

**Liquid Ecclesiology:
The Gospel and The Church**

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Contents

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Part I Currents in a Liquid Ecclesiology

1. The Gospel and the Church
2. The Gospel as Paradox and Light
3. Making Church: Gospel, Construction, and Ecclesial Fluidity
4. The Material Nature of the Gospel

Part II Discerning the Liquid Church: A Case Study

5. The Gospel and Change
6. Personal Faith
7. Narratives of Encounter
8. Evaluating the Case Study

Part III Abiding in a Liquid Ecclesiology

9. The Call to Abide
10. Seeing and Learning: Theological Education in the Church

Bibliography

Index

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¹ Pete Ward, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography with Humility: Going Through Barth," *Studia Theologica* (July 2016).

² Pete Ward, "Union with Christ: The Subplot of Evangelical Soteriology," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 2/1 (2003).

³ Pete Ward and Heidi Campbell, "Ordinary Theology as Narratives: An Empirical Study of Young People's Charismatic Worship in Scotland," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 15/2 (2011).

Introduction

“Ecclesiology is the new rock and roll.” This casual remark, made to me by the head of a major mission organisation,⁴ neatly encapsulates the growing interest in the study of the Christian Church. Ecclesiology is the “new rock and roll” because the Church has moved to centre stage in a wide variety of conversations. Whether it is in missiology or systematic theology, biblical hermeneutics or Christian ethics, the nature and function of the Church has become a pressing theological topic.⁵ In the study of doctrine in particular, the Church is at the heart of recent debates about the Trinity.⁶ As part of this renewed interest in the Church, academic⁷ and popular works⁸ on ecclesiology have proliferated. Neither is interest in the Church confined to theologians. In the social sciences, the study of the Church has become a major concern, leading to a rise in congregational studies and a focus on Christian communities in religious and cultural studies, and the sociology of religion.⁹ Most notably, an anthropology of Christianity has emerged.¹⁰

⁴ Philip Mountstephen, Chief Executive of the Church Mission Society.

⁵ For example, see Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004); Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); James W. McClendon, *Ethics: Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002); Stephen Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009); and Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁶ See for example, Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985).

⁷ See for example the activities of the Ecclesiological Investigations Group and their various publications, <http://www.ei-research.net>.

⁸ There are too many to list, but examples might include Cheryl M. Peterson, *Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty First Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013); Craig Van Gelder, and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011); Graham Fancourt, *Brand New Church? The Church and the Postmodern Condition* (London: SPCK, 2013); and Michael Moynagh, *Church in Every Context: An Introduction to Theology and Practice* (London: SCM, 2012). Probably the most popular text on contemporary ecclesiology is Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995).

⁹ For example, see Nancy T. Ammerman, *Congregation and Community* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Robert A. Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem 1880-1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation: The Marketing of Megachurch, College Inc and Museum World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004); Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014);

While academics have discovered a renewed interest in the Church, there has also been something of an explosion of discussion, debate, and ecclesial experimentation within the churches themselves. This “big conversation” about the Church takes a variety of forms. Whether it is writing about Church growth, or programmes for congregational development, discussion about a missional Church or fresh expressions of Church, Church planting or new missional communities, ecclesiology has become an immediate and deeply felt arena for reflection and dialogue in the Christian community.¹¹ The burgeoning of academic and popular writing on the Church is matched by the extraordinary creativity that is being expressed in communities, in churches, and in denominations themselves. Ecclesial innovation and experimentation is not just a matter of thought, but is also one of action. Quite simply, the Church is being reshaped and reimagined as a myriad of new ecclesial forms burst onto the scene. These forms include mega-churches, multi-site Churches, virtual churches, café churches, youth churches, and cell churches. There are too many to list here, but such developments add substance to the remark that ecclesiology has become “the new rock and roll.”

Ecclesiology, Ethnography and the Liquid Church

At the same time that ecclesiology has become central to theology and to some areas of the social sciences, a debate has begun to develop. The debate is centred, although not exclusively so, in the Ecclesiology and Ethnography network.¹² It was the writing of theologians, working independently of one another, and all advocating a turn towards ethnography, that initially sparked the network into life. While it is important to note that such an approach to ecclesiology is common in mission studies and also in the study of liturgy, what is new is that theologians from a range of perspectives have started to see the importance of applying ethnographic insights to doctrine.¹³ In 2000, Nicholas Healey made an

and Mathew Guest, *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007).

¹⁰ Fennella Cannell, ed., *The Anthropology of Christianity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

¹¹ For an account of some of these developments, see John Walker, *Testing Fresh Expressions: Identity and Transformation* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014); also Robert Doornebal, *Crossroads: An Exploration of the Emerging-Missional Conversation with a Special Focus on Missional Leadership and its Challenges for Theological Education* (Delft: Eburon, 2012); and Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2011).

¹² For more on Ecclesiology and Ethnography see <http://www.ecclesiologyandethnography.com>

¹³ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1963), is a classic text and also offers a good account of the interaction between anthropology and mission studies. In the United States, the Liturgical Press has published a whole series of ethnographic studies of worship. Excellent examples are Mary McGann, *A Precious Fountain: Music in the Worship of an African American Catholic Community* (Collegeville,

impassioned plea for what he called a practical-prophetic ecclesiology. At the heart of this kind of ecclesiology he envisioned a turn towards ethnography.¹⁴ Healey argued that ecclesiology should consider the “concrete response” of the Church to its Lord by utilising notions of culture. He acknowledged that sociological and anthropological studies of the Church had been undertaken for many years, but argued that these did not ask theologically-orientated questions, or at least, did not ask the kind of questions that were of pressing interest to theologians. Healey concluded that “the church needs to introduce its own, theological form of cultural analysis, which we can call ecclesiological ethnography.”¹⁵ In the same year, in an article published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, entitled “Ethnography is Dogmatics,” Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott discussed the importance of what they call “descriptions of the world” for theological work.¹⁶ In 2005, Christian Scharen wrote “Judicious Narratives: Ethnography as Ecclesiology.” This article, which was also published in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, picked up on the significance of ethnography in theology and made an explicit connection to ecclesiology.¹⁷ In 2007, Mary McClintock Fulkerson published her study *Places of Redemption*, in which she sought to unite perspectives gained from her own ethnographic work in a congregation with broader theological themes.¹⁸ Mary Clark Moschella’s work, *Ethnography as Pastoral Practice*, was also significant in that it addressed practitioners directly and encouraged empirical work as part of ministry.¹⁹ In 2008, the Action Research in Church and Society group (ARCS) produced a report entitled *Living Church in a Global City*.²⁰ The report offered a series of case studies using action research to develop an understanding of theology in the practice of churches and other Christian organizations in London. The ARCS group developed through this work their understanding of “theology in four voices” (operant, espoused, formal and normative), that they saw as being

MN: Liturgical Press, 2004); and David Mellott, *I Was and I Am Dust: Penitent Practices as a Way of Knowing* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009). See also Christian Scharen, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Healy, *Church, World*, 168-169.

¹⁶ Nick Adams, and Charles Elliott “Ethnography is Dogmatics: Making Description Central to Systematic Theology,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 53/3 (2000): 339.

¹⁷ Christian Scharen, “Judicious Narratives: Ethnography as Ecclesiology,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 58/2 (2005).

¹⁸ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

²⁰ Deborah Bhatti et al., *Living Church in the Global City: Theology in Practice* (ARCS Project, 2008).

entwined with practice in each of the contexts.²¹ This rise in interest in an ecclesiology that is theologically orientated and yet also able to make use of empirical, and in particular, qualitative methods of enquiry, led directly to a series of conferences organised by the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network. Two volumes emerged from the conferences: *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* and *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. These conferences were largely focused on the methodological possibilities of and limits to an ecclesiology that is both empirical and theological. The term “ethnography” has a particular history in anthropology, but because it has already gained some traction in the theological world, those involved in the network understand the phrase as referring in a more informal way to any kind of qualitative enquiry. The first two conference volumes therefore explore methodological concerns about the relationship between qualitative empirical research and theological discussion on the Church.²² Writers from quite different theological positions explore the relationships between the kind of knowledge that is produced through qualitative empirical research, and the ways of knowing and seeing that are appropriate within theology.²³ In this work, I develop these arguments further, but with a specific focus. I want to show how qualitative empirical research can contribute to the theological discussion that is taking place in the Church. Qualitative research does this, I believe, by disciplining the theologian to pay particular attention to the complex and often contradictory nature of lived faith. This attention leads to a theology of the Church that attempts to take account of these complexities and contradictions. This task is not so different from the kinds of negotiation with, and indeed inspiration, that theologians have found in continental philosophy for instance. Yet with qualitative empirical work, the complexity and difficult nature of the material arises from what is observed and its subsequent analysis, rather than from philosophical reasoning. My intention in this volume is to demonstrate how theological approaches that can emerge as a result of paying attention to lived expression have a degree of theological sophistication, and at the same time an inevitable connection to life and actual communities. I reach for the notion of a

²¹ Helen Cameron et al., *Talking about God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2010). This paradigm of “the four voices” is discussed in more detail in the case study in Part II.

²² For material from the Ecclesiology and Ethnography conversation, see the journal linked to the network, *Ecclesial Practices* (Leiden, Brill); and also Scharen and Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology*; Pete Ward, ed., *Perspectives in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); Christian Scharen, ed., *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012). There have been a number of other publications seeking to bring together empirical and theological perspectives on the Church and these include Harald Hegstad, *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013); and Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

²³ This debate has now led to monographs exploring these issues, e.g., Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2015). See also Hegstad, *The Real Church*.

