

A Summary of Dr. Karkkainen's Book, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology* Kevin Higgins

This is a brief summary of the main topics in Dr. Karkkainen's book about the church, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives*.

The book is written from the background of a systematic theologian. Dr. Karkkainen belongs to the Pentecostal/Charismatic tradition, and also served in Thailand as a church planter. He brings to the study a unique combination of well-researched scholarship and practical experience.

The author sets the book in motion in the introduction by covering where ecclesiology fits with systematic theology, how the church relates to the Spirit, Christ, and salvation, as well as some of the differences in Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Chapter one deals with Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology with its heavy emphasis on the unity of the Spirit and the Eucharist. There is an emphasis on the unity ("as a result of its being the body of Christ") and the diversity ("as a result of its being the fullness of the Spirit") in the church. Eastern Orthodox ecclesiology most closely aligns itself with Roman Catholic ecclesiology, and so that comes next.

In chapter two Karkkainen describes Roman Catholic ecclesiology and its emphasis on the structures of the church which are seen to be part of the divine plan. He ends the chapter by emphasizing the ecumenical stance of Pope John Paul II in his teachings and writings.

In chapter three we become acquainted with Lutheran ecclesiology and the connection between the gospel (read and preached) and the sacraments. The Lutherans take seriously the "priesthood of all believers" and experience the church as a community of both saints and sinners as a place for the "incurably sick" (47).

The next of the two major theologians of the Protestant side of the Christian church is John Calvin. Karkkainen suggests that for Calvin and Reformed ecclesiology pneumatology, Christology, and sacramental theology are closely related with regard to (the) doctrine of the church. The church is to be a witnessing community rather than a means of grace in and of itself. Free Church ecclesiology focuses on mission according to Karkkainen: "Mission has not been a task of the church but rather the purpose of all of church life"

(66). This and the priesthood of all believers are the most distinctive emphases of the Free Church ecclesiologies. Any notion of special ministry relegated only to a few members in the church has been adamantly opposed.

Chapter six describes the view of church associated with Pentecostal/Charismatic movements. This ecclesiology both is Charismatic and has structure.

Chapter seven brings us to the end of Part One and addresses ways the various churches and denominations deal with the issue of unity.

Part Two takes the reader into the writing of major ecclesiologists, both past and present. Dr. Karkkainen has each of them address the unity question of chapter seven, and in chapter eight one of the key bishops of the Eastern Orthodox Church says that “each local church is a whole church, since it has the whole Christ,” and “it is also a catholic church insofar as it involves the coming together of the whole church at a specific place [the Eucharist],” and it also means the “universality in that Christ incorporates into himself all Christians” (101-102).

Hans Kung is another theologian surveyed, and he suggests that the church has a charismatic nature and therefore “As the people of God the church can never be merely a super-entity poised above real human beings and their real decisions” (106). Instead the church is one pilgrim people, and the Holy Spirit rules it. This is the message of chapter nine.

Chapter ten covers Wolfhart Pannenberg and the focus is three-fold. For Pannenberg, (1) there is a “pneumatological orientation to the doctrine of the church”, (2) soteriology is a key, and (3) “the doctrine of election is joined to ecclesiology rather than to the first part of systematic theology” (114). Certainly ecumenism is also a distinctive. “Ecumenical sensitivity could well be the most distinctive feature of Pannenberg’s doctrine of the church” (115).

Another thinker surveyed is Moltmann who emphasizes the church’s Christological focus (Dr. Karkkainen calls it a “Messianic Ecclesiology”). The church is also a “free society of equals” (128), and it “never exists for itself but is always in relation to God and the world” (129). The Holy Spirit also plays a big role in Moltmann’s view of the church.

Next, Miroslav Volf says that any discussion of the church must ask and answer: (1) “What is the church?” and (2) “Where is the church?” (135) In answer to the first question he pictures the church as an “assembly.” In answer to the second he turns to the Spirit. Volf works with five principles that all relate to the invaluable work of the Spirit.

In chapter thirteen the author tracks the ecclesiology of James McClendon Jr. and uncovers the fascinating link between Western and Eastern ecclesiology as well as the Jewish-Christian connection ignored by many of the others covered in this book. The distinction of a “believer’s church” is also discussed.

Lesslie Newbigin’s *Missionary Ecclesiology* in many ways is the precursor for the more recent missional church movement. “The missionary challenge of the church amidst the postmodern, post-Christian West is enormous” (158). His ecclesiology urges the church to engage culture through “three streams” (which might be described as Catholic, evangelical and charismatic).

In Part Three, Dr. Karkkainen deals with contextual ecclesiologies and he begins in Asia, where he has worked, studied, and taught. His focus is Japan and the ecclesiology of Kanzo Uchimura. Karkkainen presents his ecclesiology as “tension filled” and this plays out in the debate between Uchimura and his followers. Certainly the key metaphor of the church is a body but there is also discussion about the invisible church, the sacraments, and the laity. In this chapter the global perspective mentioned in the title comes to fruition.

Chapter sixteen brings us to basic Christian communities or “base ecclesial communities” popular in Latin America and in the church among the poor. As Karkkainen shows us, this approach is not without controversy, particularly for the Catholics.

Chapter seventeen deals with re-envisioning the church as well as leadership in the church, and thus addresses the roles of women and takes a broader look at issues of justice.

As the book approaches its conclusion, the author includes contextualized ecclesiology from the African continent. He emphasizes the Pentecostal/Charismatic influence in African churches. “This has met the needs of Africans more fundamentally than the rather ‘spiritualized’ and intellectualized gospel that was mostly the legacy of European and North American missionaries” (201).

Chapter nineteen comes back to analyze grassroots models for church and examines the Pentecostal/Charismatic “shepherding movement” (closely associated with house churches). This church emphasizes “personal, one-on-one pastoral care” (204) and revives “the biblical concept of pastor in the form of a shepherd” (205). Dr. Karkkainen weighs aspects of the movement that are not healthy, but ultimately concludes that it has created a community necessary for the times in which we live.

Chapters twenty and twenty-one go together as they shape what Karkkainen views as the future of the church. Writing about a “world church” and a “post-Christian church” he raises the issues of contextualization, the loss of the prominence of the Western church, and a renewed call for the church to be missional. Karkkainen argues that we are “on the threshold of a new era” and he agrees we have a call to a “holy madness” (Barry A. Harvey’s idea). As he states in the Epilogue, “In light of the fact that Christian theology in the third millennium faces the challenge of how to relate to other faiths and theologies, ecclesiology can no longer accomplish its purposes in isolation from the rest of the world’s religiosity” (233).

In conclusion, Karkkainen’s book makes it clear that different ecclesiologies take the Bible to mean different things. Every variety surveyed has sought biblical evidence for its viewpoints.