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Introduction

This book is about ecclesiology, about the kind of critical theological reflection that is centered upon the nature and function of the Christian church. The book is rather more *about* ecclesiology than it is an exercise in the discipline, since much of the time it will be concerned with methodological issues. The aim is not, or not primarily at least, to make a set of ecclesiological proposals. Rather, it is to clear a space within the discipline of theology for some new and more challenging forms of ecclesiology.

However, as Karl Barth never ceased to remind us, theological method should be determined as much as possible by its subject matter if the latter is not to become irremediably distorted.[1] Beliefs about the nature and function of the church on the one hand, and the question of how we should go about doing ecclesiology on the other, bear upon one another so as to determine the kinds of things we can and cannot say about the church. Thus any argument for a methodological proposal about ecclesiology will necessarily involve making some constructive proposals as to what sort of thing the church is and what sorts of things it can and should do. So, too, here. The point is that *what* I say about the church will be said primarily in order to make a case for *how* to do ecclesiology, rather than for its own sake. Some things that would be treated within a comprehensive theology of the church, such as the church's

1. See, e.g., Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, I/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp. 295ff. I make infrequent mention of Barth, but my proposals are meant to be largely compatible with his work outside the area of ecclesiology. Like Barth, as interpreted by John Webster, my "theme," too, is "*God and humanity as agents in relation*." *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 33 (Webster's emphasis).

ministerial structures, its forms of worship and its relation to Israel, will not be considered.[2]

One cannot start from scratch in these matters. By thinking and acting as Christians we are already in some sense engaged in the practice of theology, whether we actually engage in critical reflection upon our lives as Christians or not.[3] And all "theologians," from the non-reflective to the professional, have their own preunderstandings – sets of beliefs, questions, concerns, aesthetic judgments – about what David Kelsey nicely calls "the Christian thing."[4] Such preunderstandings are manifested when, for example, we kneel rather than stand when praying; when we follow or decide not to follow some penitential exercises during Lent; when we approve or disapprove of last Sunday's sermon or simply ignore it as uninteresting or irrelevant; or when we decide that we need not go to church at all. One Christian's preunderstanding will likely be somewhat different from that of most others. Nobody's preunderstanding should be ignored or simply dismissed. But neither should anyone's conception of Christianity be regarded as unrevisible, as if their expertise or authority or personal experience could render it beyond criticism. Rather, in what follows I will take it as axiomatic that one's theological view is always preliminary, always open to challenge, assessment and partial or radical alteration by means of dialogue or confrontation with other Christians and non-Christians, as well as with Scripture and the Christian tradition more generally. Our theological perspectives are points of departure for growth in the Christian life towards better perspectives and new points of departure. I will offer an argument as to why we should think along such lines in a later chapter.

In this introductory chapter I begin the inquiry into ecclesiological

2. For views of the relation between the church and Israel compatible with the concerns of this book, see George A. Lindbeck, "The Gospel's Uniqueness: Election and Untranslatability," *Modern Theology* 13:4 (1997), 423–450; Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. chs. three and five; Bruce D. Marshall, "Christ and the cultures: the Jewish people and Christian theology," in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 81–100; Kendall R. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); Kendall R. Soulen, "YHWH the Triune God," *Modern Theology* 15:1 (1999), 25–54.
3. As Kathryn Tanner argues in *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 72. John Howard Yoder makes a similar point with regard to social ethics in *For The Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 91. The notion of starting from scratch in any intellectual or existential endeavor has, I take it, been discredited at least since Heidegger.
4. David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About A Theological School* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p. 32. Kelsey himself adapts the phrase from G. K. Chesterton.

method by describing some of the relevant concerns and beliefs that are part of my own preunderstanding. This is meant only to give some idea of the point of departure for what follows; I am not trying to establish a secure basis from which to proceed deductively or even especially systematically. Indeed, one of my aims is to show that too much emphasis upon bases and systematization is misguided, especially in ecclesiology. And so the argument to follow will proceed in a cumulative rather than deductive way. What is asserted with little or no support will usually get some backing later on. A charitable reader will therefore suspend final judgment upon both the reasonableness of the point of departure and the cogency of the subsequent argument until the end of the book. Towards the end of this chapter, I give an outline of the argument of the chapters to follow.

