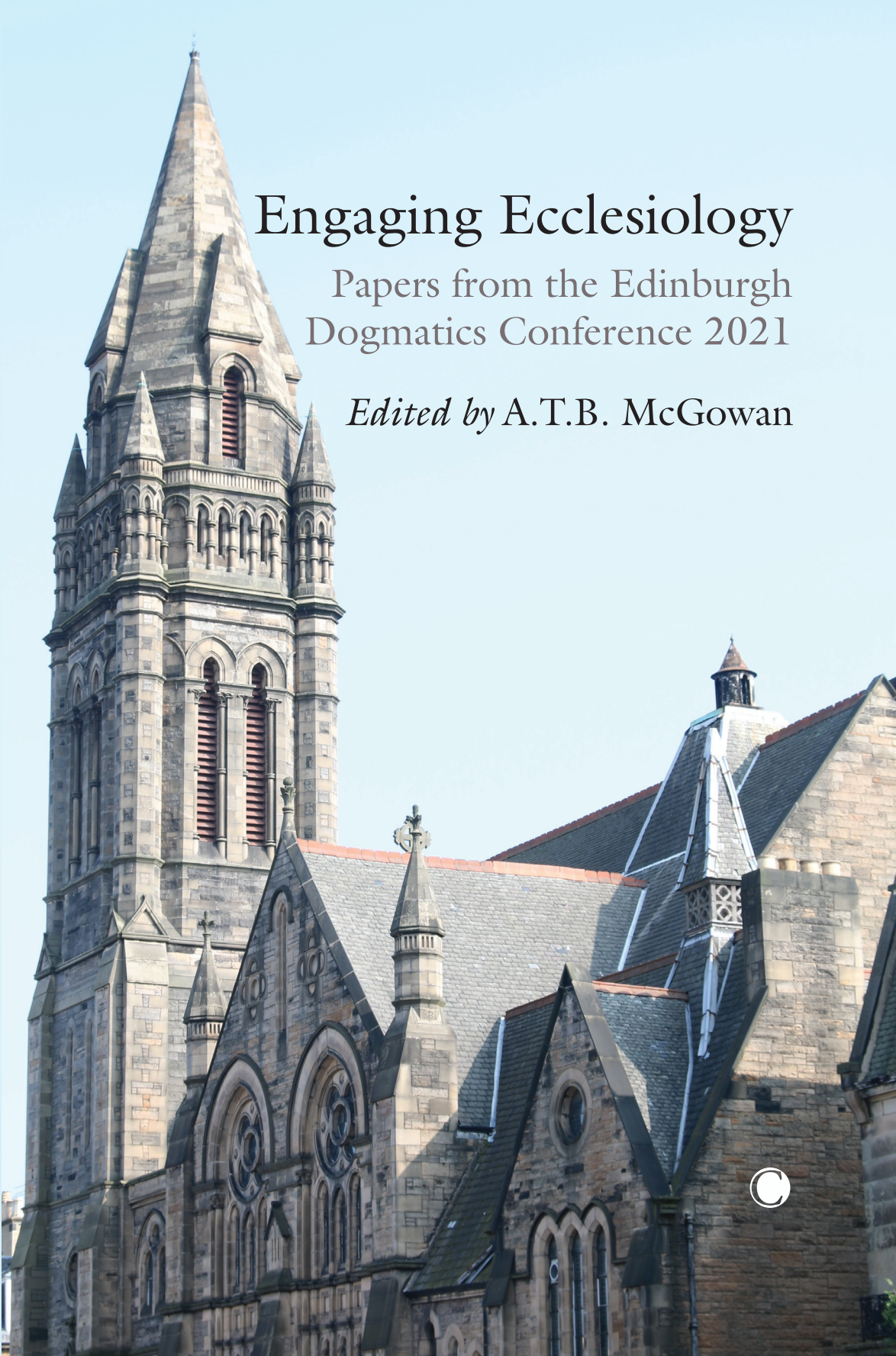

Engaging Ecclesiology

Papers from the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference 2021

Edited by A.T.B. McGowan

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Introduction

As chairman of the eighteenth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, I am delighted to write this introduction to the published version of the papers delivered at that conference. For those who do not know of this conference, let me begin by providing some background details.

Rutherford House was established in 1982 in Edinburgh by the Rev William Still and others, as an evangelical and Reformed research and study center. In its early phase of life, it was a residential library and a publisher, and, in addition, organized or sponsored numerous reading groups, study groups, and conferences. It also sought to promote biblical and evangelical thinking in the churches, by organizing training for ministers and elders, producing journals and by engaging with the major issues of the day from an evangelical perspective. Its major academic contribution is the Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference, which has taken place every two years since 1985. Since the Tyndale Fellowship, of which some of us were members, focused on biblical studies, it was thought that we could make a parallel contribution by devoting ourselves to systematic and historical theology, through hosting a conference on Christian Dogmatics. The vision behind the conferences was to create a forum where academic Reformed theology could be presented in a positive way, in engagement with others who perhaps did not share all of our theological views but were broadly sympathetic and were themselves writing and teaching constructive Protestant theology. In this way, we created an opportunity for academics and ministers from various traditions to come together and encounter one another. It was agreed that the conference would be biennial, alternating with the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians' conference, which is also biennial and which some of us attend.

The titles of the first few conferences indicate the range of topics under consideration: "The Challenge of Evangelical Theology: Approach

& Method" (1985); "Issues in Faith and History" (1987); "The Power & Weakness of God: Impassibility & Orthodoxy" (1989); "Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell" (1991); and "The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age" (1993). The normal practice was to produce a book after each conference and some notable volumes were published. Prominent speakers were invited to all of these conferences, and this resulted in serious and sustained debate. It would take up too much space to list all of the contributors over the years, but they have included T. F. Torrance, Paul Helm, Colin Gunton, Henri Blocher, Cynthia Brown, Bruce McCormack, David Wright, Julie Canlis, Kelly Kapic, Oliver O'Donovan, Elizabeth Shively, Michael Horton, N. T. Wright, Karla Wubbenhorst, Lewis Ayres, Francis Watson, Katherine Sonderegger, Don Carson, John Webster, David Fergusson, Donald Macleod, Kees van der Kooi, Kevin Vanhoozer, and many more. The conferences have attracted many speakers and attendees from overseas. For example, in 2017, papers were given by scholars from the UK, France, the Netherlands, the USA, Australia and Hong Kong.

In 2019, Rutherford House was renamed the "Rutherford Centre for Reformed Theology" and moved from Edinburgh to an office in the Highland Theological College in Dingwall. The vision for the work has been clarified and sharpened (see www.rcrt.scot) but the core commitments remain in place. There was no Dogmatics Conference in 2019, as these transitions were taking place, but we were determined to resume in 2021.

It had been intended that the eighteenth Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference would be held in Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh, from the first to the third of June 2021. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, the decision was reluctantly taken to hold the conference by Zoom. Although this was disappointing, there were also significant benefits. People from all over the world, who would have been unable to travel to Edinburgh, were able to take part. Over seventy people signed up to attend the conference, from eleven countries: the Netherlands, Germany, the USA, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Japan, Colombia, and the UK. This was the highest number attending an Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference for some years and was certainly the conference with the highest number of countries represented. Indeed, we had many subsequent contacts from participants in Asia who said that normally they would not be able to attend such a conference in Scotland because of the travel and accommodation costs involved and thanked us for making their participation possible. This is to say nothing of those who faced a travel ban due to the pandemic.

We were planning the conference just as the pandemic was breaking and we did not know if anyone would be allowed to travel to Edinburgh, so we did something we had never done before: we chose all of our speakers from the UK. Our reasoning was that, even if borders were closed, they should be able to attend. This did not in any way lower the standard of excellence of the speakers. The papers were presented by a veritable pantheon of fine scholars: Professor Oliver Crisp; Professor Tom Noble; Professor Tom Greggs; Professor Gerald Bray; Professor Stephen Williams; Dr Andrew Clarke; Professor Tony Lane; and Professor David Fergusson. In the event, they were not required to travel, and the event became a Zoom conference. We are very grateful to the Rev Stuart Love who organized the technical aspects of the conference and to Mr. Mark Stirling of RCRT for his support.

The subject of the conference was ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church. Within RCRT there is a current focus on ecclesiology and this book is one of an initial six volumes to be published in this area by in the Pickwick Publications imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, under the general title of the "RCRT Ecclesiology Series."

The church, especially in Europe, is in steep decline. Many mainstream denominations are losing tens of thousands of members each year, seem unable to attract and hold the attention of young people and have seen hundreds of church buildings closing their doors. In contrast, many churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia are growing. How are we to account for this? The other major problem is the disunity of the church with schisms and secessions and disruptions meaning that many towns and cities have dozens of churches, each maintaining an independent existence. This is to say nothing of the proliferation of new churches, independent fellowships, house churches and more. Given Jesus' prayer that the church might be "one," how can we justify our divisions? Another problem concerns the worship, liturgy, and doctrine of the church with its many "options." This is to say nothing of the outreach of the church, its mission and evangelism. Are we fulfilling the Great Commission?

Perhaps even more significant questions revolve around the nature and purpose of the church. For many professing Christians today, the church seems almost to be an optional extra. This is in marked contrast to the Westminster Divines who, in the Westminster Confession of Faith 20:2, said: "The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation as before under the law), consists of

all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation." This statement stands in the tradition of Cyprian and other early Fathers. How are we to negotiate the differences between these "low" and "high" views of the church?

As evangelical Christians in the Reformed tradition, RCRT believes that these problems and questions can only be answered and dealt with through a careful biblical and theological examination. Hence our current preoccupation with ecclesiology. Having said that we stand in the Reformed tradition, it should be noted that we espouse a particular type of Reformed theology. There is an increasing tendency among some to narrow the scope of what may be called "Reformed" in a somewhat partisan manner, convinced that only their particular version of Reformed theology is worthy of the name. This is deeply unhealthy and is entirely contrary to the true nature and spirit of Reformed theology, to say nothing of authentic Christian discipleship. From the beginning, Reformed theology has been a "school" of thought with many "strands." In the earliest days of the Reformation, scholars throughout Europe were developing Reformed ideas. These various "strands" in the "school" of Reformed theology did not always agree and often came to contradictory conclusions. They also produced confessional statements, which were different from one another in structure and content, yet all were recognized as "Reformed." There was a healthy debate between the "strands" and no one strand was regarded as having all the truth. Those who hold to the Reformed faith today must resist recent attempts to insist that only one "strand" of Reformed theology is acceptable. Like the early Reformers, we must learn to show respect for Reformed brothers and sisters who choose to express their theology in different language and with different emphases. The RCRT seeks to espouse a humble, gracious, faithful, and respectful Reformed theology.

With those convictions and that attitude to fellow Christian scholars, the 2021 Edinburgh Dogmatics Conference presented the opportunity to think theologically about the church. The papers presented covered a number of significant topics, ranging from patristic commitments (Gerald Bray) to Reformation studies (Stephen Williams) to doctrinal issues (Oliver Crisp) to the sacramental (Tony Lane) and to issues both practical and critical (Andrew Clarke and David Fergusson). Finally, we had two essays

exploring Tom Greggs book *The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*, the first in a projected three volumes on Dogmatic Ecclesiology.

I hope that you enjoy reading these essays and that, in doing so, you are drawn deeper into thinking about the life of the church and its significance in the purposes of God for the salvation of the world, as it declares the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Professor A.T.B. McGowan

Abbreviations

ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
CCC	*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, with Modifications from the Editio Typica. New York, Doubleday, 1997
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NPNF1	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series
NPNF2	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Contributors

Gerald Bray was librarian of Tyndale House, Cambridge from 1975 to 1978, when he was ordained in the Church of England and served in the parish of St Cedd, Canning Town (Diocese of Chelmsford) until 1980. From 1980 to 1992 he taught ecclesiastical history and doctrine at Oak Hill Theological College in London. From 1993 to 2006 he taught at Beeson Divinity School, where he is now a research professor. He is now also Distinguished Professor of Historical Theology at Knox Theological Seminary. He is the director of research at the Latimer Trust at Oak Hill Theological College in London.

Andrew Clarke is Honorary Professor in biblical studies at the University of Aberdeen. He served as research librarian at Tyndale House from 1990–1995 and then as senior lecturer in New Testament at the University of Aberdeen (1995–2015). He currently serves as Leadership Development Lead with the Scottish Baptist Union. His role is to work with ministers and church leaders as they look to develop their gifts and skills in leadership and ministry.

Oliver Crisp is the Professor of Analytic Theology and Director of the Logos Institute for Analytic and Exegetical Theology. He joined the Divinity School in the autumn of 2019, having previously taught at Fuller Theological Seminary in California (2011–2019), the University of Bristol (2006–2011), and the University of St Andrews (2002–2004). He has also held postdoctoral research fellowships at the Center for Philosophy of Religion, University of Notre Dame (2004–5; 2019), and the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton (2008–2009).

David Fergusson is Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, having formerly been professor of systematic theology in the University of Edinburgh. He serves as dean of the Chapel Royal in Scotland

and dean of the Order of the Thistle. He is also a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (2004) and a Fellow of the British Academy (2013).

Tom Greggs holds the Marischal Chair of Divinity (the oldest separated Divinity chair established in 1616) at the University of Aberdeen and is a founding co-director of the Aberdeen Centre for Protestant Theology. He also currently serves as head of Divinity at Aberdeen. He previously held a chair in historical and doctrinal theology and, until 2011, when he joined the University of Aberdeen, was professor of systematic theology at the University of Chester. He has also taught at the University of Cambridge. In 2019, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Tony Lane is professor of historical doctrine at the London School of Theology. He studied mathematics and theology at Oxford and Cambridge before joining the school's faculty in 1973. He was course leader for the school's BA program for twelve years before becoming director of research from 1996–2008. In 2000 he was recognized by Brunel University as professor of historical theology and in 2004 he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity by Oxford University.

Tom Noble is professor of theology at the Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City. He taught theology at Nazarene Theological College, Manchester (UK), for twenty years, serving also for twelve years as academic dean, before joining the NTS faculty. He was secretary of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical and Theological Research for five years, and now serves as chairman of the Christian Doctrine study group. He is on the board of the Manchester Wesley Research Centre and has served as President of the Wesleyan Theological Society.

Stephen Williams holds MA degrees in modern history from the University of Oxford and theology from the University of Cambridge. After a period there as Henry Fellow, he received his PhD from Yale University (Department of Religious Studies) in 1981. He served for a brief period in Oxford at the Whitefield Institute for theological research before his appointment as professor of theology in the United Theological College, Aberystwyth (1980–1991) and then as professor of systematic theology in Union Theological College, Belfast (1994–2017). He was appointed honorary professor of theology at Queen's University, Belfast, in 2017 and elected Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales in 2018.

1

Mapping the Church

Current Challenges of History and Mission

David Fergusson

In what follows I seek to articulate three key claims. First, we should avoid simple definitions of the church by favoring instead a models-based approach that suggests a plurality of ways of being and acting. Second, we should contest the relentless deconstruction of church history by seeking a more nuanced account that balances repentance with appreciation. And third, we should inspect some of the inflated claims around mission for the sake of a more sober reading of our current condition and our likely short-term future.

The Church as a Necessary Condition of Christian Faith

From my time as an undergraduate in the 1970s, I recall a talk by Professor Murdo Ewan McDonald in Glasgow. He tackled the claim by Malcolm Muggeridge that we should dispense with the church and concentrate on Jesus only. Provoked by this suggestion, Murdo Ewan wanted to engage Muggeridge in public debate. He indicated that he would put two points to him. Did not Jesus gather around himself a group of disciples who were the harbingers of the church? The formation of a body of followers was surely

integral to Jesus' ministry—any attempt to separate these is anachronistic. His second claim was that the only way in which the story of Jesus could be transmitted is through the medium of the church. The gospels themselves are the product of the early church and without the sustained witness of the institution through the centuries neither he nor Muggeridge would have received the faith. These two points remain fundamentally correct in my opinion and provide an argument for the necessity of the church. But there is a third claim that also needs to be articulated which is part of the case against separation of Jesus and the church. As the body of Christ, the church is the community in which Christian faith is experienced, nurtured, and celebrated. The Christian life may not be confined to the church, but it cannot be lived except in this communal setting with other Christians. Its significance is not merely instrumental. There are of course examples of people who have managed to keep the faith while separated from the church. Confined to his prison cell, Bonhoeffer is one heroic case. Yet his separation from fellow Christians was a constant source of lament, especially on Sundays when he was acutely conscious of his absence from the worshipping community. In a seminal essay, Andrew Walls has written,

> [T]he first effect of Christian expansion is not the production of saved or enlightened individuals, but of congregations . . . The influence of Jesus not only produces group response; it works by means of groups, and is expressed in groups. The influence of Jesus, that is, operates in terms of social relations.[1]

The sacrament of baptism makes good sense in this respect. As a mark, recognized by the ecumenical church, it signals not only a commitment to Christ but membership of his body, the church. These remain inseparable. Calvin is insistent on this point, repeating Cyprian's claim that you cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the church as your Mother.[2]

The Need to Inflect Traditional Ecclesial Dictums

In one sense, there has always been a doctrine of the church, if we intend by this a substantial body of theological literature that reflects upon the church as both a divine creation and a human institution. And there have been

1. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 10–11.
2. Calvin. *Institutes*, 1012.

some notable contributions to this in recent years, not least by Tom Greggs.[3] At the same time, we should note Pannenberg's observation that the church was not a subject of sustained theological investigation until relatively late. He points out that the doctrine of the church did not become a separate locus of theological study until the late middle ages and the Reformation.[4] While theologians wrote about the church, especially Cyprian and Augustine, they did so in occasional ways, often in other contexts and drawing upon a multiplicity of images. Despite some schisms, notably that of the Donatists in Augustine's time, the doctrine of the church was not developed in the manner of other loci since it was not the site of major ecclesiastical division. The claim that the church was one, holy, catholic, and apostolic was made in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catecheses* (c350), these four adjectives later appearing in the Nicene Creed (381). Notwithstanding this body of work, Pannenberg maintains that the Reformers were the first to introduce the church as a discrete dogmatic theme, for example in the final edition of the *Institutes* (1559) with Calvin's extended treatment of the true church, its marks, offices, and sacraments. The task here was not to defend innovation as to indicate continuity with and recovery of apostolic themes.

Despite the historical consensus, some of the better-known slogans in ecclesiology have recently been problematized and are in need of some restatement, if not discarding. The aforementioned Nicene Creed speaks of the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. This has been widely accepted throughout the ecumenical church, though questions were raised in the sixteenth century about where it was to be located and how it was to be recognized. The marks or notes of the church in the Reformed confessions were an attempt to address this problem. The church was visible through Word and sacrament—the preaching of the Word of God and the correct administration of the two sacraments. The ecumenical advantage of this claim lay in part in its minimalism. The *satis est* of the Augsburg Confession enabled recognition of any church where Word and sacrament could be discerned.[5] This enables us to view different churches, despite still lacking full visible unity, as making a vital contribution to the wider body of the universal church. In our own time, the project of receptive ecumenism seems to be governed by this assumption.[6] Notwithstanding the failure of

3. Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, vol. 1.
4. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 21–27.
5. Augsburg Confession VII.
6. Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning*.

ecumenical aspirations in the late twentieth century, the need for greater visible unity remains a Scriptural and missional imperative.

The Augustinian distinction between the visible and invisible church was frequently employed at the Reformation. By separating these, one could distinguish the invisible company of the elect through the ages from the visible church into which entire populations were baptized. The visible church could thus remain an authentic church of Word and sacrament, even though not all its adherents belonged to the elect. One could also hold that the elect might include some not adhering to the visible church through the mark of baptism, though this remained a point of division amongst the Reformers.[7]

With the tendency in modern theology to reconfigure the relationship between the church and the world, the distinction between the visible and the invisible church has had to be recast, both in Catholic (Vatican II) and Protestant theology.[8] If the church is witness, foretaste, and sign of the coming kingdom of God, then its fundamental identity is visible.[9] A purer invisible church requires a doctrine of election that stresses a decreed and final separationism. This has generally not commended itself to modern ecumenical theologians. Yet the visible-invisible distinction does not need to be abandoned entirely. If notion of an invisible church can provide us with a keen sense of our links in the *communio sanctorum* to the church across space and time, then it continues to serve a useful function. This need not be tied to earlier assumptions about the nature of Christendom and the doctrine of election.

A further difficulty with characterizing the visible church in terms of its two marks is the lack of sufficiency in the definition. Word and sacrament are necessary but what about church order, offices, oversight, government, and forms of historical continuity? Such concerns moved Bucer and the authors of the Scots Confession to add a third mark, namely that of pastoral discipline. Today we are nervous around this supplementary note, partly owing to its subsequent preoccupation with sexual morality. Yet its

7. These ecclesial distinctions were not without their practical tensions after the Reformation. Was the church a national institution into which everyone was to be baptized or a gathered company of those adhering to the true faith? See Spurlock, "Boundaries of Scottish Reformed Orthodoxy 1560–1700," 359–76.

8. For example, Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3, 722–55.

9. George Lindbeck points out that there was never a doctrine of the invisible Israel. "The Church," 179–208.