Verbum et Ecclesia
ISSN: (Online) 2074-7705, (Print) 1609-9982

The empty seats: Ecclesial failure in Matthew 22:1–14

Author:
Wilson W. Suwanto[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Faculty of Theology, Reformed Seminary of Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding author:
Wilson Suwanto,
wilson.suwanto@reformedindonesia.ac.id

Dates:
Received: 25 Mar. 2026
Accepted: 21 Apr. 2026
Published: 30 June 2026

How to cite this article:
Suwanto, W.W., 2026, 'The empty seats: Ecclesial failure in Matthew 22:1–14', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 47(1), a3869. https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v47i1.3869

Copyright:
© 2026. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Systematic ecclesiology has predominantly drawn on positive New Testament images to construct its doctrine of the church, yet it lacks adequate categories for interpreting structural ecclesial failure: patterned and persistent communal dysfunction that cannot be reduced to individual moral failure or temporary deviation from an ideal. The Synoptic parables of communal failure remain largely underused as ecclesiological data. This study reads Matthew 22:1–14 at the intersection of Matthean parable scholarship and constructive systematic ecclesiology, using close analysis of the Greek text in dialogue with major commentaries, the history of interpretation, and theological reflection informed by Bonhoeffer's distinction between ultimate and penultimate realities. The analysis identifies three movements of ecclesial failure: the failure of desire, in which the invited community escalates from indifference to violence; the illusion of replacement, in which a new community reproduces the structural conditions of the first; and failure within the replacement itself, in which membership proves insufficient for authentic participation. These movements support the development of a 'penultimate ecclesiology': an account of the church as a community whose structural imperfection is theologically anticipated rather than aberrant. This framework normalises failure without celebrating it, rejects the myth of the fresh start, and reframes the church's relationship to its own crises by locating ecclesial life within the provisional space before God's final act.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This research bridges New Testament studies and systematic theology by challenging ecclesiology to incorporate the Synoptic parables as constructive resources. It also engages the sociology of institutions as a partner for understanding ecclesial failure beyond purely theological categories.

Keywords: ecclesiology; Matthew 22; parable; ecclesial failure; penultimate ecclesiology; Synoptic Gospels; Bonhoeffer; blueprint ecclesiology.

Introduction

The contemporary church finds itself in a period of unprecedented institutional crisis. Across denominational and geographical boundaries, ecclesial communities confront realities that resist assimilation into traditional theological frameworks: clergy abuse scandals that have devastated Roman Catholic dioceses on multiple continents (eds. Keenan, Bartunek & Hinsdale 2006:3–15), the sustained haemorrhaging of membership in mainline Protestant churches across Europe and North America (Bruce 2011:34–52; Root 2022:1–25), and the institutional collapse of ecclesial networks built around charismatic authority. These are not merely sociological data points awaiting pastoral strategies; they constitute a theological problem of the first order. When ecclesial communities fail – not occasionally and accidentally but repeatedly and structurally – the question arises whether theology possesses adequate categories for interpreting such failure as anything other than deviation from an ideal (Lennan 2023:281–283). The present study defines 'ecclesial failure' not as individual moral shortcoming or temporary deviation from an ideal, but as a pattern of communal dysfunction that is structurally embedded in the life of ecclesial communities: the persistent gap between the community's calling and its actual performance, enacted not by isolated individuals but by the community as a collective entity. Dreyer (2015:1–3) has argued from a Barthian perspective that the real crisis of the church is not institutional decline as such but the church's inability to be what it already is; Mkhize (2024:1–4) extended this analysis to the South African context, demonstrating the church's failure to fulfil its prophetic vocation amid systemic corruption and inequality. In each case, the failure is not episodic but structural: it recurs across different communities, periods and contexts with a consistency that resists explanation as mere aberration.

Systematic ecclesiology has, for the most part, constructed its understanding of the church from positive biblical images. The Pauline corpus provides the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12; Rom 12) and

the Temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16–17; Eph 2:19–22); the Johannine tradition adds the vine and the branches (Jn 15:1–8) and the flock of the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:1–18). These images have served as the primary quarry from which ecclesiological reflection has been mined (Haight 2004:3–25; Kärkkäinen 2021:7–20; Minear 2004:11–27). Dulles's (2002:15–30) influential typology of ecclesial models – institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant – itself drew exclusively on epistolary and doctrinal sources, illustrating the methodological pattern in which the Synoptic tradition was bypassed. Even critical ecclesiologies – those attentive to the gap between the church's self-understanding and its lived reality – tend to critique ecclesial *practice* while affirming the fundamental theological goodness of the church as such (Healy 2003:287–295, 2004:25–30; Jinkins 1999:11–28). The result is an ecclesiology that can diagnose failures of implementation but lacks a vocabulary for interpreting failure as a constitutive feature of communal existence. As Lennan (2023:285) suggests, systematic ecclesiology has yet to reckon adequately with the reality of ecclesiological failure – a task he frames as central to the discipline's exhortatory vocation.

Yet a substantial body of dominical teaching tells a markedly different story. The Synoptic parables include narratives depicting communities that fail structurally: invited guests who refuse to attend and are replaced indiscriminately (Mt 22:1–14), stewards who murder the vineyard owner's messengers (Mk 12:1–9 par.), a community divided in half with the excluded locked out permanently (Mt 25:1–13), and a community always already contaminated by what will destroy it (Mt 13:24–30). These parables have been read through salvation-historical, christological, eschatological and moral-hortatory lenses (Snodgrass 2018:235–253; Hultgren 2000:341–349), but none of these readings has treated them as data for constructive ecclesiology. The gap reflects a deep methodological habit in which ecclesiology draws almost exclusively on epistolary and Johannine material while treating the Synoptic tradition as a source for christology, ethics and eschatology, but not for the doctrine of the church.

Among these parables of communal failure, Matthew 22:1–14 occupied a uniquely significant position for ecclesiological analysis. Its Lukan parallel (Lk 14:15–24) had been read through disability theology as a text of inclusion (cf. Gosbell 2016:129–144, 2018:218–227), but Matthew's version contained three escalations absent from Luke that made it far more disruptive as ecclesiological material. Firstly, the invited guests did not merely decline; they seized, abused and killed the king's servants (Mt 22:6). Secondly, the king responded not with a shrug but with military destruction (Mt 22:7). Thirdly, and most critically, the replacement community was itself subject to judgement when a guest without a wedding garment was discovered and expelled (Mt 22:11–13). This final episode – unique to Matthew – ensured that the parable could not be read as a simple narrative of replacement, in which a failed community was succeeded by a successful one. The failure was recursive: it persisted into the new community itself. These are the 'empty seats' of the present article's title: not merely the physical absence of those who declined the invitation, but the theological reality that every ecclesial gathering is haunted by refusal, compromise and misalignment – seats that are empty because they were refused, seats that are occupied but effectively vacant because presence has not translated into authentic participation.

