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THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF HANS KUNG

An Examination Based Upon Three Major Works

Jon M. Temme

This article offers a brief summarization of the ecclesiology of Hans Kung based upon three of his major works: *The Structures of the Church* (1964)¹, *The Church* (1967)² and *Infallible? An Inquiry* (1970)³. Of these three, *The Church* proves most useful for the task at hand and it is quoted from extensively for several reasons: it is a post-Vatican II publication, it deals with all major ecclesiological concerns, it is most systematic in its presentation. The broad five part outline Kung employs in *The Church*⁴ will be followed here.

THE CHURCH AS IT IS

The question of the true nature or image of the Church has challenged ecclesiological thought for centuries. It has been responded to in a variety of ways.⁵ Basically the issue is this; how is one to speak of the Church — in terms of its ideal

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1. Hans Kung, *Structures of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attensio (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964).
 2. Hans Kung, *The Church*, trans. Ray and Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Burns and Oates, Ltd., 1967).
 3. Hans Kung, *Infallible? An Inquiry*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1971).
 4. *The Church*, pp. 7-9. (This citation and all others from *The Church* are taken from the 1976 Image Books edition).
 5. An especially helpful examination of this is found in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 20-28.

nature (what it should be) or its reality in the historical moment (what it is like)? Kung approaches this question from the perspective of essence and historical form, stating that these are both “true” aspects of the image of Church. They cannot be separated, nor are they thus identical.⁶ Kung’s ecclesiology builds upon the premise that, “to discover this original and permanent ‘essence’, [of the Church], given that it is something dynamic rather than something static and rigid, we must look at the constantly changing historical ‘forms’ of the Church.”⁷ This means that for Kung ecclesiology is largely an historical task, constantly conditioned anew by history, although Kung does advance certain essential norms and principles for the historical forms of the Church. These norms are the pluralistic New Testament witnesses of the image of the Church. Writes Kung:

The New Testament message, as the original testimony, is the highest court to which appeal must be made in all the changes of history. It is the essential norm against which the Church of every age has to measure itself.⁸

Kung’s “essence/historical form” tension allows him to reject several distorted images of the Church, the two most notable being the Church as the object of faith⁹, and the invisible nature of the Church.¹⁰ Against the latter Kung writes, “The one Church, in its essential nature and in its external forms alike, is always at once visible and invisible.”¹¹

THE COMING REIGN OF GOD

In his ecclesiology Kung gives careful exegetical attention to the connection between Jesus and the primitive Church, seeing in the New Testament witness a futurist-presentist eschatology. Joseph Zalotay, summarizing Kung’s thought in this regard, suggests the following four foundational propositions in Kung’s ecclesiology.

- (a) In the *pre-Easter period*, during his lifetime, *Jesus did not found a church* (b) In the *pre-Easter period*, Jesus, by his preaching and ministry, *laid the foundations* for the emergence of a post-resurrection Church. (c) The Church has existed *from the time of faith in the resurrection*. (d) The *origins* of the Church do not lie in the intention and message of Jesus in the pre-Easter period, but in the whole *history of Jesus’ life and ministry*.¹²

In Kung’s view the New Testament church conceived of itself as a pilgrim community working for the approaching Kingdom of God, but the Kingdom was not identical with itself. Hence it regarded itself as the eschatological community of salvation.¹³ This community appropriated, justifiably so, the title of *ekklesia* which finds its roots in the *kehal Yahweh*.¹⁴ With regard to this point Kung makes an

6. *The Church*, pp. 23-24.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-59.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-65.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

12. Joseph Zalotay, review of *The Church* by Hans Kung, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, XXXI, p. 102.

13. *The Church*, pp. 114-116.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

effort to distinguish between the one *ekklesia* of God and the individual communities of faith. He sees the latter community as fully representing the *ekklesia* even though it is not the *ekklesia* in its essence.¹⁵

Each community or congregation finds its existence in the one Church when it is in the service of the coming Kingdom of God. Its task, therefore, is to preach what Jesus preached — the good news of the coming Kingdom breaking in through his ministry, death and resurrection. This task and service gives the Church its existence and its meaning.

