



Philip Kariatlis, *Church as Communion: The Gift and Goal of Koinonia*. Adelaide/Sydney: ATF Theology/St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2011. 267 pages. ISBN 9781921817083.

Communion or *koinonia* has been a dominant theme in ecclesiology for at least the past thirty years. Its presence, of course, goes back much further. In 1920 the Ecumenical Patriarch wrote an encyclical calling for a “league (*koinonia*) of churches.” Although not taken up in any explicit way for another fifty years, *koinonia* has since become a dominant motif in ecumenical conversation. Ecclesiology is the most difficult of all ecumenical conversations, and only recently has there appeared a multilateral convergence text on the church, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC, 2013). However, in the intervening years all churches have deepened their own ecclesiological self-understanding and brought it into dialogue with their ecumenical partners.

Philip Kariatlis has made a fine contribution to the development of ecclesiology, in particular communion ecclesiology. *Church as Communion: The Gift and Goal of Koinonia* is a serious study that is focused on the twin dimensions of *koinonia*, namely that it is a gift of God already given to the church, and that it is always taking shape in the concrete experiences of the church and as such is a goal. While the focus and context is clearly the Eastern Orthodox theological tradition, the study engages in a serious dialogue with theologians from various western traditions. This gives the book a sense of wholeness, and will make it valuable reading for people in other churches. The book is a presentation

of the doctoral thesis that Philip Kariatlis successfully presented at the Sydney College of Divinity.

Communion ecclesiology has not been without its critics, particularly those who accuse it of being too idealistic and not sufficiently grounded in the concrete expressions and experiences of the church. It can easily fail to take account of the struggles, tensions and even schisms that may characterise the life of local churches at one time or another. Kariatlis notes these criticisms and addresses them throughout the book. The gift–goal dialectic offers a means of affirming the divine reality of the church, while at the same time taking account of its human circumstances. The book begins with a chapter that presents two fundamental approaches to ecclesiology, from two theologians. One, Archbishop Stylianos Harkianakis, offers a description of the church in relation to the Trinity. The church is an icon of the divine Trinitarian communion. In this approach the church is situated within a larger framework of the whole cosmos and God’s creation. Such an approach avoids limiting communion to an anthropological concept. The second approach is that of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, who demonstrates that the celebration of the Eucharist constitutes the most perfect manifestation of the church’s *koinonia*. Kariatlis argues that Zizioulas has avoided some of the pitfalls of earlier Eucharistic ecclesiologies (notably that of Afanassieff) that saw the local church as being self-sufficient. The close connection between the church, the Eucharist and the bishop, according to Zizioulas, ensures that the bishop, as the overseer of the Eucharistic gathering, “not only maintained the unity of his local church but also witnessed to the organic *koinonia* between other local churches” (15). These are themes that are taken up in more detail in chapters four and five of the book.

By the end of the first chapter Kariatlis has laid the foundations for understanding the gift dimension of *koinonia*. For both Harkianakis and Zizioulas, *koinonia* is the foundational divine gift bestowed by God upon the church. This gift extends right back to the very moment when God decided to communicate with the world at creation. This understanding of the church informs the relationship of the church to the world. The church is squarely based in the world, but its origins lie outside the world, in the

divine *koinonia*. This twofold dimension sets up the dynamic interplay between gift and goal.

This dynamic interplay is developed more thoroughly in chapter two, which considers the New Testament background and foundation. From the very beginning the New Testament churches were more than a sociological gathering, more than a mere human institution. The church was “an entirely new reality whose nature was defined by its intimate communion with God” (27). Here *koinonia* is fellowship with God where human individuals would have a share in the life of God as well as with one another. Unity with God was made possible by the Son and the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the New Testament churches were considered as the concrete place of salvation. However, because in the New Testament these churches are located in history and have a concrete expression, *koinonia* always also entails a goal, namely that eschatological fullness of *koinonia*.

The event of Pentecost is undoubtedly where the gift–goal dialectic is seen most clearly. On the one hand, “the Holy Spirit is depicted as a gift bursting forth into the ecclesial gathering” (67). This means the establishing of the communal mode of the church’s existence. On the other hand, the Pentecost narrative is concerned with the response of the apostles, as they attend to the goal of actualising the gift of the Spirit’s *koinonia* and sharing it with the entire world. This, of course, grounds the church’s mission in the world. Hence, Kariatlis has further demonstrated that communion ecclesiology, when the gift–goal dialectic is respected, is far removed from being an idealistic ecclesiology.

The three remaining chapters develop this theme. Chapter three considers the Eucharist as the realisation and sacrament of the church’s *koinonia*. Chapter four focuses on the communal structures of *koinonia* and the exercise of authority in this context. Chapter five explores the communion of the churches and in particular the exercise of primacy.

The reader cannot doubt the centrality of the Eucharist in communion ecclesiology. “The New Testament’s primary concern in relation to the Eucharist was to show that it was *the* occasion for communion with God” (80). Immediately the gift–goal dialectic is evident.

