Boekbesprekings / Book Review

Groupe Des Dombes, 1993 — For the conversion of the churches

Geneva: W C C Publishers

Reviewer: Dr D J Smith

This document is the fruit of discussions and studies by an independent group of French Roman Catholic and Protestant ministers. The group has existed for more than fifty years and was founded in 1937, meeting annually. In this publication the group puts forth some challenging ideas about the movement towards ecumenical unity built on the key motive of the conversion of the churches.

The book is structured along the following lines: firstly there is an introductory part giving an outline of the argument used in the book. Secondly the book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the two words on which the whole issue hinges: identity and conversion and gives a clarification of the terminology used. The second chapter takes a look at examples form church history and seeks historical clarification for their main theses concerning the pivotal role of conversion. The third chapter deals with the witness of scripture and goes into the biblical vocabulary bearing on the subject. The fourth chapter gives practical suggestions for conversions that pave the way towards ecumenical unity. It also gives suggestions of how this unity can be expressed in a common confession. The heart of this suggested confession is the church's confession of itself as 'one holy catholic and apostolic'.

The main question to be answered for the divergent churches on their converging way towards ecumenical unity is: what gives a specific church its identity — is it its confession or what? The answer given by the group is: Christian identity is given by conversion to God.

The group concedes that we are so accustomed to live on the basis of a specific confession that to interfere with it causes disorientation and poses a threat to identity. The question arises whether a specific expression of faith that identifies one as, say, Roman...
Catholic or Protestant must be abandoned or maintained in the process of converging to unity? The answer they give to this question is firstly: the confessional identities must be converted to be faithful to themselves. From this flows their second argument which they formulate as follows: 'This is why conversion of Christian confessions can only emerge from themselves. It is in experiencing their Christian identity in these confessions, and at the same tie in dialogue with the other ... that disunited Christians will see where they differ, sometimes converging and sometimes diverging. This very divergence may then seem legitimate and not injurious to communion in Christ' (p 3).

The group differentiate three kinds of identities and corresponding conversions. The first is Christian identity by which they mean one’s belonging to Christ founded on the gift of Baptism. The corresponding Christian conversion means the response of faith to the call that comes to us from God through Christ.

Secondly there is ecclesial identity and ecclesial conversion. Ecclesial identity means the belonging of an individual or of a confessional church to the one holy, 'Catholic' Church. Ecclesial conversion means the effort required form the whole church and from all churches to be renewed and become more capable of fulfilling their mission in accordance with the motto ecclesia semper reformanda.

Thirdly there is confessional identity and confessional conversion. Confessional identity means belonging to a confessional church with its specific cultural and historical context and its own spiritual and doctrinal profile.

By confessional conversion the group understands the ecumenical effort by which a Christian confession cleanses and enriches its own inheritance with the aim of re-discovering full communion with other confessions (vide p 29).

Confessions can be a divisive factor. The vision of the group is that in the process of confessional conversion the divisive factor in confessions must become a complementary difference without which the fullness and universality of the church are seriously compromised.

Confessional conversion is of the uttermost importance for the group, though they are well aware that conversion on this level is most arduous and realise 'confessional conversion will be achieved only when reconciliation has led to full communion with the others and full mutual ecclesial recognition through purification and deepening in each confession in line with the gospel. The group is totally convinced that conversion is the pivot around which the ecumenical movement should hinge in this regard state: 'conversion is not simply at the source of the ecumenical movement. It represent its constant underlying motivation. When conversion flags, the ecumenical movement stagnates or even goes in reverse' (p 58).

This book gives a fresh and challenging approach to the question of movement towards ecumenical unity. Various 'modes of unity' have been proposed in the past like 'organic unity', conciliar fellowship, 'ecclesial communion', 'reconciled diversity' and so on. The group is convinced that at the heart of all these reflections on unity, we find the whole
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Dialectic of identity and diversity and they see the ecumenical movement as a great process of conversion and reconciliation of our diversities in the quest for communion among confessional identities (64).

Although one sometimes get the impression that some of their arguments are built too much on figures of speech and comparisons that may be labelled deceptive, something they themselves concede (p 3), this book is well written and well reasoned and worthwhile reading if only for its stimulating and challenging approach. We can recommend it to all interested.

Nel, M 1994 — Gemeentebou

Halfway House: Orion uitgewers. 320 bladsye. Prys: onbekend

Resensent: Prof M J du P Beukes

Die totale spektrum van gemeentebou kom aan die orde. Die teoretiese onderbou (deel I) word voorsien van 'n goed gefundeerde praktyk-model (deel II). Die bou-metafoor soos dit in die Bybel voorkom, word in deel I, hoofstuk 1, uitgewerk. In deel II, hoofstuk 2, word die problematiese saak van kerkvernuwing op die tafel geplaas. Vanuit die basies aanvaarde uitgangspunte van die Praktiese Teologie word in deel I, hoofstuk 3, 'n stwige teologiese teorie gebied vir die formulering van basisteorieë. In deel II, hoofstuk 3, word al die praktiese aspekte van gemeentebou as 'n prosesmatige gebeure beskryf.

Op die vakgebied gemeentebou is hierdie boek van Nel nie net 'n voortreflike fundering van die saak gemeentebou nie, maar tegelyk 'n Praktiese Teologie handboek wat ten volle bruikbaar vir die gemeentelike praktyk is. Nel het met hierdie publikasie beslis verdien om die Andrew Murray-prys te ontvang.

Nel se boek gee oorsigtelik 'n beeld van die vak gemeentebou, maar klee sy teorieë en praktymodel so in, dat dit 'n handboek is wat elke gemeente as breë riglyn vir gemeentebou kan benut.

Sy vertrekpunte vanuit die Skrif en die wyse waarop hy die Skrif hanteer, maak die boek beslis 'n teologiese werk. Sy 'teologiese teorieë' wat grondvat, maak dit 'n goeie prakties-teologiese werk.

Die sistematies-duidelik-geordende wyse waarop Nel werk, maak die boek toeganklik vir alle teoloë. Hy slaag veral daarin om baie duidelik 'n sinnolwe, werklike, aanvaarde definitie vir gemeentebou te gee.

Nel se aanpak van gemeentebou in aansluiting by reeds bestaande basis-teorieë van die Praktiese Teologie, lei daartoe dat gemeentebou nie gesien word as 'n nuwe saak in die kerk nie, maar as 'n wyse om die reeds bestaande werk op 'n doelgerigte, geordende wyse te doen binne die raamwerk van die presbiteriaal-sinodale struktuur.

Sy beskrywing van gemeentebou as prosesmatige gebeure met die oog op diens aan

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HTS 51/2 (1995)