If the Church believes, preaches, and lives, convincingly and actively, the message of Jesus Christ then it has a future in the modern world and in humanity. For then it will be granted not a future, above and beyond any age, but *the* future, the only perfect future: the Kingdom of God.¹⁶

THE FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

The Church as the People of God

Kung seeks to further examine the nature of the Church by means of its relationship to what has preceded it, namely, the elect community of God called Israel. Of this ecclesiastical image Kung writes, “the idea of the people of God is the oldest and most fundamental concept underlying the self-interpretation of the *ekklesia*.”¹⁷ Kung regards the Church as the radical realization of Israel’s mission and, hence, as the new and true Israel. The implications of this self-conception for today are expressed in four negative formulations. In the Church as the people of God, there must be no clericalization, no exclusiveness, no hypostatization, and no idealization.¹⁸

Yet a further implication of this image involves Christianity’s relationship to Judaism. He sees the two as being obviously interwoven and in tension, seeing “the only course of action” permitted to the Church as being the task of making Israel jealous unto salvation, building upon Romans 9-11.¹⁹ In summary Kung writes, “this is how Israel and the Church must confront one another — not in theoretical debate but in existential dialogue; not in an uncommitted battle of words, but in committed competition.”²⁰

The Church as the Creation of the Spirit

The second basic biblical image of the Church that Kung employs and develops is that of the Church as the creation of the Spirit. Kung addresses two major dimensions of this image: the freedom of the Church, and the continuing charismatic

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-177.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

structure of the Church. Kung describes the freedom of the Church in the Spirit as both freedom from sin and a freedom for service and witness. The relationship of the Church to the Spirit is one of subordination. The Church is under the reign of the Spirit which has specific consequences, most notable of which is Kung's emphasis upon the continuing charismatic structure of the Church.²¹ Kung describes a charism as signifying "the call of God, addressed to an individual to a particular ministry in the community, which brings with it the ability to fulfill that ministry."²² The charismatic structure of the Church, in that it reflects this calling to ministry, is for Kung a predominant structure or model. "Hence one can speak of a *charismatic structure of the Church, which includes but goes far beyond the hierarchical structure of the Church.*"²³

Kung, however, does not let this concern go unguarded and he does express warnings against enthusiasm, a movement which he recognizes to be as old as the church itself.²⁴

The Church as the Body of Christ

In his ecclesiology Kung discusses baptism and the Lord's Supper under the image of the Church as the Body of Christ. That image, however, must be seen as having great significance beyond those sacraments.

The Church as the Body of Christ is constituted by baptism and unified by the Lord's Supper. Such is the emphasis placed upon those two sacraments in Kung's ecclesiology. "If the Church owes to baptism the fact that it is a Church, and does not have to become a Church through its own pious works, the Church owes to the Lord's Supper the fact that it *remains* a Church, despite any falling away and failure."²⁵

As the Body of Christ the Church is fully present as local congregations in union with one another. And lest the image of the Church as the Body of Christ be misconstrued to mean that the Church equals Christ, Kung strongly emphasizes that while Christ is present in the Church, he is also not wholly contained in the Church. There exists no hypostatic union between Christ and the Church. "Despite the continuing presence in the Church, Christ is and remains the Lord of the Church."²⁶

THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CHURCH

The Church is One

In Kung's understanding of the unity of the Church emphasis is placed upon the expression of that unity through unanimity rather than unequivocal harmony.²⁷

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 236-250.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 247.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-266.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

27. *Structures of the Church*, pp. 28-36.

This has several implications, one of which is the acknowledgment that unity is not necessarily in opposition to multiplicity, but rather fosters it.

The unity of the Church, moreover, not only presupposes a multiplicity of churches, but makes it flourish anew: through the diversity of God's callings, through the multiplicity of the gifts of the Spirit given to the Church, through the variety of the members of Christ and their functions.²⁸

Such an understanding is again safeguarded against being seen as justification for the present divisions within the Church that have come about through unjustifiable actions. The reunion of the Church thus exists as a real possibility and a necessary task for the one Church. "It is fitting that the inner spiritual unity of the Church should be manifested outwardly."²⁹

The Catholic Church

For Kung identity is the basic issue of catholicity.³⁰ Writes Kung:

It is an all-embracing *identity* which at bottom makes a Church catholic, the fact that despite all the constant and necessary changes of the times and of varying forms, and despite its blemishes and weaknesses, the Church in every place and in every age remains unchanged in its essence, whatever form it takes . . . Only if this identity is present does the Church appear as the undiminished entire Church, as the undiluted universal Church, as the undivided total Church, as the truly Catholic Church.³¹

Such an emphasis upon identity always pushes the Church to consider its catholicity beyond itself and in Christ. This perspective also enables the Church to acknowledge that salvation may exist outside itself but never outside of Christ.³² P.J. Burns succinctly summarizes Kung's position as this: " 'Outside the Church there is no salvation' must be corrected to read 'Outside Christ there is no salvation'."³³

The Church is Holy

"The Church is holy by being called by God in Christ to be the communion of the faithful, by accepting the call to his service, by being separated from the world and at the same time embraced and supported by his grace."³⁴ In this quotation several important emphases can be detected in Kung's ecclesiology. First of all the holiness of the Church is brought about by the action of God which happens in spite of the sinfulness of the Church. The Church is separated from the world yet it can only exist in the world. This necessitates God's grace which is specifically experienced in terms of forgiveness and renewal. Therefore the holy Church is a forgiving fellowship and an *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

It is at this point in Kung's ecclesiology that a discussion of infallibility must

28. *The Church*, p. 355.

