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“The Visible Attests the Invisible”

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The Body of Christ takes up physical space here on earth”¹—thus writes Bonhoeffer at the beginning of a remarkable set of reflections on “the visible church community” in *Discipleship*. The consensus of much recent ecclesiology has been to confirm the correctness of Bonhoeffer’s judgment: no ecclesiology can be adequate which does not give primacy to the church’s *visibility*. In what follows, I want to propose an evangelical *sed contra*: rather than focusing on the church as a visible community of practices, contemporary ecclesiology would do well to recover a proper sense of the church’s *invisibility*—that is to say, of the “spiritual” character of its visible life. And as a corollary, I suggest that the active life of the church is best understood, not as a visible realization or representation of the divine presence but as one long act of testimony—as an attestation of the perfect work of God in Christ, now irrepressibly present and effective in the Spirit’s power. This combination of emphases—on the “spiritual visibility” of the church, and on the character of its acts as attestations of God—reflects an orderly account of the relation between God’s perfection and creaturely being and activity, neither separating nor confusing the divine and the human. The church is the form of common human life and action which is generated by the gospel to bear witness to the perfect word and work of the triune God.

I

We begin with some analysis of the significance of the theme of the church’s visibility in contemporary ecclesiology. Like the concept of communion, that of visibility is pervasive. They are, of course, correlative notions, for both are rooted in a rejection of the inherited dualisms which separate the natural history of the church from its life in God, and both therefore refuse to sever the church as the sphere of divine grace from the public existence of the church as “political” community in time. The church’s essence is participation in the divine communion; but this does not in any way entail its removal from the negotiations of temporal, social and material existence, precisely because it is as such—as a visible social form—that the church is in God. The issues could be broached in a number of ways, especially through looking at developments in ecumenical ecclesiology over the last couple of decades;² here, however, I want to explore Bonhoeffer’s thoughts a little more, and then move to recent ecclesiological use of the notion of practice.

Bonhoeffer reflects twice on the church’s visibility in *Discipleship*,³ and on both occasions what he has to say betrays his profound mistrust of the way in which the notion of the invisibility of the church can be used to resist the church’s calling by assimilating itself to or hiding itself within the civil order.⁴ Unlike contemporaries such as Althaus, Hirsch or Brunner, or later existentialist Lutherans like Ebeling, Bonhoeffer insists that the church’s distinction from the world necessarily takes visible, bodily form. “The followers are the visible community of faith; their discipleship is a visible act which separates them from the world—or it is not discipleship.... To flee into invisibility is to deny the call. Any community which wants to be invisible is no longer a community that follows him.”⁵ Returning to the same themes later on in the book, Bonhoeffer grounds the church’s visibility in a theology of incarnation, for “the incarnation does entail the claim to space on earth, and anything that takes up space

is visible. Thus the body of Jesus Christ can only be a visible body, or else it is not a body at all.”⁶ Why? Because “a truth, a doctrine, or a religion needs no space of its own. Such entities are bodyless. They do not go beyond being heard, learned, and understood. But the incarnate Son of God needs not only ears or even hearts; he needs actual, living human beings who follow him. His community with them was something everyone could see.” And “[t]he body of the exalted Lord is likewise a visible body, taking the form of the church-community.”⁷

Bonhoeffer’s use of spatial imagery is especially significant: in its acts of proclamation, sacrament and order, the church assumes a specific set of contours, and so claims a particular territory. The church’s authority in the world, its representation of a commendable mode of human existence, does not take the form of a doctrine only but of a communal enactment in space, what Bonhoeffer calls (pointedly) “the living-space [*Lebensraum*] of the visible church-community.”⁸ “The bodily presence of the Son of God demands bodily commitment to him and with him throughout one’s daily life. With all our bodily living, existence, we belong to him who took on a human body for our sake. In following him, the disciple is inseparably linked to the body of Jesus.”⁹ Whereas for most of his contemporary Lutherans, Christian difference was radically internalized, for Bonhoeffer the church’s public, territorial character is essential to its witness, for in its visibility before the world, the church “gains space for Christ.”¹⁰

Thus Bonhoeffer; many of the same themes can be picked up in recent theological interest in the concept of “practice” as it has been developed in social and cultural theory. Some of the discussion has concentrated on epistemological issues, above all, on how theological knowledge emerges out of the practices of the church¹¹—a move not unrelated to explorations of the relation of knowledge and virtue which have preoccupied some recent philosophical writing.¹² Here it is important to note that speaking of knowledge of God as carried by Christian communal activity tends to favor a certain theology of the church, one in which the “communion of the church” is to be identified in terms of its forms of life, that is, “the specific practices that make it distinctive among human communities.”¹³ This stress on practices, it should be noted, is not simply empiricist, a way of getting some kind of descriptive purchase on the actualities of church life. It is, at heart, an ontological proposal, undergirded by resistance to what are taken to be modern assumptions about the dialectical relation of inner and outer, and about the way in which the “spiritual” is always tainted by being brought into association with the embodied and public. Controverting these assumptions entails refusing to separate the church as—say—pneumatological reality from its distinctive habits of discourse, its routines of practice and its shape as a temporally extended human polity.

