Volf’s ambition in writing this book is to offer a distinctly Free Church view of the relation between person and community in Christian theology. He wants “to counter the tendencies toward individualism in Protestant ecclesiology to suggest a viable understanding of the church in which both person and community are given their proper due.” (p. 2) In this process, he engages Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as representative of a Catholic perspective and John Zizioulas as representative of an Orthodox perspective. In the Introduction, he sets the stage by noting some trends in modern life and corresponding implications for the church. One trend he points out is a “clear and irreversible ‘process of congregationalization’ of all Christianity.” (p. 13) He notes these trends not just in Protestant circles, but even in Orthodox and Catholic spheres, as well (where it may be resisted, but not, he feels, ultimately successfully). He observes that modern societies are marked by progressive differentiation into various interdependent and yet autodynamic subsystems. . . Whereas in premodern European societies the church still represented “a kind of basic element of security and limit to variation for all functional and media spheres,” today it has become a specialized institution for religious questions. (p. 14) This differentiation has contributed to the commoditization of religion, along with the low degree of ascriptivism (and corresponding privatization of decision) which also characterizes modern societies. So whereas in the past what you believed – especially religiously, what religion you were – was ascribed to you as a result of race, geography, social status, whatever. Now it is seen more as something that is chosen. (This is true not just of religion but in other areas of life as well – vocation, e.g.) Volf summarizes the impact these and other factors have had on the church; then he reflects that although history does indeed teach that with regard to the development of its own order the church is to a large extent dependent on the developments within society itself, the social form of the church must find its basis in its own faith rather than in its social environment. Only then can churches function effectively as prophetic signs in their environment. (p. 15) Also in the Introduction, Volf lays out what he hopes to accomplish by making this an ecumenical study (engaging at length with Ratzinger and Zizioulas). He does say this about determining “the” ecclesiology:
Both the Episcopal and the original Free Church ecclesiological models proceed on the assumption that there is but one correct ecclesiology . . . By contract, exegetes speak of the several ecclesial models one can find in the New Testament. I proceed on the simple systematic assumption that what was legitimate during the New Testament period cannot be illegitimate today. Furthermore, I consider the plurality of models to be not only legitimate, but indeed desirable. (p. 21)

He also restates his purpose this way: “I wish to demonstrate . . . that a Free Church ecclesiology can be dogmatically legitimate, can be commensurate with contemporary societies, and for that reason and under certain conditions, can prove to be superior to other ecclesiologies.” (p. 22)

Volf starts the book proper with a summary of a Catholic view of the church as presented in the writings of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.¹ I confess one reason I put off starting to write about this book was because this first chapter is heavy sledding, especially for someone like me who is not up on Catholic theology. Still, there are a few things I picked up on which seem significant (or that Volf highlighted as significant and that I, in faith, trust are).

First, Ratzinger holds strongly to Christus totus; he believes that the church is a single subject with Christ. I thought perhaps I was misunderstanding what this meant until I saw Volf’s critique: “It is also questionable just how the church can be a single subject with Christ and yet can be distinguished from Christ.” (p. 34) Indeed, after reading some of Ratzinger’s comments, this is the question that comes to mind.

One significant implication of this is that when the church acts, it is the same as Christ acting. Suddenly the church – its constitution and leadership – has taken on incredible significance. There is a big difference from saying, “Christ acts within and through the church” (which pretty much all evangelicals and most Christians generally could affirm) and saying, “When the church acts, Christ is acting” (which seems to be Ratzinger’s perspective).

One implication this has, as Volf draws out, is in terms of individual faith: “If the church is a single subject with Christ, then the faith coming from Christ must simultaneously be the gift of the church acting with Christ.” (p. 36) This means that “[b]elieving in a personal fashion means essentially ‘coming to participate in the already existing decision of the believing community’.” (p. 35, quoting Ratzinger)

Regarding the sacraments, Volf notes that according to Ratzinger, the sacraments secure both “faith’s communal nature and its inaccessibility to arbitrary control.” (p. 41) Thus,

[t]he character of faith as a gift (or the primacy of reception) cannot be secured by simply understanding personal faith theologically as a gift of God; one must also liturgically “practice” this faith as a gift of the church in

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¹ Compliments to Volf on choosing Ratzinger as his Catholic example; he wrote this book well before Ratzinger became Benedict XVI.

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the dispensing of the sacraments. . . Faith not sacramentally mediated is “self-invented faith”. (p. 41)

Very similar to what Chan asserted, Ratzinger says, “The church is celebration of the Eucharist; the Eucharist is the church. These two do not stand next to one another, but rather are the same.” (p. 42) “The Eucharist makes the church into the church by making it into the visible communion with triune God.” (p. 43) Because this is the case, “Every local assembly in which the Eucharist is celebrated is an ‘immediate and actual realization of the church itself,’ for it has the Lord totally.” (p. 43) And yet, a bunch of people just eating bread and drinking wine does not make them a church; there are conditions that congregations must fulfill in order to “really” celebrate the Eucharist. Indeed, “just as a human being cannot make himself into a Christian, but rather must receive Christian existence from the church, so also a congregation cannot make itself into a church, but rather must receive its being as church from the whole church.” (p. 44) Ratzinger goes so far as to say concerning a local church, “It is Catholic, or it does not exist at all.” (p. 45) (I’m not sure how this squares with the Lumen Gentium language about separated brethren, authentic baptisms outside the Roman church, and all that; Volf quotes Ratzinger as saying this does pose an “as yet unresolved systematic-theological situation.” [p. 45])

