

Ecclesiology: A Review Article

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Introduction

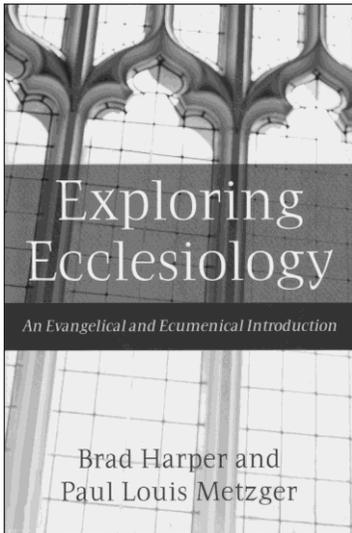
In the last five to ten years there has literally been a plethora of new books coming out on the subject of the church – what some have called an “ecclesiological renaissance”. This is very encouraging to see. It does not mean that the quality is consistent and, as in anything, discernment must always be practised. The five books under review in this article clearly are representative of these new efforts to write on ecclesiology or the doctrine of the church. They are contemporary and wrestle with the life of Christian community, the Scriptures and doctrine.

We begin with two books which endeavour to present evangelical ecclesiologies and are traditionally in the category of systematic theology. Let me first explain my philosophy on approaching them. I read and continue to recommend students and others to read and digest the great classical texts of systematic theology which almost always include a large section on ecclesiology. Here I include the works coming out of the Genevan tradition, such as Calvin’s Book IV of the *Institutes*, Francis Turretin or Benedict Pictet; the Dutch world of writers like Herman Bavinck; the Scottish world of writers like John Dick and the Bannermans; and the Americans of three strands – Louis Berkhof, Charles Hodge or Robert Dabney. I believe ecclesiological study needs to be well grounded in the “greats” of our evangelical and Reformed heritage. It will balance us, inform us and allow us to interact maturely on the subject of ecclesiology. However, we must not stop there. Thus these two books with which this review article begins help us to live in this generation, and we should take them up with enthusiasm to see what we may learn and be challenged by, but only once we have been informed by those works which have stood the test of time. As C. S. Lewis wisely said: “It is a good rule after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between.” So I have stated my method – read and know the old, now proceed to the new; if that means stepping somewhat out of your norm, that is fine.

Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology

***Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction.* Brad Harper and Paul Louis Metzger. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009, 336 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-58743-173-9**

The authors, Harper and Metzger, have both taught theology at Multnomah University and have both been involved with The Institute for the Theology of Culture: New Wine, New Wineskins at Multnomah. They note clearly in the introduction that particularly the Western world has continued on its individualistic spiritual path and has been disillusioned with “church”, the corporate entity (p. 11). There is nothing new here – numerous books on evangelical ecclesiology today make the same comment. Next they proceed to define their key terms in relation to the study of ecclesiology – evangelical *and* ecumenical. They use the term “evangelical” to refer to “that post-World War II movement in Protestant American Christianity that prizes the ‘fundamentals of the faith,’ as they were called, while rejecting a fundamentalist spirit that discourages dialogue with those outside our tradition” (p. 13). I appreciate such straightforward writing in their introduction, and they then proceed to unpack that sentence very clearly. Finally, still under “evangelical”, they state their desire to address



contemporary issues – “individualism, women in ministry, evangelism and social action, consumerism in church growth trends, ecumenism, and the church in a postmodern culture” (p. 13). Next they discuss “ecumenical”, a term which can be very loaded for many. They are not suggesting the lowest common denominator ecumenical approach but rather explain and assert the “mosaic” approach. “[This] is to take for granted that the distinctions of the various traditions have the potential to bring richness even in the midst of disagreement, creating a mosaic that, examined up close, may reveal that a few pieces are out of place or misshapen but which nonetheless at a distance becomes an image recognized by all as a beautiful work of art” (p. 17). On an aside, I thought that would have made better artwork for the back cover – the mosaic motif. The authors see this type of mosaic expressing “unity in diversity” and only able to prosper when the culture is hostile to Christianity. In other words, these two theologians are sounding a prophetic note in their ecclesiology. I believe this last point will be difficult for us in the West to come to terms with.

