A paper looking at ‘relationality’ in Donne would be less than ground-breaking. So much of our work has examined the complex ways in which he figures relationships: Donne and the lover, Donne and his friends, Donne and the king, Donne and God. But these all posit ‘one-to-one’ relationships. Even in those studies that peer closely into thinking in relational terms, the dynamic tends to be between Donne and one other.¹ Karl F. Morrison, in a larger study of empathy, offers Donne’s 17th Meditation (‘no man is an island’) as the starting point for his discussion of the different models through which individual identities are incorporated into others, and he focuses on the Church as the context within which this sacramental union happens. Donne, he says ‘was able to think of believers in personal union with Christ, their common head, and of believers in union with one another through their unity in Christ’s body’.² But


² Karl F. Morrison, “I am you”: The Hermeneutics of Empathy in Western Literature, Theology, and Art (Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 5-9, p. 6.)
not long after, the focus shifts from this ‘common identity’ in the church back to Donne’s attempt at unity with God. And we are back to a ‘one-to-one’ relationship. Something similar happens with Hans Boersma’s *Seeing God*, where we hear of Donne’s ‘participatory ontology’ but the participants discussed are two: Donne and God. ³

I want to look at Donne’s presentation of a ‘many-to-many’ relationship, the ‘common identity’ of members of the church and whether that has, for Donne, a salvific function. Is our membership of the church merely for selfish reasons, to get ourselves to heaven, or does our common aim in fact demonstrate a mutual purpose: we need each other to get there. I realise that this is partly to warm through a very old debate. Ever since Bunyan’s Christian blocked his ears from the calls of his family and ran off to the Celestial City, an argument was made possible that Protestantism ‘created’ individualism. I think we have not managed to tackle the myth that Capitalism being the unwanted love-child of Protestantism and Mercantilism decisively, and I think this is because we have not looked at the place in Protestant writings where discussions of corporate identity rests: the theology of the Church. I want to look at what Donne says about the Church, and how, for him at least, we will not get to the Celestial City by closing our ears to those around us.

Donne’s ecclesiology is, in many respects, unremarkable:\(^4\) through the sacraments, we are ‘sealed’ as Christians, and through prayer and preaching we learn to love God and sanctify ourselves. There’s nothing here that cannot be found in Richard *Of the Church*, for example.\(^5\) So we need to look at where Donne places the emphasis in discussions of the Church. The word used by Donne (and used a lot) for the Church’s functions is God’s ‘ordinance’.

\(^6\) *OED* tells us that ‘ordinance’, meaning ‘a practice or usage authoritatively enjoined or prescribed; esp. a religious or ceremonial observance’ was common at the time. But there is a web of connected meanings that are important too: in a legal sense (and Donne loves playing with different senses), ‘ordinance’ is a law with more temporary force than a statute. Perhaps Donne reminds himself that the sacraments are only needed by the militant church?\(^7\) The *OED*’s etymology tells us that the closest cognate noun is Latin *ōrdinātiō*, from which we get ‘ordination’ (in the clerical sense) and the more general sense of ‘ordering’: ‘the condition of being ordered or arranged; an arrangement’. That seems to be the direction that Donne’s thought travels, because he often couples ‘ordinances’

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\(^4\) One source for D’s thinking about the church and the mutual obligations of members of the church to each other is the Heidelberg catechism, which has a strong statement ‘that every one who hath received gifts, ought to imply them readily and cheerfully for the common profit, and salvation of all’: Jeremias Basteningius, *An exposition or commentary upon the Catechism* (1589), STC 1564, p. 74.


\(^6\) PS i.9. 313; PS ii.5.142; PS iv.2.71; PS v.1.56; PS v.3.112; PS vi.10.217; PS vii. 5.157; PS viii.4.121; PS.ix.5. 148; PS ix.8.208; PS ix. 12. 281; PS ix.13.315; PS ix.16.367.