Given all this, it is not surprising that tradition holds such great authority in Ratzinger’s thinking. Volf summarizes Ratzinger’s thought this way: “Christ as the abiding origin of the church is truth, which is why one cannot invent truth; one can only find it, and can do so only in the church as the body of Christ.” (p. 53)

Also not surprising, given his commitment to Christus totus, is that “over against every individual or communal particularism, Ratzinger underscores the totality; a Christian, a local church, and a bishop always derive from and orient themselves toward the whole.” (p. 59) Similarly, “what Ratzinger calls the ‘primacy of reception’ is encountered at every level of his ecclesiology. The liturgy, Christian existence, the being of the church and of the bishop – all these are always received from the whole.” (p. 64)

Volf concludes his chapter on Ratzinger by looking at his view of the Trinity and personhood. Ratzinger seems to say that Jesus can be thought of as a person is his action, but not in an essential sense. So, for example, Jesus does not divest himself but is the action of divestment. This is a purely relational view of personhood, which as Volf points out, is very difficult to conceive of. This also makes the goal of the Church (and thus every person who is part of the Church) integration into the Trinitarian life of God. This view of personhood doesn’t work when we think about God, nor does it work when we think about human beings. Indeed, it seems to remove the “human” part and have us just as “beings.” Also – and this goes beyond what Volf says and may be misunderstanding the line of reasoning – this seems to flirt with not only a sub-trinitarian view of God, but even pantheism. Jesus exists only as a way of God relating to himself; our purpose is to participate in this “Trinitarian” life in the same way Jesus does, as pure “relating”; what will there be that will be identified as “us”?
In the second chapter, Volf tackles an Orthodox ecclesiology as found in the writings of John Zizioulas. He begins by summarizing Zizioulas’ understanding of personhood within the Trinity. I got lost in the technicalities, but it seems Zizioulas is embracing a notion of personhood that is relational. A key point seems to be that the Son and Spirit are constituted by the Father, and the Father is conditioned by the Son and Spirit. Volf questions the necessity of this, even giving Zizioulas’ starting points, and wonders if this view of the Trinity has been influences by Zizioulas’ existing ideas about the structure of the church. Zizioulas will take what he sees as the model of the persons of the Trinity and apply it to the church and to people within the church.

Flowing out of this, and very important to understanding Zizioulas’ ecclesiology, is his understanding of persons vs. individuals. “Conceiving human beings as individuals means conceiving them so that substance, or their biological nature, has precedence. . . In contrast to the individual, the person is not a self-enclosed substantial entity, but rather an open relational entity.” (p. 81) So the individual is inferior to the person. This has soteriological implications; indeed, “Salvation must consist in an ontological deindividualization that actualizes their personhood.” (p. 83) This involves God, because “human beings can become persons only in communion with the personal God, who alone merits being called a person in the original sense.” (p. 83)

This “ontological deindividualization” happens at baptism. In baptism, the candidate is united with the life of Christ, indeed with the being of Christ. Since according to Zizioulas Christ is a “corporate personality”, this reality can only be actualized if the baptized person is also incorporated into the church. Even this is not enough, however; the person also becomes the church. “Because in baptism a human being puts on Christ as the ‘catholic human being,’ Christ’s own catholicity and thus also the catholicity of the church become that person’s inner constitution.” (p. 90)

Another key ingredient in Zizioulas’ theology is his idea of truth. For him, “Truth is salvation and salvation is truth, and both are the Son of God and communion with him.” (pp. 91-92) The line of reasoning behind this statement goes something like this: “Within the framework of the ontology of person, truth is an eminently communal occurrence. . . Truth is no longer a certain cognitive relation between intellect and being, but rather an event of love between persons; being in truth means being in communion.” (pp. 92-93) Part of the background for this statement is Zizioulas’ idea that if being is ultimately identical with person, then love must have precedence over knowledge, because cognitive activity necessarily objectifies another person (I think about him).

With this in mind, Zizioulas understands Christ as truth: “Christ is the truth because in the Spirit he exists as the communion embracing human beings.” (p. 93) This in turn affects how he thinks of God’s word as truth: “One’s disposition toward God’s word as truth is not to be one of cognitive understanding or of belief; rather, one should experience God’s word communally ‘as the sacramental intimation of God’s life.” (p. 93) It is not too hard to connect the dots and see that he is going to give great precedence to the Eucharist over the Word
(although he would not see it as one vs. the other, but as the Word present in the Eucharist). Indeed, if truth is not primarily a cognitive activity, but a way of being with others, then “to know God’s word, one may not grasp it.” (p. 94) It must be mediated in some way that is participatory rather than intellectual. So Volf summarizes Zizioulas this way: “This noncognitive interiority of the word in relation to the church can only be secured sacramentally. Deindividualization demands direct or immediate relationships, and these in their turn demand the replacement of language by sacrament.” (p. 94)

(One thing that is confusing as I read this is how to keep these ideas distinct when they are being so closely identified with each other. I know I’m not thinking about this in a deep theological way when I say this, but I wonder what this means in terms of actual activity by actual human beings? It seems to come down to, “Share the Eucharist with others.” That just seems an inferior view of . . . pretty much everything: ecclesiology, pneumatology, fellowship, anthropology, Christology.)

