Editorial

Ecclesiology – An Impossible Possibility

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Put at its simplest, ecclesiology is the theology of the church. Spelled out more fully, ecclesiology comprises a cluster of sub-disciplines that each contribute to the full-bodied theological reflection on the identity of the church – a theological reflection that is comparative, critical and constructive. But to state the scope and purpose of ecclesiology like that immediate poses a major theological problem. In one sense, the church must be studied like any other socio-historical phenomenon, just as in one sense the Bible must be studied like any other book. The church bears all the marks of an historical, political, social, economic and cultural institution, or collection of institutions. It therefore lends itself to investigation by means of the tools of historical, political, social, economic and cultural analysis. But in another and vitally important sense, the church is not like any other object of study. It is unlike any other subject matter, except perhaps Christology and the Bible. In ecclesiology, the church is posited as an irreducible mystery.1

The church holds, as a matter of faith, that it has received its essential identity from God. Christian ecclesiologists, working within the communion of the church, share this faith. The identity of the church of Jesus Christ is received, not created or constructed. It can never be the result of human striving. The existence of the church resides in the realm of grace, the realm of gift. The identity of the Church is received from the triune God, not from the efforts of its members and least of all from some fashionable and ephemeral ideology.

The Church comes to us from the hand of God. So the being of the Church is a state of continual reception. The church is created and held in being by God. If God were to withdraw God’s sustaining word or the Church were to cease to receive it, the Church would crumble into dust. It might look just the same on the outside; the life of the institution might carry on regardless, but it would be an empty shell, full of dead people walking. As Barth suggests, if Scripture were to cease to be the word of God for the church, God’s revelation would no longer be real and then there would be ‘no Church of Jesus Christ’, only a sham, a masquerade.\(^2\) The church originates not only from human, this-worldly sources, but also from a transcendent source in God. The church is an article of faith, as in the creedral confession, ‘We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’, which follows immediately from, ‘We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.’ In other words, we believe in the church only as vivified by the Spirit of God. The essential identity of the church is not self-generated or self-bestowed, but given to it and bestowed upon it. It is an axiom of ecclesiology that the church does not and cannot create, shape or rule itself. In these three vital dimensions the church is dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit and subject to the reign of God (\textit{basileia tou theou}).\(^3\)

(1) The church holds that it does not \textit{create} itself. It did not bring itself into being and does not maintain itself in existence now unaided. The church has no bootstraps. It is the creation of the Holy Spirit through the ministry of word and sacrament (\textit{creatura verbi}, as the Reformation insisted). How do word and sacrament bring the church into being? The Second Vatican Council (1962–65) stated that Jesus Christ ‘founded’ and ‘inaugurated’ the church by proclaiming the gospel of God’s coming Kingdom (\textit{Lumen Gentium} 5). Christ’s proclamation equates to the ministry of the word. Henri de Lubac coined the formula, ‘the Eucharist makes the Church’.\(^4\) The Eucharist stands for the ministry of the sacraments. It is the preaching of the gospel (\textit{kerygma}) and the teaching of the faith (\textit{didachē}), combined with the celebration of the sacraments, especially baptism and the Eucharist, that bring the church into being and maintain it in existence.

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3 Compare this threefold scheme – the creating, shaping and ruling of the church – to Barth’s fourfold scheme of the upbuilding, growing, upholding and ordering of the community: Barth, \textit{Church Dogmatics}, iv/2: §67. See also John Webster, “‘In the Society of God’: Some Principles of Ecclesiology’, in Pete Ward (ed.), \textit{Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), Chapter 11.