The Unity of the Church

A Theological State of the Art and Beyond

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE CHURCH AS AN ECHO OF THE TRIUNE GOD

Christiaan Mostert

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph. 4: 4–6)

“As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us....”

(Jn. 17:21)

I

The churches which have their particular identity from the 16th century Reformation confess themselves, in the words of the ecumenical creed of Nicaea and Constantinople, to believe “in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.” The unity of the church certainly mattered greatly to Calvin, perhaps more so than to some of the other Reformers. In reply to a proposal from the Archbishop of Canterbury that the main Protestant leaders of Europe might meet together, Calvin was enthusiastic. He wrote: “It must be counted among the worst evils of our epoch that the Churches are thus separated one from another, so much so that hardly any human society exists among us, still less that holy communion between the members of Christ which all profess but very few sincerely cultivate in reality.” Commenting on Ephesians 4:4, Calvin writes: “For if [the Ephesians] are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings to each other.”

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1 As will be seen below, this title is borrowed from a phrase of Colin Gunton.
The Reformed churches accepted that there was one church. In its chapter on the church, the Scots Confession of Faith expresses it this way:

As we believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, so we most constantly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be a Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the same Kirk, which also is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus.4

These lines, with which the chapter begins, are of particular interest because they connect the unity of the church with the unity of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the triune God. The chapter goes on to make the qualification, typical of such confessional statements, that this “one” church is the church “invisible.”5 It has always been a temptation of the churches, not only in the Reformed tradition, to content themselves with believing that the unity of the church is an attribute of the invisible church, with the implicit corollary that the unity of the visible church is an entirely secondary matter.

With the development of the modern ecumenical movement in the 20th century, beginning with the celebrated World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, the unity of the church visible—thus the visible unity of the church—came to matter a great deal more, for the sake of the church’s mission to the world. By the time the World Council of Churches was formed in Amsterdam in 1948, the concern was specifically with the unity of the visible church. Willem Visser ’t Hooft, the first General Secretary of the Council, described the WCC as “an emergency solution, a stage on the road... a fellowship which seeks to express that unity in Christ already given to us and to prepare the way for a much fuller and much deeper expression of that unity.”6 A later Assembly (Nairobi, 1975) stated:

The primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches is to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ,

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4 The Scots Confession, Chapter 16, “Of the Kirk” (1560).
5 The Westminster Confession (1647) begins its statement on the “catholic or universal Church” (Ch. 25) with an emphasis on its invisibility, meaning by this “the whole number of the elect.” In the second paragraph, it goes on to speak of “the visible Church.”
through witness and service to the world, and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.\textsuperscript{7}

This is a classic statement! The assumption is that the unity of the church is already given in and with Jesus Christ, with one Lord, one Spirit, and one baptism, but remains as something to be expressed more visibly and concretely in the actual life and mission of the churches. The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity speaks of "two poles" of Christian unity: the "bond of faith and communion in Christ, established by the saving action of God," which already exists among all Christians, and the "structures, institutions and regular practices by which [Christians'] communion in faith is expressed and formed."\textsuperscript{8} Without such structures and practices, there would be no visible expression of Christian unity and there would be no actualization of the unity of the church. A fuller statement of what such visible unity might look like was made at the Canberra Assembly (1991):

The unity of the church to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the Gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole creation. The goal of the search for full communion is realized when all the churches are able to recognize in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness.\textsuperscript{9}

It has to be acknowledged that the full expression of the church's unity is an eschatological gift, but the anticipation of that gift in the church's pilgrimage through history, already real to a significant extent, could be made more visible. The visibility of the church's unity is very limited and, despite the rhetoric in support of Christian unity, the churches do not seem to be inclined to increase it.

The unity which the Canberra statement has in view is a koinonia, a communion (communio). The church has long understood itself as

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a communion, the *communio sanctorum*. However, the concept of *communio* (*koinonia*) has played a significant part in recent ecclesiological studies, not least in connection with a more fully articulated *trinitarian* grounding of the church. Is there, indeed, some kind of correspondence between the one church and the one God, between the differentiated unity of the church and the triune being of the one God? This paper seeks to argue that, with some important qualifications, some such correspondence does exist; furthermore, that it has implications for seeking a greater visible expression of the unity of the churches. The 9th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Porto Allegre, 2006) describes the “oneness” of the church as “an image of the unity of the Triune God in the communion of the divine Persons.” But in what sense might the church be said to be an “image” of the triune God? What is the connection between them? In particular, what theological force does the correspondence have, such that the goal of visible unity becomes an imperative?