In Zizioulas’ thinking, as Volf is summarizing it, not only do truth and salvation require the sacrament, but indeed “the church is in the Eucharist and through the Eucharist.” (p. 97) In fact, “The Eucharist is not an act of the ontologically prior church; it is not the church than constitutes the Eucharist, but rather quite the reverse: the Eucharist constitutes the church.” (p. 99) However, “instead of conceiving the relation between the church and Eucharist using the categories of causality, Zizioulas views the Eucharist as an ‘all-inclusive expression of the mystery of the church’ that is identical with the church.” (p. 99) Furthermore, Zizioulas maintains that “in every [eucharistic] celebration, the Kingdom in its entirety enters into history and is realized here and now.” (p. 100) (How this happens is tied to Zizioulas’ conception of transtermoral pneumatology, which as I understood it basically means the Spirit works across time and unconstrained by time, so not only can he work in Christ in such a way that even during his incarnation he was the corporate personality of all who would be part of the church, he can in our present bring about the future reality of the Kingdom fully come.) Volf concurs, as do I, with the chare that Zizioulas presents and “overrealized eschatology.” (p. 101)

Following along with this, Zizioulas believes that each local church is the whole church. Given that the Eucharist constitutes the church, and realizes the Kingdom in its entirety, it could hardly be otherwise. He says,

Schematically speaking, in the first case the various local churches form parts which are added to one another in order to make up a whole, whereas in the latter, the local churches are full circles which cannot be added to one another but coincide with one another and finally with the body of Christ and the original apostolic church. (p. 107)

When it comes to the structure of the church and the role of the bishop, Zizioulas sees a correspondence between Christ and the church on the one hand and the bishop and the church on the other. So just as Christ is a corporate
personality, so too the bishop in some way incorporates the community of which he is a part and leads.

At ordination, a person does not merely acquire a function without himself being determined in his own being by the community. Neither does the ordained human being coming into the possession of something as an individual over against the community, but rather becomes something within the community. Ordination overcomes the self-enclosure of the ordained person and makes him into an ecstatic entity. (p. 110)

This identification of the bishop with Christ shows itself in another parallel:

Although the bishop is indeed conditioned by the church, since without it he cannot be bishop (just as Christ is conditioned by the church, since without it he cannot be Christ), it is nonetheless the bishop himself who constitutes the church into the church, and only through the bishop does the church lives as the church, since the bishop is “the one through whose hands the whole community would have to pass in being offered up to God in Christ.” (p. 112)

The role of the laity, on the other hand, seems minimal (although Zizioulas would say it is essential). He sees the laity as being ordained to that order (of being laity) in a way analogous to the bishops being ordained to their order. What is it that the laity do? “The laity’s task, indeed, its exclusive prerogative, as Zizioulas maintains, is to say the ‘amen’ as a response to the grace they have received.” (p. 114) A criticism Volf levels, which seems valid, is that this view does not necessitate all the laity to be present; it is not the laity as separate human beings (one must avoid saying “individuals” given the meaning Zizioulas assigns that term) who are necessary to say the “amen”, but only the order of laity.

One thing that came up in a couple different ways in this chapter is what I would see as the inconsistent use of Scripture by Zizioulas. As Volf points out, faith seems utterly unnecessary for salvation, given Zizioulas’ emphasis on and understanding of truth and love. This alone ignores great swaths of Scripture. So on the one hand he seems very selective about what Scriptures he does and does not include; but then he gives a very literalistic reading of I Corinthians 11 and Revelation 4.

I realize I am only reading a summary of Zizioulas’ thoughts on the church, and Volf has been selective in what he summarizes as it pertains to where he is going with his ecclesiology. So perhaps, in a pastoral setting, Zizioulas would be able to flesh out the practical and hopeful implications of his theology. Still, having given those disclaimers, here is the impression I am left with after reading this chapter: According to Zizioulas, our basic problem is not sin but that we are individuals separated from one another. The solution to this problem is to become deindividualized and become persons. In doing so, we will transcend being creatures of substance (or perhaps merely of substance) and be able to
embrace being as our true nature. The way we become persons is through baptism, through which we are united with the being of Christ, and become the church and a part of the church simultaneously. Post-baptism, we retain our personhood as we participate in the Eucharist, which is also the church. If we happen to be ordained as a bishop, we have a lot to do and again can be seen to be the church; but if we belong to the “order of laity,” we get to come to church and say “amen.” But don’t worry if you can’t make it, because you particularly are not necessary to say the amen, as you are only a part of the laity; so others who are part of the laity will say it and it won’t matter that you weren’t there. Your ultimate destination? Well, it doesn’t matter so much as every time you participate in the Eucharist, the Kingdom is fully realized. Perhaps some day you may experience your personhood as being in a greater sense, but that’s about the most you can hope for.

Finally in the third chapter Volf starts to lay out his own understanding of what the church is. As I read it, I found him putting words to thoughts and questions I have had. For example, even the title of the chapter – “The Ecclesiality of the Church” – addresses something I have been thinking about: what is “the sine qua non of what it means for the church to call itself a church in the first place.” (p. 127)

I like that Volf grounds his discussion in the context of eschatology and the Kingdom of God. As he rightly states, this was the heart of Jesus’ whole message, so we cannot talk about the church without putting it in this context. Volf will go on to say that a local church is a proleptic expression of the full, eschatological church (the complete gathering of all the saints at the consummation of all things). This element of anticipation means we can acknowledge every local “church” (as he will define that term) as the church, without falling into the errors of the Orthodox and Catholic ways of thinking (over-identification of the local and universal church and the primacy of the universal church, respectively). This aligns with what O’Brien said in his chapter in The Church in the Bible and the World.