“Liquid Ecclesiology,” because it expresses the dynamic and fluid understanding of the Church that comes from the complexity, ambiguity, and nuance that characterizes the lived expression of the Church. While the terms Liquid Ecclesiology and Liquid Church are my own, the concerns and interests they encompass have been anticipated in previous theological discussion of the Church. As an example of this I discuss the ecclesiology of Daniel Hardy.

Finding the Liquid Church

On the face of it, Daniel Hardy might seem a curious dialogue partner for a Liquid Ecclesiology. Hardy after all represents a significant, and in many ways mainstream catholic, eucharistic focus in Anglican ecclesiology.²⁴ Yet Hardy’s ideas, I want to argue, anticipate and to some extent map out the territory that I call Liquid Ecclesiology.

The action of God in the world, Hardy argues, is characterized by what he calls sociality. Sociality (or social life) gives form to the way that humans are fulfilled in the purposes of God. So for Hardy, “the forms of social life are closely connected with the free self determination of God in Christ; and their dynamic—how they move—is closely connected with the vitality and direction of God in the Holy Spirit.”²⁵ The Trinity, therefore, originates social forms, both in the Church and in society as whole. Thus it is possible to speak of particular forms of social life—whether they are political or legal institutions—as sites where the Trinity is involved in the freedom of people to be social.²⁶ Hardy’s focus is on both divine action and social forms, which suggests some notion of divine visibility. The work of God can be seen in society and also in the life of the Church. Yet alongside sociality, Hardy introduces the more dynamic and fluid notion of holiness as the moving and affective action of God in the world. Holiness, he says, is intrinsically relational and Trinitarian.

Holiness refers to the way that God is active in the world. God’s holiness, says Hardy, is “self maintaining and performative....For God is a crucible of holiness, a refining fire in the enacting and extending of it, rightly evoking religious affections such as fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude compassion and zeal.”²⁷ God sends forth light that generates relationality. This light can meet with resistance and lesser forms of relationality, i.e., fragmentation. This fragmentation of humanity is burnt away by the death of Christ on the cross. Thus God’s holiness is a fire “by which all holiness is

²⁴ Hardy stands in the line of Anglican theology that stretches back to Richard Hooker, passes through S.T. Coleridge, F.D. Maurice and on to Gabriel Hebert and A.M. Ramsey. In contemporary ecclesiology, his work is significant for a range of writers. See, for instance, Julie Gittoes et al., *Generous Ecclesiology: Church, World and the Kingdom of God* (London: SCM, 2012); and Stephen Pickard, *Seeking the Church: An Introduction to Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 2012). See also Martyn Percy, *Shaping the Church: The Promise of Implicit Theology* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 6. Percy’s work is interesting because he cites Hardy in support of his own project, which brings sociological and theological perspectives into conversation with contemporary ecclesiology.

²⁵Daniel Hardy, *Finding the Church* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 24.

²⁶ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 24.

²⁷ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 16.

generated and sustained in its relation to all else—eventually refines even that which opposes it, thereby healing the fragmentations introduced by those who resist it.”²⁸ Holiness is the direction (or movement) of God. It is relational, but it is also performative, in the sense that it needs to be performed by humans in history.²⁹ This performance takes place in society and also in the church. “The ways by which the holiness of God may be enacted in the world reach far beyond what is conventionally associated with religion.”³⁰ Hardy asks if it possible to talk of the holiness of God being “mediated” other than through “all the dimensions of life in the world, natural, ecological, societal, political, economic and cultural symbolic.”³¹ The extended live action of God beyond and within the Church lies at the heart of the idea of a Liquid Church, where the strong division between Church and society is made fluid by the work of the Spirit that passes through, moves within, and is active beyond the more solid boundaries of the Church.

Sociality is likened by Hardy to “skin.” Skin, he says, represents the thin layer of relations that connect all human beings. The connections between individuals give life to this social skin. The world and society, he suggests, are “universally” natural, social, and highly complex. This is a picture of how the world and society “actually are.”³² The historical location of sociality, or, as Hardy calls it elsewhere, the social transcendent, introduce a dynamic that is particular to human agency.³³ Human society, he suggests, is inevitably situational in nature. Hence social institutions, laws and political organisations are contingent. The same is true of economic relations of production and consumption, of family relations as well as language symbols and culture.³⁴ Talk of the social as a universal or a transcendent does not therefore preclude movement; rather it encompasses a dynamic shifting and complex reality. This complexity finds its origins in the Trinitarian life of God. Hardy illustrates the dynamic presence of God in society by speaking of the mission of St Paul. Paul was called on his missionary journeys and what he discovered was the presence of Christ in the world. “He found that the world itself was not empty but filled with the presence of Christ—a Christ-like place, so much so that travelling the world was for him a constant finding of Christ.”³⁵ The result was that St Paul found the peoples of the world to be themselves Christ-like, and his travels were a constant rediscovery of Christ.³⁶

The foundation and the texture of this universal social aspect of life have their origins in God. Here Hardy draws a connection between universal sociality and the Church through the idea of catholicity. Catholicity is not the preserve of the Church alone; it relates to universal sociality. Universality is for Hardy the

²⁸ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 17.

²⁹ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 15.

³⁰ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 17.

³¹ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 18.

³² Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 85.

³³ Colin Gunton and Daniel Hardy, eds., *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1989), 44.

³⁴ Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, 44.

³⁵ Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, 46.

³⁶ Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, 46.

work of God in the world. “That is the full meaning of catholicity in its Christian sense, the universality in which we live by the grace of God.”³⁷ God’s work in the world therefore is to be seen in the “skin” of social relations, nourishing “interrelatedness.”³⁸ All of this should not be taken to mean that social life is in itself always or inevitably “benevolent.” The social skin, says Hardy, is often diseased. It is often a leprous skin covered in lesions, “a tissue of lost people who have lost the meaning of the world, of lost security, of lost freedom, of love and friendship lost through separation and abandonment, of lost peace, lost innocence, lost homes, lost well-being, lost countries, lost lives—agonizing losses which befall people who yearn for better.”³⁹

The human forms of civil society do not in themselves fully present holiness in society. Holiness and sociality for Hardy are linked to the twin notions of *extensity* and *intensity*. The life of God, Hardy says, is nothing less than an engagement with “the extensity and manifoldness of the world.”⁴⁰ Extensity refers to the movement of God’s truth and holiness in the world. This movement involves an individual as well as a societal dynamic. Here Hardy seeks to read the Christian faith against the grain. Alongside the concentrations of the bible, Church and belief (intensity), there is a call to a “spread-out-ness.” As Hardy puts it: “We need to think of Christian faith as by nature *spread out*, as something *extended* by its ‘spread-out-ness’.”⁴¹ The extended, or as I might want to phrase it, fluid life of God, is paralleled with the invitation to intensity. Intensity is performed within the Church as it gathers around the sacrament, but it is also a call to a deeper and more centred spiritual life of prayer.⁴² This intensity is an “earnest desire, that is a rational, passionate intensity of heart, soul, mind and strength.”⁴³

As has been said, Hardy sees culture as complex and dynamic. Rather than offer faith a fixed form, his ecclesiology acknowledges that the work of God takes place within and through this cultural fluidity. Social forms move and change and the dynamic movement of God shifts across time. This fluidity extends to the Church as well as to the wider society. Hardy accepts that churches take different social forms. This is not simply or entirely the result of historical or cultural distinctiveness. He argues that churches have a “logic” and this logic can itself become a source for renewal and change. The very idea of what it is to be the Church can give rise to different ecclesial forms over time and within culture. The social forms of the Church therefore become a vehicle for this idea.⁴⁴ Here again Hardy suggests that cultural dynamics bring in fluidity in ecclesial forms. This fluidity is not simply in the collective expression of journey, however. The journey towards extensity and spiritual intensity that Hardy envisages for individual believers also implies a movement and dynamic that is in some respects liquid. I thus want to suggest Hardy anticipates some of the central

³⁷ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 84.

³⁸ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 84.

³⁹ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 85.

⁴⁰ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 159.

⁴¹ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 110.

⁴² Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 159.

⁴³ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 111.

⁴⁴ Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 110.

notions of a Liquid Ecclesiology. Before moving on, it is thus worth summarising the central ideas in my previous work, entitled *Liquid Church*.

Liquid Church⁴⁵

The ideas that eventually formed *Liquid Church* arose from a reading of Zygmunt Baumann's *Liquid Modernity*.⁴⁶ Baumann describes the shift from solid forms of social and economic life to less fixed and more fluid relations. This insight into changes in cultural life and community relationships led me to reflect on the ways the Church might also become liquid. Baumann, I should point out, is deeply sceptical of the growing fluidity in society, and so my use of his ideas was reading him against the grain. Nevertheless, I argued that the idea of a Liquid Church enables a way of thinking about the Christian community that takes the fluid nature of culture seriously. As a result, it enables a Liquid Ecclesiology, i.e., a way of seeing existing Church life as a fluid form, and it suggests a way of seeing the Church as a place of divine action in the wider society. To adopt Hardy's terms, Liquid Church develops notions of extensity by paying close attention to the communicative practices that shape both the Church in particular and society in general.

