Cheryl M. Peterson


The author argues that the contemporary church faces a theological identity crisis, viz., Who is the church? To answer this question requires paying attention to the current and past context in which the church finds itself, but also to its task of witness and pastoral care. Peterson develops an ecclesiology ‘from below’ that commences with the church’s agency and concrete ecclesial practices (as opposed to its essence or being) in contradistinction to an ecclesiology ‘from above’ (that speaks of the essential nature and structure of the church), prescinding from any given context. Peterson’s thesis is that the activity of the Holy Spirit grounds the church’s identity, so that the Triune God and what God does become the point of departure for ecclesiology, rather than what the church and its members do. For Peterson ecclesial communion models itself on the idea of the communion of the divine persons within the Trinity and is experienced horizontally as well as vertically.

Chapter One gives an overview of ecclesiological thinking and its Sitz im Leben in Protestant America. Chapter Two looks at the church as a word-event or what Ebeling calls a Wortgeschehen. This paradigm has its point of departure in Luther’s insight that the church is a creature of the word. Peterson discusses this model of the church in Karl Barth, the late Lutheran theologian, Gerhard Forde, and Michael Horton, a theologian in the Reformed tradition. For Barth the church is an Ereignis or event that must be continually constituted through the work of the Holy Spirit. Yet in Barth’s eyes the church has its own history since these two aspects, event and history, exist in a dialectical relationship. Peterson faults Barth and Forde for emphasizing the event of the word as opposed to the community created by that event. Horton fails to address the questions raised by an increasingly post-Christendom context in which many people are not raised as Christians and ask, ‘Why the church?’. Peterson notes that contemporary word ecclesiologies should emphasize the role of the Spirit in gathering the church, rather than the Spirit’s role in sending the church.

Chapter Three discusses the model of the church as a koinonia. Peterson argues that Vatican II made no sharp break with the official teaching of the recent past. She cites Avery Dulles who states that the shift was ‘one of emphasis more than substance, of rhetoric more than doctrine’. Communion ecclesiologies stress the relationship of the church to Christ and sacramental incorporation into the Triune God, not organizational structure or community. Peterson then addresses the question of the quest for church unity in the modern ecumenical movement. Different denominations need to acknowledge one another fully
as members of the one body of Christ and to make that unity transparent by sharing together in the Lord's Supper. Chapter Four looks at a third model of ecclesiology, the ‘missional’ church and focuses on the ecclesiology of Darrell Guider and that of Craig Van Gelder. Guider claims that the church has been co-opted by Enlightenment ideas that define mission in terms of success and progress. Moreover, Guider operates with an ‘incarnational’ view of the mission and nature of the church, lacks a developed pneumatology, and fails to explain how the incarnational witness of the church occurs, except via submission to the *imitatio Christi*. Van Gelder’s view of the church as a Spirit-created and Spirit-led church, though a step in the right direction, does not adequately capture the role and activity of the Spirit in the church, since he does not flesh out his ideas about the role of the Holy Spirit in the church.

Chapter Five commences with the Holy Spirit, following the story of the church in the *Acts of the Apostles* and using the narrative method to explore the identity of the church. The narrative method makes use of literary theories employed in the contemporary analysis of narrative literature. Insights derived from literary criticism are then applied to theological reflection. Peterson argues that the Holy Spirit gives the church its own identity, purpose, and mission after Pentecost, after which the Apostles became witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Spirit plays a triple role in the narrative of *Acts*: (1) as mission director that guides and directs the witness of the church by giving prophetic speech to various church leaders, (2) as ‘verifying cause’ by which various groups become members of God’s eschatological people, and (3) as supervisor and sustainer of those in the Christian community. Chapter Six examines the Apostles’ and Nicene creeds in light of an ecclesiology that ‘starts with the Spirit’. This chapter carries over the story of the Spirit-breathed church in *Acts* to the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene creed and to the four classical marks of the church as apostolic, catholic, holy, and one.

In the Epilogue Peterson tackles this question: ‘How do pastors and church leaders translate into practice the theological ideas found in this book?’. Human activities alone do not make a church. Rather, the action of the Holy Spirit through word and sacrament creates the church. In order to give a congregation a Spirit-breathed identity, the local church needs to look at scripture, the creeds, and hymnals. The congregation must pray for the Holy Spirit to equip members with the charisms they need to minister in their own neighborhood and in the world at large. Also, church members need to tell the story of how God has touched their lives and share their story with others, as was done by the early disciples in *Acts* 1:18. It seems that in a post-Christendom world, the living, loving, and forgiving Christian is the only Bible many in the present generation can read.