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1.

Seeing and Believing

Belief is illusive. Belief might be mistaken or even misplaced, in fact it is hard to know when it is present and when it is not. Belief is illusive because it is only really present when it is God breathed as a work of the Holy Spirit, likewise, the Church is the Church because of the presence of Jesus Christ. So the clue to seeing the Church lies in Jesus Christ, the way the truth and life.¹ The Church 'is' because of Jesus Christ. 'Where-ever Jesus Christ is,' says Ignatius, 'there is the Catholic Church.'² It is the presence of Christ that constitutes the Church. The presence of Christ in the Church however is mediated by the actions of the community. The Church, in a sense, is present at its own making. It is in this making that through the work of the Holy Spirit, Christ's presence is real. Hence Irenaeus can speak in a very similar way of the Spirit as constituting the being of the Church. 'For where the Church is there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is there is the Church; and every kind of grace; but the Spirit is truth.' The Spirit works to vivify and to keep the Church youthful. Faith has been received and preserved in the Church and 'by the Spirit of God, renewing its excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also.'³ Ignatius and Irenaeus demonstrate that from the earliest times it has been fundamental to the theology of the Church that the social and the historical are seen as having their being (what they are) in the being of God. This being

Comment [GL1]: Change made here to avoid redundant use of "because". Feel free to revise if you can find a better way of expressing this.

¹ John 14:6

² Ignatius Smyrri viii, p90 Ante Nicene Fathers Vol 1 p 90 as quoted in Miroslav Volf *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (MI: Eerdmans1998). 129.

³ Irenaeus Adv Her, III, xxiv,1.458

however is moving, made ever youthful by the work of the Holy Spirit. Being therefore is not static but fluid in nature.

Inspiration (the breath of God) is always carried in the cultural practice of fallible human communities. This means that it is never possible to filter out the work of God from the actions of individual believers because the two are interdependent and contingent on each other. The Spirit works in and with communities and their expression to make Jesus Christ present. The reference to communities here is not abstract. The presence of Christ makes the Church the Church in the particular and in the local. This means in the everyday neighborhood congregation. There are some implications for a theology of the Church here and for the methods of enquiry and analysis that are most appropriate for ecclesiology. For while it is relatively easy to make distinctions between different concepts of believing at the level of the ideal these judgments become much more problematic in relation to the actual practices of communities and the ways that individuals believe. As a result some means of taking account (or seeing) the lived complexity of communities is precisely what is required because the Church doesn't inhabit the ideal of the academic text it exists in the cultural and the historical and it is in this context that it seeks to fulfill its calling. So there will always be moments where it will be necessary to take stock and come to judgment but discernment is far from straight forward because of the mixture of divine life and cultural expression that is part of the 'being' of the Church. Hence to talk in solely theological ways or in solely cultural and historical terms, runs the risk of not really seeing the Church. The task of seeing requires that these elements are in some way combined.

The True Church

Ecclesiology is keen to acknowledge the historical reality of the Church but it often does not know quite what to do with it. Part of the reason for this is that the Church has always been subject to imperfections and divisions. Theological accounts of the Church have been deeply aware of the faults in the historical church and yet also concerned to find a way to preserve the Church as place of divine encounter and grace. This has led to somewhat idealized ecclesiologies. ~~So for example w~~For example when faced with the problems that arose from the Donatist schism, ~~for example,~~ Augustine sought to make a distinction between the imperfect and divided community of the Church and those who God had truly called to himself. This Church within a Church was the precious and beloved who he called the 'dove' of God. There are some who even though they are baptized, says Augustine, still continue to live contrary to the commandments. These ones cannot be seen as part of the Church that Christ purifies and presents 'without spot of wrinkle'. The Church of Christ are the ones of whom it is said 'My dove is but one; she is the only one of her mother' for she is without spot or wrinkle.⁴ The notion of 'the dove' solves the problem of the imperfection of the Church by imagining a Church within a Church. This 'true' Church exists alongside and within the historical and social with all of its divisions and schism but this solution leaves a question mark around the exact status of this church. The 'real' church therefore remains something a mystery that is inaccessible and somewhat inexpressible. In other words largely discounting or discrediting the historical and cultural or at least seeing them as

Comment [GL2]: This section could use a subheading or two to guide readers along.

⁴ Augustine *On Baptism* IV 4.5

marginal to the being of the Church has solved the problem of ecclesiology. Augustine's understanding of the Church as somehow hidden within the social expression is also seen in the Reformation notions of ecclesial visibility and invisibility.

Luther's Marks of the Church

Martin Luther says in the Schmalkald Articles that the Church can be perceived it is so obvious that even a child can see it 'For thank God today a child of seven years knows what the Church is namely the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their shepherd'⁵ Hearing the voice of the shepherd, of course, is not exactly straightforward. Preaching assumes a particular social form i.e. gathering for while there is an assumed social form here preaching in the context of the gathering of the congregation but what is taking place in that congregation, the actual 'hearing' or faith as Luther would put it, is hard to discern. So for Luther the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments are external signs of the presence of the Church pointing to the invisible faith of believers.⁶ The Church through human agency takes a form in history. It acts and constructs 'signs'. These signs point to a deeper process that is taking place between the believer and Christ. This is a call and response. Luther therefore draws a distinction between the Church visible and the Church invisible. The visible Church consists of the material and the social while the invisible points to the inward response of the faithful.⁷ Central to this idea is the sense that the outward aspects of the Church carry but they also conceal the presence of Christ.

