The church: Ark and art of salvation

Gerald J. Mast

In *Cloud Atlas*, the 2004 novel by David Mitchell, readers confront six interrelated stories, which occur across a wide range of time and space—from the mid-nineteenth-century Pacific islands to twenty-first-century England to a future post-apocalyptic Hawaii. The characters in these stories apparently share little in common—they are merely souls that "cross ages like clouds cross skies"—except for the thread of words by which one character's story is discovered by another story's character.[1] Yet this thread of words turns out to weave a profound—even if easily unacknowledged—strand of meaning and purpose and transformation into the otherwise random fabric of events by which characters' lives are begun, shaped, and ended; it forms a cloud atlas.

The church is a refuge from the disobedience of the world; it is an ark of salvation. And the church is a witness to the holiness of the world; it is an art of salvation.

About halfway through *Cloud Atlas*, I realized what was familiar about this seemingly unusual plot structure. Reading *Cloud Atlas* is like reading the Bible. An apparently random collection of stories, poems, rules, and rants is strung together by the encounter of a figure in one account with a life-transforming text that is birthed in a different time and place. The law received by Moses is retrieved from the dustbin of the temple by Josiah the king. The ballad of Miriam sung by a liberated Israel is recited as a prayer by Mary at the annunciation of the Messiah. The sweet-as-honey scroll eaten by the prophet Ezekiel is offered to the seer of John's apocalypse by the angel standing on the sea and on the land.

The stories in *Cloud Atlas* and the Bible make it clear that our lives are bound together with those of human beings and the creation from every time and place, that the convictions and choices of our daily lives have eternal significance, even—or

perhaps especially—if we are not kings and princes. As Adam Ewing, one of the narrators in *Cloud Atlas*, puts it: "What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts and virtuous acts." But Ewing recognizes that outcomes are results of a complicated relationship between what people believe about the nature of the universe and the actual events that unfold in that universe: "If we believe that humanity may transcend tooth and claw, . . . such a world will come to pass," even though such a world "is the hardest of worlds to make real" and "torturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president's pen or a vainglorious general's sword." Against those who insist that the life choices of one human being amount to nothing more than "one drop in a limitless ocean," Ewing asks, "yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?"[2]

It is this long and large view—the view from eternity—by which it makes sense to claim that the church of Jesus Christ is intrinsic to my salvation and yours, to the salvation of the world. Sacred texts written centuries ago become songs and stories that define us, that connect our lives to the words and deeds of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Ruth and Rahab—the biblical cloud of witnesses to the God of Israel who creates and redeems. Moreover, in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we come to realize that our own faithful words and deeds—when done in weakness and humility together with our brothers and sisters in Christ—are taken up in God's accomplished but not-yet-fully-realized mission to redeem and reconcile the broken creation.

The church is not a perfect community, but it is a holy community, the place where—to paraphrase Karl Barth—God has spoken and people have heard.[3] More precisely, the church is the political and social body of those who have heard this message of love's triumph proclaimed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who have begun to order their lives according to that cross-shaped message. This body transcends time and space; it is a communion of saints that spans the medieval and the modern, a global body of believers that reaches from Rome to Nome. Christians confess—by faith—that it is through this body that God's peaceable reign and the world's salvation accomplished by Jesus Christ is being made visible and available to all.

This salvation is being realized in at least two ways that are all too frequently set against each other. First, the church is a refuge from the disobedience of the world: it is a place where sinners are saved and believers are discipled into the ways of Jesus Christ; it is an ark of salvation. Second, the church is a witness to the holiness of the world: it is a place in which God's salvation of the entire cosmos is exhibited and celebrated; it is an art of salvation.

The church as ark

An ancient metaphor for the church, prized by Anabaptists, has been that of the ark. The church is a place of safety and security amid the floods of this world that threaten to overwhelm us. Here we find support in our life's struggles, wisdom for discernment, and friends to share the journey.