Volf points out that everybody agrees theologically that the church is constituted by the Spirit: “Wherever the Spirit of God is, there is the church, and all grace.” (p. 129, quoting Irenaeus) The problem is discerning where the Spirit of God is. This is why there has been the emphasis on various signs of ecclesiality – the exterior evidences of the Spirit’s presence. As Volf says,

Hence all Christian churches have understood the signs of ecclesiality to be externally perceivable and simultaneously necessary conditions or consequences of the ecclesially constitutive presence of the Spirit of Christ. These have either been the person or actions through which the presence of the Spirit is mediated in a congregation (office and sacraments), the effects of this presence itself (imitatio Christ, commitment), or both. (p. 130)
He also points out that in the Free Church tradition, another condition has to do with the organization of the church, viz., that “a church organization in which ‘power’ is held by the entire congregation represents an indispensable condition of ecclesiality.” (p. 133)

This understanding is of course the exact opposite of an Orthodox or Catholic understanding. This is one of three differences Volf points out between the episcopal and Free Church models of church. Another is how Christ’s presence comes to the church. Is it unmediated and direct, both to individual believers and local churches (Free Church); or is it mediated sacramentally and dependent on the concrete relation of any given local church to all other churches (episcopal)? The third difference concerns “the subjective dimension of the conditions of ecclesiality.” (p. 134) In the episcopal model, the church is constituted through the performance of objective activities; the Free Church tradition also recognizes subjective conditions like genuine faith and obedience to God’s commandments.

Volf spend the rest of the chapter developing what will become his answer to the question, “What makes a church a church?” As he puts it at the end of the chapter,

Every congregation that assembles around the one Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in order to profess faith in him publicly in pluriform fashion, including through baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and which is open to all churches of God and to all human beings, is a church in the full sense of the word, since Christ promised to be present in it through his Spirit as the first fruits of the gathering of the whole people of God in the eschatological reign of God. (p. 158)

Assembly – He underscores the point that almost exclusively, when *ekklesia* is used in the NT, it refers to a specific gathering of people in a specific place. The church cannot exist if it never assembles, although the life of the church can be carried out by individuals in between gathering times.

Around the one Jesus Christ – He takes Matthew 18:20 as his starting point, and draws out the implications of gathering *in the name* of Jesus. Among other things, this means gathering in the name of the Jesus who is described by the apostles; so an understanding of who Jesus is that does not conform to the apostolic witness preserved in Scripture is an inadequate understanding of Jesus, and would delegitimatize as a church any group meeting in that name.

Profess faith . . . publicly in pluriform fashion – If we are gathering in the name of Jesus, it means we are committed to him, and that commitment must be expressed in a confession of faith. I think Volf rightly identifies this as central to what it means to be the church. If we are not confessing belief in and commitment to Jesus, then we are not the church of Jesus Christ. I also appreciate Volf’s emphasis on the “pluriform” confession. In other words, the confession of faith does not just mean reading or reciting a set liturgical confession; it can include “celebration of the sacraments, sermons, prayer,
hymns, witnessing, and daily life.” (p. 150) It means confession not just with our lips but with our lives.

In his discussion on confession, Volf makes a great point about the subjective/objective difference he highlighted earlier. He says that “the church is constituted first through confessional speech and only then through faith, while the Christian is constituted first through faith and only then through confessional speech.” (p. 151) I imagine he is going to expand on this idea more in the next chapter, when he discussed personhood and the church.

**Baptism and the Lord’s Supper** – “The sacraments can be an indispensable condition of ecclesiality only if they are a form of the confession of faith and an expression of faith.” (p. 153) I’m glad he offers this disclaimer, or we would end up with something more like Chan’s liturgical theology. But with this disclaimer in place, I agree with Volf. I also think it is significant what he points out, that there is no time in the development of the Church when these were not observed.

This is not the case with ecclesial offices. Volf makes the case that while ordained clergy may be appropriate, perhaps even important or normative, they are not necessary for a church to be a church.

There was very little in the chapter I disagreed with or questioned. Volf does rely heavily on Matthew 18:20 as his starting point. He observes that from very early on in church history this has been a foundation text for ecclesiology. That is no doubt true, and I do not disagree with the conclusions he draws from this verse; it just seems strange to me to think of a church, in the fullest sense of the word, that only has two or three people in it. It is hard for me to imagine this being a “first fruits of the gathering of the whole people of God in the eschatological reign of God” (p. 158) or a setting in which all of the gifts of the Spirit could be exercised (I Cor. 12-14). Theologically I could make that case; but it just doesn’t feel right intuitively. I guess I would be most comfortable saying that two or three is the minimum but not the norm; or qualifying it by saying that two or three people could form an incipient church, or immature church, or something like that. In the wider context of Matthew 18, the “two or three” are connected to the discussion on church discipline; I think it is safe to say that most of the time, in most circumstances, “two or three” will be a subset of a church, not the church itself. Still, if you have to designate an absolute minimum . . . two or three would be it.

The item in this chapter that I’m still mulling over is Volf’s discussion of the body of Christ. He seems to land on an understanding that sees the church as the body of Christ in the same way that a man and woman are united in marriage. I think he is trying to avoid the confusion over the “Christ as one subject with the church” thinking he criticized in Ratzinger. Still, he seems to go to the opposite extreme and almost explains away (what seems to me to be) the clear meaning of the text.

