

# Sign of the advent : from the ecclesia invisibilis to the visible spiritual community

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# Sign of the Advent

## From the *ecclesia invisibilis* to the Visible Spiritual Community<sup>1</sup>

Gottfried Wilhelm Locher

### 1 The Notion of the *ecclesia invisibilis*

#### 1.1 The Church on Its Way to Itself

“In the thought of the Reformation theologians, Lutheran and Reformed alike [...] the concept of the church moves within an ellipse of which the foci are heavenly perfection and human imperfection.”<sup>2</sup> Protestant ecclesiology, one could argue, is essentially a *dynamic* enterprise, because its topic is a Church in motion. The *sanctorum communio* will always be more than what meets the human eye. As a communion, it necessarily moves through time and space, uniting men and women *in their earthly lives*. As a communion *of saints*, however, its ultimate destination lies outside the boundaries of our world. Therefore, the Church as we see it is on its way to itself.

The sixteenth-century Reformers revived and advanced Augustin’s explanation of the two-dimensional Church.<sup>3</sup> Drawing a distinction between what Luther, somewhat misleadingly, calls the “two churches”<sup>4</sup>, they conceive of the one as being *visible* or *external* and of the other as being *invisible* or *internal*. At the heart of this “old scheme”<sup>5</sup> lies the obvious and painful difference between the church we see and the Church<sup>6</sup> we believe

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on GOTTFRIED WILHELM LOCHER, Sign of the Advent. A Study in Protestant Ecclesiology, Fribourg/Switzerland 2004 (= ÖBFZPhTh, 45).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. JOHN T. MCNEILL, The Church in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology, in: RICHARD C. GAMBLE (ed.), Calvin’s Ecclesiology: Sacraments and Deacons, New York–London 1992 (= Calvin and Calvinism, 10), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Augustine’s distinction between *communio sacramentorum* and *societas sanctorum* (see YVES CONGAR’s table in: Œuvres de Saint Augustin 28 [BAug], Paris 1963, 98-99); *invisibilis compago* (De bapt. III,19,26); *corpus permixtum* (De doctr. III,32,45).

<sup>4</sup> If not otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

<sup>5</sup> OTTO ZÄNKER, Credo ecclesiam, [place of publication unknown] 1930, 74.

<sup>6</sup> For the purpose of this study, the “Church” will be differentiated from the “church” or even the “churches”. The former stands for the *essence* of the Church

(in). The distinction between visible appearance and invisible essence of the Church integrates this reality of Christian life into a coherent ecclesiological setting. It allows the Reformers to maintain that no manifestation of churchdom shall, under the conditions of this world, ever become identical with the *ecclesia una et sancta* we confess in the Creed.

## 1.2 Church in Duality

However, we must immediately focus on the weight Reformation theology puts on the mutual dependence of internal and external dimensions of the church. The visible Church is *not* distinct in essence from the *ecclesia invisibilis*. Rather, they are both dimensions of the *one* Church of the Creed, explaining the *sanctorum communio* in different perspectives of its existence. They can neither exist radically separated nor strictly limited to their own context, because they are *essentially* intertwined, affecting each other. The *ecclesia invisibilis* may therefore by no means be seen as an antipode to the visibly realised church, but rather as the reflection of its essence under historical conditions. Existing both in a visible and an invisible dimension at the same time, it is the *Church in Duality*. The Church in Duality is *the precise opposite of an alleged dualistic Church*, to which the Reformers were, like Augustine before them,<sup>7</sup> fundamentally opposed and which they so vehemently sought to refute.

The concept of the Church in Duality is widely acknowledged by sixteenth-century Reformers. It ought to be seen against the background of the historical circumstances that prompted Protestant theologians to come up with an ecclesiological alternative to claims both from the right and from the left.<sup>8</sup> First and foremost, they were concerned with the visible and

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which, depending on the ecclesiological context in which it appears, may either include both its visible and invisible dimensions or just the *ecclesia invisibilis*. The latter, however, refers to congregations and churches as they emerge into historical visibility. Note that quotations may not agree with this convention, and that it is not in every case indisputable.

<sup>7</sup> On Augustine's definition of the one Church existing in two dimensions see ALFRED SCHINDLER, Art. «Augustin/Augustinismus I», in: TRE, vol. 4, Berlin–New York 1979, 645–698, here 676–680, who denies any form of structural *dualism* in Augustine's ecclesiology. (Schindler uses the term “Dualität” in the sense of *dualism* and thus contrarily to what is termed *duality* in this study.)

<sup>8</sup> Melancthon's one-dimensional Church, possibly the most elaborate ecclesiological alternative within the context of sixteenth-century Protestant ecclesiology, will be discussed in Part One of this study.

lasting reformation of a Church, which, in their view, was jeopardised both by Romanist and Anabaptist heresy. “The Reformers find themselves jointly fighting against both the Roman and the Enthusiast perception of the church. It is on the background of this war on two fronts that they developed their doctrine of the church in delimitation of the heresies on the right as well as on the left.”<sup>9</sup>

However essential the notion of the invisible Church may be, its nature cannot be understood without some form of structural feedback to visibly realized Christianity. On these grounds, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and the younger Melancthon stand united in their recognition and application of the Church in Duality as an ecclesiological paradigm. It has been a feature of Lutheran and Reformed ecclesiology ever since.

### *Church in Duality – a Paradigm in Reformation Ecclesiology*

Clearly, the notion of the two-dimensional Church is more of a paradigmatic framework than a homogeneous conception. Reacting to the specific circumstances they find themselves in, the Reformers develop their own individual versions whose terms and connotations vary. But as a paradigm, the concept of the Church in Duality can be found in many a Reformer’s ecclesiology set out to bridge the gap between Roman Catholicism on the one hand and anti-institutional enthusiasm on the other. I shall exemplify this claim by briefly outlining what might be the most prominent instance of the concept of the Church in Duality: Martin Luther’s understanding of the church as a creature of the divine Word.<sup>10</sup>

### **1.3 Martin Luther: *creatura verbi divini*. Spiritual Community With a Physical Dimension**

Are Luther’s “zwo Kirchen” (“two churches”) to be understood as *essentially* different entities? Luther differentiates between the external (or perceptible) church and the internal church known exclusively to believers.

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<sup>9</sup> HEINRICH QUISTORP, «Sichtbare und unsichtbare Kirche bei Calvin», in: *EvTh* 9 (1949/50) 83–101, here 83. Cf. also ULRICH KÜHN, *Kirche*, Gütersloh 1980, 72 (= HST, 10).

<sup>10</sup> There are others, like Calvin’s association of predestination and ecclesiology, or Zwingli’s emphasis on the local parish as the only biblically founded form of the true church. Cf. LOCHER, *Sign* (fn. 1), 52–135.

Up to the present day, no other Reformation theologian has provoked such intensive analysis of his understanding of the Church in Duality.<sup>11</sup> The principal question remains: How can we convincingly hold those “two churches”, apparently being such different entities, together as the one Church of the Creed?

“The first one [the first dimension of the Church], which is natural, basic, essential and true, we shall call a spiritual, internal Christendom; the other, which is constructed and external, we shall call a physical, external Christendom, not in order to separate them from each other, but rather as if I were speaking of a man whom I call spiritual when referring to his soul and physical when referring to his body.”<sup>12</sup>

### *The Word: Origin of the Church*

Luther’s confrontation with Rome led him to a “concentrated re-assessment of the spiritual essence of the Church”<sup>13</sup>. The work of the Holy Spirit and the fact that it “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3,8) is fundamental to Luther’s understanding of the Church.<sup>14</sup> Being a creature of God, the Church cannot come into being nor can it exist without God’s creative Word.<sup>15</sup> It is both God’s will and his promise to act by means of his Word.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> An overview of recent studies of Luther’s ecclesiology can be found in GUDRUN NEEBE, *Apostolische Kirche. Grundunterscheidungen an Luthers Kirchenbegriff unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner Lehre von den notae ecclesiae*, Berlin 1997, 20–31 (= TBT, 82).

<sup>12</sup> Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig (1520), WA 6, 296,37–297,2: «Die erste, die naturlich, grundtlich, wesentlich unnd warhafftig ist, wollen wir heyssen ein geystliche, ynnerliche Christenheit, die andere, die gemacht und eusserlich ist, wollen wir heyssen ein leypliche, euszerlich Christenheit, nit das wir sie vonn einander scheydenn wollen, sondern zu gleich als wen ich von einem menschen rede und yhn nach der seelen ein geistlichen, nach dem leyp ein leyplichen menschen nenne...»

<sup>13</sup> KÜHN, *Kirche* (fn. 9), 37.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. WA [= MARTIN LUTHER, *Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1883 ff] 18, 695,30; WA 29 I, 369,1 ff. Cf. WERNER ELERT, «Das Dogma von der Kirche», in: *Morphologie des Luthertums*, vol. 1, München 1931, 224–240.249.

<sup>15</sup> *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium* (1520), WA 6, 560,33–561,1: “Ecclesia enim nascitur verbo promissionis per fidem [...] Verbum dei enim supra Ecclesiam est incomparabiliter, in quo nihil statuere, ordinare, facere, sed tantum statui, ordinari, fieri habet, tanquam creatura.”