In the Eucharist, the divine mystery of God's life continues to descend on the world, as gift. This gift is received in such a way that it is actualised in the concrete context of its celebration. This is ably demonstrated with reference to two familiar passages in 1 Corinthians, chapters ten and eleven. The very celebration of the Eucharist is deeply connected to the goal aspect of *koinonia*. St Paul argued forcefully to the Corinthians that any form of disunity would suggest that they did not recognise Christ's *koinonia* among them. Kariatlis links this fundamental insight in Paul to the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, in particular the idea of sacrifice. The sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist underscores the bestowal of God's self-giving love (as gift) as well as the faithful's own response in love and thanksgiving (as desiring the goal). This insight about the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist is particularly helpful, especially for those traditions that have separated a theology of Eucharistic sacrifice from its ecclesiological setting.

Building on the insights from the chapter on the Eucharist, Kariatlis introduces the discussion on authority. The insights of chapter four on authority are perhaps the most original in the book. Just as the Holy Spirit made Christ present in the form of bread and wine, so the Spirit supports the church's *koinonia* through the establishment of permanent structures. Such structures are properly understood as a divine gift. Having elaborated the gift aspect, namely that the church's ministry of authority is attributed to the divine initiative, the way is paved to explore the human dimension of the exercise of that ministry. The human dimension reminds us of the dynamic of the church as communion: the gift will only fully be realised in the eschatological kingdom, and hence is also a goal. There has been a tendency in some churches to emphasise one or other of these two dimensions. Too strong an emphasis on the gift will lead to a focus on the church as institution, where often the hierarchy are the only players in the church. On the other hand, those who place too much emphasis on the goal dimension are inclined to see the church as only an eschatological reality and thus not needing structures here and now. Rightly, Kariatlis argues that order is part of the divine constitution of the church. This chapter will be challenging for some Christians whose understanding of church authority

is focused almost exclusively on the human dimensions of its exercise. However, holding gift and goal together may well provide a way forward in the dialogue: while taking seriously the human aspect of the exercise of authority, the divine origins are given their proper place.

The treatment of order is important for a healthy understanding of authority. Ordered ministry is part of the communion of the church and is exercised in communion. Kariatlis rejects what he calls a “hierocratic pyramidal view of the church” (151). Rather, he favours a model of concentric circles proposed by Harkianakis. The bishop exercises his ministry in the communion of the whole people of God. The episcopate is here presented as the gift and goal of *koinonia*.

There follows a discussion of the relationship between the bishop and the conciliar structures of the church. This section continues the theme of gift and goal, distinguishing them as “time” and “space” respectively. The bishop manifests the *koinonia* of the local church in time, since the bishop is the direct connection between the apostles and the local church. Moreover, the bishop preserves the *koinonia* of the local church with the other local churches, i.e. in space. In practice this happens as bishops come together to meet in Council. Kariatlis argues strongly that the synodical system is an essential part of understanding the church as a communion: “in its earthly governance, the full measure of Christ’s authority was concentrated and located in the episcopate as a whole – that is, within the synodical system – since no single bishop could claim exclusive possession of the church’s truth, even though that truth was incarnated fully in each local church” (180).

The final element in the discussion on authority concerns the place of the whole body of the faithful in relation to the gift–goal dialectic. The episcopate, which has been appointed to exercise the authority of Christ in the church (i.e. a divine gift), does this by defining and teaching doctrine. However, it is not the bishop alone who is the guardian of this authority. Rather this belongs to the whole people of God. The entire ecclesial gathering strives to make the gift of *koinonia* a more genuine reality (i.e. works to realise its goal). Moreover, this does not amount to

a “democratisation” of the relationship of the episcopate to the faithful. Rather than ratifying a teaching, the faithful recognise it to be true.

The final chapter of this book completes the elements of *koinonia* under consideration. The focus here is on primacy. This is a delicate topic, not least because of the claims to universal primacy of the Bishop of Rome. While these claims are not the primary consideration of this chapter, they are acknowledged and explained. The Orthodox hesitation about those claims is made clear: it is not the primacy as such which the Orthodox call into question, “but its modern juridical mode of application” (195). The focus of the chapter is not on the juridical aspects of the Roman primacy, but on the theological dimension of primacy. As such primacy is only properly understood in the context of the preceding chapters. There is much here that provides excellent material for continuing the dialogue on this important topic.

Primacy has been a disputed question within Orthodox theology. Three approaches are identified. The first rejects the idea of a primacy, arguing that it limits the catholicity of the local church. The second will accept primacy in a limited sense, where it refers merely to the earthly governance of the church. The third position sees primacy as a theological necessity, identified with the *esse* of the church. Kariatlis develops this latter sense within the gift–goal dialectic that he has presented throughout the book. Accordingly, the primacy is a divine *gift*, given for the purposes of bringing about the church’s *koinonia* with God. Because it is exercised in a human way, it will need to struggle to bring about its *goal* of embodying the eschatological *koinonia* with God.

Philip Kariatlis has undertaken solid theological research for this book. The result is an organic understanding of the church. *Koinonia* is an idea that can contain the whole of ecclesiology. The author has demonstrated that an idea that existed in germ in the New Testament is capable of providing a framework for working out various practical aspects of church life. By holding in dialectical tension gift and goal he avoids the pitfall both of those who would see the church in purely idealistic terms and those who see only the human side and its weaknesses. The humanity

of the church is crucial to the realisation of the divine gift of *koinonia*. But without the divine gift, the church would be nothing other than club – and probably a club of like-minded people.

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