

The shape of the church

by [John W. Stewart](#) in the [May 20, 1998](#) issue

*By Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity.*  
(Eerdmans, 313 pp.)

Good books provide readers with fresh insight and useful information. Great books, especially in theology, range over several disciplines, revisit enduring human patterns and then weave new paradigms to explain old concerns. Miroslav Volf's book is both a good and great book. It is about the contemporary church, or, more pointedly, about what makes a congregation a Christian church.

Volf is a rising star in contemporary theology. His earlier and widely respected book *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996) was conceived soon after he witnessed chaos and suffering in parish and seminary life in Croatia. Nothing Volf writes is untainted by his memories of the "ethnic cleansing" and religious hatreds in the Balkans. Little wonder that he gravitated to the political theology of Jürgen Moltmann, his mentor at the University of Tübingen. Many themes from Moltmann's books echo through the pages of Volf's work. But *After Our Likeness* signals his move beyond the Moltmann circle. In this work Volf seeks to offer a newer, more inclusive, more rigorously constructive ecclesiology. It is an ecclesiology that is congregation-friendly. From beginning to end, this book links theological reflection with the nature and mission of the local or particular congregation. In a refreshing and impressive way, it is biblically sensitive, historically rich and ecumenically volatile.

Volf is very much aware of the seismic changes shaping the self-understanding of Christian communities around the globe. While Euro-American established and "mainstream" denominations appear puzzled and foundering, the "free churches" on multiple continents are flourishing. Their witness, in both postmodern and "Third World" societies, Volf finds remarkable. "Global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a free Christian form." Affirming a judgment in Harvey Cox's *The Silencing of Leonardo Boff*, Volf points to a "restless spiritual energy splashing up from the underside of society and threatening to erode traditional modes of ecclesiastical government." This free church model, with its populist overtones, is being borne, Volf maintains, "by irreversible social

changes of global proportions.” In this light, Volf is miffed that the World Council of Churches’ widely circulated document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1989) excluded the concerns and perspectives of the free church tradition.

Equally important for Volf are a “cloud of witnesses,” both ancient and modern. Volf scans the writings of the early church to discern the nature of the church. More specifically, he wants to highlight how the early church rooted its ecclesiology within the theological context of the Trinity. Volf makes a critical but respectful assessment of the ecclesiologies of two contemporary and very influential theologians, the Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Orthodox metropolitan John D. Zizioulas.

While acknowledging traditional differences in the West’s and East’s understandings of the Trinity, Volf insists that Ratzinger’s and Zizioulas’s ecclesiologies correspond with their “monarchial” or hierarchical interpretations of the Trinity. As Volf sees it, their preoccupation with the one divine nature and the one “headship” of the Father leads inexorably to the one church and the one bishop. Revealing the influence of Moltmann, Volf argues that the modern church needs to look at God as the “social trinity.” Through the lens of this particular interpretation of the Trinity, Volf sees the relationship of the persons of the Trinity as complementary. “If one starts from the trinitarian model I have suggested, then the structure of ecclesial unity cannot be conceived by way of the one, be it pope, patriarch or the bishop. Every ecclesial unity held together by a mon-archy is monistic and thus un-trinitarian.”

Volf believes that classical Catholic and Orthodox theologians have harnessed their trinitarian views to a certain kind of ecclesiology, resulting in two ecclesial practices that Volf finds unacceptable and potentially repressive: the exclusive and indispensable sacerdotal office of the bishop or priest and the disqualification of laity in the “order of salvation.” By contrast, Volf maintains that every person--male or female, tutored or untutored--is ecclesially indispensable, since all bearers of Christ’s Spirit are constitutive for the church and of equal import in the church’s witness to the world. In this sense, Volf argues that the church’s laity do not exist, ecclesially speaking, in the clergy but rather in immediate relationship with the triune God through Christ’s Spirit and in direct fellowship with other Christians. The Spirit-blessed congregation, rather than the priest or bishop, represents the presence of Christ for Volf.

In short, Volf is at odds with all ecclesiologies that presume an “episcopocentric” ministry. Not all will accede to Volf’s assessment, and I have not yet seen in print a response by either Zizioulas or Ratzinger. Few can doubt, however, that the bar has been raised in the current discourse about ecclesiology.

