

Leo J. Koffeman, *In Order to Serve: An Ecumenical Introduction to Church Polity*

Zürich/Münster: LIT Verlag, 2014 (*Church Polity and Ecumenism Global Perspectives* 1, ed. by Leo J. Koffeman, Allan J. Janssen and Johannes Smit), ISBN 978-3-643-90318-1, 274 pages

Leo Koffeman's book *In Order to Serve* is not simply an English translation of his earlier *Het goed recht van de kerk: Een theologische inleiding op het kerkrecht* (The Good Right of the Church: A Theological Introduction to Church Polity), although one might want to discuss the fact whether *In Order to Serve* is a revision of *Het goed recht van de kerk* as he included the international context, and the input of and discussions with colleagues abroad, especially from Indonesia and South-Africa, or whether it is a new book. *Het goed recht van de kerk* contained sixteen chapters, and so does *In Order to Serve*. However, there are differences. I would like to demonstrate this with an overview, which I think might be helpful. The chapters of *Het goed recht van de kerk* are in Dutch. On the right hand side, the reader can find the English equivalent in the chapters of *In order to serve*, except for part IV:

Het goed recht van de kerk

In Order to Serve

(The Good Right of the Church)

1. Introduction

Part I Kerkrecht als theologische discipline

Church Polity as a Theological Discipline

1. Kerkrecht en ecclesiologie
2. Oecumenisch kerkrecht
3. Gestalten van kerk
4. Kerkstructuren

2. Church Polity and Ecclesiology
3. Ecumenical Church Polity
4. Basic Manifestations of the Church
5. Church Structures
6. Church Polity and 'Church Law'

Part II Grond en wezen van de Kerk

Foundation and Nature of the Church

5. Kerkrecht als recht
6. Liturgisch kerkrecht
7. De gemeente
8. Het ambt

7. Liturgical Church Polity
8. The Congregation
9. Ordained Ministry

Part III Gestalte van de una sancta

Manifestations of the *Una Sancta*

9. Kwaliteitskenmerken
10. Inclusiviteit

10. Quality Markers
11. Inclusivity

11. Authenticiteit
12. Conciliariteit
13. Integriteit

12. Authenticity
13. Conciliarity
14. Integrity

Part IV Kerkrecht in context

Church Polity in Context

14. De kerk in het Nederlands recht
(The church in Dutch law)
15. Kerk en samenleving
(Church and society)
16. Mensenrechten in de kerk
(Human rights in the church)

15. Church and State
16. Contextual Church Polity

This overview demonstrates that the author maintained the content and structure of his previous book: Church Polity as a Theological Discipline; Foundation and Nature of the Church; Manifestations of the *Una Sancta*; Church Polity in Context. From a Reformed perspective the terminology is church polity or church order, not church law. However, despite the fact that he maintained the same number of chapters he changed them somewhat. I am glad to see that *In Order to serve* at least includes a proper introduction. The book finishes with chapter 16, with the lines: ‘But I have presented them [my strong convictions, LvdB] in order to enhance ecclesial, ecumenical and theological exchange on church polity. In order to serve.’ It would have been helpful for the author to have provided his readers with an epilogue, in order to give an answer to the question of whether ‘a deeper ecumenical understanding of the nature and mission of the church fosters a renewal of church polity’.

Chapter 2 concerns Church Polity and Ecclesiology. Koffeman writes about the relationships between the Bible and church polity and between confession and church polity. This chapter includes theological reflections on the church, the invisible and visible aspects of the church, with these reflections – the ecclesiology – being ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. The invisible nature of the church is the communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*). However, he also adds the attributes of this church: ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’ – referring to the Nicene Creed. With ecclesiology ‘from above’ is meant the normative ecclesiological views on the nature and mission of the church. This type of ecclesiology cannot ignore and has to be seen in conjunction with ecclesiology ‘from below’, e.g. the empirical church, the day-to-day church life. Koffeman finishes this chapter with the place of church polity within the theological encyclopedia. Church polity is a theological (sub)discipline within the theological encyclopedia. It connects ecclesiological views with juridical instruments and methods, and connects ethics, philosophy, world religions, humanities, and social science.

Koffeman agrees with the German jurist Hans A. Dombois (1907-1997) who stated that nowadays church polity needs to be ecumenical. This is what chapter 3

(Ecumenical Church Polity) is about. Church polity has too long been considered in too narrow a way, as if church polity is (only) denominational law.