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Hearing the voice of the shepherd, of course, is not exactly straightforward. Of course the words of the preacher to the congregation are one form of this voice—but the 'hearing' or faith of the congregation is hard to discern.

Comment [GL5]: Or the presence of God in the world through the church?

⁵ Martin Luther *Schmalkald Articles* Part III, Article XII, 1537.

⁶ Martin Luther *On the Councils of the Church*, 1539.

⁷ Ibid

Action, agency and materiality therefore are fundamental but they are not everything that 'is'. As Luther puts it, 'The Church must appear in the world. But it can only appear in a covering a veil, a shell or some kind of clothes, which a man can grasp. Otherwise it can never be found.'⁸

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The Concrete Church

Luther's understanding of the Church draws attention to the central dilemma in ecclesiology. The Church is constituted by the presence of Christ and the work of the Spirit but it is 'clothed' in forms. These forms are both the means of making the Church visible and also a means of 'veiling' the true nature of the Church.

Believing in the church itself is self-evident—a child can see it, but the true nature of the church is also hidden from sight. Seeing the Church therefore, is far from straightforward. This dynamic between the necessity of acknowledging the historical and the contingent, and the sense that this 'reality' both reveals and veils the work of God runs throughout the recent theological discussion of the Church. Karl Barth uses the phrase that is later picked up by Nicholas Healy, 'the concrete Church' to speak about the historical and social reality of the Christian community.⁹ Yet despite this affirmation of the 'concrete' Barth seeks to find ways to locate theological authenticity in ways that subtly create a distance between the historical and social reality of the Church and its Lord. The Church is a community of believers present in history, says Barth, but it is only the Church because of God. 'The Church is, of course, a human earthly-historical construct, whose history involves from the very first and always will involve

Comment [GL6]: Can you define this more concretely? The discussion among whom? The discussion at what time?

⁸ Martin Luther *Letters* 9.608, 1542.

⁹ Nicholas Healy *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000)

human action. But it is this human construct, the Christian Church, because and as God is at work in it by his Spirit.¹⁰ There is a human 'action' that builds the Church but what makes this 'truly' the Church is the work of God. In commenting on the Apostles Creed Barth rejects notions of the invisibility of the Church. The Church is visible, we believe in its existence. This means that each congregation is a congregation of Christ. "Take good note, that a parson who does not believe that in this congregation of his, including those men and women, old wives and children, Christ's congregation exists, does not believe at all in the existence of the Church. *Credo ecclesiam* means that I believe that here at this place, in this visible assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place."¹¹ In the 'concrete' and particular congregation the Holy Spirit, says Barth, becomes 'event'. Yet there is always a struggle between the empirical Church and the 'true' Church. The 'true' Church is for Barth an event or a happening that comes through the 'act of God'. It emerges as a quickening of the Spirit as human work to build up the community into the true Church.¹² Barth affirms the necessity of the social agency of the Church but by speaking of the true Church as an event he is concerned to emphasise the freedom of God as revelation. So despite his affirmation of the fundamental necessity of the social and the historical Barth effectively seeks to limit the 'true' Church to a moment and hence he appears to simultaneously both affirm and also down play the significance of the social and the historical.

¹⁰ Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics IV/2* (Edinburgh T and T Clark 1958). 616.

¹¹ Karl Barth *Dogmatics In Outline* (London: SCM 1949). 143.

¹² *Church Dogmatics*. 617.

Barth's ecclesiology in effect brackets out the everyday in favour of a theological moment. The implication is clear the historical and the lived are of the essence of the Church but they are also problematic. His ecclesiology therefore develops an ideal or hermetically sealed event where Church takes place. This is distinct from Augustine's dove, the Church within the Church and Luther's visible and invisible Church but it essentially sets out to achieve the same thing i.e. how to account for the imperfections of communities and the divine within the human. In contrast to this a number of contemporary theologians have sought to rediscover the theological significance of the everyday and the lived. Nicholas Healy criticizes idealized theologies of the Church as 'blue print ecclesiologies'. A theological blue print is an attempt to reason abstractly about the 'perfect' shape of ecclesial life. The pursuit of a shape for the Church that is constructed as an ideal, Healy says, carries significant problems because it fails to account for the 'concrete' Church. 'Blue print ecclesiologies', he argues, 'foster a disjunction ... betweenideal ecclesiology and the realities of the concrete church.'¹³ So in failing to deal with the 'lived' nature of the Church blueprint ecclesiology tends to overlook the theological importance of the struggles that are involved in being Christian disciples and the frustrations of dealing with a Church that is not at all 'perfect' in many respects.¹⁴ This is an interesting point because Healy hints that theological learning and discernment require the ability to take account of the tensions and problems in communities. If the Church is to move forward then attention needs to be focused on the lived and the empirical as well as the

¹³ *Church, World and the Christian Life*. 37.

¹⁴ *Church, World and the Christian Life*. 37.

theological or as the place where the drama of the theological is played out in history.

