

MODELS OF THE CHURCH

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Ecclesiology undoubtedly occupied a central place in the theological debates of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, it would be very difficult to find an area where there is more disagreement among theologians. Explanations for this vary greatly, from hermeneutical stances,¹ through differences of perspective, to variations in personal experience.² According to Dulles, however, the crux of the matter is nevertheless a disagreement over the nature of the church. This is, perhaps, not at all surprising, when we remember that one of the most common biblical categories for describing the church is that of 'mystery'.³ If we add to this the overwhelming variety of pictures used by the New Testament in order to describe the church, we can understand even more clearly the great difficulty of the task ahead of us.

Paul Minear has catalogued and analysed over eighty figures of the Church.⁴ They are drawn from the most varied areas of life: marriage, family, society, religion, agriculture, construction, anatomy, etc. The metaphors blend and intersect, delighting the imagination of the preacher, but certainly puzzling the theologian in search of a coherent picture of the whole.

The way biblical images of the church work together is characterised by a fair degree of flexibility, so that figures from relatively unrelated areas collapse into each other, as in the case of the body and temple metaphors in 1 Corinthians 6:19. Connected to this conflation of metaphors, we also witness in some cases a certain degree of ambiguity concerning the metaphorical or the literal nature of the images. According to Clowney, this happens for instance in the image of the Christians seen as members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), as well as in those of the church seen as the family or as the people of God.⁵

Before discussing their possible theological use, we need to understand how these figures of the church function in the sacred text and how we are to interpret them. Clowney warns us that we do not have to take them simply as 'word-metaphors', following the outdated substitutionary theory described earlier. He suggests rather the use of the principle of analogy, which may yield better results simply 'because God has established a universe with analogical structure'.⁶ We will not here enter into an argument about the nature of analogy, but simply mention that we refer in this context to an 'analogy of proportion'.⁷

Clowney underlines that a significant application of this principle can be found in what he calls the 'theological' nature of these figures. By this, he means that 'they continuously relate the church to the triune God' - a very important observation for what we are attempting to do in the present work. Thus, if the church is actually 'the icon of the Trinity', it would be only natural to expect the doctrine of the church to be developed from a trinitarian perspective, the consistency of which we suggest should be examined using the perichoretic model that we will be formulating.

We now need to move on to the relationship between the biblical figures of the church and their possible use as ecclesiological models. The history of theology shows that down the centuries theologians have favoured one or the other of the main biblical figures of the church, according to the degree to which they appeared to fit their theological programme. The two main figures that have always competed for the role of controlling metaphor are 'the body of Christ' and 'the people of God'.

The most striking example in this area is a relatively recent one. Vatican II, in its 'Dogmatic Constitution of the Church', generally known as *Lumen Gentium*, appears to have initiated an ecclesiological shift away from the central role played traditionally by the metaphor of 'the body of Christ'. The theologians of the council attempted to counteract the possibly negative consequences of this unilateral focus, balancing it with insights provided by the figure of 'the people of God', which has traditionally dominated Reformed ecclesiology. Whether or not they were successful in this endeavour is still open to debate.⁸

A more important issue, however, appears to be the extent to which it is profitable to use biblical metaphors of the church as ecclesiological models. If we look in the Scriptures, we can readily observe that the divinely inspired authors do not appear to favour one figure at the expense of the others.⁹ Thus, Brueggemann contends:

There is no one single or normative model of church life. It is dangerous and distorting for the church to opt for an absolutist model that it insists upon in every circumstance. Moreover, we are more prone to engage in such reductionism if we do not keep alive a conversation concerning competing and conflicting models. Or, to put it positively, models of the church must not be dictated by cultural reality, but they must be voiced and practiced in ways that take careful account of the particular time and circumstance into which God's people are called. Every model of the church must be critically contextual.¹⁰

This appears to be true, in spite of the fact that we may justifiably argue that some metaphors, like the ones already mentioned, have a more comprehensive range of meanings than others. Rather, the biblical record works with a 'vast pluralism of metaphors'¹¹ the whole picture being the result of putting together the various pieces of this puzzle, beginning, of course, with the weightier ones.

Clowney is correct when, after analysing a number of biblical images suggested as comprehensive models for ecclesiology, he concludes that:

...the effort to construct one model as an archetype from a Scriptural metaphor has not succeeded. It is conceivable that a particular metaphor could so be used, but we begin to see the dangers that would threaten the project.