The conceptual framework for this study drew on two principal sources. The first was Dietrich Bonhoeffer's distinction between the ultimate and the penultimate in his posthumous *Ethics* (Bonhoeffer 2015:81–104). For Bonhoeffer, the penultimate designated everything that preceded the final word of God – the realm of the provisional and the not-yet-resolved. The penultimate was not opposed to the ultimate; it was the necessary space in which the ultimate was awaited. The second source was Nicholas Healy's critique of what he termed 'blueprint ecclesiology' – the tendency in systematic theology to construct idealised models of the church that bore little resemblance to actual ecclesial communities (Healy 2004:25–51). Healy called for an 'ecclesiology from below' attentive to the concrete, messy and often compromised reality of the church. The present study extended Healy's project by grounding it in a specific exegetical reading that his own work had not provided.

This article aimed to provide an ecclesiological reading of Matthew 22:1–14 and to develop the concept of 'penultimate ecclesiology' from the parable's depiction of communal failure. The study pursued three objectives: (1) to analyse the history of interpretation of the parable in order to demonstrate the ecclesiological gap in existing scholarship; (2) to conduct a close exegetical reading of the parable, identifying three movements of ecclesial failure; and (3) to construct a proposal for penultimate ecclesiology on the basis of these exegetical findings.

Research methods and design

Study design

This study employed a qualitative, text-based research design combining exegetical analysis with constructive systematic-theological reflection. The design was appropriate insofar as the research questions required both careful interpretation of a specific biblical text and the constructive development of a theological concept on the basis of that interpretation. No empirical data were collected; the primary data consisted of the Greek text of Matthew 22:1–14 and the secondary scholarly literature on the parable and on ecclesiology.

Setting

The study was located at the intersection of two scholarly fields: Matthean parable scholarship within New Testament studies and constructive ecclesiology within systematic theology. The former provided the exegetical tools and secondary literature necessary for responsible interpretation of Matthew 22:1–14; the latter provided the theological

conversation partners and conceptual categories into which the exegetical findings were integrated.

Method

The study proceeded in two methodologically distinct but integrated stages, following a pattern of exegetical-constructive inquiry in which close textual analysis generated the data from which a theological proposal was developed.

The first stage involved a close exegetical reading of Matthew 22:1–14 in the Greek text, conducted in sustained dialogue with the major commentaries on Matthew (Davies & Allison 1997; France 2007; Hagner 1995; Keener 2009; Luz 2005; Nolland 2005) and with the leading works on the parables of Jesus (Hultgren 2000; Levine 2014; Snodgrass 2018; ed. Zimmermann 2015). This stage also included a focused survey of the history of interpretation, designed not as a comprehensive reception history but as a demonstration of the ecclesiological gap in existing scholarship. The exegetical reading attended to lexical, grammatical and redactional features of the text, situated within the broader Matthean narrative and its depiction of communal identity and failure.

The second stage involved constructive systematic-theological reflection, in which the exegetical findings were brought into dialogue with Bonhoeffer's distinction between ultimate and penultimate realities (Bonhoeffer 2015:81–104) and with contemporary ecclesiology, particularly the work of Healy (2003, 2004), Volf (1998), Kärkkäinen (2021) and Lennan (2023). The movement from exegetical findings to constructive theology was governed by a principle of structural analogy: the parable's depiction of communal dynamics was read as illuminating the structural conditions of ecclesial existence, not as a direct allegory of any particular contemporary community. This exegetical-constructive integration is not without precedent; Healy (2004:154–172) employed a comparable movement from concrete ecclesial description to constructive theological proposal, and Hays (1996:209–212) modelled the integration of close textual reading with normative theological reflection. The present study adopted a similar logic while specifying the governing principle of structural analogy as its distinctive methodological contribution. The aim of this second stage was to develop the concept of 'penultimate ecclesiology' as a constructive theological proposal grounded in the parable's depiction of communal failure.

History of interpretation: Four lenses, no ecclesiology

The parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22:1–14 has generated an extensive history of interpretation. What is striking about this history is not its volume but its consistency: virtually every major reading has channelled the parable's meaning away from ecclesiological reflection. Several interpretive approaches can be identified in the scholarly literature, as surveyed by Blomberg (2012:303–313), each capturing a genuine dimension of the text but none addressing the parable's ecclesiological implications. The present study identified four dominant lenses not as an exhaustive taxonomy but because each represented a major interpretive tradition that had actively channelled the parable's meaning away from ecclesiological reflection. Together, they demonstrated a comprehensive pattern: whether the parable was read as salvation history, christology, eschatology or moral exhortation, the ecclesial community consistently functioned as a backdrop rather than a theologically significant entity. It was precisely this convergent absence – the fact that *no* major interpretive tradition had treated the community itself as the primary object of theological analysis – that constituted the ecclesiological gap the present study sought to fill.

The salvation-historical lens

The most influential reading of Matthew 22:1–14 throughout the history of interpretation has been salvation-historical. In this framework, the parable narrates the transition from Israel's covenant with God to the inclusion of the Gentiles. The king was God; the son's wedding represented the messianic age; the first invited guests were Israel; their refusal and violence against the servants represented Israel's rejection of the prophets and, ultimately, of Jesus; the destruction of the city (Mt 22:7) was taken as a reference to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE; and the gathering of new guests from the highways represented the Gentile mission (Davies & Allison 1997:197, 201–202; Luz 2005:52–55). This reading had deep patristic roots – Irenaeus, Chrysostom, Jerome and others all read the parable along broadly allegorical lines (Davies & Allison 1997:197; Luz 2005:57) – and it remained the default interpretation in many contemporary commentaries. Its ecclesiological implication, where it had one, tended towards triumphalism: the church was the replacement community that had superseded Israel in God's purposes. The problem with this implication for ecclesiology was not merely its supersessionism but its optimism: by casting the church as the successful replacement for a failed Israel, the salvation-historical reading foreclosed the possibility that the replacement community itself might fail in analogous ways – a possibility that, as both Luz (2005:57) and Davies and Allison (1997:207–208) emphasise, the parable's own conclusion (Mt 22:11–14) explicitly holds open.

