1

Introduction

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH?

From the very beginning, the Christian faith has been a fellowship phenomenon. Jesus himself gathered the first group of disciples, and after his death the Christians continued to meet in his name. Based upon faith in Jesus, Christian congregations, denominations and movements have grown and developed in various times and places. Viewed from the perspective of faith, this fellowship aspect of the Christian faith is not merely coincidental, but it is of major importance. This is witnessed in the historic Creeds and confessions of the church. Here the word *church* is used to indicate this fellowship dimension. In the Nicene Creed, for example, it states: "We believe in . . . one holy, catholic, and apostolic church," and in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in . . . the holy catholic church, the communion of saints."[1]

So what does it mean to *believe in the church*? Normally, when we speak of believing in something, it is usually something we cannot experience directly. According to the Letter to the Hebrews, faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). We say that we believe in God because God cannot be experienced in the same way as other things in the world. If we understand belief in the church as being similar, this means that the church we believe in cannot be experienced. With such a starting point, it is not surprising that many theologians have referred to an invisible or hidden church, beside or behind the empirical church. The concept of *church* has thus attained a sort of duality: on the one hand, we have the church we believe in but cannot experience, and on the other hand we have the church we experience.

1. Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 22–23.

Furthermore, the obvious disjunction between what is said in the confessions of the church (for example, that the church is one and holy), and the church as we experience it (divided and most often characterized by anything but holiness) points in the same direction. Is it then the invisible church that is one and holy and not the visible one?

While such a model apparently solves certain issues, it also creates others. One issue is how we should actually conceive of such an invisible church and how it is related to the people who belong to the church. Another issue is if theological concerns are so focused upon the invisible church then less attention is paid concerning the visible church. In a way, the church in the here and now becomes something *unreal* in relation to theological ideas about the church. Finally, there is the fact that it is difficult to find support in the New Testament for the notion of an invisible church. In the New Testament the church is, first and foremost, understood as a real and visible fellowship of believers.

In this book I will argue that the question of what it means to believe in the church cannot be understood by introducing a distinction between the visible and the invisible church. My thesis is that there is only one church, namely the church as visible and one that can be experienced in the world. When we confess our faith in the church according to the historic creeds, this is the church we are referring to. This is the only church, the real church. This church is a fellowship of believers, gathered in the name of Jesus around the Word and the sacraments. This confession about the church can be understood as statement of faith because it expresses the belief that this fellowship has a special relationship with the triune God, through the presence of the resurrected Jesus, by the Spirit. Believing in the church means believing that Jesus is speaking truthfully when he promises that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt 18:20).

Such an understanding of the church presupposes seeing the church from an *eschatological* perspective. From the perspective of faith, the church is understood in light of its future as a sign and an anticipation of that fellowship between God and humans which will be brought about by the forthcoming kingdom of God. Statements about the church as one and holy must not be understood as statements about an invisible church behind the visible, but about the church in light of its eschatological destiny.[2]

2. This will be discussed in more details in chapter 2.

The fact that I believe this Christological and eschatological perspective is more apt key for ecclesiology than the traditional distinction between visible and invisible does not mean this distinction does not represent important theological concerns. Not least, it represents an important critical perspective *vis-à-vis* the actual church. As I will show, such concerns can be maintained within alternative theological framework.

BETWEEN SYSTEMATIC AND PRACTICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

If believing in the church implies that we can say something about the church we experience, this has consequences for theological statements about the church. The belief in the invisible church, has often led to an ecclesiology that primarily deals with theological *ideas* about the church, rather than the church as concrete reality. Such an ecclesiology finds its sources in the work of other theologians and in doctrinal documents from various ecclesial traditions. The extent to which there is an interest in the empirical reality of the church has largely been understood as applying a theological understanding of the church to the practical church life.

If ecclesiology is more concerned about the visible church, rather with the invisible, this will influence the way we do ecclesiology. First, this will result in a lessening of the gap between a theological understanding of the church and other academic disciplines. If theology deals with the visible church, the very same church may also be studied from the perspective of historical and social sciences. It is important to clarify how the theological understanding of the church is to be related to, and integrated with, perspectives and results from other disciplines.

