Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

if the contemporary church is breaking with its tradition when the question of an independent entry point to ethics is at stake.

Root, M and Saarinen, R (ed) 1998 - Baptism and the unity of the church


Reviewed: Dr Johan Buitendag

In order to grasp the quintessence of the book, its title – Baptism and the unity of the church – should actually be turned around: The unity of the church and baptism. The subtext, according to the title, is therefore in effect the main text. Baptism should serve as the vehicle to achieve and promote this goal of the unity of the church. The scholar, therefore, who wants to delve into the whole problem of the different issues at stake in baptism will perhaps be disappointed. But the one who is interested in a current debate of the ecumenical movement will be richly rewarded. The book wants to investigate the possibility of looking at the other (read: neglected) sacrament in pursuing the ideal of visible church unity. Most Christian churches teach that baptism is a sacrament of salvation as well as a sacrament of initiation into the Christian community. It is therefore strange that it doesn’t play a bigger role in the ecumenical debate of our day. The book follows the line of reasoning that this possibility is indeed viable. Perhaps it can achieve what the Eucharist hitherto has failed to bring about: real koinonia.

The book is the result of a study that was requested by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and begun by the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strassbourg. A consultation [sic] followed in 1996 in Hvittorp (Finland). A consensus was established among the participants that unity in baptism transcends all divisions. Unity is more eminent than differences and this is rooted in the one baptism (Eph 4:5). Emphasis should thus be laid on the indicative nature of unity and not solely on its imperative. We are thus all members of the one church and this definitely has implications for the existence of different churches. But this demands more research, according to the Hvittorp discussions.

In a well-balanced and rather traditional Lutheran manner, the Study Paper argues that albeit baptism is the fundamental bond of communion in the church, it is neither the only nor the final bond. Our baptismal unity should move us to ecumenical engagement of full altar or pulpit fellowship and full communion. And this unity is not something that should be achieved, but we are called to live and rejoice in it. It is perhaps necessary to highlight two aspects here. Does baptism according to the Lutheran tradition really make someone a member of the church? Although Lutherans have not understood confirmation as a sacramental addition to baptism, the baptised are withheld from the Eucharist until such a moment where they are confirmed by the church. This practice is perhaps an obstacle to overcome in this debate. Susan Wood’s proposal of an “integrated rite of initiation” which would reconnect baptism with the Eucharist is worth mentioning. The ecclesial meaning of the Eucharist has largely been neglected in the past, which will be retrieved in this reciprocally interpreted integration of baptism and Eucharist. This makes this “integrated rite of initiation” necessary. Secondly, the whole issue of the charismatic movement’s “baptism of the Holy Spirit” (second blessing) raises a problem as well. Neither have the merely baptised a birthright to the Eucharist nor are they second-class church members. This, of course, asks for biblical,
ecumenical and liturgical perspectives. In this regard, an article by James Dunn really deserves special attention. He contributes to the debate by indicating how illegitimate totality transfer of meaning concerning the word baptism exists. He argues that the New Testament perhaps sees the essence of baptism in the outpouring of the Spirit, sometimes even distinct from baptism with water. He pleads for an understanding of a Spiritualized interpretation of the baptism by Paul as well. It is the gift of the Spirit, not baptism, which provides the new covenant's answer to the old covenant’s circumcision. We have to be careful not to impose rich sacramental theology upon texts that speak only of the water rite. What is in any case clear, is that this whole debate of church unity cannot be sufficient should the focus be on baptism alone. The interrelation with the Eucharist even leads to a scrutiny of the different interpretations in ecclesiology. This will help one to come to grips with the debate of the local and universal church, visible and invisible unity, the assembly of saints and the indicative and imperative of this enterprise. The book is well-written, with no typing errors and, in accordance with the requirements for a good book, it prompts you to think. It definitely contributes to the (relatively sterile) debate in South Africa among certain churches in their endeavour to obtain one church denomination.

Roukema, R 1998 - Gnosis en geloof in het vroege christendom

Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Meinema. 216 pagina’s Prijs: Bfr. 700

Boekaankondiging

De gnostiek is een (onder)stroom in de geschiedenis van de (christelijke) godsdienst die oude papieren heeft. Nu eens krachtig, dan weer gedempt laten gnostische stemmen zich horen. In de recente tijd heeft de aandacht voor het Evangelie van Thomas een impuls gegeven aan de idee dat Jezus een gnostische wijsheidsleraar was. Een tegenstelling met de canonieke evangeliën wordt dan al snel geconstrueerd.

Omdat de gnostiek een fascinerende uitwerking heeft op velen, versterkt door studies die speculatief van aard zijn, is er beoefte aan een betrouwbare inleiding tot gnostiek.

Wat zijn de kernideeën van de gnostiek, uit welke bronnen put zij, wie waren de voornaamste vertegenwoordigers van de gnostiek, hoe verhoudt de gnostiek zich tot het christendom? Al deze vragen komen hier aan de orde en worden belicht. De auteur, die de bronnen heeft gelezen in de grondtalen (o m koptisch en Grieks) doet op een systematische en toeganklijke wijze verslag van zijn rondgang door het landschap van de oude gnostiek. De vondst van boeken in Nag Hammadi krijgt volop aandacht. De hedendaagse lezer heeft door deze studie de mogelijkheid om zijn kennis en inzicht in de gnostiek werkelijk te vergroten. Een weging van gnostiek, waarin de auteur het eigene van de gnosis afzet tegen het standpunt van de kerk, besluit dit boeiend boek. De registers completeren deze inleiding tot de gnostiek.