Levine (2014:17) observes that Matthew characteristically intensifies parabolic violence – the king's military destruction of the murderers and their city (Mt 22:7), absent from Luke's Great Dinner (Mt 14:16–24), reflects the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE – yet insists that this Matthean layer does not exhaust the parable: the core narrative of rejected invitation and unexpected feasting remains intact. This distinction supports her broader critique that salvation-historical readings, which allegorically map successive groups onto Israel and the church, foreclose rather than open interpretation (Levine 2014:216–217). In a subsequent essay, Levine (2022:4, 6) sharpens the point: intra-Jewish debate does not preclude supersessionism, and the problem must be addressed theologically, not explained away exegetically. The parable's own conclusion reinforces this; the improperly

clothed guest (Mt 22:11–13) and the warning that 'many are called but few are chosen' (Mt 22:14) turn judgment back upon the replacement community, undermining ecclesial triumphalism. The present study accepted Levine's critique as a necessary corrective and proceeded on the assumption that the parable's theological significance was not exhausted by its salvation-historical referents.

The christological lens

A second interpretive tendency, never fully developed into a self-standing reading but recurrent across the scholarly literature, foregrounded the christological framing of the parable. The identification of the king's son with Jesus and the wedding feast with the messianic banquet was a near-universal feature of allegorical readings from Chrysostom onward. Hagner (1995:629) connected the bridegroom figure to messianic expectation, although his commentary quickly moved to questions of Israel's unresponsiveness and discipleship. France (2007:820–827) cautioned against over-reading the christological claim, observing that the son plays no further part in the story after verse 2. The christological identification thus functioned less as an independent interpretive framework than as an initial observation promptly subordinated to other concerns. Its effect on ecclesiology was nonetheless significant: by treating the son's identity as the interpretive centre, even briefly, it cast the community assembled at the feast as a backdrop for individual decisions about Jesus rather than as a theologically significant entity in its own right.

The eschatological lens

A third tradition of interpretation emphasised the eschatological dimensions of the parable, particularly its concluding movement. The expulsion of the garmentless guest into 'the outer darkness' [τὸ σκότος τὸ ἐξώτερον] (Mt 22:13) and the closing logion 'many are called, but few are chosen' [πολλοὶ γάρ εἰσιν κλητοὶ ὀλίγοι δὲ ἐκλεκτοί] (Mt 22:14) were read as warnings about the final judgement. Jeremias (1972:187–188) classified Matthew 22:11–13 as one of the 'crisis-parables,' arguing that its primary function was to confront hearers with the urgency of the eschatological moment. The wedding garment, on his reading, symbolised the divine offer of forgiveness and righteousness (via Is 61:10) that must be accepted before judgement arrives. Osborne (2010:800–813) similarly foregrounded the eschatological orientation of the parable, reading the language of outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 22:13) as depicting everlasting judgement (2010:812), and interpreting the gathering of guests in verse 10 as carrying the same eschatological sense as the harvest imagery of Matthew 13:30, 47. While the eschatological dimension of the parable was undeniable, the exclusive focus on eschatology had the effect of deferring the parable's ecclesiological implications to the future, treating the present ecclesial community as a temporary arrangement awaiting eschatological resolution rather than as a theological reality with its own significant internal dynamics.

The moral-hortatory lens

A fourth interpretive tradition read the parable as an exhortation to individual readiness and moral seriousness. Nolland (2005:882–892) foregrounded the ethical demand of the parable, particularly in the wedding garment episode, reading it as a call to appropriate moral and spiritual preparation. Hultgren (2000:349–352) similarly emphasised the parable's hortatory function, arguing that the closing logion served primarily as a warning to complacent hearers. Carter (2000:434–437) situated the parable within Matthew's broader critique of the religious elite, reading the refusal of the invited guests as a failure of the leadership to embrace God's purposes – a reading that, while attentive to communal dynamics, remained focused on the hortatory function rather than treating the community itself as a theological object. Its limitation, for the purposes of the present study, was that it individualised the parable's dynamics, treating the community as an aggregate of individual moral agents rather than as a structural entity capable of collective failure. The question of whether the individual was ready for the feast displaced the question of whether the feast itself, as a communal event, was characterised by structural patterns of failure.

What united these four lenses was a shared treatment of the ecclesial community as instrumentally rather than theologically significant. Where the church appeared – as the *corpus mixtum* of Hultgren's hortatory reading, or as the target of Osborne's eschatological warning – it functioned as the arena within which individual decisions were made or awaited, not as a theological entity whose own internal dynamics demanded analysis. Sim's (1998:115–121) reconstruction of the Matthean community as a sectarian Jewish-Christian group in conflict with formative Judaism demonstrated that Matthew's Gospel was deeply concerned with communal identity and boundaries, yet even this insight had not been extended into constructive ecclesiology. It was this gap that the present study sought to address. The empty seats in the parable's wedding hall – the places vacated by those who refused, the places occupied without authentic participation – awaited ecclesiological interpretation.

Exegetical analysis: Three movements of failure

The following exegetical analysis identified three distinct movements within Matthew 22:1–14, each depicting a different mode of communal failure. The parable itself functions as a Matthean allegorical narrative – what Blomberg (2012:303) classifies as a three-point allegory and Snodgrass (2018:235) treats as a two-stage indirect narrative parable – whose rhetorical purpose within the Matthean discourse is both warning and communal self-examination: warning against the complacency that led to the first community's destruction, and self-examination for the replacement community that discovers failure within itself. These movements were not sequential stages in a linear decline but overlapping patterns that together composed a comprehensive portrait of ecclesial dysfunction.

The refusal (Mt 22:3–7): Failure as indifference escalating to violence

The parable opened with a king who prepared a wedding feast for his son and sent his servants to call those who had been invited (τοὺς κεκλημένους, *tous keklēmenous* [the ones having been called]). The perfect participle was significant: these were not strangers receiving an unexpected invitation but persons already within the covenant of invitation, already designated as κλητοί (*klētoi* [called ones]). In the social world of the ancient Near Eastern banquet, a prior invitation had already been issued and accepted; this second summons merely announced that the feast was ready (Nolland 2005:888). For Hultgren (2000:344), the refusal was therefore an extreme offence, because those summoned had already made a provisional acceptance. In ecclesiological terms, the first group of guests corresponded to those already within the community, already bearers of the identity conferred by prior belonging (Davies & Allison 1997:199).