Volf joins a widening cadre of Christian theologians who seek to anchor the nature and mission of the local church in trinitarian thought rather than the shifting sands of cultural practices or the muddy bottoms of tired cultic traditions. Volf insists that a “constructive ecclesiality” requires us to get to the prior and bedrock realities of the Christian doctrine of God. Volf writes straightforwardly about the methodological limits of imagining the church in a way analogous to the Trinity. Nevertheless, “if Christian initiation [i.e., baptism] is a trinitarian event, the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality. Because churches, in the power of the Holy Spirit, already form a communion with the triune God, ecclesial correspondence to the Trinity can become an object of hope and thus also a task for human beings.”

In the second half of the book, Volf turns from heady polemics to a more constructive effort. He wants to explore what “makes the church the church,” or what he calls the “ecclesiality” of the church. His short answer to this inquiry is based on an often quoted New Testament text: “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them”(Matt. 18:20). In light of that pivotal text, Volf understands the church as “a community of grace” which gathers in Christ’s name in a particular locality. In such a summoned, gathered, confessional community “not only is Christ present among them, but a Christian church is there as well.”

But Volf’s inquiries also point to a longer answer. One way to summarize this more elaborate effort is the following quote:

Wherever the Spirit of Christ, which as the eschatological gift anticipates God’s new creation in history, is present in its *ecclesially constitutive* activity, there is the church. The Spirit unites the gathered congregation with the triune God and integrates it into a history extending from Christ, indeed from the Old Testament saints, to the eschatological new creation. This Spirit-mediated relationship with the triune God and with the entire history of God’s people--a history whose center resided in Jesus’ own proclamation of the reign of God, in his death and resurrection--*constitutes an assembly [congregation] into a church* (p.129) [italics mine].

To trace how Volf identifies the church with the local congregation, one needs to unpack these shorter and longer criteria.

His *first* move is to argue for an ecclesial community that is modeled after the triune God. Assuming the so-called “social” understanding of the Trinity, the “koinonia” of the triune God is both the source and goal of the church. As a colleague of mine recently wrote, a true church emerges when Christ’s Spirit empowers human participation in the life of the triune God’s and all living as Christ’s disciples is lived as outgoing, self-giving love to others. A true church, in Volf’s view, corresponds to and is modeled after the relationship of the persons of the Trinity.

At its best, a congregation is to become a community of grace, a welcoming and embracing community, a community that derives its mission from the *missio Dei*, a community that is both identified, reconciled and nourished at the Eucharist, a community that remembers its past and hopes into its future. A congregation simply misunderstands God if it becomes exclusive or self-absorbed or ethnically enclosed or hierarchically structured. It is in this trinitarian sense that Volf links the congregation’s nature and mission.

A second move, intricately woven with the first, is that this community of grace is simultaneously a *confessional community*. A church is appropriately constituted when it confesses its faith in “the name of Jesus Christ.” Such a confession plants a particular congregation in a wider history that looks to its Hebrew past as well as to an eschatological future, a history in which Jesus Christ is the center. Not only are the members of a particular, local confessing community linked with all of the history of the people of God, this confession also integrates (Volf’s word) them into that “heavenly city” where all of God’s people dwell in communion with the triune God, an inclusive community that will not need the light of the sun or moon, for God and the Lamb will be our light (Rev. 21). Here, especially, Volf relies heavily on the federal or covenantal theology of the English Puritans, notably that proto-Baptist, John Smyth (d. 1612).

A third and crucial perspective follows. Volf repeatedly insists that the experience of salvific grace (faith) is inherently communal. “Salvation is communion with God and human beings.” Christian faith for Volf is not the “flight from the lonely to the lonely” nor is it an experience that is unilateral and self-enclosed. To the contrary, “because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of three persons . . . communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have

entrusted themselves in faith to the same God.” In this sense, the old dictum “Outside the church there is no salvation” takes on new meaning for Volf. Such a commitment places Volf at odds with two formidable rivals in the contemporary world: (a) those ecclesial traditions (Roman Catholic and Orthodox) that insist that the “constitutive presence of Christ is given only with the presence of the bishop standing in communio with all bishops in time and space” and (b) those postmodern cultural and social standards that are grounded in individualistic and consumer-driven life styles and that simultaneously relegate all religious experience to the nether regions of the privatized soul. Volf finds counterproductive and unbiblical the theologies implicit in both of these adversaries.