All this is clearly companionable to Lubac’s interpretation of the plight of modern ecclesiology: marred by the segregation of natural from supernatural history, it almost inevitably ends up in one or other version of ecclesiological monophysitism—the church is either purely divine or merely human. Worries like these often surface in analysis of Barth’s ecclesiology.¹⁴ Barth’s doctrine of the church is generally accorded a rather cool reception. If it fails (and many of its interpreters are disposed to think that, for all its glories, it does in some measure fail), it is because Barth will not allow that the church itself is the medium or form of the gospel in the world, and so presupposes the fatal separation of the divine work of reconciliation from the human and the temporal. By thinking of the church as external to the work of the Spirit, Barth leaves himself on the one hand with a pneumatology which lacks a sufficiently concrete historical referent, and on the other hand with a doctrine of the church in which the only significant ecclesial act is that of self-transcending indication of the Word and work of God, which exist in their perfection in another, nonchurchly realm. As von Balthasar put the point (his criticism has all the more substance because of his superbly attentive and sympathetic rendering of Barth’s intentions): “The greatest doubts surround what Barth means by Church.... Does this space, considered

as a concrete reality in the world, suffice to bear witness to the presence of faith and revelation in the world?”¹⁵ Now, it is by no means self-evident that the criticism of Barth stands. Barth took very seriously the “horizontal,” ethical-political interests of the Reformed tradition, and had a deep commitment to the historical and ecclesial character of Christianity; to think of him as espousing a docetic ecclesiology is, at the very least, counterintuitive. Nevertheless, Barth has often served as an example of where ecclesiology ought not to go if it is to give attention to the enduring shape and active forms of the church as a human, historical reality.

From this “turn to the visible” in contemporary ecclesiology, the questions which emerge for our attention are these: Is the church the visible presence of the new creation, or merely its sign? Does the church indicate a reality which remains beyond visible form, or is the life of the church as a public body itself the temporal realization of salvation? Pursuing these questions is a matter of some importance for the ecclesiological sketch attempted here, precisely because of its orientation to the perfection of God. Does an account of the church which is governed by the theology of God’s perfection inevitably underplay social and historical materiality, above all by rooting the ontology of the church in pretemporal election, and in the imparticipable person and work of the incarnate Son? Is not the inevitable result a “spiritualization” of the church, in which the church’s social form is extrinsic to its being and its public life is secularized or naturalized as just so much accumulated debris? And does this not lead to an overwhelming emphasis on the *passivity* of the church, segregated as it is from the acts of Christ, of which it is always and only a recipient? Does not the church then become simply a void created by the incursion into time of pure grace as an alien power? In short: what becomes of the church’s visibility?

II

We must be clear from the outset: the issue is not *whether* the church is visible, but rather, what *kind* of visible? Nothing of what has been said so far about the perfection of God, about election or about the unique efficacy and sufficiency of the person and work of Christ should be taken as a denial of the church’s visibility. What is required, however, is careful dogmatic specification of a notion of visibility, to ensure that it is demonstrably coherent with the Christian confession of God. This specification will entail (1) an account of the church’s visibility as “spiritual” visibility, and (2) an account of the acts of the church as attestations of the Word and work of God.

How is the visibility of the church to be conceived? First, the primary concern of this piece of Christian teaching is not with discriminating between true believers and hypocrites. Along with the corresponding notion of “invisibility,” the notion of visibility has often been used (especially in the Reformation tradition) to address the question of how to distinguish the church as the—invisible—community of believers from the—visible—church as a mixed body of saints and false professors. Thus Calvin: “Often ... the name ‘church’ designates the whole multitude of men spread over the whole earth who profess to worship one God and Christ.... In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance. There are very many ambitious, greedy, envious persons, evil speakers, and some of quite unclean life. Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought.”¹⁶ In the present context, however, I use *visible* in a different, though not unrelated, sense. The “visible” church is the “phenomenal” church—the church which has form, shape and endurance as a human undertaking, and which is present in the history of the world as a social project. The church is visible in the sense that, as genuine creaturely event and assembly, it does not occur in “no-space” and is not a purely eschatological polity or culture. It is what men and women do because of the gospel. The church is a human gathering; it engages in human activities (speech,

washing, eating and drinking); it has customs, texts, orders, procedures and possessions, like any other visible social entity. But how does it do and have these things? It does and has these things, and so it is what it is, by virtue of the work of the Holy Spirit. Only through the Holy Spirit's empowerment is the church a human assembly; and therefore only through the same Spirit is the church visible.