The response to the king's summons unfolded in three stages that formed a striking pattern of escalation. The first response was refusal framed as unwillingness: οὐκ ἤθελον ἐλθεῖν (*ouk ēthelon elthein* [they did not wish to come]) (Mt 22:3). The imperfect tense suggested not a single decisive rejection but a settled disposition of unwillingness (Hagner 1995:629; Osborne 2010:808). This was not apostasy or heresy; it was something less dramatic and arguably more corrosive – a simple, sustained disinclination to appear. The verb θέλω (*thelō*) pointed to the realm of desire and volition: the failure was not cognitive (they did not misunderstand the invitation) but volitional (they did not want to come) (Bauer et al. 2000:447). France (2007:822) read this refusal as a reneging on prior acceptance, likening it to the second son in 21:30 who first said yes and then failed to act. Keener (2009:519–520) deepened the social register, arguing that within the honour-shame dynamics of the ancient world, for all the invited guests to refuse constituted a concerted and deliberate insult to the king's dignity – a traumatic breach of the social order that no patron, let alone a king, could absorb without response. In the context of ancient royal authority, where an invitation from a king functioned as a command, collective refusal amounted to an act of political rebellion (cf. France 2007:822; Keener 2009:520).

The king responded by sending a second group of servants with a more elaborate description of the feast: the oxen and fattened cattle had been slaughtered, and everything was ready (Mt 22:4). The intensification of the invitation – the king did not simply repeat the summons but enriched it with detail and urgency – made the subsequent rejection all the more pointed. Nolland (2005:886) observes that the use of keywords from verse 3 provides 'a sense of repetition with intensification' in this second sending. The response to this more insistent summons introduced the second stage: οἱ δὲ ἀμελήσαντες ἀπῆλθον (*hoi de amelēsantes apēlthon*, [but disregarding it, they went away] 22:5). The participle ἀμελήσαντες (*amelēsantes*), from ἀμελέω, carries the sense of being unconcerned about something, of failing to give it proper attention (Bauer et al. 2000:53). Nolland (2005:886) describes those for whom the king's entreaty was 'a matter of no importance' and characterises them as 'the indifferent ones'. The verb is a hapax legomenon in the Gospels (Hagner 1995:630); its other New Testament occurrences (1 Tm 4:14; Heb 2:3; 8:9) consistently warn against neglecting salvific realities.

Matthew's singular use of this term to describe the guests' response thus placed their indifference within a semantic field of salvific neglect rather than mere social discourtesy. They went away – one to his own field [ἴδιον ἀγρόν], another to his business [ἐμπορίαν]. The destinations were not sinful; they were, as Nolland (2005:886) notes, 'normal workaday activities' – what he later calls 'natural images of shortsighted self-interest' (2005:889). Keener situates this refusal within the honour-shame dynamics of ancient patronage: to refuse a king's banquet after having already accepted the initial invitation constituted a deliberate insult against his dignity, an act that Gundry characterises as tantamount to a declaration of rebellion (Keener 2009:520, citing Gundry 1982:436). It is important to note the relationship between the two terms used here: indifference [*amelēsantes*] was the interior disposition; preoccupation with ordinary affairs (field and business) was its visible expression. The guests were not actively hostile – not yet – but their attention had been so thoroughly absorbed by the maintenance of daily operations that the king's summons registered as an interruption rather than a fulfilment. This was a portrait of a community in which routine preoccupation had hardened into structural indifference. A grammatical pattern reinforced this escalation: the shift from the imperfect tense (οὐκ ἤθελον ἐλθεῖν [a continuous disposition]) through the aorist participle (ἀμελήσαντες ἀπῆλθον [decisive action]) to aorist verbs of violence (κρατήσαντες … ὕβρισαν … ἀπέκτειναν) encoded the transition from disposition to decision to irreversible action.

The third stage represented a sharp and unexpected escalation: 'the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them' (Mt 22:6). The movement from unwillingness through indifference to active violence traced a trajectory with significant ecclesiological implications. It suggested that communal failure did not typically begin with dramatic rupture but with a gradual reorientation of attention – from the feast to the field, from the summons to the market – that eventually produced hostility towards those who insisted on recalling the community to its original vocation. The servants who bore the second invitation functioned within the narrative as agents of prophetic reminder, and their fate illustrated a pattern well-attested in institutional studies: organisations that have undergone goal displacement frequently respond with defensiveness or hostility when confronted with their original purpose (Merton 1957:253–255; cf. Gaillardetz 2022:242–243; Heyer 2026:133–134). What sociologists have termed 'goal displacement' – the process by which an institution originally oriented towards an external mission gradually reorganises itself around internal self-preservation – found a parabolic analogue in this escalating pattern of refusal. These were the first empty seats: places at

the feast abandoned not through dramatic apostasy but through the quiet attrition of indifference.

The king's response was devastating: he sent his troops to destroy those murderers and burn their city (Mt 22:7). Whether this verse reflected Matthean redaction in light of the destruction of Jerusalem or belonged to an earlier stratum of the tradition (a question debated by Davies & Allison 1997:201–202; Luz 2005:54–55), its function within the narrative was clear: the first community was not reformed but annihilated. The failure of the called ones was not corrected from within; it was terminated from without. Ecclesiologically, this signalled that some forms of communal failure were not amenable to internal reform – a sobering counterpoint to ecclesiologies that assumed the church's inherent capacity for perpetual self-correction. Wright (1996:182–186) situated the parables of judgement within Jesus's broader prophetic critique of Second Temple institutions, a reading that, while not itself ecclesiological, confirmed that the parable's depiction of institutional failure was integral to its original rhetorical function.

