

# What is the Church for?

## – a Review of Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen on Ecclesiological Traditions

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### Abstract

Near the beginning of his book *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen poses the question “What is the church for?” In this essay, I review Part One (“Ecclesiological Traditions”) through the lens of that question. The essay summarises the ecclesiologies of Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Pentecostal/Charismatic and Ecumenical traditions, before suggesting the equal importance of considering the view of the church from the outside.

### Framing the question

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In Part One of this book, Kärkkäinen summarises the views of the church held by seven traditions. His implicit emphasis is on how each tradition sees the nature or essence of the church. In contrast to that concern over what the church *is*, Kärkkäinen also comments “One may ask, ‘What is the church for?’” (Kärkkäinen 2002, p. 21) and although that comment is quickly passed over, it seems to me to be a helpful way to frame a comparison of the views he presents.

The question of what the church is *for* can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand what is the purpose of the church, its *raison d’être*, and on the other hand what beliefs and practice does the church promote as distinct from what it is *against*. It is the former that I take to be Kärkkäinen’s intention and the primary meaning I investigate in this essay.

### Eastern Orthodox

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According to Kärkkäinen, the Eastern Orthodox tradition views the church through Trinitarian eyes, but with a greater emphasis on the Holy Spirit than does the Western church. The church is the image<sup>1</sup> of the Trinity and reflects the same unity in diversity as the Trinity. The church derives its unity from the unity of God, but also exists in manifold local expressions.

The pneumatological emphasis in Orthodox ecclesiology is not based on the belief that the Spirit adds something to the church but rather that the Spirit is central to the essence of the church, that “The Spirit makes the church *be*.” (Zizioulas 2004, p. 132)

In answer to the question “What is the church for?”, an Eastern Orthodox perspective might be that the church is an assembly of people for the purpose of sharing in the sacrament of Eucharist. In the Orthodox view, that sacramental purpose necessitates the office of a Bishop.

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<sup>1</sup> Or *icon*, implying that the *form* of the church cannot be separated from the *content* of the life of the church. The church is not just a reflection of God, but the reality of Christ in us. (Alexander Schemmann, in Stone 2012, p. 212)

## Roman Catholic

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In the Roman Catholic tradition, Kärkkäinen sees an oscillation between the Christ-centric and Spirit-centric foundations for ecclesiology, particularly around the time of the First Vatican Council (1869-70). The dominant view around 1825 was that the church is a continuation of the incarnation of Christ<sup>2</sup>, but in recent history more importance has been given to the Spirit.

Whereas Vatican I promoted a hierarchical view of the church, Vatican II (1962-65) emphasised the role of the people of God. In terms of the church's purpose, this later approach sees the church sacramentally: being the fellowship of a pilgrim people acts as a sign of our communion with God and of the unity among all people.

One of the key voices during Vatican II, Karl Rahner, encouraged the church to allow the Holy Spirit freedom to work. He suggested that the charismatic presence in individuals should be acknowledged early rather than leaving that until the Canonisation process after their death.

Given the importance of the church as a sign of unity, the Catholic church accepts that ecumenism is core to the life and work of the church. Nevertheless, there are continued claims that unity depends on the primacy of the Pope and that the Roman Catholic church already displays the unity to which it hopes others will return.

## Lutheran

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Kärkkäinen characterises the core of Lutheran ecclesiology with a definition from the Augsburg Confession (1530): “the gathering of all believers, in which the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accord with the gospel” (Kärkkäinen 2002, p. 40). This quote highlights three important features.

First, the church is “the gathering of all believers” who are simultaneously saints and sinners. Consequently, the church too is both just and sinful. Luther focussed on what was actual and visible in the world<sup>3</sup> and preferred to use the descriptions “assembly” or “congregation” rather than “church”. Lutherans emphasise the priesthood of all believers, and hence acknowledge that all members can come before God to pray for each other, can preach and declare absolution. This is nevertheless limited in practice by a distinction between priesthood as it may be expressed “between brother and brother” and the ordained ministry of the Word within a congregation.