The Holy Spirit is the one who brings to completion the work of reconciliation by generating and sustaining its human correspondent; in this way, the Spirit perfects creatures so that they attain that for which they were created. The work of reconciliation is triune. It has its deep ground in the eternal purpose of the Father, who wills creatures for fellowship. This purpose is established by the Son, against all creaturely defiance and in mercy upon creaturely distress, overcoming alienation and reconciling us to God. The office of the Holy Spirit is then to apply to creatures the benefits of salvation, in the sense of making actual in creaturely time and space that for which creatures have been reconciled—fellowship with God and with one another. In perfecting creatures, sanctifying them so that they come to take the form purposed by the Father and achieved for them by the Son, the Spirit is, according to the credal confession, the “giver of life,” for creatures can only “have” life in relation to God who creates and defends life. But as the life-giver, the Spirit is also confessed as “Lord.” He perfects creatures through acts of transcendent freedom; he cannot be folded into creaturely causality as a kind of immanent life-force. Always he is *Spiritus creator*, renewing creaturely existence by the event of his coming, rather than simply being some sort of continuous substratum to created being. The Holy Spirit is the church's God.

This rooting of the doctrine of the church in the doctrine of the Spirit has one crucial effect. It ensures that the third element of the economy of salvation—the making real of reconciliation in human life and history—is as much a divine work as the first element (the Father's purpose) and the second (its accomplishment by the Son). In ecclesiology we are within the sphere of the perfection and sovereignty of God. There can be no sense in which, whilst God's first and second works are pure grace, his third work involves some kind of coordination of divine and creaturely elements. The history of the application within the creaturely realm of God's reconciling will and deed—that is, the history of the church—is the history of the new creation, the history of the resurrection of the dead. The reality out of which the church emerges, and in which alone it always stands, is: You he made alive. This sheer gratuity is fundamental to the church's being: it is what it is because in the Holy Spirit God has completed the circle of his electing and reconciling work, and consummated his purpose of gathering the church to himself. The church, therefore, is natural history only because it is spiritual history, history by the Spirit's grace. And so also for the church's visibility: it is through the Spirit's work alone that the church becomes visible, and its visibility is therefore a “special” or “spiritual visibility,” created by the Spirit and revealed by the Spirit.¹⁷

More closely described, the church's visibility has its center outside itself, in the ever-fresh coming of the Spirit. The “phenomenal” form of the church is therefore the phenomenal form of the *church* only in reference to the Spirit's self-gift. The phenomena of church life—words, rites, orders, history and the rest—do not automatically, as it were *ex opere operato*, constitute the communion of saints; rather, the church becomes what it is as the Spirit animates the forms so that they indicate the presence of God. This is not to fall into the trap famously identified by Cardinal Bellarmine—“they imagine two churches”: a visible casing to an inner “spiritual” reality. If visible phenomena are not in and of themselves the final truth of the church, that is not because they are phenomena and therefore unspiritual, secular, pure nature. It is rather because of the kind of phenomena that they are: they are indications of the presence of the Spirit who bears Christ to the church and the world and so fulfills the Father's purpose. And so if the phenomena of the church really are the church's visibility, this is not because they constitute a “true epiphany of God's reign in the flesh-and-blood community of the

faithful.”¹⁸ It is, rather, because through the Spirit they are consecrated, taken up into God’s service as the witnesses to his presence and act.

It is for this reason that knowledge of the church cannot be derived in a straightforward way by deduction from its visible phenomena and practices. Once again, this is not because “phenomena” in and of themselves somehow obscure the “real” internal work of the Spirit. It is, instead, because only through the Spirit’s agency are the phenomena to be grasped as phenomena of the *church*. The church is known as God is known, in the knowledge which comes from God’s self-communicative presence, of which the human coordinate is faith. Only in this spiritual knowledge is the church known and its phenomena seen as what they are. Faith does not, of course, perceive a different, “hidden,” set of phenomena, behind the natural-historical realities of the church’s visible acts. It sees those acts as what they are: attestations of God. “We need not . . . see the church with the eyes or touch it with the hands,” writes Calvin.¹⁹ Why? Not because behind dead nature there lurks the real, supernatural, invisible and intangible church. Indeed, it is only in the church’s visible human instrumentality, in the voice of its teachers, for example, that God chooses to be heard. Calvin is very far indeed from any principled separation of the sensible from the spiritual. Rather, the church is visible to the perception of faith, for it is to faith that the church steps out of the obscurity and indefiniteness of an historical phenomenon and becomes fully and properly visible as the creature of the Spirit. “[T]he fact that it belongs to the realm of faith should warn us to regard it no less since it passes our understanding than if it were already visible.”²⁰