II

What is required is a discussion of the church: its nature and being. Colin Gunton complains that ecclesiology too often ‘degenerates’ into a discussion about ministry; these days one could add missiology or church structures. In the early church, there was not much discussion of the nature and being of the church, and there is not an abundance of it now. Gunton argues that “the manifest inadequacy of the theology of the church derives from the fact that it has never seriously and consistently been rooted in a conception of the being of God as triune.” Gunton means this in the strongest possible sense: the *immanent* Trinity, not the *economic* Trinity, which has heavily accentuated the christological determinant of ecclesiology. He wants a move from the economic to the immanent Trinity, paying particular attention to the concept of *koinonia*, the threefold community of the trinitarian

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10 WCC, “Called to be the One Church: An Invitation to the Churches to Renew their Commitment to the Search for Unity and to Deepen their Dialogue,” document PRC 01.1, §3.
12 Gunton and Hardy, *On Being the Church*, 65.
Persons. It is easy to misappropriate the doctrine of the Trinity for ecclesiological purposes, as—for example—when using the subordination of the Son to the Father to justify the subordination of the laity to the clergy or women to men.\textsuperscript{15} More obliquely, Gunton argues for a view of the church as a "finite echo or bodying forth of the divine personal dynamics."\textsuperscript{14} The threefold being of God is "a community of energies, of perichoretic interaction,"\textsuperscript{15} which is the antithesis of hierarchy. This is ontologically decisive, and represents a philosophical breakthrough on the part of the Cappadocian Fathers of the fourth century. There is no underlying divine 'substance' or 'essence.' In God the persons of the Trinity are not preceded by a logically prior divine nature; they coincide with it. The following quotation from John Zizioulas describes the nature of the trinitarian koinonia and shows its implications for human community.

\begin{quote}
...it is impossible to say that in God any of the three persons exist or can exist in separation from the other persons. The three constitute such an unbreakable unity that individualism is absolutely inconceivable in their case. The three persons of the Trinity are thus one God, because they are so united in an unbreakable communion (koinonia) that none of them can be conceived apart from the rest. The mystery of the one God in three persons points to a way of being which precludes individualism and separation (or self-sufficiency and self-existence) as a criterion of multiplicity. The "one" not only does not precede—logically or otherwise—the "many," but, on the contrary, requires the "many" from the very start in order to exist.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Elsewhere, Zizioulas makes clear that the church is called to be "an image of the way in which God exists," "ecclesial being is bound to the very being of God."\textsuperscript{17} But it is not immediately clear in what way the two are "bound" together. On what basis can legitimate connections

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{13} The latter misuse of the doctrine of the Trinity is not hypothetical. Cf. Kevin Giles, \textit{The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate} (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002) and Kevin Giles, \textit{Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

\textsuperscript{14} Gunton and Hardy, \textit{On Being the Church}, 69. Later he emphasizes that the church is "a temporal echo of the eternal community that God is," 75. (Italics added.)

\textsuperscript{15} Gunton and Hardy, \textit{On Being the Church}, 70.


\textsuperscript{17} John D. Zizioulas, \textit{Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church} (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 15.
\end{footnotes}
be differentiated from improper connections? The difference between
the eternal God and temporal, fallible human communities can never
be set aside. However, the point is to think more adequately, more
theologically, about the nature of the church, and certain elements in
the doctrine of the Trinity throw an important light on this. On the
other hand, can the church be as God is? Can its life take on the char-
acter of the divine perichoretic life? In considering this, as Gunton
suggests, the ontological difference between the temporal and the etern-
al can never be ignored and must condition every correspondence
suggested. At best, therefore, the church would be only the softest
echo or the palest reflection of the triune being of God. But this is
not the only consideration: the other is the divine movement toward
the creation. Speaking of God’s perfection, John Webster makes the
important point that this is not self-contained; rather, it includes what
God gives and shares with the world in the divine movement ad extra.
“God’s excellence is complete in itself; but even as such, it is luminous,
self-communicating, and self-distributing.”

Webster emphasizes the
operationes trinitatis externae; God’s being is “not mutely objective,
a mere state of affairs to be observed; it is summons, word, love that
brings into being creaturely knowledge that corresponds to God’s real-
ity and is itself active as faith, hope and love.” It is, then, not a matter
of a creaturely effort to imitate a divine reality, but of a divine self-
communication and reshaping of a human reality, the church.

