

Joshua Cockayne. *Explorations in Analytic Ecclesiology: That They May be One*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. xix + 202pp. £65.00 (hbk).

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Joshua Cockayne's *Explorations in Analytic Ecclesiology* seeks to fill an evident lacuna in the ever-growing literature of the field of analytic theology, namely the philosophical investigation of the unity of the Church in Christ as an effect of the action of the Holy Spirit (vii). His concern is not to offer a comprehensive treatise on all dimensions of ecclesiology but rather more specifically "to offer an account of what it means for the Church to be one" (viii). To this end he especially draws from the methodology of Oliver Crisp and the late David Eford in offering "a model of ecclesiology which serves to make clear what it means to think of the Church as one in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, but one which never pretends to get to the full truth of the matter" (ix). He asserts strongly that the Church is mysterious and cannot be described or understood directly. Yet such models as analytic theology offers by drawing from the resources of analytic philosophy may nevertheless make it possible to "expand our understanding of the Church" without reducing it to the level of a merely human institution. Cockayne's essential thesis is that "the Church is a social body, composed of many individual members, united through the work of the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ" (xi).

The first three chapters have to do with conceptual matters. They present a model of the Church as a social group, of which the unity as Christ's body is principally the effect of the agency of the Holy Spirit. The next four chapters have to do with practical matters. They discuss baptism, the Eucharist, the liturgy, and social justice as actions of the Church understood as Christ's body through the work of the Holy Spirit. Chapters 1–3 thus address the question of what the Church is whereas chapters 4–7 address the question of what the Church does (xiii). Cockayne likewise includes a helpful epilogue which provides a summary of his central arguments and claims.

Chapter 1 addresses the question of Church unity. Cockayne is convinced from his interpretation of the Gospel according to John that the unity of the Church must be understood in a metaphysically robust manner (4). It must be possible to speak of the Church as a single "thing" even despite the plurality and differentiation of its members. Cockayne maintains that the tired dichotomy of individualism and holism is a false one (7). Drawing from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's critique of German idealism as well as from the work of Philip Pettit, Cockayne insists that the irreducible reality of the individual cannot be compromised even while one rejects naïve atomism in recognizing the interconnectedness of individuals and the wholes of which they are parts. The reality of the group as a unit supervenes upon the individuals that constitute it without being reducible to them.

Chapter 2 addresses the question of the Church as an agent. Cockayne prefers a "functionalist" account of agency according to which agency can be ascribed to a thing even apart from its possessing particular intentions, its own proper mental states, and other such. This makes it possible to speak of social groups like the Church as something like agents that perform actions (27). The Church is also conceived of as a specific kind of group. Coalitions are groups with a shared goal but without a joint decision-making procedure; a collection is a group constituted by agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that can attend to moral considerations; and a combination is a group constituted by agents who do not together constitute a coalition or a collective (26). The

Church is specifically understood as a collective. Its unity comes about because the Holy Spirit is operative in the hearts of different persons and coordinates their actions toward a shared goal with various degrees of success, even if these other persons are not themselves privy to everything that is happening (36–40).

Chapter 3 addresses the question of the Church as Christ's body in the world. Here Cockayne draws from recent analytic philosophical and theological work on Andy Clark and David Chalmers's so-called "extended mind" thesis. Once more Cockayne shows his preference for functionalist accounts of these things (cf. xii). Clark and Chalmers argue that one might consider certain tools used for accomplishing cognitive tasks to be extensions of a person's mind if the right conditions are met (55–58). Such conditions might obtain (say) in the case of a person suffering from Alzheimer's who makes regular and consistent use of a notebook for remembering things he would otherwise forget. Cockayne argues that a similar case can be made for understanding the Church as the "extended body" of Christ in the world given its intimate relation to him and the use he makes of it (59–63). And this relation between Christ and the Church in the world is brought about by the activity of the Holy Spirit in prompting Christians to act in this way and that (cf. the example of Linguini and Remy from *Ratatouille* at 69–70).

These chapters serve to present a model of the Church as "a social body, composed of many individual members, united through the work of the Holy Spirit to be the body of Christ" (xi). The plurality of persons constituting the Church are made to be a single group because the Holy Spirit works to coordinate the actions and thoughts of different persons at different times and places for the sake of accomplishing Christ's purpose, in just the same way one person might create a rescue group by coordinating the actions of others and directing them to do this or that for the sake of saving a drowning person (cf. 36–37). The unity of the Church is consequently not something that can easily be seen with the eyes; it lies "not in human organization or structure." As Cockayne insists, "a social ontology of the Church must emphasize the Spirit as the primary agent at work within it" (xii).