More importantly, where the church is gathered, the word of God is proclaimed and obeyed. New believers are baptized, disciples share the Lord's Table together, brothers and sisters in Christ serve one another and their neighbors with the gifts they have received. In the church, people are indeed saved from the sin and death of the world. Through baptism, Pilgram Marpeck writes, a believer "enters into the body of Christ, that is, the church of Christ, yes into Christ Himself, as the true ark wherein, through the word of obedience, one can be preserved from the flood."[4]

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As such an ark of safety, the church issues an invitation to the world and provides a fellowship of faith. For example, by its existence the church invites conversion from the bondage of sin and defeat and into a life of holiness and hope. Sometimes this takes place through organized mission activity by which the church reaches out to people in apparent distress: prison ministries, rescue missions, food banks, homeless shelters, peacemaking teams, disaster relief, and evangelism.

Just as frequently, this invitation is offered by virtue of the simple fact that the church exists. This reality is illustrated by something that happened recently during "pie night," an event my congregation holds for local college students during exam week.

While I was serving pie, I noticed that a distressed woman who was obviously not a college student had entered our fellowship hall. She told me that she had left her home after a quarrel with her husband. While walking past our meetinghouse she saw the lights on and decided to come in. A social worker put down her serving spoon in order to listen to the woman's story and to offer guidance as well as resources for support. The woman returned home with new wisdom and renewed hope. This is a routine example of the way salvation unfolds in typically unremarked yet eternally significant ways in the life of the church.

In its existence, the church reflects the sorrow and hope of the world. Like the world, it is broken and beautiful. Put another way, the church is a community of sinners who have been saved by grace through faith. As such, the church struggles through the power of the Holy Spirit to be transformed into a community of service whose members are freed from the pathologies of selfish individualism so that they are able in humility to offer one another and the world the grace that they have received.[5]

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Through the church's practices, members develop new habits and responses to the challenges of their occupations and stations, habits that reflect the way of Jesus Christ and God's plan for the world. For example, through a process of conflict resolution that is respectful of both offender and offended, and that seeks restoration rather than retribution, the church offers a model of restorative justice for addressing crime and punishment. In a discernment process that attends in an orderly way to the perspectives of each member, the church models decision making that radicalizes democracy and lifts up the last and the least. By repeatedly distributing food and drink in communion services and potluck dinners, the church begins a process of resource redistribution that shows the way to economic justice in the whole society.[6] Through communal Bible study that delights in the surplus of revelation that arises from a diversity of interpretations, the church cultivates a radically cross-cultural and

interreligious hospitality. By singing together, the church blends human voices in artful ways that herald the doxological protest by which the whole world will one day bow at the name of Jesus Christ.[7]

If this description is true, church conflicts, committee meetings, potlucks, Bible studies, and choir rehearsals have eternal significance, because in every one of these settings people are choosing not only between the vicious and virtuous but also between the conventional and the Christ-like. These Christ-defined and cross-shaped processes speak to God's intention for the whole world and signal that the church is more than an ark. It is also an art that exhibits what God is doing both in and beyond the church: "the believing community is the new world on the way."[8]

The church as art

As an artful community, the church can be understood to be painting a picture or performing a drama of God's salvation that is seen and witnessed beyond its membership. By its ongoing improvisation on the practices identified with God's people in the scriptures, the church shows the world the justice that God intends for the world. It demonstrates the peace that Jesus gives, peace that issues from the cross and not the sword.

At the same time, through the art of culturally adaptive witness, the church both exhibits and confirms the salvation that God has accomplished and that is being realized throughout the cosmos, not just in the present institution of the church. The church's vivid, even if flawed, demonstration of the defenseless love and boundless grace of Jesus Christ in its own life makes visible those worldly and cosmic events in which God's great salvation appears and in which the world's disobedience is shown to be futile and therefore under judgment. In this way, the church is a community of sight: with the eyes of faith, it can spot and name and bless every event in the life of the world that glorifies the God of Jesus Christ, even when that event is not directly related to an official denomination or orthodox conviction.[9]

A recent issue of *The New Yorker* carries an article entitled "Atonement." It is the story of an American Iraq War veteran troubled by his involvement in killing civilians while his marine

unit was under fire during the early days of the American invasion of Iraq. On April 8, 2003, Lu Lobello's unit fired on a car driving toward their unit, killing James Kachadoorian and his two sons, Nicolas and Edmund, and severely injuring Kachadoorian's daughter, Nora.