A short chapter in the book, chapter 4, is on the basic manifestations of the church. However, that does not imply that this chapter has little to say. We can sense Koffeman's heart beating when he writes on this topic. Again, Koffeman follows Dombois, whose 'objective is to make Protestant theology more aware of what lies behind the usual distinctions in church polity systems, and to relate them to basic issues in terms of law, theology and liturgy' (p. 40). Therefore Dombois distinguishes between four basic manifestations of the church which should ideally be realized together. However the empirical church shows that this is impossible. The four manifestations are: 1. universal church, 2. local church, 3. particular church, and 4. church as 'order', for example as in Taizé, the Iona Community, and the Evangelische Michaelsbruderschaft.

The next step is from 'church' to 'church structures'. In chapter 5 Koffeman deals with the three major systems: the episcopal, the congregationalist, and the presbyterial-synodical systems. I wonder why he is not consistent by using a more precise terminology: the episcopal-hierarchic, and the congregationalist-independent systems. Anyhow, these systems are typically ideal, necessarily one-sided, and, in ecumenical relationships, debatable.

Chapter 6 is on Church Polity and 'Church Law'. Koffeman moves on from church structures to church law, and on to law. As with other theological disciplines, church polity is strongly connected to legal science and jurisprudence. 'Church law' is debated particularly in the empirical church and even at academic level. This is very much the case in the Protestant church and theological faculties. Terminology such as 'church order', or 'church polity' is preferable, not so much 'church law', because law would contradict the foundation and mission of the church – quod non. Koffeman ends this chapter with this statement: 'Church law ... is there in order to serve.' (p. 80).

Church polity is not only connected to law, but also rooted in liturgy. Therefore church polity is also liturgical church polity. In the second part of his book Koffeman returns to intrinsic church polity issues. In this way he wants to detect how ecclesiological points of view influence church polity. He echoes the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Dombois who consider liturgy as highly important for church polity, the church in general, and the Christian faith. Koffeman states: 'it is my strong conviction that liturgy continues to be central to the life of the Christian community ... In its liturgical acts, in words and rituals we recognize the essence of the *ecclesia Jesu Christi*: its core is its being founded on the Word of God.' (p. 88).

Liturgy concerns the heart of the church, for example the local church, the congregation. Chapter 8 concerns The Congregation. With this aspect we are in the heart of church polity and church structures. Of course, liturgy is rooted in the congregation. Nonetheless, the autonomy of the congregation is debated in both normative and empirical ecclesiology. In the presbyterial-synodical church structure the relationship between the congregation and the supra-local

church is ‘a matter of lengthy discussions, if not serious conflicts’ (p. 107). He states: ‘The communion of both congregation and church is a matter of “sharing”: people share what God gives in his grace. Thus, both “*koinonia*” (christian fellowship) and “*ekklesia*” (the church) transcend the local community. From a theological perspective it is therefore hardly possible to speak of the autonomy of a local congregation. Both New Testament terms imply a strong sense of relationship between specific local groups in a worldwide communion, in which mutual accountability is pivotal.’ (p. 108).

Personal relationships, shared preferences or interests are not the basis of church life. It is the proclamation of the Gospel that constitutes the church. Therefore, Koffeman includes chapter 9 on Ordained Ministry: ‘The dialogue of ordained ministry and congregation in liturgy corresponds with God’s dialogue with this world.’ (p. 111). He regards ordained ministry just like church polity from an ecumenical perspective. His distinction on functional and sacramental views on ordained ministry is helpful. The first regards ministry as just one of the many functions or offices in the church. The second view sees ordained ministry as distinctly different from other functions in the church. This type of ministry comes ‘from outside’ or ‘from above’, and not ‘from inside’ or ‘from below’.

In the third part – Manifestations of the *Una Sancta* – Koffeman concentrates on the quality markers of the church. In chapter 10 – Quality Markers – he connects the four Nicene attributes – catholicity, apostolicity, unity, and holiness – to inclusivity, authenticity, conciliarity, and integrity. Inclusivity refers to the goal of the church; authenticity is connected to the source of the church; conciliarity to relations within the church; and integrity refers to the boundaries of the church. He elaborates on these quality markers in the following chapters. Each quality marker is connected to one of the chapters. So, chapter 11 is on Inclusivity. In a nutshell this chapter states that the key condition of inclusivity is on being church-in-context. Therefore the author includes examples other than in Dutch contexts in order to demonstrate that the balance of freedom and accountability is at stake.