The replacement (Mt 22:8–10): The illusion of a fresh start

Following the destruction of the first group, the king declared to his servants: 'The wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy' [οἱ δὲ κεκλημένοι οὐκ ἦσαν ἄξιοι] (Mt 22:8). He then commissioned a new invitation: 'Go therefore to the main roads [τὰς διεξόδους τῶν ὁδῶν, *tas diexodous tōn hodōn*] and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find' (Mt 22:9). The servants obeyed and 'gathered all whom they found, both bad and good' [πονηρούς τε καὶ ἀγαθούς, *ponērous te kai agathous*] (Mt 22:10), and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

The ecclesiological significance of this passage resided in its subversion of replacement logic. If the first movement narrated the failure of the original community, the second might have been expected to narrate the emergence of a purified or reformed community – a gathering of the worthy to replace the unworthy. Matthew's text refused this expectation with striking deliberateness. The replacement community was defined at the very moment of its constitution as a mixed assembly of 'bad and good' – a phrase that echoed the earlier parable of the Wheat and Tares (Mt 13:24–30, 36–43) and the parable of the Net (Mt 13:47–50), as multiple commentators have recognised (France 2007:824; Hultgren 2000:345; Osborne 2010:808). The deliberate placement of πονηρούς before ἀγαθούς – the bad named before the good – was emphatic: it foregrounded the morally compromised character of the new assembly (Davies & Allison 1997:203; Hagner 1995:631). Osborne (2010:808) noted the double significance of this ordering, observing that at the story level it indicated the indiscriminate reach of the church's mission, while at the level of Matthean theology it aligned the replacement community with the mixed harvests of the earlier kingdom parables. A comparison with Luke's parallel sharpened the point. Luz (2005:55) observed that unlike Luke 14:21, where the replacement guests were described as 'the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' – socially marginalised but morally unmarked – Matthew did not mention beggars or cripples at all but instead substituted the blunt πονηρούς τε καὶ ἀγαθούς, introducing a moral category absent from the Lukan parallel. Where Luke's replacement community was defined by social location, Matthew's was defined by moral mixture. This redactional choice was ecclesiologically decisive: it ensured that the replacement community could not be idealised as a gathering of the innocent or the victimised but had to be understood as morally compromised from its inception. As Davies and Allison (1997:203) concluded, for Matthew as for Augustine against the Donatists, the church was a mixture not to be sorted out by anyone save God at the end.

It is important to recognise that the parable's narrative operates on two levels simultaneously, as is characteristic of Matthew's discourse: the level of Jesus's ministry, in which the parable functions as a prophetic warning to its original hearers, and the level of the Matthean community, for whom the parable addressed the already-experienced reality of communal failure and mixed membership (cf. Luz 2005). The replacement community of verses 8–10 thus spoke directly to the situation of the Matthean church: a community that understood itself as a new gathering but that had already discovered within itself the same moral mixture that characterised any human institution. The parable's relevance to the present study was grounded in this dual horizon: the structural dynamics it depicted – replacement that reproduces rather than resolves failure – were not confined to a single historical moment but described a recurring pattern in communal life.

This had direct implications for ecclesiologies of renewal and reform. The Reformation's logic of *ecclesia semper reformanda* [the church always being reformed] implied that renewal was possible within the same structural framework. The parable neither confirmed nor denied this possibility, but it demonstrated that the replacement of one community with another, far from resolving the problem of communal failure, merely relocated it. The fresh start was, in structural terms, no start at all.

A methodological clarification is necessary. The present reading's focus on the structure of replacement must be distinguished from the salvation-historical reading's use of replacement as a referent for the church's supersession of Israel. The argument here was structural, not referential: what mattered was not who was replaced but that replacement itself failed to resolve the underlying problem. Levine's warning (2014:216–217) against readings that flatten the parable into a narrative of Jewish failure and Christian success was thus not only accepted but extended: the parable depicted not one community's failure and another's success, but the persistence of failure across any transition from one community to another.

The ecclesiological import of this observation was substantial. It meant that the problem of communal failure was not primarily a problem of personnel but of structure. Every new church, every reform movement, every ecclesial renewal entered the same structural space as its predecessor. This did not render reform meaningless – the parable did, after all, present a new community gathering for the feast – but it stripped reform of its pretensions to finality. The empty seats of the first community were not eliminated by the new community's arrival; they were, as it were, redistributed.

The garmentless guest (Mt 22:11–14): Failure inside the replacement

The parable's most disturbing movement was reserved for its conclusion. The king entered the hall to inspect the guests (θεάσασθαι τοὺς ἀνακειμένους [to look upon those reclining at table]) (Mt 22:11) and found one who was not wearing a wedding garment (μὴ ἔχοντα ἔνδυμα γάμου, *mē echonta endyma gamou*). The king addressed him with a single word that reverberated across Matthew's gospel: ἑταῖρε (*hetaire* [friend]) (Mt 22:12). This was the same word Jesus used to address Judas in Gethsemane 'Friend, do what you came to do' (Mt 26:50) and the same word used by the landowner in the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard to address the disgruntled labourer (Mt 20:13). As Davies and Allison (1997:203) noted, ἑταῖρε in Matthew consistently addressed someone whose relationship to the speaker was ambiguous – formally an insider, functionally misaligned. The word carried an undertone of disappointed intimacy.

The guest's response was silence: ἐφιμώθη (*ephimōthē* [he was silenced or he was muzzled]) (Mt 22:12). The verb indicated that the man was reduced to silence, and it was finally his guilty silence that condemned him (Nolland 2005:890). He had no defence because there was no defence to offer. The connection between the garmentless guest and Judas, mediated by the shared address ἑταῖρε, was theologically productive. Nolland (2005:890) noted that ἑταῖρε was a conventional friendly address for someone whose name was not known, and its use in Matthew 20:13 established a pattern; but the Judas parallel (Mt 26:50) extends the implication further. In both cases, the addressed figure was an insider whose insider status was precisely the problem: Judas was one of the Twelve, not an external enemy; the garmentless guest was at the table, not outside the hall. Both figures embodied a mode of belonging that was, upon examination, indistinguishable from absence. The king then ordered him bound hand and foot and cast into 'the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Mt 22:13). The phrase 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' functioned in Matthew as a recurring eschatological judgment formula whose force intensified with each occurrence (Erdey & Smith 2012:38), but its appearance here – inside the replacement community – ensured that such exclusion was not deferred to a distant future but enacted within the present communal space. The severity of the punishment underscored the seriousness of the offence, whatever precisely it was taken to be.

