The title’s a dead giveaway: Hammett wants to build a case from Scripture for a distinctively Baptist understanding of what the church is. He is coming at the subject of ecclesiology from a different perspective than, say, Miroslav Volf. Rather than start with a grand view in mind, trying to stay in conversation with all thinking on the subject from Irenaeus to the present and crossing all theological boundaries, he is starting with a much narrower goal: make a case for the interpretations of Scripture that support Baptist theology and polity. He is not making an inductive case, assembling all the pertinent evidence and then drawing a conclusion; he is making a deductive case, starting with a premise and then explaining why he holds that view.

I do appreciate Hammett’s approach to theology. He uses the image of a pyramid with four tiers. The bottom, foundational tier is “Begin with Scripture”; the second, “Enrich Understanding with History”; the third, “Formulate Systematic Theology”; and finally, “Utilize in Practical Ministry.” (Figure 1.1 on p. 16) He asserts (rightly, I believe) that too often we jump from the first to the fourth tier; straight from reading Scripture to making program changes. Another danger is with systematic theologians who spend so much time on Scriptural evidence, interpretation, and historical understanding of the issues yet never land on practical application or implications. Hammett’s pyramid puts the right emphases in the right places and keeps the right priorities in the right balance.

Hammett addresses the nature of the church in the opening three chapters. He gives a good, basic summary of an evangelical, Free Church, congregationalist reading of Scripture and church history. He tackles the nature of the church under the three classic headings of the people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit.

He sees four implications of the church as the People of God:

1. It gives the church a connection to the Old Testament and God’s great purpose of calling to himself a people.
2. It underscores the nature of the church as called – called by God to be his people.
3. The church is a people, not a collection of isolated individuals.
4. The church is God’s people, not a human institution. (p. 36)

For the church as the Body of Christ, he describes six implications:

1. The image of the body points to the church’s unity, seen especially in the Lord’s Supper and baptism.
2. The image of the body aptly illustrates how the church may be one, while its members are diverse.
3. The body image reflects how the members of the church should show a mutuality of love and care to one another.
4. Christ, as head of the body, is the ultimate authority for the church.
5. As head, Christ also provides for the needs of the church.
6. Christlikeness is the goal of the church’s growth; all the members of the church contribute to the growth and unity of the church as all perform their own particular ministries. (p. 43)

For the church as the Temple of the Holy Spirit, he gives three implications:

1. Because it is God’s temple, the church must be a worshipping community.
2. In God’s temple, all believers form the priesthood; all are involved in the church’s ministry.
3. The temple is also the place of relationship. (p. 49)

The second chapter concerns the marks of the church. He addresses the four classic *notae* as well as the Reformers’ emphasis on Word and sacrament. His treatment is fine but does not go beyond what Snyder and Volf said. Hammett wants to keep the gospel as the distinguishing characteristic of the church. He sees shortcomings to the four classic *notae* as being bound to a specific set of circumstances as well as being too generic (subject to lots of different meanings being read into them). He does not want to go so far as to make proper observance of the sacraments an essential mark of the church, since this would in his mind unnecessarily divide those who practice infant baptism from those who practice believer’s baptism (for example). He would rather say that both groups, if they are true to the gospel, can be real churches, rather than saying that one is right and thus a real church while the other is wrong and thus not a real church. I appreciate his concern but think he is needlessly splitting hairs. It is hard to see a group that does not practice any form of baptism or any form of Communion as a church. Even the Salvation Army says that they are living out the purpose of communion even if they don’t eat bread and drink wine together.

The third chapter lays out some theological conclusions and practical applications. Hammett’s theological conclusions are:

1. **The Church: God’s Organized, Purposeful Assembly** – Here as in the first chapter Hammett emphasizes the organization of the church. From the earliest references to the church in Scripture, there is evidence of some organization (recognized leaders, e.g.). I think this is a good point to remember; even in a house church, God has appointed someone to shepherd that flock. Also as part of this discussion Hammett emphasis the need for purpose in the church. He tips his hand early on that he is going to endorse
something pretty similar to the purpose-driven model of the five purposes of the church. Even if one does not reach that conclusion, certainly one could agree with Hammett’s statement that “[The church] is a purposeful assembly. If some Christians gather, but do nothing, they are not a church.” (p. 68) This would naturally lead to the question, “What then should they do?” which I am sure he will answer in later chapters.

2. **The Church: Primarily a Local Assembly** – Hammett points out what every other author I’ve read has pointed out: overwhelmingly in Scripture, “church” refers to a local church. He uses the traditional “local – universal” categories; I think O’Brien and Volf give a more nuanced, thorough and accurate paradigm for accounting for those “non-local” uses of *ekklesia* in the NT.

3. **The Church: By Its Nature a Living and Growing Assembly** – Highlight quote from this section: “To the degree that the church lives in accord with its own essential being, growth will occur.” (p. 73) Amen. That’s a big part of the reason I have chosen this course of study for my sabbatical.