The remaining chapters address various dimensions of the Church's activity. Chapter 4 presents an interpretation of baptism along Calvinian lines as the "sign and seal" of membership in the Church (77). Chapter 5 explains how the Eucharist brings about the unity of the Church in two ways, both as a result of the psychology of communal ritual and as a result of the fact that it is an intimate, bodily encounter with the body and blood of Jesus Christ himself (106). Chapter 6 analyzes the liturgy of the Church as consisting of corporate silence, joint action on the part of those who are capable of committing to bringing something about together as a group, and representative action that can in principle be performed by any member of the Church (133, 151–154). Chapter 7 presents a discussion of the corporate responsibility borne by the Church for the failures of its members in the pursuit of social justice and the perpetration of horrors and traumas in their actions as Christ's body in the world (162). Cockayne also considers the possibility of protest liturgies as a way of addressing these issues (183–186). These chapters thus provide a practical application of the conceptual scheme of the Church as a social group provided in the earlier chapters.

Cockayne's discussion in each chapter is far richer and more expansive than these meager summaries can indicate. He weaves together sources from social science, analytic philosophy, and an ecumenical selection of ancient and contemporary theologians alike. Readers are encouraged to consult the chapters with attention and care in order better to appreciate the nuances of Cockayne's argument. The summary here has been abbreviated for the sake of saving room for some brief observations and remarks. Although I find Cockayne's general scheme of things to be quite agreeable and insightful, I would like to present the following observations and possible objections for the sake of furthering the discussion and development of his ideas.

First, it seems to me that Cockayne's discussion does not quite get to the true essence of things. He is correct to think that the Church is a social group the unity of which is grounded in the coordinating activity of God as its principal agent who directs Christians to act in this or that way in fulfillment of his ultimate purpose. But more fundamental than and prior to this unifying action on the part of God is a free decision to act upon these people in particular and to make them into the single group of his people. This is to say that ecclesiology is founded

upon election. There is a Church first and foremost because God himself wants to have a people, and these persons in particular make up this Church first and foremost because God himself wants them to do so. One could go so far as to suggest that it is precisely God's act of claiming some number of persons for himself as his own people that makes the Church to be one in the most fundamental and ultimate sense. Every other kind of unity the Church may enjoy merely follows upon this foundational act of intentional appropriation on the part of God and constitutes its historical concretization or realization in some way or other.

It is true that connecting ecclesiology with election naturally raises any number of difficult questions. Are the boundaries of the Church coterminous with those of the collection of elect persons? Is it possible for persons to be in the Church without being elect or to be elect without being in the Church? Does such a pairing of ecclesiology with election necessitate the distinction between the visible and the invisible Church? If one is inclined to a doctrine of universal election, does this mean that every person is in the Church in at least some sense? If every person is in the Church, is there still an essential distinction between Christian and non-Christian? I address some of these questions in some of my own recent work (e.g., *Theology of the Manifest; Theological Authority in the Church*). I would be very curious to know what Cockayne might have to say in response to them.

Second, I wonder to what extent Cockayne's own analyses bear out his conviction regarding the mystery of the Church. He argues that the life of the Church is "mysterious" and asserts that "Any attempt to reduce the Church to the level of human institutions which social metaphysicians and epistemologists have as their subject matter will lead us to making the Church in our own image" (x). But the analyses he provides in the book itself do not seem at first glance to support this way of speaking. The only apparent difference between the Church and other social groups that emerges from Cockayne's discussion is that the principal agent of unity in the Church is a divine person whose actions are generally invisible and not easily discerned or located. Put another way, the unity of the Church is the result of the actions of a divine person and not of a human person, but it is nevertheless consequent upon the actions of a person univocally considered. One might therefore think that the categories of Cockayne's discussion are appropriate for any group of rational agents irrespective of the "nature" or "species" of these persons considered in particular. One might even think that Cockayne's analyses lead in the direction of an ontological scheme in which "person" is the most fundamental ontological category, the differences between God and human beings being quantitative rather than qualitative in nature (e.g., God is more powerful or knowledgeable or morally upright than they are). This in turn makes the "mystery" of the Church's life to be a matter of epistemology rather than of ontology. Its life is mysterious because it not easy to know where and how the Holy Spirit is acting for the sake of the Church's unity, though the ontological question of the nature of this unity is nevertheless univocally analyzable in terms of the coordinated actions of free persons interacting with one another in various ways, just as in the case of other social groups. I do not consider these remarks to constitute a substantive objection to the analyses proposed by Cockayne so much as observations which may call for some clarification or elaboration on his part. It may be helpful if he were to expand on and better define the meaning of the "mystery" of the Church in further discussions of these ideas. Is the notion principally ontological or epistemological or both?