29. *Structures of the Church*, p. 29.

30. *The Church*, pp. 289-391.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 389-390.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 403-411.

33. P.J. Burns, review of *Die Kirche* by Hans Kung, in *Theological Studies*, XXIX, p. 119.

34. *The Church*, p. 419.

occur.³⁵ For Kung infallibility, in terms of the holiness of the Church, means “a fundamental remaining in the truth, which is not disturbed by individual errors.”³⁶ Kung, however, feels that the term infallibility opens itself up to far too many possible misunderstandings.³⁷ Therefore he proposes the phrase “indefectability in truth.” Concerning this issue he writes:

God alone is infallible in the strict sense of the term. He alone is *a priori* free from error (*immunis ab errore*) in detail and indeed in every case: he is therefore the one who *a priori* can neither deceive nor be deceived. The Church, however, composed of human beings, which is not God and never becomes God, can constantly and in a very human way deceive herself and others on every plane and in all spheres. Therefore, in order to avoid all misunderstandings, it is better to ascribe to the Church not ‘infallibility’, but — on the basis of faith in the promises (of God) — ‘indefectability’ or ‘perpetuity’: an unshatterability and indestructability; in brief, a fundamental *remaining* in the truth in spite of all possible errors.³⁸

The Church is Apostolic

Kung considers this attribute of the Church to be crucial, because “the Church can only be truly one, holy and catholic if it is in all things an *apostolic* Church.”³⁹ The Church is apostolic only when it as a *whole* continues the apostolic commission and task. Of this, apostolic succession consists. “As a result of the continuing apostolic mission there is, in the apostolic ministry, an apostolic succession: an apostolic succession of obedience.”⁴⁰ This constitutes the real continuity and vital link with the apostles.

THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

Kung serves notice that his understanding of ecclesiastical offices is linked to the importance of the fellowship of faith.

The fundamental error of ecclesiologies which turned out, in fact, to be no more than hierarchiologies was that they failed to realize that all who hold office are primarily (both temporally and factually speaking) not dignitaries but believers, members of the fellowship of believers; and that compared with this fundamental fact any office they may hold is of secondary if not tertiary importance.⁴¹

This concern is given more formal consideration in Kung’s expression of the

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 440-443.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 441.

37. *Infallible? An Inquiry*, pp. 181-183.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 185.

39. *The Church*, p. 443.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 457.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 465.

priesthood of all believers.

The Priesthood of all Believers

One should, Kung argues, realize that the human priesthood and its mediating functions “have been fulfilled and finished by the unique, final, unrepeatable and hence unlimited sacrifice of the one continuing and eternal high priest.”⁴² For Kung, the “strange and logical consequences” of such fulfillment of human priesthood is the fact that all believers share in a universal priesthood.⁴³

The phrase, “the priesthood of all believers” is, at the same time, quite problematic for Kung for he both wishes to affirm its validity yet avoid the negative connotations which became associated with it during the Protestant reforms. There can be no doubt that Kung affirms universal priesthood as part of Catholic tradition. “The doctrine of the universal priesthood is part of the fundamental truths of Catholic ecclesiology.”⁴⁴ He elaborates further upon this fundamental truth by describing five dimensions of this universal priesthood⁴⁵: (a) direct access to God, (b) the offering of spiritual sacrifices, (c) the preaching of the Word, (d) the administering of baptism, the Lord’s Supper and forgiveness of sins, (e) mediating functions. Through the expression of these five dimensions Kung seeks to avoid the negative connotations of universal priesthood which, primarily in Protestant theology, sought to reject the idea of any priestly representation and mediation.⁴⁶

The Diaconal Structure of the Church

Multiplicity and pluralism of ministries under the aegis of service are the keys for Kung in his thought upon ecclesiastical offices. Both charismatic ministries and permanent ministries are evidenced in New Testament witnesses but both share in common the fact that they are *diakonoi* — ministries of service. Kung identifies this as the common denominator of ecclesiastical offices and he further elaborates upon this in a fourfold scheme⁴⁷: (a) both the charism-inspired ministry and the appointed ministry presuppose the original witness and the original commission of the apostles, (b) charismatic and appointed ministries alike presuppose faith in the Gospel and the receiving of baptism, (c) the ministry exercised by special commission is, in its own way, a charismatic ministry, (d) the special charismatic ministry originating in a special commission is subject, as much as the more general charismatic ministry, to the discernment of the community of believers as a whole.