Harald Hegstad takes this argument further. In the creed, he says, we affirm that we 'believe in the Church'. Notions of visibility and invisibility are problematic to this believing. There are not two churches but one. 'My thesis, he says, 'is that there is only one church, namely the church as visible and one that can be experienced in the world.'¹⁵ The imperfections in the Church however need to be seen in a wider theological context. Believing in the Church requires that this real community is viewed eschatologically. In other words understanding the historical Church depends on viewing it not simply in terms of empirical study of the present but also in relation to its future. The Church we experience is a 'sign and an anticipation' of the fellowship between God and humanity that is to come in the Kingdom of God.¹⁶ This theological perspective should not be taken as an excuse to construct ideal theological models rather it should encourage a particular theological focus on the visible. The theological vision of the Church perfected becomes a corrective or a relativising impulse in the present but this is only possible if time and attention are paid to actual churches. Hegstad argues strongly that this kind of attention requires the theologian to take account of empirical methods to do ecclesiology correctly. His suggestion is helpful in that it indicates that the historical should be valued as the 'being' of the Church but it is always in the making. Although he does not use the term, this introduces a more fluid notion of ecclesiology. The problems that Augustine, Luther, and

¹⁵ Harald Hegstad *The Real Church: An Ecclesiology of the Visible* (OR: Wipf and Stock 2013). 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 2.

Barth find with the historical are that they are concerned with being but this being is perhaps seen as essential and hence static in nature. If however being is movement and flow then change is part of what makes the Church truly the Church. So fluidity allows for correction and also deviation as part of an ecclesial movement over time and in culture. This notion gathers significance when cultural forms are themselves seen as generating meaning and identity that are themselves moving and liquid. It is in the Liquid Church that the Jesus Christ the living water is to be found.

Seeing as Wisdom

Seeing the Church in the lived is a theological discipline of attention and contemplation. This situates empirical work in a theological epistemology. Such an approach is necessary because, as has been said, the Church 'is' the Church because of the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also because 'seeing' in this empirical/theological context should be regarded as an act of reaching out towards God through the use of human observation and reason. Seeing is sharing in a divine vision. Seeing the Church therefore requires a spiritual methodology. Such a methodology also needs to be God breathed because it is an act of seeing Jesus Christ in the social and the historical.

Paul Fiddes ~~locates-defines~~ seeing ~~as~~ Wisdom. Wisdom, he argues, does not locate the one seeing as above or beyond what is seen but embraces embodied forms of knowing. These forms of knowing do not repeat the problems associated with the distance between the object and the subject and the consequent issues of power and claims to 'comprehend' that characterise

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or perhaps change to "defines seeing as Wisdom" or something similar. You use locate in the next sentence.

enlightenment forms of knowing. So Wisdom is a discipline of reflection and a kind of knowing but it transcends both of these. Seeing the world (through reason and knowledge) can be a means of knowing others in a truly relational way, and finally knowing God.¹⁷ In the biblical tradition Wisdom is personified in female form. Thus to see is to respond to the call of Lady Wisdom. “Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out.”¹⁸ The figure of Lady Wisdom represents the dancing and travelling of divine self-giving.¹⁹ This understanding of Lady Wisdom transforms the act of seeing (knowing and rationalising) from the distanced gaze of the detached but powerful modern observer that has been problematised in more recent thought into a relational movement within the life of God. The call of Wisdom, says Fiddes, is to see the world and thereby know God.²⁰ Yet for Wisdom there is a paradox that combines transcendence and immanence. As the Wisdom of Solomon says, “For wisdom is a kindly spirit, but will not free blasphemers from the guilt of their words; because God is witness of their inmost feelings, and a true observer of their hearts, and a hearer of their tongues. Because the spirit of the Lord has filled the world, and that which holds all things together knows what is said,”²¹ Here, says Fiddes Wisdom is identified as the Spirit of Yahweh and this identification contains both the notion of observer and also wisdom as the means of coherence in the world. These two

¹⁷ Paul Fiddes *Seeing the World and Knowing God: Hebrew Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013)

¹⁸ Proverbs 8 1-3.

¹⁹ Proverbs 8 22-31.

²⁰ *Seeing the World* 188.

²¹ Wisdom 1:6-7

are held in paradox. Wisdom is therefore both a “faculty of mind and the field of investigation that lies outside in the world.”²² ‘Wisdom as the faculty of God is also there in the world, drawing near to her devotees on the path of daily life; she offers them communion with her, inviting them to walk with her on her own circuit through the cosmos. This is observation that it is also sympathetic participation.’²³ Such Wisdom however cannot be pinned down. It is not to be found in a particular location. Wisdom is rather a riddle that points to a journey. Wisdom is not hidden away in a place where if we knew the secret she might be found. ‘Wisdom’, says Fiddes, ‘transcends or “goes beyond” the grasp of the human mind’ because God alone grasps the complexity of inexhaustible Wisdom.²⁴ So the personification of Wisdom is an invitation to participation in a kind of investigation and knowing that is shared with God. Seeing, even seeing in God is not entirely straightforward. The Wisdom tradition speaks of the immensity of creation and the unknowability of the created world and this invokes the ‘elusive’ quality that exists alongside the possibility of exploration. Wisdom is there to be enjoyed but she can never be possessed.²⁵ What Fiddes terms the ‘no place’ of Wisdom represents a check on the assertion that to be ‘wise’ is to have control over the world ‘it affirms a hiddenness at the heart of reality.’²⁶

The figure of Lady Wisdom, the personification in the tradition, is picked up in John’s gospel in the person of Jesus Christ. In the prologue of John’s gospel Jesus

²² *Seeing the World* 199.