Liquid Ecclesiology, I want to argue, is a shift in the theological imagination from solidity or from "Solid Church" to fluidity and "Liquid Church." Solid Church arises from the understanding that Church is a meeting. In other words, Church is a gathering in one place, at one time, with the purpose of performing a shared ritual. The idea of Solid Church, I will argue at the outset, is a reductive ecclesiology, but this broad categorization carries a theological coherence. If the essence of Church for the Catholic can be said to be the Eucharist, for the Protestant the preaching of the Word, and for the Pentecostal the singing of worship songs, then what these three have in common is a social logic.⁴⁷ They all assume a meeting. In other words, Solid Church is built upon the deep theological assumptions that make up what Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals understand as the Church. The point about Solid Church then is that it has a deep hold on the imagination of the Christian community, such that it is almost impossible to think of Church as being anything other than a meeting. This hold is what I call "the affective gravitational pull of the Church."⁴⁸

Solid Church, it must be stressed, is the product of a popular ecclesial imagination rather than considered academic ecclesiology. Hardy's ecclesiology, for instance, qualifies the intensity of the Church gathered round the Eucharist with the call to extensity. Both are places of divine encounter for Hardy and this in a sense is what Liquid Ecclesiology is seeking to foreground. Hardy also suggests that while sociality is universal, the social forms in which sociality is expressed shift over time and in relation to culture. Liquid Ecclesiology takes this notion and focuses on the way that culture operates. Thus it is important to say

⁴⁵ Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002).

⁴⁶ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁴⁷ This is a typology that I first suggested in *Selling Worship* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005).

⁴⁸ Pete Ward, "Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as a Perilous Faithfulness," *Ecclesial Practices* 2/1 (2015), 74-90.

right at the outset that a more fluid understanding of Church does not do away with gathering. Neither does it downplay the importance of key practices such as preaching, celebrating the Eucharist, gathering and fellowship, or singing praise and worship songs, or what Hardy describes as intensity. What Liquid Church does argue, however, is that fluidity is a characteristic of both divine being and of human culture. Fluidity therefore takes place both in meetings and outside of them, and this picks up again on some of Hardy's ideas of the dynamic relationship between holiness, intensity and extensity. Liquid Ecclesiology focuses on the way the divine life passes through the walls and links Church with the wider society. Hence it embraces the sensibility that sees living water as not contained within the Church. By the power of the Spirit, this living water flows within, between, and around the Church and the wider society. Samuel Trevor Francis expresses in his nineteenth century hymn as follows:

Oh the deep, deep love of Jesus, vast unmeasured boundless free.
Rolling like a mighty ocean in its fullness over me.
Underneath me all around me flow the currents of thy Love.
Leading onward leading homeward to thy glorious rest above.

The love of Jesus is not contained within Church meetings. It flows underneath within, and around. This love is there in the world and in the Church. It is the love of Jesus that makes the Church more than a meeting. Liquid Church embraces and is embraced by this love. At the same time, the liquid love of God, the living water that rises in the believer through the work of the Spirit, is paralleled by the fluid nature of cultural expression. I accept these observations are not remarkable in and of themselves. Most ecclesiology will develop patterns of theology that reflect this crucial dimension. Liquid Ecclesiology is not seeking to simply generate a theory or theology in isolation from the habituated sensibility of Solid Church, however; it wants to take seriously the social and cultural power of ecclesial culture. Liquid Ecclesiology is a cultural theology in the sense that it seeks to interact with patterns of practice and thinking that are operant in the lived expression of the Church. Liquid Ecclesiology is theological and theoretical then, but it develops theology through a deep interaction with cultural expression and the lived. Liquid Ecclesiology is a theology that takes cultural expression seriously as one part of the paradox of the Church.

Church Dogmatics: a Fork in the Road

Daniel Hardy's ecclesiology serves as a helpful dialogue partner for Liquid Ecclesiology. I have shown the substantial, and perhaps unexpected overlap in concerns, while also setting out how a Liquid Ecclesiology might take these ideas in new directions. Hardy is not the chief dialogue partner for this project, however. As I have been developing these ideas I have also been wrestling tacitly with Karl Barth's ecclesiology.⁴⁹ I accept that Barth is also an unlikely dialogue partner for this project, in that he is openly sceptical of any kind of theology that deals with the social or the historical. Barth's objections are extremely important,

⁴⁹Parts of this section have previously been published in a more detailed form in Pete Ward, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography with Humility: Going Through Barth," *Studia Theologica* (July, 2016).

and they raise a theological caution that anyone engaged in ethnographic work in ecclesiology must take seriously. At the same time I want to argue that, read with respect, but also with a certain transgressive sensibility, Barth might be extremely helpful, not just in what he appears to rule out in ecclesiology, but also because of his clear focus on ecclesiology.

I want to start my interaction with Barth with the opening section of *Church Dogmatics* (I.1), which starts with the assertion that dogmatics is “the scientific self examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God.”⁵⁰ This understanding of the task of the theologian represents something of a fork in road. It is a fork in the road because it appears to offer the possibility for a kind of theology that interacts with the lived expression of the Christian Church. Of course Barth does not take this route.⁵¹ In fact, his ecclesiology, as Kimlyn Bender has demonstrated, developed as a rejection of any kind of social or historical analysis as part of the theological task. Liquid Ecclesiology takes the other direction, however, and goes down the road that Barth rejected. This move is not meant as a rejection or a repudiation of Barth’s ecclesiology. Bender suggests that future ecclesiologies would be wise to go through Barth, rather than to attempt to go around him.⁵² Going through Barth requires consideration of why he is so cautious about an ecclesiology that draws on sociological forms of research. Barth’s caution leads to a series of theological checks and balances in ecclesiology. In taking the other fork in the road, Liquid Ecclesiology does not reject these theological parameters. It seeks instead to explore the possibility of a theology that has Barth’s theological considerations as a framework, and which then sets out to complete what Barth appears to say the task of dogmatics is. In other words, while broadly accepting the Christological framework that Barth sets out, Liquid Ecclesiology seeks to pay attention to the distinctive talk of the Church. This is what I call the other path, the fork in the road, and it starts by wondering what if the theologian takes this starting point in *Church Dogmatics* at face value? What might happen if the task of dogmatics actually involves paying close and disciplined attention to the continual and ongoing expression of the Church? How might this change ecclesiology? So while accepting that this is not exactly Barthian in approach, Liquid Ecclesiology has developed through a dialogue with Barth. Before moving forward down this alternative road, it is important to spend a while considering

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.1 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975), 3.

⁵¹ Bender defends Barth from Healy’s critique, i.e., that Barth is not sufficiently “concrete” in his ecclesiology, by pointing out that Barth does discuss ecclesial practices in *CD* IV.3.2. These practices do not define the Church, however. Bender makes the point that for Barth the investigation of practices is the preserve of practical rather than dogmatic theology. (Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 275.) Sociological descriptions of the Church should not form part of dogmatics, but they have a place in Christian ethics and practical theology (Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 276; Barth *CD* IV.3.2, 859-860.) Barth’s sociological descriptions of the Church come from the prevalence of such work in the nineteenth century and his desire to maintain the theological character of the Church. (Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 276.)

⁵² Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 285.

why, given his starting point in *Church Dogmatics*, Barth takes the route that he does.

Barth's ecclesiology is a rejection of any approach to ecclesiology that is based on social or historical analysis. Behind this move it should be noted there is a specific historical and cultural location to Barth's theology. (There is an irony here that is worth enjoying for a moment.) As Bender has shown, Barth is concerned throughout his career to define the Church against "Neo-protestantism" and Roman Catholicism. The first reduces Christ to human experience, and the second incorporates Christ in institutional practice. As Barth puts it in *Church Dogmatics*:

The only possibility of a conception of dogmatic knowledge remaining to us on the basis of Evangelical faith is to be marked off on the one hand by the rejection of an existential ontological possibility of the being of the Church (i.e. Neo-protestantism) and on the other hand by the rejection of the presupposition of a constantly available absorption of the being of the church into a creaturely form, into a "There is" (i.e. Roman Catholicism).⁵³

The being of the Church is Jesus Christ and it is freedom of the Spirit that brings about Christ's presence, rather than institutional forms or inward piety. Barth's ecclesiology, says Bender, is based first and foremost in his understanding of election. The Church is the Church in the election of Jesus Christ. This election "precedes" human action. This is not a collaborative partnership. God and man do not have "dealings" with each other. Rather, it is God who is active. The activity of humanity has no place in this election; it is the action of God that instead elicits a response.⁵⁴ Humanity is "elected" in the humanity of Christ. So for Barth, the divine freedom is that Jesus Christ is both the electing God and the elected human being.⁵⁵ The Church exists because Christ exists; it lives because Christ lives. The "Christian community can be what the human nature of its Lord and Head is."⁵⁶ This Christological orientation limits the possibility of seeing the Church through history or through visible social forms. This problematic is illustrated by Barth with a geometrical analogy. Christology, he says, is like a vertical line meeting a horizontal line. The horizontal represents human sin.⁵⁷ Justification, the work of God, is the point where the vertical and the horizontal intersect.⁵⁸ So for Barth, the Church is an event, a moment when these lines intersect. The language of event does not preclude talk of the Church as

⁵³ Barth, *CD I.1*, 41, quoted in Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 96.

⁵⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics II.2* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark), 176, quoted in Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 116.

⁵⁵ Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 117.

⁵⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.2* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1958), 59-60 quoted in Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 150.

