

Book Review

Tihomir Lazić. *Towards an Adventist Version of Communitio Ecclesiology: Remnant in Koinonia. Pathway for Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue.* Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 314 pp. (e-book version)

Professor Mark Thomas of Oxford University, who is one of the editors of the series in which Tihomir Lazić's book *Towards an Adventist Version of Communitio Ecclesiology: Remnant in Koinonia* is published, has high praise for it: "The book is a groundbreaking and highly original piece of work that seeks to bring the distinctive ideas of Seventh-day Adventist theology into dialogue with one of the dominant theological themes of modern ecclesiology: *koinonia* or *communion*" (p. vii). Having read Lazić's book, I concur with this appraisal. In 2016 the author, a Seventh-day Adventist theologian of Serbian origin, who now teaches Systematic Theology at Newbold College of Higher Education (Binfield, Berks., UK), earned his doctoral degree with the dissertation on which this book is based.

The main thesis of the book is that Adventist ecclesiology would greatly benefit from integrating its remnant-concept with the koinonia-concept that is an important aspect of many present-day non-Adventist ecclesiologies. The book has a clear three-part structure. The first part deals with the remnant concept as it originated, developed and functions within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The second part introduces the koinonia concept, which is a key element in many contemporary ecclesiologies, while the third part of the book argues that an integration of these two concepts would greatly enhance the ecclesiology of Seventh-day Adventists.

Part 1

In the first part the author explains how the remnant concept developed in conjunction with the key Adventist doctrines, in particular the Sabbath, the three angels' messages and the conviction of the imminence of Christ's Second Coming, with the work of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary as its "main her-

meneutical horizon" (p. 15). He argues that Adventists need a strong ecclesiological engagement beyond their focus on the remnant-concept, if they want their church to retain unity, maintain relevancy and have a more clearly defined relationship with other religious bodies (p. 23). Although the concept of the remnant is accompanied by other apocalyptic motifs (e.g. Elijah, Enoch, 3 angels), it remains the most important ecclesiological motif. It is mostly seen from a functional perspective: the remnant must proclaim its specific message and, thus, is mostly task-driven. Lazić states that an ecclesiology that is primarily task-driven is not adequate, and he points to the importance of the ontological perspective: the church must emerge from its essence, not just from what it *does*, but from what it *is* (p. 76). Adventism's predominant remnant ecclesiology suffers from four major deficiencies. Firstly, 'a lack of systematic reasoning': the remnant concept fails to articulate some other important ecclesiological ideas (p. 106). Secondly, its definition of "church" neglects the ontological perspective (p. 107). Thirdly, the SDA church operates with a reductionist (logocentric, propositional) concept of truth (pp. 109–112). Truth, however, is also experiential and the Spirit leads in further discovery of truth (pp. 116–117). However, the most important problem in Adventism ecclesiology is the pneumatological deficit. In SDA theology, the emphasis is mostly on the Father and the Son, with insufficient acknowledgment of the work of the Holy Spirit (p. 120).

This pneumatological deficiency has a number of causes, as e.g. the false dichotomy between mind and emotions and the failure to recognize the difference between the transrational and the irrational (pp. 122–123). The pneumatological deficiency has some serious consequences; among them is over-institutionalization, the tendency to see unity in terms of uniformity, the tendency towards centralization and the creation of a hierarchy, and a lack of a sense of God's presence in our everyday-life (p. 124).

Perhaps Lazić over-emphasizes the predominance of the remnant concept somewhat and does not give full due to other aspects of Adventism's (admittedly, meagre) ecclesiology. He could also have indicated that in current Adventism, several definitions of the remnant compete with each other.¹

¹ See Hasel, Frank M. "The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology." Angel Manuel Rodriguez, ed. *Towards a Theology of the Remnant*. Silver Spring: Biblical Research Institute, 2009, 159–180.

However, this first part of the book serves as a solid basis for what follows. Lazić's analysis of the implications of giving such strong priority to the church as a remnant, which has as its main task to "herald" a special message, is quite convincing.

Part 2

The second part of the book focuses on *koinonia* ecclesiology and builds on the central premise that the Seventh-day Adventist Church would do well to supplement its current ecclesiological approach by developing its own version of a *koinonia* or *communio* ecclesiology. This type of ecclesiology has arisen in the ecumenical climate of the late 20th and early 21st century and has become the predominant ecclesiological paradigm (p. 146). This ecclesiological approach gives due attention to the communion between the three Persons of the Trinity, the vertical communion between God and man, the horizontal communion between the believers, and the communion between the global and the local church. Lazić argues that merging the *koinonia* aspect with the remnant aspect has great potential. It is a biblical and enriched concept of church, as it touches on the *esse* of the church (pp. 153 ff.).

Of particular importance is the discussion of the relationship between the church and the Trinity. The idea that the church is an *imitatio* of the Trinity must be rejected. This is a path that leads to mere speculation, since human beings do not know enough about the inner workings of the Trinity (p. 183). However, a participatory vision, in which the believer becomes an active participant in the triune life of God, offers much promise. Adventism's traditional Christ-centeredness must be enriched pneumatologically (p. 186). Lazić admits that Adventists are generally hesitant to take experience as a starting point for doctrine (p. 188), but believes that some elements of divine mystery are only known through the Spirit (p. 190). He points to the work of the Spirit *within* us (the fruits of the Spirit), and *through* us (the gifts of the Spirit), which form the basis for the ministries in the church, and *around* us (the impact of the Spirit outside of the church, on society and on the earth) (pp. 193–200).