Second, the church only exists where “the gospel is purely preached”. Although the church and individual believers are dependent on the Holy Spirit, the work of the Spirit can only occur when the Word is preached.

Third, the church only exists where “the holy sacraments”, namely Baptism and Eucharist, are faithfully administered.

In one sense the two marks of the church – the Word and Sacrament – demarcate what counts as church, but in another sense they are its purpose. The church exists *in order to* preach the Word

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<sup>2</sup> On the surface, this can only make sense analogically. For it to be literally the case, we would have to accept that Christ was not only God and human but also an organisation (or at least a collection of humans). (Compare with Buckley, Bauerschmidt, and Pomplun 2008, p. 329.)

<sup>3</sup> Though not mentioned by Kärkkäinen, an ambiguity arises from the use of the word “all” in this phrase from the Augsburg Confession. The use of “all” suggests a universality that transcends time and place. If the church is viewed as actual and visible, in what context did Luther imagine “all” believers would be gathered?

and administer the Sacraments. The church provides a place where Christians can exercise God-like love; to be Christs to each other; and to be the bread and drink for those who need them.

## Reformed

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In this section, Kärkkäinen compares the views of two early leaders of the Reformation – John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli – and the more recent reformulations of Karl Barth, concluding that core to Reformed ecclesiology is an understanding of covenant.

Like Luther, Calvin emphasised the visible church, though both acknowledged that there is also an eternal, invisible aspect. Calvin was more concerned than Luther to specify the appropriate form of church structure, for instance distinguishing between ministers and elders. Zwingli tended towards a view that final ecclesiastical authority rests with the local community of believers, though confusingly thought that such authority was exercisable by civil government.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Barth re-interpreted and extended Reformed ecclesiology with his emphasis on the church as the body of Christ. He located the authority of the church within a model of congregational governance rather than the episcopal (i.e. requiring a bishop) or presbyterian (i.e. councils of presbyters/elders) models favoured by Reformed practice. He proposed that the main task of the church is to be a witnessing community.

According to Zwingli, the purpose of the church is “to glorify God in the faith and life of His people” (Dubbs 1902, p. 8), and that is reflected in at least some current Reformed churches (e.g. Lampley 2014).

## Free Church

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Kärkkäinen rightly notes that there are various ecclesiologies within what may be called the Free Church tradition (Kärkkäinen 2002, p. 60). Rather than follow his approach of trying to outline what is common to them all, I would like to focus on Anabaptism contributions<sup>4</sup>. I use “contributions” in plural because even within Anabaptism there is a diversity of opinion about ecclesiology. Regardless of that diversity, however, Anabaptist writers generally consider ecclesiology to be central to what distinguishes Anabaptism from other Christian traditions, both practically and theologically (Estep 1975, p. 180; Gish 1979; Bender and Dyck 1989).

A core component of Anabaptist ecclesiology is the authority given to the visible, local, worshipping community, a natural consequence of which is that different communities will develop their own understandings and praxis.

The priesthood of all believers plays a larger role in Anabaptist thinking than in the traditions described earlier in this essay. This operates in conjunction with a belief that membership of the church is voluntary, in contrast to the enforced membership of state-aligned churches at the time of the Reformation. These emphases gave rise to the later appellations “Believers’ church” and “Free church”<sup>5</sup>. The voluntary nature of church membership is the foundation of an

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<sup>4</sup> That choice reflects some personal history but also because it seems to me that Kärkkäinen under-values the contributions of that tradition. For instance, he credits Barth with ideas about the voluntary nature of church membership, opposition to infant baptism and opposition to any union between church and state, when those were some of the fundamental stances that distinguished the original Anabaptists from other Reformers 500 years earlier.

<sup>5</sup> The former seems to have been coined by Max Weber (Bender and Dyck 1989b). Although I cannot trace the origin of “Free church”, its primary intention is to indicate that the church is (or at least should be) free from state control.

implementation of Jesus' instructions regarding conflict within the church (Matthew 18) that is more explicit and nuanced than most other Christian traditions, leading to what some Anabaptist groups call "the ban".

