

## THE SOCIETY FOR ECUMENICAL STUDIES

### ***Reshaping Ecumenical Theology – The Church Made Whole? Paul Avis, Continuum, 2010***

*A review by David Carter*

January 2011

In this book, Paul Avis lays particular stress upon three points. First and very much foremost, he emphasises the ascetically demanding nature of all ecumenical dialogue which must be profoundly spiritual and relational, stretching testingly our generosity of spirit. Secondly, he argues that the sheer diversity of the Church Universal and the many expressions of the one faith in Christ must be taken more seriously than hitherto. Finally, he argues that it is in shared mission that we will realise most fully our unity. Unity and mission are inseparable as, of course, they are in our Lord's High Priestly prayer in John 17.

As always, Paul Avis writes clearly and attractively. However, in this book, one feels that he reveals not just the depth of his learning but a heart set on fire for the unity of Christ's church. To read a book by Paul Avis is always a delight intellectually, but this one is also spiritually moving.

His chapter on the hermeneutics of unity is particularly important for its emphasis upon the deeply spiritual and relational nature of all ecumenical activity. It stresses the bedrock of common faith in Christ that unites all Christians, however much they may differ on other matters. Avis stresses that 'the experience of ecumenism enriches us, transforms us and in the end makes us different people', a point that needs emphasising as it is not always realised that true ecumenism means change for all those churches and Christians that are involved.

He also stresses that whole churches have to be changed. It is not enough for dialogue commissions or others to agree. There must be a 'critical mass' in

the churches to be changed, a point that challenges our denominations at every level as to their willingness to be changed and to be involved in what one might call 'whole church ecumenism', rather than leaving things just to specialist ecumenical officers and/or church leaders. Reaching this critical mass continues to be a key challenge in reception that confronts all denominations, our society as well.

Paul stresses that in ecumenism we seek understanding of texts, cultures, communities. I stress the latter two, since it is to the whole living community that we must relate in any particular, case not just to its formalised theology. The relating to communities and cultures that are very different from our own can be considerably more difficult than relating to the theology in the abstract. Paul stresses that ecumenical reception means churches taking one another to themselves, taking their members, their traditions, their spirituality (p.66). It involves empathy and a real wrestling with the otherness of the other, if we cannot know what it is to be like the other, to stand in their shoes...understanding will elude us. (p.69)

Another particularly interesting chapter is that on episcopacy. While, as an Anglican, he naturally commends it, Avis is very sensitive to the reservations about it entertained by many in the non-episcopal churches. He mentions the 'Lima' stress on oversight as communal, collegial and personal; and the chapter might have benefited from a somewhat more extended discussion of the problems involved in establishing a true balance between all three forms of oversight.

There is a very important chapter on the problems raised by recent disputes both within churches and between them over ethical issues in which the author stresses the importance of maintaining conversation and patient mutual listening with every attempt being made to stay together. There is also a very good chapter on recent thinking and developments in reception.

Not everyone will agree with everything in this book and I suspect that some Roman Catholics will have difficulties with his stress on diversity as inherent in

the human response to the Gospel and, in particular, with the idea that our responses are always relativised. However, no one can fail to be stimulated. This is an important book and should be read by all seriously engaged in ecumenical activity.