I think a lot hinges on the understanding of that genitive “of Christ.” Could there be other ways of understanding this other than the total identification on the one hand and the total dissociation on the other? Can’t there be a way to affirm that the church is meant to carry on Christ’s work in the world, and to be in the
world as Jesus was in the world, while still recognizing the unique salvific activity of Jesus? (In other words, the church is not necessary for salvation the way Jesus is necessary for salvation.) I'm not sure what the legitimate grammatical options are for this; but I think Volf may fall into the same trap as Ratzinger and Zizioulas in making that phrase mean more than it is intended to. Neither in Ephesians 4:12 nor I Corinthians 12:27 is Paul making a statement about the identification of Christ and the church. Rather, in Ephesians 4 the context is the church under the headship of Christ, and in I Corinthians the context is the interdependency of individual believers. This is a metaphor, not a categorical statement. In Ephesians 4, the church is the body of Christ because Christ is our head; in I Corinthians 12, the church is the body of Christ because Christ is that which we have in common (vv. 12-13).^2

In fact, as I reflect on this more, perhaps even a case that we should be "incarnational" in our witness should not hinge on references to the body of Christ, but rather on appeals to us as disciples of Christ. Likewise, the point that we not carry on Christ's mission should hinge more on the Great Commission and Acts than on this metaphor. I think we are on safest ground when we use the body of Christ imagery to refer to the church under the headship of Christ, or to illustrate the interdependency that should characterize our relationships.

I found myself highlighting less in the fourth and fifth chapters than I have in the earlier ones. Partially this is because Volf summarizes and refers back to his earlier critiques of Ratzinger and Zizioulas (and in those earlier chapters, he had foreshadowed his own take on the issues he was addressing). Perhaps the fact that I read those chapters when I was tired and had read a lot already had something to do with it, too!

In chapter four, Volf develops his idea of personhood. He starts by presenting two classic and apparently mutually exclusive views on Christian communion: "Similar to the social models customarily called ‘individualism’ and ‘holism’ (or ‘collectivism’), these two basic ecclesial models seem to be incompatible. One comes either by way of Christ to the church, or by way of the church to Christ.” (p. 150) This puts into words what I had been feeling since reading Volf’s first two chapters and Chan’s book.

If I understand Volf’s view correctly, he is saying that salvation is a personal (individual) exercise of faith that can only happen in the context of an ecclesial community. This exercise of faith is made possible not by the church, but by the Spirit; yet it must happen within the church.

Part of what has determined Volf’s view is his reading of Matthew 18:20: “According to this text, Christ’s presence is promised not to the believing

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^2 The only problem with my line of reasoning here is the way Paul makes the transition in I Corinthians 12:12. He says, “Just as in the body . . . in the same way also Christ.” Is Paul saying that Christ is made up of many parts? That would in fact lead to a very strong identification between Christ and the church; that the church is now Christ. I wish Paul would have said, “in the same way also in Christ.” Honestly, I think that would have made more sense in the context. But he didn’t; so what did he mean? In defense of my point, he does not use a complete sentence here, and his meaning is made more clear in the verses that follow (v. 13 starts with “For”). And the point of v. 13 is clearly the unity that we share.
individual directly, but rather to the entire congregation, and only through the latter to the individual.” (p. 162) I am not sure I follow him on this. The context of Matthew 18:20 is not salvation, but how to relate to a brother who has offended you (which has become the basis of church discipline). It seems to me that Romans 10 provides a more direct teaching on what constitutes salvation: “. . . that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.” Clearly salvation is conceived of in individual terms here.

This is not to say that the community is unimportant or only incidental. As Volf points out, the sacraments are clearly communal events; our confession of faith must be public and is meant to be shared. I guess the question would be what if a person has an individual transaction with God in which he believes and confesses, but does not become part of a church, isn’t baptized, doesn’t take communion? Would that person be saved? I have a feeling Volf would say no, or at least not completely. Everything in my evangelical upbringing says, “Yes, he would be,” but I can imagine some of the counter-arguments. For example, in Romans 10, Paul goes not to say that people cannot believe and confess unless they hear, and they cannot hear unless they are preached to, and people cannot preach unless they are sent. So even there this individual confession is in the context of others sharing. Someone has to share the gospel of Jesus with the potential convert; he cannot receive that saving knowledge from general revelation. So even if it is tangential (a Gideon Bible in a hotel room, or a preacher on TV), any person who believes and confesses does so in the context of community. So I guess I’m agreeing with Volf’s conclusion more or less, even though I disagree with the soteriological conclusion he draws from Matthew 18:20.

