Editorial: From Ecclesiology to Ecclesiastical Polity

Paul Avis
Exeter University
reception@leahill.co.uk

This Journal is obviously devoted to ecclesiology, the theological exploration of the nature and mission of the Church; it focuses particularly on the Church’s mission, ministry and unity. But ecclesiology remains abstract and ungrounded unless it is translated into polity. Ecclesiology is frankly helpless without polity. It lacks purchase and efficacy. It is not enough for a church or a communion of churches to have, and to own, an ecclesiology. A church or a communion of churches also needs a polity, an order or structure that facilitates its work. Polity has to do with the distribution and exercise of authority, the exercise of oversight, the making of policy and the resolving of disputes. Polity enables discernment of God’s will through the practice of conciliarity, which involves consulting the consensus fidelium (the common mind of the faithful), deliberation through study and debate, and the taking of decisions at the end of the day.

Ecclesiology and polity are – or should be – intimately connected. A church’s polity should derive from and express in concrete terms the ecclesiological principles of that church – which of course the church in question believes to be consonant with the nature, the ecclesiological principles, of the one Church of Jesus Christ. Polity is based on theological principles that are fundamental to the authentic existence of a church. As Karl Barth insists, church order, polity and law must stem from the church’s confession, its corporate faith, applying that faith to the sphere of human action. It is not for us to invent, re-invent, or dream up a polity, or to play around with it because we have come across some bright ideas. Polity is not arbitrary, nor is it a purely pragmatic matter, though it is shaped by history including politics, economics and socio-demographic factors, and therefore a certain pragmatism, in the sense of realism and the art of the possible, must play a part. But polity is essentially the outcome of applied theology, a salient example of praxis. Indeed, polity is a

1 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics [cd], ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-), IV/2, p. 707.
subdivision of ecclesiology as a theological discipline. Church laws are covert theological statements. Theology comes first, polity second; polity is dependent on theology (ecclesiology). Ecclesiology is constitutive, the rules of polity are regulative. Theology must judge and critique polity and with it the laws and rules of the Church.\(^2\) I agree with Leo J. Koffeman that ecclesiastical polity is essentially a theological discipline. Koffeman writes: ‘Church polity is a theological (sub)discipline: it aims at the critical analysis, systematic study, and practical development of positive church polity (i.e. church polity as it is in force ... in, for instance, a church order ...) from an ecclesiological perspective.’\(^3\) Since its raw material includes substantially the rules or canon law of a church, it sits between the theoretical discipline of ecclesiology and the practical discipline of ecclesiastical jurisprudence, the practice of church law as a component of pastoral oversight and the work of church courts. But it would be a mistake to think of polity as a purely formal matter and to that extent rather arid and devoid of spiritual vitality. It is polity that provides patterns and models for personal and group interaction and channels of mutual fidelity. Polity has a key relational dimension.\(^4\)

In the present era of post-modernity, polity, like politics itself, is widely distrusted. The structures of the churches, cumbersome and unnecessarily complicated as they often are, struggle to do their work in the face of the pervasive current post-modern suspicion towards all historic, especially political, structures and institutions. And that endemic suspicion is accompanied in the West by a culture of spontaneity and individualism which militates against collective action and social responsibility. But against the current scepticism with regard to institutions and antipathy towards structures we have to insist that polity is a proper concern of the Church. The Church needs to take form in every age, a form that will enable it to respond coherently and effectively to challenges,


\(^3\) Koffeman, *In Order to Serve*, p. 23.