4. **The Church: A Gospel Assembly**

5. **The Church: A Spirit-Empowered Assembly** – Kudos to Hammett for acknowledging that perhaps a reason for the growth of Pentecostalism around the world, despite some fairly obvious theological deficiencies, is the open dependence of Pentecostal churches on the power of the Holy Spirit.

After reading this first section, one of my thoughts is what an ecclesiology for Alliance churches would look like. We do not have the roots to draw on that Hammett and the Baptists do (going back to the Anabaptists and English Separatists). And, while early Baptists gave serious consideration to topics like church covenants and the congregational form of church government, early Alliance churches grew somewhat by accident and more as a result of their connection to a person (Simpson) than a shared theological conviction about the church.

An ecclesiology for Alliance churches would have to land on the church as the agent of God’s mission in the world. This paradigm could include the Kingdom of God emphasis, the power of the Spirit emphasis, the focus on “Jesus Only”, and our practical efforts in world evangelization, theological education, and church planting.

Another thought that has struck me, though this comes more from my reading in general than from Hammett’s book, is that a lot of the authors I am reading spend a lot of time talking about the church without spending a lot of time talking about the Holy Spirit actually doing anything. Hammett mentions the Spirit in connection with baptism and fellowship, and these are valid topics to consider. But still it seems to be a trend that the “people of God” and “body of Christ” images get a lot more ink than the “temple of the Holy Spirit” image. Yet how can you have an Biblically faithful ecclesiology without a robust
pneumatology? What about spiritual gifts in the life of the church? What about the power of God? And probably North American evangelical/charismatics need to consider this question at greater length: how can we develop a pneumatology that is corporate, not individualistic, yet appreciates the dynamic and personal nature of the Holy Spirit? In other words, how does the power of God show up for us, not just me? How can we discuss spiritual gifts with the emphasis being more on their corporate exercise (to build up the body) rather than their personal benefit (to edify the believer)?

Are there charismatics or Pentecostals writing any ecclesiologies? Catholics – yes, more than you can shake a stick at, for centuries. Orthodox – yes, even if we in the West aren’t as familiar with them. Evangelicals – surprisingly, yes, especially in the last ten to fifteen years. Pentecostals – haven’t come across them yet. Maybe I will soon; I hope so.

In Part Two of his book (chapters four and five), Hammett addresses the issue of regenerate membership. As he comments in the beginning of chapter four, “The biblical basis for seeing the church composed exclusively of believers is so strong and obvious that the difficulty is in seeing how this idea was ever obscured.” (p. 83) I agree. Hammett does give a brief summary of the biblical reasons for holding this view, and traces the development of the issue of corpus permixtum throughout church history, along with the recovery of regenerate church membership beginning with the Anabaptists. This biblical and historical summary comprises the first part of chapter four.

In the second part of chapter four, Hammett spells out four ways in which he sees regenerate church membership as being at the core of Baptist ecclesiology. He says:

Regenerate church membership . . .
- Is preceded and safeguarded by believer’s baptism.
- Is the basis for congregational church government.
- Is reflected and preserved in the Baptist practice of closed communion.
- Is a prerequisite for effective church discipline and is protected by church discipline.

Certainly the link between regenerate church membership and believer’s baptism is fairly straightforward, as Hammett points out. Likewise, the connection to church discipline makes sense, even if many churches (Baptist and otherwise) don’t have a very robust practice of it today.

I follow his reasoning for the link between regenerate church membership and congregational church government: because the church is make up of believers, and they have the Holy Spirit in them, they are competent to make decisions about the governance of the church. This is fine as far as it goes; my hesitation about endorsing this view wholeheartedly is twofold. First, while it may be true (should be true) that every church member has been regenerated, they have not been fully sanctified (in practice). In other words, we’re still human and subject to weaknesses, sins, pettiness, pride, etc.
My second reservation is the testimony of Scripture. It is hard to find many examples of groups voting for something, especially voting for something that was clearly God’s will for them (initial report of the spies, making Saul king, electing Matthias to replace Judas, etc.). On the other hand, it is pretty easy to find examples in Scripture where the minority was in fact right, or where God used an individual to lead his people into what he had for them. So I hesitate to endorse congregational church government to the extent that Hammett urges.

In the fifth chapter, Hammett traces the decline of the priority of regenerate church membership in Baptist churches and urges some steps to reclaim this as a practical reality. The first step he recommends is a return to church covenants. He suggests that members sign the covenant each year, and that those who don’t be dropped from the membership list. Great idea!

The second step is to reform baptism and church membership. He urges that churches wait to baptize children until it is clear that their faith is their own and their understanding of their salvation is well-formed. He suggests waiting until children are at least twelve. I see his point, although I hesitate to make even a “rule of thumb” benchmark since each child is so different.

