

Pete Ward. *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church*. Boston: Brill, 2017. 220 pages. \$57.

In this book, Pete Ward, a professorial fellow at Durham University, articulates what he calls “Liquid Ecclesiology” through an empirically-oriented theological investigation of the lived expression of the church. He argues that the theological imagination of the church has been centered on the “Solid Church,” which arises from the understanding of the church as “a gathering in one place, at one time, with the purpose of performing a shared ritual” (10). By attending to the growing fluidity in society and culture, Ward contends the necessity of shifting the focus in the theological discussion of the church from solidity to fluidity because “fluidity is a characteristic of both divine being and of human culture” (10).

This book comprises three parts with ten chapters. In part 1, Ward lays a theological basis for a Liquid Ecclesiology upon a theology of gospel and church. Chapter 1 explores the nature and manner of the divine presence, which is a theological rationale of the presence of Christ in and through the imperfect cultural expression of the church. The church and the gospel have their being in the presence of Christ, but at the same time they are expressions in cultural forms, which are always partial and imperfect to convey the fullness of the divine presence. What makes possible the presence of Christ in cultural forms of expression is God’s impassioned love, which is characterized by *kenosis*. This love of God shapes the presence of Christ in the church and the world through self-emptying and humiliation. In chapter 2, Ward explicates his understanding of the gospel as paradox. The paradox of the gospel is that the gospel is Jesus Christ, but it is also the message the church is called to proclaim. The communicative form of the gospel has to be always articulated in and through cultural expression, while always remaining provisional (57). This paradox of the gospel acknowledges the fluid nature of the lived expression of the church and opposes the simplistic view of the gospel as fixed doctrinal propositions. Chapter 3 sets out a theoretical framework to examine the cultural and material forms that make up the life of the church. The expression of the Church and the gospel always assumes cultural and material forms. Ecclesial forms of expression as a part of cultural flow are always fluid and changing. To see the presence of Christ that comes in fluid cultural forms, one must pay attention to the lived expression of the gospel in the life of the church (80). Chapter 4 investigates the content of the gospel as message. Because of the diversity of cultural expression of the gospel, the content of the gospel cannot be understood as certain fixed doctrinal propositions. The author employs the concept of “the grand narrative as an approximate frame of reference” that works as a guide for the expression of the gospel and to discern whether a cultural expression of the gospel is appropriate or not (92).

Part 2 examines a case study of the lived expression of the gospel in the evangelical and charismatic churches. Chapter 5 traces the origin of the understanding of the gospel as a series of short doctrinal expressions. To be effective in sharing the gospel with young people, Christian communities simplify the expression of the gospel as fixed doctrinal truth, and this enables the church to accommodate surrounding culture for effective communication of the gospel. Chapter 6 explores how an effort to connect with the cultural context of young people has generated a highly personal and subjective form of Christian faith. Chapter 7 examines the worship songs and shows how “the objective gospel is replaced and repositioned with a subjective narrative of encounter with God” (153). Chapter 8 is an evaluation of the case study in which the author delineates unintended negative consequences of the church’s effort to express the faith in the contemporary cultural context for evangelism. Those consequences are “widespread amnesia

about the Gospel” (174); the split between the objective doctrine of the gospel and the personalized theology of everyday worship (177); the marginalization of the gospel in the life of the church (179); and the loss of the significant elements of Christian narrative due to the highly abbreviated form of the gospel (179).

Part 3 deals with the issue of normativity in “Liquid Ecclesiology.” In chapter 9, the author proposes his understanding of normativity as discernment of the presence of Christ. His understanding of discernment is not a detached observation with a disinterested judgment. Rather, discernment is the practice of abiding in Christ. It is seeing Jesus Christ in the paradox of the life of the Church through contemplation and reflection on the revelation of Jesus Christ in Scripture and the contemporary lived expression of the church. Through the practice of abiding in Christ, the Christian community can make a judgment on its ecclesial life and the lived expression of the Church, and thus it is able to correct and generate new forms of ecclesial life. Chapter 10 examines how disciplined attention to the lived expression of the Church can contribute to the ongoing renewals of the Church. The author provides a plan for theological education as an example.

As the term “Liquid Ecclesiology” implies, Ward does not provide a clear-cut definition of what the Church is in terms of a theological essence. Rather, he offers a comprehensive theological framework to observe and evaluate fluid understandings of the Church that are embedded in the lived expression of the Church in ecclesial practices. By attending to lived expression, Ward articulates a unique approach to ecclesiology that moves beyond theological and empirical reductionism. One critique for Ward is his simplistic understanding of culture. Ward seems to assume that culture is a neutral medium with which the Christian community makes the cultural expression of the church. However, the change of culture often presupposes power struggles and conflicts between groups. Without attending to this aspect of culture, the expression of the church can only reflect the voice of the dominant group in the society and thus unintentionally contribute to silencing the voice of the marginalized.

This book enriches theological discussion on the church in educational settings. It is also helpful for preachers who are called to struggle with the mystery of Christ’s presence in the Church and the world. This book invites preachers to abide in Christ as they continue to discern and name the gospel with imperfect cultural expression.

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