

Amy Plantinga Pauw. *Church in Ordinary Time: A Wisdom Ecclesiology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017. 188 pages. \$20.

In *Church in Ordinary Time*, Amy Plantinga Pauw makes the case for an ordinary-time, or wisdom, ecclesiology. Ordinary time refers to the liturgical periods which fall between major feasts of the Christian calendar. Pauw elevates ordinary time as “a metaphor for our creaturely existence,” adding that “[a]n ordinary-time ecclesiology emphasizes that the church lives in the gap between the resurrection of Jesus and the last things as God’s creatures” (1). An honest admission of the liminality of creaturehood prompts Pauw to explore biblical wisdom traditions, which deal unabashedly in the ordinary, in-betweenness of creaturely life. From wisdom traditions, Pauw draws forth a theology of creation which becomes the backbone of her ecclesiology. With characteristic perception and pastoral sensibility, she takes on various accounts of church which deny or evade the reality of the dimensions of creaturehood. She suggests, alternatively, an ecclesiology which holds in tension the vast scope of all creation, with the particularity and created conditions of life on earth. She proposes an *earthy* ecclesiology rooted in the “original grace” of creation, which imagines the church not aside from the world, but as deeply entrenched in the world and intertwined with creation. This ecclesiology is characterized by contingency and parity with fellow creatures, while it “resists the ecclesiological temptation to center its attention on what makes Christians different from other creatures” (13). Ultimately, a wisdom ecclesiology imagines church to exist not merely for the sake of the world, but rather “for the world in its solidarity with the world” (34).

Even as Pauw blurs the social, religious, and cultural boundaries which so often preoccupy the Christian imagination, she does not forfeit the uniqueness of Christian faith nor the potency of the gospel. The book itself takes on a trinitarian structure, with three sections that focus respectively on God the creator, Christ as wisdom enfleshed, and the Spirit that guides the church through the various seasons of life. In the first section, Pauw draws the readers into a theology of creation which admits the smallness of earth, and the conditions of creaturehood. Here, she delineates a wisdom theology which affirms the alterity of God, arguing that “God is not on one end of the same ontological scale as creatures” (26). This divine alterity is an essential component to her wisdom ecclesiology, which imagines church to live alongside creation, not as mediator between creation and God. At times, however, the resolve with which Pauw discusses divine alterity seems to preclude the possibility of theodicy. How might suffering creatures appeal to a supremely Other God? A theology of suffering seems to hang in the backdrop, only narrowly addressed, in Pauw’s discussions of finitude.

In the second section, Pauw emphasizes the humanity of Jesus as she articulates a wisdom Christology. Creaturehood is marked by dependence upon others—a radical contingency and parity—which Jesus displays throughout his life. Many theologians have all but sterilized the womb of Mary to protect the divinity of Jesus from the fleshiness of birth. But Pauw reclaims the full humanity of Jesus, arguing that “any theological proposal that makes the flesh of Jesus essentially unlike other human flesh sabotages human salvation” (19). Her embrace of Jesus’s humanity extends to the church, calling the church to recognize its interdependence with the rest of the earth. In the final section, Pauw describes the church in the power of the Spirit as the church moves through the rhythms and cycles of the Christian calendar. Each chapter focuses on a different liturgical season, including Ordinary Time, Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. This final section of the book functions like a practical charge to Pauw’s readers, helping us to imagine a wisdom ecclesiology in action.

Pauw's project is surprisingly timely for the most extraordinary of times, offering an ecclesiology which easily rises to the occasion of ecological crisis, and now, a global pandemic. Perhaps her emphasis on the alterity of God lets God off the hook too soon, when much of wisdom literature voices a desire for a divine account for our frail, finite conditions. And yet, her aim in this project is not to offer a defense of God, nor an explanation for human suffering, but rather to reorient the church to its place in creation for all the many seasons we endure—be they ordinary, or extraordinary.

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