

Invisible Church?

An Ecclesiological Idea Reconsidered

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Christian faith has from its outset included a notion of relating to transcendent reality, to that which is beyond human experience. As sight plays a prominent role in human experience, the transcendent reality has typically been referred to as invisible – in contrast to the visible realities of this world. The center of this transcendent reality is God – invisible and still (paradoxically enough) associated with the phenomenon of light: he “dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16).¹ This notion also constitutes the concept of *faith* as the human ability to have knowledge about and relate to the transcendent, invisible reality: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

The knowledge of faith is not limited to the invisible, however, but is also a tool for understanding the visible world. In Hebrews 11, the statement of the relation of faith to “things not seen” is followed by a statement of faith as a key to the interpretation of the world, an interpretation that includes a relation between the visible and the invisible: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (Heb 11:3). In the Letter to the Colossians this relation is understood in Christological terms, describing the historical figure Jesus as “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). In the same passage he is also characterized as “the head of the body, the church” (Col 1:18), thus pointing to the ecclesiological relevance of this theme.

Nothing in this text sanctions the later idea that the relation of the church to the invisible God through Christ should imply that the church itself can claim a similar invisibility. It rather seems to be part of those earthly realities that point beyond themselves to realities not seen. When the concept church (*ekklesia*) is mentioned in New Testament texts it simply refers to the fellowship of Christians. This fellowship is primarily understood as local groups of believers (e.g. 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2), even if it is combined with the idea of the unity,

¹ All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

and thus the singularity of the church (cf. the reference to the “church of God” in 1 Cor 15:9 and Gal 1:13) (Küng: 1981, 79–87).

This rather basic meaning of the church as the fellowship of Christians related to God in Christ was soon supplemented by a more advanced and complex understanding of the concept. As the church grew to include the teeming millions of the Roman Empire its identification became more ambiguous. In the doctrinal development the church not only continued to be the social context of Christian faith, but was also included in the content of this faith – as we find for instance in the Nicene Creed: “We believe in [...] one holy, catholic, and apostolic church” (Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 22f).

As faith according to Hebrews 11:1 is “the conviction of things not seen”, the inclusion of the church among the objects of faith may draw the church in the direction of the invisible. A contribution in this direction is also the apparent mismatch between the qualities attributed to the church in the creed (e.g., one and holy) and the church in its actual state. This raises the question of whether the church in which belief is confessed is the actual empirical church, or some invisible reality beyond the empirical and visible. And if the church confessed is the invisible church, what then is the relationship between that church and the church we experience? The idea of an invisible church thus leads to a certain duality in the understanding of the concept *church*, between a visible and an invisible church, connected but still in some respects distinct from each other.

Throughout the history of Christian theology the notion of the invisible church has played a prominent role as an ecclesiological idea. Although the concept has hardly any support in the New Testament, it has provided a conceptual framework for expressing important ecclesiological insights. Only in a strictly Biblicist thinking would such a concept be *a priori* illegitimate. In the context of systematic theology it should rather be judged by its function in a general ecclesiological framework.

In spite of (or maybe rather because of) its prominent role, the notion of the invisible church is no unified concept, and it has been used with rather different meanings and given different functions within ecclesiology. Any discussion of the concept therefore has to take into account the different versions of the idea of the invisibility of the church. In the next section of this article I will present two examples of how the idea has been interpreted and utilized, as well as the theological concerns that lie behind the concept in each case. This should not be mistaken for a comprehensive overview of the different meanings of the

concept, but only as a presentation of important examples. To my knowledge, the full “history of the invisible church” has yet to be written.

I will then turn to some sociological perspectives on the question of the “invisibility” of social groups, before returning to the question as to whether the theological concerns behind the idea of the invisible church could be accommodated without recourse to so problematic a concept.

Two types of the invisible church

The following two examples of how the invisibility of the church has been articulated are not to be understood as covering all versions of the concept. They are intended as examples, albeit important and influential ones. Another important version of the idea of the invisible church which will not be treated here is that of the heavenly church as an invisible counterpart to the human church on earth (cf. Hegstad: 2013, 45–49).

