Paul Avis


This slim volume is packed with rich content. With refreshing brevity and clarity it offers the reader an overview of what ‘ecclesiology’ is and why it matters. By its very nature any introduction invites the enquiring reader to explore a larger terrain. Starting from what is generally known, it sets out to convey a coherent picture of what lies beyond and to offer pointers that make further details accessible. The writer succeeds admirably in this aim, and makes clear that his own locus is within the Church of England, the world-wide Anglican Communion and the ecumenical movement as a whole. The rootedness of this perspective is important, since inevitably any expression of the Church’s life is historically contingent. The first pre-requisite for engaging with partners in dialogue is to understand where they are coming from. Abstract theorising in the stratosphere is of little avail.

This title was first published in 2000 and has been re-printed three times. The new edition has been expanded in five ways: contemporary developments are brought up to date; fuller reading lists are provided; more details are available in end-notes; questions for discussion and reflection are suggested after each chapter; and the focus is less on the Church of England and more on the global Anglican scene. The author manages to achieve this within a main text of about a hundred pages. The material is condensed and tightly argued, but is easily readable throughout. This competent primer is well mapped and sign-posted, and particularly suited as a tool for group study.

The two opening chapters tackle not just the basic question, ‘What is the Church?’, but also the pressing issue as to why – in an age when Christian belief and values can no longer be taken for granted – any thinking Christian needs a clear grasp of what the Church stands for and where its faith comes from. The author puts his finger on the main causes underlying the diminished influence of religion in the public sphere, and examines some of the symptoms of decline and signals of vitality observable within the Church’s life. Against such a background it is all the more important that the Church’s claims about itself should be convincing, and not be undermined by exclusiveness, insularity, superiority or complacency.

Distinctive features of Anglicanism are shown to include an unwillingness to regard itself as the only true church and its openness to other traditions. How Anglicans perceive their branch of the church in relation to the universal whole and what they understand to be their own theological credentials in ministering word, sacrament and pastoral care – these are amongst the basic
ingredients of their ecclesiology. This term is defined as ‘reasoned and informed reflection on the nature of the Christian church ... in the light of God’s revealed nature and purpose’ (p. 13) and ‘the department of Christian theology that takes the Church’s self-understanding as its object’ (p. 19). Five sub-divisions are enumerated: (a) pastoral theology, including ministry and sacraments; (b) governance or decision-making; (c) ecumenical reflection that transcends particular traditions; (d) missiology; and (e) canon law. Avis believes that ‘the Church’ should always be spoken of with the definite article, and deplores the current fashion for talking of ‘being church’ as if it revolved around human activity rather than divine initiative. He argues that critiques arising from other disciplines, such as history, textual criticism, sociology, science or alternative ideologies, can be of positive value for the Church’s integrity – particularly in times of conflict or renewal.

The rest of the book focuses tightly on the specifics of Anglican ecclesiology. No single vision or theory has dominated the emergence of Anglicanism, since it has been shaped as much by historical changes in society and culture as by the writings of its own theologians from the mid-sixteenth century to the present day. The course of this quest is summarised in chapter 3, after which come two very ‘meaty’ and cogent chapters deserving close attention. Chapter 4 identifies the main strands that underlie the simplistic labels of churchmanship, and expounds three particular models: the Erastian view of nation and church as being virtually coterminous, the Oxford Movement’s emphasis on apostolic succession and episcopacy, and the focus on communion (koinonia) as the core of the Church’s corporate life. The strengths and weaknesses of these insights are critically evaluated. The author rightly draws attention to the broadening of ecumenical understanding regarding the apostolicity of the whole church, not just the ordained ministry. In a masterly analysis that is finely written he goes on to show what elements of lasting value from each of these models are conserved in contemporary Anglican practice. Chapter 5 shows a welcome freshness in setting forth the characteristic Anglican appeal to the threefold sources of catholic tradition, the Bible (especially as perceived through Reformation insights) and sound learning. With judicious balance Avis offers ‘a noble vision of a reasonable, reformed Catholicism’ and concludes with an illuminating analogy from Jung’s approach to the human psyche. This is a compelling account of what binds Christians together.

Chapter 6 accurately enumerates the main sources of Anglican ecclesiology. Some more imaginative discussion questions could perhaps draw more out of this section of material. The final chapter sums up the overall shape of what has so far been reviewed and throws light on several points that are often not clearly understood. The author reveals his close acquaintance with ecumenical