Now that we know the book's key terminology, we can proceed to the main body. After the essential introduction, the book falls into sixteen chapters. The first is "The Church as a Trinitarian Community: The *Being*-Driven Church" which flows well into the second chapter, "The Trinitarian Church Confronts American Individualism". Two comments here – first, this is a very different starting point in ecclesiology than we are used to. It has roots which echo more with Early Church or Eastern Orthodoxy. Does this suggest a barrenness in our own evangelical Protestantism today to fail to appreciate a deeper Trinitarian theology? Next, notice how the authors combine this with the reality of individualism. Here is a thought-provoking paragraph:

We have before us three problems: overemphasis on the individual, the individual family, and the individual church. How shall we respond? The individual is important to God, just not in isolation from the church. The family is important to God, but not to the detriment of God's family. The individual church is important to God, just not in isolation from other churches. (p. 41)

Since there are sixteen chapters, I will not mention them all. Some I thought were very helpful, such as chapters nine, ten and eleven: "The Church as a Serving Community", "Church Discipline – The Lost Element of Service" and "The Church as an Ordered Community". With the last one, I was surprised to see a section devoted to the three basic forms of church government plus "strengths and weaknesses" of each. Harper and Metzger show they have tried to read widely and see the "lay of the land". They make some fair and judicious comments. My conclusion after reading this book is that there are evangelical theologians out there who are very much trying to write on ecclesiology, even including the related area of polity. There are some good things in these chapters.

Now for a chapter which left me confused – "The Role of Women in the Ordered Community" (chapter twelve). This must be addressed in ecclesiology today. It is not there in Bavinck or Hodge, but let's commend Wayne Grudem for dealing with the subject in *Systematic Theology*. My problem was I did not find a conclusion with this chapter. The other chapter which I found "a bit fuzzie" was chapter four, "Eschatology, the Church and Ecology".

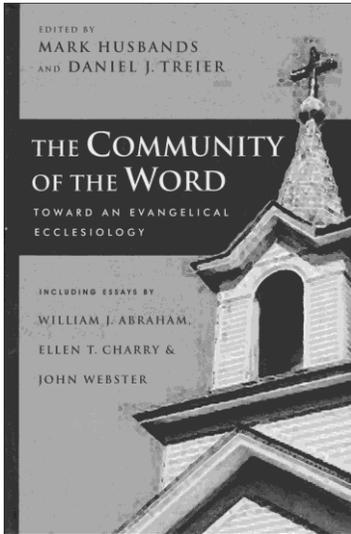
The remaining chapters tend to be dealing more with the matter of being a missional church, which over the last fifteen to twenty years has been receiving much attention and cannot be ignored now in this area of systematic theology. If you have not read much in this area, these chapters will give you quite a good overview of this theme in ecclesiology today.

The authors provide a good "Recommended Readings" section at the back for the chapters. The appendix, "Types of Ecclesiology", is interesting but appears to stand alone and in my estimation needs some more explanation. Overall this is a well-researched book and clearly helps to organize us on

moving forward in this generation towards a richer ecclesiology. I think it needed to interact more with the classical authors of Protestantism, but I am sure that would have made it double the length. However, at times by being so contemporary it loses that historical balance of evaluation. No doubt this is not the final word but another helpful step. I think we can learn and benefit from *Exploring Ecclesiology*, and it should inspire us to write more ourselves.

***The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology.* Edited by Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier. Downers Grove, IL/Leicester: InterVarsity Press/Apollos, 2005, 291 pp., paper. ISBN 0-8308-2797-8**

Now to the second book, *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology*, edited by Husbands and Treier of Wheaton College. Generally I find collections less inspiring and less unified. This book has thirteen different contributors, and I will confess at the outset I was drawn to one essay, one in the middle of the book, by Darrell L. Guder, “The Church as Missional Community” (pp. 114-128). This essay comes in part two of the collection, “Locating the Church Dogmatically”. It is short but well-written and very helpful to grasp the theological construct of the church as “missional”. The essay alone is worth the price of the book and will serve as an excellent essay to give to today’s students in ecclesiology courses in Bible colleges or divinity courses in a seminary.



Back to the book’s organizational structure, part one is “The Church in ‘Evangelical’ Theologies: Looking Back”. This begins with a very provocative essay by D. G. Hart. I have mentioned part two above. Part three is “The Church as Moral Community” and part four, “The Church as Sacramental Community?”. Here one sees that it is not just a discussion about the number of sacraments but rather a fuller-orbed approach to the understanding of a “sacramental theology”. Part five is “Locating the Church Culturally”.