Type 1: Its true members are unknown and thus the true church is invisible

The transformation of the church from a sect-like grouping to a religious institution for the populace at large posed serious challenges for ecclesiology. The mixture of committed and not-so-committed members in the same church organization raised the question of the true church in a new manner. Who were the true believers, and where was the true church?

For Augustine this issue primarily plays upon the difference between the empirical church and the future “City of God”. While the present church includes both good and **bad**, the future church will be perfected and without any trace of evil. In the present church there are those who will not be part of the church in its perfected state. At the same time there are those who do not believe now but are destined to become part of the perfected church:

She must bear in mind that among these very enemies are hidden her future citizens; and when confronted with them she must not think it a fruitless task to bear with their hostility until she finds them confessing the faith. In the same way, while the City of God is on pilgrimage in this world, she has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints (Augustine: 1984, 45).

While the difference for Augustine between the two forms of church is based on divine predestination, for the Lutheran reformers the main question is where to find true faith as opposed to dead or false faith. While the real church consists of the real believers, the empirical church includes also those who only appear to believe and do not have true faith in their hearts. The notion of the true church “hidden” in the visible was developed as a response to two challenges. In the face of the Roman Catholic understanding of the church as an outward institution, the reformers held up the church as a fellowship of believers and of true faith. To the agitation of the radical reformers who wanted to establish a *pure church*, the reformers responded by stressing the indissoluble unity of the true church and the external community. Although distinguishing between the hidden church that cannot be seen, on the one hand, and the outer, visible church, on the other, Luther does not make any absolute distinction between the two, but regards them as qualities of the same church (Althaus: 1966, 287–293; Elert: 1965, 226–229; Neebe: 1997, 215–44).

The classic expression of this distinction is to be found in article VIII of the *Augsburg Confession*:

Although the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints and those who truly believe, nevertheless, because in this life many hypocrites and evil people are mixed in with them, a person may use the sacraments even when they are administered by evil people. [...] Both the sacraments and the Word are efficacious because of the ordinance and command of Christ, even when offered by evil people (Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 43).

The article accepts the validity of the church as a visible community, since the means of grace are administered in this context. As a fellowship gathered around Word and sacrament, this church consists of both those who have true faith in their hearts and those who do not. As such it hosts but is still not identical with the church “properly speaking” that includes only the saints and true believers.

Melanchthon’s comments on this question in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* reveal that this distinction can be interpreted in various ways. Here he refers to the allegation made against the reformers that they understood the church as a “platonic republic” rather than as a reality. He ripostes that the reformers believe “this church truly exists, consisting of true believers and righteous people scattered through the entire world” (article VII–VIII, here VII–VIII, 20; Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 174–183, here 177). The church consists of specific people. In reality, however, these people do not constitute a distinct group, as the church is

“principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons”. At the same time it “has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ” (article VII–VII, 5; Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 174). Melancthon thus tries to secure the connection between the two forms of church, at the same time confirming the inner and hidden church as church in the truest sense.

Identifying the hidden church by reference to the invisible faith is widely represented in later Lutheran theology. An example of such an ecclesiological approach can be found in the dogmatics of the Danish theologian Regin Preter. Preter takes his point of departure in the Augsburg Confession’s understanding of the church to be a gathering of true believers as constituted by the Word and faith. While the Word is outward and visible, a believer’s faith remains invisible. This duality between the visible Word and invisible faith makes the church simultaneously visible and hidden: visible because the church is constituted by the Word, and hidden because the church is a community of the faithful (Preter: 1967, 515–545).

As regards the church as a communion, this to a large extent belongs in Preter’s perspective to its hidden reality. The church’s visibility is primarily associated with the Word and sacrament as the visible sign of God’s grace: “It is manifest through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments” (Preter: 1967, 527). Thus the church becomes primarily visible through the administration of Word and sacrament by the ordained ministry.

