Book Reviews

Paul Avis (ed.), (2018) *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. xvii + 649 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-964583-1 (hbk), £95.00.

There are a number of ways in which one could formulate a handbook of essays on the fundamentals of the doctrine of the church. One might, for example, place ecclesiology within the wider pattern of loci which form systematic theology to consider the doctrine of the church in relation to Christology, pneumatology, sacramental theology, soteriology, the doctrine of creation, and so on. Alternatively, one might approach ecclesiology from the perspective of history, movements and figures. *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* opts quite resolutely, although not entirely exclusively, for the latter. Of course, this has disadvantages and advantages. Among the disadvantages, one might point to a lack of focused attention on the theological framework which supports any doctrine of the church, particularly in relation to Christ, whose body the church is, and the Holy Spirit, whose gifts form the church. The church is, fundamentally, a Christological and pneumatological reality. Among the advantages, one is crucial: the focus on history, movements and figures prevents a consideration of the church as a kind of speculative ideal, abstracted from its historical reality. The singular strength of this volume, therefore, born of the editor's decades-long engagement with the ecumenical movement and the messy reality of Christ's church in its various denominational guises, is a focus on the church both as an eschatological hope, but also as an historic, holy, sinful, and wounded body, in both past and present (p. 23). The tension between the eschatological and empirical identity of the church – between the church triumphant and the church militant – runs as a significant thread through the essays. The editor's introductory essay lays out this approach to ecclesiology with great clarity. Ecclesiology is 'the comparative, critical, and constructive study of the dominant paradigms of the church's identity' (p. 4). That identity is investigated through various aspects of the church's life: its origins, ministry,

authority, sacraments, liturgy, and relation to the state and to civic society. Scripture, historical theology, present experience, and the fruits of non-theological enquiry are ecclesiology's principal sources.

The volume features twenty-eight essays divided into four sections: biblical foundations; resources from the tradition; major modern ecclesiologists; and contemporary movements in ecclesiology. The contributions are uniformly strong. The section on biblical foundations includes an outstanding essay by Walter Moberly on the relation between Israel and the Church which also offers an overview of the reading of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. This is complemented by detailed contributions covering the church in the Synoptic Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, the Johannine vision of the church, the Pauline churches, and the church in the General Epistles. The section entitled 'resources from the tradition' features an excellent overview of the development of early ecclesiology in the West by Mark Edwards, a candid study of the Eastern Orthodox tradition by Andrew Louth, a fine survey of the development of conciliar ecclesiology and the papacy, from the Gregorian reforms to the Reformation, by Norman Tanner, as well as six essays covering the ecclesiologies of the main Christian denominations, including Baptist and Pentecostal understandings of the church. The third section, 'Major Modern Ecclesiologists', includes essays on Karl Barth, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Joseph Ratzinger, John Zizioulas, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Rowan Williams. This section, featuring four essays on Roman Catholic theologians, offers a very good account of the theologies of the church which formed, and were formed by, the Second Vatican Council and particularly *Lumen Gentium*. Insofar as the Council marks a radical shift in ecclesiology in the twentieth century, opening new opportunities for ecumenism and a deeper self-understanding for the church, these essays are crucial. Of particular importance is Theodor Dieter's essay on Joseph Ratzinger's *communio* and eucharistic understanding of the church. Beyond the contributions on Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed and Lutheran thinkers, Mike Higton's essay on Rowan Williams deserves particular mention. This is an unusual and very moving chapter which gives an account of Williams's understanding of the church rooted in years of scholarly study, yet worked out in blood, sweat, tears and love over the course of ten years as Archbishop of Canterbury. Importantly, there is a rawness to Williams's ecclesiological vision, partly because it is not composed in the context of a formal magisterial structure. Higton does not force Williams's writings on the church into a dogmatic or systematic straight-jacket, but allows them to coalesce around a simple vision: Jesus Christ as the one before whom every Christian stands by the grace of the Spirit to be stripped of fear, self-indulgence and fantasy: 'The resurrection', says Williams, 'creates