<sup>16</sup> Dass eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeinde Recht und Macht habe... (1523), WA 11, 408,12–16: «Des haben wyr gewisse verheyssung gottis Jsaia.55.

Luther emphasises the fact that God has bound the acting of the Spirit to the Word, either preached or administered in the sacraments: “Even if Christ were given for us and crucified a thousand times, it would all be in vain if the Word of God were absent and were not distributed and given to me with the bidding, this is for you, take what is yours.”<sup>17</sup> Where the Word is, there surely must be the Church,<sup>18</sup> and where it is lacking the Church cannot exist.<sup>19</sup> The Word is therefore constitutive for both essence and appearance of the Church. The Church is *creatura verbi divini*.

### *Word of God: Internal and External*

The Word of God is fundamentally an entity embracing two dimensions, i.e. an internal and an external dimension.<sup>20</sup> The internal dimension is the word understood, in a narrow sense, as the substance of God’s communication, whereas the external dimension consists of the biblical text as well as the preacher’s words. The latter is equally indispensable because God’s Spirit will only give faith to men through the external word (and sacra-

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“Meyn wort (spricht Gott), das aus meynem mund gehet, soll nicht leer widder tzu myr komen, sondern wie der regen vom hymel auff erden fellet und macht sie fruchtbar, also soll meyn wort auch alles ausrichten, datzu ichs auss sende.»

<sup>17</sup> WA 40, 212f.

<sup>18</sup> Predigt über 1 Kor 1,4–9 (1536), WA 22, 309,29–31: «[...] wo das Wort bleibt, da bleibt gewislich auch die Kirche, Denn wo die lere rein ist, da kan man die Tauffe, Sacrament, Absolutio, Zehen Gebot, Vater unser, gute werck, alle stende und alles rein erhalten». Dass eine christliche Versammlung oder Gemeinde Recht und Macht habe... (1523), WA 11, 408,16–20: «Da her sind wyr sicher, das unmöglich ist, das nicht Christen seyn sollten, da das Euangelion gehet, wie wenig yhr ymer sey und wie sundlich un geprechlich sie auch seyn, gleich wie es unmöglich ist, das da Christen und nicht eyttel heyden seyn sollten, da das Euangelion nicht gehet [...]»

<sup>19</sup> Wider Hans Worst (1541), WA 51, 518,24–26: «[...] denn allein das gewisse, rein und einig Gottes wort gepredigt werden. Wo das feilet, so ists nicht mehr die Kirche, sondern des Teufels Schule.»

<sup>20</sup> Cf. HEINRICH BORNKAMM, «Das Wort Gottes bei Luther» (1933), in: Luther. Gestalt und Wirkungen. Gesammelte Aufsätze, Gütersloh 1975, 147–186; RUDOLF HERMANN, Von der Klarheit der Heiligen Schrift (1958), in: Studien zur Theologie Luthers und des Luthertums (ed. Horst Beintker), Göttingen 1981, 170–255; PAUL ALTHAUS, Die Theologie Martin Luthers, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (1962), Gütersloh 1983, 42–56; CHRISTOPH SCHWÖBEL, “The Creature of the Word. Recovering the Ecclesiology of the Reformers”, in: COLIN C. GUNTON, C./DANIEL W. HARDY (ed.), On Being the Church. Essays on the Christian Community, Edinburgh 1989, 110–155, here 122–126; NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11), 186–192.

ment).<sup>21</sup> Both the internal and the external word are to be seen as two aspects of the one Word of God in a two-dimensional context. This two-dimensional Word creates and maintains the Church. “Because the Holy Spirit uses the external word as an effective device [Wirkmittel] to cause faith, it transforms into the internal word. Hence, the internal word is nothing else than the external word which has been confirmed by the Spirit to be trustworthy, saving [heilschaffend] and certain [tragfähig].”<sup>22</sup>

God has bound the acting of the Spirit to the Word in its internal and external dimensions. Employing the external word (preaching and the use of sacraments), he initiates faith *within the hearts* of believers, thus acting internally by using external means.<sup>23</sup> The Holy Spirit creates the Church through preaching of the word and the use of sacraments.<sup>24</sup>

In accordance with the two dimensions of the Word and with the dual activity of the Spirit, the Church itself is two-dimensional. The internal word creates faith, thereby constituting a spiritual *communio*, whereas the external word unites believers in a physical congregation.<sup>25</sup> Both the spiritual and the physical dimension of the Church are created by the Spirit through the Word.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. WA 18, 136. In addition to the distinction between internal and external word, Luther uses the term *verbum* either as another expression for the preaching of the word, or as a generic term for the unity of preaching and sacraments (*verbum invisibile et verbum visibile*). Luther’s understanding of *verbum* cannot always clearly be defined in a specific context; cf. NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11), 187.

<sup>22</sup> NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11), 186.

<sup>23</sup> Vom Abendmahl Christi. Bekenntnis (1528), WA 26,506,4–12.

<sup>24</sup> SCHWÖBEL, Church (fn. 20), 123: “Scripture is (externally) clear insofar as it unambiguously witnesses God’s revelation in Christ as the revelation of God’s true relationship to his creation. The internal clarity of Scripture refers to the ‘teaching of the Spirit in the heart’ whereby God authenticates the truth of his revelation in Christ witnessed by the external clarity of Scripture as the personal certainty for the believer. Where the external word of Scripture is authenticated by the internal testimony of the Spirit, it becomes God’s word, *viva vox dei*. The word makes faith, the unconditional trust in God the creator, redeemer and saviour, possible. And this faith is the only adequate response to the word of God which constitutes the Church by making this response possible.”

<sup>25</sup> According to SCHWÖBEL, Church (fn. 20), 123, Luther distinguishes between the creation of the Church, which is the result of God’s actions, and human faith, which is not created, but only made possible by God. NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11), 188, maintains that Luther regards both the believer’s faith and the Church as God’s creatures. Either interpretation agrees on the fact that the Spirit is the unique *source* of faith among men.

### *The Spirit Alone Creates the Church*

Luther emphasises that no one can create and maintain the Church apart from the Spirit, who is free to constitute the Church where and when he wishes.<sup>26</sup> External matter is irrelevant to the constitution of the Church, for the *essence* of the Church is *purely* spiritual, even though it appears on earth in its physical dimension.<sup>27</sup> As the Church is *spiritual*, i.e. created by the Spirit through the Word, no other authority can make or govern it.

Luther therefore sharply distinguishes between the creative power of the Spirit and the created physical community, in other words between “what makes Church possible” and “what is made possible in the Church”<sup>28</sup>. The Church is not the source of the Word, rather the Word is the basis on which the Church is built.<sup>29</sup> For this reason, believers are neither in a position to accept each other into the spiritual community, nor can they exclude each other from communion in Christ. Christians may only expel *themselves* from the community of grace, life and salvation through their own unbelief and sin.<sup>30</sup>

### *The True Church Is Essentially Concealed*

This brief outline sets the theological framework of Luther’s ecclesiology. The next step the Reformer takes is the one at the heart of our topic. Be-

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<sup>26</sup> Auf das überchristlich usw. Buch Bock Emsers zu Leipzig Antwort (1521), WA 7, 684,20f.: «Also beschliess ich, das die Christliche kirche sey nit an yrgend eyne statt, person odder zeytt gehafftet [...]»

<sup>27</sup> Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig (1520), WA 6, 297,7–11: «[...] die natürlich, eygentlich, rechte, wesentliche Christenheit stehe im geiste, unnd in keinem eusserlichenn ding, wie das mag genennet werden. Dan alle ander ding mag haben ein unchristen, die yhn auch nymmer mehr einen Christenn machen, ausgenommen den rechten glaubenn, der allein Christen macht.»

<sup>28</sup> SCHWÖBEL, Church (fn. 20), 127.

<sup>29</sup> Vom Missbrauch der Messen (1521), WA 8, 491: «Die Kirche macht nicht das Wort, sondern sie wird von dem Wort.»

<sup>30</sup> Ein Sermon von dem Bann (1520), WA 6, 64,6–13: «Disse gemeynschafft mag wider geben noch nehmen yrgent eyn mensch [...], ssondern alleyn gott selb durch seynen heyligen geyst muss die eyngissen ynss hertz des menschen, der do glaubt ynn das sacrament, wie ym sermon gesagt ist. Also mag auch hieher keyn ban reychen noch seyn, dan alleyn der unglaub odder sund des menschen selb, der mag sich selb da mit vorbannen und also von der gemeynschafft gnaden, leben und selickeyt absondern.»



cause Luther now explicitly identifies what he calls the true Church with only one of its dimensions, i.e. the internal one. He underlines that the communion of Saints<sup>31</sup> is a community that is “hidden, invisible and spiritual”<sup>32</sup> and which can neither be sensed nor located.<sup>33</sup> Whatever we can make out as a historical appearance of the Church is merely a “physical, visible, external sign”<sup>34</sup> of the communion in Christ.