The formation of the archetypal model requires a distinct process of construction. The metaphors of Scripture are employed occasionally, not systematically or comprehensively. The metaphor that would be extended to use as a model must be such that other scriptural metaphors and non-metaphorical statements can be included in it. It must also be such that it suggests new ways of understanding the riches of scriptural teaching about the church.¹²

Does all this mean, however, that in ecclesiology we have to work with a multitude of models? Dulles suggests this solution when he says that if we attempt to be balanced in our approach, 'we have to keep several models in the air at the same time'.¹³ Obviously, our agreement on this matter depends on the definition of model being used. Kuhn's theory of models appears not to favour such a position. For him, the model, or paradigm, is a super-theory that controls the whole area under scrutiny. If we agree with this, it follows that in order to get the best results we have to use only one 'exclusive' model for ecclesiology at any given time. Goldingay agrees with this position when he says:

The different models of the church cannot be related to each other as models. It is as difficult to find the relationships between the church as mystical communion and the church as servant as it is to combine the elements of a painting of a cornfield by Van Gogh with elements of one by Constable. Each is offering an account of the whole from a particular perspective.¹⁴

Nevertheless, this does not mean that any given model can be absolute or that it excludes other possible approaches. Neither does it mean that one particular model is as good as any other. Such relativism would only engender confusion and meaninglessness. As in the case of good or bad metaphors, we need criteria¹⁵ which will allow us to judge the extent to which the 'redescription' of the church provided by a certain model 'fits' first and foremost the biblical data, and secondly the experience/tradition of the Christian community through the centuries.

From a classic Protestant perspective the first criterion appears to be quite unproblematic, with only one possible exception. We need to ask ourselves what happens when, for a reason or another, a certain biblical metaphor becomes problematic in the contemporary context. Some may be tempted to suggest that if it no longer works, we should simply find a new one. The issue, however, is not as simple as it appears to be. As Boersma points out in a recent article on the relevance of penal substitution, 'while metaphors are culturally formed and embedded, we cannot simply exchange them for others without also affecting the contents of what we are saying. We need to ask what is lost in the shift from one metaphor or model to another'.¹⁶

The second criterion consists in the need to validate the metaphors we use within the Christian communion of. One may ask why it is necessary to check our models over against the experience of the *communio* of the faithful. We have to do this firstly because this is the primary source of the biblical images, themselves and secondly because if a certain metaphor does not catch the imagination of the Christian community it cannot work effectively in renewing its vision. This may not be as easy to accomplish today, as it used to be in the past. We agree with Dulles that 'in times of rapid cultural change, such as our own, a crisis of images is to be expected. Many traditional images lose their former hold on people, while the new images have not yet had time to gain their full power. The contemporary crisis of faith is, I believe, in very large part a crisis of images'.¹⁷ What we may need to witness is, as Minear argues, the power of imagination being restored to the church of Christ.¹⁸ Without this dynamic, there is little hope that we will experience any real church renewal.

To these considerations we may need to add a kind of pragmatic corollary, which has to do with the practical consequences of applying a certain model or theory within an ecclesial community. If these consequences are negative, we may need to re-check the theoretical reconstruction that informs our practice. Dulles is right when he argues that 'a model that leads to practical abuses is, even from a theoretical standpoint, a bad model'.¹⁹

In the light of what has been said already, it is also reasonable to contend that much confusion can be avoided if the ecclesiological model for which we are looking is constructed from outside of the limited data of biblical revelation. This is precisely our approach in the present thesis, by suggesting a perichoretic model of the church. We believe this could be a valuable instrument for investigating ecclesiological systems in general, but particularly those developed on a trinitarian basis. Moreover, it might prove to be a very useful basis for renewing our ecclesiological thinking.

At the same time, such an approach does not have to exclude recourse to biblical metaphors of the church: quite the contrary. In fact, as Clowney rightly argues, 'we can never discard the metaphors of Scripture. The metaphorical form is not chaff to be blown away once the wheat of meaning has been harvested. No, the metaphors remain, not only to compel us to re-check our conclusions, but also to lead us into further understanding produced by the power of their truth'.²⁰ However, as he points out, they have to be 'understood in their context by careful exegesis', which has to be 'sensitive to both their independent structure and their interrelation'. Likewise, we have to be careful not to 'interpret scriptural metaphors by imaginatively applying [to them] our own associations',²¹ which may be very different from those normally made by the implied readers of the text. Furthermore, 'we must also take account of the horizon of the history of redemption in which the discourse is found'.²²

Notes

¹ Clowney, for instance, ('Models', 105), believes that 'the denominational divisions of the church do exist in part because of hermeneutical failure'.