So what would my answer be to the question, “Does someone come to Christ by way of the church, or by way of the church to Christ?” I guess first I would have to define “church” in this context. I do think a person can come to Christ apart from the context of a particular local church. But if in this context one defines “church” in its broadest eschatological sense, and if one understands that the way the Spirit works in the church is through individuals, then I would say that a person comes to Christ in the context of the church. Our salvation is mediated essentially by the Spirit and proximately by another person. In saying this I think I am agreeing with what Volf calls the “universal motherhood of believers”; “Christians are the mother church.” (p. 166)

I must be quick to add that I don’t believe a person can grow and mature as a Christian apart from a local church. For example, baptism and communion are presented as such normative experiences that I cannot imagine a person growing to much maturity without them. Likewise for spiritual gifts: they are not meant to be exercised in isolation (and indeed most cannot be). So a person who confesses and believes but does not become part of a local church would remain, at best, a stunted and immature disciple; at worst, he would be like the rocky or thorny soil which receives the seed but produces no life or fruit.
I do like what Volf says in answer to the Catholic argument which he summarizes in this way:

It is the mediation of faith by way of sacramental office that alone makes it possible for individual human beings to receive their faith from outside, from God, instead of having to construct it themselves by designing their own Christianity from the Bible (or from the entirety of Christian tradition) and by living it according to their own direction. (p. 165)

Volf counters this by saying,

But by surrendering to “authoritative” officials the distinction between true faith and self-made superstition, do we not run the risk that these custodians of faith may degenerate into lords of faith by repressing rather than expressing the genuine sensus fidelium? Ultimately, the only way to escape this danger is to trust in the Holy Spirit. Why should it then by misguided to entrust from the outset the process of discernment between faith and superstition to the Holy Spirit active within believers as they study the Bible and Christian tradition. (p. 165)

Regarding the ecclesiality of salvation, I agree with Volf’s summary: “The church is not a means, but an end in itself; it is a necessary mode of the life of faith. At the same time, however, the church is also a means of grace since the processes of ecclesial life . . . both mediate and support faith.” (p. 174)

Also in this chapter Volf maintains a real identity for individual persons, counter to the tendency in both Ratzinger and Zizioulas to lose “person” within the “whole Christ.” In this he expands on comments he had made in the first two chapters. Since I already agree with his conclusion; and since the conceptualizations of personhood presented by both Ratzinger and Zizioulas seemed to me to be incomprehensible, contrary to common sense and experience, and ecclesiologically and soteriological unacceptable; there wasn’t much in these pages that particularly stood out to me.

In the fifth chapter Volf starts to develop the theme referenced in the title, the relationship between the Trinity and the church. He begins by noting the tendency we have as humans to think in one of two “traditions” as presented by Oto Marquard:

The tradition of universalizing philosophies brings to bear “the precedence of the one before the many. . . . Wherever multiplicity rules, we have an unfortunate situation that must be remedied . . .” By contrast, the tradition of pluralizing philosophies brings to bear “the precedence of the many before the one.” The rule of unity – of the one science as well as of the one party – is an “unfortunate situation that must be remedied . . .” (p. 193)
Volf goes on to say, “To think consistently in trinitarian terms means to escape this dichotomy between universalization and pluralization.” (p. 193)

I think he puts the whole discussion of the relation between the Trinity and ecclesiology in proper perspective when he says, “Conceiving the church in correspondence to the Trinity does not mean much more than that thinking with theological consistency, all the while hoping that reality will not prove to be too recalcitrant.” (p. 194)

After these preliminaries, he starts his discussion proper by noting the limitations inherent in a discussion such as this, one in which we are trying to draw comparisons between God and us. He notes, “Our notions of the triune God are not the triune God, even if God is only accessible to us in these notions.” (p. 198) Furthermore, “‘Person’ and ‘communion’ in ecclesiology cannot be identical with ‘person’ and ‘communion’ in the doctrine of the Trinity; they can only be understood as analogous with them.” (p. 199)

Volf takes a few pages to make the point that the relationships between members of the Trinity cannot be analogous to relationships between local churches, as both Ratzinger and Zizioulas held (in different ways). Rather, those relationships can only be analogous to relationships between individual Christians within churches.

The Trinity indwells in the local churches in no other way than through its presence within the persons constituting those churches, since the church is those who gather in the name of Christ. That is why although interecclesial correspondence to the Trinity is important, it can nonetheless be conceived only in analogy to the pivotal intraecclesial correspondence to the Trinity. (p. 203)

He also takes a few pages to discuss the implications of what he is saying about the Trinity on the idea of personhood and relationships. This is another issue that was a big part of his critique of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, but which is not a burning issue for me (since Ratzinger’s and Zizioulas’ explanations mostly did not make sense and when they did make sense, were not convincing). He comes out of this discussion emphasizing the perichoretic model of the Trinity. “Perichoresis refers to the reciprocal interiority of the trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate each other, though in so doing the do not cease to be distinct persons.” (p. 209)

This was hard for me to wrap my brain around; still, it makes sense in light of passages like those in John where Jesus talks about him being in the Father and the Father being in him and them being one.

This is one prime example of what Volf had said earlier, about there being no strict correspondence between the Trinity and us. “Another human self cannot be internal to my own self as a subject of action. Human persons are always external to one another as subjects.” (p. 211) Even God’s indwelling of us is different than the reciprocal interiority within himself; the Spirit indwells us, but we do not indwell Him (at least not in the same way he does us). Furthermore, “[a]t the ecclesial level (and at the creaturely level in a broader
sense), only the interiority of personal characteristics can correspond to the interiority of the divine persons.” (p. 211) In other words, in our interactions with other people, we share some of who we are and receive some of who they are.

He ends the chapter by making a case that understanding the relationships between the persons of the Trinity does not allow one to make a case for a hierarchical structure of the church, as both Ratzinger and Zizioulas do (although in different ways).

Now that he has presented Catholic (Ratzinger) and Orthodox (Zizioulas) ecclesiologies, and has developed his own ecclesiology in contrast to them, Volf moves on to talk in more specifics about the structures of the church in chapter six. He builds up in this chapter to talking about office, but as he notes, this discussion about office is a part of the discussion of ecclesiality; you can’t discuss office apart from the discussion of what constitutes a church.