²³ *Ibid* 199.

²⁴ *Ibid* 239.

²⁵ *Ibid* 239.

²⁶ *Ibid* 250.

is introduced as the *logos*. 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God'²⁷ The *logos* terminology in John's Gospel, Fiddes points out, echoes the personification of Wisdom.²⁸ The implication is that Wisdom is made manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. The divine 'wisdom' or *logos* is incarnate in Christ and this is the 'glory' that is seen by believers. 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'²⁹ The revealing of Wisdom in Jesus Christ, the *logos*, does not however lead to an escape from complexity and ambiguity. The plethora of names for Christ in the New Testament, even in this opening passage of John's gospel (light, life, son, lamb, word), are an indication that in Jesus Christ there is the 'fullness' of God. This personification (or incarnation) is the revelation of complexity. It is precisely for this reason that the Christ of the gospels is elusive even as he is revealed.³⁰

For Fiddes 'seeing' is not confined to the Church. Seeing encompasses the ways of God in the world. Discerning Jesus Christ and the work of the Spirit therefore becomes more fluid notion where the presence of Christ passes between the Church and the wider culture. This fluidity challenges a solid notion of the Church as containing the work of God and defining by its actions all that God might be and do. The presence of Christ in the Church is rather a clue to the further discernment of the work of the Spirit beyond the solid meetings and worship activities of the community. This fluid nature of the work of the Spirit is

²⁷ John 1:14.

²⁸ Ben Sirach 24: 6-10.

²⁹ John 1:14.

³⁰ *Seeing the World* 345.

a call to reach beyond the Church that is to some extent embodied in the concern to express faith and connect but it is also a continual challenge to the Church to be drawn into and participate in the work of the Spirit beyond the solid boundaries of the Church. Such fluidity is a parallel to the cultural adoption and adaption that mark the life of the contemporary Christian community. The contextualising of worship and ways of experiencing faith through the use of the forms and ways of communicating of popular culture is a further clue that the Spirit, the world and the Church have porous boundaries. This is what I call

Liquid Church.³¹

The Trinity as Relations

God is seen by Fiddes as a complexity that matches the complexity of the world.

The Trinitarian God for Fiddes subsists as persons in relation. The Trinity he argues is “not a mathematical puzzle. It is all about a God who lives in relationship and is in movement.”³² The persons of the Trinity are not to be seen as formed by relations but as actually being relations. “The Trinity, then is a vision of God as three interweaving relationships of ecstatic, outward-going love, giving and receiving.”³³ The persons in relation move within and between each other in movements suggestive of a dance. This movement is expressed in the term *perichoresis* where the persons in the Trinity ‘co-inhere’ with each other without ‘confusion’.³⁴ This is a development of the words of Jesus in the Fourth

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³¹ Pete Ward *Liquid Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson 2002)

³² Ibid 256-257.

³³ Ibid 150.

³⁴ Ibid 151.

Gospel 'believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.'³⁵ So for Fiddes, "The hypostases are "distinct" realities as relations and the *perichoresis* is an interweaving of relations."³⁶ This language about God is not generated out of the position of the distanced 'observer' because to see in these terms is to share in the relations of God. God 'makes' sense as we are 'involved' in God's life.

"Talk of God as Trinity is not the language of spectator, but the language of a participant."³⁷ To see God in this sense is to be taken up in movements of being glorified, being sent and being breath. As Fiddes puts it, "Talk about God begins from encounter with God"³⁸ It is this God that opens a space in the interweaving and dancing movement for relations with human beings. "In creation and in redemption God opens a space within the interweaving movements of relation, so that the created universe exists "in God",³⁹ and to speak of God in this way is not to 'describe God' or to claim to see God. The language of relations "describes what it is like to engage in God."⁴⁰ Relation with God is like the intermingling flow of water. The Trinity is the fount, the spring and the stream, "three currents or movements of "delight", which intermingle and can nevertheless be distinguished from each other."⁴¹ The Trinity seen as relations opens the space for understanding the world as being within the movement of God. So to see is to share in the divine movement, to see 'in God'. This form of knowing is particularly appropriate for ecclesiology where cultural forms and theological expression are seen as being that is in movement.

³⁵ John 14:11.

³⁶ Ibid 151.

³⁷ *Seeing the World* 152.

³⁸ Ibid 153.

³⁹ Ibid 153.

⁴⁰ Ibid 257.

⁴¹ Ibid 259.

The liquidity of the Church is therefore to be seen as arising from the being of God but just as God is being in relation and movement so is the Church. Yet in so saying it is always acknowledged that the ability to 'see' this movement and hence to discern the Church arises from relation. Seeing is participatory rather than being structured by modern notions of subject and object. There is then an appropriateness to this approach to epistemology as the basis for an ecclesiology that takes account of the lived in coming to discernment and also construction.