He also urges that adults be sufficiently instructed and examined before they are baptized. I appreciate that he is wanting to recover the meaning of baptism and not make it so easy that someone who is in fact unconverted could be baptized (and admitted to membership). It does make me wonder about how easy we make it for people to be baptized. Is one baptism orientation class enough? Are we sure enough of the testimonies of all those we baptize, or could we take more time on this? (But how do we balance this with the testimony of Scripture where people are baptized immediately upon conversion?)

Finally, he urges a return to redemptive church discipline. This would help ensure that those who are part of the church as believers continue to live as believers.

For the most part, I find myself agreeing with Hammett, although he is one step more conservative in some ways than I am comfortable with. And of course, the exaltation of all things Baptist doesn’t do much for me (but I was prepared for that by the title and expected as much). Most of all, I appreciate his method. He really does follow the pyramid structure he laid out. So while I disagree with some of his conclusions, or the applications he makes, I do like being able to see clearly how he got there and why.

In Part 3 of his book (chapters 6-8), Hammett looks at how the church is governed. In chapter six he looks at church polity, and expands on the case for congregational government as opposed to presbyterian or episcopal. He explains each of the three systems and gives his evaluation of the biblical, historical and theological thinking behind each. I disagree that the biblical, historical and theological case for congregational government, especially as opposed to presbyterian, is as clear-cut as he sees it. Still, this is a decent summary.
In the second part of the chapter, he presents four challenges to the practice of congregational government today. The first is “the need for responsible, regenerate congregations.” (p. 151) Here he sounds many of the same notes as previously. If we are going to entrust the decision-making process for a church to the members, they had better be godly and sanctified. The second challenge is “the rise of larger churches.” (p. 152) Hammett points out that it is hard to get a large percentage of the congregation to participate in congregational government; that even if you get a lot of people to the church meeting where decision will be made, it is difficult for them all to be well-informed on the issues and people under discussion; and that the reality is that a lot of larger churches tend to be pastor-driven in practice, even if they are theoretically congregational. The third challenge is “strong pastoral leadership and church growth.” (p. 153) He sees there being pressure for churches to grow numerically, and the assumption that strong pastoral leadership is necessary for this to happen. The fourth challenge is “the emergence of elder rule.” (p. 154) Here he just notes the trend in many circles, including some Baptist churches, to see a plurality of elders as biblically necessary; and that this understanding has the effect of working against congregational government. My take on this discussion is that it is impossible to prove from Scripture, history or theology that there is one right method of church governance. It could be, as Hammett cites John Vaughn as arguing, that the size of the church has more to do with the polity it should have. Or, as Hammett points out the possibility of, perhaps the current dominant political style has more influence on church polity than we would like to admit. If there is not one right method, then we are left to decide a polity that honors God and is effective. Here are some factors I would want to pay attention to in determining what the polity should look like.

1. We should take seriously the truth that believers have God’s Spirit in them. At least in theory, this does qualify any believer to make decisions regarding church matters. In this I agree with a lot of what Hammett has said. Certainly I disagree with a strongly episcopal position which would say that the laity are qualitatively different from the clergy and thus disqualified from participating in decision-making.

2. We should also take seriously the reality that at best any of us are only en route to being holy (practically; positional holiness is of course decided at conversion). So we should have a system of church government that guards against abuses of power by individuals on the one hand, and against poor decisions by groups of immature people on the other hand. No system can eliminate these dangers; ultimately we trust in the Holy Spirit to protect and guide us, no matter what system of government we employ. Still, I think that prudent systems can reduce these dangers and make them less likely.
3. We need to follow the example of Scripture. The model of Scripture is consistently of God using anointed individuals to lead his people. The counter-argument could be made that many of these examples are in the Old Testament, when the Holy Spirit was only given to certain individuals. Post-Pentecost, the Spirit is distributed to all believers, and thus all believers are qualified to make decisions. I would respond that even after Pentecost, Scripture focuses on the way God used individuals (Peter, Paul, John) to expand his Kingdom and build his churches. And while it is appropriate to see the first Apostles as uniquely “apostolic” in some ways, it is also true that others are referred to as apostles in the NT, that apostles are one of the kinds of leaders gifted to the church in Ephesians 4, and that apostles are included in the spiritual gifts on I Corinthians 12. So unless we are going to embrace cessationism, we need some understanding of apostles (lower case “a”) in our contemporary ecclesiology. Likewise, leadership and administration are spiritual gifts given to individuals, and there must be a context in which they can be exercised. Gifted, anointed leaders, especially those who are appointed by God to break new ground, must be free to fulfill their calling.

Given these starting points, it probably comes as no surprise that I would advocate a mixture of forms of church government. I think that the congregation (members) should be included in decisions and should have input in them. For example, when officers are being chosen, the church at large should be able to give input and offer cautions or endorsements. It could very well be that someone in the church may know something about a nominee for office that would disqualify him from serving, or at least should be taken into consideration. The person with this knowledge should be able to disclose that knowledge to the right people in the right way. I believe it is Hammett who makes the point that regardless of the official form of church government, the people in the church do vote – with their feet and with their wallets. So in addition to the biblical and theological arguments one could advance, it makes practical sense to give the congregation input into at least the broad strokes of where the church is going, how money is being allocated, etc.