The visibility of the church is thus spiritual event, spiritually discerned. This is not to espouse an ecclesiological occasionalism, as if the church lacks a durable identity and is simply a string of discreet moments in which the Spirit from above seizes dead forms and gives them temporary animation. That would be to deny that the Spirit really is promised and really is given to the church. But how promised and how given? Not in a way which is convertible into something immanent to the church or something which the church fills out or realizes in its action. The Spirit is promised and given as Lord and giver of life. And as Lord and giver of life he is other than the church, the one in whom the church has faith, to whom the church is obedient, and for the event of whose coming the church must pray, *Veni, Spiritus creator*.

To sum up, the church is visible through the work of the Holy Spirit. Its life and acts are the life and acts of the communion of the saints by virtue of the animating power of the invisible Spirit, and known as such by the revealing power of the invisible Spirit. Such an account of the church’s visibility attempts to govern itself according to the fundamental norm of ecclesiology, namely the perfection of God in his works toward the saints. This perfection is as true in pneumatology as elsewhere; the outpouring of the Spirit, his gracious descent upon the community, is not a breach of the Spirit’s integrity. But this norm does not assume a secularization of the church through a separation of inner from outer. It simply acknowledges that the Spirit’s life-giving and revelatory agency is fundamental to the church’s being, including its visibility in creaturely time and space. The church is and is visible because God the Holy Spirit is and acts.

III

If this is the way in which the church “takes up space on earth,” then what is to be said of the basic shape of the church’s action? What *kind* of visibility does the church have? The suggestion I wish to explore is that the active visibility of the church consists in attestations of the Word and work of the God who is its Creator, reconciler and consummator.²¹ In speaking of the acts of the church as acts of attestation or witness, we are trying to answer the question: what is the relation between the visible undertakings of the church and their ground in the perfect work of God? In view of the perfection of

God's grace, and in view of the special visibility which the church has on the basis of the fact that it exists in that grace, the notion of witness tries to express the permanently derivative character of the work of the church.

We may orient our explanation of this by returning to the doctrine of election. The church of Jesus Christ is a "chosen race" (1 Pet 2:9). It exists by virtue of the unshakably strong declaration of the Son in which the eternal resolve of the Father is realized: "You did not choose me; I chose you" (Jn 15:16). This being the case, the church is characterized by a particular dynamic or movement. This dynamic is its origin in the determination of God the Father, whose purpose is set forth in the Son and brought to human fruition in the work of the Holy Spirit. Its origin in the divine resolve is what gives the church its specific character, which is fundamentally not one of communion, still less one which is a form of practice, but rather a dynamic of *being chosen*. Divine election, as it unfurls in the economy of God's grace, must not be thought of simply as a background or preliminary reality, perhaps the church's ultimate ground or origin but not an operative factor in giving an account of what the church actually does. Quite the contrary: the dynamic of being chosen determines the modes of common life and activity in which the church is visible. Its forms of life, its principal activities—all the ways in which it disposes of itself in time and space—have to be such that they partake of a reference to the election of God.

A number of demarcations follow from this. First, if the visible life of the church does have this definite and specific dynamic, then a general phenomenology of sociality will not prove particularly serviceable in setting out a doctrine of the church. Some recent ecclesiology has been (alarmingly) relaxed at this point, making free use of social or ethical or cultural theory to frame an account of the church to which talk of divine action is then rather loosely attached. But election and its outworking in the mighty acts of God through which the saints are gathered is not patent of ethnographic or pragmatic description. That is not because the life of the saints is not visible, but because it is spiritually visible, and therefore can be described only by reference to the work of God. Second, the application of the language of "practice" is similarly restricted in a theology of the church, most of all because it can drift into immanentism, in which the doctrine of God threatens to become a function of the church. A representative account suggests that in an ecclesiology oriented to church practices, there is "*one single starting-point: in the Spirit, beginning with God's action and beginning with the Church and its practices are one beginning, in a unity in which the divine and the human are neither divided nor confused.*"²² But "Spirit" here becomes broadly identifiable with the acts of the church; the "without confusion" can carry no real weight if Spirit and church together constitute "one beginning"; and the referential objectivity of the church's acts is thereby in some measure threatened.²³ Third, even more directly theological language of the church's acts as epiphany, realization or mediation of the acts of God is not fully adequate to secure this reference. Such language certainly has a long tradition of usage across the confessions, and ought not to be discarded lightly. And it is genuinely theological, far from the easy pragmatic immanentism which can afflict some theologies of the visible church. Nevertheless it can unravel rather quickly (this often happens when it is used in the context of sacramental theology or the theology of ministerial order). Only with some real vigilance can it be used without some damage to the proper distinction between *opus Dei* and *opus hominum*. Otherwise, the purity and sufficiency of the work of God is in some measure broken down; divine agency, if not suspended, is at least relegated to background status and so in some measure inhibited.

