

BOOK REVIEW

Scott Cowdell, *Church Matters: Essays and Addresses on Ecclesial Belonging* (Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2022), pp. 240. ISBN 9781922589255
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This selection of essays and addresses by Australian Anglican priest and theologian, Canon Professor Scott Cowdell breathes a freshness, creativity, analytical power and prophetic voice for the contemporary church. Most of the 15 chapters in this book have been previously published in books, journals or online over a 25-year period. The earlier writing is as prescient and arresting now as then; the latter work is evidence of Cowdell's matured and formidable intellect applied to current concerns. With an overarching theme of ecclesial belonging, the chapters traverse a range of ecclesial and missional concerns of the church. So, for example, chapters on the postmodern church, lay vocation and worship, the Holy Spirit and mission, sacramental life ('Baptismal Ecclesiology and its Enemies' and 'The Eucharist Makes the Church') give testimony to what Cowdell refers to as his 'stubborn confidence that God is still at work in the Church and that despair is unrealistic'.

The basis for Cowdell's confidence is unfolded in an important chapter 'On Loving the Church', in which he argues for a pneumatology of hope. Such hope is not a recipe for escapist despair but rather is born of a hard-nosed reality check flagged over half a century before by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together*: 'He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial'. Cowdell locates his confidence in a 'spirituality of disciplined abiding, contemplatively tuned to the active presence of God'. From this place the Church (ch. 14) can engage with contemporary society and culture mindful that 'the secularising impulse is a biblical one, a prophetic one' disarming the traditional tribal deities and opening new possibilities for faith and hope.

This basic theological and spiritual disposition filters through Cowdell's discussion of the parish: 'Two Cheers for the Parish' – not three!; 'Catholic Anglicanism for Evangelicals'; and 'Mimesis and Ministry'. This last-named chapter is an illuminating and in parts disturbing examination of the dynamics of Christian ministry and the role of clergy. Cowdell brings his seasoned intellectual engagement with the work of the French anthropologist René Girard to bear on the way Christian leaders so easily succumb to rivalrous behaviour, inability to collaborate, conflict avoidance, 'fawning sycophancy' and indifference, in the face of bullying

laity and superiors. How then might clergy learn to inhabit the institutional church? Cowdell, following James Alison, refers to three ecclesial virtues: hilarity, pathos and irony. This chapter ought to be required reading for all church leaders and clergy.

Cowdell's discussion of an abusive church culture (ch. 6) is not only worthy of careful reading but also of wide discussion in the church. While recognizing the serious nature of sexual abuse in the church and the suffering of victims and survivors, Cowdell offers an insight into the dynamics of dysfunctional cultures, the default to scapegoating and the blindness that infects church leadership. He exposes the inflation and expansion of disciplinary codes as applied to clergy for issues of misconduct quite unrelated to matters of sexual abuse. He offers an incisive discussion of the nexus between unhealthy and immature approaches to relationships and authority in the church with 'a widespread, harmful image of God' as punisher. His conclusion rings true: 'Clergy who abuse and victimise others emerge not from a vacuum but from the Church's culture. Only by attending to that culture, and the spiritual distortions that it accommodates, can we cut the nerve of victimisation and abuse.'

The final and most recent writing, 'Theology in the School of Humility', strikes a decidedly autobiographical note. Over the course of his internationally recognized theological career, Cowdell has sought to hold together two fundamental concerns: the imperative 'to remain open to the real world while being continually formed in the Christian narrative'. For Cowdell this is the joint calling of theology. The deeper the immersion into this double calling the more deeply one is drawn into the life of God and the kenosis at the heart of all genuine knowing and acting in the world.

Cowdell's *Church Matters*, offers the reader a feast of rich theological and practical engagement with some fundamental issues for the church, theology and society. I came away with a renewed energy for, and a clearer sense of what is required of the People of the Way.

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