And Luther gives a detailed explanation of why the spiritual community is hidden. Five motives for the postulate of the *ecclesia invisibilis* can be made out across Luther’s ecclesiological comments:

1. In his first major ecclesiological study, Luther claims that the true Church is hidden because it is not *essentially* a physical assembly. Rather, it is by nature a “*congregation of hearts*”,<sup>35</sup> united in the one faith and as such hidden from human recognition. It is not a physical gathering of all believers, because all members of the physical congregation cannot possibly come together in one place.<sup>36</sup> The unity of the Church must therefore be an invisible quality. No matter how far its members may live from each other, the spiritual community is always *one*, united in the one faith, hope and love.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Von den Konziliis und Kirchen (1539), WA 50, 624,16–18: «Da deutet der klerlich, was die kirche sey, nemlich eine gemeinschaft der Heiligen, das ist, ein hauffe oder samlung solcher Leute, die Christen und heilig sind, das heisst ein Christlicher heiliger hauffe oder Kirchen [...]»

<sup>32</sup> Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften (1519), WA 2, 752,36–38: «Derhalben es auch nutz und nott ist, das die lieb und gemeynschafft Christi unnd aller heyligen vorborgen, unsichtlich und geystlich gescheh, und nur eyn leylich, sichtlich, eusserlich zeychen derselben unss geben werde [...]»

<sup>33</sup> Auf das überchristlich usw. Buch Bock Emsers zu Leipzig Antwort (1521), WA 7, 684, 29f.: «[...] das die heylige Christliche kirch niemant sehen kan noch fulen, mag auch nit sagen “sich, hie odder da ist sie”»

<sup>34</sup> Ein Sermon von dem hochwürdigen Sakrament des heiligen wahren Leichnams Christi und von den Brüderschaften (1519), WA 2, 752,36–38: «Derhalben es auch nutz und nott ist, das die lieb und gemeynschafft Christi unnd aller heyligen vorborgen, unsichtlich und geystlich gescheh, und nur eyn leylich, sichtlich, eusserlich zeychen derselben unss geben werde [...]»

<sup>35</sup> Von dem Papsttum zu Rom wider den hochberühmten Romanisten zu Leipzig (1520), WA 6, 293,3f.: «also das der Christenheyt wesen, leben und natur sey nit leylich vorsamlung, sondern ein vorsamlung der hertzen in einem glauben...»

<sup>36</sup> WA 2, 743,27–744,1; 748,6–18.

<sup>37</sup> WA 6, 292,37–293,3.

The Holy Spirit gathers men into a spiritual unity of believers,<sup>38</sup> and such a gathering may take place in the form of a visible meeting. Yet, its unity can never be constituted in a physical manner, as it is entirely free of earthly constraints. The Church is neither bound to specific locations nor to any particular ecclesiastic structure.<sup>39</sup> Believers become part of the spiritual community because they participate according to their nature as “souls“ *in faith* rather than in the form of physical “bodies”.<sup>40</sup> Luther rejects all attempts of transforming such spiritual unity into any form of implementation by human beings, claiming that there was no biblical evidence for locating the spiritual community in physical terms.<sup>41</sup>

2. The Church cannot be seen because it is *believed*; it is an “article of faith”<sup>42</sup> rather than a product of knowledge, and therefore it evades human perception. According to Luther, it is in the nature of articles of faith that they cannot be seen. Vice versa, whatever becomes visible cannot be included in the Creed.<sup>43</sup> Faith is exclusively concerned with matters escaping the human senses.<sup>44</sup>

Consequently, whatever form visible churchdom appears in, it cannot possibly be the objective and goal of our faith (making it impossible to assign credal status to the believer’s membership in the Church of

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<sup>38</sup> Luther uses the word “Einigkeit” (union, unity, concord), emphasising the oneness of the church. Cf. NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11) 42, fn. 31 on the linguistic implications of the term.

<sup>39</sup> WA 2, 19,37–20,6: «Non quod novam monarchiam nostri saeculi Romanorum damnem aut negem, sed quod vim scripturae verbis fieri nolim et insulsissimorum quorundam hominum stulticiam reprobem, qui nobis Ecclesiam Christi tempori et loco affixerunt contra verbum Christi dicentis: Non veniet regnum dei cum observatione, et Christianum esse posse audent negare, qui non sub Romano Pontifice decretisque oppressus fuerit.»

<sup>40</sup> Von dem Papsttum zu Rom... (1520), WA 6, 295,12–14: «Weytter folget, das, wie der mensch ist von zweyen naturen, leyp und seel, also wirt er nit nach dem leibe gerechnet ein glidmasz der Christenheit, sondern nach der seelen, ja nach dem glauben.»

<sup>41</sup> WA 7, 684,1 f.

<sup>42</sup> WA 50, 626,18.

<sup>43</sup> WA 7, 684,30–32: «Dann was man glaubt, das sihet odder pfindt man nit, [...] Widerumb, was man aber sihett oder empfind, das glaubt man nit.»

<sup>44</sup> WA 6, 300,37f.: «Dan was man gleubt, das ist nit leyplich noch sichtlich [...]»; cf. Hebr 11,1. *Ad librum eximii Magistri Nostri Magistri Ambrosii Catharini...* (1521), WA 7, 710,1–3.

Rome).<sup>45</sup> The holy Church is neither here nor there. It neither owes its creation to the creative skills of certain individuals, nor is it dependent on the leadership of a pope.<sup>46</sup> The community of saints is invisible, because it is not built on earthly foundations. Luther warns Christians not to believe in temporal matters such as human societies. Instead, they ought to put all their faith in the invisible spiritual community, as all earthly and temporal things will inevitably vanish.<sup>47</sup>

3. The Church is not visible because it is obscured by sorrow and torment.<sup>48</sup> Due to historical circumstances, the Church is hindered from gloriously revealing itself to the world. Instead, it mirrors the way in which Christ remained concealed from public recognition. “As the body of Christ, the Church represents his humanitas. It reflects the weakness and suffering of his historical body [...]”<sup>49</sup> Much like its

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<sup>45</sup> «Niemand spricht also: Ich gläub an den hl. Geist, eine heilige, römische Kirche, ein Gemeinschaft der Römer; auf dass es klar sei, dass die hl. Kirche nit an Rom gebunden, sondern so weit die Welt ist, in einem Glauben versammelt, geistlich und nit leiblich. Die äusserlich römische Kirche sehen wir alle; drum mag sie nit sein die rechte Kirche, die gegläubt wird, welche ist eine Gemeinde oder Sammlung der Heiligen im Glauben: Aber niemand sieht, wer heilig oder gläubig sei [...]»; Clemen ed., vol. II, 325.

<sup>46</sup> WA 7, 683ff.: «Alle Christen in der Welt beten also: “Ich glaub in den heiligen Geist, ein heilige christlich Kirche, Gemeinschaft der Heiligen”. Ist der Artikel wahr, so folget draus, dass die heilige christliche Kirch niemand sehen kann noch fühlen, mag auch nit sagen: “Sieh, hie oder da ist sie”. Dann was man glaubt, das siehet oder empfind’t man nit. [...] Nu halt sie gegenander, die heilige Kirche Christi und die tolle Kirche des Bapsts. Die heilige Kirche Christi spricht also: “Ich glaube ein heilige christliche Kirche”. Die tolle Kirch des Bapsts spricht also: “Ich sehe ein heilige christliche Kirche”. Jene spricht: “Die Kirche ist weder hie noch da”. Diese spricht: “Die Kirche ist hie und da”. Jene spricht: “Die Kirche liegt an keiner Person”. Diese spricht: “Die Kirche liegt am Bapst”. Jene spricht: “Die Kirche ist nit auf ein zeitlich Ding gepauet”. Diese spricht: “Die Kirche ist auf den Bapst gepauen”.»

<sup>47</sup> WA 2, 752,38–753,8: «[...] dan wo die selben lieb, gemeynschafft und beystand offentlich were, wie der menschen zeytlich gemeynschafft, sso wurden wir da durch nit gesterckt noch geubt, yn die unsichtlichen und ewigen guter zu trawen odder yhr zu begeren, sondern wurden vill mehr geubt, nur yn zeytlich sichtliche guter zu trawen [...] Dan es muss alles tzeytlich und empfindlich dingk abfallen und wir yhr gantz entwonen, sollen wir zu gott kummen.»

<sup>48</sup> WA 7, 684,9f.: «Die Christliche kirche mag nit on marter, vorfolgung und sterben, ja auch on sund sein [...]»

<sup>49</sup> WILHELM MAURER, «Luthers Anschauungen über die Kontinuität», in: *Kirche und Geschichte. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, vol. 1: Luther und das evangelische Bekenntnis, Göttingen 1970, 76–102, here 87.

master, the Church has to accept its cross and fight against the false church and against the devil. Already in his early *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513–1516), Luther's first lecture on the Psalms, he claims that the Church must seek conformity with Christ in suffering,<sup>50</sup> a conviction which remains important in Luther's ecclesiology in later years.<sup>51</sup> Life under persecution and sorrow is essential for the true Church, even if this implies the provisional concealment of the *ecclesia triumphans*.