What, by contrast, is involved in speaking of the church's acts as *attestations* of the Word and work of God? Testimony is astonished indication. Arrested by the wholly disorienting grace of God in Christ and the Spirit, the church simply *points*. It is not identical or continuous with that to which it bears witness, for otherwise its testimony would be self-testimony and therefore false. Nor is its testimony an action which effects that which it indicates; the witness of the church is an ostensive, not an effective,

sign; it indicates the inherent, achieved effectiveness which the object of testimony has in itself. Strictly subordinate to that which it is appointed and empowered to indicate, raised up not to participate in, extend or realize a reality which lies quite outside itself, the church lifts up its voice and says, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. As Barth says of John the Baptist (probably Barth's favorite biblical character): "for the very reason that he is a genuine witness. [He] only makes reference to another. He has no subsistence of his own. He is without importance of his own. He only functions as he bears witness of another and points away from himself to another."²⁴ Crucially, that to which the church's acts point is not something inert—locked in the past or in transcendence. The church points to the prevenient perfection of the triune God. It witnesses to God the Father's omnipotently effective purpose which in Jesus Christ has broken through the realm of deceit and opposition, which is now supremely real and limitlessly active in his risen presence, and which is unleashed with converting power in the Spirit of Christ. Of all this, the church is an attestation.

Developing a theology of the church's visible acts along these lines carries with it the considerable advantage of avoiding the transference of agency from God to the church. It ensures a conception of the church's action in which the work of God is not a reality awaiting completion, but a *perfectum* of unrestricted, self-realizing power. Yet this does not mean a reduction of the church to pure passivity, so that its only visible feature is emptiness, waiting upon the self-presenting Word of God. Attestation is human activity bent to the service of God. If the church takes with full seriousness that to which it bears witness, it is not indolent or irresponsible, precisely because the gospel is a summons. But it is a summons to act in particular ways which are shaped by the truth of the gospel. That means that the church is appointed to visible activity which is in accordance with the given fact that the world is the sphere in which the triune God's antecedent grace is wholly victorious and resplendent. To act in accordance with that given fact is, indeed, to *act*: think, speak, judge, assemble, celebrate, suffer, heal, share, bless. But such actions have no center in themselves, no pure spontaneity. They are acts that arise from trust and hope in the action of God in Christ now present through the Spirit. They are wholly defined by the basic statement which underlies and conditions all other statements about the church: the Holy One is in your midst. The church *is* by virtue of the being and acts of another; and its acts are enabled by and witness to the one to whom the church owes itself and toward whom it is an unceasing turning.

IV

The concrete forms of the church's attestation of the gospel are the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments. In Word and sacraments, the church sets forth the presence and activity of the living Jesus Christ. Word and sacrament are not "realizations" of Jesus Christ's work, for in the Holy Spirit he is self-realizing. They are, rather, a reference to his being and his work, a work which has been achieved with royal freedom and full effectiveness, and which now sets itself before the church in its converting effect. Word and sacrament are the church's visible acts which let God act.

Time does not permit anything like a full account of the theology of Word and sacrament, and I want to restrict myself to some theological remarks about the ministry of the Word in the church. I do so not to fall in with the sacramental minimalism which has attached itself to some bits of the evangelical tradition. Often espoused as a reaction to what is perceived to be lush sacramentalism, this minimalism is deeply disruptive of the church's exposure to the gospel, and all too often goes along with a dreary moralization of the Christian faith. Here I want to concentrate on Word for a couple of reasons. First, modern ecumenical ecclesiology has shown surprisingly little interest in the topic, and tends to have concentrated its energies elsewhere, on the sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and on the theology of ministerial order. An effect of this has been to promote a theology of the church in which the ministry of

the Word does not always play a determinative role in understanding the character of the church's action. Sacramental agency has usually been assumed to be paradigmatic of the church's action, and fundamental questions about the relation of God's work to the work of the church have commonly been approached by trying to sort out a number of issues in Eucharistic theology (a good example is discussion of the "sacrificial" character of the Eucharist as the quintessential ecclesial act). The result is that "Eucharistic ecclesiology" presents itself as self-evidently normative, and I hope to redress the balance a little. My second reason for focusing on the ministry of the Word is that evangelical ecclesiology has a serious dogmatic task to undertake in this matter. To speak of the church as the "community of the Word" involves a good deal more than routine affirmations of the authority of the Bible and the importance of preaching in the church. It rests upon some primary Christological affirmations, affirmations which effect a recharacterization of the church as the community which witnesses to the prevenient presence of the Word of God.