\(^7\) For example, in a sermon preached at S Pauls upon Christmas day 1628, Donne writes of the church as ‘a visible and constant and permanent means of salvation, by his Ordinances there, *usque ad consummationem*, till the end of the world: PS VIII, 306-8.
with ‘institutions’ of the Church. And ‘institution’ also has a specific religious sense (‘the establishment or ordination of a sacrament of the Christian Church’) and a more general sense: ‘the giving of form or order to a thing; orderly arrangement’. In short, the church has been ‘ordered’, ‘arranged’ and as it were designed by God to provide a means to heaven. Indeed, the church is the only thing set up by God for that end: he has not made alternative provision. Donne tell us:

The place then where we take our degrees in this knowledge of God, our Academy, our University for that, is the Church; for, though, as there may be some few examples given, of men that have growne learned, who never studied at University; so there may be some examples of men enlightened by God, and yet not within that covenant which constitutes the Church; yet the ordinary place for Degrees is the University, and the ordinary place for Illumination in the knowledge of God, is the Church. (PS 8.9.226)

The Church is how and where salvation happens, and it happens in a crowd. It is in common prayer, and the collaborative effort of receiving and giving the sacraments, hearing and preaching a sermon, that grace is transmitted. We may be elected individually, but our means to heaven were ‘ordered’ to be gregarious. Even solitary reading of the Bible is not recommended without the church’s help: ‘At home, the holy Ghost is with thee in the reading of the Scriptures; But there he is with thee as a Remembrancer, (The Holy Ghost shall bring to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you, saies our Saviour) Here, in the Church, he is with thee, as a Doctor to teach thee; First learne at Church and then meditate at home. Receive the seed by hearing the Scriptures interpreted here, and water it by returning to those places at home.’ (PS. 8.9.227)
fellow-feeling of others miseries, that is Sympathy, and God loves Harmony, and fellow-believing of others Doctrines, that is Symphony’.⁹

Donne’s participatory model of salvation does not merely put individual Christians together in the church building; he obliges them to work together. And the term he uses to explain this is another recurring phrase in his sermons: the ‘offices of mutual society’. In the Accession day sermon of 1617, he writes:

Every man hath a Politick life, as well as a natural life; and he may no more take himself away from the world, then he may make himself away out of the world. For he that dies so, by withdrawing himself from his calling, from the labours of mutual society in this life, that man kills himself, and God calls him not (PS I.3.209-10).¹⁰

This always reminds me of the plaintive letter Donne wrote to Goodyer before his ordination in which he declares that he would ‘fain do something’, but the act of choosing is itself to do something: ‘to be no part of any body, is to be nothing. At most, the great men, are but great wens ... except they be so incorporated into the body of the world that they contribute something to the sustentation of the whole’. (Letters, pp. 50-51).

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¹⁰ PS I.3, pp. 209-10. Accession day sermon, Paul’s Cross 1616/17. Donne qualifies this using the example of John the Baptists, to say that occasionally everyone should retire from worldly business to lay aside time for prayer: PS IV.8.228.
To be ‘incorporated into the world’ is to ‘contribute to the sustentation of the whole’, to be *useful*, and certainly one of the most important elements of the ‘offices of mutual society’ is to be gainfully employed. It is such an important obligation that even the fear of sinning does not absolve us from it: ‘no over-tender or timorous soule’ is permitted to ‘hide it self in a retired life, from the offices of society’ Donne says.\(^\text{11}\) And in the 1622 *Directions* sermon, he is scathing about those who fail to contribute:

> Men that sucke the sweet of the Earth, and the sweat of other Men: Men that pay the State nothing in doing the offices of mutuall societie, and embracing particular vocations; Men that make themselues but pipes to receiue and conuay, and vent rumors, but spunges to sucke in, and powre out foule water; Men that doe not spend time, but weare time, they trade not, they plough not, they preach not, they plead not, but walke, and walke vpon the way, till they haue walked out their sixe moneths for the renuing of bands. (Q1622 sig Er)

But how can one’s civic obligation to be ‘incorporated into the world’ have a bearing on salvation? For Donne, being incorporated into the world is also to be incorporated into the church, and our duties to each other in that regard are many, and not merely for preachers.\(^\text{12}\) The discourse of vocations is an important but understudied aspect of English post-Reformation writing, and it is one that Donne handles at length in his 1622 Spital sermon. But the first

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\(^\text{11}\) PS. 9.15.344, on Ps. 32.7.

