

2015

WHO IS THE CHURCH?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century. By Cheryl M. Peterson

Theodore Hopkins

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, hopkinst@csl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hopkins, Theodore (2015) "WHO IS THE CHURCH?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century. By Cheryl M. Peterson," *Concordia Journal*: Vol. 41: No. 2, Article 22.

Available at: <http://scholar.csl.edu/cj/vol41/iss2/22>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Journal by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

WHO IS THE CHURCH?: An Ecclesiology for the Twenty-First Century. By Cheryl M. Peterson. Fortress Press, 2013. 176 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

Cheryl Peterson, professor of systematic theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, initially developed her ecclesiology that starts with the Spirit in her dissertation, and this book is a revision of and a development from that initial work.¹ Peterson's ecclesiology is part of the growing research in the church after Christendom, and is one of the best comprehensive accounts of the church for post-Christendom. Peterson appropriates insights from communion ecclesiology, the *missio Dei* movement, and the Lutheran tradition, particularly Luther's Large Catechism, in order to offer an account of the church's identity for this time after Christendom. As such, Peterson's book offers much for the Lutheran tradition and for the church during this awkward time of disestablishment and is worthy of attention.

The major ecclesiological problem, for Peterson, is that the narrative of Christian America has developed an anthropocentric ecclesiology based upon the voluntary principle.² The voluntary principle means two things: the church is a "voluntary association of believers" and such voluntary associations work together to promote the American project of a virtuous republic (24). This problem is deeply theological—the voluntary principle makes the church primarily about the *volunteers* instead of about God—and it is also deeply practical. Christendom is over, which means church can no longer be a "chaplain" to the nation. For theo-

logical and practical reasons, the church must think of its mission apart from the social vision of America (30–31). For Peterson, Christendom in America has produced not only a problem of the church's purpose, but more importantly Christendom has fostered a crisis of ecclesial identity. Who is the church if it no longer has any role in the American project? Peterson answers, "We are the church because of what *God* has decided and is doing for our redemption—and because of what *God* desires for the sake of *God's* mission in the world" (32, emphasis original). The church is a missionary church because it finds its identity and mission in God.

As Peterson defines the contours of a missional ecclesiology, she engages with three paradigms of ecclesiology: "word-event," communion, and *missio Dei* ecclesiology (93–95). The "word-event" ecclesiology, represented primarily by Gerhard Forde, reduces the church to the sermon, but is right to stress God's address to his church from the outside, which creates the church through the word of forgiveness.³ Communion ecclesiology, represented especially by Robert Jenson, asks primarily about the unity of the church rather than its identity and purpose.⁴ Nonetheless, communion ecclesiology rightly highlights that the church not only declares forgiveness, but it also makes Christ present to believers to share in the communion of the Triune God. This improves upon the word-event ecclesiology because of the concept of *koinonia* as the visible communion of the church. Both the word-event ecclesiology and communion ecclesiology, however, do not take "into account the post-Christendom context in the same way

as the missional paradigm” (94). Hence, the *missio Dei* model provides a starting point for Peterson by emphasizing the economic Trinity and the mission of God in the world. In the missional paradigm, the church is identified in terms of God’s work in his creation, and it is given a purpose to embody God’s mission (94).

Although Peterson is concerned about the church’s identity and purpose—categories that are sociological—she grounds the church on theology rather than sociology. In fact, she begins her ecclesiology with “the *ad extra* movement of God in the *missio Dei*” (99). From this perspective, Peterson argues that a narrative which “starts with the Spirit” identifies the church in a missional way, incorporating the important elements of the word-event and communion models. Peterson “contends 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).⁵ Hence, Peterson’s narrative ecclesiology “starts with the Spirit,” by looking at the book of Acts. The church is “Spirit-breathed,” given its “new identity and mission to forgive sins (Jn 20:22–23) and to be witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1:8)” (106). In Pentecost, the Spirit gathers the people of God—now experienced universally throughout the nations and not just in Israel—and calls God’s people to be witnesses to Christ. Thus, the story of the church in Acts is a story of the Holy Spirit pushing the church into mission as witnesses to Christ, guiding the disciples to cross ethnic, religious, and social barriers in proclaiming the salvation of God, and drawing believers deeply into *koino-*

nia with God and each other. The same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead gives new life to the church, creating, sustaining, and calling God’s church into mission (107–115).

