

Book Reviews



Eugene R. Schlesinger

Missa Est! A Missional Liturgical Ecclesiology (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017),
xxx + 270 pp. ISBN 978-1-5064-2334-0 (hbk). \$79.00; 978-1-5064-1859-9 (eBook).

This is an ambitious and visionary work by an outstanding younger Anglican (Episcopal) ecclesologist – a revised version of his doctoral dissertation at Marquette University, Wisconsin, USA. What makes the book both ambitious and visionary is that Schlesinger's argument is driven by an integrating dynamic, a drawing together of themes often pursued in separation or antithesis, and a binding together of diverse insights into a missiological-ecclesiological synthesis. Schlesinger's entirely sound methodological premise is that 'The structure of Christian identity is an irreducible reality, which only functions as a whole' (p. 180). The goal of this work is 'a liturgically grounded ecclesiology of communion' (p. xvi), but a liturgical communion ecclesiology that is *ipso facto* missional. A basic conviction is that 'In a secular age, it is only by becoming missional that ecclesiology can remain viable' (p. xiii). But that is not a paradoxical statement because mission is not a discrete aspect or an activity of the church but is 'constitutive of the church's essence' (p. xiii), an expression of its essential identity.

Schlesinger is combating two opposite tendencies in contemporary ecclesiology. The first is a missiology that sidelines liturgy. Here he points to the Missional Church movement in the USA and what he believes to be its suspicion of the role of ritualized and liturgical forms in mission. This approach results in a missionary impetus that lacks structural, institutional and sacramental embodiment (p. xvi). The second tendency is a liturgical theology that evinces little interest in mission (he hints darkly at some forms of Eucharistic Ecclesiology which, he suggests, see the Church as static reflection of trinitarian relations.) In place of what he regards as the half-truths of these two tendencies, Schlesinger aims to provide a communion ecclesiology that is structured by liturgy and mission equally. So this work wrestles with the question, How are liturgy and mission to be held together? Schlesinger's answer, which he spends

the bulk of the book defending, is that liturgy and mission are two complementary modes of our participation in the Paschal Mystery.

The Paschal Mystery is defined as the saving event of Christ's death, resurrection, ascension, sending of the Holy Spirit and expected *parousia*, as commemorated and celebrated in the Eucharist. Here both liturgical action and missional activity find their eschatological momentum. (a) *Liturgical*. The Eucharist is a communion sacrifice of the *totus christi*, Head and members, through which the Son and the Spirit continue their temporal missions. The Eucharist is a vehicle of Christ's continuing mission in the power of the Spirit. In the eucharistic *Epiclesis* the Church prays the Father to send the Spirit upon it so that it may become what it is shortly to receive in the sacrament. In the Eucharist the Church finds that 'in what it offers, it is itself offered' (Augustine, *City of God*, 10.6). A exploration in depth of communion ecclesiology reveals a missional vision and logic at its heart. 'The same trinitarian dynamic that establishes the church as communion establishes it as mission' (p. 202). (b) *Missiological*. St Paul describes his mission to the Gentiles in liturgical and priestly terms in Romans 15.16, which can be translated as, Paul has received grace 'in order to be a liturgist of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving in the priestly ministry of the gospel of God, in order that the offering of Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.' There is an identity between the central concept of liturgical ecclesiology (the Paschal Mystery) and the central concept of missional ecclesiology (*missio dei*) (p. 58). The *missio dei* is the redemptive activity of God in the world, of which the church is the privileged instrument and agent. But liturgy too is 'redemptive activity'. Liturgy and mission are one reality, seen from two perspectives. The constellation of liturgical, sacramental events that comprises Christian initiation inducts us into the Paschal Mystery, but also into the church's mission.

The Church makes a twofold oblation: (a) in the liturgy, as the sacramental commemoration and making present of Christ's intercessory self-oblation to the Father, once on earth and now in heaven; (b) the church's self-giving (sacrifice) as the agent of God's mission in the world (p. 178). The Church's liturgical life and its missional identity are inextricably connected (p. xx). The articulated sacramental celebrations – baptism, confirmation, communion – that make one a Christian are precisely what makes the church the church. 'The very rituals that make a person a member of the Church are themselves the building blocks for a theological understanding of the Church itself' (p. 90, citing Peter McGrail). In this way the Eucharist can be seen to give form to the church. Christ's threefold messianic office (*munus triplex*) as Prophet, Priest and King gives the church its messianic ('anointed') identity and points to its threefold task: to teach through the Word; to sanctify through the sacraments;

and to govern, lead and guide the faithful. But all the baptized receive this identity and are called to share in Christ's messianic mission in the world, serving the Word, the sacraments and the Church's conciliar (synodical) structures of governance.

The most technical part of the book is also the part that underpins the overall thesis, where Schlesinger engages critically with the trinitarian theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Bernard Lonergan S.J. respectively. He finds certain problems with the former and a way forward with the latter, through Lonergan's acceptance of a contingent element in the missions of the Son and the Spirit. If some missiologist and ecclesiologist readers feel that they lack the time to follow all these ramifications, or are perhaps doubtful whether we can know quite as much about the trinitarian life of God as some theologians assume, they would do well to stick to the main thread of the argument; if they do, I believe that they will find their thinking and praying permanently directed and enriched.

Paul Avis

University of Durham, UK, and University of Exeter, UK

dr.paul.avis@gmail.com