While not disregarding or lightly dismissing the differences in ecclesiastical structure in the New Testament and throughout history, Kung’s emphasis on the diaconal structure of the Church is an effective unifying principle and it can serve as

42. *Ibid.*, p. 469.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 473.

44. *Structures of the Church*, p. 85.

45. *The Church*, pp. 476-488.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 537-538.

a guiding principle for the present and the future.

It is essential for any church order inspired by the New Testament to exhibit not a uniform, single-shaped ecclesiastical hierarchy (sacred dominion . . .) but a multiform, many-shaped ecclesiastical “diakonia” (“ministry” in the completely ordinary sense of “ministering to”): a “multiplicity of the Church in the multiplicity of disciples, witnesses, and ministers.” The position of the “pastors” or *Church leaders* — today, normally bishops and presbyters, in such a biblical-pluralistic view, is in no way impaired but rather fortified.⁴⁸

The Petrine Office

Of all of Kung’s ecclesiastical thought and writings, most attention has been paid to his views concerning the papal office. It becomes difficult to summarize his position in this regard because of the great deal of material published on and about his views, including his own book, *Infallible? An Inquiry*. Erring on the side of simplicity, several salient points shall be mentioned. The criterion of service, which is the unifying factor in the structure of ecclesiastical offices in general, is crucial for Kung in the evaluation of the Petrine office. “The idea of the pope as the servant of the Church is one that can be supported from Catholic tradition. The Church never exists for the pope, the pope always exists for the Church.”⁴⁹ However, the testimony of history is that papal power increased without a corresponding increase in papal service.⁵⁰ As a result the office that should have been a unifying factor in the diaconal structure of the Church has instead become, for quite some time, a divisive one. Kung would contend that the papacy does indeed have a genuine contribution to make to the Church but only if it returns to the biblically based criterion of service. Papal primacy, in other words, ought to be built upon primacy of service.

Together with the bishops, he (the model pope) would provide a new form of service to the ecclesiastical community and its unity; he would be able to stimulate the missionary work of the Church in the world and to continue his efforts for peace, disarmament, and the social betterment of peoples and races, with quite a new credibility. In the Christian oikumene and far beyond it, he could thus constantly make the voice of the Good Shepherd heard in his life and work. He would be inspiriter in the spirit of the gospel and a leader in the postconciliar renewal and Rome would be a place of encounter of dialogue and of honest and friendly co-operation . . . A Petrine ministry in the biblical sense can only be a *pastoral primacy*: a pastoral ministry to the whole Church.⁵¹

The “road back” to such a pastoral primacy for the Petrine office will necessarily involve the renunciation of power in other spheres. Such is Kung’s vision of the papal office, most succinctly expressed in his concluding chapter to *Infallible? An*

48. *Infallible? An Inquiry*, p. 227.

49. *The Church*, p. 576.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 590-601.

51. *Infallible? An Inquiry*, pp. 246-247.

Inquiry, entitled, "The Pope as He Might Be."⁵²

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF KUNG'S ECCLESIOLOGY

By way of conclusion several dominant characteristics in Hans Kung's ecclesiology ought to be identified. Throughout Kung's writings on the Church one is aware of Kung's heavy dependence upon the biblical witness. Kung himself expresses his indebtedness to the gifts of modern biblical exegesis. "Modern historical-critical method provides the theologian of today with a scholarly instrument for investigating the origins of the Church which an earlier generation of theologians did not possess."⁵³ This exegetical insight is most helpfully applied in his examination of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, the New Testament ecclesiastical structures, and the texts relating to the Petrine office.

It is equally obvious throughout his writings examined that Kung is critical in both a positive and negative sense from the perspective of Roman Catholic tradition. He speaks to and from his own tradition in an attempt to reform it, yet his criticism is not confined to just that particular tradition. This is to say Kung's ecclesiology is ecumenical in spirit which is also to say that Kung is a devoted ecumenist, seeking to overcome the unjustifiable divisions within Christianity. This is clearly the point of departure for the whole of *Structures of the Church*. It is also quite evident in his oft repeated lament that the papacy should be the force that unites Christianity, rather than the force that sharply divides it. With regard to his ecclesiological thought, Hans Kung might be best described as being one in a long line of Christians who out of response to the Gospel and in love for Church, actively seek to reform the Church of God.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 241-247.

53. *The Church*, p. 41.