

Introduction

HOW DO WE PERCEIVE the church today? Must it always be the case that churches as institutions are prone to sin and failure? What can churches offer in an age that has seen so many abuses of power in the church? This book does not claim to provide comprehensive answers to these complicated and age-old problems. Rather I intend to do something more modest, namely to reflect on some diverse, yet topical, themes in contemporary ecclesiology and ecumenical dialogue.

Glancing through the table of contents, the reader may be struck by the somewhat diverse range of topics. This points to the genesis of this book. The seven chapters contained here were not originally planned to make up a book. Rather, in the last few years I had the opportunity to write separate articles, partly invited, partly chosen by myself, which I have included here. The idea of a book emerged in 2009 when it became clear that the ecclesiological and ecumenical themes I had worked on largely embraced three marks, or attributes, of envisioning the church: the church as apostolic, ecumenical, and radical. Thinking about it further, I then decided to assemble, revise, and add new material in order to present a coherent volume. Considering the intrinsic connections between these three marks, i.e., the fact that they are linked and how they are linked, I thus want to formulate my central thesis: The church, if it is truly apostolic, is radical, and the church, if it is truly radical, is apostolic; both marks shape the vision of an ecumenical and prophetic church. This is the book's basic thesis which underlies its critical engagement with several distinct, yet related, themes pertinent to my argument.

Perceiving the church as apostolic, ecumenical, radical, and prophetic essentially means a church that is aware and proud of its origin

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and roots. It is a church that appreciates its tradition but always also critically questions it and is ready to learn, and willing to change. Further, it is aware of its political and social dimension. It means that Christians who embrace such a vision will not content themselves with personal piety, as important as this may be, but are strongly committed to the church as community. Such is the church that Jesus intended for the people of God. We read in Acts that the earliest community had all things in common. This is a far cry from what separates Christians today—not only their different denominational affiliations and a wide variety of theological convictions, but also scandalous discrepancies between rich and poor, north and south, “first” and “third” world. The vision of a radical church, a church that respects its roots and the otherness of the kingdom of God, as Jesus taught it, thus includes a political, at times countercultural and subversive dimension. The body of Christ, if it is true to its roots and its faith in the kingdom of God, can therefore never content itself with socio-political establishments and economic systems which display little or no interest in seriously promoting social responsibility and tackling the ever-increasing divide between rich and poor.

The first part of the book, then, examines apostolicity from different angles. Apostolicity, including ministerial offices in the church, remains at the heart of ecumenical concerns. Over the last forty years remarkable progress has been made in a common understanding of apostolicity, in particular, in issues of church ministry. Yet despite such advances, the slow progress in the reception of bi- and multilateral ecumenical statements in the churches is felt amongst those who have dedicated themselves to ecumenical dialogue.

In the first chapter we will consider the role of the apostle, apostolicity, and ministry in the early church. Changes in perceptions of apostolate/apostolicity occurred in the first few centuries, which have had lasting consequences to this day. Naturally within the scope of this book, we can only briefly focus on some of the most important aspects. Yet this is essential as the biblical witnesses and the beginnings of the church are still relevant to any contemporary ecumenical agreement on what remains the most difficult obstacle in church unity, namely ministry.

Chapter 2 will give an account of and analyze how the notion of apostolicity has been developed in some recent ecumenical statements

of the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches. As a member of the Lutheran Church residing in Ireland, and as one who has worked for many years in an institute of Catholic theology, my ecumenical interest has centred especially on Roman Catholic–Lutheran relations. Further, given the close theological and ecclesiological connections between Anglicans and Lutherans that have been affirmed and expanded through the Meissen and Porvoo agreements, these dialogues are also taken into the discussion. We will see how the Porvoo agreement is especially groundbreaking and encouraging in enabling Lutheran and Anglican Churches in setting out on genuinely new steps towards visible unity.

Over the last three decades, ecumenism in itself has become divergent, multifaceted, lacking in cohesion, and above all a unified vision. The third chapter thus focuses on current unresolved issues in ecumenism, including reflections on method in ecumenical dialogue. In particular, albeit briefly, I will consider the process of reception, and the notion of “differentiated consensus” statements, as well as pneumatological freedom in shaping the church of Christ. I also will take up an idea, first noted by Karl Rahner, about the relevance of the “factual” faith of the people of God and their ecclesiological understanding vis à vis church teaching, which, if further developed, could have a bearing on perceptions of the four marks of the church, as well as on a more radical vision of what is essential to being church, and on our search for unity.

The second part of the book examines two specific ecclesiological and ecumenical issues: the church’s concrete modern manifestation as denominations and the worldwide annual celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Chapter 4 looks at the concept of “denomination.” What is a denomination and what does it mean for the churches to understand themselves as such and in relation to other denominations? My focus here concentrates specifically on my own Lutheran denomination, especially as it emerged and developed in the United States. Of course, denominations will be with us into the future, yet, while peaceful denominational co-existence grants Christians diversity, one wonders whether it is or can be sufficient for visible unity among the churches. Hence the tension between unity and diversity, as well as specific ecclesial histories need to be addressed when discussing the church as “denomination.”

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The fifth chapter follows with a critical reflection on the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The Octave, once a driving force in the ecumenical quest, seems to lack the potency it once possessed. It has become something of an “institution,” *reminding* us of the unity we already have and the unity for which we hope(d), rather than functioning as an inspiring, exciting instrument towards new stages of unity. The chapter outlines the history and theology of the Week and concludes with some critical observations and suggestions for its future.

In the final section, the second “mark” of the book’s title comes especially to the fore: envisioning the church as radical and prophetic, i.e., radical and prophetic in its commitment to justice, freedom, and love, radical in its commitment to the four marks of the church, and ultimately to the kingdom of God, which, as Jesus tells us is—and should be—among us. Today this includes a preferential option for the economically poor, for outcasts and the marginal groups in society. Here I will discuss the work of theologian Dorothee Sölle and of literary critic and (unofficial) theologian Terry Eagleton. Working in twentieth-century German and British contexts respectively, the concerns of these two seminal thinkers, one Lutheran, the other Roman Catholic, correspond in their (left-wing) theological-political engagement. Sölle proposes a vision of Christianity that must always seek first the kingdom of God and embrace the cross of Christ. This centrally includes a siding with those on the margins as well as reflections on ecological matters. Her emphasis on a theology that must start and end in praxis is akin to liberation theologians in Latin America who significantly inspired her own work and thought. Eagleton has critically examined (Catholic) church structures and advocated the idea of a Christian society in his early writings. Latterly, he has written again on religious matters, e.g., a critical defense of Christian faith in the context of recent atheistic attacks on the *raison d’être* of religion itself.

Finally, in an engagement with the work of some contemporary ecclesiologists, such as Nicholas Healy and Richard Gaillardetz and others, the book concludes with a reflection on, and advocacy of, a church committed to being apostolic, ecumenical, radical, and prophetic in our age and into the future.