I think that while the congregation should have input, the actual decisions should be made by a smaller group. (I believe this should be the elders.) Having the elders make decisions helps to insure that qualified individuals are making the decisions. Having a group make the decisions provides a safeguard against one person (who may or may not be hearing from God correctly) make those decisions. Again, pragmatically, it is more efficient for a smaller group to discuss and decide than for the church as a whole.

I believe that while the congregation should have input, and the elders should make the decisions, much of the initiation of ideas and vision should come from those with gives of apostleship and leadership. Hopefully this describes the pastor of the church. The wise and mature leader will not assume that he is the source of all good ideas, or that God will only speak to and through
him, but will be looking for how God is at work and speaking in and through the people in the church. He also will be aware of who else in the church has those gifts of leadership, discernment, etc. and pay special attention to what they have to say. It would make sense that this would describe several if not all of the elders. So saying the pastor should be the initiator does not mean he comes up with all the ideas, but that he is a first-stage filter for ideas and vision.

So what might this look like practically? A pastor receives from God (directly or through other people) vision for the direction of the church. This could pertain to ministry activities, budget, church officers, etc. He brings that vision to the elders. They offer feedback and refine the vision. The vision is presented to the congregation for their input. The elders weigh that input and adjust the vision as necessary. The pastor then implements the vision. This model is, like any model, and over-simplification and more cut-and-dried that reality. Because the pastor is an elder, even the decisions he makes or that the elders make will be collaborative. And, while this model makes it sound like the members wouldn’t have direct access or input to the pastor, this is not likely to be the case in reality. (In fact I would say it should not be the case in reality.) Also, while the elders would together decide on the vision to present to the members, it would likely be the pastor who would present this vision (at a church meeting, e.g.).

Really I am describing a system which could be episcopal, presbyterian or congregational depending on how you define those terms. If “church government” has to do with who makes decisions, then this is a presbyterian system. If it has to do with who initiates vision, it is episcopal. If it has to do with who is included in making decisions, it is congregational.

Who decides who is the pastor or the elders? Here again I think a system that allows for input from the many but a decision by a few makes sense.

In this system the pastor initiates and implements vision, but does not impose it on the church. The elders deliberate and decide, but do not dictate. The members have a voice in decisions, and validate the vision of the church, but do not vote on it.

This system is not perfect and could be subject to abuse like any other system. Still, by trying to draw on what is best from all three models, it minimizes those risks and creates the most space for spiritual gifts to be exercised and for God’s will to be accomplished.

In the seventh chapter, Hammett talks about the role of elders. Not surprisingly (given his theological bent), he discounts the validity of apostles and prophets today. He also minimizes the role of evangelists in the local church (which, frankly, seems weird to me). So the only office (from Ephesians 4) that he ends up with is pastor-teacher.

He does give a brief but helpful overview of the language used for elders in the NT. He then goes on to describe what he sees as the four primary responsibilities of elders. “The first may be called the ministry of the Word,” (p. 163) which is most directly exercised through a preaching and teaching ministry. The second is “pastoral ministry,” (p. 163) or what is involved with tending to the flock. The third area of responsibility is oversight or administration. The fourth is
to serve as an example to the flock. Hammett rightly states that this last one is easily overlooked; yet it is clear in Scripture and important still today.

After discussing the responsibilities of elders, Hammett talks about their qualifications. He looks at moral qualifications, marital and family qualifications, areas of giftedness and spiritual maturity. What he says here is fine as far as it goes; he avoids an overly legalistic reading of “husband of one wife” and presents a better, more balanced view.

He does go on to list a fifth qualification, that eldership is restricted to males. He does not break any new ground here but restates as best he can egalitarian arguments and then, more convincingly, complementarian views on this issue. As with other issues in the book, if you agree with him coming in, this will be a good summary; but it is unlikely to convince anyone who does not already agree with him.

The final qualification he describes is a call. I like what he says about “vocational” ministry; after defending a pastor’s right to receive a salary, he says, “But God’s calling is always a calling to minister, not to receive a paycheck.” (p. 176) This subsection of the chapter on calling is actually quite good.

He concludes this chapter by discussing the number of elders. While he has been equating “elder” with “pastor” throughout the chapter, he makes a case that the biblically preferable situation is for a plurality of elders in a congregation. Of course, he does not believe this necessarily means churches should embrace “elder rule” over congregationalism; he is just saying that it is appropriate to identify more than just the “pastor” as having the biblical office of elder, and that these elders should lead the church (but again, without contravening congregational rule).