Such a view of the Trinity, in which there is an integration of God
a se and God ad extra, the immanent Trinity and the economic Trin-
ity, presupposes that the doctrine of the Trinity may be the basis of
inferences in the realm of creaturely existence. Almost 200 years ago,
Schleiermacher, describing the doctrine of the Trinity as “the coping
stone of Christian doctrine,” said that “a halt” should be called and
no “further elaboration of the dogma” could usefully be undertaken.
Dietrich Ritschl, much more positive about the importance of the doc-
trine of the Trinity, sees it as essentially doxological in character; one
must therefore be cautious about making strict deductions or infer-
ences from the doctrine of the Trinity, not least in the area of eccle-

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18 John Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker, eds,
God’s Life in Trinity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), ch. 12, 145.
19 John Webster, “God’s Perfect Life,” 145.
Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 739.
Theology. As already suggested above, there is more than one way in which inferences can be drawn, with quite opposite results. There is always the possibility that we will read into the doctrine of the Trinity things which have their ground elsewhere, rather than really reading things out of the doctrine of the Trinity. However, Ritschl's main criticism is the failure to distinguish adequately between descriptive and ascriptive (notably doxological) language. The step from statements about the economic Trinity, based on the experience of God's activity in human life, to statements about the immanent Trinity is already risky, in Ritschl's view. But it is a further, very large step, when we venture to draw conclusions from the intra-trinitarian relations for our social reality, whether church or wider society. This criticism is sharpened the more it is realized that the language used of God is unavoidably metaphorical.

Ritschl's criticism should not be ignored but it invites its own questions in response. First, it might be asked whether theology is permitted only to speak about language about God or whether, difficulties notwithstanding, it may (or must) speak about God: God's being and God's action. At some point, and with an appropriate form of justification, it has a responsibility to speak about God if it is to be considered theology. Second, can we really distinguish so neatly between descriptive and ascriptive language? The relationship between language and the world which it purportedly describes (including, for this purpose, God) cannot be so simply stated, certainly not from "an Archimedean point outside of language." Trinitarian language functions in more than one way, and it cannot be determined in advance whether a particular use is legitimate or not. Third, on the same point, is ascriptive (especially doxological) language not capable of a 'thicker' account than Ritschl appears to assume? It need not be seen simply as the ascription of glory to God in response to God's gracious turning to humankind; that would make it a one-sidedly human matter. A richer alternative is to see it as a participation in the triune life of God, thus above all an event of grace. Alan Torrance understands worship as "an event

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of ‘theopoietic’ koinonia, which is both ‘in Christ’ and ‘through the Spirit’, and one, therefore, in which the Kingdom of God is…actually and freely present…”24 Doxology, then, is as much a mode of being as a particular doing. If this is correct, then a communion between the triune God and the community of the church is actually effected, not by us, but by God. We shall return to this point.

III

What we may say about the triune life of God (including the intra-trinitarian relations) and its bearing on ecclesial relations will depend greatly on the framework within which we engage in such thinking and speaking. If Ritschl is concerned with the constraints of general epistemological considerations, others are concerned with the possibilities generated by our ontological determination. As noted above, being taken up into a “theopoietic koinonia” in Christ and through the Holy Spirit provides a very different framework within which to speak of connections between the Holy Trinity and the church. One theologian who has explored this framework in considerable detail is Miroslav Volf, in part through a discussion with two other major writers on the subject, Josef Ratzinger (now known as Pope Benedict XVI) and John Zizioulas. A key point in Volf’s thought on the subject is the insistence that the Trinity does not merely provide the church with a model to emulate but is also “a source of that very emulation.”25 The nature of God’s being is “integral” to the character of Christian existence, including its beginning and end. The decisive factor is the reality of the communion which God has established with humankind.