Preter’s ecclesiology is a clear example of the potential of the idea of the invisibility of the church in legitimizing the institutional church, including the role of the pastor as the one responsible for preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. While the church as a community remains in the sphere of the inner and hidden, the church’s outer reality is primarily understood as an institutionally embedded facilitator of grace.

While Preter’s adoption of the reformer’s idea of the hidden church is brought forward to support the legitimacy of the institutional church, the notion has recently also been adduced in the debate on the so-called “folk church” in a Nordic setting, i.e. the role of the former Lutheran state churches in continuing to facilitate the religious life of the majority of the population (cf. Eriksson/Gunner/Blåder: 2013). In an article on the future of the folk church, the Norwegian theologian Trygve Wyller identifies the invisible, hidden church as those who have received religious citizenship in baptism, and thus remain part of the church even if they do not participate in its activities or profess their faith. The visible church is valid

only insofar as it supports and confirms this invisible church, and according to Wyller this should be an important criterion in the ongoing debate on the structure of the Church of Norway. An identification of the visible church as the real church would imply that it was becoming a sect rather than remaining a Lutheran church (Wyller: 2011).

Even if Wyller refers to the traditional Lutheran understanding of the hidden church, he clearly turns it on its head. While the hidden church in the Augsburg Confession is a more restricted entity than the visible church (since not everyone in the visible church has true faith and does not belong to the hidden church), for Wyller the hidden church is a much wider entity than the visible church, including as it does those that do not (or very seldom) reveal their affiliation to it.

While the notion of the invisible church in Prenter's perspective serves as a legitimization for the institution of the church, Wyller's understanding serves as an argument for the continued importance of the folk-church model, even when the empirical basis for this model is weakened. By resorting to the concept of the invisible church, the missing empirical basis serves rather as an argument for the superior theological value of the hidden reality.

Type 2: The church is invisible as the body of Christ

An understanding of the invisible church based on the invisibility of (true) faith is not the only option for understanding the concept. In the twentieth century an understanding of the church based on the New Testament image of the church as the body of Christ (cf. e.g. 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:23f; Col 1:18.24) has come to be rather influential in both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology. In Catholicism, this idea has served to counterbalance a fairly institutional understanding of the church (Dulles: 1987, 47–62). In Protestantism this ecclesiological motif has been advocated by such influential figures as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. Common to these approaches is an understanding of the church in analogy to the incarnation: as the body of Christ the church includes both the human and the divine.

In his early work on ecclesiology *Sanctorum Communio* Bonhoeffer interprets the church Christologically, on the basis of the idea of it as the body of Christ. For him this means that the church is a form of existence for Christ himself, the church is *Christus als Gemeinde existierend* ("Christ existing as church-community," Bonhoeffer: 1998, 141, 199, 214).² This

² For more on Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church in other works than *Sanctorum Communio*, see Green: 1999 and Nielsen: 1989.

does not exclude an interest in describing the church as an empirical reality in the world, available for sociological investigation. At the same time, his understanding of the church as a form of Christ himself leads him to a certain duality in his understanding of the real church and the empirical church, between the church as Christ himself and the church as a fellowship of people. As the body of Christ, the church is invisible, as a social entity, it is visible: “The church is visible as a corporate social body in worship and in working-for-each-other. It is invisible as an eschatological entity, as the ‘body of Christ’” (Bonhoeffer: 1998, 141).

In spite of this duality Bonhoeffer attempts to show how there is still a close connection between the two, and how the sociology of the church is of theological significance. The distinction is necessary owing to the sinfulness and imperfection of the visible church, which makes it necessary to distinguish between “the empirical and the essential church” (Bonhoeffer: 1998, 217; *empirische und wesentliche Kirche*). While holiness is an attribute of the invisible church, sinfulness is a mark of the visible: “Here we still walk in faith, which means we can see nothing but our sin, and accept our holiness in faith” (Bonhoeffer: 1998, 212).

