A specter is haunting the Christian world—the specter of the liquid church.¹ Solid churches try to expel it or to contain it; nevertheless, a movement is starting to appear. New manifestations of being church are taking shape, whereas the old institutions are eroding continuously. Websites, festivals, religious publications, and gatherings suggest a network of Christian believers, characterized by a positive evaluation of ‘postmodernity’, and transcending the distinctions between Conservatives and Liberals. This Church movement appears under various names (Price 2002): Emerging Church, Next Wave, New Paradigm, and Liquid Church.

This paper addresses the concept of liquid church, which may be tentatively defined as de-institutionalized Christian religion that still bears some resemblance to the church as we know it, or the communication of Christ in a network. Drawing on the distinction between early, or ‘solid’, modernity and late, or ‘liquid’, modernity, this concept promises to open up possibilities to interpret and evaluate forms of religious praxis outside the institutionalized church as manifestations of being church, nonetheless. Religious praxis that takes place outside the regime of religious institutions is often interpreted at an individual level. The concept of liquid church may serve to hold on to an analysis of religion on a social level, even when it has emigrated from the church as an institution.

Pete Ward is a lecturer in Youth Ministry and Theological Education at King’s College London. His Liquid Church has been well received within the Christian community. It started a global debate,² and has been translated into the Dutch language (Ward 2004). In Fall 2004, in a search for ‘liquid church’, Google provided 378 ‘most relevant’ hits. This score provides a rough indication of how widely discussed

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¹ See De Groot (2006a) for an earlier version of this article.
² For one of the many reviews, see Andre Perriman at www.opensourcetheology.net. For an interview with the author, see www.youthspecialties.com.
this book is. Although, in the introduction, I have used revolutionary imagery, Ward’s intention is not to overthrow, but rather to reform. Contemporary church life, Ward argues, is moulded around an institution that rewards institutional participation, uniform behavior and dedication to the club. Ward imagines what the church would be like if it conceived of itself as part of contemporary culture, where people see themselves as individuals rather than members of a community, as buyers rather than producers. *Liquid Church* provides a sociological and theological exploration of the idea that the church should reflect important features of late modernity, as it has done in the past with early modernity. It presents a practical ecclesiological vision and connects its message with the insights into contemporary (religious) culture both of contemporary sociological and theological authors. (Each chapter deals either with a sociological or a theological discussion.) This short, accessible, and provocative book raises three questions.

Firstly, there is a sociological question. In the course of the Christian tradition, it is fairly new to conceive of the church as something that ‘happens’ in the context of the market. Is it not sociologically inevitable that this liquid church will mix with other religious traditions and vanish as something unidentifiable, unless there is a solid church that supports it? Solid church, so to speak, was the key to the successful rise of early Christianity (Stark 1996). In a contemporary market approach to the church, one cannot ignore the ‘rational choice’ thesis that, in a context of pluralism, only churches operating as exclusive firms will be vital (Stark & Finke 2000). According to this theory, the liquid church would inevitably be ‘a sell out’, not because it ‘embraces the believer as a consumer’, but because it uses an ineffective marketing strategy. Ward acknowledges that solid church is a successful form of marketing (Ward 2002, 62). He does not, however, address the critical thesis that in a volatile environment only strict churches are strong. I take it as Ward’s hypothesis that in late modernity fluid structures may be successful means to put the Christian message across.

A more theological question is the following: is this really church—or are we merely talking about some of the activities that the church should promote? Although the author states more than once that a true church is marked by authentic communication of the Word and the sacraments, he does not indicate in what way the liquid church provides ‘the right administration of the sacraments’ (Ward 2002, 67–68). This is especially intriguing since the author radically criticizes