Second, if the concrete and empirical church becomes the object of ecclesiology, this means that theology cannot simply see the church as a doctrinal topic. Theology must also take into account what the church actually is. Ecclesiology is not only about the church from a theoretical point of view, but a doctrine of the church as we experience it in reality.

An ecclesiology that sees the church from different angles has its proponents, as exemplified by Don S. Browning's practice-theory-practice-model from his book *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.[3] Understanding the theological project as essentially practical, he distinguishes between four movements in the theological enterprise: descriptive theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and strategic practical theology. The

3. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.

merit of this model is twofold: it attempts to keep the different theological disciplines together within a comprehensive understanding of theology, and it proposes a way of relating practice and theory to each other. Theology is not understood as theory divorced from practice, but as reflection built upon practice, and related to practice. It starts from practice and returns to practice. It starts with the descriptive movement to outline and interpret empirical realities. This descriptive work raises theological questions that have to be worked through in the light of Christian history, tradition and doctrine. In historical theology questions from practice are related to central texts and events of the Christian faith, including the Bible. In systematic theology a critical and philosophical perspective is further added to the theological process by discussing normativity and the validity of truth claims.[4]

Building on the results of the three first phases, strategic practical theology "brings the general fruits of descriptive theology and practically oriented historical and systematic theology back into contact with the concrete situation of action."[5] It asks the question for means, strategies, and rhetoric that should be used in the concrete situation. Contrary to the traditional view, this phase of practical theology is not to be understood as an application to the practice of theology as a theoretical discipline, but rather as "the culmination of an inquiry that has been practical throughout."[6]

When applying this model to ecclesiology, we can see how the first phase entails the necessity of a descriptive ecclesiology which, in the best possible way, can try to understand the church in actual reality. Such a descriptive or empirical ecclesiology not only relates to other disciplines and their results (interdisciplinary), but also integrates within one's own academic work, concepts, methods, and perspectives from other disciplines (intradisciplinary). Not least, this requires the use of empirical methods and theoretical perspectives borrowed from the social sciences.[7] Historical ecclesiology examines the church throughout history and how the church has been interpreted theologically, starting from the New Testament up to the present day. The task of systematic ecclesiology is to

4. Ibid., 47–54.
5. Ibid., 55.
6. Ibid., 57.
7. Van der Ven, *Practical Theology,* 101–2.

understand the church doctrinally and dogmatically. Systematic ecclesiology should also relate to the church as concrete existence. At the same time it should be general enough so as to include insights that are not restricted to the given context. Finally, a strategic practical ecclesiology should revise the fellowship and practice of the church according to what the church is called to be.

In recent years, this desire to work towards a theology that is more related to the concrete and empirical church has been endorsed by other theologians as well. For example, the issue of ecclesiological methodology have been raised by the Roman Catholic theologian Nicholas M. Healy.[8] Healy points out, that a basic weakness in contemporary ecclesiology has been the fact that it has primarily worked with abstract ecclesiological *models*, rather than being related to the empirical church.[9] A result of this way of thinking has led to an ecclesiology that has idealized the church, rather than dealt with the *sinfulness* of the church. Instead of using this model, Healy calls for a *practical-prophetic* ecclesiology that can help the church carry out its mission.

Healy underlines the limited value of ecclesiological models, and points to the fact that such models are in practice understood and applied in very different ways, depending upon the theological framework in which they are used and often includes a predisposed understanding of the church.[10] The aim of ecclesiology should be a reflection of the concrete identity, rather than the formulation of general statements concerning the *nature* of the church.[11]

8. Healy, *Church, World, and the Christian Life*. Another example of a similar line of thought is presented by the fellow Roman Catholic scholar Roger Haight in his three-volume work on ecclesiology: Haight, *Christian Community in History*. Haight describes his objective as: "The primary object of the study of ecclesiology is the empirical church. To phrase the same thing somewhat differently, the subject matter of ecclesiology is the concrete community that exists in history, although not without hope in its eschatological fulfillment" (ibid., vol. 3, p. 35). In comparison to Healy, Haight is more concerned with history. His presentation is, to a greater degree, a presentation of the history of *the understanding of the church*, rather than of the concrete church in history.