The identity of the wedding garment (ἔνδυμα γάμου, *endyma gamou*) has been extensively debated throughout the history of interpretation: patristic interpreters identified it with baptismal garments (Luz 2005:57–59), Reformation exegetes with faith or grace, Jeremias (1972:189) with the divine gift of forgiveness and righteousness, and more recent scholarship with ethical conduct consistent with discipleship (France 2007:824–825; Hagner 1995:631). Luz (2005:57–59) provided the most thorough survey of this debate, tracing the garment's identification from Chrysostom's 'life and practice' through Calvin's faith to modern interpretations emphasising the 'righteousness of the kingdom' (cf. Mt 5:20). Carter (2000:438) read the garment as signifying a failure to discern and honour the authority and goodness of the king: the guest had not behaved or lived in a manner appropriate to the status of being invited. Nolland (2005:890–891) argued that the garment represented the appropriate response to the king's generosity – a readiness that went beyond mere attendance to active alignment with the feast's purpose. The present study proposed that the specific identification of the garment was less important than its structural function within the parable's ecclesiological portrait. Whatever the garment represented, its absence demonstrated a single point: presence within the community was not identical with authentic participation in the community's purpose. The garmentless guest had accepted the invitation, entered the hall, and taken his seat. By every external measure, he belonged. Yet the moment of inspection revealed a fundamental misalignment between his physical location and his actual condition.

This third movement completed the parable's ecclesiological portrait. If the first movement depicted the failure of the original community and the second depicted the impossibility of a clean replacement, the third depicted the persistence of failure within the replacement community itself. The problem was not that the wrong people were at the feast; the problem was that the feast itself, as a structure of gathering and belonging, was insufficient to guarantee authentic participation. The garmentless guest represented a category that most ecclesiologies struggled to accommodate: neither the outsider who had not yet heard the invitation, nor the apostate who had deliberately rejected it, but the insider who was present and yet fundamentally out of place. This was the most troubling of the parable's empty seats: a seat that was occupied and yet, in a decisive sense, vacant.

The parable concluded with its most sweeping statement: πολλοὶ γάρ εἰσιν κλητοὶ ὀλίγοι δὲ ἐκλεκτοί (*polloi gar eisin klētoi oligoi de eklektoi* [for many are called, but few are chosen]) (Mt 22:14). This logion universalised the dynamics of the parable. The gap between κλητοί [the called] and ἐκλεκτοί [the chosen] was not incidental but constitutive. It described not a temporary deficiency that the community might overcome but a permanent structural condition: the community of the called would always be larger than the community of the chosen. Belonging would always exceed authentic participation. The gap could not be closed this side of the eschatological banquet.

Read ecclesiologically, this concluding logion functioned as a definition of the church *in via* – the church on the way, the church not yet arrived. It was a community constitutively marked by the disproportion between invitation and response, between external membership and internal reality, between what the community was called to be and what it actually was. This was not a deficiency to be overcome by better programming, purer doctrine or more rigorous discipline; it was the condition of the church as the penultimate community, existing in the space between calling and consummation.

Discussion: Towards a penultimate ecclesiology

Key findings

The exegetical analysis identified three distinct movements of ecclesial failure within Matthew 22:1–14: the failure of desire (escalation from unwillingness through indifference to violence), the illusion of replacement (a new community reproducing the structural conditions of the first) and failure within the replacement (the garmentless guest's insufficient participation despite membership). These movements were unified by the closing logion's universalisation of the gap between calling and election.

Discussion of key findings

These findings invited a constructive theological response. The concept proposed here – penultimate ecclesiology – drew its name and its conceptual structure from Bonhoeffer's treatment of the penultimate in his *Ethics*. For Bonhoeffer (2015:81–104), the penultimate was the entire realm of human existence insofar as it had not yet received the final word of God. The penultimate was not disposable – it was the necessary condition for the reception of the ultimate – but neither was it self-sufficient. Bonhoeffer (2015:87–92) was concerned to resist two errors: the radical solution, which dismissed the penultimate entirely in favour of an unmediated encounter with the ultimate, and the compromise solution, which treated the penultimate as self-sufficient and thereby rendered the ultimate irrelevant. Transposed into ecclesiological terms, the church could be neither bypassed (radical solution) nor absolutised (compromise solution); it had to be inhabited as precisely the penultimate space it was.

The transposition from Bonhoeffer's anthropological concern – the penultimate as the space of human existence before justification – to the ecclesiological register requires brief justification. Already in *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer had established that the church was not merely an aggregate of individuals before God but a real, structured community – 'Christ existing as church-community' – whose unity was constituted by divine action prior to any knowing or willing of its members (Bonhoeffer 2009:199–206). This ecclesiological foundation made the transposition of the penultimate framework from individual anthropology to communal existence not only possible but theologically coherent. The parable of the 'Wedding Banquet' provided concrete material for this transposition: each of its three movements depicted a community that was real, significant and failing – and whose failure was the condition under which the feast, nevertheless, continued. Applied to ecclesiology, this framework meant that the church was a penultimate reality: genuinely significant, genuinely a locus of divine action, but not yet the kingdom, not yet the eschatological banquet, not yet the community it was called to become. Root (2022:xi) has recently argued that the church's crisis lies not in the loss of resources but in the loss of a God who is God; the penultimate framework proposed here offered a complementary diagnosis by locating the crisis not in any particular failure but in the structural condition of the church as such.

The parable of the Wedding Banquet gave concrete content to this Bonhoefferian framework by specifying four characteristics of a penultimate ecclesiology.

Firstly, a penultimate ecclesiology *normalised failure without celebrating it*. The parable depicted failure not as an aberration requiring explanation but as a recurring pattern woven into the structure of communal existence. This was distinct from both triumphalism, which denied the structural character of failure, and from despair, which concluded from failure that the ecclesial project was bankrupt. The penultimate framework held both realities simultaneously: the church genuinely failed, and the feast continued. Healy's (2004:154–172) call for ecclesiology to attend to the church's 'concrete identity' rather than its idealised self-image found here an exegetical grounding that his own work, focused primarily on contemporary theology and practice, had not provided. Mulder (2018:179–182) has similarly argued that Healy's critique, while methodologically productive, insufficiently explicates its own theological commitments; the parable supplies what Healy's proposal lacks: a dominical text in which communal failure was not an exception to be explained but a pattern to be expected.

Secondly, a penultimate ecclesiology *rejected the myth of the fresh start*. The replacement community in the parable included 'both bad and good'; its constitution was not a purification but a relocation. This challenged every ecclesiology that treated schism, renewal, or reformation as an opportunity to begin again with a clean slate. The Donatist instinct – the conviction that a pure church is achievable through sufficiently rigorous discipline or sufficiently radical restructuring – was undermined by a parable in which the new community was as mixed as the old. Volf's work (1998:145–152) on the church as the image of the Trinity provided a helpful parallel: the church's identity was constituted not by its members' moral quality but by the divine action that gathered them. Zizioulas (1985:158–162) similarly grounded ecclesial identity in divine constitution rather than human moral quality, although his communion ecclesiology did not reckon with the parabolic tradition's depiction of failure within the divinely constituted community. The parable added to Volf's insight the further observation that this divine gathering was, structurally, never a gathering of the worthy.

