CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE CHURCH AS AN ECHO OF THE TRIUNE GOD

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There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4: 4–6)

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....” (Jn. 17:21)

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The churches which have their particular identity from the 16th century Reformation confess themselves, in the words of the ecumenical creed of Nicaea and Constantinople, to believe “in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” The unity of the church certainly mattered greatly to Calvin, perhaps more so than to some of the other Reformers. In reply to a proposal from the Archbishop of Canterbury that the main Protestant leaders of Europe might meet together, Calvin was enthusiastic. He wrote: “It must be counted among the worst evils of our epoch that the Churches are thus separated one from another, so much so that hardly any human society exists among us, still less that holy communion between the members of Christ which all profess but very few sincerely cultivate in reality.”2 Commenting on Ephesians 4:4, Calvin writes: “For if [the Ephesians] are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings to each other.”3

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1 As will be seen below, this title is borrowed from a phrase of Colin Gunton.
The Reformed churches accepted that there was one church. In its chapter on the church, the Scots Confession of Faith expresses it this way:

As we believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, so we most constantly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be a Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the same Kirk, which also is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus.4

These lines, with which the chapter begins, are of particular interest because they connect the unity of the church with the unity of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the triune God. The chapter goes on to make the qualification, typical of such confessional statements, that this “one” church is the church “invisible.”5 It has always been a temptation of the churches, not only in the Reformed tradition, to content themselves with believing that the unity of the church is an attribute of the invisible church, with the implicit corollary that the unity of the visible church is an entirely secondary matter.

With the development of the modern ecumenical movement in the 20th century, beginning with the celebrated World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, the unity of the church visible—thus the visible unity of the church—came to matter a great deal more, for the sake of the church’s mission to the world. By the time the World Council of Churches was formed in Amsterdam in 1948, the concern was specifically with the unity of the visible church. Willem Visser ‘t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the Council, described the WCC as “an emergency solution, a stage on the road… a fellowship which seeks to express that unity in Christ already given to us and to prepare the way for a much fuller and much deeper expression of that unity.”6 A later Assembly (Nairobi, 1975) stated:

The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ,

4 The Scots Confession, Chapter 16, “Of the Kirk” (1560).
5 The Westminster Confession (1647) begins its statement on the “catholic or universal Church” (Ch. 25) with an emphasis on its invisibility, meaning by this “the whole number of the elect.” In the second paragraph, it goes on to speak of “the visible Church.”