9. The idea of ecclesiological models to which Healy refers to has been developed, among others, by Avery Dulles in *Models of the Church*. Dulles' work can be described as comparative ecclesiology. Dulles attempts to understand the ecclesiology of various theologians as expressions of a limited number of *models* that interpret biblical conceptions of the church in relation to concrete situations.

10. Healy, "Some Observations on Ecclesiological Method," 54.

11. Ibid., 57–60; *Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 154–85.

I agree with Healy's concerns that ecclesiology should relate to the concrete church. However, I disagree with Healy that ecclesiology should never attempt to formulate general statements concerning the basic identity of the church. Of course, we can never arrive at a final formulation of the church's identity. Furthermore, both the Bible and Christian tradition are so rich and varied that *any* attempt at formulating what the church is, in more general terms, will clearly represent an incomplete and one-sided picture. However, this is not to undermine the necessity of such a project, but instead it is a continual reminder that all theological constructs are works in process and imperfect.

I believe we should distinguish between different stages of a theological and ecclesiological work. While a practical, descriptive ecclesiology is primarily an examination of the church at a given point in time and space, systematic, dogmatic ecclesiology is an attempt to formulate a valid understanding of the church that goes across time and space (without becoming decontextualized). An ecclesiology that *only* deals with the church in a specific context is problematic, especially when we consider the theological conviction that the church is the *same church* that exists in different places and at different times.

It is important that the stages of practical and systematic theological development are not removed from one another. In order to avoid this, theologians need to be able to communicate and work across the different stages. To do this, we need to see the object of study for both practical and systematic ecclesiologies in such a way they recognize that they are dealing with the *same* object. For dogmatic ecclesiology, this means that all work regarding ecclesiological *ideas* should be considered with an awareness of what these ideas refer to, namely the real, visible church.

Having acknowledged that there are different stages of theological and ecclesiological work, this present book will primarily come under the category of systematic ecclesiology. I will therefore, not investigate the concrete reality of the church and its historical and social preconditions.[12] Within the framework of systematic theology, I will examine the theological *understanding* of the church. However, in line with my understanding of the concrete and visible church as the real church, I will make reference to the *relationship* between the general doctrinal understanding

12. As such, this book is different from the example given by Johannes A. van der Ven in his book: *Ecclesiology in Context*, which takes as its starting point the conditions of the church in contemporary society.

and the empirical reality of the church. In order to do this I will also make connections between the theological perspectives and perspectives from other academic disciplines, especially the social sciences.

CONFESSIONAL CONTEXT AND BIBLICAL BASIS

Even though systematic theology is practiced by individual theologians, it is not without a certain ecclesial context. As I understand it, systematic theology is on behalf of the church and for the benefit of the church. As Karl Barth states in his classical definition of dogmatics: "As a theological discipline dogmatics is the scientific self-examination of the Christian Church with respect to the content of its distinctive talk about God."[13] According to Barth, theology is exercised on behalf of the church and is the investigation of the content of the church's faith and doctrine. At the same time, as indicated by his use of the expression "scientific self-examination," Barth suggests a critical perspective. Theology is not simply a reproduction and apologetic of what the church thinks and does, it is also a critical enterprise. For Barth the criterion for such criticism is given in the *object* of theology, namely God and God's self-revelation as witnessed by the Bible.