At the beginning of the apocalypse, John writes thus:

I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet... Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades." (Rev 1:10, 12-18)

What instruction might we receive here for our understanding of the church as the communion of saints which—like John the seer—bears witness to the Word of God (Rev 1:2)?

Jesus Christ is alive, gloriously and resplendently alive, because alive with the life of God. He is risen from the dead, and so he is neither inert nor absent, neither a piece of the past nor one who possesses himself in solitude and remoteness: he is majestically and spontaneously present. And this presence of his is communicative or revelatory, in a way which is wholly free, self-originating and authoritative: he presents himself in royal power and glory, and with axiomatic certainty. He is life and therefore presence. There is no creaturely initiative here; his self-communication is prior to any human seeking. The "loud voice" which John hears (Rev 1:10) is "behind" him, anterior to him; John "turns" (Rev 1:12) to the voice which is already addressing itself to him; the voice is not the voice of a creature but "the sound of many waters" (Rev 1:15); from the mouth of the speaker there issues no human speech but the "sharp two-edged sword" of divine judgment. To see and hear this one is to be utterly overwhelmed: "I fell at his feet as though dead" (Rev 1:17). But the Son of Man does not slay; he *speaks*. And as he speaks, he declares himself: "I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev 1:17-18). He declares himself to be present to all times and places, catholically real because infinitely alive, spreading abroad the knowledge of himself and of his own repleteness.

Why begin here? Because what John describes is the fundamental situation of the church which seeks to testify to the Word of God. The church is the assembly which is addressed by this Son of Man. The situation in which the church speaks is, therefore, not one in which the church is as it were called upon to fill a silence, or to take some initiative in order to communicate Jesus Christ. No, it is a situation in which this Son of Man, undefeated and alive, is in the church's midst (Rev 1:13), not on the periphery,

and is already lifting up his voice and making himself known. The church speaks, because it has been spoken to. Only because there is a word from this Son of Man—only, that is, because there is a Word of God—is there a word to be uttered by the church. And this word of the church is therefore nothing other than “witness to the Word of God” (Rev 1:2). In its word, the church does not activate, demonstrate or justify the Word which has already been spoken; it simply attests that Word in its inherent clarity and self-demonstration, announcing what has already been announced with kingly power.

This, then, is the fundamental dynamic of the Word in the church; this is what occurs when the church hears the announcement of the gospel in Holy Scripture and attests what it hears. For Jesus Christ, the church’s Lord, announces himself to the communion of saints in the canon of Holy Scripture. In the words of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ declares himself. The crucial factor here is Jesus Christ’s personal, nontransferable agency—that is, the fact that he *himself* declares himself. At his glorification to the Father’s right hand, Jesus Christ does not resign his office of self-communication, handing it over to the texts of Scripture which are henceforth in and of themselves his voice in the world. Rather, in the texts of Holy Scripture, the living One himself speaks: Scripture is his prophet and his apostle. Holy Scripture is “holy” because it is sanctified: that is, it is set apart by God for the service of his self-announcement. Scripture is the elect, consecrated auxiliary through which the living One walks among the churches and makes known his presence. For this reason, Scripture is a transcendent moment in the life of the church. Scripture is not the church’s book, something internal to the community’s discursive practices; what the church hears in Scripture is not its own voice. It is not a store of common meanings or a Christian cultural code—and if it engenders those things, it is only because Scripture is that in which Jesus Christ through the Spirit is pleased to utter the *viva vox Dei*. Consecrated by God for the purpose of Christ’s self-manifestation, Holy Scripture is always intrusive, in a deep sense *alien*, to the life of the church.

All this is to say that the church assembles around the revelatory self-presence of God in Christ through the Spirit, borne to the communion of saints by the writings of the prophets and apostles. This divine revelation is “isolated”²⁵—that is, it is a self-generating and self-completing event. God is known by God alone: this is central to a proper understanding of the church’s relation to Scripture. Scripture is not to be thought of as one element of a movement of revelation which is completed by the church’s acts of reception and interpretation. Scripture is not an initial stage of a process of divine communication which is only fully realized in the life of the church—whether that life be conceived through a theological notion of tradition or through hermeneutical notions such as readerly reception. Scripture bears witness to divine revelation in its perfection. It is for this reason that Holy Scripture is to be spoken of as possessing the properties of clarity and sufficiency. Both these ways of speaking of Scripture emphasize the completeness of Scripture, the fact that in Scripture the church encounters a fully achieved divine communication: in this sense, they are parallel to the sacramental notion of “real presence.” Of course, neither “real presence” nor scriptural clarity and sufficiency eliminate creaturely acts of reception. But they do reorder those creaturely acts. So when, therefore, the church “interprets” Scripture, it does not bestow upon Scripture a clarity which Scripture does not already possess, or bring about a completion of the event of revelation of which Scripture is only the precipitating occasion. Interpretation is not clarification or completion, but recognition, assent to the inherent clarity and adequacy of the prophetic and apostolic witness which bears to us the voice of the church’s Lord.

