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Book Review:

The Church: Presbyterian Perspectives

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Book Reviews

The Church: *Presbyterian Perspectives* By Donald K. McKim

Publisher: **Cascade Books (Eugene, Oregon, USA)**

Year: **2017, Pages: 108 pp.**

ISBN-10: **1532600534**

Price: **\$15.99**

Reviewed by: **Henry S. Kuo, Graduate Theological Union**

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Donald McKim has served the Presbyterian Church (USA) both as an ordained minister and as professor of theology at theological seminaries in Memphis and Dubuque. As the executive editor of theology for the Presbyterian publishing house Westminster John Knox Press, McKim is also responsible for producing several reference volumes for scholars, and theological guides for church leaders. His book *The Church: Presbyterian Perspectives* falls into the latter category, being written primarily for laypeople, ruling elders, and pastors in positions of leadership. Hence, an exhaustive and systematic ecclesiology is not his objective. Even so, the sheer brevity of these mere ninety-five pages on Presbyterian ecclesiological perspectives was a bit disappointing. Nevertheless, it is still valuable reading for certain audiences.

Its layout is quite straightforward, with a central focus on the sentences of the Apostle's Creed, especially those pertaining directly to ecclesiology. However, given the Christological focus of the Reformed tradition, it is not surprising that Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of Jesus — specifically, McKim represents Jesus as the norm around which Christian conduct and discipleship are organized. This is part of a broader effort to dissuade Christians from adopting a “my way or the highway” approach to Christian community, which is an attitude that so often reinforces perceptions of Reformed churches as being helplessly fragmented. Chapter 2 continues this Christological focus by examining the Word of God and the

Reformed dictum *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum Verbi Dei*. This is not a call for a static ecclesiology, but rather for a church that is reformed and reforming according to the Word of God, that resists ossifying polarities of “liberal” and “conservative” camps, and encourages a theological dynamism and preparedness that responds to changes in the church and in society.

In Chapters 3-5, McKim reflects on three different phrases from the Apostles’ Creed that pertain to ecclesiology. Chapter 3 presents the pneumatological basis for ecclesial existence. McKim reviews the critical role of the Spirit in illuminating and interpreting the Scripture and considers how the Spirit inspires believers and equips them for God’s work in the world; the Spirit in the members of the church awakens, builds up, and then extends into the world as witness to God’s salvation in Jesus Christ. In Chapter 4, McKim considers the concept of holiness and catholicity in the church, arguing that the holiness of the church is God’s to judge, and that Christians must recognize how Reformed theology has not traditionally argued that the church on earth is perfectly holy. Similarly, the church’s catholicity pertains to its unity, but also the fullness of the truth that it proclaims. These ecclesial marks do not speak of the church as it *is*, but as it *should be*, constituting a goal for the church to work towards. In Chapter 5, McKim discusses the *communio sanctorum*, reminding readers that the church is a fellowship of believers in the present, past, and future. He also uses this sentence of the Creed to exhort the church to situate itself within a wider community to avoid an ecclesial myopia that is insular and focuses only on the problems within its walls. Chapter 6 closes the book with a summary and a provocative call to “imagine the Church” fearlessly and to remember how being in Christian community is not a chore, but an invitation to participate in the very ministry and life of God in the world.

McKim’s book is a crisp volume that suits its intended audience, but for the theologian, it illustrates one critical problem in Reformed ecclesiology. By way of contrast, we may consider Walter Cardinal Kasper’s accessible book on ecclesiology, *The Catholic Church: Nature, Reality and Mission* (Bloomsbury, 2015). This 463-paged treatise is a relatively brief survey of Roman Catholic ecclesiology and its relation to soteriology,

Christology, missiology, eschatology, as well as an investigation into ecclesiological currents such as *communio* ecclesiology, ecumenical relations, and interreligious dialogue. In comparison, Reformed ecclesiology has often been treated as an impoverished theological subdiscipline, often needing to feed off the scraps that fall of the table of Christology, biblical studies, pneumatology, and other disciplines. McKim's very short book seems to subtly illustrate this dynamic, though perhaps unintentionally. In prefacing his Reformed ecclesiology with two chapters on Christology and the Word of God, there seems to be a clear implication that the church in the Reformed imagination takes Christology and the hermeneutics of Scripture as fixed givens, after which ecclesiology falls into place. However, contemporary and contextual approaches to theology have reminded Christians today that Christ is not a unicity but a multiplicity.¹ Thus, ecclesiology has never quite fallen into place and instead has fallen into pieces, as variant Christologies and scriptural hermeneutics produce fault lines of schism in the *ecclesia*. As the Dutch Reformed ecclesiologist, Eduardus Van der Borght observes, the lack of a *sensus unitatis* among Reformed churches is a challenge that seems impossible to surmount.² This problem is not exclusively present in McKim's short book, but it does seem to illustrate a wider structural problem behind the ecclesiological self-understanding of Reformed Christians.

This book is well recommended as a suitable place to begin understanding Reformed ecclesiology. Elders, deacons, and trustees in a church will certainly find the work accessible and an important resource for their ministries. Pastors and ministers can also find the insights helpful to their work, as well as providing a general "refresher" for any ecclesiological subjects they may have learned as seminarians. Within the seminary curriculum, McKim's book can serve as supplementary reading for M.Div. courses that have an ecclesiological component in it, particularly introductory systematic theology courses that cover ecclesiology or even

¹ See Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (London: Routledge, 2008), 175.

² Eduardus Van der Borght, "The Unity of the Church and the Reformed Tradition – An Introduction," in *The Unity of the Church: A Theological State of the Art and Beyond*, ed. Eduardus Van der Borght (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1.

an introductory ecclesiology course. Readers interested in broadening or deepening their perspective on the topic may wish to consider Lewis Mudge's *The Sense of a People* (Trinity Press, 1992), Letty Russell's *Church in the Round* (Westminster/John Knox, 1993), Shannon Craigo-Snell's interdisciplinary work, *The Empty Church* (Oxford, 2014), Amy Plantinga Pauw's *Church in Ordinary Time* (Eerdmans, 2017), or Neal D. Presa's *Ascension Theology and Habbakuk* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). Beginning with McKim's volume and following through with any of the aforementioned sources is a good way for readers to, as McKim puts it, "imagine the church."

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