The ecclesial context of systematic theology (including ecclesiology) can never be just about the church in general, because the church exists only in and through specific denominations and ecclesial traditions. Any account of ecclesiology has to be placed within a certain context and confessional tradition. As a Lutheran, I write from within the Lutheran tradition. My Lutheran background will therefore influence both the sources I use and my line of argument. Non-Lutheran readers will notice the references I make to the Lutheran confessional documents and in particular the Augsburg Confession. Within a Lutheran framework this is a normal part of doctrinal discourse. The confessional documents do not have the same authority as the Bible, but they are regarded as the primary, authoritative interpretation of the biblical gospel. These confessions, nevertheless, also serve as ecumenical documents in the sense that there is not much in them that is not also to be found within other confessional traditions. These have to be interpreted as documents as set within a certain historical context, and distinctions have to be made between their

13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. I/1, 3.

central doctrinal content and the conceptual and philosophical framing of this content.

Ecclesial affiliation is not only a general denominational or confessional affiliation, it is also an affiliation to a church as placed within a concrete, cultural and social setting. Even if the ecclesiology of this book is not limited to a single context, it will be evident to the reader that I am part of the Nordic "folk church" by the examples and references I make.

The fact that ecclesiology is exercised *within* a specific ecclesial context, is not to limit ecclesiology *by* this context. There are inherent ecclesiological reasons why this is so, due to the fact that there is only *one* catholic and apostolic church. Any account of ecclesiology cannot be limited therefore to only one section of the church. However, it still remains true that this one church only exists within and through concrete *churches*. In other words, ecclesiology always takes place in a specific setting. Even if the ecclesiology proposed in this book has its primary frame of reference within a certain context and tradition, it is not limited to just the Lutheran church, nor is it only written just for Lutherans. Its theme is the Christian church in general, and it is written for an ecumenical readership. With this in mind, I will refer to, and dialogue with, theologians from variety of denominational backgrounds.

When proposing a theological argument that is not only limited to a certain confessional framework, this raises the question of what precisely is the basis for a theological argument. What may be very convincing argument within a confessional setting does not necessarily mean it will have the same value within a wider ecumenical setting. For example, the sources and creedal documents of a particular tradition might contradict and even be in opposition to those of other churches. In the recent ecumenical discourse, there has been an increased awareness of the primary role of the Bible for ecumenical theology. Building upon this common authoritative source, ecumenical rapprochement has often been advanced by a collaborative and renewed reading of the Scriptures. An important aspect of this progress has been to incorporate the insights of modern historical exegesis. This has helped to provide common ground, one that goes beyond traditional confessional readings of the biblical texts.

Following this development, references to biblical exegesis (primarily New Testament) will play an important role in this book. This is not to say that I hold simplistic, Biblicist position, whereupon one imagines that all questions can be simply answered by referring to isolated texts or

to interpreting the Bible without consideration of how it has been understood throughout history.

Using biblical texts as a basis for ecclesial unity has been questioned by, among others, Ernst Käsemann in a famous essay, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church." In his view, the New Testament does not contain one consistent doctrinal system, but rather it includes variety of contradicting doctrinal positions. This means the canon of the New Testament does not constitute the unity of the church; on the contrary it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions.

Käsemann is obviously correct when he says that the New Testament cannot be used as a doctrinal handbook. There are not a seamless amount of proof texts that can support a clear cut theological system. Rather, the various books, and groups of books, all have their own specific theological profile and emphasis. This, of course, also applies to a New Testament understanding of the church, a fact that is demonstrated in an assortment of historical studies made of New Testament ecclesiology.[14] However, it is an oversimplification to draw the conclusion that there are *no* unifying New Testament elements in understanding the church. While exegetes may have historical interests as their primary focus and make deliberate choices in what differences and contradictions are to be highlighted, a theological exegesis in the service of the church will also look for unifying elements. These unifying elements are not to be found elsewhere other than in the central content of the New Testament gospel of Jesus Christ. Biblically based ecclesiology thus has to be theologically and Christologically founded.[15] The possibility of such an exegesis, in contrast to Käsemann's view, is historically valid as verified by the aforementioned role of biblical exegesis in ecumenical dialogue.