⁵⁷ Bender points out that the analogy of intersecting lines is a significant development from Barth's earlier work in *Romans*. Here the work of God in the world is likened to a tangent that just touches the edge of a circle. The tangent being the work of God and the circle the sinful world. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, 168.

⁵⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1*, 643, quoted in Bender.

institution. Indeed, the Church as event can only exist in concert with the “flesh and blood” of communities. But, says Bender, for Barth the relationship between event and the historical social form of the Church cannot be reversed.⁵⁹

The relationship between the divine and human in ecclesiology is Christologically “ordered” for Barth. This is what George Hunsinger has identified as the Chalcedonian pattern of relations between the divine and the human in Barth’s theology. The pattern consists of a unity, a differentiation, and an asymmetry of relations.⁶⁰ This pattern is derived by Barth from a Chalcedonian Christological definition whereby in the relation of human and divine in the person of Jesus Christ there is a unity, but this unity leaves the distinction between divinity and humanity in place and there is an irreducible hierarchy of relations. By analogy, this pattern extends to the Church. Here the asymmetry in relations is understood through the patristic ideas of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*.⁶¹ These are again firstly Christological, and only by analogy extended to the Church. *Anhypostasia* is a negative assertion that the human in Jesus Christ does not have any existence apart from the Word. *Enhypostasia* expresses the related view that the human has a real and complete existence in the Word. The *anhypostatic/enhypostatic* pattern means that the intersection of divine activity cannot be read off the life of the Church. “The pattern whereby the church can be understood as the indivisible unity of a divine event and a historical and human institution in irreducible and unconfused distinction is the Christological pattern of Chalcedon and the anhypostatic-enhypostatic logic, whereby the church is a single reality composed of a divine call and a human society in asymmetrical relation, the second entirely dependent upon the first.”⁶² What follows from this is that the Church, rather than being accessible to sociological observation, can only be understood as an object of faith: *Credo ecclesiam*. As such it is impossible to grasp its reality through historical or indeed empirical means. The Church is essentially a mystery. This does not mean that the lived community can be ignored, because for Barth the opposite is the case. The Church is a community of believers present in history, but it is only the Church because of God. “The Church is, of course, a human earthly-historical construct, whose history involves from the very first and always will involve human action. But it is this human construct, the Christian Church, because and as God is at work in it by his Spirit.”⁶³ There is a human “action” that builds the Church, but what makes this truly the Church is the work of God. In commenting on the Apostles’ Creed, Barth rejects notions of the invisibility of the Church. The Church is visible; we believe in its existence. This means that each congregation is a congregation of Christ. “Take good note, that a parson who does not believe that in this congregation of his, including those men and women, old wives and children, Christ’s congregation exists, does not believe at all in the existence of the Church. *Credo ecclesiam* means that I believe that here at this place, in this

⁵⁹ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 168.

⁶⁰ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 4.

⁶¹ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 4, see also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I.2 (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956), 163.

⁶² Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 168.

⁶³ Barth, *CD* IV/2, 616.

visible assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place.”⁶⁴ It is in this concrete and particular congregation that the Holy Spirit becomes “event.” Yet there is always a struggle between the empirical Church and the “true” Church. The “true” Church emerges as a quickening of the Spirit as human work to build up the community into the true Church.⁶⁵ The Church exists as it responds to the Holy Spirit. The “true” Church is made by the free working of the Holy Spirit. This work is predicated on the historical and social, but it is not reduced to this. The historical form of the Church makes the invisible visible, but only as the Holy Spirit is at work.⁶⁶ “The Christian community, the true Church, arises and is only as the Holy Spirit works—the quickening power of the living Lord Jesus Christ.”⁶⁷ So the Church as an article of faith (*Credo ecclesiam*) does not preclude the “concrete” nature of the Church. Indeed, the opposite is the case, because the Holy Spirit calls the community into existence. So, says Bender, the real Church should not be sought apart from the historical manifestation of the community, but within its historical forms. Yet the true Church is only perceived in the historical by means of faith.⁶⁸ To see the Church only on the historical plane is to fail to understand the true nature of the Church.⁶⁹ The Church there has a reality and a mystery that coincides with the incarnation. “The glory of Jesus Christ was hidden when he humbled himself, when he took flesh He was obedient to God, when He destroyed our wrong, when he established our right. So, too, the glory of humanity justified in him is concealed. And this means that the glory of the community gathered together by him within humanity is only a glory which is hidden from the eyes of the world until His final revelation so that it can be only an object of faith.”⁷⁰ Barth’s theology therefore sets the question of visibility at the heart of ecclesial reflection.

Reduced Visibility

The project that I propose is not without its problems. Indeed, some might argue that the whole enterprise is mistaken. Before returning to Barth and what it might mean to “go through his theology,” the issue of visibility and invisibility needs to be investigated. Writing from within the Ecclesiology and Ethnography conversation, John Webster adopts a Barthian rejection of the theological possibilities of ethnography. He warns of the limits of empirical research in our ability to “see” the real nature of the Church. Ecclesiology, he argues, must be viewed in hierarchical terms. For Webster, “a theology of the Church cannot simply be a phenomenology of ecclesial social history, but an inquiry into that history’s ontological ground in the being and works of the church’s God.”⁷¹ For

⁶⁴ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 143.

⁶⁵ Barth *CD IV/2*, 617.

⁶⁶ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 171.

⁶⁷ Barth *CD IV.2*, 617 see in Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 171.

⁶⁸ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 171.

⁶⁹ Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 177.

⁷⁰ Karl Barth *CD IV.1*, 656-657, quoted in Bender, *Karl Barth’s Christological Ecclesiology*, 174.

⁷¹ John Webster, “In the Society of God’: Some Principles of Ecclesiology,” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 200.

Webster, it is not so much that the empirical study of the Church is impossible, but rather that there should be a hierarchy of understanding between the origin of the Church and the phenomena of the Church. Webster's contention is that the empirical study of "phenomena" will always be limited. It will see something, but it will inevitably be frustrated because of its limitations.⁷² There are two kinds of theological investigations into the Church. The first is enquiries into the origin of the Church which is the task of dogmatics. The second deals with the phenomena of the Church. But there is a problem here, says Webster, because these phenomena are "elusive." The phenomena are "signs whose matter does not inhere in themselves; they have a special visibility; they do not exhaust themselves in their natural manifestation."⁷³ For Webster it is this hierarchy of knowing that is important, rather than a specific methodology. As he puts it: "In the order of knowing, which comes first is probably a matter of indifference."⁷⁴

On the face of it, Nicholas Healy is more optimistic about the prospects for an ecclesial ethnography. Modern theology, he argues, suffers from over abstraction. What he calls the "blueprint" approach to doctrine, "can lead to reductively abstract and theoretical views of the church."⁷⁵ For Healy, there is one crucial drawback to this form of ecclesiology: it provides very few tools that enable theologians to critically examine the "concrete identity of the Church." "Ecclesiology is not about the business of finding the single right way to think about the church, of developing a blueprint suitable for all times and places. Rather, I propose that its function is to aid the concrete church in performing its tasks of witness and pastoral care within its ecclesial context."⁷⁶ By context, Healy is not talking about a setting that is separate from the Church, and neither is he advocating some kind of correlation between theology and this context. He is talking instead about the ways in which the Church is part of, and intertwined with, cultural and historical developments. "The concrete church, living in and for the world, performs its tasks of witness and discipleship within particular, ever shifting contexts, and its performance is shaped by them."⁷⁷ Ecclesiology has developed in response to events. So Healy criticizes doctrinal theology as being abstract, and yet his consideration of the possibilities for ethnographic work is also a little sceptical. Writing in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Healy presses on the limits of ethnography for theological construction. The action of God cannot be read directly from the practice and communal life of the Church, because the lived is complex and so often contradictory in nature.

Visibility and invisibility are categories that run deep in ecclesiology. Claims to be able to "see" the action of God in the world are obviously problematic, but I want to argue that this caution should not simply be applied to empirical work. It applies in equal measure to the theologian. The theologian is constructing a theology and it is worth asking why this construction is privileged

⁷² Webster is taken to task on the issue of the limits and possibilities of empirical work in ecclesiology by his colleague, Chris Brittain, see Brittain, (2014) 5-30.

⁷³ Webster, "In the Society of God," 221

⁷⁴ Webster, "In the Society of God," 221.

⁷⁵ Healy, *Church, World*, 38.

⁷⁶ Healy, *Church, World*, 38.

⁷⁷ Healy, *Church, World*, 39.

over the work of someone who pays close attention to the expression and life of a community, and where the writing that ensues is also a construction. This question gains some force when theological understandings of the Church are so clear that the action of God takes place in and among this communal life. This is not to say that such attention to lived communities in order to discern the action of the divine is straightforward. Discerning the work of God is determined by the being of God. Empirical work in ecclesiology and ethnography should therefore be fundamentally “theological” in nature, and not only theological, but spiritual i.e., a relational knowledge. Thus in ecclesiology Christ is known only as the knower is also known. This, I would argue, is true in all theological work, be it work with texts or work that focuses on the lived expression of communities. This relational dynamic is set within the contingent nature of theological expression, however. Theology is construction and this sensibility must introduce limitations and reflexivity into ecclesiology.