4. The Church remains hidden because it is covered by weakness and sin, even though it is sanctified through God's Word.<sup>52</sup> Luther seems to assume that God has willed that the spiritual community should not be allowed to shine in glory. The Lord hides his Church behind a variety of defects and shortcomings, thereby bringing misjudgements upon it.<sup>53</sup> The true Church is not visible because its appearance is inundated by infirmity, sin and errors. Its holiness cannot be seen.<sup>54</sup>

In later years, Luther blames the devil's evil actions for causing the concealment of the glorious Church.<sup>55</sup> He fears that the devil has been

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<sup>50</sup> WA 3, 565, 26–31.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. WA 50, 642,1–4: «[...] das es mus alles unglueck und verfolgung, allerley anfechtung und ubel [...] vom Teufel, welt und fleisch, jnwendig trauren, bloede sein, erschrecken, auswendig arm, veracht, kranck, schwach sein, leiden, damit es seinem Heubt Christo gleich werde.»

<sup>52</sup> *De instituendis ministris Ecclesiae* (1523), WA 12, 194–195: «Ecclesia enim etsi infirma est in peccatis, impia tamen non est in verbo, peccat quidem, sed verbum neque negat neque ignorat.»

<sup>53</sup> Vorrede auf die Offenbarung S. Johannes (1530), WA DB 7, 420,1–3: «[...] so kan sie Gott auch mit gebrechen und allerley mangel verbergen, das du must druober zum narren werden, und ein falsch urteil über sie fassen.»

<sup>54</sup> *In epistolam S. Pauli ad Galatas...* (1535), Walch ed., vol IX, 702: «Deshalb bekennen wir im heiligen christlichen Glauben mit Recht, dass wir eine *heilige* Kirche glauben. Denn sie ist unsichtbar, wohnt im Geiste an einem Orte, da niemand zukommen kann, darum kann ihre Heiligkeit nicht gesehen werden. Denn GOTT hat sie so verborgen und überschüttet mit Gebrechen, Sünden und Irrthümern, mit verschiedenen Gestalten des Kreuzes und Aergernissen, dass sie, was das Fühlen anbelangt, nie zu Tage kommt. [...] Wir aber lehren so: die Kirche habe keinen Flecken noch Runzel, sondern sei heilig, doch durch den Glauben an JESUM Christum; sodann im Leben dadurch, dass sie sich enthält von Lüsten des Fleisches und sich in geistlichen Früchten übt; aber sie sei noch nicht heilig dadurch, dass alle bösen Begierden von ihr genommen sind und sie davon befreit ist, noch auch dadurch, dass sie von allen gottlosen Meinungen und Irrthümern gereinigt ist. Denn die Kirche bekennt immer ihre Sünde und bittet, dass ihr ihre Schuld vergeben werde.»

<sup>55</sup> WA DB 7, 418: «Der teuffel kan sie wol zu decken, mit ergernissen und rotten [...]»

increasingly successful in obscuring the true Church. The devil's "church" however, gains from such obscurity and may more easily be mistaken for the Church of the Creed.<sup>56</sup>

5. Finally, the Church is not visible because it is too precious to be revealed to an unholy world. God's holy men and women are like gems not to be cast before swine.<sup>57</sup> He protects them from the views of the impious by hiding the Church. It is thus impossible to identify its members without fail. "The church is hidden, the saints are unknown."<sup>58</sup>

*The Historical Reality of the Church: corpus permixtum*

The invisibility of the true Church leads us to another essential attribute of Reformation ecclesiology: the understanding of the visible church as a mixed body, *corpus permixtum*, a community not only comprising true believers, but also "false and unbelieving Christians".<sup>59</sup> The fact that popes, bishops and cardinals belong to what Luther calls external Christendom does not mean in any way that they participate in the true spiritual Church.<sup>60</sup>

The reality of the *corpus permixtum* is an inevitable aspect of the life of the Church. But it is more than a mere fact: in order to reach out to the world, the spiritual community is even *called* to co-exist with unbelievers. The Word has been given to the Church in order to be preached among believers and unbelievers alike. Luther insists that the concept of a separate church consisting only of true believers is wrong, as one should not assemble the holy and the justified in a secluded place. He rejects the idea of a visible pure congregation, maintaining that the good and the evil must

<sup>56</sup> WA 50, 644,12–24.

<sup>57</sup> *De servo arbitrio* (1525), WA 18, 651,24–28: «Non est res tam vulgaris, Mi Erasme, Ecclesia Dei, quam est nomen hoc: Ecclesia Dei, nec ita passim occurrant sancti Dei, ut hoc nomen: Sancti Dei. Margaritum et nobiles gemmae sunt, quas spiritus non proicit ante porcos, sed ut scriptura vocat, absconditas servat, ne impius videat gloriam Dei.»

<sup>58</sup> WA 18, 652,23: «[...] abscondita est Ecclesia, latent sancti.»

<sup>59</sup> WA 50, 630,21–631,5: «[...] wo die Tauffe und sacrament sind, mus Gottes volck sein, und wiederumb. Denn solliche stuecke heilthums hat, gibt, ubet, braucht, bekennet niemands, denn allein Gottes volck, ob gleich etliche falsche und ungleubige Christen heimlich drunter sind.»

<sup>60</sup> WA 6, 294,1–3: «Vil sein unter den Christen in der leyplichen vorsammlung unnd einickeit, die doch mit sunden sich ausz der ynnerlichen, geystlichen eynickeit schliessen.» Cf. WA 6, 297,10–14.

live together in the same body without being separated.<sup>61</sup> The mission of the Church to reach out to unbelievers safeguards it from establishing a society of the allegedly pure and sinless.

*Signs of the True Church: notae ecclesiae*

However, within such a conception the question arises how such a *corpus permixtum* is actually related to the internal, invisible Church. Without such a logical link, no essentially independent notions of the church would coexist. Therefore, Reformation theologians seek to establish clear indications of where the true Church can be assumed present, signs of the true Church or *notae ecclesiae*, as they call them. The Church is invisible in essence, yet the *notae ecclesiae* partially visualise what is otherwise concealed by acting as pointers towards that hidden spiritual community. To Luther, “they are but reliable indicators of the presence of the church without actually making visible what is concealed”.<sup>62</sup>

It is important to observe Luther’s distinction between the *notae ecclesiae* and the *attributa ecclesiae*. The attributes (*una, sancta, catholica, apostolica*) define the essence of the church. They are generally accepted means of describing what the Church is. The *notae*, on the other hand, are only relevant within the concept of the Church in Duality. Their function is to act as a link between the true (and thus hidden) church and its visible dimension, the *corpus permixtum*.

Following Luther, the only certain sign of the true Church is the preaching of the gospel.<sup>63</sup> Luther characterizes it as *the* most important mark of the church,<sup>64</sup> calling it “*certissimum et nobilissimum Ecclesiae symbolum*”<sup>65</sup>. Furthermore, Luther relates the sacraments of baptism and communion closely to the preaching of the Word, arguing that God had bound the action of the Spirit to Word *and* sacrament. Hence, as the Church is constituted by the Spirit, the sacraments of baptism and of the

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<sup>61</sup> *Epistola ad Romanos*. Die Scholien, WA 56, 439,6–21; here 12f.: «Vnde Currit hic Regula vna de intellectu Scripture, Quod simul loquitur de bonis et malis in eodem corpore mystico existentibus [...]»

<sup>62</sup> NEEBE, Kirche (fn. 11), 216.

<sup>63</sup> WA 50, 628,29–629,4; cf. WA 7, 721,15–17.

<sup>64</sup> WA 7, 721,4–7: «Ubi vero Euangelium non esse videris ..., ibi non dubites Ecclesiam non esse, etiam si baptisent et vescantur de altari, nisi parvulos et simplices exceperis.»

<sup>65</sup> WA 7, 721,10.

Eucharist, too, are visible signs of the spiritual community.<sup>66</sup> Together Word and sacraments act as reliable *notae ecclesiae*. Even if the spiritual community remains concealed, its external marks are visible and can be experienced under the conditions of time and space. Wherever they become visible within the *corpus permixtum*, the true *communio sanctorum* will be present.

In summary it may be said that Luther understands the true church as an invisible community, created by the Holy Spirit. Thanks to its physical emanation, it becomes effective in history.

## 2 New Challenges

The Church in Duality is a powerful concept. It manages to answer ecclesiological challenges with which the sixteenth-century Reformers were confronted. In particular, it explains how Christians can, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, "believe (in) the Church" without being forced to proclaim faith in visible Christendom. The Church in Duality is capable of accommodating the obvious discrepancy between realised churchdom and the community of saints, yet without explicitly releasing the bond that holds them together. The pure and unchanging essence of the true Church finds its necessary reflection within the imperfect historical Christian community. The two-dimensional concept explains the Church of the Creed in the light of a Christian congregation which is not visibly united, which cannot claim to be visibly holy and which consists both of true believers and of hypocrites.

