

## Miroslav Volf on Church and Trinity

### A Review of Volf's *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

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[NOTE: This review article is to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Asbury Theological Journal*. Since that publication has been delayed, I have posted it temporarily to my website.]

Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. Trans. Doug Scott. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998. xii, 314 pp., paperback.

“The church’s fellowship is always in transit between the historical minimum and the eschatological maximum of the correspondence to the love in which the trinitarian persons live” (p. 207). This is a key idea in Miroslav Volf’s rather dense book on church and Trinity. His intention, he says, is “to make a contribution to the trinitarian reshaping of Free Church ecclesiology” (197).

*After Our Likeness* may be described (reflecting the author’s personal background and theological formation) as a charismatic trinitarian theology in the Free Church tradition. This is a monumental work in systematic ecclesiology, for several reasons. Because it brings three great ecclesial traditions into dialogue—Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Free Church—it makes an important ecumenical contribution. It is refreshing to see the likes of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, John Zizioulas, John Meyendorff, and Vladimir Lossky brought together with such Free Church theologians as Gordon Fee, Robert Banks, Gilbert Bilezikian, and especially John Smyth (with plenty of Moltmann and Pannenberg thrown in). This has never been done before.

Volf, formerly professor of systematic theology at Fuller Theology Seminary and now at Yale Divinity School, places his Free Church perspective in dialogue with Roman Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiologies through an analysis of the writings of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, his principal dialogue partners. *After Our Likeness* is the inaugural book in Eerdmans’ *Sacra Doctrina* series. It is a translation of the original 1996 German edition, though the publication data at the front of the book does not make this clear.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I consists of two long chapters: “Ratzinger: Communion and the Whole,” and “Zizioulas: Communion, One, and Many.” In the second, somewhat longer part Volf elaborates his own ecclesiology in five chapters: “The Ecclesiality of the Church,” “Faith, Person, and Church,” “Trinity and Church,” “Structures of the Church,” and “The Catholicity of the Church.” Part II could in fact stand alone as Volf’s own ecclesiology, though all along the way he cross-references to Ratzinger and Zizioulas. (In classroom use, a professor might consider assigning Part II only, after giving a summary of Part I.)

To grasp the central thrust of the book, it helps to understand what the book is *not*. It is not a biblical exposition, though Volf does in the latter part make strategic use of the New Testament, particularly Paul's writings, in establishing the charismatic nature of the church. The book is not written for a popular audience, nor does it make many practical applications, though implications for church practice abound. Rather surprisingly, Volf hardly references Karl Barth, even though Barth's fundamental ecclesiology parallels Volf's at a number of key points.

Positively, this book is an important corrective to traditional ecclesiology, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant (including popular Evangelical). Over the centuries most ecclesiology has largely ignored or misunderstood the biblical nature of the church, grounding it more in tradition than in Scripture and the trinitarian nature of God. *After Our Likeness* is a persuasive theological justification of the trinitarian and charismatic nature of the church; a significant defense of biblical ecclesiology.

Volf is relentless in ferreting out contradictions in the ecclesiologies of Ratzinger and Zizioulas. Here the discussion has to do primarily with the relationship between the one and the many in the church (with attendant issues of authority, structure, and office). Volf effectively uses theological reflection on the Trinity (following especially Moltmann and Pannenberg) to point out the difficulties and inconsistencies in classical Orthodox and Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

Volf notes that despite general acceptance today that "ecclesial communion should correspond to trinitarian communion," yet surprisingly "no one has carefully examined just where such correspondences are to be found" or "where ecclesial communion reaches the limits of its capacity for such analogy." The result, he says, is that trinitarian reflections on the church

often say nothing more than the platitude that unity cannot exist without multiplicity nor multiplicity without unity, or they demand of human beings in the church the (allegedly) completely selfless love of God. The former is so vague that no one cares to dispute it, and the latter so divine that no one can live it. We have as yet no detailed examination of the correspondence between Trinity and church. . . . My goal [is] to sketch out the trinitarian foundation of a nonindividualistic Protestant ecclesiology within the framework of a critical discussion with Ratzinger and Zizioulas (191).