I have been drawn to the present inquiry in part by the impression that while the ecclesiology of the last hundred years or so has been sometimes profound, and its impact upon the church also sometimes profound, it has not been as helpful as it could be for the Christian community. As the next chapter will begin to show, in general ecclesiology in our period has become highly systematic and theoretical, focused more upon discerning the right things to think about the church rather than orientated to the living, rather messy, confused and confusing body that the church actually is. It displays a preference for describing the church's theoretical and essential identity rather than its concrete and historical identity.[5] That preference may be one reason why ecclesiological reflection has fallen prey to ever-shifting theological fashions, and why some of it has become quite dull, something it need never be. But whether or not that is so, the concern here is to show how their methodological preference has inhibited theologians from engaging in adequate theological reflection upon the concrete shape of the church.

The organization of the inquiry is informed by this concern. I will analyze the various ways in which modern ecclesiology obstructs adequate reflection upon the concrete church, and discuss some of the resulting problems. I will also make some methodological and constructive suggestions as we go along that will enable us to focus theological attention more readily upon the church's actual rather than theoretical identity. This shift in focus will make it easier to identify ways to respond to some of the challenges presently facing the concrete church. The

5. Colin E. Gunton traces this preference to Augustine in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, second edition (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991/1997). See especially pp. 56ff.

methodological proposals that result from the inquiry are not meant to constitute a full-fledged ecclesiological method, nor to replace the present approaches. Rather, the primary goal is to develop broader, more concrete forms of ecclesiological reflection. Such complementary approaches are formulated in order to help improve reflection not only upon the church's concrete identity, but also upon its essential or theoretical identity.

What is the "concrete church"? Two things, to begin with, that it is not. First, the concrete church is not to be thought of reductively as merely the visible or empirical church in contradistinction to its more "spiritual" or "theological" aspects.[6] Rather, the latter "aspects," including most fundamentally the active presence of the Holy Spirit, are constitutive of the concrete religious body. To deny this would be to fall into something like the ecclesiological equivalent of Nestorianism, by splitting the church into a human part and a divine part, or into Ebionism, by thinking of the church as the product of human activity alone. Thus any attempt to reflect upon the concrete church requires much more than, say, a sociological analysis of its empirical identity, although such an analysis may well be useful on occasion, provided that it is properly subsumed within theological discourse.

Second, the concrete church is not, as sometimes even its members reductively assume, to be thought of simply as an institution which is dedicated to handing on to another generation that set of doctrines or moral principles that make up the Christian worldview. The church does not teach a theory that at some subsequent stage is to be put into practice. As Stanley Hauerwas has argued, Christianity becomes distorted if it is treated as a system of beliefs.[7] Rather, it can be summarily described as a distinctive way of life, made possible by the gracious action of the Holy Spirit, which orients its adherents to the Father through Jesus Christ. By schooling its members, the church makes that orientation a present possibility for them.[8] The Christian way of life is distinctive because its Lord

6. See Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), for an account of why, for much of the ancient world, such a binary opposition would have made little sense and cannot be presupposed in Paul's conception of the church.
7. See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them In the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville: Abingdon/T&T Clark, 1998).
8. Nicholas Lash notes how many religions have traditionally understood themselves as schools "whose pedagogy has the twofold purpose . . . of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire." *The Beginning and the End of 'Religion'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 21. See also L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgement: Toward a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

is a particular person and because its God is triune. Its life takes concrete form in the web of social practices accepted and promoted by the community as well as in the activities of its individual members.[9]