These circumstances have indeed changed little, since the Church of our time is still the flawed community it was in the days of the Reformation. One does not need to be overly sceptical to acknowledge that the relationship between the *una sancta* and the churches of our time is as questionable as ever. Of course, the churches *we* belong to may have more visible links and mutual agreements than they had in the days of the Reformers. Our century has seen remarkable progress as far as the dialogue between churches is concerned. The sustained contribution of the World Council of Churches to ecumenical *rapprochement*, but also recent bilat-

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<sup>66</sup> WA 6, 301,3–6: «Die zeichenn, da bey man euszerlich mercken kan, wo die selb kirch in der welt ist, sein die tauff, sacrament und das Evangelium... Dan wo die tauff und Euangelium ist, da sol niemant zweyffeln, es sein heyligen da, und soltens gleich eytel kind in der wigen sein.»

eral inter-denominational statements, such as the Leuenberg (1973), Meissen (1988) and Porvoo (1993) agreements, give evidence of new beginnings in the spirit of reconciliation and unity.

However, it can hardly be denied that these links exist at a predominantly institutional level and that, in practice, they are limited to closer links between administrative bodies rather than parishes and congregations. Furthermore, although the ecumenical body of the WCC is important, it is in many ways more of a platform for dialogue than a truly united entity, and it has not (yet) led to comprehensive eucharistic unity among Christians. Without a more active participation of the Roman Catholic church, the ecumenical movement can hardly become an all-embracing gathering around the table of the Lord. We cannot but admit that worldwide Christianity is far from celebrating the Eucharist *together*.

As for the holiness of the Church, visible manifestations of the *una sancta* seem to be even harder to identify. On what grounds would we want to claim that our churches have become any more visibly holy than they were in Luther's days? No doubt, many of the ecclesial activities bear traces of holiness as they reveal God's healing power among and through his faithful. However, is it not as easy to name all those utterly unholy moments in church history as it is to point at signs of visible holiness?<sup>67</sup> The state of visible churchdom past and present makes it rather difficult to be read as a plain account of God's plan of salvation for his people.

It therefore seems fair to say that our perceptions of the *una sancta* and the visible churchdom remain as contradictory as they were at the time of the Reformation. As far as correspondence between the destination and the historical reality of the Church is concerned, what we can make out is still the *corpus permixtum* it has always been. As a body, the Church quite literally leaves us with "mixed" feelings.

To this extent, the concept of the Church in Duality is as valid as ever. It insists on a Church that is aware of its visible shortcomings as well as its invisible truth, and it compels the Church to keep in motion on the way to itself. Because the historically realised Church does not correspond to its spiritual essence, it is permanently in need of reformation, it is *ecclesia*

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. the master of "deconstructive" church history, Karl-Heinz Deschner. In his many books, he gives a gruesome account of two thousand years of what he calls the "criminal history of the church". Cf. e.g. KARL-HEINZ DESCHNER, *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*, Hamburg 1987ff., or: THE SAME, *Das Kreuz mit der Kirche*, München 1980.



*semper reformanda*.<sup>68</sup> The fact that it provides an ecclesiological paradigm for such ongoing change is, I believe, the strength of the Church in Duality. *But at what a price!* The logical separation of material appearance from spiritual essence entails a number of problematic consequences. These inconsistencies have not, of course, just disappeared over time, and contemporary Protestant ecclesiology still faces “the unsettled problem of the twofold definition of the Church”<sup>69</sup>. There are three key reasons why we ought to question the traditional notion of the Church in Duality at the beginning of the third millennium.

## 2.1 Three Questions

*Is the Life of the Visible Church not the Life of the True Church?*

The notion of an invisible Church necessarily involves an ontological statement. Sixteenth-century Reformers implicitly and occasionally even explicitly call the *true* Church invisible. Such statements imply a reality in which the invisible and abstract sphere is ontologically superior to the visible and tangible dimension of manifest Christendom.<sup>70</sup> To Huldrych Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer in Zurich, the *credo ecclesiam* appears to be exclusively concerned with the invisible church.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Luther’s distinction between the *ecclesia stricte dicta* and the *ecclesia late dicta* indicates an ontological predominance of the invisible dimension. The mixed body of the Church, *corpus permixtum*, can only be related to its invisible truth because it incorporates the Spiritual communion of saints. Both Luther and Zwingli are convinced that the invisible church holds a deeper truth than its visible reflection. Calvin’s perception of the true Church is different insofar as it describes the number of the elect less as a *norm* for the external Church than as its *core and focus*. However, even Calvin establishes a precedence of the “invisible” dimension which he regards as the ideal structure of the Church.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cf. WILFRIED HÄRLE, Art. «Kirche (VII. Dogmatisch)» in: TRE, vol. 18, Berlin–New York, 262–277, here 293.

<sup>69</sup> KÜHN, Kirche (fn. 9), 164.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. OTTO WEBER, Grundlagen der Dogmatik, vol. 2, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (1962), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1987, 601; he mentions Augustine’s distinction between *corpus* and *anima ecclesiae* as an example of such a thought.

<sup>71</sup> HULDRYCH ZWINGLI, Schriften, Zürich 1995ff. (= Z), Vol. 3, 756.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. WEBER, Dogmatik (fn. 70), 603.

What then, one might be compelled to ask, what are all those actions that are carried out in and by the visible church? What, if not activities of the true Church, are happenings like church services, prayer meetings, Sunday school lessons, pastoral visits, bible studies and the like? What is their ontological quality? Are they all just reflections of an otherwise invisible truth? The Church in Duality may answer the obvious discrepancy between the church of the Creed and the historically realised Church. But the prevalence of its invisible dimension brings it dangerously close to a mere idea of the church, a normative construction of the body of Christ rather than actually being that body. Such an understanding would eventually alienate the Church from any historical manifestation of the people of God living under the conditions of this world.

*Are So-Called "Hypocrites" Still a Sufficient Reason to Uphold the Idea of a corpus permixtum?*

There is a second reason for challenging the traditional Church in Duality: one of the key issues lending plausibility to the *ecclesia invisibilis* is simply no longer as prevalent as it was half a millennium ago. The point in question is the problem of so-called hypocrites among the members of the church community. The issue of how to integrate non-believers within a consistent ecclesiological setting (a problem of great importance to the Reformers), has lost much of its urgency in our time. Compared to other problems with which our churches are confronted, it is quite certainly not as burning an issue any more, marginalized by the continuing expulsion of ecclesial authority from many domains of Western society.

Not only institutional aspects, such as the influence which the Church once enjoyed on political, social or moral policy, are affected, but also the relationship between individual churchgoers and the community of Christians to which they belong. Given the close links between the church and the state at earlier stages in the history of Christianity, Christians may have had various reasons for remaining associated with a particular congregation. Participation in, and even more so absence from the life of the Church had much stronger societal connotations in Calvin's Geneva, for instance, than is the case in our contemporary churches. The decision of the *Consistoire* to exclude somebody from communion potentially affected an individual's social life. Even without genuine attachment to the true communion of saints, even without the urge to participate in the means of salvation, the entanglement of citizenship and church membership may well

have been incentive enough for demonstrating one's involvement in the Christian community.<sup>73</sup>

In Western societies, few people still experience this kind of public pressure to participate in communal Christian life. As social prestige is generally no longer attached to somebody's standing in church, non-believers have lost their main motivation for partaking in its activities. Hence the once irritating thought of local churches crowded with people some of whom might not be true believers, is therefore no longer the prime concern of those who are involved with clerical matters. (And if I am not mistaken, it seems that among the clergy one can make out a subtle longing for the times when the Church was still plagued by such problems.) Reconciling the Church of the Creed with the fact that not everyone of those sitting in the pews on a Sunday morning may be a true believer has lost much of its momentum. Nowadays most of the alleged "non-believers" simply stay away from church activities. Zwingli's and Luther's concerns about the *corpus permixtum* are no longer at the centre of what troubles those who still consider themselves Christians, as the oftentimes depressing reality of half-empty churches has taken over. The Church has indeed acquired an invisible dimension, but it is frightfully different from what the Reformers had in mind.

### *Is Visibility Not Essential for the Truth of the Church?*

Thirdly, the shift away from active participation in ecclesial activities requires an adequate reconsideration of the role of "visible" members of the Church. The withdrawal of established churchdom from public life gives reason to believe that *today's* explanation of the relationship between visible churchdom and the Church of the Creed may no longer be the device

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Calvin's *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* (1561), edict et Ordonnance passee en grand Conseil, le 12 Novembre, 1557, touchant ceux qui mesprisent de recevoir la Cene: «Pour ce qu'on a par cidevant qu'aucuns se sont de leur bon gré abstenuz de la sainte Cene. [...] Mais s'il continue en son obstination, tellement qu'outre le passé il demeure encores demi an sans y venir: qu'estant renvoyé devant Messieurs (sinon qu'il demande pardon de sa faute et soit prest de l'amender) il soit banni pour un an de la ville, comme incorrigible. Et toutesfois encor qu'il recognust sa faute, pour avoir reietté les admonitions du Consistoire, qu'il soit chastié à la discretion des Messieurs, et renvoyé pour reparer le scandale qu'il aura faict se monstrant ainsi rebelle.» Vgl. CO [= IOANNIS CALVINI opera quae supersunt omnia, ed. W. Baum et al., Braunschweig, 1863–1900 (Corpus Reformatorum, vol. 29–87)] 10/1, 118f.

of the *ecclesia invisibilis*. The ecclesiological challenge of our time has largely shifted from explaining the invisible number of hypocrites within the visible congregation to explaining the visible number of believers within an increasingly “invisible” church. The challenge is now how to relate the *material* existence of the Church to the *credo ecclesiam*, or in other words, how to move from the non-essentiality of visible churchdom to its genuine integration in the Church of the Creed. In the Reformers’ days, institutionalised Christendom was a historical fact, and the issue at stake was thus how to identify the invisible number of true believers vis-à-vis an institution whose visible magnitude was overwhelming. The Protestant emphasis on the *ecclesia invisibilis* emerged from the fact that the visibility of churchdom was a matter of course.

