Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

Best, T F & Robra, M (eds) 1997 — Ecclesiology and ethics: Ecumenical ethical engagement, moral formation and the nature of the church

Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications

Reviewer: Dr Johann Beukes (Kriel)

This interesting book brings together the results of the 1992-1996 World Council of Churches study on ecclesiology and ethics, conducted jointly by Unit I (Faith and Order) and Unit III (Justice, Peace and Recreation). The book seeks to explore the fundamental relation and link between what the church is and what the church does: the critical stance of its nature and its actions. It explores the ethical dimension of being church of Christ not as a separate component of the church’s life, but rather as integrally related to its worship, its confession of faith and its witness and service in the world. It explores how churches practise moral formation (or training) in ethical decision-making and discernment through their teaching and church life. It tries, inevitably so in a postmodern realm, to integrate distinct languages and discourses, especially those of theology and ecclesiology on the one hand and contemporary Christian ethical reflection on the other.

The book consists of two parts: Part I deals with reports from the above-mentioned study process, whilst Part II is an exposition or reflection on that process. Part II makes for interesting reading, with Duncan B Forrester, Larry Rasmussen, Elizabeth S Tapia and Viorel Ionita as the main contributors. In approaching these reports (Part I) and interpretative essays (Part II), readers should bear in mind two overarching thematic convictions which seemingly guided the study as a whole and which provided a framework for reflection on the study process and its results. The first conviction is that ethical reflection and action (that is, ecumenical ethical reflection and action) are intrinsic to the nature and life of the church. Thus ecclesiological and ethical reflection are considered to be inseparable: accordingly, Christian ethical engagement is an expression of the church’s deepest ecclesiological convictions, and ecclesiology must likewise be informed by the church’s experience of ethical engagement, by its living out of the gospel in complex situations of civil (and not so civil) reality. The second conviction is closely related: namely, that ecclesiology and Christian ethics must stay in close dialogue, each honouring and learning from the distinctive language and thought-forms of the other. Ecclesiologically this means that the languages of koinonia, of hope, of memory, of tradition, of homiletics, of eucharist and baptism — the languages of the church — should stay in constant dialogue. For ethics it involves particularly the notions of the church as a ‘moral community’ (that is, one which wrestles with issues of moral import, out of necessity so in light of the gospel) and of moral formation, the ‘training’ in ethical decision-making and discernment which comes through formal church teaching but, more pervasively, through the whole life of the church, and not least in its worship. This emphasis on the dialogue between the languages, discourses and, to use French philosopher Deleuze’s concept, mannerisms of ecclesiology and ethics should be welcomed.

Although neither the editors nor the contributors proclaim this directly, this book shows that the church has become part and parcel of a postmodern world: it is simply no longer possible to maintain the

ISSN 0259-9422 = HTS 55/1 (1999)
great modern divide between church and ethics, between sacrament and society, between the immanent and transcendent, between theology and philosophy, between ethics and aesthetics, between subject (God/humankind) and object (humankind/God). The real worth of this study, in my opinion, is to be found exactly in this postmodern quality.

The book is highly readable and wellcomposed. It comes highly recommended and justifiably so. Those who participated in the study process, as well as the editors and contributors of this book could, even though the study process continues, feel content about the direction their study has taken them.

Capon, R F, 1998 — The foolishness of preaching: Proclaiming the gospel against the wisdom of the world

Cambridge: Wm B Eerdmans

Reviewer: Rev J C van der Merwe (Kemptonpark)

Robert Farrar Capon is an Episcopal priest and the author of many popular books such as The mystery of Christ, The romance of the Word, The astonished heart, The parables of the kingdom, The parables of grace, and The parables of judgment. However, his books are not just for Episcopalians but for both clergy and lay persons who live in other households as well. He has in mind not only the few star preachers who have a consuming interest in preparing sermons but also the working stiffs (sometimes eleventh-hour workers, and sometimes literally stiff) who must stand in the pulpit every Sunday and try to say something useful in the name of the Father, the Son en the Holy Spirit.

In The foolishness of preaching, he addresses a couple of questions most frequently asked by preachers ‘in whatever Church they find themselves, such as: what is the cornerstone of good preaching? How should preachers go about to prepare themselves to preach effectively and true to the meaning of the Holy Spirit?’ One aspect that makes the book exceptionally valuable is that Capon also addresses the congregants and explains to them what they can expect from their preachers. The fact that he tackles these questions in a fresh and honest manner makes reading the book not only a joyful but also a very good learning experience for both the clergy and the laity. I am sure that the book will give the laity a better idea of what’s supposed to be involved in the preparations of sermons.

The book has two parts. In part one Capon addresses ‘The bedrock of preaching’, and in part two ‘The practice of preaching.’

In Part One a number of issues are discussed. Chapter 2 deals with how essential it is to have a passion for the Passion. One thing is clear: nothing counts but the cross. Therefore Capon pleads for a passion for the Passion. If I can make up your mind, when you go into the pulpit, to forget everything except Jesus Christ and him crucified, you’ll have nothing to give them but the good news. Chapter 3 tackles the stumbling blocks in the way of genuinely accepting grace, for example religion pills, spirituality pills and morality pills. It is a stern but timely warning that the church, by and large, has drugged itself into thinking that proper human behaviour is the key to its relationship with God. What preachers need to do is force themselves to go cold turkey, with nothing but the word of the cross. Chapter 4 poses