As baptism into the triune name attests, beginning the Christian pilgrimage does not mean simply to respond to God’s summons but to enter into communion with the triune God; to end the Christian pilgrimage does not mean simply to have accomplished an earthly task but to enter perfect communion with the triune God.26

24 Torrance, Persons in Communion, 313.
26 Volf and Welker, eds, God’s Life in Trinity, 3.
Something similar must be said of the Christian community, on its way from Pentecost to Parousia. The Holy Trinity is not simply its "social exemplar," but grants to the church a communion with itself inasmuch as it is a community of the baptized. The term 'communion,' central in the discussion, has three aspects: the perichoretic communion between the persons of the Trinity; the communion which the triune God grants to the church already in proleptic (and broken) form on its journey through history, a communion which will be perfected in the eschaton; and the communion in which the churches live and work together here and now, both within their distinctive (and divided) traditions and across their ecclesial boundaries. The latter of these aspects is central in the discussion of the visible unity of the one church but, as has been shown already, it has its ontological ground in the first and its epistemological possibility in the second. It has already been emphasized that the fragmentary ecclesial communion that exists empirically among the churches is at best analogous to that perfect communion that characterizes the trinitarian persons.

The divine persons are persons-in-relation, a point more prominent in Eastern trinitarian theology than in its Western counterpart. Volf is critical of the Western view of the Trinity, as articulated by Ratzinger, for accentuating the common divine ‘substance’ at the expense of the trinitarian persons. Trinitarian unity is then not a differentiated unity of persons-in-relation but "a unity in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit 'coincide.'" He sees this as leading to a "monistic" ecclesial structure: "[T]he relations between the trinitarian persons have no structural consequences." He is equally critical of the Eastern view of the Trinity, as articulated by Zizioulas, because it sees the reciprocal relations between the trinitarian persons as asymmetrical: the monarchy of the Father is a central element in the East's trinitarian theology. Only the Son and the Spirit are constituted relationally—the Father is their personal aitia (cause)—whereas the Father is only conditioned by the Son and the Spirit. The ecclesiological implications will be readily seen: at the trinitarian level the one Person (the Father)

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27 Alan Torrance uses this term in his critique of Catherine LaCugna, Persons in Communion, 318.
29 Volf, After Our Likeness, 71.
constitutes the communion (of the three Persons). This is reflected ecclesially inasmuch as the many (the laity) are constituted as an ecclesial communion—and also as persons—by the one (the bishop).\textsuperscript{30} There is reciprocity of a kind, but no symmetry, which goes against the grain of Volf’s own ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{31} The only point at which there is near-symmetry is in the relationships between local churches, ‘local’ being understood as the ecclesial unit presided over by a bishop.

Volf’s view of the unity of the churches—congregations within one ecclesial tradition as well as denominational traditions—is eschatological: “[T]he future of the church in God’s new creation is the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people….\textsuperscript{32}” This is how the Apocalypse of John describes the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1–22:5). This is the fulfillment of the Johannine Christ’s prayer for the unity of his followers and those who would come after them. This mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son and the indwelling of the ‘followers’ in the communion of the Father and the Son is indeed what the church hopes for. But the church also experiences it in the present, as 1 John 1:3 already declares and the church of every time and place confirms. It is an anticipation—in the ontological, not the noetic, sense—of the eschatological communion of the church with the triune God.\textsuperscript{33} Already, then, the koinonia of the church, expressed in its life and its worship, notably in the sacraments of baptism and the Holy Supper (the Eucharist), is a sharing in, and thus an image of, the perichoretic communion of the persons of the Trinity, however much the conflict and brokenness that mark the concrete life of the churches suggests the opposite. It is the Spirit who incorporates the church into the communion of the divine persons, already now bringing that future reality into the present. The church already lives from that future and toward that future. On the other hand, it must be careful, as it were, not to get too far ‘ahead of itself.’ Its eschatology must not become too ‘realized’; the eschatological tension must be preserved.

\textsuperscript{30} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 106. Actually, Volf’s discussion is somewhat more differentiated.

\textsuperscript{31} The ecclesiology he nominates as his own is what he calls a ‘free church’ one, probably better described as congregational or independent. (In certain parts of the world ‘free church’ means something quite different.) It would be interesting to see how he has modified this view since he became an Episcopalian.

\textsuperscript{32} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 128.

\textsuperscript{33} Volf, \textit{After Our Likeness}, 129.
Through this present anticipation of the eschatological communion between the triune God and the church, the churches are related to each other horizontally or synchronically. The earliest Christian congregations, addressed as the *ekklesia tou Theou*, understood themselves as “the eschatological people of God assembling themselves from all the nations at particular places.”  \(^{34}\) This is a single people, though it might assemble in countless different places, adopting many local patterns and living doxologically and diaconically in ways that are shaped contextually. However, whether they are part of great ecclesial ‘families’ (patriarchates, communions, confessional traditions, denominations) or live their faith in relative isolation or independence, they all find their identity as Christian churches in their relation to the one eschatological people of God (the church). Such unity as they presently make visible is a proleptic, anticipatory experience of the eschatological communion of the whole people of God, which is a sharing in the communion of the Holy Trinity. Their relation to their future in the one people of God and their consequential relation to each other in the present belong to their ecclesiality, their identity as the church of God.