Not unlike Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth in his discussion of ecclesiology in Volume IV of *Church Dogmatics* is concerned to say something about the visible and empirical church.³ He argues against an ecclesiological docetism that does not take seriously the visibility of the church. Just as the individual Christian lives his or her life in space and time, the church too exists, not as an abstract entity, but as a concrete fellowship of human beings in space and time, visible to all, he asserts (Barth: 1956, 653; Barth: 1965, 723f).

Because of the church’s Christological foundation, this is not all that is to be said about its visibility. As the body of Christ, the church is *Jesus’ earthly-historical form of existence* (Barth: 1956, 661). This means that the church is not only visible, but at the same time *invisible*, just as the glorified Christ is visible only to the eyes of faith (Barth: 1956, 660f). Ecclesiology and Christology are thus analogous: just as Jesus as Son of God has assumed a human nature and entered the visible world, so has the church a visible and an invisible dimension, even if Barth admits that the analogy has its limitations (Barth: 1965, 722–730).

In contrast to the understanding deriving from Augustine and Luther, this way of understanding the invisibility of the church shows little interest in the distinction between true

³ The passages on ecclesiology can be found in § 62 (Barth: 1956), § 67 (Barth: 1958), and § 72 (Barth: 1965). Cf. the critical analysis in Healy: 1994.

and false members of the flock. The invisible church is thus not the invisible community of the true believers among the visible fellowship of the baptized, but rather the church in a certain abstraction from the people that belong to it. As the body of Christ, the church in this perspective seems to have a certain independent existence beyond its manifestations in the empirical world.

The theological basis for this understanding is primarily the Christological analogy drawn from the New Testament image of the church as the body of Christ. We may certainly ask whether this image is taken too far when what originally seems to be a metaphor describing the concrete fellowship of the church is taken as a description of an invisible reality beyond any such fellowship. The sociological basis for such an understanding, at least as regards Bonhoeffer, is to be found in a way of thinking that allows social entities to be *reified*, i.e. given an ontological basis independent of the people that belong to them. Bonhoeffer explicitly subscribes to such an understanding when he introduces the notion of the “collective person” applied to social groups in general, and the church in particular. A collective person is a group entity that functions as an individual and is therefore ontologically independent. In this case Christ himself is the collective person of the church, which complicates any identification with the empirical church (Bonhoeffer: 1998, 76–80, 97–106).

A Christological identification of the church as exemplified by Bonhoeffer and Barth might from one point of view be understood as a rather “high ecclesiology”: the church is not only human, but also has a divine aspect. However, by attributing all the weighty theological characteristics to the *invisible* church, little is left to be said about the visible. A high ecclesiology afforded to the invisible church leaves only a “low ecclesiology” for the visible church (cf. Healy: 1994, 265).

A sociological perspective on the invisibility of the church

In the case of Bonhoeffer the understanding of the invisible church based on the analogy with Christology meant a *reification* of the church, i.e. an understanding of the church as an entity with an ontological status abstracted from the individuals that belong to it. In Bonhoeffer’s thinking this is a theological usage supported by a type of sociology that allows for such an understanding of social entities.

In an article discussing the possibilities and limitations of Bonhoeffer's early work, sociologist Peter L. Berger takes him to task for resorting to this type of abstract and non-empirical sociology. Bonhoeffer's concept of social reality in *Sanctorum Communio* leads, according to Berger, to an extreme sociological realism, assigning social institutions a strange character of independent being. In contrast, Berger contends that such institutions only exist by virtue of human actions and human meaning, and have no separate and independent existence (Berger: 1963, in particular pp. 76–78).

Berger also raises an *ethical* argument against this kind of social ontology. To understand institutions as analogous to persons attributes to them a value in their own right. According to Berger, however, “no institutions can be of ethical significance in and of themselves, but only insofar as they serve and protect real persons – that is, real and individual human beings.” In Berger's perspective, this also applies to the church (Berger: 1963, 78).