He begins the chapter by talking about spiritual gifts. He makes the case that the charismata are not given just to certain people, but to all Christians. The church is not therefore episcocentric but polycentric. An implication of this is that every Christian has a calling and an office (although the offices vary as much as the charismata do). An individual Christian’s office is simply the way he carries out his calling (really, the calling in which all Christians share) under the Spirit’s power and direction in his context.

One implication of this universal distribution of the gifts pertains to the function of those with the charisma of leadership (“officeholders”). “The task of leaders is first to animate all the members of the church to engage their pluriform charismatic activities, and then to coordinate those activities.” (p. 230)

Much of what Volf says in this section on spiritual gifts was not new or surprising to me; honestly, it’s stuff I’ve taught or preached on several occasions. Volf reaches many of the same conclusions through theological argument rather than simple Biblical reference, but the conclusions are indeed the same. One angle he develops, which is very consistent with his overall schema of church, is the idea that the church community plays a role in the distribution of the gifts (and in their recognition and exercise). Not that the church can choose who gets what gifts; the church’s role is more in the reception of the gifts. He calls this the “interactional model of the bestowal of charismata.” (p. 233) A big part of his argument is that we are instructed by Paul to strive for and pursue spiritual gifts; but we can only know what we should strive for and pursue in the context of a community. Our understanding of what we need, or what gifts would fit well with who we are, must be tested by others.

After this discussion of spiritual gifts, Volf goes on to talk about the church as an institution. He starts by defining what he means by institution, and it’s a pretty broad definition:

According to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, “institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors.” Institutions are in this view the stable structures of social interaction, and they arise in every social situation that endures.
beyond its own origin, including when two people do the same thing together repeatedly. (p. 234)

According to this definition, even the Trinity can be thought of as an institution (though, as Volf clearly points out, with significant qualitative differences from human institutions). And since Volf has an explicitly social view of the church, it too is an institution. Indeed, as Volf says, “the essential sociality of salvation implies essential institutionality of the church. The question is not whether the church is an institution, but rather what kind of institution it is.” (p. 235)

On the one hand, the church should reflect the “institution” of the Trinity. “The church reflects in a broken fashion the eschatological communion of the entire people of God with the triune God in God’s new creation.” (p. 235) Yet this reflection will, now, at best be only “broken.” The church is not yet at its destination of that perfect communion. So the church should also be thought of as a human social phenomenon. Volf argues persuasively that we must appreciate both of these aspects of the church’s institutionality to have an adequate understanding of the church as it exists now (prior to our eschatological fulfillment).

Volf says that “the character of an institution depends primarily on two factors: the pattern of power distribution and the manner of its cohesion.” For the power distribution, he gives the two extremes of “symmetrical-polycentric” and “asymmetrical-mono-centric.” For the manner of cohesion, the extremes are “forced” and “freely affirmed integration.” If the church is to reflect the Trinity, and the Trinity is symmetrical (as Volf argues contra Ratzinger and Zizioulas), then “the more a church is characterized by symmetrical and decentralized distribution of power and freely affirmed interaction, the more it will correspond to the trinitarian communion.” (p. 236 for all the quotes in this paragraph)

This is not to say that a kind of “pneumatic anarchy” should prevail in the church. As Volf makes clear, to say that the members of the church should love one another in a way that reflects God’s character implies at least some kind of law or rule. Someday, when we are perfectly transformed and sanctified, this love could happen completely spontaneously and subjectively; but since we are not at that point yet, “one will not be able to do without rules of interaction that are not at least partially external to every member.” (p. 237)

Volf goes on to say:

The pivotal question is accordingly not whether freely understood love or rules of interaction are to determine the social life of the church, but rather whether the rules of interaction specifying the practice of love are to be formalized, or whether, in anticipation of the eschatological subjective spontaneity of communal life, they are to determine the life of the church only as internalized rules of habit. (p. 237)

While acknowledging that the more formalized rules can be more repressive, he concludes that due to our not-yet-perfect condition, “much argues
for legal formalization of the rules of interaction. Although legality cannot
generate love, it can create space for love by specifying duties and rights.” (p. 238) I think this is a good perspective to have and a realistic expectation. It also
would help guide the kinds of rules that are set up; the point of the rules is to
create space for love, not to make love happen.

He also notes that the further away we are from our future identity as the
eschatological people of God in perfect communion with God, the more we need
the external rules. We are moving toward a time when the external rules will not
be necessary.

There follows from this a tendentiously minimalist understanding of church
statutes; the less ecclesial life must be regulated, and the more the
institutions of the church are lived as the fellowship itself of siblings and
friends, the more will these institutions correspond to their own future in
which they will be identical with the realization of the communion of the
church with the triune God. (p. 238)

So while some external formulations of rules are necessary, they should
be as few and as minimal as necessary, and should serve the function of
creating space for love to happen.