Volf begins by positing "faith as a simultaneous incorporation into both trinitarian and ecclesial communion." Here is "the initial cornerstone of a trinitarian understanding of the church, since only by already understanding the initiation process itself in a trinitarian fashion, and only by understanding the church as more than just a fellowship based on will can one arrive at the notion that the fellowship of Christians should reflect the trinitarian unity of God." Volf maintains that "those assembled in the name of Christ, even if they number only three, can be an *eikwn* ('image') of the Trinity" (197). Though "this thesis may seem radical, it is not new," Volf maintains. He quotes Tertullian, and of course Matthew 18:20 is the underlying biblical foundation. In fact Matthew 18:20 functions as a key ecclesiological text for Volf (as it did for Barth), together with John 17:21, Galatians 2:20, and 1 Corinthians 14:26, among others.

Volf is aware of the limits of analogy when basing ecclesiology on trinitarian categories. In particular, one must be alert to “the difference between the historical and the eschatological being of Christians.” He writes insightfully,

For a *sojourning* church, only a dynamic understanding of its correspondence to the Trinity is meaningful. If the church remains at a statically understood minimum of correspondence to the Trinity, it misses possibilities God has given it along with its being; if by contrast it reaches for a statically understood maximum, it risks missing its historical reality, and certainly if it claims to realize this maximum, its self-understanding turns into ideology. . . . The ecclesologically relevant question is how the church is to correspond to the Trinity *within history* (199f; emphasis Volf’s).

The second half of the book explores this question. Volf’s sixth chapter, “Structures of the Church,” is particularly important because here the practical implications of the author’s proposals become evident. Volf discusses the charismatic nature of the church by reflecting on the relationship between charisma and Trinity, drawing out lessons for ministry, ordination, and institutional forms.

Volf fully exposes the contradiction inherent in any hierarchical understanding of the Trinity (and hence of the church). The Trinity is “a community of perfect love between persons who share all the divine attributes”; thus any “notion of hierarchy and subordination is inconceivable.” Ratzinger and Zizioulas are both wrong: “The structure of trinitarian relations is characterized neither by a pyramidal dominance of the one (so Ratzinger) nor by a hierarchical bipolarity between the one and the many (so Zizioulas), but rather by a polycentric and symmetrical reciprocity of the many” (217). This, then, is central to Volf’s understanding of the church as image the Trinity: The church is a polycentric community of symmetrical reciprocity. Volf therefore advocates a “polycentric participative model of the church” as the only theologically coherent and biblically sound way of understanding the church in light of the reality of the Trinity.

This reasoning leads then to Volf’s central argument: “The symmetrical reciprocity of the relations of the trinitarian persons finds its correspondence in the image of the church in which *all* members serve one another with their specific gifts of the Spirit in imitation of the Lord and through the power of the Father. Like the divine persons, they all stand in a relation of mutual giving and receiving” (219; emphasis Volf’s). Here Volf’s trinitarian charismatic understanding of the church is clear.

Volf discusses at length the question of ecclesial structure and institution, based on this trinitarian-charismatic model. Trinitarian logic must be carried through to the level of structure: “The essential sociality of salvation implies the essential institutionality of the church. The question is not *whether* the church is an institution, but rather *what kind* of institution it is” (235; emphasis Volf’s). But Volf is careful to define what he means by “institution.” Institutions, he says helpfully, are “stable structures of social interaction.” In this sense, one can note a correspondence between Trinity and church. “The institutionality of the church can be conceived in correspondence to the Trinity only because the Trinity is in a certain sense an ‘institution,’” though “only analogously.” For this reason, the church’s structures and institutions “should . . . correspond to the Trinity as well. That they are able to do this derives from the character of the charismata that structure the church” (235). Or, as he

says later, “Trinitarian relations can serve as a model for the institutions of the church because the triune God is present in the church through the Holy Spirit, shaping the church in the image of the Trinity” (239).

