

# Week 8: The Church and the Christian Life

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- Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).
- José Comblín, *People of God*, ed. and trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
- Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (2nd edn; Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985).
- Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

# 1. Ecclesiology

- Ecclesiology too may have a claim to stand at the centre of Systematic Theology.
- Church is rare or unique form of religious organisation.
- Existence of Christian theology closely bound up with it.
- Church is the place where the gospel is proclaimed.
- Preservation of orthodox teaching has always been seen as responsibility of the Church.

# Ecclesiology II

- Origins of the Church are nevertheless complicated.
- Loisy: 'Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God, and it was the Church that arrived'.
- Gospels contain few hints indicating institutional developments.
- Jesus did not baptise, but *after* the resurrection instructs his disciples to do so in Mt 28.
- In Mt. 16, he instructs Peter to be 'the rock on which I will build my church.'

# Ecclesiology III

- Central for subsequent Christian life is the Eucharist, which Jesus is said to have instituted 'in the night when he was betrayed.' (1 Cor 11, 23-6).
- Jesus gives the bread (and the cup) 'in remembrance' of his death for his believers.
- Unlike the synoptics, the Gospel of John does not have the story of the last supper.
- John 6 has often been read as a Eucharistic text:
- 6, 51: I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

# Ecclesiology IV

- Creed of Nicaea and Constantinople (381)
- [I believe] in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
- Augsburg Confession VII (1530): [The authorities] teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.
- Thirty-nine Articles (1571): The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

## 2. Church as Christ's Body

- One tradition of ecclesiology holds as crucial the continued presence of Jesus with his community.
- Expressed most powerfully in the metaphor of the Church as 'the body of Christ' (Eph. 4, 12).
- Emphasis on organic unity among believers, but also their hierarchical connection with Christ as their head:
- Eph. 4, 15-6: But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.'

# Church as Christ's Body II

- What does it mean to say 'the head is Christ'?
- An analogical reading finds here the justification for a hierarchical church.
- Ultimately, priests, bishops, the pope could take the place of Christ in lieu of him.
- This depends on a theology of representation.
- Yet the reference to Christ as the head always has a subversive dimension too.
- When the analogical reading is found unpersuasive, the ecclesiastical hierarchy can be seen as *replacing* rather than representing Christ.

# Church as Christ's Body III

- Nineteenth-century Catholic ecclesiology (Moehler, Newman): church as the extension of the Incarnation.
- This underwrote a number of claims:
- Identity of external and spiritual church.
- Identity of universal and local church.
- Alignment of theology and history: the apostolic church as the true, universal church.
- Alignment of the church's authority with the authority of Christ.



### 3. Church and Spirit

- Evidence for Church as Christ's continued presence complicated by relationship of Church and Spirit.
- Does Christ stay present with his disciples after the resurrection?
- In Matthew, yes (Mt 28).
- In Luke/Acts, he 'ascends' to heaven (Acts 1).
- Spirit is sent (according to Acts 2) *after* ascension.
- This is understood as the origin of the Church.

# Church and Spirit II

- In this perspective there is discontinuity between the 'age of the Incarnation' and the 'age of the Church'.
- What does this mean in practice?
- Gifts of the Spirit (according to 1 Cor 12): Words of wisdom, healing, working of miracles, speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues.
- Stronger emphasis on individual believers and their active life of faith.
- Tension with institutional view of the Church.

# Church and Spirit III

- Montanist crisis in 2nd century caused by 'new prophecy'.
- Led to victory of institutional church.
- Authority is not vested in charismatic individuals but in the offices of the Church.
- Bishops are legitimised by their historical relation with the apostles and their canonical institution,
- NOT by their charismatic gifts.

# Church and Spirit IV

- Individual Christians are guided by institutional prescriptions and discipline *not* by a requirement to prove their possession of the Spirit.
- This fundamental decision was retained in all the major churches, including mainline Protestantism.
- But the ideal of a spiritual church was kept alive in movements.
- Y. Congar critiqued the 'incarnational' understanding of the Church as institutionalist. Spirit was an important corrective for Catholic ecclesiology.

# Church and Spirit V

- Emphasising the Spirit does not have to lead to an enthusiastic ecclesiology.
- The Gospel of John calls the Spirit 'comforter'.
- He is sent as a placeholder while Jesus is absent.
- Christians in this sense live 'between the times':
- After the Incarnation but before Christ's second coming.
- The Church is the time of this interval.

## 4. Church as one and many I

- Creed states belief in 'one Church'.
- In reality, there have always been churches:
- Local, regional, confessional differences have existed from the beginning.
- Today, Christianity is irreducibly plural.
- In many ways, Church is where 'two or three are gathered in [Christ's] name' (Mt 18, 20).
- Church is experienced as community.

# Church as one and many II

- Can the formula of the one Church still make sense?
- Vatican II: Model of concentric circles.
- Inclusivist ecclesiology with RC Church at the centre.
- Advantage: acceptance of factual plurality while maintaining the need for institutional representation of unity.
- Protestant alternative: distinction of visible and invisible Church.

# Church as one and many III

- The *invisible* Church is the community of all those elected by Christ as his followers.
- The visible Church is any institutional realization.
- The two overlap but are not identical.
- Advantage: more genuinely inclusive.
- Disadvantage: hard to explain the dignity of the institutional Church.



## 5. Life in the Spirit

- Traditional ecclesiologies strongly emphasized institutional dimension.
- Partly for pragmatic reasons related to religious establishment.
- Christian faith however has always been deeply personal.
- Strongly reflected in the mystical tradition (religious experience).

## Life in the Spirit II

- Today the institutional frame of the Church is less formative.
- This is a problem if faith becomes individualistic.
- Community is an inalienable dimension of Christian life.
- Individualisation can be a genuine opportunity if churches understand that their role is to offer a communal frame for personal encounters with God.