After he returned to the U.S. and was discharged from the marines, Lobello was haunted by the events of that day. He recalled a blood-soaked infant being held by its mother; she was asking, "Why did you shoot us?" He remembered the dead lying beside the road. He wondered what had happened to the people in the car who had survived, and he felt an urge to find them and talk to them.

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Through Facebook, Lobello discovered that the survivors of the attack had moved to California and that Nora Kachadoorian, the young woman injured by shrapnel, had survived. He made a video in which he expressed his concern and his interest in what had happened to the rest of her family. He also said that he wished to speak with her: "I can't go on not trying to say hello to you." He sent her the video through Facebook.

Nora's family turned out to be Armenian Christians who are Jehovah's Witnesses. Her father, James—killed during the marine attack—was a conscientious objector who had refused to fight when drafted into Sadaam Hussein's army and who had been to prison twice as a result. Nora responded to Lobello's video with a message of forgiveness and a Bible passage that offered assurance that they would see her father and brothers again one day. The message stated: "Me & my mother we both forgive you, we know we will see them in the kingdom of Jesus."

With the help of a journalist, Lubello set up a meeting with the Kachadoorian family. He spoke with them about his distress over what had happened and listened to their stories of grief and agony. Margaret Kachadoorian—the mother—told him again that they forgave him, citing a passage from 2 Corinthians and asking Lubello whether he read the Bible. Lubello, a lapsed Mormon, said that he used to read the Bible and that perhaps he should

start again. Lubello and the Kachadoorians embraced one another, and in the months since the meeting they have been in contact with one another. Nora told him that she now thinks of him as her third brother.[10]

This startling story of forgiveness and reconciliation makes it clear that salvation takes place in the world of terror and beauty outside the church, that "the whole world is the House of God," as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it.[11] At the same time, this story exemplifies how the church and the church's book are essential to the salvation that God is bringing about. Texts inscribed with the holiness of God centuries ago reveal the holiness of the creation today, call sinners everywhere to seek restoration, urge victims of all times to offer forgiveness, invite enemies in every conflict to join in God's great reconciliation project. The church indeed is a work of art that is enshrined in the beauty of the earth, in the glory of the heavens, and in the goodness of humanity.

Conclusion

This article has focused on routine and concrete ways that the church realizes our salvation and the world's. It may appear that I have an overly reductionist understanding of God's great salvation. It would be a mistake to read my argument this way. Rather, I am suggesting that God uses modest means to accomplish eternal ends, a mustard seed to grow a large and irrepressible plant, the little flock to herald the multitude from every tribe and nation. We are assured that the drops of faith that we offer to the world in the name of Jesus Christ and through the life of the church will become, one day, the mighty ocean by which "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14; NRSV). Thanks be to God.

Notes

[1] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (New York: Random House, 2004), 308.
[2] Ibid, 507–9.
[3] Karl Barth, *God in Action* (Manhasset, NY: Round Table Press, 1963), 22–33.
[4] Pilgram Marpeck, "The Admonition of 1542," in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, trans. and ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1978), 201.
[5] Karl Barth, *God in Action*, 32–33.
[6] The examples of conflict resolution, group discernment, and communion are drawn from John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community*

before the Watching World (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 1–27; 61–70.
[7] The examples of Bible study and singing are drawn from Gerald J. Mast, *Go to Church, Change the World: Christian Community as Calling* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2012), 41–48, 121–26.
[8] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 50. See also Barth's statement that the world is "waiting—not for the Church but to become the Church itself" (Karl Barth, *God in Action*, 24).
[9] I am following John Howard Yoder's reading of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV.2 as found in Yoder's essay "The Paradigmatic Public Role of God's People" (Yoder, *For the Nations*, 24–27).
[10] Dexter Filkins, "Atonement," *The New Yorker*, October 29 and November 5, 2012, 92–103.
[11] Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 4.

About the author

Gerald Mast is professor of communication at Bluffton (OH) University. His most recent book, *Go to Church, Change the World: Christian Community as Calling* (Herald Press, 2012), displays how the practices of the church prepare believers for the work of the world. He is a member of First Mennonite Church, Bluffton.