The eighth chapter concern the office of deacon. He briefly looks at the biblical background of deacons and their qualifications, then discusses at a little more length the role and responsibilities of deacon. My summary of what he says here is that deacons have a helping role in managing the church, especially concerning benevolence and finances. He talks about the number and selection of deacons. He does not advocate for “terms of office;” rather he says that new deacons should be selected only when a current one steps down or when a new area of need is determined. He also encourages churches to appoint all those, but only those, who are qualified.

He gives a good bit of attention in the chapter to the idea of an office of deaconess. As I read what he says, he seems to say that while the office of deaconess is not required by Scripture, there are some ministries that women are specially suited for, and it is appropriate to recognize those who serve in those ministries (although not necessary to do so). He also points out that if the offices of elder and deacon are clearly delineated (which he admits is not the case in many Baptist churches), then there is no reason why a women could not be a deacon. He endorses as one positive model a church that elects couples to serve together as deacons.

Also in this chapter he talks about ordination. While rejecting a sacramental view of ordination, he allows that it is an appropriate recognition by
a congregation of a pastor’s calling and gifting. He suggests that many in a congregation could be “ordained”, although by this he means not in the legal sense that the U.S. government would recognize, but in the sense of recognition of their gifting and calling to a specific ministry. (He even suggests that “ordination” in these instances be instead called commissioning, blessing or affirming to avoid confusion.) He ends the chapter with a conclusion in which he paints a picture of what a local church would look like, and how it would operate, if it implemented all that he had advocated in the three chapters in this section of the book.

In Part 4, Hammett addresses the question of what the church should do. In chapter nine he looks at the ministries of the church. He is close to Rick Warren’s understanding in seeing five basic ministries of the church: teaching, fellowship, worship, service and evangelism. He notes that he differs from Warren in considering these ministries, not purposes. While he makes a valid point (that the purpose of the church is to glorify God, and it does so through five ministries), this difference seems more semantic than substantive. He also sees Acts 2:42-47 as the source for these five ministries, rather than the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Again, this is a legitimate difference from Warren, but seems slight. Potentially his most significant point of diversion from Warren is that he sees these five ministries as essentially related to the nature of a church; a church that is not undertaking these ministries is not a biblical church. It is true that while Warren doesn’t explicitly use this terminology in The Purpose-Driven Church, I suspect that if asked if he agreed with Hammett in this matter, he would say that he did.

Both Warren and Hammett make convincing cases for these five purposes/ministries as essential foci of the church’s activity. While there is overlap between them, they do seem significantly distinct to warrant individual mention. For example, while in worship we do “teach” through the content of what we are singing (or praying or confessing, etc.), teaching is not a subset of worship, nor is worship a subset of teaching. I do wonder if service could be seen as one essential expression of fellowship; if one sees service or ministry as strictly intra-church, then this case could be made. If “service” is used to include ways we work to show God’s love outside the church, then it could not.

What about the terms used? Hammett, drawing from Acts 2, is on safe ground when he refers to teaching, fellowship, and worship. However, he uses “service” to summarize these phrases: “Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need . . . enjoying the favor of all the people.” Wouldn’t “generosity” be a better summation? And how does “service” include the idea that they “enjoyed the favor of all the people”?

I also wonder about prioritizing Acts 2 over the Great Commission and Great Commandment. Certainly all three passages are important, and I guess one has to choose which passage(s) to use to interpret the other(s). There is something in me that want to hold to the language of “love” and “discipleship” as the primary terms, over the five terms used by either Warren or Hammett. (In this regard, the Stirring’s motto is commendable: “We love. We make disciples.”)
With this as a starting point, teaching is a way we make disciples; worship is a way we express our love for God; service is an expression of our love for others; etc. I even wonder if one could define discipleship in terms of love? “Disciples are those who are following the example of Jesus in growing to love God and love others.” That love is then expressed by _____.

One other quibble with Hammett’s use of Acts 2: he ignores v. 33, which says, “Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.” If we are going to take these verses as paradigmatic to describe the life of the church, as Hammett argues, then we must somehow account for this verse. Maybe my disciple definition should be expanded to say, “. . . and love others in the power of the Holy Spirit.” (The major problem with this is then that Jesus original disciples weren’t really disciples until after Pentecost, since they did not have the Spirit available to them until then. Although, they were empowered by Jesus when he sent them out . . .)

“Disciples are those who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, are becoming more like Jesus by growing in their love for God and for others.”

Hammett contend that these five ministries distinguish churches from parachurch organizations. A church by definition will do all five, while a parachurch organization will focus on one, or perhaps even on one expression of one ministry.

After setting the stage in this way, Hammett looks at each of the five ministries in more detail. In his discussion of teaching, I appreciate his emphasis on purposefulness in a discipleship track. Simply offering a bunch of adult Sunday School classes does not ensure that believers are growing as disciples. While I’m not sure I would embrace fully either of the examples of an intentional discipleship track he mentions, I think the principle behind this is key. How do we expect people to grow as disciples? What opportunities are we giving them? What is the priority and order of what we offer?