\(^\text{12}\) For Donne and the preacher’s calling, see Donald M Friedman, ‘Donne, Herbert, and Vocation’, *George Herbert Journal* 18 (1995), 133-58. One Donne’s sense of the preacher’s affective bond with the hearers and his obligation towards them, see esp. PS VIII, p. 169-70, Preached at St Pauls. the Sunday after the Conversion of St Paul. 27.Jan/ 1627 [1627/8]
‘vocation’ that he considers in the text is ‘the Christian church’: God has ‘shined’ on his hearers by bringing them to be baptised in a true Church (PS 4.3.104-7). Although Donne talks particularly about the calling of preachers, he insists that the obligation to let God’s light ‘shine in our hands also, in our actions, in the example of our life’ is not restricted to them (p. 111-3). In secular ‘callings’ he says we are sensible to take the example of others, and in our religious life we should do the same, looking to the example of Jesus but also to the example of good people around us (pp. 99-100). We are living examples to each other on how we should live:

And when you have made up your profit that way, rectified your self by that course, then, as your Sons write by Copies, and your Daughters work by Samplars, be every Father a Copy to his Son, every Mother a Sampler to her Daughter, and ever house will be an University. O in how blessed a nearness to their Direction, is that Child, and that Servant, and that Parishioner, who, when they shall say to Almighty God, by way of Prayer, What shall I do, to get eternal life? shall hear God answer to them by his Spirit, Do but as thou seest thy Father do, do as thou seest thy Master do, do as thou seest thy Pastor do! (PS 4.3.100)

Our actions matter for our souls not least because they are an example, and have an effect, on others. The ‘bad example’ that we might give is also something Donne considered in detail: he preached three sermons (two companion pieces at Lincoln’s Inn and his last sermon at Paul’s Cross) on the sin of ‘scandal’: the ‘stumbling block’ that our misdeeds create that cause others to sin.\(^{13}\) It is a

\(^{13}\) PS 3.6 and PS 3.7 (these sermons were probably preached February to May 162), and PS viii.7, preached in 1629. On Donne and scandal, particularly regarding preaching, see Jeanne Shami, \emph{John Donne and Conformity in Crisis in the Late Jacobean Pulpit} (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 2003), 84, 137.
knotted topic, and Donne delved far into the scholastic distinctions between sinful deeds by us that cause others to sin, neutral deeds that we do not avoid that cause sin in others (both kinds of ‘active scandal), and even those innocent deeds at which offensive is wrongfully taken (‘passive scandal’). I think it is noteworthy that these casuistic complications arise from the dynamic between two or more people: one acting in response to the example set by another. And Donne is intensely interested in this. His preaching explores the contours of the positive sense (giving an example) and the negative sense (giving or taking scandal) by which our actions have an impact on the spiritual life of others, and how that in turn has an impact on the state of our souls.

The most significant relationship in any of Donne’s works is between the body and the soul, and the essential nature of that bond is what, for Donne, ties the members of the Church together in mutual support and dependency: what we do in our bodies makes real and communicates our faith: we show our faith in our works. In a Whitehall sermon of 1626, in which Donne explains that the ‘whole duty of Christianity consists in these three things: piety towards God, love of neighbour, and sanctification of the self. But he then goes on to show that the last of these depends partly on the second, our actions towards others:

... but yet, as though our bodily hand reach to our temporal food, yet the mouth and the stomach must do their office too; and so that meat must be distributed into all parts of the body, and assimilated to them; so though our faith draw this salvation neer us, yet when our mouth is imployed, that we have a delight to
glorifie God in our discourse, and to declare his wonderfull works to the sons of men, in our thankfulness: And when this faith of ours is distributed over all the body, that the body of Christ's Church is edified, and alienated by our good life and sanctification, then is this Salvation nearer us, that is, safer seal'd to us, then when we believed only. (PS. 2.12.263)

And I cannot think of a better way to end this paper.

14 Another sermon that discussed the embodied soul and the duties to care for the health of body and soul, and the social body, is the sermon on 1 Cor. 15.29, PS VII, 3. 104)