Part 3

In the third part of the book the author faces the awesome task of bringing the remnant and *koinonia* concepts together. Perhaps not all readers will feel that he fully succeeds in accomplishing this, and/or that his discourse remains too

vague and does not provide enough avenues to produce the desired integration. It seems to me that this evaluation might be understandable but would be unfair. To deal with the many topics that relate to this integration, in any kind of exhaustive way, would be far beyond the scope of one monograph. There remains a lot of work for others to pursue various aspects of this undertaking, but in this book Lazić is giving a valuable overview of where the integration might become visible.

In this connection the structure of the church is an important facet. Neither democracy nor hierarchy can serve as the ideal. This book suggests a middle position that focuses on communion – as proposed by Yves Congar as the better approach (p. 239). No secular organizational model can serve as blueprint, since it does not recognize the underlying spiritual reality of the church. The church is “Spirit-mediated koinonia with God” (p. 242).

Lazić endorses the view of Raoul Dederen (d. 2016), a prominent Adventist systematic theologian, about the relationship between the global church and the local church: “The local visible ekklesia is the whole church expressed locally in a particular time and space” (p. 244). In theory the Adventist Church confesses the priority of the local church, but in reality the global church requires obedience and uniformity. The manner in which the issue of the ordination of female pastors was handled in 2015 during the church’s world congress in Dallas (USA) illustrates this. Lazić comments optimistically: The “divide between Adventist theological ideals and administrative reality can be reduced by acquiring and implementing a more Spirit-sensitive theological outlook” (p. 245). In the context of the ministries of the church, a more “dynamic guidance of the Spirit” will overcome the deficiencies in this area.

The section about challenges the church faces with regard to the interpretation of divine truth is in my view somewhat disappointing. Lazić enumerates four channels the Adventist Church has as its disposal: (1) a number of hermeneutical principles that the church has adopted; (2) the gradual emergence of a creed-like summary of the church’s Fundamental Beliefs; (3) The global Sabbath School system which assists in maintaining unity in the interpretation of Scripture; (4) decisions by the world church during a General Conference session. This, Lazić states, does not provide a satisfactory theological basis and does not give an adequate role to the community. But how can this communal, Spirit-led role be actualized? Lazić suggests that there should perhaps be some kind of “teaching office”, with experts who are more gifted

in the area of interpretation than others. Is this perhaps the role of a Biblical Research Institute-type institution? This section raises more questions than providing satisfactory answers.

In this final chapter there is also a discussion about the impact of a Spirit-driven approach to the church's mission, which should be God-centered rather than church-centered, with more communal and relational modes of outreach (p. 261). There are also a few paragraphs on the need for a greater sensibility for what the Spirit does outside the Adventist Church, and a greater willingness to learn from others (p. 262), while sharing the Adventist viewpoints with them (p. 263). Attention is further given to the need for a willingness to reform the church, with a balance between a *reversionist* and a *revisionist* attitude, in recognition of the fact that the church – and that includes the SDA Church – always is *semper reformanda* (p. 268).

General Remarks and Evaluation

Each chapter of this book is followed by a large number of endnotes and a separate bibliography. I would have found it much easier to consult the notes if they had been presented as footnotes. I also wonder whether one integrated bibliography would not have sufficed. The notes and the bibliography attest to the wide reading of the author in all the different areas that are discussed in his book. I noted an unfortunate mistake in the reference to Dr Barry D. Oliver, who is correctly listed in the index, but in a number of bibliographical references his last name and first name are reversed (e.g. p. 291). Of course, I appreciated the fact that there are numerous references to some of my own publications. I missed any reference to Dr Richard Rice's important book *Believing, Behaving, Belonging* (Association of Adventist Forums, 2002), which in many ways affirms the thesis of Lazić that the remnant concept of the church needs to be supplemented by the koinonia ideal.

Towards an Adventist Version of Communio Ecclesiology: Remnant in Koinonia is a book that deserves a wide reading among Adventist opinion makers. Not all will, however, embrace it enthusiastically. Lazić has, in particular, been inspired by a number of prominent Roman Catholic theologians (e.g. Yves Congar, Joseph Ratzinger) and the *Lumen Gentium* documents that issued from the Second Vatican Council. The strong anti-Catholic sentiment, that still characterizes the more conservative streams in Adventism, will prejudice many Adventist readers against the book.

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Unfortunately, there are some (or even many?) among the church's administrators, and other people with influence, who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinitarian emphasis of the book will not go down well with them. A very practical hindrance in reaching a wide readership is the exceptionally high price (even as an e-book). Nonetheless, I hope that Denis Fortin, professor of historical theology at Andrews University (Berrien Springs, MI, USA), is right when he predicts: "This is a valuable study that will make a lasting contribution to Adventist theology and will help situate Seventh-day Adventism within the wider Christian world" (p. xv).

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