Visibility and the Affective Gravitational Pull of the Church

In contemporary thinking it has become commonplace to root theologies of the Church in the doctrine of God. In particular, a number of theologians have generated social theologies of the Trinity as the basis of the Church, although more recently, some others have questioned the wisdom of this approach in ecclesiology. Stephen Holmes is one among many theologians who are finding problems with the social doctrine of the Trinity as a “blueprint” for ecclesiology.⁷⁸ Holmes develops his critique by addressing some of the assumptions about Trinitarian theology and arguing how those who advocate a social doctrine of the Trinity have, in his view, misread the tradition. Along the way he makes an interesting observation about the relationship between theology and reasoning about the Church. Holmes points out that John Zizioulas and Miroslav Volf have very similar Trinitarian theologies, yet these theologies appear to fund contrasting and contradictory ecclesiologies. Holmes observes that while for Zizioulas Trinitarian theology leads to a hierarchical and structured pattern for the Church, for Volf, by contrast, it leads to a more democratic and participatory ecclesiology. Although they have very similar “blueprints” in terms of their readings of the Trinity, each appears to conclude that these plans support very different—in fact diametrically opposite—ecclesiologies. Zizioulas is, of course, an Orthodox theologian and Volf (at the time of writing) is Free Church.⁷⁹ Holmes appears to have uncovered what I have elsewhere called the “affective gravitational pull of the Church.”⁸⁰ The affective gravitational pull of the Church refers to the way ecclesial patterns become deeply habituated in believers. This habituation is evident among theologians, where, despite the claim to be reasoning theologically, habituated norms of ecclesial affiliation appear to hold sway. So, having done the complex reasoning that Trinitarian theology seems to require, the resulting ecclesiologies appear to

⁷⁸Parts of the next section were published in *Ecclesial Practices* as “Blueprint Ecclesiology.” and the Lived: Normativity as a Perilous Faithfulness.”

⁷⁹Stephen R. Holmes, “Three Versus One? Some Problems of Social Trinitarianism,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 3 (2009): 77-89.

⁸⁰Ward, “Blueprint Ecclesiology and the Lived: Normativity as a Perilous Faithfulness,”

divide along rather predictable lines. The Orthodox Zizioulas settles for hierarchy, and the Free Church Volf for shared leadership. This calls into question the whole project of ecclesiology as a means of generating a framework for the Church. It is rather like a situation where two builders are given the same plans and one builds a bungalow and the other a five-storey block of flats. The point here is that there appears to be something more than theological reasoning at play. What can be observed is the affective gravitational pull of the Church.

Gravitational pull describes the way that ecclesial traditions shape and condition reasoning. Traditions are affective because they are inhabited, lived in, and simultaneously habituated and internalized. Theologians are, in this sense, no different from any other Christians, in that their tradition in the Church shapes how they reason. It is worth introducing Karen Kilby's critique of social Trinitarianism as projection here.⁸¹ Kilby argues that the God in God's self is "hidden" from us, such that it is not possible to directly reason from the economic to the immanent Trinity. Those who advocate social doctrines of the Trinity appear to have seized this "hiddenness" as an opportunity, however. What by rights is not known and shouldn't be known—the apophatic—has been filled by the social and political concerns of the theologian. Kilby judges this to be "projection." These observations on social Trinitarianism in effect echo Albert Schweitzer's critique of the liberal lives of Jesus, i.e., that liberal theology recreates Christ in its own image.⁸² There is a deep irony here, and one that is not lost on Kilby, because those who want to utilize Trinitarian theology in ecclesiology are doing so because they want to insulate themselves against "liberal" theology based in experience. The assertion that the Church is rooted in the being of God is intended to provide a theological assurance against the prioritization of the lived as seen in the prevailing move towards culture and contextualisation. Kilby's suggestion that these theologies are some kind of projection undermines this assurance somewhat. Traditional ecclesiology might not be the kind of idealised, or normative "plans" that the designers claim. The work of Holmes and Kilby is deeply significant, but there is a further move that neither of them quite makes, and this relates to the appropriation of Social Trinitarianism in the Church.

Trinitarian theology has been enthusiastically taken up in ecclesial discourse. This taking up is deeply significant because it indicates a symbiotic relationship between theology and the lived. To illustrate this, it is worth quoting Catholic theologian, Catherine LaCugna:

The heart of the Christian life is to be united with the God of Jesus Christ by means of communion with one another. The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately therefore a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other. Trinitarian theology could be described par excellence as a theology of relationship, which

⁸¹ Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* (October, 2000); and Karen Kilby, "Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (January, 2010).

⁸² Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: A.C. Black, 1911).

explores the mysteries of love, relationship, personhood and communion within the framework of God's self revelation in the person of Christ and the activity of the Spirit.⁸³

Here the Trinity is swimming in a cocktail of ideas: community, relationship, and communion with one another. These concepts are precisely what Kilby identifies as projections, and as such they represent the aspirations of the contemporary Church. We want these things. We are drawn towards this vision of ourselves. These ideas lay bare the affective gravitational pull of the Church. They reassure us in the face of the disintegration of community, the rise of consumerism, and the hegemony of the self, that the Church embraces another way. The irony here is that this "other way," read as projection, is not the robust theological understanding of the Church that it purports to be. It is, in effect, another version of what Heelas and Woodhead call the subjectivization of religion.⁸⁴ The only difference is that it is the collective or communal self that is centre stage.

What this brief discussion of Social Trinitarianism demonstrates is the fluidity of theological discourse itself. Theology is liquid because it utilizes culturally-conditioned forms of expression: it is construction. The idea of affective gravitational pull is an attempt to factor in the extent to which culture, here manifested as tradition and embodiment, plays a decisive role in theological reasoning. The point of this observation is that it relativizes the normative claims of theology to shape a vision of the Church through privileged forms of reasoning. This does not mean that theology plays no role in Liquid Ecclesiology: the opposite is the case. It simply means that the theological voice that draws on the tradition should be positioned for what it is, i.e., "construction." It is faith seeking understanding. The theologian builds a world, but the status of this world is not guaranteed, nor does it have any particular claim to apprehend the divine. At the same time, this does not mean that the divine is closed off from theological discourse. Theology is part of the expression of the Church and as such conditioned and contingent. Theology does not have any special claim to visibility, but neither is it occluded from the vision of God. The point is that what theologians say about God is a contested and contesting field, and to claim anything beyond that is problematic. Ecclesiology is liquid, in other words.

Exactly the same needs to be said of theologically-informed qualitative work on the Church. In fact, qualitative enquiry is characterized by a continual focus on the way the researcher brings theoretical and personal perspectives into their research. These perspectives are often foregrounded, not to claim any kind of "objective" knowledge—since it is accepted that such knowledge is problematic—but rather to develop a dialogue between the researcher and the research context. Liquid Ecclesiology identifies how this reasoning itself is part of "expression" and therefore contingent. While this does not preclude any attempt to seek a theology of the Church, it accepts that such a project does not stand on any kind of self-evidently sacred or supra-cultural ground. Rather, the

⁸³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 1.

⁸⁴ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 2-5.

reasoning needs to take place with a weather eye on how culture, tradition, and embodiment play a powerful role in reasoning. All of this is to argue that reasoning about divine action through theology or through theologically-informed empirical work is fluid and contested. This is what critical realism calls epistemic relativity.

Critical Realism and Perilous Normativity

The limits of theological expression are suggestive of the epistemological framework offered by critical realism.⁸⁵ Critical realism, says Andrew Wright, is characterized by ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationality.⁸⁶ *Ontological realism* is the assertion that there is a distinction between the realm of knowledge and the realm of the real. "Objects exist and events occur in reality whether we are aware of them or not....So there is a crucial distinction to be made between ontology and epistemology. Once the distinction between ontology and epistemology is established it becomes possible to develop a rich account of the contours of reality."⁸⁷ *Epistemic relativism* resists both enlightenment certainty and postmodern scepticism. Ontology has a primacy over epistemology because reality precedes the knowledge of that reality. Our knowledge is limited, however, and therefore it is epistemologically relative.⁸⁸ Knowledge lies between the extremes of absolute certainty and radical scepticism and it consists in reasoned attachment to positions. Knowledge is "faith seeking understanding."⁸⁹ "The affirmation of epistemic relativism acknowledges the limits of our knowledge, but does not deny either the actuality of genuine knowledge or the possibility of establishing better knowledge in the future."⁹⁰ *Judgemental rationality* recognizes that not all accounts of reality are equal. It is possible to make judgements between differing expressions of knowledge. There are neither secure foundations for knowledge nor fixed criteria for deciding between truth claims in knowledge, but nevertheless, rational discussion is possible, in fact it is necessary. As Wright puts it, "The priority of ontology means that we must adapt our epistemic tools in response to the objective demands of reality, rather than adjust reality to bring it into conformity with our epistemic tools."⁹¹ Knowledge is contextual rather than foundational. Knowledge is built through a creative process and once it is expressed it is subject to revision and correction. Yet both constructs and the means by which we may decide between competing explanatory forms of knowledge are subject to revision. They are provisional. Judgmental rationality, says Wright, is rather like a court of law where different forms of knowledge and information are at play in the pursuit of the truth.⁹²

⁸⁵ See Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume 2, Reality* (London: T and T Clark, 2001), 234-244.

⁸⁶ Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2012), 10-13.

⁸⁷ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 10.

⁸⁸ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 11.

⁸⁹ Anselm, quoted in Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 13.

⁹⁰ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 13.

⁹¹ Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 13.

⁹² Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism*, 14.