The effect of this is clearly a rather drastic revision of some habitual ways of thinking of the church’s relation to the Word. The Word is not *in* the church but announced *to* the church through Holy Scripture. The church is therefore not first and foremost a speaking but a hearing community. John the seer says that he turned to the voice that was speaking to him (Rev 1:12); and there are few more succinct statements of the primary dynamic of the Christian assembly. The church *is* that turning. And, further, in

making that movement, in fear and trembling, falling at the feet of the Son of Man, the church receives its appointment to a specific task: it is summoned to speech.

But what is the character of its speech? If Jesus Christ is the prophet of his own presence through the texts of the canon, then the speech of the church is an indication or attestation of what he himself says. The church's speech is a second—not a first—move, a responsive act whose aim is achieved when it draws attention, not to what it says itself, but to what it has heard. In concrete terms, this means that the primary public language of the church is the exegesis of Holy Scripture. Exegesis is the attempt to listen to the voice of the Son of Man who “walks among the seven golden lampstands,” to hear “the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword” (Rev 2:1, 12). Christian exegesis of Scripture is neither textual archaeology nor hermeneutical revitalization, because the canon is not a lumber-room of obscure historical data or religious meaning which needs to be unearthed by exegetical or interpretative skill. Both these approaches make the mistake of naturalizing Scripture by extracting it from its place in the communicative economy of Christ and Spirit. Christian exegesis is, properly, listening to the address of Christ in his prophets and apostles, and trying to indicate what has been heard of him through their testimonies. “[A] holy exposition doth give a setting out to the word of God, and bringeth forth much fruit to the Godly hearer,” says Bullinger in the *Decades*.²⁶ His term “setting out” catches exactly the way in which the church's public speech, rooted in its attention to the scriptural declaration, is an attestation of what has been spoken to the communion of saints. To “set out” the Word is not to attempt to extend, enlighten or otherwise improve upon what has been said, as if it required to be made more manifest by some ingenuity on the church's part. Rather, it is simply to let the Word stand as what it is, and therefore to be placed beneath its governance.

My suggestion, therefore, is that as the community of the Word the church will be characterized in all its speaking by a deference to Holy Scripture. Of that deference, the primary expression is the church's act of reading so that it may bear testimony to what has been announced. Deferential reading of the Word—listening to and “setting out” the words of Jesus Christ's apostles and prophets—is the paradigmatic instance of the church's activity as a community of attestation. This deference, it ought to be added, is not simply secured by a doctrine of scriptural authority. Such a doctrine is necessary, but it cannot be expected to bear the whole weight of the church's life in the Word of God. The church will demonstrate that it is a community of the Word not simply by formal affirmations about the nature of Holy Scripture, important though they are, but by setting itself beneath Holy Scripture as the law by which its mind and actions are ruled. The church's relation to Scripture cannot be settled once and for all by a theology of biblical authority and inspiration—and if we think that it can be so settled, we run the risk of arresting that movement in which the church has its being: that ceaseless turn to the voice of its Lord, and that echoing act of witness.

V

In closing, some summary thoughts on evangelical ecclesiology.

First, evangelicals need an ecclesiology, and the ecclesiology they need is an evangelical ecclesiology, for the gospel is ecclesial. But an ecclesiology has to be a good deal more than a set of inchoate instincts which grab hold of whatever bits of doctrine float in their direction. A properly evangelical ecclesiology has to take its place within the scope of doctrinal affirmations which spell out the Christian confession of God, Christ, the Spirit, election, reconciliation, sanctification and the rest. Evangelical Christianity is nowadays sometimes tempted to think that the remedy for its instinctive ecclesiological indifference or minimalism is to move upmarket. The evangelical tradition has latterly been alarmingly indiscriminating—in its very open attitude to socially immanent theories of atonement, for example, or in its enthusiasm for the concept of “relationality” as a theological panacea. But the

evangelical tradition surely has more to offer to catholic Christianity than a soft-focus version of the contemporary ecclesiological consensus. Is it too much to hope that the evangelical tradition will dig a little deeper into the theology of grace? Barth warned Roman Catholics around the time of Vatican II to beware lest they became liberal Protestants; my worry is that evangelicals will become catholicized Protestants who make the mistake of thinking that the only ecclesiological improvement upon individualism and “soul liberty” is a rather ill-digested theology of the *totus Christus*.

