the test that shows whether the church is apostolic. More exactly, preaching Jesus Christ to and faithfully incarnating the body of

Christ among the poor is a key sign that the church is apostolic—that it really is sent by Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

Preaching the gospel to the poor is powerful precisely because it *combines in one* the apostolic and prophetic notes, holding them together. This is no doubt what B. T. Roberts had in mind when he said “preaching the Gospel to the poor is the standing miracle which attests to its Divine origin,” and what John Wesley meant when he called preaching the gospel to the poor “the greatest miracle of all.”<sup>22</sup> It is a miracle because it won’t happen unless the church is empowered by the Spirit and captivated by the character of Christ. For a church to preach the gospel to the poor is more of a miracle than are physical healings. Of all the “miraculous signs and wonders” in the church, this is the greatest. It is more miraculous for the church to transcend in this way the laws of sociological dynamics than for the laws of physics or physiology to be transcended in a healing or physical miracle.

The church is uniquely, divinely both apostolic and prophetic when it ministers the gospel to and among the poor in fidelity to the words, work, and life of Jesus Christ. This requires being empowered by the Holy Spirit, the one through whom the Son “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant,” humbling himself, becoming “obedient to death” (Phil. 2:7–8).

*Preaching the gospel to the poor is essential to the church’s faithfulness.* It is a test of the church’s apostolic mark. It is a sign that, spiritually speaking, the church is genetically related to Jesus and is being conformed to his likeness. Apostolicity is rather abstract and easily loses its tie to the actual life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Ministering to and with the poor is concrete action, not abstract concept. It is done or not done. Claims of apostolicity ring hollow if the church is not in fact good news for the poor. Whatever else apostolicity may mean, it certainly means incarnating the gospel among the poor. Here, then, is a key test of the church’s apostolicity.<sup>23</sup>

In faithfully ministering the gospel to and among the poor, the church is both apostolic and prophetic. It is both holy and charismatic, because it demonstrates God’s holy love powered by the Spirit.<sup>24</sup> It is both catholic and local, because ministry to and among the poor is always a universal, global concern even while it is always a matter of specific places. Similarly, preaching the gospel to the poor combines the unity and diversity of the church. It unites the church in a common gospel mission while it also affirms the world’s cultural mosaic as the church incarnates Jesus’ love among the diverse populations of the world’s poor.

## The Great Confession and the Great Identification

The question is not just *what* we confess but also *who*—and *whose*—we are. It is not enough simply to say that the church must minister among the poor, powerful as this is. In the Gospels, we see not only what Jesus did but also who he is. We find Peter saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and Jesus responding, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. . . . and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:16–18). Again, the issue is not just what Jesus did but also who he is. Jesus is himself the “chief cornerstone” of the church (Eph. 2:20), and the church is based on the confession of him as “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The church is based on who Jesus Christ is and on what he provides for us in his life, death, resurrection, and continuing reign. The purpose of the church is not to help people be religious; it is to help them live like Jesus Christ seven days a week.

And so the question of the true identity of the church comes back to the identity of Jesus Christ. The meaning of being the body of Christ depends on who Jesus Christ is. If the church truly is the body of Christ, it has Jesus’ DNA. Our ecclesiology (how we understand the church) depends totally on our Christology (how we understand the person and work of Jesus Christ).

In other words, the true church combines *the great confession* (“You are the Christ . . .”) and *the great identification* (“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” [John 20:21]). The great confession is that Jesus Christ is Lord, Savior, and Liberator of the world. The great identification is that we are his body, share his spiritual DNA, and must follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:21). We, the church, are his disciples, servants, and priests. Think of the many “as” passages (“Love each other as I have loved you” [John 15:12], for example). Or, in the words of the apostle John, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6).

The church is born in the great confession of, and great identification with, Jesus Christ. So Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Matt. 18:20). Jesus spoke of his disciples “abiding” or “remaining” in him and of our finding our life in him (John 15:4–7). This is the great identification. And if the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, our identification with Jesus will lead us to do what Jesus did: preach the gospel to the poor. It runs in the genes of the true church. Ministry to and with the poor runs in the family.

The great confession and the great identification constitute biblical ecclesiology, the meaning of Christ's body. The church is born out of this *koinōnia* of the Spirit, this identification with Jesus Christ. Identification with Jesus through the Spirit issues in the *great communion* or community—the church (*koinōnia* the communion of saints)—and the *great commission*, identification with the disciple-making mission of Christ as given in Luke 4:18–19, Matthew 28:19–20, and 1 Peter 2:9.

## The Pavement Test

Does the understanding of the church's DNA presented in this chapter stand up to the pavement test? Does it work on the streets—in the homes and offices, schools and factories, prisons and hospitals, where the church is called to minister? Or is this just theory?