Discerning the Body

The investigation of believing in the contemporary Church requires the 'wisdom' of God. But seeing is complex and discernment is not straightforward. The 'reality' of believing is to be found in the work of the Spirit and in the presence of Jesus Christ. To see the Church therefore is to see God. At the same time this 'seeing' requires the ability to discern Christ within the particularity of lived expression. Seeing therefore is problematic and it ~~equates~~ relates to the Wisdom that Fiddes describes. To see however is not simply an academic exercise.

Comment [GL11]: Relates?

Seeing and the attempt to develop discernment is a responsibility for every believer in the Church. Christians are called, says Clare Watkins, to continually be attentive to the presence of Christ in the practices of the Church. She calls this "discerning the body".⁴² Her starting point for understanding what it means to discern the body is found in the Eucharistic passage in 1 Corinthians 11: 27-29.

"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord."

⁴² Clare Watkins Recorded Address at King's College, London [2014](#)

Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”-

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This passage has traditionally been interpreted in Catholic circles as concerning Eucharistic reception, says Watkins, but the passage might also be seen in the light of the wider argument of the letter as a commentary on the life of the Church. In particular 1 Corinthians chapters 10 and 11, she points out, are an extended discussion of the ethical behavior of the Church and particularly the way that worship is conditioned by communal life. Verses 27-29 come therefore at the conclusion of some of these arguments. Discerning the body as a result becomes an admonition about what it means to be the Church i.e. the body of Christ and how by not discerning the body individuals may effectively put themselves outside the community by taking part in meals in in-appropriate ways. The appeal to the words of the Lord and the discerning of the body, says Watkins, thus takes on a particular meaning. Believers are called to pay attention to the practice of the Church and to be aware of their own participation in the practices because to share is to partake in the ‘body’. There is then, says Watkins, for all members of the Church, a constant task of discerning the body of Christ, not simply in the sacraments but also in those practices and ways of living together that form communal life. Discerning the body means paying attention to Christ in and through the practices of the Church, seeking out and being conditioned by the presence of Christ in the community. Discernment however is also a task that involves an ability to be self critical and reflexive about the life of the Church. Seeing in this sense involves a call to share in the life of the

Church while being attentive to the possibility that practices and communal expression may be less than the 'body'. This kind of discernment is a call to take responsibility for the imperfections of expression and the social forms that constitute the Church. Such attentiveness does not mean separating oneself from the Church to be 'objective' or indeed adopting the role of the 'critic' but accepting that participation in the Church always involves the contingency of cultural expression and as such discernment remains necessary even as Christ might be made present be it in the sacrament or in preaching or indeed through singing contemporary worship songs.

The significance of Watkins' approach to discernment is that all Christians are called to be continually attentive to the life of the Church. Discerning the body is an ongoing responsibility, a call to faithfulness. It is in this context that the work of the theologian should be understood. Theologians, says Watkins, are seeking to discern the body of Christ when they start to take seriously what is taking place on the ground. Such attention is a demand on theologians but this kind of discernment is itself complex because there are different layers of meaning within communities. She calls these "Christ's various and layered presences in the practices of communities"⁴³. Discernment is therefore a human activity that is spiritual, pastoral and intellectual. Discerning the body needs each of these areas if it is to be possible to encounter what she calls, the mysteries of Christ's presences in practices. Discernment therefore requires an empirical engagement with ecclesial communities and the ways in which they express faith in cultural forms. So for Watkins the Spirit is out there doing the work of God

Comment [GL13]: Specific citation for this quote?

⁴³ [Clare Watkins Lecture at King's College London 2014.](#)

and the task of the theologian is to catch up with what God is doing. An ecclesial practice is a response to the work of God in the world. The theologian articulates what is taking place. The role of the theologian therefore is to articulate in relation to the empirical how God might be at work. This approach rests ultimately for Watkins on a particular understanding of work of God in the world drawn from Catholic Theology. Vatican II she points out argues that scripture makes 'progress' in the Church with the movement of the Spirit. This includes all of the work and teaching of Bishops and priest but it is also concerned with the believing of individuals.

"This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words, which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts⁴⁴ (through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth...The words of the holy fathers witness to the presence of this living tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying Church. Through the same tradition the Church's full canon of the sacred books is known, and the sacred writings themselves are more profoundly understood and unceasingly made active in her; and thus God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son..."⁴⁵

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⁴⁴ See Luke, 2:19, 51.

⁴⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 8.

Here revelation is seen as developing in the Catholic Church both through official teaching and through the ways in which individual believers take up the words of scripture and inhabit them as part of who they are. Seeing the Church therefore involves paying attention in order to 'see' the work of Christ in communities and in practices. She likens this process of discernment to the revelation that comes upon the Apostle Peter in the book of Acts when he sees the Holy Spirit descend upon the gentile Cornelius and the members of his household. Peter expresses his own transformation to Cornelius with these words. 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.⁴⁶ But even though he says these words of acceptance and welcome it is only when he witnesses the Holy Spirit descending on these gentiles that he 'discerns' Christ at work. Astonishment then quickly turns to acceptance and these new believers are welcomed into the community through baptism.⁴⁷ Discernment in this context is complex. Peter is a participant in the events that are unfolding but his understanding seems to grow as he 'sees' the work of the Spirit. This kind of participative discernment Watkins argues is the responsibility of every member of the Church. The call is to seek to discern where and how God is at work. And in order that the work of God might be discerned it becomes essential to engage with practice. In order to know what God is doing in the world there is an imperative to engage in attentiveness. and hence This means that there is a requirement that theologians who study the Church to seek to develop the skills

⁴⁶ Acts 10:34-35.