An issue Hammett addresses in his discussion of teaching, and one he comes back to when he talks about worship, is the issue of seeker-sensitive services. He makes the point that while we should take reasonable steps not to make our worship inaccessible to unbelievers, the service is primarily for believers. So the preaching and worship should be geared for believers, perhaps with explanations made for unbelievers of unfamiliar terms or practices. I can’t say that I disagree with him on this. In the context of talking about evangelism, he makes the point that what is really attractive to people is changed lives. I think that if people are coming to a church service and are filled with awe because they see God’s power displayed (Acts 2:43), encounter people who have been changed by God, and witness and experience tangible love, then they will probably ask questions, come back, and eventually put their faith in this God who has been demonstrated to them. I think this will happen even if some of the sermon is over their head, or a song uses a biblical image with which they are not familiar, etc. I agree with Hammett that unnecessary barriers, like an insistence on formal dress, should be done away with. I would even say it is appropriate to welcome guests and explicitly say how they can take “next steps”
to find out more and get connected. But I think keeping believers in mind as the primary audience for worship and teaching is appropriate.

What Hammett says about fellowship is fine but not earth-shattering. True fellowship is make possible by the Spirit and runs counter to our American cultural mindset. Small groups are important.

Likewise, his discussion of worship is good but does not present any radical new ideas. While he does express great reservations about changing the style or content of worship (especially music) to appeal to seekers, he does not see anything wrong with contemporary music per se. I agree with him that while some hymns express great theological truths, so do some contemporary worship songs; and while some contemporary praise and worship is shallow and narcissistic, some hymns are likewise too tied to the culture and time in which they were written and should be discarded.

Hammett includes ministry to the poor under the heading of “service.” He offers the suggestion that small groups could adopt service projects to do together. A question I have is whether there is a difference between ministry in the church and service in the world. Should every Christian have a ministry in the church and be serving outside the church in some way? Or are some Christians gifted and called to minister in the church and some are called to serve outside the church?

One of the most challenging sections of this chapter, and even this book, is Hammett’s discussion of evangelism. He makes the case that evangelism is more an activity that God does than one that we do. He points out that in Acts 2:47, it is God who adds to their number daily. Elsewhere in Scripture, exhortations to evangelize are rare, especially compared to other ministries. He does see an appropriate emphasis on outreach, but wonders if efforts focused on evangelism exclusive of the other ministries of the church will be effective. He says:

If the understanding of the New Testament teaching regarding evangelism sketched out above is correct, perhaps the reason for the lack of evangelistic effectiveness lies in weaknesses of other ministries. And if this is so, then the solution is not simply a stronger emphasis on and louder calls for commitment to evangelism. Rather, the solution is the development of healthier churches with stronger ministries of teaching, worship, fellowship and service that, in turn, produce changed lives. It with such changed lives that intentional emphases on evangelism and practical training in evangelism produce results. (p. 255)

To me this was a different way of thinking about evangelism, but it makes a lot of sense. I think the emphasis on changed lives is important. I would add to this experiences of God’s love and power (both in corporate gatherings and in individual encounters) as key for convincing unbelievers to repent. (All of this assumes the essential role of the Holy Spirit in convicting them of their need to repent, making it possible for them to believe, etc.)
The second chapter in this section, chapter 10, looks at the Lord’s Supper and baptism. He starts by discussing the proper terminology (he settles on “ordinance” but also sees “sacrament” as appropriate as long as one understands that the act does not impart grace); the proper number (two); the proper administrator (theoretically anyone but for the sake of orderly worship, the pastor); the proper setting (only a church service); and the proper perspective (both a divine and human activity).

I have sometimes wondered why foot washing has not become an ordinance along with baptism and the Lord’s Supper; Hammett points out that whereas baptism and communion relate specifically to our salvation, foot washing relates to how we are to relate to one another. This makes sense; plus foot washing is icky.

I would not state quite as strongly as Hammett does that one cannot baptize or observe communion apart from a whole-church service. I agree one cannot do either alone and have them mean what they really mean; but I could see, for example, a small group doing either with the blessing of the church leadership and it being fine. Plus, what do you do if you have a baptism service to which the whole church is invited but only 20 people come? Can you not do the baptisms then, because there aren’t enough people there? Do we have to establish a quorum for the ordinances to be able to be observed?

After this introductory discussion, Hammett looks at baptism and communion in turn. He identifies the meaning of baptism as having to do with identification with Christ, purification from sin, and incorporation into the body of Christ. His conclusion is that baptism is an outward sign that reflects the reality of all three of these meanings, rather than an instrument which accomplishes any of them.

He makes the case against infant baptism; a good, standard argument. He reiterates his point that children should only be baptized when they are old enough to make a clear and independent confession of faith. He stops short of setting an age limit but seems to agree with those who aim for around age twelve. Some of his discussion about baptism was not helpful to me because he identifies the act of baptism with becoming a church member (not surprising, since he is, after all, a Baptist; but still unhelpful to me).