Today, however, the situation has changed substantially. *Our* historical fact is the rapid disintegration of traditional church bodies, and so today’s challenge will be to locate the visible essence of the Church vis-à-vis the fragility of a community which we no longer can take for granted. In a time when the *ecclesia invisibilis* is about to become a *historical* reality, it may no longer be such a helpful paradigm of Protestant ecclesiology.

## 2.2 Avoiding the *Status Quo Ante Reformationem*

However, without the notion of an *ecclesia invisibilis*, the risk of returning to the *status quo ante Reformationem*, i.e. the identification of visibly institutionalised churchdom with the Church of the Creed is considerable. Accepting the fact that every congregation and every historical church is plagued by its own characteristic shortcomings, how can we maintain the notion of the one and holy Church, if not by resorting to some sort of invisible essence? Without the concept of a Church in Duality, realized churchdom is inclined to confuse its actual appearance with the genuine shape it ought to have according to the Creed. The distinction between the visibly realized community and the invisible Church of the Creed is strong enough to act as guarantor of ecclesial modesty. If it is to be replaced, then it can only be replaced by a paradigm convincing enough to do likewise. The following chapter seeks to deliver such a synthesis.

### 3 The Visible Spiritual Community

Fundamental to the subsequent approach is the departure from the notion of an *ecclesia invisibilis*. All reference to a distinction between visible and invisible dimensions will be abandoned and replaced by a different kind of two-dimensional framework. The Church in Duality need not be perceived as an entity with visible and invisible dimensions. Its two-dimensionality is essential, but of a different quality. The challenge of such an endeavour is how to overcome difficulties inherent to the traditional Protestant perception of two-dimensional ecclesiology, yet without at the same time giving up the indispensable distinction between what visible churchdom is and what it ought to be.

#### 3.1 Empowered By the Free Spirit. On the Essence of the Church

In line with the sixteenth-century Reformers, especially with Martin Luther, we therefore reiterate *the fundamental dependence of the Church on the presence of the Spirit*. Fundamental Spirituality implies that only insofar as the Church exists and evolves in and through the power of the Spirit, may it actually be called body of Christ

However, there is more to an acknowledgement of the Spirit's creative role for the Church than the rejection of human collaboration in creating the Church. What matters to our re-definition of the Church in Duality is the fact that *freedom is the distinctive feature to the nature of the Spirit*. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So is it with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3,8) Because of such fundamental freedom, the Spirit is unbound to become active whenever and wherever he chooses. He is not constrained by human interference in any aspect of his existence.

Nevertheless, we should carefully maintain the fundamental distinction between various aspects of the existence of the Church, such as specific forms of ecclesiastical structure, and the actual *media salutis*.<sup>74</sup> God

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. COLIN E. GUNTON, A Brief Theology of Revelation. The 1993 Warfield Lectures, Edinburgh 1995, 102f.: "The Spirit in this context is the one who works through and in time, and that means that although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has chosen himself." Gunton is right in emphasising the (human) need for tradition within the community of believers. We must, however, at the same time recognize that 'tradition' is *not* among the *means* of salvation on the same level as Word and

in his supreme freedom has chosen to bind himself in Word and sacrament, and in Word and sacrament *only*.

It is precisely the well-defined *quality* of God's self-restriction that ought to let us acknowledge the fundamental character of the Spirit's freedom: *God himself* has chosen Word and sacraments; they are the means of *salvation* because they have been designated *by the Saviour* as binding elements of the Spiritual community. We ought to acknowledge that his free choice is crucial to our understanding of the essentially visible Spiritual community. Only Word and sacraments are thus capable of securing the presence of the living God. Were it not so, how could we attribute supreme freedom to the Spirit and at the same time assume that *factually* this freedom does not exist because of supposedly indispensable ecclesiastical arrangements?

### *The Promise of the Spirit's Visible Presence*

By now, particularly those readers who, quite rightly, emphasise the fundamental catholicity of the Church may fear that we are moving dangerously close towards some kind of nonconformist and essentially enthusiastic ecclesiology. Should we actually conclude that the Spirit is fundamentally unpredictable, even erratic in his movements on earth? Is God's presence on earth unintelligible both to believers and unbelievers alike?

Why, one might ask, should believers structure their communities by means of ministries and offices, if there is a permanent uncertainty about the presence of the Spirit? I cannot honestly say that there is no cause for suspicion of non-conformity. *Ecclesia semper reformanda* will always involve a certain craving for the transformation and indeed undermining of established clerical structures. Only by being willing and able to ceaselessly shake off whatever belongs to the past will the Church succeed in following the movements of the Spirit. And only by seeking the presence of the free Spirit will the Church receive the power to *remain* the Church. The freedom of the Spirit calls for a highly flexible community, largely unhindered by the burden of potentially paralysing clerical framework. No

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sacraments. Instead, it is precisely because of this difference that we can say *ecclesia semper reformanda*. The community around Word and sacraments ought to be reformed continually, surely not by making it constantly change its appearance or by disregarding the value of its historical development, but by observing the vital difference between ordinances and the *media salutis*.

congregation can claim to command some sort of automatic presence of the Spirit purely by adhering to a certain kind of organisational configuration. Any congregation or clerical administration which is not fundamentally and radically open to structural change, lacks the agility necessary to follow the Spirit's movements within creation. The fact that Christian congregations meet for divine service in a colourful range of forms should be taken as a sign of the free Spirit in action. A truly Spiritual Church is always a Church on the move, a dynamic body.

But despite this plea not to give in to the temptation of "ordering" the Church, there can be no doubt that the Holy Spirit is not a Spirit of arbitrariness or chaos, as "God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor 14,33). The freedom of the Spirit does not imply that its community could exist without some kind of structure and order or even without specified offices and ministries. In fact, quite the opposite is the case: because the Spirit's presence invariably causes unity, it affects and transforms not only individual believers, but also their mutual relationships. The Spiritual community should not be regarded as a fundamentally unstructured gathering of individuals, but rather as a re-definition of human co-existence brought about by the power of the Spirit. The order of the Church is, as long as it reveals the Spirit's presence in Word and sacraments, a Spiritual order.

### *The Visible Spiritual Community*

Having emphasised the all-important closeness of the Spirit, we now proceed to the term which is meant to replace the notion of the *ecclesia invisibilis*, and that term is the visible Spiritual community. We call the church Spiritual, because, quite literally, the Spirit provides for its presence and future. And we call it visible, because we understand the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, not only as signs of an otherwise invisible community, but rather as visible means of salvation. In other words: participation in the preaching of the Word and receiving the sacraments always and necessarily includes participation in the true church. Those who hear the preached Word, those who are baptised and receive communion, are not just entering an alleged *corpus permixtum*, but rather the body of Christ. The true church is not to be understood as existing "behind" the means of salvation, but precisely in the act of realising them. This is the crucial meaning of emphasising the visibility of the Church. And it bears two equally significant consequences.

Firstly, *all* those who both listen to the preached gospel and are given the sacraments are members of the true Church. The presence of the Spirit is given to the world and for the world rather than to an elect (yet concealed) group of supposedly “true” believers. Whoever hears the Word and receives communion can thus be assured of his or her dwelling in the Spiritual community. Secondly, the emphasis on the power of the Spirit’s presence in the means of salvation is characterised by an equally categorical exclusivity: whoever does not partake in the Word and the sacraments, is essentially excluded from the Spiritual community. This, of course, cannot imply an exclusion from salvation per se – God alone knows the number of the elect. Yet the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are instrumental in keeping the Christian community in touch with the movements of the free Spirit.

### **3.2 Instituted As the *Body* of Christ. On the Attributes of the Church<sup>75</sup>**

It is one thing to claim that the true Church is essentially visible and that its two-dimensionality does not embrace an alleged *ecclesia invisibilis*. However, to explain how such a visible Spiritual community actually becomes manifest under earthly conditions, how it can be distinguished from man-made churchdom, and how such an essentially visible Church relates to the *credo ecclesiam*, is indeed quite another. How can we relate the *ecclesia una et sancta* to the visible Spiritual community without at the same time creating whatever form of invisible dimension?

Now, it is of course true that the answers differ according to different confessional traditions. An Anglican perspective is different from what Rome has to say on that issue. So let me just give you a Reformed view on something that is highly controversial.

First, we once more acknowledge that the term *body* involves physical historical reality. Without this implication, “body“ loses its most important connotation and effectively represents nothing more than a mere *idea* of a body. If we call the true Church the *body* of Christ, then we are referring to a tangible and recognisable entity which we are capable of localising in time and space. To call the *ecclesia invisibilis* the body of Christ would therefore amount to a logical impossibility.