His warning against assigning an independent ontological status to social institutions abstracted from real people (i.e. a reification) does not amount to a denial of the objectivity of social reality as such. Groups, institutions and societies do exist in the real world, not only the people who belong to them. As pointed out in the classical study on the sociology of knowledge which Berger wrote with Thomas Luckmann (Berger/Luckmann: 1971), the objectivity of human society is experienced in a variety of ways, e.g. when challenging social norms. In such a situation the reality of society is encountered through a wide range of measures, from mild forms of social control, to law enforcement through the police and penal system.

Society's objective reality does not however imply that it is accessible for direct observation in its totality. Human actions, individually or as a whole, are observable, as are material aspects of society, such as buildings, objects and documents. Society *as such*, however, is not accessible to direct observation – it remains in a certain sense “invisible”. According to Berger and Luckmann, the reality of society is constituted by the shared knowledge of society, knowledge broadly understood as including all forms of explicit and implicit, descriptive and normative ideas. Such knowledge is of societal significance to the extent that we share it with others. It is in fact shared knowledge that makes society possible. Society exists only because people share the idea that it exists. Being part of society means sharing in the knowledge of society (Berger/Luckmann: 1971).

This understanding of the objective reality of society may very well be applied to the church as a social entity. From a social scientific perspective the church cannot be observed in its totality. In this sense the church is “invisible”, even if it still is an empirical reality. This “invisibility” is not special to the church, but applies to other groups and institutions as well as to society. There is thus no need to apply a special ontological or theological type of invisibility to the church in order to take this into account.

This observation might also serve as a comment on Wyller’s attempt to utilize the idea of the invisible church to interpret and defend the folk-church model (cf. above; Wyller: 2011). Wyller’s concern is to include all the baptized in the understanding of the church, including those who seldom express their relation to it through word or practice. These church members are not as “visible” as those who might gather frequently for worship or are involved in church activities. Yet this does not make them “invisible” in any ontological sense. This group of church members is available for empirical investigation, quantitative or qualitative, as is frequently done by various studies within sociology of religion and other disciplines.

Even if there is a genuine theological question as to how this group of church members should be evaluated and interpreted in an ecclesiological context, assigning them a specific ontological status different from other groups available for empirical research seems baseless and unnecessary. The “invisibility” of this group of church members is not ontologically different from the “invisible” aspects of other social formations. Like all social phenomena they are available for empirical, sociological investigation, even if no such research is able to cover all aspects of a phenomenon. As in all phenomena there will always remain a certain hiddenness – a hiddenness that belongs to the empirical world itself and does not imply a special theological category of hiddenness or invisibility.

An ecclesiology of the visible: A constructive proposal

In its different versions the notion of the invisible church has played an important ecclesiological role. It has served important theological concerns, at the same time having the negative consequence of drawing theological attention away from the church as a concrete fellowship of people. Not surprisingly, the notion of the invisible church has been formed by the dominant thought forms of the time. In the philosophical frameworks utilized by theology

over the centuries, including a heavy Platonic influence, distinctions between visible and invisible, the immanent and the transcendent, below and above, outer and inner, earthly and heavenly have quite naturally played an important role.

In contemporary theology such thought forms have lost out to historical and empirical ways of thinking. A common trait among such influential theologians as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson is the focus of attention on God's work in the world in history. In this line of thinking God's relationship to the world is interpreted through the lens of eschatology, anchoring the salvation of the world in the future, not primarily in the transcendent. As the *eschaton* is anticipated in the acts of God in Christ, eschatology is a tool for interpreting the present. This historical-eschatological approach has served as a tool for renewed interpretation of various theological topics, such as the Trinity, soteriology, political theology and ecclesiology.

In *The Real Church* (Hegstad: 2013) I have made use of the insights gained by this type of theological thinking for ecclesiology. The main thesis of the book is that the church in the theological sense is the church as it is experienced in the world, as a fellowship of people. The church as it exists in the world is the only church and the real church.

This does not mean that a theological understanding of the church collapses into a subset of sociology. Theology has more to say about the church than what can be said from a purely empirical point of view. The difference between a sociological and a theological understanding of the church is not that they refer to different objects, sociology to the visible fellowship of people, theology to the invisible object of faith. Rather, the theological perspective means that the same (visible and empirical) object is understood in its relation to God in Christ, to his presence now, and his coming in the *eschaton*.