forgiven persons, in a community of the forgiven. The resurrection creates the church' (p. 508). An important aspect of Williams's writings, both as a theologian in the academy and a bishop in the church, concerns heresy as that which limits the radical richness of Christian orthodoxy. Higton conveys Williams's view thus: heresy is one of the forms of language that 'flattens out the depth' of human life, and deprives the church of a resource for bringing before the resurrected one 'the extremities of experience, obsessive passion or jealousy, adoration, despair'. We are told that 'Williams therefore puts "heresy" in the same category as "the deadness of bureaucratic jargon, the deadness of uplifting waffle, the deadness of acronyms and target setting"' (p. 511). These are powerful words in the context of the life of many Christian churches today.

The fourth section of this collection concerns contemporary movements in ecclesiology. The essay entitled 'Feminist Critiques, Visions, and Models of the Church' by Elaine Graham is particularly welcome and is well complemented by essays on social scientific approaches to the church by Neil Ormerod, liberation ecclesiologies by Michelle Gonzalez, Asian ecclesiologies by Simon Chan, and African ecclesiologies by Stan Chu Ilo. The contribution on liberation ecclesiologies offers a welcome foray into the domain of contemporary political theology which is so important to a full understanding of the church in the world. The latter contributions, on Asian and African understandings of the church, are particularly helpful in dealing with the complexities of inculturation and indigenous churches.

One of the boorish tendencies of reviewers of collections such as *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology* is to point to 'obvious omissions'. This collection is extensive (well over 600 pages), scholarly, accessible, and expertly edited. Of course, not everything can be covered and, given the largely historical approach to the topic, the treatment is very rich. Nevertheless, at the risk of being boorish, this collection does make one aware of a different kind of approach to ecclesiology that would complement rather than challenge this handbook, namely one which studied the doctrinal framing of the theology of the church as well as its liturgy, sacraments, spiritualities, and practices of preaching and teaching. Taken as a whole, therefore, this collection marks its quality by provoking more general reflection on ecclesiology as a theological sub-discipline.

As an example of such general reflection, one may notice an important observation that occurs a number of times in the handbook: ecclesiology is a modern theological science. As Mark Edwards puts it in his excellent essay on 'Early Ecclesiology in the West', this is not to deny that the church for the patristic theologians was 'the ineluctable presupposition of all dogmatic reasoning and scriptural exegesis'. Nevertheless, 'a defence of the church was never undertaken without an apologetic motive' (p. 163). That apologetic motive was

certainly present at times in the ancient and medieval church; one thinks of ecclesiological questions raised by Pelagianism and Donatism in the fourth and fifth centuries which provoked Augustine's reflections on the church as a *corpus mixtum* of wheat and tares, saints and sinners. However, the crisis of the church's identity which would give birth to ecclesiology as a discrete area of historic and dogmatic reflection is often traced to the eleventh century split of West and East, the ensuing Gregorian reforms, the Conciliar Movement in the late medieval period, and decisively to the sixteenth century Reformation. The traumatic birth of ecclesiology as a theological science in the midst of crisis and polemic perhaps still colours the theological study of the church today: it is often conducted in apologetic, defensive and even polemical mode, recalling past errors and provocations, and establishing the coherence of a thinker's own tradition, its unique balance and reasonableness, and fidelity to the most ancient church. While the success of the ecumenical movement, the transforming effect of the Second Vatican Council, and the founding of the World Council of Churches have assuaged the polemical and defensive character of ecclesiology, one can still sense the echoes of this approach in some contemporary work. One might ask, therefore, whether there is a more constructive mode of dogmatic ecclesiological enquiry which is richly informed by the painful history of doctrines of the church yet looks forward to a deeper understanding of the mystery of the church which is the body of Christ and the fruit of the Spirit.

Simon Oliver

Van Mildert Professor of Divinity, Department of Theology and Religion,
Durham University, Durham, UK
simon.oliver@durham.ac.uk