Those familiar with the concept of cultural engagement will sense where this section charts the waters. As I read this last section of essays, I started to think that perhaps these were aimed at graduate-level seminars or advanced seminars on ecclesiology. They are demanding, and I came away thinking an essay like James K. A. Smith’s, “The Church as Social Theory: A Reformed Engagement with Radical Orthodoxy”, needs much more background than is contained in the essay for most students and pastors. Generally the other three parts of the book are much more accessible to a wider audience. The other essay writers are Dennis Okholm, Jonathan R. Wilson, John

Webster, William J. Abraham, Allen Verhey, Craig A. Carter, Gary Badcock, Ellen T. Charry, Willie James Jennings and William A. Dyrness.

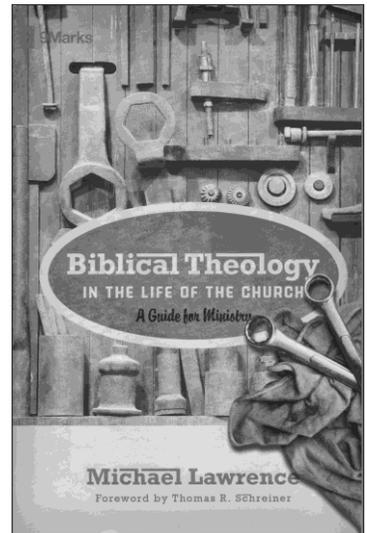
The Community of the Word lacks a unifying voice. There are tensions between some writers; the first essay clearly demonstrates this. I am not convinced that overall the collection moves us a great deal forward “toward an evangelical ecclesiology”. I came away saying there were some nuggets of gold “here and there”, but an overall unity appeared lacking to me.

Biblical Theology and Ecclesiology

***Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry.* Michael Lawrence. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010, 233 pp, paper. ISBN 978-1-4335-1508-8**

From systematic theology we move over to biblical theology and Michael Lawrence’s *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*. Graeme Goldsworthy sees Lawrence’s book as a “skilfully integrative approach” that “breaks new ground in the practical application of biblical theology”.

This book is part of the 9Marks Books,¹ thus readers familiar with Thabiti Anyabwile or Mark Dever will already know some of the parallel themes to that examined by Lawrence. *Biblical Theology* comments upon Dever’s formulation of the second mark of a healthy church, namely “biblical theology”. Lawrence’s chapters here emerge out of sermons he preached as part of Dever’s vision to have writers address the nine marks. From sermon form they were transcribed, and then from transcription it appears they were taught in a class setting with a book in view. Since the author, Michael Lawrence, is associate pastor at Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC and works with colleague Mark Dever, there is very much a unified voice with the 9Marks movement or group. It does appear to be a distinct movement in my estimation.



¹ For those not familiar with 9Marks, see my article, “Reformed Identity and *Semper Reformanda* as Applied to Discussions on Ecclesiology in North America”, *Hadlington House Journal* 12 (2010): 149-160. Dever’s nine marks are: expositional preaching, biblical theology, a biblical understanding of the gospel, a biblical understanding of conversion, a biblical understanding of evangelism, biblical church membership, biblical church discipline, biblical discipleship and biblical church leadership.

Biblical Theology distils and integrates much of the ground which has been gone over by Meredith Kline, O. Palmer Robertson, Gerhardus Vos and Edmund Clowney. It contains some excellent charts such as the chart “Table of Major Biblical Covenants” on page sixty-one. Those familiar with the major components of what has been written on biblical theology will find many of the chapters, perhaps well over half the book, covering familiar ground. Those not as well acquainted with the subject will find a good read here. Such chapter titles as the following illustrate well my point: “Biblical Theology Tools 1: Covenants, Epochs, and Canon”; “Biblical Theology Tools 2: Prophecy, Typology, and Continuity”; “Biblical and Systematic Theology: Do We Really Need Both?”; “The Story of Creation”; “The Story of the Fall”.

This takes us then to section three of the book, namely “Putting It Together for the Church”, the shortest portion of the book with only chapters eleven and twelve – “Preaching and Teaching (Case Studies)” and “Biblical Theology and the Local Church”. Lawrence develops his “sermon application grid” in chapter eleven. Grid subjects include: the text’s points, the Bible storyline (redemptive historical), non-Christian/worldviews, society, Christ, the individual Christian, the Church, and the Shepherd’s taxonomy.

The final chapter, “Biblical Theology and the Local Church”, briefly mentions God’s people as the “assembly” and then proceeds to look at “spheres of ministry” – counselling, missions, caring for the poor, and Church-State relations.