⁴⁷ Acts 10:44-48.

and ways of paying attention that are found in empirical work. It is important to stress that such attention is not a reduction of the theological to the social and cultural but precisely the opposite. The point that Watkins is making here is that these theological insights generate an approach to seeing and discernment that means that must of necessity embrace empirical methods are nit simply an option they are a necessity. Seeing in these terms is participation in the complex and layered nature of the Church.

Comment [GL15]: The syntax here is a bit awkward. Reword?

Comment [GL16]: This point is critical, yet the sentence structure leaves things somewhat obscure. Reword?

Introducing the Four Theological Voices

The contemporary Church is a complex, and at times, contradictory mix of theology and experience, individual spirituality and corporate expression. Making sense of this rich and varied mix requires the ability to pay attention to a range of different ways of sharing faith. It is these different 'ways' that take us deeper into the state of believing. In *'Talking About God in Practice'*⁴⁸ the authors introduce what they call the different theological 'voices' that become evident through a careful examination of the practice of the church. These voices are mixed together in the everyday speech and action of communities, and as such they form a rich, and living 'whole'. In seeking to understand how theology is intertwined in action, they have developed an interpretative typology that helps them to identify different strands of theological communication in the life of the Church. The authors are clear however that their typology is at risk of over simplifying the organic and interconnected nature of the lived situation. They see the voices typology is a 'working tool'. The tool is developed around the

Comment [GL17]: I think subheadings for each of the voices would be helpful in this section, though it isn't always exactly clear when you finish your discussion of one voice and move on to the next.

Perhaps the voices are too intertwined to discuss as separate entities, as I imagine. What do you think?

Could you provide a few sentences of description for each voice, and then go on to describe how they fit together and provide examples?

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⁴⁸ Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney and Clare Watkins *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM 2010)

notion that in the lived practice of the Church there are four theological voices: Operant Theology, Espoused Theology, Normative Theology and Formal Theology.⁴⁹

Operant Theology

Cameron et al argue that the fundamental starting point needs to be the realization that the practice of the Church is 'theological'. As Clare Watkins puts it "practices are bearers of theology."⁵⁰ This means that 'theology' is somehow embodied in the practice of the Church. Embodied theology is not generally something that is easily explained or described, they argue, rather it needs to be uncovered and discovered by believers themselves. This is because 'operant theologies' are often slightly hidden from view, or taken as 'just the thing that we do'. It is only when they are subjected to attention and reflection that these everyday ways of believing reveal their theological nature. This observation echoes the work of John Swinton and Harriet Mowat who suggest that the theology that lies embedded in practice can be illusive and hard to find. "Practices", they argue, "contain values, beliefs, theologies and other assumptions which, for the most part, go unnoticed until they are complexified and brought to our notice through theological reflection."⁵¹ 'Complexifying' might suggest creating an elaborate theory around practices. This is not exactly what is meant here. Swinton and Mowat are talking about the way that focused

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Comment [GL18]: Subheading here? Operant Theology

⁴⁹ Ibid 49-56.

⁵⁰ Clare Watkins (with Helen Cameron, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney) 'Practical Ecclesiology: What Counts as Theology in Studying the Church?' in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*.

⁵¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM 2006). 2.

attention on action and belief in the life of the Church can reveal the layers of interaction and entwined meanings. This, in a sense, is exactly what Luhmann's work does so successfully. By spending time in getting underneath the skin of the everyday she reveals its depth and also its many contradictions. The four voices method of analysis has come about because the researchers have found in their work with Churches a particular tendency for there to be differences between the theology that is evident in practice and the theology that people articulate. The first is operant theology and the second is what the group call espoused theology.

Espoused Theology

This kind of 'Complexifying' is one of the most common issues that qualitative empirical research brings to the surface. Very often when Churches are studied belief and believing appears to operate in a way that enables and occasionally supports subtle, and at times, confusing differences that co-exist between what is stated and the underlying operant theology that works out in practice. Watkins gives the example of a Catholic diocesan Agency for Evangelisation where the espoused theological position may emphasize the responsibility of the Church for the wider society and yet the practice might actually be much more orientated towards catechesis and adult education within the Church. So the operant theology that lies behind these work patterns and strategies does not quite ring true with the theological position that the workers espouse or speak about as their theology.⁵² This example serves to show how espoused theology

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Comment [GL19]: Paragraph break and new heading here? Espoused Theology

⁵² 'Practical Ecclesiology 177.

is always connected to the other voices. It exists alongside operant theologies but it is also drawn from formal and normative voices.

