



Review of "Ecumenics: The Science of the Church Universal", by John A MacKay

1965

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*Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 59 (November): 60-62.

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This book gathers together much of the teaching for which John A. Mackay will be remembered by that very wide circle of men and women whom he has influenced decisively towards commitment to the Church's mission, and by the historian who tells the story of the ecumenical movement in the first half of the twentieth century. It is important as a statement of the basic themes of the ecumenical movement conceived (as it should be conceived) in missionary terms, and - perhaps even more - as the confession of faith of a great and beloved teacher.

The first part of the volume defines the origins, relations, and content of "the science of ecumenics." Of this science Dr. Mackay gives the following definition: "Ecumenics studies the Christian Churches within the context of God's purpose declared in Holy Scripture, and the human situation as it is today, with a view to the development of a Christian strategy worthy of the mandate of Jesus Christ to bring all nations to his allegiance, and receptive to the infinite resources made available by God to Christ's followers through the Holy Spirit." It is especially valuable to have in this section Dr. Mackay's autobiographical account of his own "rediscovery of the Church" and of the part he played in the formulation of the great slogan of Oxford 1937 - "Let the Church be the Church." Coming at the present time when we are in the midst of a deep reaction against this thought, when it is generally thought reprehensible if the Church is anything other than the world, Dr. Mackay's reflections on this point are of special interest. He had lived through a mood of despair about the Church, but had come to "a new sense of the Church as a dynamic missionary community," and it is this vision of the Church which controls the present book.

Following this historical section, and a section dealing with the relation of ecumenics to kindred subjects, we have an important chapter on "The Subject Matter of Ecumenics : The Church Universal." Here some of the most perplexing problems begin to appear. The chapter is divided into two sections: "The Church as an Empirical Fact" and "The Church as a Spiritual Reality." If

one begins with this dichotomy, the problem is always to know how to relate the two. The statement that the latter is "beyond and beneath" the former does not help very much. Without attempting to pass judgment on its various visible forms, Dr. Mackay is content to insist that the Church is essentially a community, and that the one criterion by which it is to be tested is that it should be, or "should aspire to be," a missionary community in Christ." As compared with this one essential, questions of visible form, liturgy, and order are secondary.

Part II deals with "The Church in the Purpose of God." Fundamental to Dr. Mackay's exposition of this theme is the conviction that God cares for people individually. One must express gratitude for the passionate insistence with which he speaks again and again of the individual, interior aspects of Christian discipleship, of the "hidden life of the soul," of the experience of the great men and women of all Christian confessions who have tasted and known the love of God in their

personal lives. The absence of this note is a terrible impoverishment of much current ecumenical thinking and talking. I cannot help wishing that there could be a clarification of the relation of this - so fundamental - element in Dr. Mackay's thought with what he says about the Church. One can agree that the Church is not an end in itself, and yet be uncomfortable with the purely functional account of the Church which some passages in the present volume suggest. God does not love men as a means to an end; he loves them! This surely means that the debate as to whether the Church is a means or an end is barren. The Church is neither: it is the first-fruit of God's redeeming action, and is therefore the place where God's love is known as a reality, a reality which impels us to share it.

This discussion bears upon Dr. Mackay's central theme: "The Church conceived as a missionary Community." After discussing some of the biblical images of the Church - the new Israel, the flock, the temple, the body, the bride - he comes finally to that which he describes as "the climactic designation of the Church" as "the Fellowship of the Road." This is the image which he selects as being the fundamental one for the understanding of the Church. The Church is a pilgrim people, and "only as a mobile, dynamic community, a fellowship on the march in every land and every culture, can the Christian Church fulfill its destiny and achieve its God-given mission." The central, indeed the burning question which has been raised by the discussion on "missionary structures for the congregation," is the question how a congregation can at the same time be the pilgrim people, and also the temple, the bride, the flock. One is bound to ask whether the New Testament permits us to take this one image as the absolutely de-terminative one. I think that an important contribution to this question has been made by a book which Dr. Mackay does not include in the very full bibliography which he supplies - the study entitled *Pentecost and Mission* by Harry Boer. In contrast to Dr. Mackay, Boer argues that the decisive factor in the missionary expansion of the early Church was not the so-called "Great Commission" of Matt. 28. He shows that this played no important role in the earliest period. What was essential was simply the gift of a new life, a life which - as it were - flowed out spontaneously to others. Mission was not so much a command as a gift.

