Book Reviews


As the successor to Dame Mary Tanner as General Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England, Paul Avis has a well-deserved reputation both as an exponent of ecumenical theology and as one of a small number of theologians who are both interpreting and sometimes maybe shaping Anglican identity at this very complex time in the history of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion.

His present work, *Reshaping Ecumenical Theology: The Church Made Whole?* draws together and re-shapes some of his published articles and addresses on a range of ecumenical matters. All are valuable and worth reading by anyone interested in ecumenism or, for that matter, Anglicanism. The opening sentence of his Preface sets the stage for what he attempts to do in this work: ‘The ecumenical movement is ripe for reform and renewal.’

The first three chapters and the concluding chapter contain his major argument and his recommendations for a new ecumenical methodology. Successive chapters deal with many particular ecumenical issues such as the hermeneutics of unity, reception, episcopacy, building and breaking communion, ethics and communion. He outlines three criteria in the Preface for a reconstructed ecumenism which he then explores in a variety of ways in these successive chapters.

One criterion is taking seriously the diversity of the Christian family, not only as a simple fact of life, but as a theological key to an effective ecumenical ecclesiology. His concern is less the limits that need to be placed on such diversity, as how much unity is compatible with it. This shift in emphasis is one of the most striking elements in his work. A clue to his understanding of ecumenism may be the simple statement in the first chapter: ‘When we accept that a diversity of expressions of Christianity and of the Church are here to stay, we begin to accommodate ourselves to it.’
A second criterion is the close relationship between mission and unity. Mission and unity are but two sides of the one coin as far as he is concerned, and so he argues for an identity between missiology and ecclesiology. This criterion is very closely related to the former because diversity is a result of mission. The church which emerges as a result of mission will stand in tension with the traditional church that gave birth to it and hence a potential for division arises. Ecumenism is a response to what mission has achieved.

For Avis, the Truth of the gospel is beyond the grasp of any particular church and therefore no church can claim to have the final word about faith or order. Diversity must always be grounded in the Truth, and a process of discernment within the communion of the church or between the churches ensures this. Avis opposes this position to what he describes as a Roman Catholic view which would see the magisterium deciding what diversity is acceptable.

His third criterion is the need for a realistic methodology which is a step-by-step movement towards unity. The primary obligation of Christians is to be in communion with other Christians and to maintain and defend that communion. In the last chapter of his book he says idiomatically, ‘In my book, to break communion is the very last thing on earth that we should ever do.’ This could also be a statement of his fundamental principle. Communion must be maintained or re-established at whatever cost.

Avis’ realism is also related to his first criterion. Diversity means diverse and enduring identities, which are essential if the Truth of the Gospel is to find adequate expression. Such realism made possible ecumenical agreements such as the Meissen Agreement and the later Porvoo Agreement of 1996 between most of the Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches and the four British and Irish Anglican Churches, which encompasses the sharing of pulpit and altar fellowship. Each of these agreements establishes real communion to differing degrees but not yet full, visible unity.

His realistic ecumenical methodology would seek to restore communion between divided churches as soon as it is possible so that they can share as much as they can and learn from each other. Then within the context of that communion they can work to overcome the remaining obstacles, some of which may be doctrinal and one of which could certainly be the Anglican commitment to the historic episcopate.

An important dimension of his ecumenical methodology is ‘reception’. Avis contrasts his position with what he sees as the Roman Catholic position which is fundamentally a process of obedience or acceptance of the teaching of the magisterium. This does not do justice to the Catholic position because it falls