In his discussion of communion, he lays out the four views of what “This is my body” means. He acknowledges the memorial view as the most common in Baptist circles but seems sympathetic to the “spiritual presence” view of Calvin. He talks at some length about open versus closed communion. Given his view of baptism and church membership, his case for closed communion is consistent. Since I do not agree with those starting points, it was not convincing for me. With open communion, my sense has been that while communion really only has meaning for believers, it is not wrong for an unbeliever to partake. For them, it is only a snack, and not really communion; but still, I’m not sure it’s worth excluding them explicitly. I would prefer to emphasize the meaning for those who have put their faith in Christ. I think the aspect of communion which is a confession or proclamation does not need to refer just to a local church, but can be an
acknowledgment of our fellowship with all those who proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Hammett emphasizes the importance of preparation before communion, which is something that probably could stand to be emphasized more in our churches. I don’t know that the format he suggests for doing this needs to be implemented at every communion observance, but some emphasis on preparation should be included. He advocates for a monthly observance on practical grounds; I agree with him that quarterly is not often enough. However, I could be talked into weekly observance; this was clearly the pattern of the early church. Plus, what communion signifies is so central to our faith, I don’t know that we can over-emphasize it. I know the argument against this is that doing it weekly could lead to it becoming commonplace, and thus losing some of its significance; but the answer to this could be creative and thoughtful reminders of its significance each week rather than observing it less often.

Side note: what a difference between Chan and Hammett. For Chan, don’t bother doing anything ever if you don’t celebrate communion; and when you do, make sure the whole service is centered around it. For Hammett, well, it’s important but lots of the details are negotiable.

The final section of the book looks at where the church is headed. In chapter 11, Hammett addresses this question in the context of America, and in chapter 12 he broadens his view to address this question globally.

In terms of the church in America, Hammett notes the rise of secularization and postmodernism, then identifies four direction in which he sees churches moving. First, he sees churches moving “to the seekers.” Here he reiterates some of the critiques he has offered previously in the context of discussing worship and teaching. I appreciate that he sees a continuum of “seeker” churches, from “seeker-aware” to “seeker-driven.” A mistake I have seen others make is to lump all “seeker” churches in one category and then offer critiques that really cannot be applied so broadly. Hammett also is to be commended for noting some positive aspects of seeker churches. On the whole he gives a fairly balanced presentation. One connection he makes here, and has made previously in the book, is that seeker churches use contemporary music. It almost seems to me that he believes the reverse is true, as well: that any church that uses contemporary music is therefore “seeker” to some degree. I am not convinced this is the case, that the only motivation for using contemporary music and instruments is to be more appealing to those outside the church. In my experience, even people who have grown up in the church, or who become believers as adults but have been in the church for several years, still do not necessarily connect with traditional hymns and instruments. I think it is possible that a church could adopt exactly the perspective Hammett advocates (that Sunday worship services are primarily for believers and should be directed toward them) and still end up with contemporary worship.

In his discussion of seeker churches, Hammett addresses the issue of marketing. He lands on a position pretty close to what I believe, although perhaps slightly more conservative. Basically, he says that while we can be wise
is how we present ourselves and our message, we cannot allow a desire to get people to come to our church change the essence of our message. That message - which includes the need for repentance, the reality of hell, the holiness of God, etc. – may be unpopular, but it is our only message and cannot be altered. I think if you tie marketing to consumerism, as Hammett does and as he quotes Barna as doing, then the cautions he offers are absolutely appropriate. However, when I think of “marketing,” I think more in terms of communication strategies – how and where and to whom we communicate, not what we communicate. The cross is an offense; we cannot and should not try to make it less offensive. Still, I don’t think we should add unnecessarily to that offense by the ways we communicate the message. And what’s wrong with wanting to share our “offensive” message with as many people as possible in the clearest possible way? So I believe there is a lot we can learn and apply from the world of marketing, without falling into the legitimate dangers that Hammett identifies.

The second direction Hammett sees is “to extremes of size.” I like the way he phrased this, as it takes into account both megachurches and what he calls microchurches. In his discussion of megachurches, he raises the commonly-raised point that in a megachurch, the full Biblical sense of fellowship cannot be experienced in the main worship service, and so small groups of some kind must be emphasized. I agree; but I would ask whether that kind of fellowship can be experienced in a church of 500, or 200, or even 80. I think small groups may be necessary for anything other than a house church.

Under the heading of microchurches, Hammett looks at small groups, cell groups, and house churches. He does a good job distinguishing these terms that often get conflated. I largely agreed with his description and assessment. He sees that a house church can be a legitimate, Biblical church in itself; while a small group or even a cell group, be design, cannot be.