It is thus not unreasonable to describe the concrete church, at least initially, more in terms of agency rather than in terms of being. Its identity is constituted by action. That identity is thoroughly theological, for it is constituted by the activity of the Holy Spirit, without which it cannot exist. But it is also constituted by the activity of its members as they live out their lives of discipleship. It is therefore not enough to discuss our ecclesial activity solely in terms of its dependent relation upon the work of the Holy Spirit. The identity of the concrete church is not simply given; it is constructed and ever reconstructed by the grace-enabled activities of its members as they embody the church's practices, beliefs and valuations.[10] We must indeed insist that the only adequate form of reflection upon the concrete church is that of theology. But if ecclesiology is to contribute to the health of the church – and by "health" I do not mean, of course, merely success in terms of numbers or prestige – it must examine our human activity as it concretely is: thoroughly human. To do so, it needs to find ways to make theological use of those forms of discourse that critically examine the complexities and confusions of human activity, such as sociology, cultural analysis and history. For, as Stephen Sykes contends, in the face of what he sees as Barth's occasional tendency towards ecclesiological abstraction, "the language of sociology and the language of theology may be separate, but the reality of divine and human power is not. It is not parallel or merely coordinated; it is inevitably, and dangerously, mixed."[11] My concern here, then, is to rule out both theological and non-theological reductionism in descriptions of our ecclesial identity by developing ways in which ecclesiology can appropriate a wide range of critical tools.[12]

9. I follow David Kelsey's definition of "practice" in his *To Understand God Truly,* p. 118: "A practice is any form of socially established cooperative human activity that is complex and internally coherent, is subject to standards of excellence that partly define it, and is done to some end but does not necessarily have a product." Kelsey's definition is based upon Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 187, but it is perhaps more in accord with Charles Taylor's "vague and general" usage defined in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 204.
10. My language here reflects my indebtedness to William A. Christian, Sr., *Doctrines of Religious Communities: A Philosophical Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).
11. Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 207.
12. James M. Gustafson argued against such reductionism some time ago in his *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: The Church as a Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

We will find that in order to reflect theologically upon the concrete life of the church we will need to take a thoroughly catholic (i.e., ecumenical) perspective. Throughout what follows, then, except in obvious instances, the word "church" refers to all those diverse Christian groups who accept what is sometimes cumbersomely called the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed.[13] That this book is written by a Roman Catholic will no doubt be evident at times from its selection of theological examples. But a particular perspective has to be taken, otherwise the discussion becomes intolerably general or else interminable in treating all possible confessional responses to a given question. Thus, for example, when I discuss the issue of ecclesial arrogance, my primary reference is, as it must be, to the Roman church, although the problem clearly arises in different forms within other denominations. My hope is that the proposals to follow will be useful for every confession and denomination, and that they can help to clear away a few of the many obstacles in the path towards greater communion within the one Christian church.

Wherever we begin, we need some norms and criteria. If we begin with what the church does, looked at from a theological and ecumenical perspective, one of the things we must say about it is that it has been entrusted with the apostolic task. The church's responsibility is to witness to its Lord, to make known throughout the world the Good News of salvation in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Correspondingly, whatever else one must say about the individual members of the church, they too have been given a task: to be disciples of Jesus Christ.[14] The effectiveness of witness and the truthfulness of discipleship both depend entirely upon the Holy Spirit. But they are no less *our* tasks, so we must try to do them as well as we can. Although the two tasks are distinct,

13. "Church" is not capitalized either. The reason, admittedly not a very forceful one, will be evident in a moment when I discuss the church's sinfulness. Since it concretely is on a par in so many ways with other religious and non-religious bodies, it seems reasonable to reflect this in however minor a way.

14. Robert W. Jenson also begins with the apostolic mission in his *Systematic Theology.* Werner G. Jeanrond has used similar criteria, too, though to a somewhat different end, in his *Call and Response: The Challenge of Christian Life* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1995). Considering the church as agent could begin somewhat differently by focusing on the central task of worship (which I take here as an integral and partly formative element of discipleship). Significant arguments for that focus have been made by Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); and more recently by Daniel W. Hardy, for whom worship "is the central means whereby human beings are called to their proper fullness in society and the world." *God's Ways with the World: Thinking and Practising Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 8. See also, in a different mode, Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

they are usually mutually conditioning and cannot be treated entirely separately. The church's task of witness includes the pastoral function of helping individual Christians become better disciples. This function is accomplished, for example, by developing suitable practices and institutions that help form the dispositions of its members and guide them in their activities.[15] And correspondingly, the individual's task includes contributing to the church's witness by embodying it in her life of discipleship.