The framework of this article does not allow a full elaboration of this thesis. I will therefore limit myself to relating it to the two understandings of the invisibility of the church presented above. Although I do not subscribe to either of them, they both represent important theological concerns that have to be taken into account in any ecclesiology. In the following I will try to identify these concerns and show how they can be accommodated within a framework that does not make use of the notion of the invisible church.

Starting with the second model (represented by Bonhoeffer and Barth), its concern is to secure the close relationship between the church and God in Christ. This relationship is established by using the New Testament image of the church as the body of Christ, interpreted as a sort of *identification* between Christ and the Church. As Christ himself is not available

for empirical observation, this means that the church as the body of Christ has to be an invisible reality. It is doubtful, however, whether the New Testament texts really justify this type of ontological identification. The concept “body of Christ” is clearly a *metaphor* and should not be interpreted literally. The meaning of the metaphor is to point to the intimate relationship between Christ and the church, defining the identity of the church and commissioning it as a tool for Christ’s work in the world. In the New Testament texts this image is used alongside other images such as the “temple of God” (2 Cor 6:14; Eph 2:20ff) (Roloff: 1993, 100–110, 227–231; Banks: 1980, 62–70; Hegstad: 2013, 25–30).

Even though the concept of the body of Christ has a distinctive metaphorical aspect associated with it, it is important to stress that Paul undoubtedly wishes to say something about the reality to which the metaphor refers. In other words, it is more than just an illustration. What it seeks to illustrate is not some sort of divine (and invisible) quality of the church itself, but rather the intimate relationship between the human (and visible) church and the reality of the divine. This divine reality itself can of course not be located as an object in the empirical world. Even if God is present and at work in the world, the divine in itself is not available for observation. If the church has some sort of divine nature as well (as the Christological analogy suggests), this implies some sort of invisibility. If, however, we understand the church as fully human, and the *relationship* to the divine as the factor that makes it church in a theological sense, then the church itself remains fully visible while maintaining a relationship to the hidden reality of God himself.

In Christian ecclesiology this relationship to the divine has been found in the presence of God when the church gathers for worship. A key text is the promise of Jesus in Matt 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (cf. Volf: 1998, 135–137; Hegstad: 2013, 17–20). This text is of special interest for our inquiry, as it combines the concrete and empirical (“For where two or three are gathered in my name”) with a statement about the divine presence in the world (“I am there among them”). This perspective qualifies the church in a fundamental Christological way: it is the presence of Christ in the fellowship of believers that makes the church a theological reality. This Christological qualification is at the same time a Trinitarian qualification: in Jesus, God the Father is present. After Pentecost the presence of Jesus happens through the Holy Spirit.

A similar understanding of the church as a human fellowship constituted by the presence of Jesus is expressed in article VII of the *Augsburg Confession*: “The church is the assembly of saints (*congregatio sanctorum*) in which the gospel is taught purely and the

sacraments are administered rightly” (Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 43). The reference to Word and sacrament serves as a qualifier to the understanding of the presence of Jesus: it does not happen unmediated, but through certain core practices among those gathered, namely the reading and preaching of the gospel and the sacramental acts of baptism and eucharist.

Related to the question of (in)visibility, this leads to an understanding of the church as a visible fellowship, engaging in visible practices, pointing to an invisible reality beyond itself. This reality is not the church itself, not even an aspect of the church, but rather the divine reality that – in the perspective of faith – makes the church the body of Christ and the people of God.

In this perspective, to believe in the church (as confessed in the creeds) does not imply a belief in the church as an invisible reality; it rather implies trust in the promise of divine presence in the visible fellowship. *To believe in the church is to believe in the promise that Jesus is present among those who are gathered in his name.*

In the first model (Luther, Melanchthon, Prenter) the basic concern was to distinguish between true and false in the church, between those who are genuine believers and those who only have the outward appearance. Rather than establishing this distinction in the visible church through attempts at creating a “pure” church, the distinction is located in the “hearts” of the believers, thus making the true church the hidden fellowship of these true believers.