In Part III Dr. Mackay describes "The Functions of the Church Universal" under four heads - worship, prophecy, evangelism, and unity. Each of these chapters is rich in material drawn from Dr. Mackay's life-long service in the Church's world mission. The difficulty, of course, is that the field is too large to permit a thorough discussion of the many points which are touched. The student of ecumenics will have to take, for example, Dr. Mackay's discussion of worship in the several communions as a starting point for the study of what scholars of those communions themselves have written to interpret their practice of worship. The twenty lines into which the

Roman Catholic doctrine of the Church is compressed cannot do justice to the new movements of thought in that Church - movements to which Dr. Mackay elsewhere makes appreciative reference. In his cordial account of the Church of South India he expresses the hope that the Lambeth Conference will one day do what it already did in 1958. The extended critique of the famous "Blake-Pike" proposals for unity might be held to be somewhat out of proportion to the scale of the discussion as a whole. But this reviewer finds himself moved to admiration by the ringing courage of the writer's declarations on some of the most urgent issues of our time - especially in the chapter entitled "The Church's Prophetic Function."

Part IV deals with "The Relations of the Church Universal." Here again the problem is one of scale. Five pages do not give room to say anything very substantial on the burning question of the relation of the Gospel to other faiths. In his discussion of secularism and "neo-secularism," Dr. Mackay gives no ground to those who would "substitute obeisance to secular pluralism for subjection to Christian absolutes," to those who propound the view "that, inasmuch as the 'world has already been reconciled to God, commitment to God as a ground for acceptance by him and of reconciliation to him, has no meaning." Above all, he will have none of the "cult of the uncommitted." Discipleship is a matter of passionate commitment, rooted in wonder and gratitude at the love of God in Jesus Christ. Out of this passionate commitment arises both his urgent sense of the duty of evangelism, and his downright condemnation of those - including the General Board of the National Council of Churches - who have, in his judgment, failed to speak the necessary word to the Government of the United States on the subject of relations with Christians in Cuba and China.

Reflection on the book as a whole prompts one question which this reviewer asks with diffidence, because he is not himself a teacher of Theology. It is the question of the status of "The Science of Ecumenics" as a separate theological discipline. The very fact that Dr. Mackay's book has to cover so vast a canvas, and has therefore - inevitably - to deal so slightly with so many deep and difficult

issues, prompts the question whether this is indeed a separate subject in the theological curriculum. Is the truth not rather this : that the whole theological curriculum has to be re-conceived in the kind of terms which Dr. Mackay sets for his own study - in terms, that is to say, of the whole Church conceived as a missionary community? I believe that this question echoes Dr. Mackay's own convictions, and that perhaps the true fruit of his work might be precisely that a text-book on "Ecumenics" became unnecessary because the entire course of theological study was directed "to the development of a Christian strategy worthy of the mandate of Jesus Christ to bring all men to his allegiance."

But for this reviewer the final word must be one of gratitude and admiration for this passionate, prophetic and triumphant testimony to Jesus Christ. Dr. Mackay has held a unique place in the world mission of the Church during the past forty years as evangelist, prophet, statesman, theologian, and fearless spokesman for his Lord. Above all this book is testimony to Jesus Christ. An Indian friend of mine gave to one of his books the title *One Who Won My Heart*. Jesus Christ won the heart of John Mackay, and out of that conquest has come a lifetime of witness to his glory. For all that this book distills of that witness, let God be thanked.

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