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<sup>75</sup> The Reformer’s focus on unity and sanctity is mirrored here; some aspects of apostolicity and catholicity need further investigation.



Secondly, the body of the Church is of a specific nature: it is the body of Christ, “Jesus existing as community” (Bonhoeffer in his early *Sanctorum Communio*)<sup>76</sup> or “Christ’s own earthly historical form of existence” (Barth)<sup>77</sup>. This is the appearance by which the Church emerges into history. Being the body of Christ, the Church stands in the same life-giving power as God the Son from whom it draws its own *raison d’être*. By receiving  $\overline{\text{P}}\overline{\text{P}}\overline{\text{P}}$ , breath of life, from God the Father (or, depending on whether one is prepared to accept the *filioque*, from God the Father and the Son)<sup>78</sup>, the Church is drawn into the internal movement of the Trinity. There is nothing static, nothing stationary about the church.

#### *Attributes of an Evolving Church – Traces of the Free Spirit’s Presence*

Equally, the attributes of the Church should be regarded as descriptions of a process rather than as definitions of an immutable being. Once we have fully acknowledged the essential Spirituality of the Church, it becomes clear that the attributes of the Church are not comparable to the characteristics of unchanging static bodies. If the Church only comes into being in the power of the Spirit, then the attributes of the Church are essentially *attributes of the free Spirit’s presence*. In more expressive words, we may call the attributes *traces of the Spirit*, thereby emphasising both the sole cause for their emergence and their incomplete appearance in history. *Attributa ecclesiae* are descriptions of the visible Church, yet as such they are characteristics of an institution wholly dependent on the Spirit’s presence.

Thus, can we claim the Church to be “one”? Under the traditional two-dimensional concept, the answer was: the Church is not visibly united, but as *ecclesia invisibilis*, in faith, it is *ecclesia una*. In re-defined duality however, the Spiritual community bears *visible* traces of unity. Transformed by the Spirit’s presence, Christians meet for worship, local congregations

<sup>76</sup> DIETRICH BONHOEFFER, *Sanctorum Communio*. A Dogmatic Inquiry into the Sociology of the Church, transl. by R. Gregor Smith, London 1963, 203: «Now the objective spirit of the church has really become the Holy Spirit; the experience of the ‘religious’ community is now really the experience of the church and the collective person of the church really ‘Christ existing as the church’.”

<sup>77</sup> KARL BARTH, KD [= Kirchliche Dogmatik] IV/2, § 67, 695.

<sup>78</sup> Concerning the discussion on the *filioque*, cf. LUKAS VISCHER (ed.), *Geist Gottes – Geist Christi*. Ökumenische Überlegungen zur Filioque-Kontroverse, Frankfurt a.M. 1981 (= ÖR.B, 39).

take up mutual support, entire church bodies establish links between each other, worldwide co-operation and alliances materialize. The very moment two or three gather in Christ's name, *visible unity* is brought about by the power of the Spirit. All our churches bear such traces of unity, in various forms and possibly to various degrees, but without exception in such a way that we can name and localize them.

And is the Church *holy*? The Reformers' invisible Church was always holy, unaffected by its historical reality, even if incorporated in sometimes truly unholy churchdom. The Spiritual community, however, can only be called holy if and when the Spirit draws near; in fact, the Spiritual community only exists in the Spirit's presence in Word and sacraments. He alone has the power to sanctify the *sanctorum communio*. Called into his presence, people are empowered to alter their lives, local congregations find ways of carrying the light of the Christian message into the communities in which they live, and church administrations use their political weight to speak out on behalf of all those who have no voice in society.

However subtle the traces of grace may be, however preliminary and incomplete unity and holiness may be implemented among Christians, *attributa ecclesiae* can always be seen, sensed and experienced as long as the Spirit is present through the preaching of the Word and the administration of sacraments. Where they appear, the Spirit's traces can be recognised by believers and non-believers alike.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> There is reason to argue that even mere *places* of the Church such as parish churches, cathedrals, prayer houses and community centres carry the potential to communicate the presence of the Spirit to the world. To members of a particular congregation and the general public alike, premises used for worship are evidence of the Spirit's traces and thus of the presence of the visible Spiritual community. Individuals who belong to this community and who therefore frequent its premises share a pattern of social behaviour, induced and nurtured by the Spirit's presence, which they have acquired as a group gathering in a specific location rather than just anywhere. Some Christian denominations take this into account by consecrating new church premises (and even desecrating them once they are no longer used for worship). This way, they visualise the significance of an otherwise irrelevant location for the Spirit's presence in and through the means of salvation. The sanctuary is a *holy place* because it represents the expected or experienced presence of the Spirit in a material form. Of course, the shortcoming of such a plain localisation of Spiritual power is liable to undue restriction of the free Spirit whose presence will uniquely determine the whereabouts of the true Church. Strictly speaking, God alone enacts consecration by sending his Spirit in order to communicate the means of salvation. Obviously, God is free to do so wherever he wills. Protestant ecclesiology may nevertheless benefit from acknow-

### 3.3 Leading the Way to the Father. On the Mission of the Church

So far, I have sought to re-define elements of traditional Protestant ecclesiology within a concept of the visible Spiritual community. The final step shall now be the re-definition of the two dimensions of the church, or, in other words, a new understanding of the Church in Duality.

I acknowledge the *fundamentally* two-dimensional nature of the Church. It cannot be our aim to establish some sort of circular reference of visible churchdom to itself, thereby making it into an immutable absolute. The truth of the Church is not confined to what is immediately recognisable – there is good reason to confess *credo ecclesiam* rather than *credo in ecclesiam*. The concept of the Church in Duality continues to serve as a valid and apt description of the Christian Church.

However, if the said Christian Church can be defined as the visible Spiritual community, then any distinction between its two dimensions must reflect its *essential* visibility. Hence any notion of the *ecclesia invisibilis* will lose its persuasiveness. Thus, the two-dimensional nature of the church takes up a new quality as it now serves as a description of two different aspects of Christian life as a community. I propose to call these two dimensions transformative and significative respectively. Let me explain.

#### *The Transformative Dimension of the Church*

The transformative dimension of the Church is that aspect of the visible Spiritual community which represents its inner life: the co-existence of those men and women, who have been renewed and transformed by the presence of the Spirit. In its transformative dimension, the Church can be *experienced as a process* rather than as a body, as it emerges into existence whenever believers meet to hear the Word and to celebrate communion. This process consists of *a sequence of events* – the means of salvation – that make and maintain the Church throughout history.<sup>80</sup> *Continuous* par-

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ledging that, to common contemporary perception, the “Church” means first and foremost *a place with a difference*. The association between the Spirit’s institution and its visible premises ought not to be disregarded. Giving it up, e.g. by promoting an *ecclesia invisibilis* which is “freed” from the need for some sacred meeting place, may forego an ecclesiological element which is indispensable for an intelligible doctrine of the Church.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. PAUL MCPARTLAN, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*. Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in *Dialogue*, Edinburgh 1993, 287 on John Zizioulas’ understanding of the body of Christ: “The eucharistic community is the Body of Christ *par excellence*,”

icipation in the means of salvation is effectively the only way to comprehend the preaching of the Word and the distribution of sacraments as elements of an ongoing process. Thus, one has to be a member of the Spiritual community to experience the Church in its transformative dimension and to acknowledge the Church in Duality. The experience of the promise of Spiritual presence in and through the *media salutis* is inseparable from personal existential involvement, and individual transformation is the basis on which Christians recognise the transformation of an entire community into the body of Christ.

However, the Spiritual community is bound to remain a one-dimensional entity in the eyes of those who have not “taken off their old self with its practices and put on the new self” (cf. Col 3,10). No doubt, the Spirit’s traces are visible to all creation, yet only those standing in the Spirit’s power may comprehend them as traces of a *process of sanctification and unity*.

*Attributa ecclesiae*, traces of the Spirit’s presence, characterise the transformative dimension of the Church as a continual manifestation and metamorphosis of a community committed to unity and sanctification. The transformative dimension of the Church designates the place where such a new creation takes place, the place where people “serve in the new way of the Spirit” (Rom 7,6).

The second feature of the transformative dimension of the Church is a *concentric orientation of its members*. Gathering around its Lord Jesus Christ, the Spiritual community is directed to the source and centre of its existence. The Church embraces those men and women who communicate with their Lord by receiving the means of salvation in the Spirit’s unifying presence. Word and sacraments are *media salutis* because they bring about the transformation of an entire community together with the new creation of individual beings. The communal character of the means of salvation is inseparable from the focus on Christ: “We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Rom 6,4). Therefore, we may say that the transformative dimension of the Church is the context in which the Spiritual community *literally realises*

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says Zizioulas, by which he understands a *rhythmic* attainment, for, as we have seen, the identity experienced in the Eucharist is immediately lost again, to be abidingly acquired only on the last day. While still being ‘the People of God journeying in history’, in the Eucharist, where she ‘lives the presence of Christ’, the Church ‘becomes what she is delayed in being [ce qu’il lui tarde d’être]’. In short, the People of God is *rhythmically* the Body of Christ.”

its existence: it becomes conscious of its new identity *and*, at the same time, it is visibly transformed and reborn.