These two normative tasks can function as criteria for assessing the identity of the concrete church in terms of the adequacy of its witness and pastoral care. They make it appropriately difficult to avoid consideration of a number of problems, two of the most significant of which I want to focus on here. There is a saying of Saint Paul's that encompasses them both: "far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). Paul, of course, made the statement in the context of a polemic against relying upon the law and circumcision. But the rule has wider application. One part is proscriptive: that apart from Christ crucified, *we should not glory or boast in anything*. The other part is prescriptive: that *we should boast in Jesus Christ crucified.* Evidently the prescription has to do with witness and discipleship. But before we discuss that, let us see how the proscription could apply to the church, using the two criteria. To do so, we need to consider the church's sinfulness.

It is not unjust to say that the concrete church has frequently failed in its task of witness and pastoral care. The power of sin is manifested not only in the actions of individuals but in the Christian communal body, when the latter fosters practices, valuations and beliefs in its membership that are incompatible with the gospel. One of the more obvious examples of this is the failure of the church's leadership to avoid the corruptions of power. A classic illustration of this failure are the Papal Bulls, *Clericis Laicos* (1296) and *Unam Sanctam* (1302), of Boniface VIII.[16] Boniface's teaching does not necessarily reflect actual sin on his part, for he may well have acted with good intentions and in ignorance. But his Christian character was formed within a church whose concrete identity at the time was

15. It is Stanley Hauerwas who, perhaps, has most helped us to retrieve this conception of the church's function. See, e.g., his earlier work, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). For a more recent sustained discussion of Christian and non-Christian virtue theories, see Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).
16. *Documents of the Christian Church,* ed. and trans. H. Bettenson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1943), pp. 159–161.

flawed, its witness corrupted by the ideology and practices of worldly power. Another, quite different example of malformation can be found in the church's relation to the Jews in Germany and in some occupied lands during the Second World War. A recent apology for the Holocaust by Pope John Paul II spoke only of the sins of individual Christians. No one doubts that many individuals committed actual sins. But, as many Jewish groups have pointed out, the Pope seemed to ignore the corporate failure of the church to witness to its Lord and to help its membership in their task of discipleship by developing appropriate counter-practices to those of the fascist and racist culture.[17]

It might be argued that we cannot blame the church for its misuse of power and authority, its tolerance of slavery, its treatment of women, Jews and non-Christians, and its other failures to conform to its Lord. Perhaps these failures are for the most part simply manifestations of the church's finitude rather than its sinfulness. An analogy could be drawn between the failures of the ecclesial body and an individual's wrongful actions and flawed character. People, we say, who act wrongly in ignorance of moral truth are not guilty of sin. Nor do we blame them for what we know to be unchristian character traits when they live in cultural and ecclesial environments that consider such traits to be laudable. Accordingly, one might contend that the church can also be ignorant, blinded by its location within a corrupt, and corrupting, cultural environment. By historical-cultural contextualization, the church would be absolved from guilt.

There is something to this, to be sure. But some blame may well be involved since the church was often able, even when it was small and weak, to distance itself, sometimes at great cost, from a number of "worldly" cultural practices that it recognized to be sinful. At other times the church was such a powerful moral force within society that it could reasonably be held responsible for at least some of the flaws of its concrete identity. A more significant issue, though, is that Christians believe sin to be an unavoidable and pervasive aspect of our existence. Sin is a fact that has been revealed to us in the work of Jesus Christ. This belief is a doctrine, not something that can necessarily and straightforwardly be discerned from historical experience.[18] Whether or not it does so in ignorance, when the church fosters sinful practices and beliefs among its membership, its concrete identity displays the confusions and stupidities

17. Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the 'Shoah,'" *Origins* 27:40 (1998), 669–675.
18. See Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them,* ch. 3, pp. 61–74.