A critical realist perspective introduces a significant analytical framework into ecclesiology. Blueprint ecclesiologies rest on the assertion that the being of the Church is derived from the being of God. Normativity therefore arises from a kind of privileged access to ontology. Theological method, reason illuminated by the Spirit, gives access to the “isness” of God and the “isness” of the Church, but what is meant here by ontology is quite distinct from the understanding of ontology within critical realism. For critical realism, ontology refers to the “real,” but the description of this “real” is epistemological and therefore relative. In other words, while knowledge is formed in relation to the real, any account of “what is” does not operate in the field of ontology. Blueprint ecclesiologies tend to conflate epistemology and ontology. In fact, this merger lies at the heart of their claim to authority. This is what Wright calls enlightenment certainty. The certainty in blueprint ecclesiology comes from complex associations of ideas. The first part of the chained set of ideas is the assumption that truth can be attained at the level of abstraction. Abstract descriptions of the Church are then articulated with a claim to expressing ontological truth, i.e., being able to speak about what really “is.” What really is, it is claimed, has its roots in a deeper knowledge, the knowledge of God. This heady mix is the habituated mode of operation for theological discussion.

Critical realism suggests a move beyond the attempt to find a fixed theological reference point for ecclesiology. First, it identifies doctrinal discussion as epistemologically relative. Despite the claim to operate at the level of what is, critical realism reads blueprint ecclesiologies as accounts of the real and not as ontology itself. As such, these accounts are relative, open to challenge and revision. At the same time, a critical realist perspective allows the possibility that there is an ontological reality beyond our accounts of that reality. Thus ontology in a critical realist perspective is present, but it is closed off as a privileged field of discourse. Critical realism short circuits the link that theologians have been inclined to make between abstraction, ontology, and revelation, but it opens the door for a kind of ecclesiology that can interact with the doctrinal as situated knowledge, i.e., as part of the lived. It does this while resisting the tendency to entirely collapse the doctrinal into the cultural, however. The critical realist perspective also frames a theologically informed, qualitative method. Here also the real is accepted as the lived expression of the community (and within and through this the work of the Spirit), with accounts of the real accepted as contested and “epistemologically relative.” These accounts are constructed in relation to the real, but are never taken to be identical with it.

Critical realism re-orientates the discussion around visibility and invisibility. Instead of the position where the action of God is invisible and human social patterns are by contrast visible, critical realism suggests that the real is visible and accounts of the real are always provisional. The real here relates not simply to divine presence, but also to the lived expression of the Church. Empirical work is therefore also problematic in relation to the real. This means that there are two kinds of “real” at play in ecclesiology that is drawing on empirical work. The first relates to the lived as the real. The second is theological, and relates to the possibility for either a theologically-oriented empirical work or a theology that works with texts to have access to the “real,” i.e., to the divine presence. The point is that this second “real” is not inaccessible to theological work either in the empirical form or in the more traditional forms, but what is

produced, i.e., the accounts of the real—or what I would call “the construction”—is epistemically relative. The epistemic relativity needs to be combined with a theologically-oriented epistemology, however, which would insist that “seeing” the divine either in texts or in empirical data requires a positioning in relationship, i.e., faith. The real in ecclesiology is only accessible as the basis for belief through the relational dynamic of the Holy Spirit. I explore this idea in Chapter 9 as the call to “abide,” although abiding is both attention and relational wonder. Abiding is the condition for ecclesiological ethnography in that both theology and empirical work seek to express the work of Jesus Christ in the human.

Going Through Barth

When returning to Barth and the task of “going through” his theology, it is worth starting with the contextual location of his work. As I stated earlier, Barth’s theology is constructed in opposition to two ecclesial polarities, what Bender calls neo-protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Liquid Church has a similar starting point. It shares a reaction against the first of these, neo-protestantism, i.e. theologies of the Church based on experience alone, but rather than embrace Roman Catholicism instead, seeks the alternative of a “blue print ecclesiology, as Healy calls it, or the construction of ecclesiology purely as an ideal. In advocating the need for attention to the lived expression of the Church, my intention is not to advocate experience or the “ultimate concern” of individuals or communities as an adequate basis for ecclesiology. At the same time, it is important to resist the assumption that the theologian writing a theoretical ecclesiology has some kind of ability to “see” that has priority over the experience of lived communities. The dichotomy between empirical or culturally-generated theological perspectives and those developed by scholars working from texts is in my view a false one. The central issue is the distinction between the presence of Jesus Christ in the Church and the ability of the theologian working either with text or with empirical data, or preferably both, to speak of the presence of Christ in, with, and through human expression. Taken in this way, I think it is possible to heed the warning that Barth lays down concerning the task of ecclesiology without necessarily accepting the limitations he sets out for empirical and historical methods.⁹³

⁹³ The Chalcedonian pattern of relations that Hunsinger has identified in Barth is suggestive, but inherently problematic. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). It is suggestive because this pattern reinforces the priority of the “theological” in ecclesiology. By theological I do not mean the ways of speaking and constructing that are associated with theologians. I mean divine presence and action. The critical realist perspective acknowledges this ontological priority, while accepting the epistemic relativity of any attempt to express this ontology. The point here is that this caution needs to be extended to the Chalcedonian pattern itself. There needs to be a certain theological modesty here. The notion of *anhypostatic/enhypostatic* relations is itself a construction. The reality of the incarnation is closed off from the theologian and this construct is an attempt to make sense of the humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ.

I agree with Barth that the basis for ecclesiology is Jesus Christ. What I do not accept is that the construction of the theologian affords unproblematic access to ontology.⁹⁴ At the same time I would argue that the theological task is essential. It is the calling of the Church to express the gospel and as part of that expression there needs to be reflection and critique. The theologian therefore has a crucial role. This role requires both a searching after the presence of Christ in the lived expression of the Church and also the continual reinterpretation of the tradition of the Church in relation to changing culture and contexts. This task is necessary because culture is fluid. It is also necessary because through the power of the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ is present in the Church as wind that cannot be predicted, as light that illuminates cultural practice, and as living water that flows in, around and through the expression of the Christian community. Cultural fluidity shapes ecclesiology, because meaning, practice and communication are always in movement. Raymond Williams speaks of culture as a way of life. Culture, he says, is a “structure of feeling.”⁹⁵ This way of life is “as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity.”⁹⁶ Culture is organic in nature and yet it manifests itself in organization. Like an organism it shifts and changes over time.⁹⁷ There is a sense in which it can only be made visible to those who are within its organism, but at the same time “visibility” may be restricted by the sense that this is simply the way things are. Hence Williams can talk about the mystery of cultural transmission. “One generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own ‘structure of feeling’, which will not appear to have come ‘from’ anywhere.”⁹⁸

It is the fluidity of culture and the nature of divine presence that determines the orientation of a Liquid Ecclesiology. For Barth, the Church is apprehended by faith. It is therefore a mystery to be received rather than an object for study. The task of ecclesiology rests on the conviction that the Church is the object of faith. Faith because it has its being in Jesus Christ, but faith also, I would add, because Christ is present in and through the fluid and often imperfect expression of the community. Faith then precedes and shapes the rational task of ecclesiology. This is Anselm’s classic description of theology as “faith seeking understanding.” For Barth, faith does not indicate the agency of the believer so much as the way in which the being of God structures what it means to believe. The being of God, he argues, precedes the questions of the Christian.⁹⁹ Liquid

Chalcedon, I would argue, maps out the possibilities and the limits of speech about Christ, but as it does so it traces our unknowing rather than our knowing.

⁹⁴ It is worth noting that Barth is clear also that there are significant limits to the theologians’ ability to see Jesus Christ (Barth, *CD* I.1, 3-24).

⁹⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1961), 64.

⁹⁶ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 64.

⁹⁷ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 65.

⁹⁸ Williams, *The Long Revolution*, 65.

⁹⁹ Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm’s Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

Ecclesiology rests on a similar conviction, but faith, i.e., belief in the Church, lies at the heart of ecclesiology also as a practice of abiding.

With Barth, I accept that neither of these offers an unproblematic account of divine action. Where I part company is in the caution that Barth expresses concerning the significance of the historical and the social in ecclesiology. For Barth, the true Church is “event.” This episodic affirmation of the presence of Christ makes sense in relation to Barth’s chief concerns about neo-protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Liquid Ecclesiology seeks to embrace some of the Christological grounding of ecclesiology that Barth advocates, but it sees the presence of Christ in the cultural as fundamental. Chapter 2 sets out the case for this orientation towards the Christ within the lived expression of the community. Rather than attempt to create a boundary around the “true” Church, I advocate a theology of paradox and kenosis as the basis for relationship: Christ present in the imperfect expression of the Church. It is the fact that expression is always imperfect that necessitates the task of theological ethnography. The point here is that expression in the lived community of the Church is not simply imperfect, it is multi-layered, characterized by a plurality of voices. I seek to illustrate this dynamic through an extended case study examining the expression of the Gospel in contemporary evangelical/charismatic churches. This case study is there to illustrate how taking account of the actual proclamation of the Church, i.e., what Barth appears to say is the task of dogmatics, is far from straightforward. Communities and individuals appear to live comfortably and often without awareness of the mutually contradictory or incompatible theological implications of shared cultural expression. These layers of ambiguity might be taken as a prompt to retreat to the safer ground of doctrinal theology. This is a mistake. Doctrinal theology is just as compromised even where doctrines have been agreed by Church councils. Instead, the call is to believe in the Church as the body of Christ that is divided and yet somehow one; in conflict and yet called to unity; sinful and yet also a place of blessing. This is what it means to believe in the Church.