The third direction he identifies is “to the postmodern generation.” He does as good a job as anyone I’ve read of summarizing what is meant by “postmodernism,” including the perspective that there is no such thing as “postmodernism,” merely “hypermodernism.” A major part of his discussion here, after talking about what the term means, regards the emerging church. Again, he does as good a job as I’ve seen of presenting a fair and balanced explanation and critique of the emerging church. He recognizes that there is a wide continuum of churches that could be identified as “emerging.” He acknowledges that McClaren, for example, does not speak for every “emerging” church or pastor! He does not hesitate to point out the emphases in emerging churches which are in fact helpful corrections to blind spots in more traditional churches. And while he does point out the errors or shortfalls in “emergent” thinking, he does so in a way that lacks the bile and anger of other critiques.

A thought came to me after reading his take on this that, while he doesn’t put it in these words, I think Hammett would agree with. The church should not be postmodern, modern, or even pre-modern. We should not define ourselves in relation to those terms. We should be Biblical, godly, Christlike. The starting point is not, “Where do we stand in regard to our culture?” but rather, “Where do we stand in relation to God’s standard for us?” This will lead to engagement with
our culture, but starting here allows us to thoughtfully discern which aspects of
our culture are in line with God’s standard and which aspects don’t. No culture –
defined in terms of modernity, geography, or history – perfectly matches the
Kingdom of God. So accommodating to or reacting against whatever culture (or
subculture) we find ourselves in is the wrong way to approach the issue of our
identity and practices.

In fact, I wonder if we could think of the Kingdom of God as the culture the
church should be producing? I would need to look more carefully at the definition
of “culture” as that term is used by sociologists to see if this could be a helpful
analogy or not. Our goal is not to impose the culture of the Kingdom of God onto
our existing culture (at best that only leads to Christendom). Rather, we call
people out of “the world” and into a proleptic expression of “the world to come.”
Often we say we should be “not of this world” and “counter-cultural.” But that
does not mean we become a-cultural (having no culture). I don’t think that is
humanly possible; it’s not the way God has created us. I also do not think that
developing a Christian subculture is right, either. If we think of ourselves as a
subculture, we are still defining ourselves in relation to the world, and
acknowledging that we still share many aspects of the wider culture. Even the
term “counter-culture” indicates that we are thinking of ourselves in light of the
surrounding culture. Perhaps it would be better to think of what we are called
into as an alternate culture. There will be points of congruence between this new
culture and our surrounding culture, as well as many points of incongruence. It is
appropriate to acknowledge those, but they are not our starting point. Hmmm…
something to think about more.

Hammett briefly address one more direction, “to the past.” He points out
this trend across a wide variety of churches, and on the whole he sees it as
positive. I agree; I think we need the alternate perspective of those who lived in
different times, and under difference circumstances, as a correction to our
myopia and narcissism.

In his final chapter, Hammett looks at the wider, global church. He gives a
very brief summary of world missions, highlighting the rapid expansion of the
church in the last two centuries. He then identifies three trends he sees
currently.

The first trend is the emphasis on global church planting. He notes the
emphasis on Church Planting Movements. While he sees church planting as
right and necessary, later in the chapter he will offer some critiques of rapidly
reproducing house churches. Do they develop disciples or just converts? Do
they have adequate leadership as defined Biblically? Are they full expressions of
church, Biblically understood?

The second trend he sees is the vitality of the Pentecostal/charismatic
branch of the church. He summarizes the development of both the Pentecostal
and charismatic movements, and notes their rapid growth and predominance in
many parts of the world. As has been his pattern throughout the book, he does
not dismiss them out of hand, or over-generalize. He does express reservations
about how closely Baptist missionaries and churches can work with these groups
without compromising their own message. But he also identifies three contributions of the Pentecostal/charismatic movement to the wider evangelical church. First, they offer an important reminder of the importance of the power of the Spirit in empowering believers and churches. Second, they are examples of zeal in evangelism. And third, leaders in this movement have been able to instill indigenous principles in planting new churches in some Third World countries.

The third trend is the movement of the weight of the church from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern. He briefly summarizes the recent material written on this subject.

He concludes the chapter with a discussion of questions raised by these trends. In addition to some issues already mentioned, he talks about the challenge of contextualization, especially in Muslim contexts. I get the impression he would have serious reservations about “insider” and “C5” type strategies. If you start with the view of the church he has developed and defended in this book – which includes an insistence on believer’s baptism, congregational polity, all five ministries being essential – then I can see how those movements would raise significant questions for him.

Hammett offers a brief conclusion in which he summarizes again the reasons he wrote this book. He emphasizes that the measure of success is faithfulness, not numerical growth, and hopes that this book will help Baptist pastors meet that standard of success.

My overall take on this book is that it was good. Even at the points where I disagreed with him, it was helpful for me to think through and have to articulate why I disagreed with him. I think his summary of where the church is headed identified the right trends, and in a concise way. I like what Hammett has done for Baptist churches; now I wish someone would do the same for Alliance churches!