Espoused theology has its roots in the wider tradition and expression of the Church. As Cameron et al put it 'Espoused theologies come from somewhere'. Churches and believers develop their espoused theological understandings in relation to the ongoing teaching and theological understanding of their Churches. So the theology that people speak about in relation to their practice is drawn from scripture or liturgy or other theological and spiritual writings as well as experience.⁵³ The normative theological voice is introduced to show how these varied sources are often utilized as a guide and a corrective alongside practice both by communities and by believers, here again it is possible to observe quite interesting and 'complexified' relationships between the normative voice in a community and the espoused theology of individual believers.

Espoused Theology and Normative Theology an Example

In his study of an evangelical Church in the North of England the sociologist Matthew Guest traces the way that members of the congregation negotiate the official teaching of the Church in different ways. From his extensive observation and interviews made over a period of seven years Guest was able to identify the different theological positions that co-existed in the Church.⁵⁴ Perhaps surprisingly given its reputation as a leading Anglican Evangelical Church, Guest found that a great many of those in the congregation appeared to hold quite

⁵³ *Talking About God in Practice* 53.

⁵⁴ For methods see Mathew Guest *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007). 231.

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Comment [GL20]: Subheading here? Normative Theology

liberal views. This liberalism extended to what he identifies as key issues for this section of the Church, for instance the kind of 'truth' and authority that is to be found in scripture, and the place of women in the ministry of the Church. He also saw evidence that some were in the process of re-drawing the boundaries of an Evangelical world-view. Guest found that there was a move towards tolerance, universalism, and a general openness to spiritual exploration. This more open and experimental mind set brought with it a sense that it was possible, and even desirable, to engage in re-thinking the Christian tradition. The result was that congregation appeared to support more individualistic forms of believing. The shift toward more open and exploratory forms of evangelicalism, however, was not universally welcomed in the congregation. Alongside the 'liberals' Guest uncovered a number of conservatives who advocated a more traditional approach to evangelical theology. Interestingly some of the leaders in the Church welcomed the way that people with different perspectives were all able to be part of the congregation. Diversity in this sense became a value that they sought for the Church. Yet this shift towards a more open theology that overtly welcomes diversity is kept in check by the conservative members of the congregation and the sense that a move towards more liberal theology would result in censure from the wider evangelical world. As a result the more open theological approach of some of the leaders and some in the congregation does not find itself reflected in the official theological statements of the Church. What appears to take place therefore is a complex set of checks and balances between the public voice of the Church and the more veiled private beliefs and convictions.⁵⁵ In Cameron et al's terms these correspond to the Formal voice and

⁵⁵ Ibid 95 – 97.

the Espoused voice, respectively. Guest traces this accommodation through a study of the sermons at the Church.

From his study of just under fifty sermons Guest concluded that the preaching served to minimize conflict between the conservatives and the liberals in the Church.⁵⁶ They did this by charting a middle path between the two groups at times supporting one and then the other. So the public discourse of the church,

Guest argues, “appeared to function as a unifying force by keeping these two ‘narratives’ in tension. It did this by avoiding the open endorsement of extreme positions and evading issues likely to provoke disagreement.”⁵⁷ (Guest p 102)

Comment [GL21]: Change to a footnote reference.

Guest found that within the congregation there were quite different perceptions of what it meant to be evangelical. The size of the congregation enabled different microclimates of theological understanding to co-exist. In this context the formal theology of the Church as seen in the public preaching on the face of it offered a point of unity but this is not really the whole story. What Guest found was that individuals in the congregation heard and understood different things in what was being said by the leaders from the front of the Church. “Conversations with individual parishioners revealed a vast diversity of responses to sermons, from boredom to incredulity, enthusiasm, emotion, deep reflection and an experience of being inspired to make life-changing decisions.”⁵⁸ They found ways, therefore, to negotiate space for their own particular forms of espoused theology. This space it appears is in part supported by the preaching, and in part worked out as a mild form of resistance to what is seen as the party line. Guest sees these

⁵⁶ Ibid 98-102.

⁵⁷ Ibid 102.)

⁵⁸ Ibid 103.

dynamics as the collective mechanism that enables the Church to maintain an evangelical identity while avoiding significant conflict but they give a particular insight into how there are layers of theology that work together in the Church. Read through the interpretative lens of the four voices approach to theology what becomes apparent is that an evangelical identity might encapsulate significant contradictions between formal theological utterances and more individual espoused theological positions. This contradiction may even extend to leaders who consciously or unconsciously reproduce a party line in public while holding different views themselves. Normative theological speech and espoused speech in this way may be stretching in different directions when attention is paid to the lived expression of the Church.

Formal Theology

The final voice identified by Cameron et al is that of Formal Theology. This refers to the contribution that might be brought to understanding practice and the life of the Church by academic or 'professional' theologians. This voice however is deeply entwined with the other three theological voices. Espoused and normative theology may draw to varying degrees on formal theology.⁵⁹ A good example of this is the way that ministers may continue to find inspiration from their studies at college when they preach or how the extent to which believers may engage with academic theology when they attend Christian festivals and events, ~~for example Greenbelt Festival in the UK.~~ The normative theology that is contained in the liturgy of Church is often influenced by the wider academic conversations that make up the formal theological voice.