Scripture and Theology

Abiding in Christ is the call to worship and adoration as the starting point for discerning Christ in the scriptures and in the community of the Church, the body of Christ. The approach to scripture developed in this book sits within a wider turn towards a theological understanding of scriptural interpretation. The scriptures, argues Stephen Fowl, are the work of human writers. They reflect the diverse languages, histories and cultures of their authors. The scriptures and those who were responsible for preserving, editing and organising these texts were subject to “social, material and institutional forces,” although the relative significance of these may be an area for discussion. Despite these contextual and contingent factors behind the text and canon, Christians understand scripture as the word of God. As Fowl puts it, “Christians are committed to the notion that Scripture is the word of God. In, through, or in spite of its clearly human, historical characteristics, Christians confess that Scripture repeats, conveys, or reflects the words of the living God.”¹⁰⁰ Scripture therefore remains the standard against which any expression of the faith is to be assessed. Theological

¹⁰⁰ Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 2.

interpretation of scripture, says John Webster, should be understood from a theological perspective that locates the bible and its reception in the Church within the “scope of the progress of the divine word.”¹⁰¹ This approach to scripture rests on an understanding of what it “is,” i.e., “Holy Scripture, God ministering his Word to human beings through human servants, and so sharing with them the goods of knowledge of himself.”¹⁰² Scripture therefore forms part of the self-communication of the Trinitarian God. It is situated within the relational movements of glorification, sending and breathing. Coming to scripture as a place of abiding and transformation is therefore to be drawn into and to participate in the life of God; to be indwelt and to indwell. This participatory understanding of the work of the Spirit through the scriptures embraces rational thought and a range of hermeneutical strategies, but it finds its being in the being of God.¹⁰³ Scripture is to be understood as part of the activity of the Trinitarian God that “is graciously directed to drawing humanity into ever deeper communion with God and each other.”¹⁰⁴ It is for this reason that scripture needs to be at the heart of communities as the means for continual encouragement and reflection. As Fowls puts it, “Scripture is primarily addressed to communities and it is within Christian communities that believers are to be formed and transformed to enhance their movement into ever deeper communion with God and each other.”¹⁰⁵

The particular theology of abiding drawn from John’s Gospel that I advocate in this book rests on the move towards the theological interpretation of scripture. Scripture is here understood as a place of divine encounter and transformation, but I have put a priority on the gospel narratives and in particular the Gospel of John as providing a framework for a constructive engagement in analysis and critique of the Church. The focus on John is not an argument for the priority of one gospel over the other writings in the New Testament. It is simply a lens that allows for a corrective reordering of the way that theology has operated in relation to practice in the Church. The argument is that contemplation of Jesus Christ in the actual words of scripture is the place where God is revealed. This revealing calls for worship and only thereafter reflection, and then construction. Worship involves a reordering in the presence of Jesus Christ—Jesus Christ seen in the scriptures but made present through the work of the Holy Spirit who leads the Church into truth. This “truth” is not doctrine or proposition, but a person, Jesus Christ, which does not mean that doctrinal formulation has no place in the Church, because the Church is called to express and communicate Christ in cultural forms. The point is that theological construction, because it is provisional, needs always to be reformed and reframed through the practice of contemplation of Jesus Christ. This worship has deep and significant parallels with the lived spirituality of the contemporary Church. The practice of singing worship songs is a coming into the presence of

¹⁰¹ John Webster, “Editorial,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/2 (April 2010): 116.

¹⁰² Webster, “Editorial,” 116.

¹⁰³ Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/2 (April 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Fowl, *Theological Interpretation*, 51.

Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit. Times of worship are moments of abiding and contemplation that transform and revivify the Church. This basic sensibility is deeply significant. It is not a sellout to consumerism; it is the fragment of life in the Church that I believe needs to be grasped and renewed through a more scriptural orientation. The “you” of the worship songs needs to become the Jesus of the gospels, not the other way round. So a critical analysis of the cultural forms of the Church is a way of paying attention to the way that practice generates particular forms of theological expression. This is what it means to reflect, i.e., to seek the presence of Jesus Christ in the life of the Church and to do this through disciplines of paying attention. The fluidity of the Church is part of its life in the Spirit, but this life needs attention precisely because it is life. Attention comes through a critical and sustained curiosity about how Church is lived out in social forms, but these forms are only “seen” as they are brought into worship through the contemplation of Jesus Christ in the scriptures. This in a sense is complexity coming into the presence of complexity. The complexity of the lived finds its orientation and re-orientation in the life that is Jesus Christ. This is what it means to worship in Spirit and in Truth and to be reformed in the image of Christ.

The Gospel and the Church

Barth’s starting point for *Church Dogmatics* i.e., “the scientific self examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God” locates the gospel at the centre of the theological task and hence in ecclesiology. Liquid Ecclesiology finds its orientation in the fluidity of culture, but it derives its origins from the presence of Christ in the Church and in the world. This inevitably raises the question of the gospel in relation to the Church, because it is the gospel that is the good news of Jesus Christ and hence the origins of the Church. It is tempting to see the gospel as a fixed point in a fluid culture. The Church has its message, and this is the rock that can stand amidst the ebb and flow of culture. Appeal to the gospel as the firm basis for the Church is not unusual. Liquid Ecclesiology challenges this simplified approach to theological expression, however, by arguing that if there is a “fixed” point in the gospel, then this needs to take account of the cultural nature of all ecclesial expression. The problem with the gospel as a fixed point can be illustrated from two quite different theologians: the Anabaptist, William McClendon, and the Anglican, Michael Ramsey.

The Gospel, McClendon argues, is the starting point for a vision of the Church as a moral and ethical community.¹⁰⁶ The ethical life of the Church finds its orientation in the “great story” of the Old Testament and the New Testament and Jesus Christ is the heart of this story.¹⁰⁷ McClendon has a vision of the Church as people who inhabit and are inhabited by this story. The gospel presents a “strange world” of the Kingdom of God. But this strange world is an open story that can be entered by believers in the present.¹⁰⁸ The Gospel story gives rise to three motifs that shape the life of the Church as an ethical community. Firstly, the Church is located within the story as a band of travellers

¹⁰⁶ McClendon, *Ethics* 47.

¹⁰⁷ McClendon, *Ethics* 48.

¹⁰⁸ McClendon, *Ethics* 338.

who are on *the way*. Thus the gospel presents the Christian life as a road or a journey.¹⁰⁹ For those who are on the way—the journeying people of God—there is the experience of a growing awareness of a particular responsibility for fellow travellers. McClendon calls this responsibility *watchful care*. Christians are not individual travellers, but a community in relationship. Linked together as brothers and sisters the “congregation” pledges to watch over each other on the road.¹¹⁰ The third motif is that of *witness*. The Church is not a closed group of believers, but an open circle of care.¹¹¹ The Church expresses care by sharing the Gospel with the wider society and offering care in the world. McClendon therefore develops his ecclesiology around a people shaped by this narrative journeying together on the way and called to a particular ethic expressed as a way of life in their congregation and in the wider society. For McClendon, this ecclesiology arises from an overtly Anabaptist vision of the Church.

In *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, Michael Ramsey also takes as his starting point the relationship between the gospel and the Church.¹¹² The Church, he argues, does not find its relevance in social engagement or in generating what he calls international policies that attempt to remedy the ills of the world.¹¹³ Rather, the Church finds its point of reference in “the death of Jesus the Messiah, and...the deeper issues of sin and judgment.”¹¹⁴ The Church is shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ who has died and who has risen again.¹¹⁵ This is the work of Christ on the cross, bringing about a new humanity. “Christ is here defined not as the isolated figure of Galilee and Judaea but as one whose people, dead and risen with him are his own humanity. Membership of the Church is to die to self i.e. to be utterly dependent on the body.”¹¹⁶ The fact of Christ includes the fact of the Church.¹¹⁷ The Church, he argues, is the people of God. “The individual Christian exists only because the body exists already.”¹¹⁸ Through baptism individuals are incorporated into the body of Christ and it is as part of this corporate body that they experience grace. The link between baptism and the gospel mirrors Ramsey’s overall conviction that the shape of the Church should be derived from the gospel. “The Church’s outward order expresses its inward meaning by representing the dependence of the members upon the one Body wherein they die to self.”¹¹⁹ The Church’s outward order, he argues, is not a matter of indifference, but is supremely important because the visible Church tells the gospel.¹²⁰ Order, he suggests, exists in three main elements: baptism, the Eucharist and Episcopacy. Baptism is the act where a person is brought into a

¹⁰⁹ McClendon, *Ethics* 48.

¹¹⁰ McClendon, *Ethics* 51.

¹¹¹ McClendon, *Ethics* 53.

¹¹² Michael Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Cowley, 1936).

¹¹³ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 3-4.

¹¹⁴ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 5.

¹¹⁶ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 44

¹¹⁷ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 33.

¹¹⁸ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 38.

¹¹⁹ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 2.

¹²⁰ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 50.

new relationship with Christ,¹²¹ and in a continual response to this baptism the believer lives out their Christian life. It is in the Eucharist that the Church's life is gathered together. In fact, for Ramsey, all of life is brought to the Eucharist.¹²² The bishops in the Church are central because they are the ones who show that the community is gospel oriented, not just in the present, but throughout Christian history in the succession of bishops from New Testament times.