It should be acknowledged that the mixed character of the ecclesial community is not a novel observation. Augustine's *corpus permixtum* – the church as a mixed body of saints and sinners separated only at the eschaton (Augustine of Hippo [1998] 2003:I.35; XX.9) – addressed the same reality. The present proposal differed in two respects: Augustine's *corpus permixtum* described a static condition, whereas the parable depicted a dynamic process in which failure escalated and was reproduced through replacement; and Augustine's framework functioned primarily as a disciplinary principle against premature purification, whereas penultimate ecclesiology functioned as a hermeneutical principle for interpreting the church's ongoing experience of crisis. The two were compatible but not identical.

Thirdly, a penultimate ecclesiology *created theological space for 'the garmentless' – those who were inside but did not belong*. The guest without a wedding garment inhabited a category that most ecclesiologies could not accommodate: neither a seeker outside the community's boundaries, nor a hypocrite consciously performing a faith he did not possess, but someone who had accepted the invitation, taken his seat, and was nonetheless found fundamentally out of place. This figure occupied a zone between belonging and exclusion that could not be resolved from within the community's own categories.

Fourthly, a penultimate ecclesiology *reframed the church's relationship to its own crises*. Contemporary ecclesial crises – abuse scandals, institutional collapse, mass departure – have typically been met with defensiveness or reformism. Gaillardetz (2022:221–227) has recently argued that ecclesiology must engage more seriously with sociology to understand institutional dynamics; the parable suggested a third posture that complemented this sociological turn: the acknowledgement that crisis was not a disruption of the church's normal condition but a revelation of its actual condition. This was not fatalism; the feast continued and the invitation remained open. But it was a refusal to be surprised by failure. Hauerwas's (1981:1–10) argument that the church existed as a community of character was not contradicted but recontextualised: character formation occurred precisely within a community that could not guarantee its own faithfulness, as Lee and Dreyer (2018:3–5) documented in their analysis of the Korean mega-church crisis.

The proposal of penultimate ecclesiology might appear to stand in tension with Matthew's broader ecclesiology, because Matthew is the only gospel that uses ἐκκλησία (Mt 16:18; 18:17) and is traditionally regarded as the most explicitly pro-church gospel. However, the first evangelist consistently held together a high founding theology with a realistic depiction of communal failure. The same gospel that records 'I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it' (Mt 16:18) also contains the 'Wheat and Tares' (Mt 13:24–30), the community discipline procedure that anticipates a sinning member (Mt 18:15–17), three consecutive parables of failed response (Mt 21:28–22:14), the 'Ten Virgins' (Mt 25:1–13), and the declaration that 'not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom' (Mt 7:21–23). Matthew's ecclesiology was therefore penultimate from the outset: the church was founded, authorised and commissioned – and simultaneously depicted as structurally prone to the failures the parables narrated. The promise that the gates of Hades would not prevail was not a promise that the church would not fail; it was a promise that the church would not be destroyed by its failures. This was the parabolic equivalent of the continuing feast: the banquet proceeded not because the community succeeded but because the host did not abandon it.

Strengths and limitations

The principal strength of this study lies in its novelty: no previous scholarship had attempted a sustained ecclesiological reading of Matthew 22:1–14 or of the Synoptic parables of communal failure more broadly. The study's grounding in the Greek text provided exegetical rigour sometimes absent from constructive ecclesiology, and its Bonhoefferian conceptual framework offered a theological vocabulary that avoided both triumphalism and despair.

The study's principal limitation was its focus on a single parable, leaving open whether other parables of communal failure would confirm, complicate or contradict the concept. The study was entirely text-based; empirical verification of the three movements in contemporary churches would require a different methodology. The relationship to the Lukan parallel (Lk 14:15–24) and the wider context of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, including *Sanctorum Communio* (Bonhoeffer 2009), both exceeded the scope of this article and warranted further investigation.

Implications and recommendations

The findings carried implications for systematic ecclesiology, New Testament scholarship and practical theology. For systematic ecclesiology, the Synoptic parables constituted an underutilised resource for constructive theological work; ecclesiology's reliance on Pauline and Johannine imagery had produced a systematically incomplete picture of the church's theological identity. For New Testament scholarship, the study demonstrated the viability of ecclesiological readings of texts predominantly interpreted through other lenses. For practical theology, penultimate ecclesiology offered a framework for responding to institutional crisis that acknowledged crisis as revelatory of the church's actual condition while maintaining hope in the continuing feast.

Future research should extend the analysis to additional Synoptic parables of communal failure, including the 'Wicked Tenants' (Mk 12:1–9 par.), the 'Ten Virgins' (Mt 25:1–13), and the Wheat and the Tares (Mt 13:24–30). A comparative study of Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:15–24, and an empirical study examining whether the three movements corresponded to observable patterns in contemporary communities, would complement the present analysis.

Conclusion

This article set out to provide an ecclesiological reading of Matthew 22:1–14 and to develop, on the basis of that reading,

the concept of penultimate ecclesiology. The dominant interpretive traditions had consistently channelled the parable's meaning away from ecclesiological reflection. A close exegetical analysis identified three movements of ecclesial failure: the failure of desire, in which the called community escalated from indifference to violence; the illusion of replacement, in which the new community reproduced the structural conditions of the old; and failure within the replacement, in which the garmentless guest demonstrated the insufficiency of membership for authentic participation.

These three movements, taken together, warranted the proposal of a penultimate ecclesiology – an understanding of the church as a community whose structural imperfection is theologically anticipated rather than aberrant. Drawing on Bonhoeffer's distinction between ultimate and penultimate realities, the study argued that the church existed in a penultimate space: genuinely significant, genuinely a site of divine action, but not yet the kingdom, not yet free from the gap between calling and election. This penultimate ecclesiology normalised failure without celebrating it, rejected the myth of the fresh start, created theological space for the ambiguous insider, and reframed the church's relationship to its own crises.

The empty seats of this article's title are not merely a historical memory but a permanent feature of ecclesial existence. They take three forms corresponding to the three movements of failure: the seats vacated by those who drifted from unwillingness into indifference and finally into hostility; the seats in the new hall, filled with replacements who carried within themselves the same mixture of good and bad; and the seat occupied by the garmentless guest – present but not participating, belonging but not aligned. Every church contends with these empty seats, and a penultimate ecclesiology does not pretend they will one day all be filled, nor does it treat them as evidence that the ecclesial project is irredeemable.