**IV**

In the final section, some implications of what has been said so far for the life and the mutual relations of the churches in their concrete existence must be drawn. If the churches’ self-understanding as part of the one eschatological people of God—living in one faith, worshipping one (triune) God, celebrating one baptism, and having one hope—is a constitutive element in their ecclesiality, then their sense of, and relations with other churches should matter a great deal more to them than appears to be the case. Reformed churches do not think very much of the church as our ‘mother,’ forgetting that Calvin himself was not disinclined to so. As mother, the church conceives us in the womb, gives us birth, nourishes us at her breasts, and keeps us under her charge.  \(^{35}\) He is speaking of the relation of every Christian to the church. Its consequence is that every other member of the church is

\(^{34}\) Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 139.

\(^{35}\) Calvin, *Institutes*, IV,1,4.
our brother or sister. As is the case with the Pauline metaphor of the body and its parts (1 Cor. 12:12–27), this cannot be restricted to the life of a single congregation; we are not baptized only into the congregation but into the body of Christ. We cannot be satisfied to regard other assemblies of Christian believers as strangers to us, even if we should find some characteristics of their worship or life ‘strange’; they are related to us as siblings. Neither can we be satisfied to pretend that they do not really exist. In other words, the churches cannot be content to be isolated from each other.

Communion between churches, expressed in varying degrees of visible unity, cannot correspond to the mutual love of the persons of the Trinity except in partial and broken ways. We are always caught, as Volf suggests, in the tension between:

the historical minimum and the eschatological maximum of the correspondence to the love in which the trinitarian persons live. The minimum consists in “being from others” and “being together with others,” for only a communion of persons can correspond to the Trinity. The maximum consists in perfect “being toward others,” in the love in which they give of themselves to one another and thereby affirm one another and themselves.

The question arises whether the churches forfeit their ecclesiality if they only minimally correspond to the trinitarian communion which any church should reflect. Must the churches be with each other, in the sense of full organic unity, or is it sufficient for ecclesiality for them to be together with each other, in the sense of shared fellowship, cooperation in mission and the like? Being open to other churches is essential; an unwillingness to seek communion in any way or at any point would arguably constitute a refusal to seek any degree of correspondence to the koinonia of the Trinity.

But what does openness to one another as churches mean? It can be indicated formally by participation in ecumenical bodies and associations, by entering into covenants with other churches for certain agreed purposes, as minimally as an occasional joint service of worship or as maximally as full inter-communion or indeed full organic union. Openness to one another across ecclesial barriers is not reducible to

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36 Volf argues for the two complementary metaphors of siblings and friends. “The church is the fellowship of siblings who are friends, and the fellowship of friends who are siblings.” Volf, After Our Likeness, 181.

37 Volf, After Our Likeness, 207.
any one thing but operates at many levels and is expressed in many forms, both formal and informal. The World Council of Churches has provided many instruments by which churches can test and increase their openness to each other. The most recent Assembly of the WCC invited the churches “into a renewed conversation—mutually supportive, yet open and sharing—about the quality and degree of their fellowship and communion, and about the issues which still divide them.” Such conversation is indispensable, whether at a bilateral or multilateral level, whether of scholars looking at subtle points of doctrinal difference or of more broadly based representatives of the churches, whether about missiology or liturgy or faith-formation. But none of it takes us even one step forward if there is lacking in the consciousness of the churches a deep desire to be with others. Of the difficulty of this we all know enough, even within the one ecclesial body. Of the importance of this, as an element in the churches’ ecclesiality, and as an anticipation of the eschatological communion of an undivided church, we appear to be in need of further persuasion.

There is one God and there is one church, which experiences its life and worship in brokenness and division. To say that the churches that comprise the one church echo sufficiently the three trinitarian persons who are the one God would be an inexcusable rationalization, allowing the divisions to remain unchanged. The one God draws us into the intra-trinitarian communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, an immeasurable gift. This same God also calls us to recognize a corresponding communion across all the barriers our history and politics have created and to make it visible as the communion of the one church. This too is a great gift, and a pressing task.

38 WCC, “Called to be the One Church,” introductory paragraph.

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