

Review of Chapter 4 *The Church as Covenant* - REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY

Introduction

This is a critical review essay on Chapter 4 *The Church as Covenant* - *REFORMED ECCLESIOLOGY* from Kärkkäinen's, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives*¹.

It will examine Kärkkäinen's outline of the Reformed churches from the post-Lutheran period through to the modern church (as far as Barth's neo-orthodoxy is concerned). The essay will intersperse opinions and ideas from the reviewer, before summarising the overall perspective of the chapter's benefits and issues.

Chapter Structure

This chapter logically follows from an historic outline of *Lutheran Ecclesiology* previously². Presenting a summary of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli as the contemporary theologians in comparison to the doctrines of Martin Luther. It is still the mainstay of many modern Reformed churches. Concentrating more on Calvin, the distinguishing differences include church government (ruling and teaching elders), church discipline, and the relationship of church and state³.

Calvinism (which is Augustinian in most features) demarcates the church as *visible* (from a human perspective) and *invisible* (the elect, that only God fully recognises)⁴. Of course, Calvin acknowledges only God can judge the hearts of men, but allows for the church recognising the fruits of Spirit in a believer's life.

Kärkkäinen continues to summarise the lack of consensus of various scholars regarding Calvin's eucharistic theology⁵. There is no consolation in the fact that Calvin's works display a slight change in his thoughts as he matured. (Similar to his concepts on paedobaptism). But the consensus is definite; "*ALL* [reviewer's emphasis] good things come to us from their graceful source in God ... The climax of God's good gifts for Calvin is Jesus Christ." (Kärkkäinen, 2002, 53). For Calvin, the Word of God is the highest authority centred around Jesus Christ, as θεόπνευστος (God-breathed) by the Holy Spirit. (This doctrine is represented paramount by all the Reformed churches represented in the subordinate Confessions⁶.)

The chapter continues to examine the discrepancies (*tensions*) between the emerging

¹ Kärkkäinen, Veli-Metti (2002). *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives*. 50-58.

² Ibid. 39-49.

³ Ibid. 51.

⁴ Ibid. 52.

⁵ Ibid. 53.

⁶ *Belgic Confession*, Articles 2-7, 1972-1973; *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I:1-8, 2027-2029; in Beeke, Joel R. [Gen. Ed.] (2014). *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*.

reformed theologies. The author concentrates on Zwingli's earlier preference for congregational government and the Anabaptists endorsing an even more extreme local government.

Zwingli had differing views regarding personal faith in the local community constituting the church (but not including some Roman Catholics). He and Calvin also had a differing appreciation for the sacraments (baptism and Lord's supper), especially from Roman trans-substantiation and Lutheran co-substantiation.

As previously mentioned, Calvin had convictions of paedobaptism, based on the Old Testament covenant promise to children of believers (ie. formerly circumcision). This remains a minor contentious matter between modern Presbyterians (who endorse paedobaptism and credobaptism⁷) and Baptists (who exclusively endorse credobaptism⁸ by full-immersion).

It's important that Kärkkäinen concludes with Karl Barth's "Revisionary Reformed Ecclesiology". Barth is one of the foremost theologians of the 20th Century, if not all Christendom. The author demonstrates his expertise in the global position of many 'Reformed' churches that embrace neo-orthodoxy.

He presents the fact that Barth's theology emulates the Free church's teachings, with emphasis on pneumatology and Christology. Also, Kärkkäinen alludes that Barth denied the doctrine of "special revelation" in the traditional orthodox doctrine of the reformed church, promulgating an "event" revelation whereby the Bible "becomes the *Word of God*" in the Holy Spirit illuminating the hearer⁹. Barth is also said to accept that the local congregation is the "visible" church, and promoted congregational form of government. (These are untenable with most Reformed / Presbyterian churches from an Australian perspective¹⁰.)

Kärkkäinen continues to present Barth's negative criticism on Reformed mission and evangelism. Interesting to note, Barth was historically dealing with a church *damaged* by liberalism and post-modernism¹¹ (ironically of which he originally contributed, under Kant's philosophy and Schleiermacher's theology)¹². He was also encountering serious problems with Nazism and other political encumbrances of his period and location¹³.