Third, the argument can be made that Cockayne's preference for "functionalist" accounts of group ontology undermines the realism or metaphysical robustness of his proposals. The idea of an "extended body" is conceivable if one understands parthood in functional terms. A thing becomes a part of one's extended body to the extent that it fulfills a typical bodily function, irrespective of what kind of thing it may be. But it seems to me obvious that the notion of an "extended body" is essentially figurative, a way of speaking that does not correspond to anything strictly real. A prosthetic limb does not become a real extension of one's body (cf. 59). A thing is "really" *F* if it is *F* apart from and prior to what anyone may think about it. A man may refer to his prosthetic leg as "his leg" insofar as it has this meaning for him; he makes regular use of it, and it is indispensable for his way of life—yet this does not really make it to be his leg. Suppose a man had so many prosthetic legs at his disposal that it made no difference to him whether any one in particular were broken or stolen from him. Suppose even that he made use of them to walk when he had them at his disposal but would

be perfectly indifferent if they were to be destroyed and lost forever. It is not at all clear to me that there is any basis for speaking of the prosthetic limb as being “his leg” in any metaphysically robust sense in cases like this one. The mere use of a thing does not thereby make it into a real extended part of one’s body. Cockayne admits that “some kind of identification with an artefact appears to play a role in [bodily] extension, in a way that differs this relation from mere use” (61). But a thing is not really a part of one’s body after all if it is one’s identification with the thing that makes it to count as a part of one’s “extended” body. If the thing is only a part of one’s body to the extent that one identifies with it, which is to say as a result of the way one thinks about it, then it is only “irreally” or figuratively a part. Granting this line of argument entails that a few of Cockayne’s proposals should be interpreted in non-realist terms. For example, the Church “is” the body of Christ on earth only in the unreal sense that it has a certain meaning and usefulness to him insofar as its actions are coordinated by the influence of the Holy Spirit to serve his purposes. It is not *really* his body.

This same line of reasoning would also apply in the case of the Eucharist. Cockayne apparently nowhere clearly endorses James Arcadi’s understanding of the bread and wine of the eucharistic meal as parts of Christ’s extended body (cf. 49, 67). But the same conclusion should be drawn there too: if the bread and wine are parts of Christ’s extended body, then they are not really his body and blood at all but only irreally or figuratively so. Once more, whether or not this line of argument constitutes an objection or an observation that calls for a clarification depends upon whether Cockayne understands himself to be offering a “realist” account of the Church or not.

There are many more particular questions and possible objections I might raise if I were to write a detailed interaction with any of the chapters of the book. For example, one might think to ask whether Cockayne’s emphasis upon the activity of the Holy Spirit as the principal unifying agent of the Church implies a kind of social trinitarianism, or whether there are any reliable signals for discerning the boundaries of the Holy Spirit’s activity and thus drawing borders between the Church and other human beings, and so on. But the observations mentioned above will have to suffice for the present context. They too touch on “big” and fundamental questions for his analyses.

There are also a few quibbles and infelicities to note in the text which do not touch upon the substance of Cockayne’s argument at all. The word “who’s” at the bottom of page 95 should be “whose.” There is also a citation on page 111 of a paragraph written by Panayotis Coutsoumpos. Since the time of the publication of this book Coutsoumpos has been shown to have plagiarized extensively in his academic writings, although it is not evident that the particular passage cited by Cockayne was itself plagiarized. It might be useful in future editions of the book to indicate awareness of this point in a footnote. There is further an unnecessary semicolon in these sentences on page 127: “Its function appears instead to be unitive; in eating the animal they have sacrificed; the community are united to God and united to one another.” But it is worth stressing once more that these are quibbles and minor points which have nothing to do with the principal arguments of the book. They can easily be corrected.

I can conclude by saying that Cockayne’s proposals for an analytic theology of the unity of the Church are to my mind very compelling and plausible. What is especially significant from my point of view is his emphasis on the activity of the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of the Church’s unity. The Church is one because it is a group that the Holy Spirit brings about through his coordinating influence upon the feelings, thoughts, and actions of distinct individuals. It is one because the Holy Spirit uniquely and ultimately leads people to act as one in obedience to Christ’s commands. Cockayne notes that this emphasis on the Holy Spirit’s unifying agency uncouples the notion of the Church’s unity from questions of uniformity of doctrine (cf. 2) or organizational structure (xii). It is because *A* and *B* both yield to the influence of the Holy Spirit who prompts them to accomplish Christ’s work in the world in a way that only he comprehends in its totality that they constitute a single body called the Church. This can hold true even apart from *A*’s believing the same things or belonging to the same ecclesial communion as *B*. This is a welcome perspective with ecumenical value and is also highly consonant with my own argumentation in my most recent books. I recommend Cockayne’s treatment as exemplifying the virtues of analytic theology and as making helpful contributions to centrally important questions of ecclesiology.

References

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- . 2023. *Theology of the Manifest: Christianity without Metaphysics*. Lexington Press/Fortress Academic.