The feast, however, continues. The invitation remains open. The banquet proceeds – not because the community has overcome its failures but because the host has not abandoned the feast. This is the strange hope of a penultimate ecclesiology: the feast is not contingent on the church's success. The empty seats testify to the church's imperfection; the continuing banquet testifies to a faithfulness that is not the church's own. The Wedding Banquet alone is sufficient to establish this framework's foundation: the church is the community of the feast that continues despite the empty seats.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Wilson W. Suwanto: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Augustine of Hippo, [1998] 2003, *The city of God against the pagans*, transl. R.W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bauer, W., Danker, F.W., Arndt, W.F. & Gingrich, F.W., 2000, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature*, 3rd edn, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL.

Blomberg, C.L., 2012, *Interpreting the parables*, 2nd edn., InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

Bonhoeffer, D., 2009, *Sanctorum Communio: A theological study of the sociology of the church*, transl. R. Krauss & N. Lukens, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Bonhoeffer, D., 2015, *Ethics*, reader's edn., C.J. Green (ed.), transl. R. Krauss & C.C. West, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Bruce, S., 2011, *Secularization: In defence of an unfashionable theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Carter, W., 2000, *Matthew and the margins: A sociopolitical and religious reading*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY.

Davies, W.D. & Allison, D.C., 1997, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, vol. 3, International Critical Commentary, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Dreyer, W.A., 2015, 'The real crisis of the church', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 71(3), a2822, 1–5. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2822

Dulles, A., 2002, *Models of the church*, expanded edn., Image Books, New York, NY.

Erdey, Z.L. & Smith, K.G., 2012, 'The function of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in Matthew's Gospel', *Acta Theologica* 32(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v32i1.2

France, R.T., 2007, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Gaillardetz, R.R., 2022, 'The chimera of a "deinstitutionalized church": Social structure analysis as a path to institutional church reform', *Theological Studies* 83(2), 219–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639221091289

Gosbell, L.A., 2016, 'Banqueting and disability in the ancient world: Reconsidering the parable of the banquet (Luke 14:15–24)', in A. Picard & M. Habets (eds.), *Theology and the experience of disability: Interdisciplinary perspectives from voices down under*, pp. 129–144, Routledge, London.

Gosbell, L.A., 2018, *'The poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame': Physical and sensory disability in the gospels of the New Testament,* WUNT II/469, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Gundry, R.H., 1982, *Matthew: A commentary on his literary and theological art*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Hagner, D.A., 1995, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B, Word Books, Dallas, TX.

Haight, R., 2004, *Christian community in history*, vol. 1: Historical ecclesiology, Continuum, New York, NY.

Hauerwas, S., 1981, *A community of character: Toward a constructive Christian social ethic*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN.

Hays, R.B., 1996, *The moral vision of the New Testament: Community, cross, new creation; A contemporary introduction to New Testament ethics*, Harper, San Francisco, CA.

Healy, N.M., 2003, 'Practices and the new ecclesiology: Misplaced concreteness?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5(3), 287–308. https://doi.org/10.1111/1463-1652.00110

Healy, N.M., 2004, *Church, world and the Christian life: Practical-prophetic ecclesiology*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Heyer, K.E., 2026, 'Moral agency between the times: Shared finitude, fragility, and fragmentation', *Theological Studies* 87(1), 126–149. https://doi.org/10.1177/00405639251408684

Hultgren, A.J., 2000, *The parables of Jesus: A commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Jeremias, J., 1972, *The parables of Jesus*, 2nd rev. edn., transl. S.H. Hooke, SCM Press, London.

Jinkins, M., 1999, *The church faces death: Ecclesiology in a post-modern context*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.

Kärkkäinen, V.-M., 2021, *An introduction to ecclesiology: Historical, global, and interreligious perspectives,* rev. and expanded edn., InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

Keenan, J.F., Bartunek, J.M. & Hinsdale, M.A. (eds.), 2006, *Church ethics and its organizational context: Learning from the sex abuse scandal in the Catholic Church*, Sheed & Ward, Lanham, MD.

Keener, C.S., 2009, *The Gospel of Matthew: A socio-rhetorical commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Lee, Y. & Dreyer, W.A., 2018, 'From proto-missional to mega-church: A critique of ecclesial "growth" in Korea', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 74(4), a4665, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i4.4665

Lennan, R., 2023, 'Ecclesiology and the challenge of ecclesiological failure', *Journal of Moral Theology* 3(CTEWC Book Series 3), 281–295. https://doi.org/10.55476/001c.72071

Levine, A.-J., 2014, *Short stories by Jesus: The enigmatic parables of a controversial rabbi*, HarperOne, New York, NY.

Levine, A.-J., 2022, 'Supersessionism: Admit and address rather than debate or deny', *Religions* 13(2), 155. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020155

Luz, U., 2005, *Matthew 21–28*, transl. J.E. Crouch, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Merton, R.K., 1957, *Social theory and social structure*, rev. and enlarged edn., Free Press, Glencoe, IL.

Minear, P.S., 2004, *Images of the church in the New Testament*, new edn., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.

Mkhize, T.E., 2024, 'Breaking the silence: Is the church failing to address South Africa's sociopolitical problems?', *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 80(2), a9580, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i2.9580

Mulder, S., 2018, 'Practical ecclesiology for a pilgrim church: The theological motives behind Healy's ethnographic turn', *Ecclesiology* 14(2), 164–184. https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-01402005

Nolland, J., 2005, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Osborne, G.R., 2010, *Matthew*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Root, A., 2022, *Churches and the crisis of decline: A hopeful, practical ecclesiology for a secular age*, Ministry in a Secular Age, vol. 4, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

Sim, D.C., 1998, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The history and social setting of the Matthean community*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Snodgrass, K., 2018, *Stories with intent: A comprehensive guide to the parables of Jesus*, 2nd edn., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Volf, M., 1998, *After our likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Wright, N.T., 1996, *Jesus and the victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2, SPCK, London.

Zimmermann, R. (ed.), 2015, *Puzzling the parables of Jesus: Methods and interpretation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN.

Zizioulas, J.D., 1985, *Being as communion: Studies in personhood and the church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY.