I

Thinking about the Church

Every journey needs a place to begin, and a reason for beginning. Ours begins where it will end, not with the doctrine which is to be the chief focus of our study but with talk about the church, a concern for the health of which is one reason for setting out on this particular expedition. Is it wrong in a work that is intended to serve the academy as well as the church to draw attention to such a reason? Not if it is sound method to indwell one's subject. Not if the church itself is a consequence of the ascension, as we believe, and not merely the inventor of a doctrine of the ascension. But with that primary presupposition stated, and the reader forewarned as to which side of the road we are travelling on, let us not delay our beginning; the journey will be a long and demanding one.

Eucharist and Ambiguity

There is no context in which to ground serious thought about the church but the eucharistic assembly. Here Christian theology in general takes root in its own proper soil.[1] Here ecclesiology is furnished with the object of its special consideration. We quite agree, then, with John Zizioulas, who in his book *Being as Communion* calls for a recovery of 'the lost consciousness of the primitive Church concerning the decisive importance of the *eucharist* in ecclesiology.' He goes on to argue, in fact, that it is the eucharist which constitutes the church, not the reverse,[2] a point some find difficult. But whoever is at least prepared to assert, with a well-known Faith and Order paper of the World Council of Churches, that 'it is in the eucharist that the community of God's people is fully manifested,'[3] must also admit that just there the nature of the church is laid open (in a qualified way) to genuine observation and interpretation.[4]

[1] 'A heuristic impulse can live only in the pursuit of its proper enquiry. The Christian enquiry is worship' (M. Polanyi 1962:281).

[2] 1985:20f. (see also P. McPartlan 1993); cf. Hans Frei 1975:159.

[3] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Eucharist §19.

[4] Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* makes this very point, reminding us that 'it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the Church' (A. Flannery 1975:1).

Other starting points for thinking about the church are common enough, of course. Denominational concerns override doxological ones; political arenas compete with the eucharistic assembly as the dwelling place of ecclesiology; sociologists or scientists become the doctors of the church. But the fact remains that the church itself is established only by 'the upwards call of God in Christ Jesus,' and that call is made concrete precisely in the eucharistic liturgy. *Sursum corda!* is the cry that heralds the possibility of ecclesial being, and to that possibility ecclesiology is naturally bound.[5]

Is this really an assumption the whole church can share? Even if we grant the priority of a doxological starting point over a strictly institutional or perhaps an ethical one, must we name the eucharistic assembly specifically? Let us turn the question around. Where *shall* we begin if not at the very place where the bond between head and members is proclaimed, where the church's identity is renewed in memory and hope, where its unity is plainly set forth?[6] The simple answer is that no other situation presents itself as an adequate alternative. All the various resources on which we must lean for insight into the church – scripture, creed, tradition, baptism, the experience of the faithful – live and move and have their being in a community knit together around a common table.

Immediately we are faced with certain consequences of conceding that the eucharist provides the axis along which the heuristic impulses that govern a sound ecclesiology will run. First, we cannot approve of an ecclesiology that attends primarily to the past, that is dominated by a ponderous history of traditions perspective and related concerns about formal unity. Such an approach is too abstract. Neither, then, can we afford to substitute an ecclesiology that is focused primarily on the future, very much the modern temptation.[7] By this we mean both the church's own future (its institutional viability) and that of the world. Where the latter is concerned it must be asked, not out of pessimism or hysteria but for reasons known only to itself, whether the church should not be quite dubious about its prospects.[8] In any event the church, unlike the world,

[5] The transcendent dimension of the church requires an internal and strictly doxological engagement for its interpretation (cf. Phil. 3:14, Rev. 1–5). Interfaith dialogue may have something to contribute; even the secular paths to understanding the church are not devoid of insight (cf. J. Moltmann 1977:4ff.). But it is not *vis-à-vis* the world's own social, religious or scientific communities that the truth about the Christian communion is ultimately to be uncovered.

[6] Or *denied*, which helps to account for our ecclesiological confusion. Cf. G. Wainwright 1978:140f.

[7] According to Jürgen Moltmann (1988:23), 'the basic question of modern times is the question of the future. Therefore Christian theology of modernity must necessarily be a theology of the future.' But cf. 1979:16.

[8] See Matt. 24, e.g., or Rev. 8:1–5 (a specifically liturgical passage). That the same need not be said of the church itself is due entirely to its eucharistic possibilities. What we mean by that will later become clear; but it will already be clear that we are no longer speaking in a way that typifies the WCC.

takes its bearings not so much from planning committees and strategic summits as from the new meaning given to its *present*, as in the Spirit it actually meets with the one it remembers and for whom it hopes. A eucharistic ecclesiology must reckon faithfully with that fact, seeking first of all to accompany and assist the church as it inhabits the present in a transformed and transforming way.[9]

Second, and more profoundly, we are brought face to face with the eschatological nature of ecclesial being as we know it. Zizioulas and Geoffrey Wainwright are among those who have drawn to our attention the fact that the eucharist is in every respect an eschatological act. No doubt there are different ways to articulate this, not all of which are compatible. But since it is only Christ who can make the church the church, perhaps the best way is to point directly to the central paradox of the *Christus praesens* and the *Christus absens*. The one around whose table we are said to gather is 'in a manner present and in a manner absent,' to borrow Calvin's way of putting it.[10] Is there anything about the church that is unaffected by this peculiar ambiguity at its very heart? The oddity of the eucharistic situation must never be overlooked, even if we are ashamed of the quarrels it has occasioned! For it is in its eucharistic ambiguity that the church is marked off from the world ontologically and not merely ideologically. It is in confessing that ambiguity that its appeal to the Holy Spirit is spared the banality, or rather the blasphemy, of reducing to self-reference. It is in knowing the provisionality of its own existence that the church is able to speak with some integrity of a reality that lies beyond itself and beyond the world in which it lives. To put the matter more positively, there is something more to the church than meets the eye, and that 'something more' belongs to the christological enigma which the eucharist introduces.

To grapple with the mystery of the *quodammodo praesens et quodammodo absens* is indeed ecclesiology's constant challenge. Where either side of that mystery is neglected the mystery of the church itself is undone. Not long ago a rather cheeky editorial in *Theology Today* encouraged us to learn to appreciate 'the presence of the absence,' something we propose to do; but to take such advice at face value, eschewing the eucharistic movement from absence to presence, would be to give up believing in the church altogether.[11] On the other hand, those who are content to build lopsidedly on the wonderful promises of presence in Matthew 18:20 or 28:20, for example, will still find it difficult to press through to a serious view of the church. In neither case are presence and absence brought into their right relation, for they are not seen *together*, as the eucharist demands.

[9] As Zizioulas (1985:180) points out, in the eucharistic community the Spirit 'brings the eschata into history,' confronting 'the process of history with its consummation, with its transformation and transfiguration,' thus transcending its linearity.

[10] Quoted by J. B. Torrance 1996:82 (see Chap. 5 below).

[11] Hugh T. Kerr 1986:1ff. (see Chap. 6 below).

Thus the intimate association between ecclesiology and eschatology is lost from view and the church is gradually assimilated to some more or less worldly agenda.[12]

Third, it becomes clear (how did it ever become unclear?) that the liturgy of the sacrament and the liturgy of the word also belong together as different dimensions of a single reality.[13] Just because Jesus Christ, even in his eucharistic parousia, is in some sense still absent or yet to come, it is plain that neither his presence as word nor his presence as sacrament is meant to stand alone. Disembodied word or mute substance would be unnaturally divided aspects of his self-giving to the church. Each needs and qualifies the other, testifying jointly to the provisional nature of his presence and the graciously contradicted fact of his absence. Where they are prised apart the consequences are always negative; only by correcting any imbalance here can the church hope to keep properly in touch with its Lord, and so to guard its worship and its theology from subjection at critical points to the restricting canons of worldly orthodoxy.[14]

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In our day the liturgical net has been strained by a catch of bewildering variety, but the simple pattern laid out by Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century will suffice to set before us these two moments of Christian worship in their natural relation. Justin's description runs like this:

> And on the day called Sunday all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray . . .[15]

In other words, scriptures, sermon, and prayers are the backbone of the liturgy of the word, in the church as in the synagogue. If we allow that the prayers may take many forms (confessions, intercessions, psalms, hymns, etc.), and if we leave room for the fact that words of instruction

[12] i.e., a self-generated eschatology of some sort arises to impose an ecclesiology of its own making. Ironically, this problem is common to the anti-sacramentalist traditions *and* to the sacramentalism they have learned to fear.

[13] Gregory Dix (1945:36f.) reminds us that in origin the synaxis and the eucharist were distinct, and remained detachable, though the normal custom was to combine them in regular Sunday worship. All we are claiming here is that there is indeed an organic connection between them in the life of the church (cf. Frei 158).

[14] The imbalance fosters both rationalism and a false mysticism, which is paralleled by a dangerous dichotomy between the church as visible institution and as mystical body, wreaking havoc with Roman and Protestant ecclesiology alike (cf. T. F. Torrance 1988:270ff., 1993:5ff.).

[15] First Apology §67 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 1).

and exhortation may not be confined to the president, this outline still fits most churches today. Only one major element has been added and hallowed by more than a millennium of common tradition: the recitation of the creed. That distillation of the essential content of the liturgy of the word, though it arose under pressure of controversy, quickly became a vital doxological act in its own right.[16]

Much might be added about the messianic pattern of receiving and responding to the word of God, but we must go on to speak of the transformation of the contents of the liturgy of the word as they are ultimately caught up and fulfilled in the eucharist itself. Justin continues:

> and when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks has been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons.

In this manner words are transfigured by and into actions. The kiss of peace is put in place of mere reminders of brotherly regard; gifts are presented in place of mere acknowledgment of indebtedness to God; above all, communion together in the body and blood of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit replaces mere confession of a common hope and need.[17]

Just here the eschatological character of the liturgy comes to the fore, together with its cosmic scope and ramifications, as Justin's conclusion indicates:

> But Sunday is the day on which we all hold our common assembly, because it is the first day on which God, having wrought a change in the darkness and matter, made the world; and Jesus Christ our Saviour on the same day rose from the dead.

This observation helps us to set the mystery of the church in a much wider context; that is, in the context of a more mundane ambiguity, the ambiguity of the whole world that is owed to the fall. The eucharistic event, as a movement from absence to presence, is as such a movement from chaos to order, darkness to light, death to life. It is an inventive, ordering event on the same plane as the act of creation, though its actual results are largely withheld from our view. It is an event aimed at nothing less than the restoration to creation of its own proper goodness, and of its lost transparency to the goodness of God.

We are quite right, then, if following the habit of the eastern church we insist on connecting that movement with the appeal to the Holy Spirit

[16] That it is widely ignored in churches that concentrate mainly on the liturgy of the word is odd; that it is now regarded only as 'the language of love' by many churchmen and theologians in the sacramental churches is a clear sign of the twofold malaise of rationalism and mysticism.

[17] See §65f. for details.

(i.e., with the epiclesis, to use the technical term). Was it not the Spirit, hovering over the waters of our world at its birth, who brought it into being *as* a world? Likewise, the Spirit is the one who brings the church into being as a new creation in Christ by making possible its communion with him. The ἐπίκλησις and its answer, complete with the χαρίσματα, are entirely necessary if any genuine response is to be made by us to the ἄνω κλῆσις or upwards call – that is, if any real fellowship with Jesus in the presence of the Father is to occur. For it may indeed belong to the church to make claims that embrace heaven and earth, yet of itself it has no claim on either; without the Spirit its ambiguity is not at all paradoxical but quite mundane.[18]

The movement itself, however, is christologically grounded, and it is dramatized by the handling of the bread that is presented. Gregory Dix, a twentieth-century liturgist, has highlighted the fourfold action of taking, blessing, breaking and distributing which is at the core of every eucharistic liturgy.[19] What this drama declares is the sanctification of our humanity through the life and passion and heavenly intercession of Jesus – what for economy's sake we will often refer to as Jesus-history – a sanctification that actually takes effect in us as we and our histories are made by the Spirit to overlap with him and his.[20] That overlap, it is plain, requires the deconstruction and reconstruction of the reality belonging to us, as the sacrament of baptism likewise declares. That is why the *Christus praesens* is and remains for us the *Christus absens*, why the Spirit himself is given only in pledge form. For the course marked out by Jesus, the movement that reverses the fall and leads 'upwards' to the new creation, is a radical departure from our own.

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About the eschatological qualification of ecclesial being much more must be said, but there is here an epistemological rebound we do well to observe at the outset. Is it not ecclesiology's special contribution to the theological enterprise to draw attention to the fact that all its labours are in vain if

[18] Otherwise put, it is only by appealing to the Spirit – Justin is careful to include mention of the Holy Spirit alongside the Son – that we can insist on the *Christus praesens* at all, a point our study is intended to underline (cf. W. Kasper 1989:186ff., A. Heron 1983b:152ff.).

[19] 1945:48ff. Dix, though not in this context, supports the idea that the 'primitive eucharist is above all else an "eschatological" rite' (see 256ff.); cf. G. Wainwright's *Eucharist and Eschatology*.

[20] If the centre of that overlap is the holy communion – and why should we wish to deny that there *is* a centre? – its periphery is as wide as the experience of the faithful. Yves Congar (3/228ff.) rightly describes the life of the church as 'one long epiclesis.' But that means that we must be careful not to divorce the consecration of the gifts from that of the people who present and receive them; for the work of the Spirit is to bring about a change in the onto-relations not only of the bread and wine but of the eucharistic assembly itself and its participants.

they are not grounded beyond themselves in the mystery of the kingdom of God? That the moment they propose to be self-sufficient, to deal only with what is publicly accessible, they cease to be churchly and hence to be Christian?[21] Ecclesiology is, or ought to be, the conscience of biblical studies, by which we seek to clarify our reading of scripture; of dogmatics, by which we strive to comprehend the faith embodied in the creed; of practical theology, through which we hope to translate the prayers of God's people into a thoughtful course of action consistent with the upwards call. It ought to remind those disciplines (and itself) of their liturgical footing and *raison d'être*, of their epicletic dependency.

Unfortunately, ecclesiology itself is prone to move in just the opposite direction, displaying a keen interest in the church's self-justifying and self-serving agendas. By subtly transferring the church's ambiguity to Christ himself, a process we shall witness many times over in the course of our journey, it stands the eschatological relation on its head.[22] Small wonder, then, if biblical studies often gives the impression that the identity of *Jesus* is a great, perhaps an insoluble, problem; if systematics has detached itself from the creed; if practical theology has for some time looked to the sociologists and scientists for direction. Small wonder if ecclesiology is a discipline that divides rather than unites; if the table of the Lord has become the table of this or that ecclesiastical authority. But to dig further into these matters we must look into the ground of the eucharist itself.

Two Histories

On the road to Emmaus, where only two or three traveled together, they found Jesus in their midst. His path fell alongside theirs and the liturgy of the word began, burning deep into their hearts and minds though their eyes remained veiled. At the house of Cleopas eyes, too, were opened at the breaking of bread. The one who was present was finally recognized, and that decisively, but in the recognition was suddenly found to be absent again. The new creation had apparently begun, but not without its ambiguity.[23]

This remarkable vignette, a prophetic scene situated at the church's foremost border, introduces in narrative form the problem we have already

[21] If the *ordo cognoscendi* must follow and obey the *ordo essendi*, as Karl Barth attempted to impress upon us, then there is in the eucharist this most fundamental implication for theology and theologians: Our thinking about the church, and all our thinking for the church, must be done in a *churchly* way.

[22] In this light consider again Zizioulas' really quite vital point that the church does not constitute the eucharist but the eucharist the church.

[23] E. Ellis (1991:276) points out that Luke has structured his account to present this meal as Jesus' eighth meal with his disciples, the first of the new creation. Note the parallels with Adam and Eve walking and talking in Eden with the Lord, and eating the fruit in his absence, with the result that their eyes are 'opened;' here the situation is reversed. We may also observe with J. Nolland (1993:1208) that 'a nice irony emerges' at the outset of this encounter, with the disciples remarking on what they suppose to be the ignorance of *Jesus*.

identified as the central challenge of ecclesiology, the problem of the presence and the absence. Jesus is seen here as one who still moves in parallel with his people, if with considerably greater freedom of movement than theirs. He is resurrected to walk the old roads, but without being subject to all their usual conditions. In some sense he is already in a manner present, in a manner absent; perhaps even in a manner here, in a manner there. The privilege and the need of his people is to find him at least momentarily visible or tangible in their midst, instructing them and nurturing them for the journey together – for without him it is not at all clear that they *are* a people. The eucharistic assembly is to be the place where this will happen. It is the place where Jesus will reveal and interpret himself; where the church, therefore, will also interpret itself in his presence and renew its gospel mandate.[24]

But how and when and in what way precisely will these paths touch in the necessary manner? With the cross and resurrection the history of Jesus has taken a startling turn, and so also the history of God's people; that is the beginning of the good news. How, though, are the two to be held together? Has not the sudden turn in Jesus' own history to some extent thrown his people off his track, at least temporarily, so that it is difficult to speak of parallel paths? We cannot avoid the fact that the Easter events introduced a discontinuity into the life of Jesus which renders the kind of links we are used to impossible and irrelevant. The path of Jesus cannot be traced as if by some kind of extrapolation.[25] How then are we to speak sanely about his presence, and thus to speak also and secondarily of our own ecclesial existence?

Many answers to this critical question, which has been posed under a great variety of guises, have been attempted down through the centuries. The problem of the presence and the absence, of the Lord who is seen but not seen, who is at table but not at table, who is both with us and away from us, who is walked with yet awaited, has dogged ecclesiology from the beginning. According to Dietrich Ritschl, the question 'What does it mean that Jesus Christ makes himself present?' lies at the center of christology itself, and of all theology.[26] He attempts to show that the notion of a timeless God, accompanied by a negative view of ordinary world history and an insistence that God's decisive actions lie in the past, has led the west as a whole into a theological impasse precisely through an inability to come to grips with this question. Only a new focus on the *Christus praesens*, he contends, a new starting point for theology in the ongoing 'history of God' as the present subject of our own lives, can move

[24] Cf. Frei 135ff., 149. See also Dix's comments (56ff.) on the last supper as a *chabûrah* meal, a concept which helps to link the Emmaus story to the church's eucharist. It is not a eucharist, of course, but a pre-Pentecost encounter with the risen Jesus.

[25] Mapping Jesus-history by extrapolation (e.g., L. van den Brom 1994) is for those who do not reckon with that history as Jesus' *own*.

[26] 1967:20f.

us ahead.[27] We may ask, however, whether Ritschl's thought-provoking analysis really penetrates to the heart of the problem. We may even ask whether a new focus on the *Christus praesens* is possible without at once attending more seriously to the *Christus absens*. For the history of God with which scripture and the creeds have to do is the history of the man Jesus, and Jesus, as we have said, has a course all his own.[28]

A course all his own? We have not yet mentioned the ascension directly, but then it is remarkable (as J. G. Davies observed in his Bampton lectures on the subject) how little mention the ascension gets these days.[29] Once it was seen as the climax of the mystery of Christ:

> He was made known in the flesh,
> vindicated in the Spirit,
> beheld by angels,
> preached among the nations,
> believed on in the world,
> taken up in glory.[30]

Once too it was celebrated as the crown of Christian feasts and the ground of the sacraments.[31] Today it is something of an embarrassment. Both exegetically and theologically the ascension is quickly assimilated to the resurrection.[32] Its festival is commonly passed over as a redundant marker on the road to Pentecost, allowing it little or no impact on the shape of Christian life and thought. It is said to smack of the triumphalism we intend to put behind us or of the remoteness of God we want to overcome. For many the very idea conjures up an outmoded cosmology; for a few, something more sinister.[33] But perhaps its greatest offence is that just here the eucharistic dilemma of the two histories, and with it the troubling ambiguity of the church, stubbornly asserts itself. For with the ascension

[27] Ibid. xii, 6f.; cf. 1986:171ff.

[28] If christology is not to collapse eventually into a vague pneumatology, if it is not to be employed simply as a means of saving the appearances in an evolving church, the discontinuity between his history and ours must not be glossed over. Ritschl is not as clear about this as he might be.

[29] 'Of all the articles in the Creed there is none that has been so neglected in the present century as that which affirms our Lord's Ascension into heaven' (1958:9).

[30] 1 Tim. 3:16; note the complex parallelism set up by the combined use of couplets and an abc/abc pattern.

[31] Davies (1969:16) quotes Augustine in support: 'This is that festival which confirms the grace of all the festivals together, without which the profitableness of every festival would have perished . . .'

[32] 'According to the dominant line in the New Testament witness, resurrection and ascension may be considered as different aspects of the one reality of the risen and exalted Lord.' That is all that *Confessing One Faith* (Faith and Order Paper No. 140, §158) has to say about the ascension.

[33] G. Jantzen, in a recent editorial in *Theology*, has even managed to link it with sexism and to read it 'as yet another of the many biblical "texts of terror."'

the track of Jesus-history, still genuinely visible in some sense on the Emmaus road, passes beyond all ken. 'Where I am going you cannot come.'[34]

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It is the divergence of Jesus-history from our own that gives to the ecclesia its character and its name. It is the divergence of Jesus-history from our own that calls for a specifically *eucharistic* link: for the breaking and remoulding, the substantial transformation of worldly reality to bring it into conjunction with the lordly reality of Jesus Christ. The kind of ecclesiology we wish to do is quite impossible, then, without careful attention to the ascension, however difficult and unpromising that doctrine may appear today. Certainly it is true that the divergence in question began at the beginning, that is, with the conception of Jesus. His devotion to the Father, his sinless life, was a profound deviation from our history. His death too was unique, a fact to which its jarring, tomb-opening effects bore witness. With the resurrection and brand new beginnings for Jesus all doubt about his uniqueness disappeared, at least for the disciples, and the ecclesiological problem also came into view.[35] But it was not with the resurrection or on the road to Emmaus that the church began. Its footings were laid on higher and firmer ground. It was not with the resurrection that Jesus' link with his people became inscrutable and enigmatic.[36] Only with his establishment at the right hand of God – 'separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens'[37] – did ecclesial being become possible. Only then did its eucharistic form become necessary, somehow anticipating a second and more profound 'change in the darkness and matter' that is yet to come.

When we want to think about the church we are therefore obliged to think about the ascension, and that is what we propose to do in the present work. We are not unaware of the skeptical response we are inviting even from within the church; beyond it the project can commend itself only as an exercise in the history of Christian dogmatics, on which we hope to shed some further light. The embarrassment of our subject does not much concern us, however. We will come in due course to a consideration of the cosmological difficulties which today beset the notion of Jesus' ascension, only remarking here that there never has been a cosmology into which that part of his story could be fitted without impossible strain. On the other hand, the same must be said of Jesus-history as a whole and

[34] John 7:33ff.; cf. 20:17, also Luke 24:36ff.

[35] Where Jesus' identity was concerned, says Frei (149), the ambiguity was over. But plainly a new kind of ambiguity came into being, an ambiguity in the identity of his followers which also requires our attention.

[36] Not for nothing does the fourth Gospel bracket its magisterial treatment of the ecclesial situation (14–16) with references to Jesus' absence and exhortations to guard against anxiety, a concern which also informs Jesus' high-priestly prayer in chap. 17.

[37] Heb. 7:26, RSV.

of the eucharistic community as such, which brings us back to what we have called the troubling ambiguity of the church.

What exactly do we mean by that? In Jesus covenant history was reduced to the history of one single man, on whom, Christians claim, the covenant community has become entirely dependent for its true identity.[38] But the outcome of Jesus-history was something so radical, in the proper sense of that word, as to leave that community stripped of every earthly distinction from the rest of humanity. Jesus, broken on the cross and restored in the resurrection, was 'taken up in glory' as the representative and judge of all people. Since the ascension the only thing standing in the way of the community's complete dissolution into the world (hence into what is commonly called universal history) is its eucharistic reincorporation into the society of one whose course is known to God alone.[39] The church, then, is marked off from the world, insofar as it is marked off, not by race or culture or even by religion (marks which are definite enough by worldly standards and more or less acceptable) but by its mysterious union with one whose life, though lived *for* the world, involves a genuine break with it.[40]

Now the church is only really itself when it accepts and embraces this situation of radical continuity, and equally radical discontinuity, with the world. But that can hardly be taken for granted! Most of the really thorny issues in ecclesiology, as in Christian spirituality, arise where this uncomfortable tension is rejected and a more stable (or at least condign) identity is sought. So too do the great betrayals of ecclesial integrity to which history bears witness, among which the greatest is surely the church's attempt to hand over its own proper scandal to the Jews, deflecting the animosity of the world onto their shoulders by encouraging the exaggeration of their racial and cultural and religious differences. For insofar as the church seeks to alleviate the eucharistic pressure – usually by denying or falsifying its own much more profound discontinuity with the world – it is bound to spend much of its time and energy trying to cover up for that discontinuity. A surprising amount of ecclesiastical history can be accounted for in just that way.[41]

[38] Cf. Frei 137.

[39] It is a weakness of Frei's work that the ascension is taken too little into account, and the eucharist too, so that the tension of the presence and the absence is eased by talk of 'indirect presence.' That leads (155ff.) to a different construction of the ecclesiological problem as a tension between Christ in the church and Christ in the world. Frei does not overlook our concern altogether, however.

[40] That break is represented by the ascension no less than by the cross; where this point is overlooked the cross itself becomes a mere religious symbol.

[41] It does not follow that Christians should cease to proclaim the gospel to the Jews, or that our theology must be reduced to theodicy, a defense of 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' against crimes committed in his name. Only a theology constructed on its own proper ground, its course set not by our agendas (not even that of a wounded conscience) but by God's own agenda in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, will suffice.

What is not surprising is that the doctrine of the ascension (if it is not rejected outright) is often pressed into service here, precisely by refusing to allow it to teach a doctrine of absence and hence of discontinuity. The following excerpt from a theological dictionary illustrates how readily the ascension is converted into a prop for the notion of universal presence:

> Thus, even if Jesus appears to be absent from his church, in one sense, he is, in fact, more profoundly and intimately present to the church, in another sense. For he is now in 'heaven' with God – in the heaven which, according to the biblical tradition, is a symbol not only of God's transcendence and inaccessibility but also of God's omnipresence. Paradoxically, being in heaven with God, Jesus is also present in the world in the way that God is present.[42]

No doubt there is an element of truth in this, not to mention a quite different intention behind it. But in what way *is* God present, and how can Jesus be present in that way? How does his presence in the church differ from his presence in the world, or does it? (If not, what is the church?) How is he to return from such a heaven, and what can heaven possibly mean for the rest of us?[43] Above all, what does the ascension, so interpreted, do to his humanity? Is there not a marked tendency towards the de-humanization of Jesus, and thus towards that confusion between him and the Spirit that is so prevalent today?[44]

The notion of Christ's universal presence is an exceedingly common one, as we shall see. Whatever its other merits it nicely sidesteps the question of the two histories and the difficult ecclesial situation that goes with it. The burden of the cosmological and the ecclesiological challenge of the ascension is lightened, but at the cost of trifling with Jesus' identity too.[45] What is sacrificed for the sake of this *Christus praesens*, as Calvin noticed long ago, is his specificity as a particular man. Christ everywhere really means Jesus of Nazareth nowhere. In the

[42] L. Swain, *A New Dictionary of Theology* (Komonchak 63). On the whole the entry is a good one, but we cannot resist noting this Sunday School parallel culled from the *Church Times* ('Growing in Faith,' 12 May 1995): 'once Jesus stopped being present in one place at a time, he could start being present everywhere at once. Does that seem strange? . . . Drop the tablet [representing Jesus] into the water. You cannot see the tablet now, but it is still present in the water. Jesus was going to heaven; but he would still be in the world.'

[43] J. Ratzinger (1975:46) suggests that 'it would be a misunderstanding of the Ascension if some sort of temporary absence of Christ from the world were to be inferred from it.' But surely that assertion leads more or less directly to another, *viz.*, that a visible return should 'not be taught as a certainty' (thus the Congregation of the Sacred Office in 1944; quoted with some amazement by Karl Barth, *CD* 3/2:510).

[44] Gordon Fee's massive study, *God's Empowering Presence*, essays for the sake of pneumatology to reclaim the distinction between Jesus and the Spirit in the letters of Paul. Our own first concern is with the integrity of christology, but the health of each depends on the other, and the health of ecclesiology on both.

[45] See Heb. 13:8.

ascension he becomes ἄτοπος in the most literal sense: he is unnatural, absurd, for he has no place of his own.[46] (Vague talk among modern theologians about 'a change of state, not of place' hardly alleviates that difficulty, however effective it may be in turning aside impolite inquiries as to Jesus' actual whereabouts.) For that reason, and others we will encounter later, we begin to hear of the 'post-existent' Christ or about the period *after* the incarnation. In other words, just when the gospel has taught us to think of salvation in the most concrete terms, as an act of God in the flesh and for the flesh, the story of Jesus is turned against itself. His humanity is betrayed and marginalized after all. The ascension means, not the consummation, but simply the *end* of Jesus-history.[47]

When that happens, of course, the problem of the church's own identity is badly compounded; for it is no longer clear who it is that it confesses as Lord. The next step is almost always to fix even more strongly on one or another aspect of its own structure or mission as a guarantee of its fidelity and continued relevance – 'seeking to grasp identity from the fear of nonidentity,' in Hans Frei's phrase.[48] That in turn throws up barriers to eucharistic unity by creating competing notions of the church which must be jealously guarded.[49] In fact, the more the church struggles to establish an identity that can be clearly delineated in worldly (i.e., non-eschatological) terms, the more it suffers fragmentation along its political and cultural fault-lines. And in *that* brokenness it shares less and less with its Lord; at the same time the glass through which it sees grows darker and darker.

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We have, then, a second reason for taking up the doctrine of the ascension, since it is chiefly by way of that doctrine that the church's eucharistic ambiguity is passed on (all in vain) to Jesus. We shall find ourselves arguing what is perhaps an unusual line. It is frequently said that the humanity of Christ used to be the great problem for theology but that today it is his divinity which is distracting and difficult. Our study suggests that the case is otherwise. It is still the humanity of Christ over which we are prone to stumble, and what is required today more than ever is a doctrine of the ascension that does not set his humanity aside.

Such a doctrine will actually require a new and more coherent relationship between the disciplines of christology, ecclesiology and

[46] Frei's main reference to the ascension (see p. 49) is an attempt to counter this notion, but he offers no hints as to how we might do that.

[47] 'Christ is not confined to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I dare not cling too closely to Christ as past event, lest I miss the incarnation present now' (J. Nelson, *Body Theology*, 193).

[48] p. 154 (the context is not ecclesiological).

[49] Cf. 1 Cor. 3:1ff., 11:18f.

cosmology.[50] How that relationship is commonly understood, and what we believe to be a more right-minded approach, we will leave to unfold with the work itself. For we do not intend to launch directly into a systematic consideration of the ascension but to examine at some length its treatment in scripture, tradition and the modern context, making our systematic observations along the way. We will of course keep a constant watch on the manner in which the doctrine of the ascension is brought to bear on the doctrine of the church, and return in our concluding chapter to the concerns of the present one. Our main sub-thesis in ecclesiology may be stated in advance, and it is this: To the extent that the doctrine of the ascension *is* used to dissolve Jesus' humanity, ecclesiology also deteriorates into the impersonal and, indeed, the irrelevant. But we shall have to fill this out from the tradition in order to make much sense of it.

To open up a fruitful discussion of the ascension today (if we may offer this broad hint about the realignment of disciplines) we must be prepared to take Jesus-history far more seriously than our own. Christians have never believed that the cross was the end of that history, nor even the resurrection. To adopt such a view would put us in the strange position of having to fall silent midway through the creed. Yet to continue in full voice is not possible without renewed commitment to the absolute priority of Jesus-history. And here we may recall another occasion, recounted by Luke no less than three times, when after the ascension a small band of travelers again met up with Christ upon their road. This time it was not Jesus whose path was temporarily arrested at a mortal's bidding, but just the reverse. Only one of the travelers saw anything specific at all, but what he saw and heard completely overwhelmed the confident categories of his own existence. The collision knocked him from his seat, provided *him* with a new identity, and thoroughly rearranged his theology in the process. That is what may be called a new starting point!

[50] It will also require new efforts on the part of biblical scholars. Once it was decided that Jesus' identity had been determined by the church, rather than the reverse, the history of tradition – not Jesus' own history – became the proper object of scholarly investigation, and New Testament studies became a branch, albeit a highly independent one, of the self-absorbed ecclesiology we criticized above. But things have already changed somewhat; a new interest in Jesus himself is emerging. We mean to urge that interest on towards the climax of his story.