The Shape of an Eschatological Ecclesiology: 
*More Than Communion* by Scott MacDougall

ELLEN K. WONDRA*

*More Than Communion: Imagining an Eschatological Ecclesiology.*

Over the last fifty years or more, the paradigm of church as *koinonia* (communion, *communio*) has dominated ecclesiology. It is an approach with broad ecumenical appeal and has in actuality helped to advance ecumenical dialogues and efforts in theology and in practice at every level of the church. The model of church as communion highlights the importance of the eucharist as foundational to the church as such, and it takes believers’ actual experience of Holy Communion and applies it to all aspects of church life, from prayer and worship to mission and even church structures. Christians may not yet be able to share the eucharist with each other across all denominational lines. But we can envision doing so, and we can develop a variety of possibilities that will help us move from division to some kind of doctrinal, ethical, and structural interchurch convergence. Indeed, much of the current discussion in ecumenical circles and within worldwide churches is less of the churches coming together in “full visible unity” than of forming a “communion of communions.” It is helpful to be able to speak of “the real but imperfect communion [the churches] already share” in a context where the extent and severity of divisive issues tends to be the focus.

At the same time, *koinonia* ecclesiology is not without its problems. The notion of *koinonia* is itself broadly interpreted in reality, and its apparently infinite adaptability is in fact one of its drawbacks.

---

* Ellen K. Wondra is research professor emerita of theology and ethics at Bexley Seabury Seminary Federation and Editor Emerita of the *Anglican Theological Review*. She represents the Episcopal Church on the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.
Koinonia is often used as an abstraction, with not much attention paid to how it gets enacted and embodied—or at least, not until there is a crisis that points out that different groups in fact mean different, conflicting things by “communion.” Communion is a lot easier to talk about than to live into.

And there is a tendency to emphasize the communion of churches as a theological actuality and skip over the extent to which it is also eschatological in both theology and practice. This is the focal point of Scott MacDougall’s excellent book, More Than Communion. MacDougall identifies six significant problems with koinonia ecclesiology, and focuses on three of these: insufficient eschatology; unrealistic view of relationality; and separation from actual Christian practices. He addresses each of these in great depth and scope.

It is the first of these—eschatology—that is primary here. That is, koinonia ecclesiologies (and they are plural) tend to be ecclesiocentric in their eschatology. Eschatological fulfillment tends to take the form of the perfection and universality of the church, without adequate critique of the historical character of the churches, their theology, and their practices.

Second, this approach to ecclesiology has a fairly strong realized eschatology, with relatively little attention to the tension between the present “already” and the future “not yet.” Communion ecclesiologies tend to claim that the churches are already in communion in significant ways; what we need is more. In the midst of real church conflict and wrestling with complex doctrine, recognizing how much churches have in common actually generates some of the thaw needed to move out of the now decades-long “ecumenical winter.” For those devoted to the ongoing work of ecumenism, the hope inherent in communion ecclesiologies is vital.

At the same time, MacDougall notes, missing here is a firm critique of how and why the communion the churches share cannot be just more robustly strengthened. There are elements of each church that need to be thoroughly critiqued for their ongoing adherence to division. For churches to move into a communion that is more like even our current flawed vision, they will have to give things up as well as take things on. There will have to be not only repentance but also grief in order to move forward adequately even to the possibilities that sit squarely in front of us.

Third, communion ecclesiologies tend to be Johannine in their eschatology, using both Gospel and epistles along with the
More Than Communion by Scott MacDougall 113
duetero-Pauline epistles. Missing is the sharp distinction between the “already” and “not yet” of the authentic Pauline epistles and of the Synoptic Gospels. This is not just a matter of inadequate grounding in scripture, in MacDougall’s view; it also fuels at best over-optimism, and at worst out and out complacency. That is—the fourth point—it puts forth a restorationist eschatology, a valorization of some mythical pre-lapsarian state rather than of actual transformation beyond where the unfolding of history can take us.

MacDougall demonstrates these problems through close examination of the ecclesiologies of John Zizioulas and John Milbank. It is important to note that the communion ecclesiologies of other theologians and of various ecumenical groups show the same problems as these two exemplars (as MacDougall shows in the second chapter).