Both McClendon and Ramsey seek to build their ecclesiologies from the gospel. What is remarkable is that, given what appears to be a shared starting point, they have generated two very different visions for the Church. The one is clearly Anabaptist and the other is High Church Anglican. And what is clear is that not only have they argued for quite different kinds of Churches, the one hierarchical, sacramental and static, and the other more oriented towards ethics, congregation and movement, they also express the gospel in quite different ways. Both are participatory at heart. For McClendon, the story incorporates the believer; for Ramsey the believer is incorporated into the body of Christ, the Church, but these forms of participation signal quite different gospel sensibilities. In other words, the "gospel" is problematic as a fixed starting point for developing ecclesiology. The gospel appears to be itself part of expression and theological construction. Having said this, there is the paradoxical position that both McClendon and Ramsey press, that "the gospel" must be at the heart of ecclesiology. It is a mistake to conclude from this that the task is simply to clarify what the gospel is and that these theologians have somehow made a wrong turn. The point is that the evaluation of any ecclesiology needs to take account of the expression of the gospel, and the ways in which that gospel is embodied. In other words, there is a theological task that requires an engagement with expression and the lived, but also a revisiting of the scriptures and the Christian tradition. This is the task of Liquid Ecclesiology.

Part I: Currents in the Liquid Church, deals with the theological and cultural theories that shape Liquid Ecclesiology. A theology that is empirically orientated needs to be theological. Theology can of course be manifest through empirical research, but there are ways of speaking and writing that are distinctively theological in both tone and method. In the following chapters, I develop a theology of Gospel and Church as the basis for a Liquid Ecclesiology. I make this move in order to situate Liquid Ecclesiology within a wider theological conversation and also to develop a theological frame for the empirical. This frame is itself a "construct," and I have constructed it in order to shape what is then illustrated further in the Case Study in Part II.

The theological voice is necessary to the argument, but it is also presented with self-knowing, i.e., the consciousness that it is provisional. In adopting a theological voice in these chapters, I am aware that this is a voice that seeks to be rooted in the tradition and has the confidence to speak of the work of God in the world. To speak in this way of the work of God reveals a confidence that is perhaps less evident in empirical research, or perhaps the empirical researcher needs to be more hesitant with a theological voice. Speaking and discerning in a theological voice is an essential aspect of ecclesiology and ethnography. Yet

¹²¹ Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 58.

¹²² Ramsey, *The Gospel*, 118-119.

adopting a theological voice and using this as a starting point is a deliberate move. It is a construction, but it is a construction that is made with a measure of self-awareness. I am acknowledging that what I say, even as it may claim “normativity,” is epistemologically relative. This point should not lead to hesitancy, however. The Church needs theological speech and would die without it, in fact. Theological speech offers ways of living, a perspective and a vision of transcendence. There is thus something of a Catch 22 situation here. It is necessary to speak theologically in order to confidently express the life of God in the world and in the Church. It is right and necessary that this way of speaking makes claims and seeks to change the way that we live as the Church and as humanity. At the same time, we must acknowledge and accept that such a way of speaking is not definitive. This is what it means to be faith seeking understanding.

Chapter 1 argues that the Church and the Gospel have their being in Jesus Christ. The presence of Christ in the world and in the Church shapes the Church and the gospel. This presence has its origins in the “crazy love” of God. The fluid being of the Church is dynamic, relational and made ever youthful by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church and the gospel are expressions in culture, and therefore a limitation of the divine presence. They are the humiliation of the Word in the Church. Chapter 2 sets out the case for the paradox at the centre of ecclesiology. The paradox is that the Light of the World transforms and yet is also communicated within the expression of the Church. The Light shapes individuals and a way of life in the community, but as it does so it is paradoxically limited to the partiality of cultural forms. Chapter 3 explores how, through the work of the Spirit, the presence of Christ in the Church is fluid, a fluidity that is matched by the way culture works. Cultural forms shift their meaning across time and within communities. The gospel cannot be preserved as if it were somehow outside or above culture. Instead, the Church has accepted that the Gospel finds its authenticity in Jesus Christ, as he is revealed in scripture and also in the embodied and expressed tradition of the Church. While it is evident that both the scriptures and the Church are culturally bound, this does not mean that all and any kind of expression is acceptable or above criticism. Chapter 4 explores the content of the gospel message in relation to the idea of a “grand narrative” of the Church.

Part II: Discerning the Liquid Church, A Case Study, shows how these theological and cultural frameworks operate in the expression of the Church. The case study focuses on the gospel as it is understood and has operated in contemporary evangelical and charismatic churches. The case study illustrates how close attention to the fluidity of expression and the dynamics of culture, making use of a variety of methods of empirical research, can generate a multi-layered understanding of an issue in ecclesiology. In this case, the issue is how the gospel relates to the Church. The case study takes the form of discourse analysis and it centres on the lived expression and communicative practices of the Church. This analysis serves to illustrate how qualitative empirical work can both enrich and also challenge theological discussion about the Church. Discourse analysis brings together a range of different empirical data to generate an analysis of the expressive and cultural communication of elements within the contemporary Church. The case study deals with the contemporary

evangelical/charismatic Church in the United States and the United Kingdom. The case study takes as its starting point the widely-held view that the gospel is unchanging, while the Church has a responsibility to continually adjust its life and expression to the changes in culture. The notion of espoused and operant theology is used to explain how in practice the evangelical expression of the Gospel has become disconnected from the everyday lived practice of the contemporary Church. Chapter 5 looks at the idea of an unchanging gospel and how expression itself has made this idea possible. Chapter 6 traces how the desire to communicate the faith, particularly among young people, has led to the adoption of more subjective forms of expression. It is argued that the concentration on the self and a personal relationship with God has led to the more objective Gospel becoming less and less significant. Chapter 7 traces this split between the espoused Gospel and the operant faith of the Church through a detailed discussion of contemporary worship.

Part III: Remaining the Liquid Church, develops the notion of judgment and normativity in Liquid Ecclesiology. Chapter 8 examines the case study and explores the specific issues and problems that arise from a separation of Gospel and the lived practice of the Church. In Chapter 9 these perspectives are then used as the starting point for a discussion of normativity in ecclesiology as the practice of abiding. Finally, Chapter 10 sets out how abiding might become part of the lived expression of the Church through theological education.

Liquid Ecclesiology and Normativity

Liquid Ecclesiology: Gospel and Church is thus an attempt to explore an ecclesiology that takes full account of culture and the divine being of the Church. The gospel is central to this project as it is the gospel that forms the heart of the community. Once it is accepted that this gospel is itself cultural and therefore fluid, questions arise concerning the continual faithfulness, authenticity, and legitimacy of the Church. In other words, the whole issue of normativity in theology arises. Liquid Ecclesiology accepts that theological arbitration as it has traditionally been conducted is not an entirely acceptable solution. This is because theological expression is itself cultural and therefore fluid. Fluidity need not be seen as inherently problematic, however. Liquid Ecclesiology takes as a main tenet that there is a symbiotic relationship between the divine being and the cultural expression of the Church. Both are moving and alive, i.e., more liquid than solid. Thus while theologians are able to generate distinctions and make deliberations when they limit themselves to “ideas,” the lived, living, indwelling, and indwelt Christian community requires a more compromised and muddled form of analysis, i.e., an analysis that accepts its own limitations and its own contingency. Such an observation does not preclude the practice of ecclesiology or the necessity for judgement. Normativity remains a key function of ecclesiology. I simply argue that this practice needs to be reoriented.

The re-orientation of ecclesiology rests on the notion of “abiding,” which has two aspects. The first is a turn towards worship and wonder. Worship and wonder are focused on Jesus Christ revealed in the scriptures. Secondly, abiding refers to the practice of discernment. This is the discipline of paying close attention to the cultural expression of the Church. This attention is also a practice of worship and wonder since its primary orientation is towards the

presence of Jesus Christ in the Church and also in the world. Abiding is the call to return continually to Jesus Christ to be transformed as a community. Abiding operates as normativity in the Liquid Church. This normative function is not only necessary, it is essential. Because of the gravitational pull of the Church, normativity appears to be a perilous activity without guarantees. This ambiguous and muddled aspect of ecclesiology is part of its situation in the lived. Abiding is thus inherently perilous.

Normativity, reconstituted as abiding, describes an ecclesial practice. Fundamentally this means that normativity, as abiding, comes with none of the guarantees that traditional ecclesiology might expect. Normativity is not simply delivered through the genre of theological rationality and the ability to make distinctions in the ideal. Neither can it be achieved by privileging the voice of the trained theologian. Being part of the expression of the Church locates the theologian in the flow of tradition and as part of the prayer of the community. Abiding is not simply the prerequisite for knowing (and being known), it is its primary location. What this means is that the “product” of theological creativity, presented as knowledge, is not in and of itself normative. Normativity is always located in the lived. The theological product is thus the approximation to normativity. It is always contingent. If judgment is simply deciding between competing idealized accounts, then normativity can operate by an exchange between theological products. This kind of normativity is not at all what is required in ecclesiology, however, because judgment has implications for the social and the cultural. Churches have to take material form. They are “things.” The connection to the material and historical requires ecclesiology to forge some kind of connection with the particular. Normativity in ecclesiology calls for something more than this, i.e., a way to develop judgment in relation to the contingent. Liquid Ecclesiology draws attention to the gravitational pull of the embodied. What this means is that normativity operates in relation to the lived and as part of the lived and this is precisely what this book sets out to explore.