Given this understanding of institution and the fact of the charismata, Volf can say,

The members of the church do not stand over against the church as an institution; rather, their own actions and relations *are* the institution [sic] church. Although the institutional church is not their “product,” but rather is a “product” of the Spirit, the church does not stand over against them as a kind of objectified, alien entity, but rather is the manner in which they relate and behave toward one another (241; emphasis Volf’s).

Thus in the broadest sense, the church of course is an institution. Volf adds new insights here, pointing out that the very “structural” dimensions of the Trinity have implications for structuring the church. Yet the nature of the Trinity and of the freedom of the Spirit mean that charismatic relations and charismatic ministry cannot be formalized into church law, which would over-objectivity and restrict the ministry of the Spirit through persons and the charismata. Volf argues that “any legal formalization of spiritual activity would result in a false liberation of people”; “church law can provide religious certainty only by tethering religious life” (242). Volf means by this (at least in part) that charisma cannot be hardened into ecclesiastical office or other formalized structures that limit and purportedly guarantee the effective operation of the Spirit.

Volf is here working especially with 1 Corinthians 12 and 14. He writes, “Exercising charismata is essentially *an open ecclesial process*. It cannot be the purpose of legal regulations [i.e., canon law and formalized structures] to restrict this process, but rather to protect its openness” (243; emphasis Volf’s). This has clear implications for all church structure. Only structure which “protects the open ecclesial interaction” of all believers and gifts can “do justice to the church itself and be commensurate with the fact that the pluriform ecclesial ministries actually derive from the sovereign Holy Spirit present both in individuals and in the congregation as a whole as the firstfruits of the eschatological reign of peace” (243).

So far, so good. But here Volf introduces a problem which he doesn’t resolve. This has to do with his understanding of “office” and “laity.” He writes, “The church lives through the participation of its members, that is, the laity and the office holders, and is constituted through them by the Holy Spirit” (222). But why this categorization, this distinction between “laity” and “office holders”? Volf has laid no adequate basis for it, and the drift of his discussion of charismata would argue against it. Surprisingly, Volf never gives a biblical or theological definition of “laity.” In his discussion of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, he uses “laity” in the traditional bipolar clergy/laity sense. Volf criticizes the clergy/laity “bipolarity” in Zizioulas (116); one would have thought therefore that he would directly confront this unbiblical (and theologically unsustainable) bipolarity later. But he doesn’t. He says forcefully, “The church is not a monocentric-bipolar community, however articulated, but rather fundamentally a *polycentric community*” (224; emphasis Volf’s). But in fact Volf never really overcomes the clergy/laity bipolarity. This seems inconsistent with his “polycentric participative model” of the church.

Remarkably, Volf begins his treatment of ordination by saying, “In the preceding discussion, I have simply presupposed ‘office’ and ‘ordination.’” He notes that he is here “following the long Protestant and Free Church tradition which, apart from a few exceptions such as the Society of Friends or the Plymouth Brethren, has not questioned the institution of office as such.” He is following in particular John Smyth who, Volf notes, was “by no means hostile to ordained office,” being in fact deeply “indebted to the Reformed tradition, which held the institution of office in high esteem.”

Volf acknowledges that there is really no biblical basis here, so he attempts “to ground the institution of office and ordination *theologically*” (245; emphasis Volf’s). Volf, however, merely assumes what is to be proved. He asserts, with no biblical support, “‘Offices’ are a particular type of charismata” (246). There is “no difference in principle between officeholders and other members”; the distinction “does not divide the church into two groups.” But of course it does. Volf says “all members of the church, both officeholders and ‘laypersons,’ are fundamentally equal.” The argument fails, however, because Volf has made them unequal by inserting the more restricted category of “office,” or what he calls (with no biblical support) “charismata of office,” thus by implication limiting the meaning of “laity.” This is like saying: Men have authority over women, but of course in principle they’re equal.

