

*Who is the Church? An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century.* By Cheryl Peterson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013. 153 pp.

In this reworking of her Marquette dissertation, Peterson provides a thoughtful and engaging study in contemporary ecclesiology along with her own constructive proposal for a narrative ecclesiology that starts with the Spirit. The premise is that “ecclesiologies emerge to address concrete problems faced by the church” (13). In the context of post-Christendom, with the immediate challenge being decline, the dominant question has been “What shall we do to turn this situation around?” and the prevailing answers have been strategic, giving rise to competing brand-name ecclesiologies such as “church growth,” “emerging church,” and “purpose-driven church.” All these movements, Peterson thinks, ask the wrong question because they assume the primary issue is *strategic* (2-4). She disagrees, seeing the primary issue as *identity*. The question that a contemporary ecclesiology must answer is “Who is the Church?” The answer lies “in the activity of the Holy Spirit” (6).

Chapter one opens with a penetrating look into ecclesiology in America. Peterson asserts that “mainline churches have been culturally co-opted by a very particular form of ‘Christendom,’ the concept of a

'Christian America,' which has operated as a sort of narrative that serves the 'modern project' in America" (3). Several themes shape this narrative: the voluntary principle, the strategy of revivalism, the idea of progress, and the doctrine of Christian perfection. Above all, the goal of the church in America has been to be a vital part of the fulfillment of America's destiny. Peterson notes Lutheranism has tended to remain an outsider to this vision of church; nevertheless any attempt to shape a particularly American ecclesiology must recognize the power of this narrative and address it.

Chapters two through four provide a cordial, but critical conversation with three dominant paradigms in Lutheran and Reformed ecclesiology: The Church as "Word-Event," as "Communion," and as "Missional." Both the Word-Event and the Communion paradigms developed under the assumption of Christendom and, therefore, ask different questions than Peterson. The Word-Event paradigm emerged in the sixteenth-century Reformation. It asks "where is the [true] church?" and answers it by reference to the two classic marks of the church: where the gospel is preached rightly and that sacraments administered accordingly. It stresses the gathering of the church. The communion paradigm emerged in the ecumenical context of the twentieth century. It asks about the unity of the church and answers it by reference to the church's participation in the divine *perichoresis* (dance) of the trinity. It stresses the fellowship of the church. The missional paradigm developed with post-Christendom in mind. It asks "Why the church?" and answers by reference to witnessing to the mission of God in the world. It stresses the sending of the church. (In her own proposal, Peterson sees these paradigms as complementary.) She lays bare in impressive fashion the diversity and disagreement between key figures within and between each paradigm. Especially noteworthy is the debate within the missional paradigm between "classical (or special)" and the "ecumenical (or general)" forms. To my mind the distinction of law and gospel could add to the debate, but no one seems to be yet thinking in those terms.

Chapters five and six set forth Peterson's proposal for a post-Christendom ecclesiology by using "a narrative method that starts with the Spirit" to allow the Book of Acts and the ecumenical creeds to

narrate their own account of a Spirit-breathed church. She cites two reasons for using this method: 1) “it solves the problem of using ‘identity’ as a category” and 2) it “resonates with the sensibilities of the postmodern, post-Christendom context,” which understands “reality relationally, through stories and narrative, rather than through propositionally stated, universal truth claims” (100). She starts her ecclesiology with the Spirit: “Although the church’s own story is rooted in the story of Israel and the ministry of Jesus, I contend that the church receives its *particular identity and purpose* through the Holy Spirit, which in the Acts narrative is promised by Jesus after his resurrection and received at Pentecost” (105). From Acts, Peterson identifies three roles for the Spirit in relation to the church: 1) Holy Spirit as “mission director,” 2) Holy Spirit as “verifying cause” for incorporation into God’s people, and 3) Holy Spirit as “supervisor and sustainer” of Christian *koinonia* (109–10). Above all, the church’s mission is rooted not in a “fear of survival” but in the promise of the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. From her exploration of the creeds, she vigorously defends Luther’s Spirit-breathed ecclesiology, engages in an interesting discussion of “a pneumatology of the cross” (128–30), and shows how the four classic marks of the church in the Nicene Creed are fitting “attributes of the Spirit-breathed church’s narrative and missional identity for a post-Christendom context” (131).

The book ends with a modest Epilogue intended to give some sense of how her ecclesiology might be applied to actual church practice. Peterson calls it “a vision of revival,” not because she is a proponent of revivalism, but because revival (bringing back to life from death) not survival (living by staving off death) is what Spirit-breathed identity is all about. She concludes: 1) What needs to die is our idea of church as a voluntary association. 2) What needs doing is the use of narrative to think anew about “who the church is” through Scripture study, preaching and liturgy. 3) What needs learning is how to share the story with others, for we are all witnesses of the healing, reigning, reconciling work of God. 4) What needs to inform our life together is a lively practice of receiving and offering the forgiveness of sins.

“Who is the Church?” is a question well worth considering. I commend this book for all willing to do so.

LAKELAND COLLEGE  
SHEBOYGAN, WISCONSIN

Steven C. Kuhl

