

Andrew Stirling: “An Ecclesiology of Monism or Trinitarianism: Which way forward for the Church?”

In support of a recommendation that the United Church restructure its ministry into ‘one order’, the argument is made that because church and society are changing, the Church must restructure its ecclesiology and adapt to the changing times. In support of this proposition, the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ is cited as a foundation for these changes and is seen therefore as a continuance of the Reformation ideals. There are, however, two very important questions that this proposal must deal with.

Is the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ essentially a positive foundation for an ecclesial polity?

I would argue that it is not. Along with Tom Greggs¹, I suggest that essentially the idea of universal priesthood was a negative doctrine through which the Reformers responded to the extreme sacerdotalism of the medieval church. A problem arises when the only reason to resurrect this doctrine is in discerning the nature of our current ecclesiology. With Greggs, I believe the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ is essentially a theological matter in so far as it describes the nature of the church as a whole. The problem with restricting its use to governance is that it simply becomes a convenient phrase through which ecclesiology is defined, rather than starting from a biblical and theological doctrine of the church. It is used to address the exigencies of the current era without thought to its theological foundations.

This can lead to flawed conceptions of ministry. For example, in the New Testament there is only one person who is described as ‘priest’ and that is Jesus Christ. He is the ‘High Priest’ (Hebrews 5:1-10) in the non-Aaronic line of Melchizedek. It is Christ alone who is the mediator between God and humanity and only Jesus Christ can atone for the sins of the world. The Church (Christ’s body according to Paul – who never uses the phrase ‘priest’ to describe ministry) is a body made up of many parts, each with its own giftedness and function, with Christ as its head (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). However, the unity of these different parts is not constituted by sharing a common name, designation or order, but rather in a fidelity to the One Lord from whom the parts received their call. Furthermore, while Peter called believers a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:5) who make their lives a living sacrifice, they are only called ‘priests’ because they serve Jesus Christ and are willing to endure suffering and persecution for the sake of the reign of God. In this sense, ‘priesthood’ along with ‘holy nation’ and ‘chosen generation’, only applies to the whole church, which exists as Christ’s outreach to the world. Therefore, no argument from the New Testament can be made to suggest that the term ‘priest’ should be applied to any individual person or designated group. Rather, the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ is really a product of ecclesiastical battles of the past and is essentially only helpful in uniting the church to see its ministry as a whole, but not in defining orders of ministry.

If ministry reflects the nature of God, should there not be a place for diversity within a unified mission?

¹ Tom Greggs, *The Priesthood of No Believer: On the Priesthood of Christ and His Church*, International Journal of Systematic Theology, Volume 17, Number 4, October 2015

The recommendation to have only one order of ministry by flattening the structure to accommodate this view, reflects an erroneous notion of unity. It is predicated on a form of philosophical monism. The argument is made that because the church has one mission and the dictates of society (for mainly practical and financial reasons) requires one form of ministry to serve that singular mission, all forms of ministry must therefore lose their distinctive qualities and reflect this overarching 'oneness'. Does, however, this reasoning construct a form of ministry that reflects either the nature of the divine or the *missio dei*?

Current trends in doctrine point to a revival in Trinitarian understandings of God. God is understood as Trinity - a divine *perichoresis* where the three persons of the Trinity exist in a bond of love, yet where each maintains its own distinctiveness. Indeed, it is the very asymmetrical nature of that relationship which constitutes God's dynamism and power. The Triune God is social in nature and therefore reaches out to the world by drawing all creation into the inner relationship of the three persons.

If, therefore, the church is to reflect the Trinitarian mission of God, should it not also maintain and encourage the distinct nature and identify of its parts? Would the church not be stronger and more dynamic by encouraging distinct forms of ministries by preserving orders that reflect different (yet mutually supportive) forms of service? Indeed, one of the great strengths of the United Church is its emphasis on unity in diversity. Furthermore, the various forms of theological education that have supported these diverse orders have strength precisely because they recognize and seek to reinforce the multiplicity of abilities and needs within the church. I see no need to impose a structural monism to maintain the unity of the church, for as in the case with the Trinity, it is *agape* love that constitutes this important bond of unity.

Notwithstanding the evident need for a greater liquidity in church structures, a removal of distinctive orders in ministry would be a mistake. Clearly, the *oikoumene* to which the United Church belongs is comfortable in recognizing a great diversity of orders in ministry. As an ecumenical body who also wishes to be a uniting church, I believe the United Church should do likewise, and in so doing affirm its own Trinitarian foundation.

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