
Focus

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Review of Abraham van de Beek, *Lichaam en Geest van Christus: De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest*, Meinema, Zoetermeer 2012, 556 p., € 34.50 (ISBN 9789021143101).

Many of the contributors to the festschrift *Strangers and Pilgrims on Earth: Essays in Honor of Abraham van de Beek* (Brill, 2011), which was published before *Lichaam en Geest van Christus*, expressed eager anticipation for this work by Van de Beek on ecclesiology and pneumatology. Having teased out aspects of ecclesiology and pneumatology from his voluminous body of writing up to that point, they longed for a definitive and concluding crown jewel joining together into a systematic unity the key themes that have been his passion.

Now that Van de Beek's book is out, it is safe to say that the anticipation was appropriate and that those who looked forward to its appearance will not be disappointed. It is a massive work (nearly 500 pages plus notes and bibliography; with eye-popping documentation containing many additional nuggets of insight), but never dull and with a clear point of view — a distinctly counter-cultural posture. According to Van de Beek, the people of Christ must be “wereldvreemd” (p. 13).

More about that later, but first a few words about the structure of the book into three divisions: “The Church”; “The Church Preserved by Christ”; “And in the Holy Spirit”. The first section deals with the attributes of the church. After an introductory section which includes a strong affirmation of the cruciform nature of the church — a theme essential to his ecclesiology — Van de Beek begins conventionally enough with an extensive discussion of the church's attributes: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity. The content is not conventional, however. The longest section is on catholicity and reminds one of Herman Bavinck's magisterial Kampen Rectoral Address of 1888, *De Katholiceit van Christendom en Kerk*. But Van de Beek's real passion is the church's unity: “A divided church is worse than a sinful world.” (p. 31) Repeatedly drawing from the resources of the early church, Van de Beek lauds the Reformation for recapturing the genuine catholicity summarized by Ignatius: “Where Jesus Christ is, there the catholic church is.” But Rome was also right in emphasizing Ignatius' insistence that formal catholicity and unity were also essential: “the church is where the bishop is who serves the eucharist.” (p. 91) The Reformation was correct in restoring the importance of the *content* of the

gospel but its willingness to forsake formal, institutional unity led to schism and sectarianism. Then, remarkably, he notes that Roman formalism and institutional power are easier to correct – Vatican II has already done it by restoring gospel *content* – while the one-sidedness of Protestantism’s emphasis on truth-content has only led to further splintering and seems so much more immune to correction. In that context, Van de Beek’s appeal to the early church as leaving room for a “reformed?” Petrine office is mildly startling.

Of the three sections, the third section on the Holy Spirit is clearly intended to be dependent on the first two and consists of 100 pages whereas the first two are each roughly 200 pages long. Van de Beek notes that though there may be good reasons for following the usual order of subordinating the church to the Holy Spirit, there are good reasons in our time to reverse this order and priority. Contemporary theology, he argues, tends to divorce the Spirit from the church and he wants to reverse the pattern. Taking his stance in the way that the Apostle’s Creed intrinsically ties the Spirit to the church, Van de Beek takes definite exception to Van Ruler’s ground-beaking essay on the structural differences between the christological and pneumatological perspective (pp. 392). He even distances himself from his own earlier appreciation for a cosmic pneumatology in *De Adem van God* (1987). The structure here reveals everything about Van de Beek’s main intention and concern about the church and is the ground of what I earlier called Van de Beek’s “distinctly counter-cultural posture.”

In a nutshell: Van de Beek is hopeful about the church but pessimistic about the future of Western civilization. He writes elegantly and with passion about the catholicity and unity of the church, provides sound critique of the misuse of the *missio Dei* idea, and movingly addresses the plight of a broken and lost world. I found his discussion of apostolicity to be a bracing corrective to those who use it only to validate missiology. Apostolicity, Van de Beek insists, means “that the church is faithful to the Apostles.” (p. 92) Earlier, in his discussion of the church’s unity, he took exception to using a social doctrine of the Trinity as the anchor analogy for the diversity in unity of the church. He regards this as one more example of using the doctrine of the Trinity for ideological purposes, comparable to the fourth-century attempts to use it to buttress the Eastern Empire. The social Trinity as model moves the church away from its christological, cruciform and eucharistic center and identity to an emphasis on social realities. “The spotlight turns to human relations as mirror images of God’s love.” (p. 36)

A similar passionate concern shapes Van de Beek’s discussion of church and kingdom and the church’s relation to the world, particularly the state. Here Van de Beek uses Barthian artillery to attack Van Ruler (as a symbol of a