As an exposition on Mark Dever’s mark of “Biblical Theology” being one of the defining marks of a healthy church, there is much here to be commended. The author distils the work of many authors on both biblical and applied theology. However, I came away somewhat disappointed. Yes, the book does help distil much on biblical theology. Yes, it provides many “tools”, or would it be better to say “frameworks”, for consideration; but I thought it was going to help to integrate and apply this in the life of the church. I have since concluded that the book is really foundational and that it is much more about principles as to how the Word as biblical theology shapes church life, theology and worship. This helps to explain the fact that there are only two “application” chapters (chapters eleven and twelve).

Applied Theology and Ecclesiology

***The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love.* Jonathan Leeman. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010, 375 pp., paper. ISBN 978-1-4335-0905-6**

Another new book expounding upon two of Dever’s formulations of the nine marks of a healthy church is Jonathan Leeman’s *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline*. Leeman focuses on the two marks of church membership and discipline. He is an elder at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in

Washington, DC and is the director of communications for 9Marks. The book's foreword was written by Mark Dever.

The thesis of the book promotes church membership and the practice of local church discipline; the way that Leeman explains these marks is to show that they are rooted in a correct understanding of what constitutes biblical love. Biblical love has commitments and relationships and has right and wrong built into its nature (p. 11).

Like many books, Leeman's book is divided into three parts: part one, "Love Misdefined"; part two, "Love Redefined"; and part three, "Love Lived". Part one has one chapter, and Leeman certainly tries to bring his subject into the reality of Western culture. The chapter's opening header is John Lennon's "All you need is love". He begins the chapter by using the style of a catechism:

Main Question: How do our common cultural conceptions of love today hinder our acceptance of church membership and discipline?

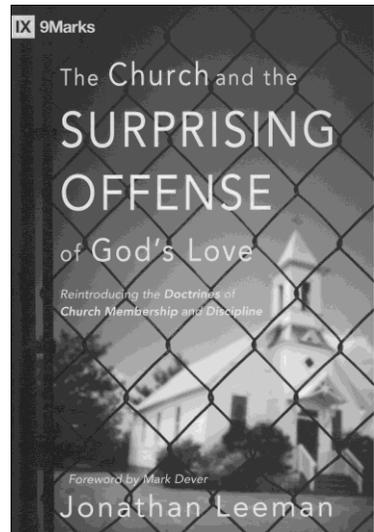
Main Answer: We have made love into an idol that serves us and so redefined love into something that never imposes judgments, conditions, or binding attachments. (p. 39)

It is a very stimulating chapter and certainly makes the topic of church membership relevant to today, not some historical nicety. It may not read as well outside of a Western context, where some of the illustrations may lose their impact.

Part two is the heart of Leeman's book and totals almost two hundred pages. Here he takes us to the connection between God's love and church membership. He then proceeds to the topic of authority as grounded in love, and next, the topic of Christ's authority in local churches. Again his catechetical introduction here states his thesis:

Main Questions: What authority does Christ give the local church and why?

Main Answers: Christ authorizes the local church to proclaim and protect the gospel, to recognize or affirm those who belong to him, to unite them to itself, to oversee their discipleship, and to exclude any imposters. He gives the local church this authority in order to protect and display his gospel in a fallen world which continually misunderstands and misports- trays his gospel love. (p. 169)



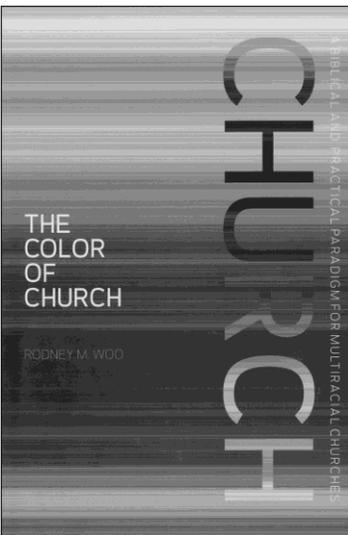
The final chapter here on love redefined is “The Covenant of Love”, which answers the main question, “What exactly is this commitment or ‘covenant’ of local church membership?”

Now, two hundred pages is a lot of reading. I did wonder if this section could have been reduced and made more concise. What is said here is sound, yet I still came away thinking there could have been more biblical development on the subject of membership. That may sound like a contradiction, but I do not see it as such. Leeman makes his point, but there is still more to argue than he has room for because it seems too exhaustive on his chief rationale.