Volf affirms that “office can be based on no other [authority than] . . . the authority of Christ,” and “emphatically cannot be hierarchical” (246, footnote). Precisely. So where is this authority specified or given? This is a mere theological assertion; Volf does not show biblically or even logically how office could be based on Christ’s authority, and his theological argument begins by assuming what needs to be proved: That there is such a thing as “charismata of office.”

Volf supports his assertion of office with purely pragmatic or functional arguments. He admits that “office really does not belong to the *esse* of the church”; a congregation with “no official officeholders can be a church in the full sense.” But officeholders are necessary pragmatically (or sociologically). “In this limited sense, (ordained and nonordained) offices are a necessary part of ecclesial life” (248). If Volf were merely saying that every church needs and will have leadership, fine. The New Testament doctrines of the charismata, universal priesthood, and Christlike servanthood provide for that. But Volf is asserting much more when he associates “office” with “charisma.” This confuses the issue since there is in fact, as Volf admits, no biblical doctrine of “office.” Volf reifies “office” in a way that is not warranted by the New Testament and not necessary theologically.

Volf thus comes down on the side of tradition over Scripture here. At this point he is closer to Ratzinger and Zizioulas than to Paul or other New Testament writers. In fact, he fails to carry through the logic of the trinitarian and charismatic models he has been working with. The drift of his logic would have been to say: There is no biblical (or necessary theological) distinction between “office” and “laity”—first of all because “laity” means *all* the people of God, including *all* the charismata without exception, and secondly because the New Testament simply does not address the question of office.

What is lacking here is definitions of “laity,” “office,” and “charismata of office.” Since Volf is so careful to define everything else, it is rather surprising that he merely assumes and does not define these crucial categories. As nearly as I can discern, by “charismata of office”

he means essentially the equipping charismata of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher (Eph. 4:11). But he gives no justification for his assumed distinction between gift (or gifted person) and office. (Theologically, one could posit here a sort of grid of possible options, ranging from a hard-and-fast total identification or merging of office and charisma, on the one side [classical Roman Catholic ecclesiology] to a total rejection of office or recognized particular leadership on the other [something like Plymouth Brethren ecclesiology]. But a number of in-between options could be posited, and evaluated biblically.)

Volf ends his book with a fine discussion of the catholicity of the church. He notes that although the Reformed tradition posits catholicity as a quality of the *invisible* church, it is a mere “ecclesiological platitude to say that the invisible church is catholic.” The decisive question is how catholicity can be ascribed to “concrete, visible churches” (270; emphasis Volf’s).

Volf’s answer is that catholicity must be understood eschatologically, as “an anticipation of the still outstanding gathering of the whole people of God, albeit an anticipation in which communal eschatological salvation is experienced concretely.” He believes that “the catholicity of the concrete local church” cannot coherently be understood “as a realization of the existing universal church” but only as its anticipation. “The catholicity of the local church is a historical anticipation of the eschatological catholicity of the people of God in the totality of God’s new creation” (272).

A local church is catholic in this anticipatory sense because it now partakes of the fullness of God’s salvation, including what Volf calls “the catholicity of charismata.” In the Free Church perspective, Volf argues, “each congregation contains *all* ministries within itself necessary to mediate salvation” and “the totality of its members is the bearer of these ministries. Here catholicity means *the fullness of spiritual gifts allotted to the local church* (273; emphasis Volf’s). A true local church is catholic, in other words, because it partakes of the fullness of grace for its own life and witness and thus anticipates the eschatological fullness of God’s plan in the new creation.