### *The Significant Dimension of the Church*

To the members of the Spiritual community, the Church is revealed in the form of a process or a movement as they themselves are transformed and moved by the Spirit's presence. I have called this concentric focus the transformative dimension of the Church in Duality. Its second dimension is different insofar as it describes the outer life of the Church, its relationship with society and with the world in which it exists. Here, its function and status is the one of a pointer, a signpost or even, to use a somewhat controversial term, of a leader for the whole of mankind.

The Spirit transforms and unites individual beings into the one body of Christ. We have called this process or movement the *transformative dimension* of the Church. However, by so doing the Spirit not only communicates with its Spiritual community but also with the wider world *extra muros ecclesiae*. Such communication happens whenever the Church emerges into visibility as body. Whatever shape the gathering of Christians may take, it will invariably have an effect on the environment in which it stands.

Due to its essential visibility, the Church cannot but represent *something*. The way it organises its life as a community, the stances it may take in political matters and its social involvement, even the apparently more mundane aspects of management such as its employment policies, economic behaviour and the structure of its decision-making process are recognised by the world in which it operates. There is no action of the Church that remains free of a corresponding message about its priorities, values and objectives. Whatever the Church does or says, it will make a statement about itself. Its actions are received by the world as *indications of its essence*. It is for this reason that an adequate description of the Church ought to complement the transformative dimension with an equally essential significant dimension of the Church.

Yet how do we know whether what we see is actually the *true Church*? How do we know the body of Christ from its counterfeit? It goes without saying that visibility is not in itself a guarantor of truth. False churches are as visible as the actual Spiritual community. Since the first coming of the Lord, there has always been visibly realized churchdom, gatherings of people claiming to be the body of Christ. *Something* "Christian", some

kind of self-proclaimed “Church”, has been visible at all times and indeed still exists in an overwhelming variety of shapes.

The true Church discloses its identity to the world in its significant dimension. By emerging into visibility, the body of Christ is constantly making statements about its own origins. In the presence of the Spirit, the communion of saints will adhere to a form of interaction that gives indications of the basis on which it is built. It belongs to the inmost essence of the Church that, through all its actions, its political opinions and social commitments, it is saying something about itself and, even more so, about its creator. Rather than just being an inevitable by-product, such self-revelation through visible existence is part of the very nature of the Church. By acknowledging its significant dimension, we recognise that the Spiritual community is as much an entity with historical relevance as it is the place where individuals are transformed and reborn. Once more we ought to acknowledge that the Church as we see it is *not* just a mirror image of invisible truth. Rather, it is an essential channel of communication between creator and creation: God speaks to all people through the Church in its significant dimension.

### 3.4 The Sign of the Advent

#### *Instituted by the Spirit – Pointing at the Son*

Now, against the background of its *significant* dimension, the character of the mission of the Church finally emerges. It derives from the fact that the Church *as a visible body* necessarily represents something vis-à-vis the society in which it exists. As the body of Christ interacts *with* the world, it becomes capable of carrying out a mission *for* the world and it is called to do so.

In its significant dimension, the Church by definition acts as a *sign*. As such, it visibly represents something that lies beyond its own existence (*significanda*) without being identical with what it stands for and points to (*significatum*). Empowered and commissioned by its creator and maintainer, the Church enters into communication not just with those who together form the body of Christ, but also with all people who see themselves confronted with that body. Such is the calling of the Spiritual community: to become historically manifest in a way that enables the world to understand it as God’s sign and to relate to it.

What, then, does the *Spiritual* community point to? In a precise sense of the word, the Church *points to* Jesus Christ, the foundation on which it is built and from which it is given the characteristics of its existence. Preaching the Word and distributing the sacraments, it is its mission to proclaim Jesus Christ as the saviour *visibly, i.e. publicly and unmistakably*. Its own members are the first to recognise that what they hear and receive re-orientates their lives and *together* sends them on a new way.

But its missionary existence reaches beyond *verbal* statements. The Church must acknowledge that all aspects of its historical life have significant character. Its physical appearance may reveal as much about the foundations on which the Church is built as do explicit confessions. Unless its visible shape is reconciled with the message of salvation which it promotes, the *Spiritual* community can hardly interact meaningfully with its environment.

### *Body of Christ: Pointing at the Father*

Showing the way to the Father, Jesus Christ revealed himself as the incarnate Son. Standing in the power of the Spirit, he effectively pointed at himself in order to point at the Father. The Church, however, will always be pointing *away* from its own existence, towards the Christ whom we meet in the preached Word and at the communion table. No Christian gathering will ever become identical with the living Son of God; the body of Christ necessarily obeys Christ as its head. Unlike the Son, the *Spiritual* community necessarily remains distant from the foundation on which it is built. Being a sign to all people, the Church must acknowledge that sharing the Son's mission implies respect for the fundamental difference between the creator and his creation. Only the living Jesus can say: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14,6) The Church, however, is neither the way nor the truth nor the life. It is but a signpost on that way, at best a credible pointer to such truth and a community standing in the life-giving presence of the Spirit.

### *The Sign of Hope*

Creation as a whole is still longing for the second and glorious coming of the Lord. The conditions of living in this world, the suffering and the lack of all-embracing peace, make it only too manifest that comprehensive holiness and unity are matters of Christian hope rather than of experience.

The difference between mere traces of the Spirit on the one hand and the kingdom of God on the other remains elementary. The Church is commissioned to act as a sign of holiness and unity precisely due to the difference between what this world is and what the next one will be. *This is the mission of the Church: to exist in such a way as to make the second coming of the Lord credible to all creation.* “The meaning and content of our time – the last time – is the fulfilment of this provisional representation as the task of the community of Jesus Christ.”<sup>81</sup> The *ecclesia una et sancta*, however flawed and incomplete it may be, is given the power to uphold the hope for the coming kingdom of God. The visible Spiritual community acts as the sign of the coming of the Lord, and therefore it is *the sign of the advent*.

Visible Christendom will necessarily signify *something* to the world, whether this ‘something’ is the coming kingdom of God or merely a facet of a religious community’s belief in itself. It is therefore pure grace if men and women, in worship as well as in their daily lives, are *together* given the power to become the sign of the advent – visibly, perceptibly and, God willing, credibly.

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<sup>81</sup> BARTH (fn. 76), 703 (Church Dogmatics, transl. by G. W. Bromiley, vol. IV/1, Edinburgh 1956; vol. IV/2, Edinburgh 1958, 621).



*Deutsche Zusammenfassung*

Charakteristisch für die Kirchenlehre der Reformatoren ist die «Kirche im Dual», also das Konzept einer Kirche, die notwendigerweise gleichzeitig in einer sichtbaren (historischen) und einer unsichtbaren (bzw. verborgenen) Dimension existiert. Diese Kirche im Dual ermöglicht es, die Wahrheit der geglaubten Kirche von den Unzulänglichkeiten sichtbaren Kirche-Seins zu unterscheiden. Durch gegenseitige Bezogenheit beider Dimensionen lässt sich gleichzeitig ein Auseinanderfallen in ein dualistisches Kirchenverständnis verhindern.

Die evangelischerseits postulierte *ecclesia invisibilis* stellt aber einen ökumenischen Stolperstein dar, der eine interkonfessionelle ekklesiologische Konsensbildung noch immer behindert. Wie also könnte sich reformatorische Theologie auf eine ökumenische Öffnung hin weiterentwickeln, ohne die Überzeugungskraft ihres mehrdimensionalen Kirchenverständnisses preisgeben zu müssen? Vorgeschlagen wird hier eine Neudefinition der Kirche im Dual, welche die Sichtbarkeit der Kirche nicht mehr als Abbild einer wesentlich verborgenen Wahrheit darstellt. Als Herausforderung erweist sich die Frage, wie die wesentlich sichtbare Kirche formuliert werden kann, ohne dass dadurch die unverzichtbare Dynamik einer vom freien Geist Gottes geschaffenen und getragenen Gemeinschaft in Frage gestellt wird.

Als Lösung bietet sich an, die Vorstellung von der *ecclesia invisibilis* durch den Begriff der «sichtbaren geistlichen Gemeinschaft», also einer sich unter den Bedingungen der Geschichte manifestierenden Gemeinschaft in der Kraft des Heiligen Geistes, zu ersetzen. Die sichtbare geistliche Gemeinschaft ist die Kirche im neu definierten Dual, welcher nicht mehr eine unsichtbare und eine sichtbare, sondern eine transformative und eine signifikative Dimension eignet. Beide dieser kirchlichen Dimensionen sind erkennbar in ihrem gelebten Vollzug: In ihrer transformativen Dimension erfährt die Kirche immer von neuem ihre eigene Umgestaltung in den Leib Christi; in ihrer signifikativen Dimension hingegen wird die Kirche ermächtigt und berufen, zum Hoffnungszeichen für die ganze Schöpfung zu werden. Indem die Kirche in der Kraft des Geistes von sich weg auf ihr Haupt Jesus Christus zeigt, indem sie dann mit Christus den Blick auf Gott als den Schöpfer der neuen Welt richtet, wird sie zum geschichtlich wirksamen Zeichen des Advents.