Second, in the present unreconciled state of the churches, evangelicals need to offer what they have received from their own traditions to the wider fellowship of the saints. They must do so without stridency or anxiety, with humble confidence and generosity, with attentiveness and a teachable bearing toward those from whom they find themselves separated by reason of confession. But these things can only happen if evangelicals take the time to reacquaint themselves with the deep exegetical and dogmatic foundations of the traditions to which they belong; and, more important still, they can only happen if evangelicals demonstrate the supreme ecumenical virtue of acknowledging that we also need to change. This, at least, the churches in the Reformation tradition ought to know—*ecclesia reformanda, quia reformata*: having been reformed, the church still needs to be reformed.

Third, ecclesiology is secondary. The life of the fellowship of the saints comes first, because it is in that fellowship that we keep company with God. The renewal of the fellowship of the church is not a matter for dogmatics, but for the invocation of the church’s God. And that is why we may fittingly close with this prayer: “Almighty God, we beseech thee graciously to behold this thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ was contented to be betrayed, and given up into the hands of wicked men, and to suffer death upon the cross, who now liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end.”

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), p. 225.

² On recent developments, see M. Tanner, “The Goal of Unity in Theological Dialogues involving Anglicans,” in *Einheit der Kirche*, ed. Günther Gassmann and Peder Nørgaard-Højen (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck 1988), pp. 69–78; idem, “The Ecumenical Future,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes et al. (London: SPCK, 1998), pp. 427–46; M. Root, “‘Reconciled Diversity’ and the Visible Church,” in *Community, Unity, Communion*, ed. Colin Podmore (London: Church House 1998), pp. 237–51. From the earlier literature, see the notable essay by Max Thurian, “Visible Unity of Christians,” in *Visible Unity and Tradition*, trans. W. J. Kerrigan (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964), pp. 1–49.

³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, pp. 110–15, 225–52; both sections have the same title, “The Visible Church-Community.”

⁴ For background, see David Yeago, “The Church as Polity?”

⁵ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 113.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

¹¹ See chapter four, note 6 of this volume, and Bruce Marshall, *Trinity and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² See Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and*

Responsibility (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999).

¹³ James Buckley and David Yeago, eds., “Introduction: A Catholic and Evangelical Theology?” in *Knowing the Triune God*, p. 8.

¹⁴ See, for example, N. Healy, “The Logic of Karl Barth’s Ecclesiology,” *Modern Theology* 10 (1994): 253–70; J. Mangina, “‘Bearing the Marks of Jesus’: The Church in the Economy of Salvation in Barth and Hauerwas,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52 (1999): 269–305; idem, “The Stranger as Sacrament: Karl Barth and the Ethics of Ecclesial Practice,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999): 322–39; Reinhard Hütter, *Evangelische Ethik als kirchliche Zeugnis* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993); idem, “Karl Barth’s ‘Dialectical Catholicism’: *Sic et Non*,” *Modern Theology* 16 (2000): 137–58; James Buckley, “Christian community, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 195–211; Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001); John Yocum, *Ecclesial Mediation in Karl Barth* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2004).

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), p. 245.

¹⁶ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.7.

¹⁷ See here Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, pp. 656–58; 4/2, p. 619; 4/3, p. 726.

¹⁸ Yeago, “The Church as Polity?” p. 229.

¹⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.1.3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ On the ecclesiological primacy of witness, see *Church Dogmatics* 4/3, pp. 843ff.; Karl Barth, “The Christian as Witness,” in *God in Action* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), pp. 94–118; Christoph Schwöbel, “Kirche als Communio,” in *Gott in Beziehung: Studien zur Dogmatik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002); idem, “The Creature of the Word,” in *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community*, ed. Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989). See also T. F. Torrance’s deployment of the somewhat similar notion of “hypodeigma,” in *Royal Priesthood: A Theology of Ordained Ministry* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp. 94–97—though Torrance envisages a good deal more continuity between divine and human action than I am suggesting here.

²² Buckley and Yeago, eds., “Introduction: A Catholic and Evangelical Theology?” pp. 17–18.

²³ See here N. Healy, “Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003): 287–308.

²⁴ Barth, “The Christian as Witness,” p. 107.

²⁵ The word is Barth’s, from *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions*, pp. 48–49, 56.

²⁶ H. Bullinger, *Decades I and II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), p. 72.

Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier, *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 96–113.