The third section of the book tackles two “Main Questions”: “How should a church responsibly affirm, oversee, and remove members? Should it account for cultural differences in these activities?” and “What does it mean to submit to a local church? Are there limits to the church’s authority over the individual?” Even if one’s polity is not Baptist or historic Congregationalist, there is still much to learn from here. Having said that, there is an underlying polity with which not all Protestant traditions will be in complete agreement.

Leeman has certainly given us a large work on the subject of church membership. The size will limit its usage in small group settings in local churches, so it will become more the domain of the pastor or theology student.

***The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches.* Rodney M. Woo. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing, 2009, 290 pp., paper. ISBN 978-0-8054-4839-9**



The last book in this review article, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches*, is distinctive in that its theme is not in the forefront of any of the other four books reviewed. However, it is a critical aspect of biblical ecclesiology and its application, namely that of church as multiracial. This book is very much a case-study text of Wilcrest Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, where the author, Rodney Woo, has pastored for seventeen years. In these years a once all-white congregation has undergone an incredible transformation to now being represented by forty-four different countries and a white population of less than forty percent. As a multiracial church, this book, *The Color of Church*, uses this definition:

“a multiracial congregation is composed of racially diverse believers united by their faith in Christ, who makes disciples of all nations in the anticipation of the ultimate racial reunion around the throne of God” (p. vii).

The book comes really as a sequel to Michael Emerson and Rodney Woo's *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States*,² and as such it is much more focused. One congregation is used as a case-study, and from this the author endeavours to develop the biblical basis for a multiracial ministry and then makes application. Thus the three main sections of the book are as follows: section one, "Biblical Basis"; section two, "Current Reality"; and section three, "Implementation". The book is reflective of the author. His father was half Chinese, his wife is Hispanic, and his Ph.D. thesis is entitled "Paul's Contextual Approach for Evangelizing the Jews and the Gentiles against the Background of Acts 13:16-41 and Acts 17:22-31".

The biblical basis section is not a difficult read, nor is the entire book. There is a lightness about the book, not shallow but light because of the author's writing and illustration style. It is not a weighty theological tome which only academics will read. It is certainly meant for church leaders and members to read and study together. This is evidenced by all the "Discussion Questions" placed at the end of each chapter. Even the biblical section is very testimonial, but this should not be off-putting because I found myself learning a great deal about congregational life in a multiracial, suburban Texan context. Given the nature of urbanization in the West today, ministerial training cannot afford to ignore such realities, or we will ignore them at our peril. I personally did not find anything biblically alarming or very controversial from what Woo was saying. I think there are some practicalities, such as language in multiracial churches, which are not factored in sufficiently here. Language does come up briefly under the implementation section (p. 192) but is very much limited to Wilcrest Church and not very well developed beyond the case study.

Two chapters which I intend to use in teaching are chapters ten and eleven, "The Role of Worship in the Multiracial Church" and "Leadership in a Multiracial Church" (pp. 180-225). The chapter on worship helps us to see different models in multiracial worship when it comes to music. These must be known and discussed. Woo does not demand one model but gives us the "lay of the land" as a helpful starting point. His eight-fold "Character Sketch of a Multiracial Leader" in chapter eleven is very engaging and good material for a seminar training session. Anyone wanting to explore leadership in a multiracial church must read this chapter.

The Color of Church is theologically a challenge to the development of our ecclesiology and helps us to consider how to apply our doctrine. Yes, it is very geographically bound – Houston, Texas. However, we have here an evangelical pastor and professor helping us with a very important part of ecclesiology. It is not a definitive work, because that is not the nature of this

² Michael O. Emerson and Rodney M. Woo, *People of the Dream: Multiracial Congregations in the United States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

book. I will never forget one story from the author. When Rodney Woo was being considered as a pastoral candidate for Wilcrest, a church member approached a member of the search committee and asked if Woo had ever considered adding the letter “d” to his surname so that he would be more readily accepted by the congregation. Are you interested in the book?

Conclusion

This article has surveyed recent works in the evangelical fold all related to the doctrine of the church. The first two were in systematic theology, the third in biblical theology as practised in the church, and the fourth and fifth in the area of applied theology and church life. It is hoped that by examining these five books in one review article, the large scope of the field of study and practice related to ecclesiology will be seen. Stand on the shoulders of the great classical writers but remember we live today. These five books, as works by living authors, do in different ways help us to live in our generation. Their audience is very much, I think, the Western church; yet having said that, there are universals for the global, Christian evangelical community. Though discerning these universals will require some sifting, it will be well worth the effort.