Although the reviewer agrees with Barth's general opinion on this characteristic, it was not the case for the initial Reformed churches. Of course, many of the Reformers (clergy, lay persons, illiterate believers alike) were martyred for their conviction to teach and preach to the lost (particularly in their homelands)¹⁴. The Reformers¹⁵,

⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, XXVIII:6, in Beeke, Joel R. [Gen. Ed.] (2014). *The Reformation Heritage KJV Study Bible*, 2048

⁸ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, XXIX:2, 61.

⁹ Gore, Bruce W. [Bruce Gore]. (2019, Jan 24). *Philosophy and History of Christian Thought* [80. Karl Barth].

¹⁰ The reviewer is an elder in the Presbyterian Church of Queensland.

¹¹ Stott, John. (1999). *New Issues Facing Christians Today*. 50-51

¹² Douglas, J.D., Comfort, Philip W. [Eds.] (1992). *Who's Who in Christian History*. 64-66

¹³ Reeves, Michael. (2011). *On Giant's Shoulders - introducing great theologians from Luther to Barth*. 147-168.

¹⁴ Berry, W. Grinton [Ed.]. (2005). *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*.

Puritans¹⁶ and Covenanters (to mention a few examples) were extremely evangelistic, with the Lord using many Reformed folk in various historic revivals around the globe. Many reformed churches in persecuted countries (eg. Middle East, North Africa and Asia) remain extremely evangelistic, with the support of Western churches¹⁷.

In the Australian Reformed environment, the case of the union of the *Presbyterian* [PCA] with *Methodist* and *Congregationalist* to form the *Uniting Church of Australia* [UCA] provides a fascinating study of this chapter in “real-life”. The PCA was a conglomeration of liberalism and neo-orthodoxy [~ 66%] before union¹⁸. After the union in 1977, the continuist-PCA was more *Calvinistic*, however there has been a current increase towards *Barthian* theology in the past 20 years¹⁹.

Summary

Overall, Kärkkäinen wrote an excellent and balanced summary of the Reformed church in this chapter. It provided a good theological background for foundations of the Reformed faith through history. It doesn't mire the novice in excessive detail, and allows a continuity with the other chapters' historic ecclesiologies.

Chapter four superficially introduces Calvin and Zwingli, then elucidates the post-enlightenment direction of Barth, in the modern Reformed churches. The author subtly leads from Calvin (with the symbiotic relationship between the church and state) to Barth (who emphatically denies their compatibility). Calvin and Barth are both theological “giants”, and the author accepted a daunting task to summarise them. (Especially when there is so much debate, even among Christian scholars, about these men and their works).

This chapter is conspicuously missing the characteristic sub-ordinate standards. Although the creeds are common to most churches, the Confessions are endorsed as essentially second to Scripture in Reformed churches (“as read in the light of the declaratory statements”, of great value, but non-canonical)²⁰. The various Reformed creeds and confessions are still recited and studied in modern churches, although decreasingly (depending on their proclivity for Calvinism or Barthism).

The entire book is a comfortable read, this chapter included. Kärkkäinen is to be commended for this stepping stone onto the path of Christian ecclesiology studies.

¹⁵ Brown, William [Ed.]. (1989). *The Reformed Pastor by Richard Baxter*. [6th Ed]. 94.

¹⁶ Beeke, Joel R. (2010). *Puritan Evangelism - A Biblical Approach*. [2nd Ed.]. 63, 66, 67.

¹⁷ Eg. *Middle East Reformed Fellowship* <<https://merf.org/>>

¹⁸ Cooper, Paul C., Burke, David A. [Eds.] (2017). *Burning or Bushed - The Presbyterian Church of Australia 40 Years On*. 5-21.

¹⁹ Reviewer's personal research [unpubl.] - as an Elder in the *Presbyterian Church of Queensland*

²⁰ Cooper, Paul C., Burke, David A. [Eds.] (2017). *Burning or Bushed*. 10, 15, 18.

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Soli Deo gloria. AMEN.