For Peterson, this pneumatological foundation of the church is fully Trinitarian since “the work of the Spirit is centered in Christ.” The story of the Spirit is “the story of God’s mission in the world,” which finds its center in “the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ” (123). The Holy Spirit should not be known as a general Spirit of creation, but the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. This is an essential point in Peterson’s ecclesiology since it establishes the fully Trinitarian understanding of God’s story with its focal point in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

As Peterson looks at the Lutheran tradition, she finds an ally in Martin Luther’s Large Catechism. Following Reformation scholar Gottfried Krodel, Peterson argues that Luther’s interpretation of the Creed tells the narrative of God and places the individual within God’s story (123–24). In the third article, Peterson sees Luther telling a story of the Holy Spirit bringing people to faith at the same time they are drawn into church community. Faith and forgiveness of sins both happen within the church community even as the church hears this word from God (126). Moreover, Peterson understands Luther to extend the mission of the church to the world in the Large Catechism: the Holy Spirit speaks “*through* the holy community to extend God’s blessings to the world” (127, emphasis original).

Based on this, Peterson sees Luther developing a “story arc” with the Holy

Spirit and the people of God as two major characters, moving from the resurrection of Jesus Christ to Pentecost to the second coming of Christ. In the middle of the story, Luther understands the church's identity as given by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit empowers the church for its purpose through the gospel. Thus, Peterson states, "the Holy Spirit gives the church its narrative identity as a Spirit-breathed people, in whom the Spirit breathes new life, life that is experienced not only existentially through the gift of faith but also through the lived-out reality of forgiveness of sins and transformed relationships." Furthermore, this community embodies the new life of the Spirit, by which it witnesses to the world (128).

As I stated at the outset, Peterson's ecclesiology is the best account of the church from the Lutheran tradition for post-Christendom that I have read thus far. She consistently understands the church in theological language and in a biblical framework without neglecting the life of the visible, concrete community. She centers the church on the Triune God, particularly the *ad extra* movement of the Spirit, which envisions the church as a concrete, visible community, called to live out Christ's forgiveness in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. As such, Peterson's perspective is extremely valuable for this time after Christendom. Her understanding of the church's mission as part of God's mission through Christ and the Spirit is a necessary biblical perspective, especially during this time when the church has lost its purpose and identity.⁶ Peterson rightly understands the church in terms of its visibility and concreteness, doing so without lapsing into idealistic

talk about "practices."⁷ Although I would quibble with Peterson on the pneumatological starting point instead of a christological one, Peterson's ecclesiology is on the mark and deserves to be read widely. I highly recommend this book.

Theodore J. Hopkins
Saint Louis, Missouri

Endnotes

¹ See also Cheryl M. Peterson, "The Question of the Church in North American Lutheranism: Toward an Ecclesiology of the Third Article," (PhD diss., Marquette University, 2004).

² In her dissertation, Peterson identifies this as an issue but primarily targets the problem of Lutheran ecclesiology: Lutheran ecclesiology does not understand the church as a missional church. See Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 1–3.

³ For analysis of Forde, see Peterson, *Who is the Church?* 45–48 and 52–54; Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 139–60.

⁴ For analysis of Jenson, see Peterson, *Who is the Church?* 66–70 and 73–76; Peterson, "The Question of the Church," 161–99.

⁵ In Peterson's dissertation, this argument was merely formal; Peterson never told a story which identified the church. She merely asserted that the church exists in the narrative arc of the mission of God, starting with the Holy Spirit. Although I remain concerned that Peterson's story is too formal without a substantial Christology, this monograph has improved upon her dissertation in an important way.

⁶ For an account of how the church's mission has turned into partisan politics, which I see as a major problem, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: University Press, 2010).

⁷ For a critique of practices, see Nicholas M. Healy, "Practices and the New Ecclesiology: Misplaced Concreteness?" *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003): 287–308.