The second quality marker is on Authenticity, chapter 12. It includes paragraphs on confessions and confessing church, apostolic ministry, and doctrinal discipline. Chapter 13 is on Conciliarity. It refers to the classical notion of *concilium*, i.e. council. It concerns unity, and diversity. This does not imply that diversity contradicts unity, or that is ‘a concession to unity, but rather a necessary aspect in the implementation of unity.’ (p. 192). The author deals with Integrity in chapter 14. Integrity is closely connected to holiness. Church members and office-bearers are expected to meet the highest standards of ethical behavior. Despite these high(est) standards, the people of the church are imperfect. Church members and office-bearers sometimes fail in their actions and decisions. With this acknowledgment in mind the church as a moral community needs to strive for holiness.

From part II (the foundation and the nature of the church) and part III (the quality markers of the church as a manifestation of the *una sancta*) it becomes clear that church polity needs to be shaped in a continuing dialogue with culture(s). In short: 'church polity is contextual by definition.' (p. 233). Therefore, part IV is on Church Polity in Context. In comparison with Koffeman's previous boek *Het goed recht van de kerk* this part is the most revised. In the previous book part IV consisted of chapter 14. De kerk in het Nederlands recht (The Church in Dutch Civil Law); 15. Kerk en samenleving (Church and Society); and 16. Mensenrechten in de kerk (Human Rights in the Church). In the new book this part consists of two chapters, 15. Church and State; and 16. Contextual Church Polity. Chapter 15 includes sections on Religious Freedom; Separation of Church and State; A Dutch Case Study; Theological Observations; and Other Contexts. As a theological discipline church polity 'includes the analysis, evaluation and development of church-state relationships'. (p. 237). Indeed, Koffeman is right when he states that the pairing of the words 'church' and 'state' easily causes misunderstanding. It would be better to substitute it by something like 'religion' and 'rule of law' in the 'broad variety of legal arrangements in this area worldwide'. (p. 238).

Chapter 16 is divided into sections including Contextuality Dilemmas; Universality?; and Human Rights in the Church. Contextuality is not something new or modern. It is also not an appendix to church polity, but 'it is part and parcel of any theological discussion on the church and its life.' (p. 253). However, contextuality is not a magic wand, the solution for everything.

At the end of his career Leo Koffeman revised his book *Het goed recht van de kerk*. This revised book is the first in a series: *Church Polity and Ecumenism Global Perspectives*. He added three other volumes to this series. Definitely, towards his retirement the author left behind a valuable church polity heritage. Despite the author's strong convictions concerning ecclesiology and church polity, it is always striking to discover his spirituality. He is aware of these convictions. Koffeman's writings, and perhaps even his strong convictions, express his love for the church. This publication also reveals his love for church polity. Nonetheless, it still puzzles me whether the author is writing as an expert in (reformed) church polity, in ecclesiology, or in ecumenism? The subtitle makes it clear that this book is an ecumenical introduction to church polity, whereas his previous book was a theological introduction to church polity. That makes one consider the focus of this book. Is it ecumenism, ecclesiology, or (contextual) church polity? The author provides an answer on the back cover: it is 'a truly ecumenical and inter-cultural approach of the theological discipline of church polity, without neglecting its juridical character'. Although it is an attempt, it promises a lot, and sometimes too much. For example, chapter 16 could have contained more about the other contexts (pages 248-252). It is mainly on church-state-relationships. However, strong his short sentences on page 249 concerning the most pressing theological questions of the recognition

of pluralism in society are, he could have elaborated on this. In chapter 2 – Church Polity and Ecclesiology – ecclesiology is dominant. At the end of the chapter the reader finds more about the position of church polity in the theological encyclopedia, as if church polity were the servant of ecclesiology. Of course, chapter 6 – Church Polity and ‘Church Law’ – reveals more on this topic, but still relatively speaking it is marginal. This chapter seems to be an elaborated version of the previous chapter 5. Including Indonesia and South Africa raises the question as to why Koffeman did not include the North American, the Australian, and New Zealand contexts because of the presence of the Dutch reformed ecclesial church (polity) heritage in those parts of the world.

In Order to Serve is an interesting book for students of theology; those who want to specialize in (ecumenical) contextual church polity; pastors who want to encounter a new approach to church polity, jurists who want to learn more from the theological discourse about church, ecclesiology, ecumenism, and church polity; and others who take an interest in this field of theology. They will find in this book that it is more than just a boring topic, a neglected aspect of church and church polity, and also that it is more than just about church order issues. The strength of this book, and of the work of the author in general, is that he provides a theological, ecclesiological, ecumenical, contextual, and maybe even a spiritual approach. Although Leo Koffeman has now retired I hope that he keeps on providing us with such fascinating publications and new material, in order to serve.

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