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## REVIEW

# COMMUNION ECCLESIOLOGY IN A RACIALLY POLARIZED SOUTH AFRICA.

K.T. Resane, (Bloemfontein:SUN MeDIA, 2017). 285 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-920382-96-4, R365.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The author attempts to contribute to the field of systematic theological ecclesiology by focusing on what he calls “communion ecclesiology”. One could also call this a pastoral approach with a strong focus on relationality, which is a central theme in the book. In recent discourses, especially since Vatican II, communion ecclesiology took centre stage. The author also attempts to anchor his understanding of his communion ecclesiology in the African and South African context.

Since Vatican II, the intellectual work of a number of scholars has developed an interest in concepts such as “communion” and “relationality”. The latter refers to a deep connectedness that we can also call the interwovenness of life. This interest is related to a renewed focus on the Trinity, which is essentially relational with the emphasis on reciprocity. Therefore, if relationality belongs to the essence of God and it is a key to human cognitions and structures, it holds important consequences for theology. If the church is a

new community where the members are relationally linked to one another, it means that theologians also have to think differently about anthropology and ecclesiology.

The impact of the latter on us as South Africans is huge and disruptive because of the history of apartheid, as this disruption has deeply influenced our theological and ontological insights. We are still sitting today with separate churches that function according to race and this indicates the failure of the history of the churches in our country to be an image of the triune God – a life in communion.

## 2. OVERVIEW

The author starts **Chapter 1** with a biblical understanding of communion and spends time on discussing the topic in the Old and the New Testament as well as on community around kerugma. In **Chapter 2** he engages with the historical roots of communion ecclesiology and converse on the early church as communion, secular philosophies as well as religious threats to communion. He then examines communion ecclesiology in the age of the Reformation as well as in the modern era, including Vatican II. In **Chapter 3** he describes traditional and contemporary definitions of communion ecclesiology and spends time on Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and African Initiated views on communion. In **Chapter 4** the author explains his understanding of African ubuntu and communion ecclesiology by looking at the conceptual understanding of ubuntu and then on how ubuntu builds the communion. **Chapter 5** discusses the South African Reformed theology's journey towards communion, which he aptly describes as "building the laager". For the heading of **Chapter 6** the author uses the Setswana proverb *Matlo go sa mabapai*, translated as "an injury to one is an injury to all". In this chapter he gives an ecumenical picture of English Christianity, starting off with the Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches and then moving on to the African Independent Churches. The heading for **Chapter 7** is "the forgotten golden nuggets" in which the author looks at the Coloured people, the Muslims and the Indians in South Africa. **Chapter 8** explores the pastoral application of communion ecclesiology in which he identifies six functions of communion ecclesiology, namely identity, dialogue, integration, policy, management and reconciliation and ending the chapter with a sub-section on communion ecclesiology in the world. In **Chapter 9**, the last chapter, he defines our eschatological journey in terms of "now" by reflecting on the sociological and theological factors involved in communion ecclesiology. He ends off pointing to the *Missio Dei* as the "task of communion ecclesiology".

### 3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

I greatly appreciate this comprehensive work of the author on a variety of concepts with the golden thread of communion and relationality that runs throughout his argument. I especially enjoyed the parts that dealt with the African Independent Churches, as it is a field that has not received much attention in the mainstream of academic theology in South Africa. However, in Chapter 4 on ubuntu, I got the impression that the author over identifies with the subject and believes that it is the final solution to all of the church's problems. I understand where he comes from and why this concept was so important to him, but found it strange that he did not pay attention to the critique that had already been made against the notion. Several scholars have already examined the "dark sides" of the concept.

Unfortunately, there are factual errors that he makes when writing about the Reformed Church (p.119), for example, "The Reformed Church originated in the Orange Free State Republic", while the Reformed Church originated in Burgersdorp and later moved to Potchefstroom. On p.176 he writes:

It could have been a huge inspiration if the NGK was involved ecumenically, when in 2010, there was a historic union of two reformed bodies of churches - The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council.

The truth is, the DRC was present and played a major role in the historical unification.

When the author uses the metaphor "to build the laager" in Chapter 5, it is true that Johan Heyns played a major role in the communion ecclesiology of the Dutch Reformed Church, but he was certainly not the only voice. Here one thinks about the influence of someone like Willie Jonker who made a huge contribution from the beginning to an ecumenical ecclesiology. It would have given more weight to his argument if he could bring more voices into the conversation, as there are also differences between Heyns and Jonker.

The chapter that I found the strangest is Chapter 7 titled "The forgotten golden nuggets" in which the author describes the role of the so-called "Coloured and Indian churches". I am not sure that these essentialist categories will be well received by our brothers and sisters as an indication of their respective identities. Firstly, because the Coloured population of our country does not all consider themselves Coloureds, with at least some identifying themselves as Khoi and San and secondly, because the danger of a racially based argument emerges here.

Finally, although this study is part of systematic theological ecclesiology and I therefore understand the author's presuppositions, I do not agree with his definition of practical theology, namely "that practical theology is the implementation of systematic theology, especially the branch known as ecclesiology". This is a very old and obsolete view of practical theology, as practical theology is standing on its own legs and is not merely an application of systematic theology.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

On the whole, I enjoyed the book as the author is in conversation with many discourses that have to do with the church's well-being in a racially polarized South Africa. I think it is a book that should be read by ministers and theologians, because it can help us on the long road of healing that lies ahead for all the churches in our country.