For Volf these three moves or perspectives are both sufficient and necessary for an “ecclesiality of the church,” and he labors to make his case for the local congregation as the true church. “In every congregation assembling in Christ’s name to profess faith in him, the one and whole Christ is present through his Spirit. For this reason the congregation is not a part of the church, but rather the whole church.” While students of ecclesiology will recognize in these perspectives an unflagging congregationalism, Volf is sensitive to areas in which the free church tradition is especially vulnerable: the unity within the Christian communities; the bonds that connect one congregation to others; the accountability of congregations and clergy; and the ever-present threat to neglect or abandon the apostolic tradition.

Volf is more provocative when he wades into the swirling waters of organizational structures of particular congregations. He knows that many an ecumenical conference has capsized in the crosscurrents of church polity over the nature of the pastoral office. He restates ideas that are well known in the free church tradition, ideas that go back as far as John Smyth in England and the early Anabaptists in Germany.

Here are a few of those affirmations: all baptized Christians have Spirit-granted charismata assigned to them; offices are a particular type of charismata; there is no ontological difference between officeholders and other members of the congregations; the priesthood of all believers does not divide a congregation into distinct groups (laity and clergy); ordination is a public attestation to the presence of the particular charismata by the whole congregation; ordination is not necessarily an irrevocable appointment to a lifelong task. In this sense, officeholding and ordination do not belong to the *esse* (essence) of the church (as explicit in Catholic and Orthodox traditions and implicit in many Protestant ones) but rather to the more

practical bene esse (well-being) of the church.

Volf adds little that is new to classical congregationalist views about ordination. Of course, these free church views present a sharp contrast to Catholic and Orthodox views of ordination which are rooted in apostolic succession. Absent from Volf's discussion, however, is still another view of ordination prevalent among "mainstream" and free church Protestants in North America, namely, that ordination that blends a mystical clericalism and credentialized professionalism, a hybrid ordination graphically symbolized by clergy who lead public worship while wearing academic hoods and doctoral stripes on the sleeves of their robes. It is not clear how Volf's perspectives about ordination address this "culture of professionalism" in modern churches that draws a sharp demarcation between clergy and laity and pays no mind to the doctrine of the Trinity.

In the final chapter Volf seeks to justify the catholicity of the particular congregation. For many this phrase is an oxymoron: local and catholic appear to be opposites. Volf does not back away from this usual criticism of "free church" ecclesiology. He argues that the local church, in which the whole and true church can be located, can and indeed must be "open" to all other churches. "Openness to all other churches is a formal identifying feature of catholicity . . . and to this feature we must add *loyalty to the apostolic tradition.*"

Such a defense seems to come down to this: the local church is preserved from suffocating provincialism when it intentionally engages in dialogue with other churches and when it remains steadfast in appropriating and witnessing to the "apostolic tradition." Given the "cocooning" tendencies of congregations in these postmodern times and given the theological amnesia in most modern Protestant churches that I know, I am not so reassured by Volf's defense of the kind of catholicity that he believes is attainable in local churches.

Volf's discussion of the structures and catholicity of the free church prompts a final observation about this seminal book. It's startling that Volf neglects to consider the theological dilemmas associated with locating a congregation (free church or other) in specific and variegated sociocultural contexts. Not everything that a congregation embraces is tried before the jury of the "apostolic tradition." As one who has written so poignantly about the horrors of exclusion in religious communities in our own day, Volf is surely not maintaining that local congregations can somehow become hermetically sealed off from their immediate cultural influences or ideological

contexts.

*After Our Likeness* becomes more enigmatic when one recalls how carefully Volf has considered the historical studies of scholars such as Yves Congar, the theological insights of Reinhold Niebuhr and the ecclesial analyses of feminist and liberation thinkers. Volf knows that modern congregations, like older ones, have uncritically incorporated cultural, racial and political strategies to define and direct their own institutional identities and agendas. He knows that many burgeoning “free church” congregations in North America, for example, are often conditioned by class orientation and entrepreneurial ideologies. Yet, as I read him, Volf provides little or no compelling argument as to why or how the free church tradition resolves *better than other ecclesiologies* this enduring dilemma of all Christian congregations, namely, how the church is to be in the world but not of it. Until we have the pleasure of reading the promised sequel, we will have to wait for a fuller resolution of this pressing predicament.