With regard to the church's purpose, Anabaptism holds that the church is not simply the bearer of God's message to the world, nor the result of that message, but an essential part of the message (Gish 1979, p. 24, drawing on John Howard Yoder).

## Pentecostal/Charismatic

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Although Kärkkäinen himself comes from a Pentecostal background<sup>6</sup>, he acknowledges that there is no well-established ecclesiology within the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement. This is probably because the movement places higher importance on the lived experience of the Spirit than on abstract analysis.

It is possible, however, to infer an understanding of church from its practice. Fellowship (*koinonia*), for instance, is a primary feature, which arises from an understanding that each member contributes to the body through the gifts of the Spirit. Likewise, the emphasis on charismatic gifts leads to an understanding of church that is far less institutional – though of course the Catholic Charismatic movement shows that the two need not be in conflict.

I was surprised that Kärkkäinen did not mention the so-called "third wave" or neo-Charismatic denominations (Burgess and Maas 2010), which seem to me to draw (largely unconsciously) on Barth's ecclesiology. For example, the Vineyard movement's catch-phrase "Everyone gets to play" (Wimber 2009) can be seen as a paraphrase of Barth's views on the giftedness of all members of the church for ministry and the necessity of coupling the priesthood of all believers with the Pauline understanding of the gifts of the Spirit.

## Ecumenical

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In the final chapter of this section, Kärkkäinen affirms that "If the church is the church of Christ, and since there is only one Christ, then unity belongs to the nature of the church" (p. 79). From an ecumenical frame of reference, the unity of the church is given by God and hence independent of anything its members do. This essential unity does not deny or threaten the valuable diversity that occurs as the church finds the most appropriate structures and liturgies for the varied contexts in which it operates.

The traditions outlined previously find it difficult to agree on what such unity should look like or how we could move towards it. Nevertheless, there is a broad acknowledgment that we should attempt to live up to the ideal of unity and numerous bi-partisan and multi-church initiatives seek that end.

Unity is not only seen as central to the church's essence but also as important to its purpose. Not all would agree with Wolfgang Pannenberg that the unity of the church points towards the unity of all humanity. But there is a long-held belief going back to at least the third century that the unity of the church is derived from and reflects the unity of the Trinity (Cyprian 1986). These abstract

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<sup>6</sup> "An ordained minister of the Full Gospel Churches of Finland" according to <http://humbleapproach.templeton.org/Pneumatology/participants/karkk.html>

notions underpin a missional intent: that the church would present, to all humanity, a unified witness to its one Lord.

## Conclusion: the view from outside

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The traditions considered here clearly express varied and sometimes conflicting views on the essence of the church and answer the question “What is the church for?” quite differently. For some, the focus is *upward* (the glory of God, or the sacramental communion with God), for some *inward* (a pilgrim community or fellowship of God’s people), and for others *outward* (faithful preaching and witness as part of God’s message to the world).

Throughout this book, Kärkkäinen’s attention is directed towards a view of the church from the inside rather than a view from outside. The lack of acknowledgement of the church as a socio-political organisation seems to me a significant omission. An important component of the church’s function in the world is its provision of a context for shared meaning, for satisfying the human yearning to belong, and for overseeing rites of passage. Those functions are central to what the church looks like from the outside, to people who do not share Christian metaphysical assumptions. Furthermore, the influence of institutional politics and bureaucracy on the church’s self-identity is significant.

Without needing to become defensive or apologetic, I believe it is important for us to encounter ourselves through the eyes of the Other. What can we learn, for instance, from those who see the church as aggressive, oppressive, escapist, irrational, overly patriarchal, judgmental, guilt-driven and exclusive? It is just as important for us to own *those* characteristics of the church as the unified, grace-filled, apostolic, Christ-instituted, Spirit-constituted, gospel-preaching, sacrament-administering, covenantal, believing fellowship, witnessing community to which we aspire.

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