As a reality check, we sent a draft of this chapter to Mark Van Valin, a friend who for a dozen years has faithfully pastored an urban church in Indianapolis. His response accented especially the church's identification with Jesus Christ and his coming kingdom. His words capture much of the thrust of this book:

The creeds, Acts, and the epistles give guidance in determining the “marks” of the church. I have found great help, however, in simply seeing Jesus' person and work as the compass by which all other things become clear. Jesus' intimate life with the Father and the Spirit, and his invitation to graft us “in,” will forever stretch our vision of the *unity* of the body. His cross, with its sacrificial, self-denying posture before the Father will call us ever deeper into *holiness*. His resurrection, the proof of his lordship, will continue to birth confidence in the victorious *catholicity* of the church. His incarnation, his “Emmanuel” presence that continually seeks out the margins of a sinful race, will forever direct our sense of *apostolic* mission.

The sociological implications of these marks challenge me as I try to lead the people at West Morris Street. I also think they hold the key to a peculiar witness that would capture the world's imagination and whet its appetite for God.

Another mark of the church strikes me as vital to our self-understanding and our mission. This is the *apocalyptic* nature of the church. [Genuine Christians] are in earnest to get to heaven. If we are convinced of a coming Kingdom, we should be set free to live courageous and sacrificial lives here and now.

Yes! The body of Christ, united to Jesus, stretching forward toward that day when the kingdom comes in fullness. It is this intimate connection with Jesus, our head and forerunner, that prompts the church

to flesh out in today's world the meaning of being one and diverse, holy and grace-filled, universal yet local, apostolic and prophetic.

## Conclusion

What, then, can we say about the church's DNA? Three things, in particular:

- By themselves, the four classic marks of the church are inadequate and one-sided. A fuller appeal to Scripture reveals the necessary key complements to the traditional marks.
- A fuller understanding of the marks of the church that stresses the necessary complements to one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, yields an understanding of the church that is both theologically richer and missiologically more powerful, affirming that the church is also diverse, charismatic, local, and prophetic.
- A biblical ecclesiology will emphasize that the church is the body of which Jesus alone is head. The faithful church will radically identify with the life, works, and words of Jesus Christ, because Jesus is its progenitor. A key sign of faithfulness is taking the gospel to the poor through the power of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus did.

Our endeavor to decode the church's DNA must conclude with a warning: There will always be a tendency for the church to drift away from the more radical marks to the more manageable ones. There will always be the tendency to over-objectify the marks, making them abstract attributes of the church as institution or invisible reality rather than as flesh-and-blood community. Therefore, the church must always be alert to its biblical DNA—especially the more “radical” components—staying close to Scripture and to radical expressions of Christian community.

Obviously, this look at the church's genetic structure only begins to decode the church. Fully decoding the church's DNA is a task that is no doubt beyond us. Mapping the spiritual genome of the church will require more than one brief survey. But perhaps this introduction will prove useful in understanding more fully the church's life and mission. It gives a broader picture of the *mystery* and *complexity* of the church and will also help us decode other issues that we will examine in this book.

*Mystery.* The church is a mystery because it participates in the mystery of the incarnation, the mystery of the Trinity, and the mystery of the kingdom of God (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; John 17:23; Eph. 1:9–10;

3:6–10; 5:32; Col. 1:26–27). But God has revealed to us “the plan [*oikonomia*] of the mystery” as it centers in Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:9, NRSV). The church has the high calling to live out the Good News within society so that we may see God’s kingdom come and his will done “on earth as in heaven.”

*Complexity*. The church is a complex organism, partly because it is a living organism. It is simultaneously a spiritual, a social, and a physical organism. (Christians have bodies and live in time and space.) Our next move, then, is to ask: What more can we learn about the church by exploring the concept of *complexity*? This will be the focus of the next chapter.

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## Heartland Church Discovers the Body

Pastor Darrell Dorset had been serving Heartland Evangelical Church for three years. Things were going well. He had come to love the people, and they appreciated his open spirit, his love, and his biblical preaching. The church was growing not only in number but also, many felt, in spiritual depth.

In the spring, sometime after Easter, Pastor Dorset began a series of sermons on the nature of the church. He had never preached on this subject before, so it was a learning experience for him. He knew that the Book of Ephesians was the a good place to find rich material on the church, so he decided to base his sermon series on the first four chapters of that book.

Several years earlier, Pastor Dorset had read a seminary textbook that talked about the “marks” of the church. He found his old textbook and reviewed the passage about the “four marks”: one, holy, catholic, apostolic. With this in mind, Pastor Dorset began a careful study of Ephesians. *Why not build my sermons around these four marks?* he thought.

Along with the sermon series, Pastor Dorset decided to try something he’d heard about from another pastor. It was risky, but he thought the people would buy it. He proposed replacing the usual Wednesday night prayer meeting for six weeks with small groups that would meet in members’ homes. Each group would study Ephesians, the same passages he would preach on.

A few people weren't happy about the change in routine, but the church agreed to try it. They trusted their pastor, and they could hardly object to some extra Bible study.

To give the congregation a chance to warm up to the topic, Pastor Dorset decided to begin the small groups three weeks before the sermon series started. He gave each group an outline with several discussion questions and appointed two leaders for each group, one to guide the discussion and one to jot down comments and questions that came up. He asked the scribes to give him copies of their notes to help him make the sermons practical.