Within a theological framework based on a historical-eschatological perspective, this concern may be met in a different manner. Rather than locating a church free from falsehood in the hearts of the believers, it may be understood in an eschatological perspective as an expression of the church’s relationship to the coming kingdom of God. In such a perspective, the difference and the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God serves as an important ecclesiological key (Pannenberg: 1998, 27–38; Küng: 1981, 54–55, 88–104).

As an eschatological reality the kingdom of God is both a future and a present reality. It is *already* present in the world, though *not yet* fully realized. Ecclesiology too should be seen through the eschatological, *already-and-not-yet* interpretative lens. On the one hand, Jesus is already present in the church, on the other hand, the full fellowship between God and humanity in the kingdom is not yet here. A fellowship that gathers in Jesus’ name is thus an anticipation and a foretaste of the perfected human fellowship that is to be realized in the forthcoming kingdom of God (Hegstad: 2013, 30–34).

The relationship between the church and the kingdom of God can be characterized by the two terms *sign* and *anticipation*. As a *sign*, the church points beyond itself to something

else, something greater. In the church, the reality of the kingdom of God is *anticipated*. The fellowship with God in which humanity will participate at the final consummation is anticipated in the church, through the presence of Jesus among those who are gathered in his name. Pannenberg sums this up in the following manner:

The church, then, is not identical with the kingdom of God. It is a sign of the kingdom's future of salvation. It is so in such a way that this future of God is already present in it and is accessible to people through the church, through its proclamation and its liturgical life (Pannenberg: 1998, 37).

This anticipation of the fellowship of the kingdom of God within the church is typified by contradiction and ambivalence. The church manifests by its fellowship not only the fellowship of the kingdom, but also the fellowship of sinful humanity. Holiness and unholy, belief and disbelief, will all exist side by side in the church until the final consummation. This shows the necessity of endorsing a fundamental *eschatological reservation* when it comes to the church as it exists now: not everything or everyone in the church will be part of that consummation. Between the church and its final destination is the inevitability of judgment day. This judgment is not only an indicative of the *world* – of everything *not* being church – but also indicative of the *church itself* (cf. Matt 7:21ff; Luke 13:24–30; 1 Pet 4:17).

In this perspective the distinction and tension between truth and falsehood, between holy and unholy, between unity and division, exists within the church as it is present here and now in the empirical world. These two sides of the church's existence are presently inseparable, and what the church *really* is must therefore be understood from the eschatological point of view. Rather than understanding the notion of the church “properly speaking” (*proprie*, cf. the *Augsburg Confession*, article VIII; Kolb/Wengert: 2000, 43) as referring to a dichotomy between outer and inner, visible and invisible, it should be understood as the tension between the church in its present reality and as an anticipation of the fellowship of God's kingdom. The point is not the difference between the idealized fellowship and the real fellowship, but that between the fellowship of the church as it is experienced here and now, and the fellowship that will one day be experienced in the perfect kingdom of God.

Final remarks

The idea of the invisible church has played an important role throughout history. In this article I have presented two versions of the concept. Ideas of the invisibility of the church have served to secure important theological concerns, but have also had consequences for the understanding of the empirical, visible church. On the one hand, it has made theology less relevant in the understanding of the empirical church. When the real church is relegated to the invisible sphere, the visible church becomes the arena of pragmatic concerns. On the other hand, the empirical church has become less relevant for the theological understanding of the church, for ecclesiology in a dogmatic sense. Instead, ecclesiology has become a discussion of various *ideas* of the church – not the church itself.

Overcoming this split would make ecclesiology more relevant for the understanding and practice of the empirical church, and the empirical church more relevant for ecclesiology. In order to bring this about, the basic question of the visibility versus the invisibility of the church has to be furnished with a satisfactory solution. In this article I have indicated a possible direction in this quest.

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