MacDougall argues that the difficulties with eschatology contribute to important problems in the ecclesiological understanding of relationality, and to the practice of communion within and among the churches. That is, the assertion that communion already exists among churches because communion is the nature of God in Godself helps to support claims that existing hierarchical structures and an inward focus on worship as itself mission are the way God wants the church to be, because that is the way God is. Mission gets lost. The value of true otherness gets lost. The importance of human freedom (particularly for those who do not have much of it) gets lost. And, quite importantly, in practice it is very hard to see, experience, and describe communion between churches that have been divided. What, for example, will change now that the ELCA and the Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Relations of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops have both recognized thirty-two points of significant agreement? Will they be able to enter into “eucharistic hospitality”? And of what sort? When? How do we get from here to there? Communion ecclesiologies generally do not address those matters.

MacDougall has some suggestions for giving eschatology the proper weight and scope in ecclesiology. Admirably, almost half of the book is given to proposing and discussing these explicitly.

As a result of remarkably wide and deep scholarly study, and of theological and ecclesiological reflection, MacDougall proposes an eschatological ecclesiology that will ground and inspire:

It will produce a church that is one in serving God and the world in love, holy in creating an opening for the sanctifying
grace of God’s promised future to flow into the present through worship and worldly Christian practice, *catholic* in understanding the entire cosmos to be God’s beloved creation and the object of our co-ministry with the Holy Spirit in the work of reconciliation, and *apostolic* in witnessing to the promise of the realization of the four-fold communion through our works, worship, and ways of individual and corporate living.¹

MacDougall further elaborates that “four-fold communion” refers to communion “between humanity and God, among human beings, within human persons, and between humanity and the rest of the world.”²

Theologically, this entails a recovery of the anticipatory disposition of eschatology into ecclesiology, and the de-centering of the church as the fulfillment of God’s saving work. Ultimately, it is the whole of God’s creation that is healed, reconciled, and fulfilled, not merely followers of Christ. In an eschatological ecclesiology, the church must be *in* but not *of* the world, while at the same time being *for* the world.

Practically, casting ecclesiology in eschatological terms means that church congregations and leadership structures need to be intentional and disciplined over time in engaging the practices of communion, reconciliation, and solidarity, not only within the church but well beyond it. And MacDougall indicates that this entails critical examination of church structures as well as local practices. Further, individual Christians need to integrate what they hope for in light of what God promises into their daily lives, including their work and home life, their friendships and family, and their emotional and spiritual lives. Practice goes a long way in anticipating what we long for God to bring into being.

There is the necessity of reciprocal critique and revisioning here, between theology and practice: “If theological concepts require embodiment in appropriate theological practices, theological practices likewise require tempering with appropriate theological concepts

¹ MacDougall, More Than Communion, 256.
² MacDougall, More Than Communion, 257.
if they are to achieve the purpose for which such practices have emerged: anticipation of the basileia [kingdom of God] in and for the world.”³

MacDougall knows that there is always a disjunction between the church that is and the church that will be in light of God’s promises. There is both discontinuity and continuity. What MacDougall lays out in More Than Communion is the shape of an ecclesiology “based in the missio Dei, the true source of ecclesial unity”:

Animated by an ecumenism of anticipated communion, the various churches would find themselves united in their context-specific attempts to proleptically and partially (and here that word is apt) instantiate the basileia in and for the world, humbled by the tensive provisionality of what it means to be living between the times (that no one expression of communal Christian discipleship will “get it right”), open to the inbreaking of the unpredictable future (emergences of basileia-shaped life in other ecclesial settings), willing to accept the risk of discipleship while maintaining trust in the other Christian communities that have done the same, even if differently, and all of this in the shared hope of all Christians in God’s promise to perfect the communion toward which the churches are committed to strive even while knowing and lamenting that, this side of the eschaton, they will always fall short of it.⁴

It is an ambitious project. And it is one that is desperately needed both within and between contemporary churches, locally and globally.

As someone who is deeply engaged with ecumenical and intra-communion ecclesiology, I find More Than Communion almost unbearably exciting and suggestive. Anyone involved in ecclesiology will benefit from reading it. Not the least of its virtues is its bringing together the communion ecclesiologies of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican traditions with the more critical and future-oriented

---

³ MacDougall, More Than Communion, 219.
⁴ MacDougall, More Than Communion, 262.
approaches of Moltmann and Metz and the various liberation and context-specific theologies emerging from sites where sustainability and justice are key themes. The churches’ approval and adaptation of the United Nations’ Millennial Development Goals make it clear just how tightly woven together these two thematic clusters must be. MacDougall has given us a rich and stimulating text whose basic project many should embrace.