Is this then a catholicity that has no practical relevance beyond the local church? In other words, is this merely another form of a platitudinous invisible (because totally future) catholicity? Volf’s reasoning would seem to lead in this direction. However he insists, “A church cannot reflect the eschatological catholicity of the entire people of God and at the same time isolate itself from other churches” (275). He therefore posits three “identifying marks of catholicity” (though it is not clear how these derive from his preceding argument): (1) openness to all other churches, (2) loyalty to the apostolic tradition, and (3) universal openness to all Christians, irrespective of race or social class —what Volf calls “the creational dimension of catholicity.”

“There can be no catholicity,” Volf maintains, “without a willingness to accept other Christians and other churches precisely in their otherness (see Rom. 14:1—5:13)!” This is only “the minimum of catholicity,” however; churches “should strive to reflect historically the eschatological shalom of the whole people of God through positive integration (not assimilation!) of the entire breadth of cultural wealth within God’s rich creation” (278).

Rather strangely, though understandably given his defense of the Free Church tradition and his critique of Ratzinger and Zizioulas, Volf limits catholicity to the *local* church. He says

(in what may be an overstatement) that in Free Church ecclesiology one can “speak only about the catholicity of *local churches*. The reason is apparent enough, since in the strictly theological sense this ecclesiology allows for no other church than the local church” (emphasis Volf’s). He admits that this is “the Free Church dilemma of catholicity,” for how can any one local church be catholic? Volf attempts to resolve the dilemma by using a “qualitative understanding of catholicity” rather than a quantitative one, appealing to the “manifold grace of God” in 1 Pt. 4:10 and to the church’s “encounter with the richness of creation” (270).

But why limit catholicity to the local church? This is not necessary either biblically or theologically. Here it seems Volf is overreacting to Roman Catholic and Orthodox views, positing too sharp a split between the local and universal church. Interestingly, while Volf *assumes*, with insufficient biblical basis, charismata of office, he misses a structural element of New Testament ecclesiology for which there is some biblical evidence, and which points beyond this extreme emphasis on the local church: translocal networking. Certainly denominational structures as such have no biblical basis, but the New Testament does not portray simply a scattering of local congregations, each totally independent and autonomous. Rather, Acts and other New Testament books picture active, largely informal networking among the various congregations. We read of frequent, vital interconnection between the hundreds of local church bodies, utilizing the comings and goings of the apostles and their associates and many hand-carried letters and oral messages. The experience of the early church was one of interdependence and vital interconnection. The New Testament gives numerous hints of this, most notably in references to the many persons who traveled with, or were sent back and forth by, Paul and other apostles and leaders. The many letters to the churches that form so rich a part of the New Testament are themselves evidence and examples of such networking. In this sense, the body metaphor of 1 Corinthians 12 legitimately applies to the whole church, not just to local churches. Theologically this would seem to imply that the proper answer to the vexing issue of catholicity is not global organizational unity, unbridled denominational proliferation, nor local church autonomy, but rather functional, organic forms of translocal networking regionally and worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these limitations, *After Our Likeness* is a landmark work in ecclesiology and a significant contribution to ecumenical debate. The most obvious gap is the absence of any dialogue with the Wesleyan (or for that matter Anabaptist or Dutch Reformed) tradition. An author cannot of course be criticized for not doing what he or she never intended. Volf, helpfully and audaciously, set out to dialogue with Orthodox and Roman Catholic perspectives, not others. It is worth noting, however, that John Wesley did something similar, though less systematically. In his ecclesiological reflections Wesley was creatively in dialogue with Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Free Church (principally Moravian) traditions—precisely the main dialogue partners in Volf’s work.

The book closes with an affirmation that is also a call to discipleship: “The Spirit of communion opens up every person to others, so that every person can reflect something of the eschatological communion of the entire people of God with the triune God in a unique way through the relations in which that person lives” (282). This affirmation combines and nicely summarizes all the essential themes of the book.

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<sup>1</sup> In the revised edition of *The Community of the King* (InterVarsity, 2004) I suggest that the New Testament witnesses to only four essential church structural elements: Charismatic leadership, gatherings for worship, some form of small-group experience, and translocal networking.

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