“worldly theologian”) and much of the ecumenical movement since World War II. The target: theologies that focus on this world and its politics and see the role of the church as serving the world’s liberation and well-being. *Missio Dei* is the term that represents the essence of God in his poured out love for the world. The church is called simply to locate, identify and participate in this mission. The church must be *relevant*. Following Stanley Hauerwas, Van de Beek objects to efforts to *make* the gospel relevant to those who do not seem to desire it. “If we need to make the gospel relevant, then it is no longer the gospel.” (p. 112) Van de Beek considers this a theocratic impulse though he recognizes different forms of theocracy, including that of “prophetic critique” of the state and social order. Yet even here, all too often the church is seen in terms of being a “beach-head for the kingdom”, which puts it in the arena of other power players in the human project. Van de Beek objects strongly to all this. “The church is not at all in service of higher ideals... The church is not the beach-head of the kingdom. She is the fellowship that belongs to Christ and is wholly different.” (p.124) In this context, undoubtedly with a side-glance at the Belhar Confession, he notes that the language of “siding with the oppressed” is also an ideology: the ideology of apartheid theology is included; “but so is the ideological character of anti-apartheid theology.” (p. 124)

All of this will warm the hearts of those who have been drawn to and influenced by Van de Beek’s long-time insistence on a pilgrim church and a pilgrim form of Christian discipleship. Christian existence, after all, *is* cruciform existence. (p. 108, n. 492)

Yet, it is disappointing that Van de Beek follows Stanley Hauerwas’s interpretation of the American church-state narrative even though he does not mention Hauerwas by name in the key passages on pp. 114-117. Van de Beek had rightly pointed out that the notion “theocracy” can refer to at least four quite different positions: a) the church tells the state what to do; b) church and state together stand under the Word of God; c) the state and religion (*godsdiens*) are inseparably woven together; and d) the state claims no absolute power because God alone is King. Curiously, he places the American scene under (c), claiming that America is “the most telling contemporary example [of church and state being mixed together], where the state sets itself up as the guarantor of Christian culture with the expectation that the churches will give the state unconditional support.” (p. 115)

With all due respect, this is a bizarre observation. Stanley Hauerwas is a discredited and untrustworthy narrator of the American story because his anabaptist sectarian ecclesiological frame of mind has no real appreciation for the messiness of church and political life being a penultimate good. For Hauerwas, it’s all or nothing; America is the kingdom of God *or* Babylon. Since it

is clearly not the former, it must be the latter. Here Van de Beek would have done well to follow his own anti-perfectionist, anti-utopian insights on the holiness of the church, similar anti-utopian insights on the ecumenical movement and liberation theology, and his deep appreciation for the formal, institutional dimension of Rome. It is sometimes hard for Europeans who have christendom in their DNA to understand and appreciate the American achievement in ordered liberty. Alexis de Tocqueville and Abraham Kuyper come to mind as two exceptions. For Van de Beek the repudiation of christendom seems to mean a social and political order that is totally secular and devoid of christian influence because he only sees exercise of power that is at odds with the cruciform, eucharistic identity of the church. Again, an either/or. But, America is a voluntarist society with church establishment ruled out by law *and* at the same time a socio-political order that still (!) retains much of the capital of biblical religion. I fail to see that America's complete secularization by removing that presence and influence from public life would be a good thing for the world. America is not the kingdom of God, but only theocrats claim it should be, and most of us who do appreciate her history and character are not theocrats.

Finally, to bring this to a more theological closing, my own sense is that Van de Beek would do well to revisit his rejection of Van Ruler's important distinction between the christological and pneumatological viewpoints as well as his own turn away from cosmic pneumatology. Barth was wrong in his repudiation of Brunner's call for the church in its mission work to look for ways of appealing to the actual presence and general revelation of God to those outside of Christ. I share Van de Beek's passion for a pilgrim church, a church that is not simply one more player in the power struggles of our world. In bringing the gospel to the lost world, however, the church can and indeed must assume that God is present to all people, that he addresses them in their creaturely humanity and that they cannot evade God or avoid responding to him. The Spirit who gives life to all, who apportions his general gifts indiscriminately, is ahead of the evangelist and missionary, preparing the way for the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. To deny or ignore this is to risk the church becoming a gnostic sect and not the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church. The Spirit *does* come before the church.

None of this is to take anything away from my deep appreciation for Van de Beek's accomplishment. He is a provocative thinker and great conversation partner who combines profound learning with deep piety, and his work should serve the church and academy for many years.