For the purposes of this book, this means that the biblical material will play a crucial role. When applying this material, I will distinguish between the use of concepts and the lines of thought presented by the different books and groups of books. At the same time, I will focus on recurring themes as a common basis for a New Testament understanding of the church. As with other questions, the core of the New Testament message is to be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. For ecclesiology, the belief in Jesus as Son of God and savior of the world is basis for any theo-

14. See e.g., Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament*, and Collins, *The Many Faces of the Church,* which include bibliographies of similar studies.

15. Cf. the reflections concerning this question in Küng, *Church,* 15–23.

logical interpretation of the church.[16] Above all, this is reflected in the understanding of the church as a fellowship which gathers in the belief that Jesus is present among those who gather in his name.

Even if the New Testament is the primary and normative basis for all Christian theology (including ecclesiology), doctrinal theology cannot be confined to an account of New Testament theology. Systematic theology is distinguished from biblical theology by the use of concepts and philosophical ideas that are not necessarily identical to those of the New Testament. While the New Testament reflects the experiences of the first Christian generation, systematic theology has to take into account the experiences and reflections of latter generations, while also addressing the challenges and needs of the church of today. Systematic theological ecclesiology has to reflect upon the meaning of the continuous existence of a fellowship of believers who assemble in Jesus name.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ECCLESIOLOGY

In recent years there has been a greater emphasis placed upon the empirical church as the object for ecclesiology and for doing theological empirical research about the church. While this present work wants to contribute to this trend, there is good reason to make reference to other significant ecclesiological developments which have been of importance for the thesis presented in this book.

A very important contribution in the development of the ecclesiological debate has undoubtedly been the reorientation of Roman Catholic theology articulated by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), not least by the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.[17] Since Vatican II we have seen the publication of important and innovative works made to ecclesiology, from Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant theologians.[18] Besides the contributions made by indi-

16. According to Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament*, 11–12, the common Christological foundation is the main unifying element of New Testament ecclesiology.

17. Published in *Teachings of the Second Vatican Council*. Cf. also the Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio)*.

18. Other theologians who have been important influence in my work on ecclesiology are notably: Hans Küng (e.g., *Church*), Jürgen Moltmann (e.g., *Church in the Power of the Spirit*), John Zizioulas (e.g., *Being as Communion*), Wolfhart Pannenberg (e.g., *Systematic Theology*) and Miroslav Volf (e.g., *After Our Likeness*). For a comprehensive overview of recent ecclesiology see Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology*. From the Norwegian

vidual theologians, ecclesiological questions have also played a key role in various ecumenical documents. Although these documents are far from uniform, it is still possible to identify some common trends. Some of these trends can be summarized as follows:

(a) The work of ecclesiology has much more ecumenical profile nowadays than it ever had before. Earlier, ecclesiology was formulated within different confessional traditions, and was often polemically orientated to distinguish it from other traditions. Ecclesiology was seen as a means to articulate a particular confessional character, and was often used to show the ecclesial superiority of one's own church compared to other churches. Ecumenical developments in contemporary theology are now moving ecclesiology in another direction: First, the question of church unity has become a central theme of ecclesiology. Confessional ecclesiology often makes reference to conversational partners from other denominations, be they bilateral or through ecumenical organizations.[19] Second, the discussion of ecclesiological issues not only takes place within the various denominations, or polemically between denominations, but crosses confessional lines of demarcation. This is especially true of ecclesiological research within academic theology, which generally moves across confessional affiliations. Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians refer to each other even if their respective confessional affiliations still are of importance for their particular viewpoints. We can see theological and practical ecclesial developments and movements across denominations, which in various ways, also contributes to ecclesiology.[20] Third, the *subject* of ecclesiology is increasingly not just about individual churches, but the Christian church in a more general sense. This has also become a distinguishing feature among many Roman Catholic ecclesiologists whose

context, I am indebted to the work of Ola Tjørhom (e.g., *Kirken—troens mor*).

19. An important document from a Norwegian point of view is the Porvoo Common Statement, which in 1992 established communion between Anglican churches in Britain and Ireland with Lutheran churches in the Nordic and Baltic regions. In order for this to happen, it was necessary to work on the differing views concerning ecclesiology before an agreement could be reached. See *Together in Mission and Ministry*, cf. Tjørhom, *Apostolicity and Unity*.