of our sinful state. The church knows that we cannot escape from this state by our own actions but only through the saving work of the triune God. It is thus reasonable to hold that the acknowledgment of ecclesial sinfulness is an essential part of Christian witness to the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yet it remains the case that the church – especially the Roman – has been rather unwilling to acknowledge that it is part of the fallen world. Until very recently the Roman hierarchy, for example, would admit that only the members of the church sin, not the church itself. Charles Journet's formula, asserting that "the church is not without sinners, but she herself is sinless," has been accepted as if it were doctrine.[19] While the church does not regard itself as immune from some kinds of mistakes it continues to display, as Gregory Jones has noted, a "surprising . . . tendency to self-deception, to a lack of penitence."[20] This cannot be due to lack of familiarity with the concept of social sin. Many judgments have been made by theologians and the church leaderships against various non-ecclesial bodies and societies. But little has been said theologically about how, where and why the Christian social body has succumbed to temptation. Nor, as I will argue in the next chapter, has the acknowledgment of ecclesial sin had much effect upon the way in which ecclesiology is done.

One reason why the church is unwilling to acknowledge its sinfulness has to do with the Christian doctrine that the church is unlike any other religious or non-religious body. The church is distinctive in two ways, sociological and theological. It is sociologically unique because it alone is manifestly orientated towards a particular person, Jesus Christ. That distinguishes it from Islam, for instance, which is distinctive in its own way, since its life is orientated, one might say, around obedience to Allah, who reveals his will through his prophet, Mohammed. This kind of distinctiveness seems obvious enough.[21] But the church claims, in addition, that it is unique in a theological way. As the Creed implies, the church's activity and being are dependent in some fundamental and special way upon the activity of the Spirit of Christ in its midst. It is the Spirit who makes the church's witness true and effective, and who upbuilds the church in a way

19. Charles Journet, *Théologie de L'Église* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1958), p. 236. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994) still focuses on individual sinfulness. See the section on the church's holiness, pp. 218f.
20. L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 67.
21. I will be discussing some of those for whom it may not be so obvious in chapter 4.

beyond the possibility of human activity. It is this theological uniqueness that is implied in describing the church by means of such phrases as the Body of Christ, *Creatura Verbi*, Temple of the Spirit, and the like.

From this unexceptional Christian doctrine some have drawn further, more problematic conclusions. It has been argued that when the church is truly itself, or when considered at its most profound level, it is something that is fundamentally free of sin.[22] On this view, which in various guises is one often found in contemporary ecclesiology, to deny the perfection of the theological identity of the church would be to raise the possibility that it is distinctive only in the first, sociological way, but not in the theological way. Perfection and theological identity are thus inextricably linked; what is truly special about the church is its essence, which is perfect. The consequences of this move are either that ecclesial sin is simply ignored as incompatible with ecclesial perfection, or else it is rendered of secondary account, as merely an empirical distortion of the church's true theological identity. Either way, ecclesial sin retains little theological significance.

Is it necessary to make such a move? Not, I think, for a theological view of the *concrete* church. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit is perfect. And some strands of the tradition, such as the Roman Catholic, believe that the members of the church have been so transformed that they are in some real sense no longer sinners. But both Scripture and tradition indicate that ecclesial activity can at times be sinful, however dependent it is upon the Spirit, or however transformed by grace its members may be. The eschatological "not yet" reminds us that until the end of the church's time it remains imperfect and sinful, always *ecclesia semper reformanda* or *semper purificanda*.[23] Although the church at Corinth was evidently not of the highest quality, its members are still "called to be saints," and are "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:2). And for Augustine, the church is *corpus permixtum*, a body in which sinner and saint are commingled, yet it is truly the (pilgrim) church in spite of its present imperfections.[24] As Christians, then, we have not only to fight against the power of sin in the fallen world, we must fight against it in the midst of our ecclesial body and within ourselves. This fact should be reckoned with in every ecclesiology as an unavoidable aspect of the church in its

22. I discuss these claims more fully in the next chapter.
23. See *Lumen Gentium* 15.48, and *Unitatis Redintegratio* 3.6. in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents,* ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1975/1986).
24. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. H. Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972/1984), Book 1, chapter 35.