⁵⁹ *Thinking About God in Practice* 55.

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Comment [GL22]: Subheading here? Formal Theology

Comment [GL23]: What is the significance of including this example?

Alongside this embedded formal voice there is a particular role that Cameron et al see for academic engagement with practice. Academic theology can offer a critical perspective on the lived expression of the Church. It is able, when it is at its best to 'shine a light' on the actions of the Church and the state of believing.

The State of Believing forms a part of the formal voice of academic theology. This means that by writing I am adding my voice to other voices around both operant and espoused in the hope that I can help the Church by shedding light and developing new perspectives. In other words I understand the process of writing as part of the ecclesial conversation rather than as something that is set apart from the conversation. Throughout the book I make use of the idea of espoused and operant theologies to highlight the central problematic of the disconnection between the evangelical gospel and the lived expression of faith. So I adopt the term espoused theology as a reference to the gospel and operant theology as a short hand for personal and communal lived believing. The use of espoused and operant in this way does have its problems. As Guest's work shows there is a complex link between espoused theology in for instance a sermon and lived believing. It is a misunderstanding to treat one as entirely distinct from the other. The same is true of the kind of lived believing that we have seen in Luhrmann's *When God Talks Back*. The vibrant lived faith of those who converse with God is constructed in relation to the wider discourse (or voice) of the community. In fact operant theology is always and already espoused and the same is very often the case for espoused theology that finds its life in what is lived or operant. Yet despite these caveats the terminology creates a distinction that is helpful in that it allows for an examination of a specific kind

Comment [GL24]: Another subheading here?

of doctrinal expression in relation to how this is habituated believing. This leaves the question of the normative voice. It is important to note that 'normative' within the Four Voices typology refers to those sources that are judged by those within the community as being authoritative. It therefore speaks of the way that Churches self-regulate and seek affirmation and correction in their own lived expression. This is quite distinct from the notion of normativity that operates more widely in Practical Theology. Where theological sources are used to develop a corrective or a transformed way forward for the Church. Normativity here is a kind of judgment that the Practical Theologian offers to the community rather than a reference to how sources are used authoritatively within the everyday. Normativity in the way it is understood in Practical Theology is probably best seen as part of the formal theological voice. Formal theology inevitably carries within it moments of choice and evaluation. I have referred to this as discerning the body and seeing the work of God in the Church and in the world. The basis for such discernment however lies in rational and considered intellectual work but I am arguing that this finds its orientation in the call to abide in Jesus Christ.

The Four Voices and the State of Believing

The four voices understanding of theology in the lived practice of the Church offers a nuanced and attentive way into the questions that surround the state of believing. As we have seen there is a tendency for theologians to express deep concern over the spiritual health and vitality of the Church but they generally fail to take the time to examine in detail what is actually happening in communities. The result of this lack of attention to the lived, which comes from a failure to

Comment [GL25]: The lived experience?

Comment [PW26]: I like the phrase the lived

value or make use of empirical methods, is that the problems are described in rather sweeping and broad-brush terms. The empirical study of the Church that I am taking up requires attention to **the lived** through the Four Voices but this is simultaneously a discerning of the body. Making sense of believing and **discerning whether** believing might need correction is not therefore simply the exercise of reason. This is a journey towards seeing as the Wisdom of God. Seeing, I argue in Chapter 5 is the practice of abiding in Jesus Christ. Abiding I suggest has two aspects the first is contemplation of Jesus Christ in the scriptures. The second is reflection on the presence of Christ in the life of the Christian community. Reflection proceeds from contemplation because it is the discerning of Jesus Christ revealed in the scriptures in the on going life of the Church. Reflection is the seeking the face of Jesus Christ in the practices of the Church but it is also a way to explore how the cultural forms of the Church do not just 'veil' the divine but occasionally how they might obscure it. This kind of discernment is complex and needs a particular kind of attention. The Four Voices and other empirical methodologies offer tools to pay attention but alongside them there is a need to locate enquiry in the movement of God. This kind of work is impossible if sufficient time has not been taken to attend to the lived and the embodied theology of believers and how this is enacted in the context of the communal theological expression of their Churches. This has particular implications for the way that theological insight might be offered to build the Church in its journey towards faithfulness in the state of believing. In the following chapters the specific instance that gives rise to this study is introduced. Using a range of different empirical studies and methods the disconnection between the espoused theology of the evangelical Church i.e. what

Comment [GL27]: The lived experience?

it regards as the gospel will be explored. Methodologically I [adopt](#) an approach to discourse analysis drawing on insights from cultural studies. Discourse analysis with a focus on diverse forms of communication connects well with the idea that there are multiple voices in the Church. I start by looking at the processes of communication that have generated the view that the gospel is 'unchanging'. These are examined and discussed in the next chapter and then in the following chapters this unchanging evangelical gospel is contrasted with the much more fluid and fast changing operant theology that is most evident in the worship songs. This attention to the espoused and the lived is an exercise in seeing or discerning the body of Christ. What follows then will be analytical in nature but it is a critique that is seeking the presence of Christ and the work of the Spirit in the hope that by so doing any problems that may be uncovered can be transformed as the Church learns how to abide in Jesus and thereby share in the relational life of the Trinity.