Volf then begins to tie together what he has said about the charismata and
the church as institution. Basically, he says that you cannot legislate how a
charisma will work because the charismata are essentially pneumatic activities.
(This has implications when it comes to ecclesial office, as Volf will go on to
demonstrate.) In fact,

Exercising charismata is essentially an open ecclesial process. It cannot
be the purpose of legal regulations to restrict this process, but rather to
protect it in its openness. Legal precautionary measure serve to create
the space in which the complex mutual interdependence between
individual charismatics and the congregation can be realized. (p. 243)

Furthermore, “the human dimension of ecclesial institutions requires that
the assignment of certain individuals to certain roles (charismata) must always be
viewed as provisional.” (p. 244)

With this foundation in place, Volf moves on to discuss ordination and
ecclesial offices. He starts with this train of thought:

If one’s premise is the equality of all ministries in the church, then the
necessity of (ordained) office is not apparent. Since all ministries in the
church are charismatic, office cannot simply be derived by way of
charisma; it must be grounded by way of the particular features of those
ministries performed by the officeholders and of the charismata bestowed
on them for those ministries. The specific element attaching to the
charismata of office is their reference to the entirety of the local church.
(pp. 246-247)
Also,

Like all other charismata, the charismata of office must be recognized by the congregation in order to be constituted as charismata at all and to function as such in the local church. . . . Thus recognition on the part of the congregation enters into the ontology of office . . . Whether this recognition is explicit or implicit is of secondary significance; what is decisive is that it is present. (p. 248)

The clear implication, then, is that “ordination is to be understood as a public reception of a charisma given by God and focused on the local church as a whole” and is “an act of the entire local church led by the Spirit of God.” (p. 249) The contrasts to the ways that Ratzinger and Zizioulas (and Catholics and Orthodox more generally) conceive of office and ordination should be readily apparent. Going along with what he has said in the first sections of the chapter, Volf says that any ordination should be considered provisional and tied to a specific local church; if the officeholder goes to minister in another local church, he must in effect be re-ordained to minister there.

Volf concludes this chapter with a discussion of how officeholders should obtain their office. Not surprisingly, given his Free Church context and all that he has said up to this point, Volf makes the case for election of church officers by the congregation.

I appreciated the way Volf ended the chapter. Even though he has made the case for equality, symmetrical relationships, election of church officers by the congregation, etc., all of this emphasis on human activity does not diminish in any way our need for God to be at work among us.

A participative model of the church requires more than just values and practices that correspond to participative institutions. The church is not first of all a realm of moral purposes; it is the anticipation, constituted by the Spirit of God, of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God in the communion of the triune God. Hence the church needs the vivifying presence of the Spirit, and without this presence, even a church with a decentralized participative structure and culture will become sterile and perhaps more sterile even than a hierarchical church. For it will either have to get along without the participation of most of its members, or it will have to operate with more subtle and open forms of coercion. Successful participative church life must be maintained by deep spirituality. (p. 257)

I think this is a hugely important point, and I see the negative consequences he mentions played out all too often in churches. Many churches do get along without the participation of most of their members; they hire more staff, or stuff that should get done just doesn’t happen, or a few people end up doing more than they should. The other alternative is no less dire: many churches do operate via coercion, whether subtle or open. The example that
comes to mind is “guilt tripping” people into serving, giving, attending, etc. At Risen King, if we tend toward one of these extremes, I think it is more toward “getting along” than coercion; although I would say on both counts we probably do better than many churches.

What a better option it is when the church can operate under the power of the Spirit, when individual members are growing in maturity and as a result participate in church life freely and willingly. This is the alternative I want to be increasingly true of Risen King.

In this chapter, and indeed throughout the whole book, I appreciate Volf’s balance of the human and divine elements at work in individuals and the church. I like the way this shows up in his emphasis on making space for God to work. This idea of “making space” is a good conceptualization for me of what it looks like to cooperate with God. We have a role; we are not passive. Yet the initiative and power comes from God, not us. While I have heard Bill teach on this many times in relation to our personal spiritual formation, I like the way Volf is applying this to church structure and “external rules.” What would a church look like – in what ways might Risen King be different than we are now – if this concept guided our methodology, strategies and liturgy?

In his final chapter, Volf addresses the issue of catholicity. Perhaps it is because I read this with a bad head cold, but this chapter did not seem as pertinent or significant as the earlier chapters. Plus, what he says about catholicity in this chapter merely expanded on comments he had made earlier in the book, so there was not a lot of new ground covered.

In essence, Volf argues that the catholicity of the church is grounded in its eschatological future as the whole people of God in communion with the triune God in the new creation. So a local church now can said to be catholic as it anticipates that future reality, and as the Spirit (of the whole church) make Himself knows in that congregation.

Volf does give three marks that local churches must exhibit to meet the minimum standard of catholicity. First, a catholic local church must be open to all other churches. Second, it must be loyal to the apostolic tradition. (As Volf notes, this second condition answers the question of which ecclesial groups a church must be open to.) Third, a local church must be open to all human beings who confess faith in Christ without distinction. A church which meets these three minimum standards may rightly be called catholic.

Volf also discusses the catholicity of persons. Basically, I understand him to say that a person can be considered catholic as he stands in relation to others in the church.

Overall this book was very helpful for me. Reading it helped me accomplish one of my goals in this research project, which was to take a careful and thorough look at the foundations of my ecclesiology. While I was not thinking that I needed to become Catholic or Orthodox, the contrast of Volf’s robust Free Church ecclesiology to their ecclesiologies helped solidify my
theological thinking about what the church is and should be. Volf also provided a pretty good answer to my questions about a minimum definition of a church. Because Volf's study was so helpful in building and reinforcing my theological understanding of "church," I feel ready to move on from the question of what the church is to the implications of that identity: what should the church do to live out that identity.