20. For example, Charismatic theology, feminist theology and liberation theology. We can see denominational borders also being crossed with shared concerns about evangelization, church planting, and church growth.

work has come to represent not only their own denomination, but that of the church as a whole.[21]

(b) There has been a growing tendency to stress the church's character as *fellowship* (Greek: *koinonia*; Latin: *communio*). This emphasis was a central theme in the Second Vatican Council' teachings on the church, and has ever since been an important motif in further ecclesiological presentations.[22] In the ecumenical movement *koinonia* ecclesiology, is a key when it comes to work towards greater fellowship between the churches.[23] To the extent that we view the church fellowship as something real (and not merely as something spiritual and mystical), this too is an important theme when it comes to relating theological and sociological perspectives about the church to one another. An important factor in this reorientation has undeniably been the major changes in the social formation of the major European churches over the last two centuries. From being the religious dimension of society as a whole, the churches have gradually lost much of their religious hegemony. In many European countries the church membership is a minority compared to the population as a whole. Even in countries where the church members are still the majority of society, the church as both institution and fellowship in relationship to society has a more independent identity. This has led to internal consolidation where churches and congregations are increasingly being seen as distinct fellowships. One outcome of this development has been an increased awareness of the *local congregation's* role. This can be seen in ecclesiological scholarly works and within the practical theological context. Not least, this is reflected in the material about church planting and church growth, which to a large extent, also focuses upon the

21. Both Johannes van der Ven and Nicholas M. Healy can be interpreted as *post-ecumenical* ecclesiologists. Simply stated, this assumes that ecclesiology is about the Christian church in the broadest sense. When van der Ven in his ecclesiology focuses on the Roman Catholic Church, this is for practical and not evaluative reasons (*Ecclesiology in Context*, xiii). Healy defines the object of his ecclesiology as reflecting all the Christian groups who accept the Nicene Creed (*Church, World, and the Christian Life*, 6).

22. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 47–62.

23. For example, see the statements made by the Lutheran World Federation at Curitiba (Hjelm, *I Have Heard the Cry of My People*); the World Council of Churches at Canberra (Kinnamon, *Signs of the Spirit*); Faith and Order report at Santiagio de Compostela (Best and Gassmann, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*); and the report from the Ecumenical Research Institute at Strasbourg *Communio/Koinonia*. I will return to this point in more detail in chapter 5.

local congregation. A result of seeing the church as a distinctive fellowship has put the issue of the correlation between ecclesiology and ethics on the agenda. As moral community the church upholds certain moral standards for its own fellowship and provides a challenge to the ethical and political matters of society.[24]

(c) A marked feature of the theology of the last few centuries has been a renewed awareness of the Christian *eschatology*. This is not only seen as one of many truths, but is understood as the key to understanding Christian faith and theology, and also the church. Accordingly, Christian existence in the here and now is understood in light of the end of history with the second coming of Jesus. With Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God's kingdom is made present in the world. The life of the church and of individual Christians is therefore, characterized by the tension between what is already given, and what is not yet realized. The rediscovery of the essential role of eschatology within theology has furthermore been an important influence in ecclesiology.[25]

(d) The awareness of a church as a pilgrim people moving towards the final consummation, while also acknowledging that the church has lost its majority position in society, has led to a new awareness of the church's *mission*. According to this interpretation, mission is not just a part of the church's history, but is its call that runs throughout all ages. Mission is not only one of many activities the church engages in, but is paramount to understanding the church in its fullness. The church should not just *do mission*, but is by nature a *missional church*.[26]

24. Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauwerwas have, in their various ways, helped to shed light on these issues, see Rasmusson, *Church as Polis*.

25. Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are theologians who have contributed to giving eschatology greater significance for theology in general, which in turn, has influenced ecclesiology. Cf. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology,* vol. III; Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*.

26. Van Gelder and Zscheile, *Missional Church in Perspective*.