Things went well the first three weeks. Pastor Dorset was surprised that attendance at the small groups was greater than that at the usual Wednesday prayer meetings. People were talking about what "church" means and what the New Testament church was like. The response to his first sermon, on the unity of the church, was encouraging.

Monday night after the first sermon, Pastor Dorset got a call from Ray Schilling, one of the group leaders. "Our group discussions have been really good," Ray said. "Questions have come up I never thought about. And we've been having some great prayer and sharing times.

"We had an interesting discussion on unity and oneness. You know, Roberto and Leda are in our group, and they're fairly new to the church. We're getting more diverse. How do we have unity and diversity at the same time? And Roberto wanted to know what the gifts of the Spirit are all about.

"But actually I have a different question, pastor," Ray continued. "We had a big discussion last week about Ephesians 1:23, where it says the church is 'his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.' What in the world does that mean?"

Pastor Dorset knew better than to be the answer man and give a learned response. So he replied, "Well, what do the people in the group think?"

"Some say it is referring to the risen Christ, not the church," Ray said. "Others think it must mean the church triumphant, when we all get to heaven. I don't know."

The pastor had an idea. "Let's try this," he said to Ray. "What key words do you see in that verse?"

"Well," Ray replied, "certainly 'body,' and I guess 'fullness.' And maybe 'everything.' And of course, 'church' from the previous verse."

"Right," said the pastor. "Now, we've got three more weeks. As you're working through the rest of the passages, look at other verses where those words occur and compare them. See what you find and let me know."

Ray agreed, and the key words from Ephesians 1:23 helped spark the discussions over the next weeks. Ray liked to study on his own, and in a commentary he discovered that the phrase “members together of one body” in Ephesians 3:6 is actually one word in the Greek, *syssōma*, “joined in one body” or “one-bodied together.” He reported his finding to the group. Debbie Smithson, one group member, pointed out how often Paul used the word “together.” “Are we really ‘one body together?’” she asked. “What does that mean? Is it like we all have the same genetic code or something?”

That kicked off some lively discussion. Jim Richards, another group member, said, “You know, I saw something on the news last night about DNA and genetic research. If the church is the body of Christ, do you suppose it has some kind of spiritual DNA?” Jim liked the idea, and since he was the scribe, he stuck that in his notes. Pastor Dorset was intrigued when Jim’s notes landed on his desk.

Meanwhile, Pastor Dorset continued his sermon preparation. As he went back and forth in Ephesians and other Scriptures, Jim’s question kept popping up in his mind. Does the church have DNA? He worked the idea into his fourth sermon, in which his theme was the church as apostolic.

The sermon series ended, and so did the small-group discussions. Wednesday night prayer meeting resumed. Everyone felt that the sermons and the groups had deepened the church’s life.

But the question kept percolating in Darrell Dorset’s mind: Does the church have DNA? If so, what is it? What does it *really* mean that the church is the body of Christ, that Jesus is its head? He decided to read up on genetics a bit as he continued to study the Bible.

A couple of weeks later Pastor Dorset ran into Ray Schilling at a local restaurant. They were both alone, so they shared lunch together and soon were talking about the church.

“I kind of miss our small group,” Ray said. “We should do that again.” The pastor had thought about that, too, but summer was coming on, and it didn’t seem like a good time to start something new. He discovered, though, that Ray was beginning to think in similar ways about the church. The two decided to meet for an early breakfast once a week to discuss these things and to pray and study the Bible together. Pastor Dorset thought it was a good discipling opportunity. Besides, he found he actually learned things about what the church is and what it could be through his talks with Ray. They developed a deeper bond in Jesus Christ.

It was only months later that Pastor Dorset realized that a shift had occurred in his thinking and even in his preaching. He was beginning to think and talk of the church as a living organism—as something alive,

not just as an organization or program or building. He discussed his thoughts with Ray. Ray understood. “I guess I’ve been thinking that way, too,” he said.

As it turned out, this was only the beginning of the story.

## Questions for Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. The creeds define the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” This chapter identifies Scriptures that suggest the church is also diverse, charismatic, local, and prophetic. Why is it that often only some of the church’s genetic traits are emphasized and others are slighted?
2. Try to imagine how history might have developed differently over the past two thousand years if the church had defined itself as “diverse, charismatic, local, and prophetic” rather than as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”
3. What social dynamics or other factors cause the church to ignore the mandate in Scripture to preach the gospel to the poor?
4. If your local congregation began to think more in organic terms, defining the church as a body instead of as an organization or building, what changes might occur?
5. Of the Scriptures or marks (genetic traits) of the church mentioned in this chapter, which ones seem especially important to you right now? To your church? Why?
6. What do you think of Heartland Evangelical Church’s attempt to reach a deeper understanding of what the church really is?
7. Do you see any signs that Heartland Evangelical Church is *one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*? Is there any evidence that it is *diverse, charismatic, local* (rooted in its locality), and *prophetic*?