² A. Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987²) 15. This is still the standard work in the area of church models, as indicated by the extensive use of Dulles's approach in a quite recent article, J. A. Kroeger, 'Revisiting Models of Theology. An Exploration into Theological Method', *Asia Journal of Theology*, 15, 2, 2001, 364-374.

³ Dulles (*Models*, 18) points out that the mysterious nature of the church has important methodological implications. 'It rules out the possibility of proceeding from clear and univocal concepts, or from definitions in the usual sense of the word. The concepts abstracted from the realities we observe in the objective world about us are not applicable, at least directly, to the mystery of man's communion with God'.

⁴ Minear, *Images*. To be precise, Minear counts ninety-six figures, but some of these, as Dulles rightly points out, may not really be images of the church. We need to add to this two other remarkable studies that take a conceptual approach, rather than Minear's metaphorical one. In his article entitled 'Rethinking Church Models through Scripture' (*Theology Today*, 48, 2, July 1991, 128-138), Walter Brueggemann gives valuable insights to contemporary ecclesialogists by describing three Old Testament community models: (1) the *pre-monarchic*, called also the 'new church start', (2) the *monarchic*, or the 'temple community' and (3) the *post-exilic*, or the 'textual community'. Similarly, in his paper 'Models of Christian Community in the New Testament' in D. Martin & P Mullen, eds., *Strange Gifts. A Guide to Charismatic Renewal* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), Dunn challenges our ecclesiological thinking with his sometimes debatable but always astute analysis of church models in the New Testament.

⁵ Clowney, 'Models', 77.

⁶ Clowney, 'Models', 76.

⁷ For a discussion on analogy in the context of theological models, see J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992) 69-72.

⁸ A lengthy analysis of this and other related matters can be found in the book by Herwi Rikhof mentioned above.

⁹ Minear (*Images*, 222) agrees with this conclusion when he says that 'no one figure can be selected as the dominating base line'. Clowney ('Models', 95) in his turn adds: 'No single metaphor used in Scripture provides an adequate model to incorporate the cognitive elements of all the other metaphors. The two best candidates, 'people of God' and 'body of Christ', demonstrate this by their very juxtaposition, for neither is adequate to express the full content of the other'.

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 'Church Models', 129.

¹¹ Clowney, 'Models', 79.

¹² Clowney, 'Models', 82.

¹³ Dulles, *Models*, 10. To be fair, we have to concede that the author tries to make a distinction between a mere 'model' and a 'dominant model' or a 'paradigm', understood in Kuhnian terms. However, his case appears to us rather unconvincing. The fact that in the second edition of the book the author proposes, besides the five models debated in the first edition, his own comprehensive model, 'the church as a community of disciples' may perhaps be taken to substantiate our case.

¹⁴ Goldingay, *Models of Scripture*, 11.

¹⁵ Discussing theological models in general, Glenn ('Criteria', 298) suggests two categories: (1) 'criteria of preference' - which help the theologian choose between models, and (2) 'criteria of reference' - that help assess the extent to which the model fits the biblical data. Glenn ('Criteria', 299-300), following J. McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology. Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ*, (London: SCM, 1966), chapter 3, suggests four criteria of preference, in terms of: (1) *scope* - ability to correlate a high proportion of the relevant biblical material; (2) *clarity* - ability to 'communicate the clearest and deepest understanding of the truth in question'; (3) *relevance* - ability to 'make the truth of the Bible most relevant'; (4) *pragmatism* - ability to 'renew and sustain faith in Jesus Christ with moral results'. In fact, what we shall endeavour to do in what follows is to offer a way of pairing these criteria in two groups and add a new one, related to community validation.

¹⁶ H. Boersma, 'The Disappearance of Punishment. Metaphors, Models and the Meaning of the Atonement', *Books & Culture*, March/April 2003 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2003/002/16.32.html>, accessed on March 19, 2003).

¹⁷ Dulles, *Models*, 21. Further on (p. 26), and closely related to the above, the author adds that 'theological verification [of such models] depends upon a kind of corporate discernment of spirits'.

¹⁸ Minear, *Images*, 17.

¹⁹ Dulles, *Models*, 28.

²⁰ Clowney, 'Models', 97.

²¹ Clowney, 'Models', 84-85.

²² A very good example is the way the Old Testament metaphors related to the people of God are transformed in the light of the new covenant (Clowney, 'Models', 87-89).