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The Nature and Mission of the Church

While no one statement can adequately cover or encompass the entirety of the church, the statement of the World Council of Churches, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, serves to move the dialogue forward towards a more comprehensive and unified position. The paper, published in 2005, replaces the previous statement by the WCC and reflects the latest official theological reflections on the church. Because of the methodology employed by the WCC and the stated goal of the WCC, namely moving to unity, the focus of the paper highlights the areas where most local churches can agree. In cases where disunity, disagreement or legitimate theological differences exist, the paper lays out the options as the WCC sees. The purpose of this paper then is to integrate the document with other ecclesiological reflections and with the experiences of the author. Due to space constraints and in an effort to not recapitulate ideas presented elsewhere, this paper is not a comprehensive reflection on all aspects of the church, but rather on those specific areas of importance or focus as outlined below. It is also is not intended to place greater priority on certain issues than others.

The Nature of the Church

The church exists only because God created it, provided the means of inclusion through the death and resurrection of Jesus and leads it through the work of the Holy Spirit. *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (subsequently referred to as “NMC”) describes the Church as “the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit. (9)” Through the power of the Word becoming flesh and later the sending of the Spirit, the church is primarily a witness to the Kingdom of God. The church and the kingdom are not synonymous, nor are they equal entities and should not be treated as though they were. The Kingdom of God, inaugurated by the Incarnation of Jesus and consummated at the end of time, encompasses far more than the church. While nothing in the church exists outside the Kingdom of God, it is possible or perhaps probable that much of the Kingdom exists outside the church. The church as a witness to the Kingdom, points to the essential qualities and nature of the Kingdom of God here on earth, but the picture is only a fraction of the true nature of the Kingdom. Thus, the church is similar to a peephole on a door. One can see out and observe, participate and engage in what one sees, yet the totality of what one sees is both distorted by the way the lens is made (objects are distorted) and is limited by the size of the hole. Not all of what exists outside the door is seen through the peephole. Nonetheless, through the church, the world can and should gain insight into the person, character and nature of the Trinity by the words and actions of the church.

The church finds its anchor in the theologically rich concept of the Word of God. In the Old Testament, the Word of God denoted actual words of God as well the ethos of God. This is reflected in the main theological statements of the Old Testament. The Decalogue (Ex. 20) reflects direct words of God for maintaining basic relationships with God and with humanity. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12) serves as the context from which the Decalogue operates. Finally, the Torah embodies the will of God towards His people and provides the means for entering into and maintaining proper relationships. The Word of God in the Old Testament give the framework for what later becomes communion. However, in the New Testament, the concept of the Word of God expands to include the *logos* who became flesh and dwelt among people (John 1). The *logos* is both the actual word of God in flesh (God speaks in the flesh) and a

connection point between the creation and now the church. The Word of God who incarnated and lived with people calls His followers to proclaim the *euangellion* or Good News about the Word, specifically the life available through the death and resurrection of the Word. Followers of Christ are united with the Word in the proclamation of the Word and are empowered and emboldened to speak by the Spirit of God.

The traditional attributes of the church, one, holy, catholic and apostolic, find their meaning in God. They illuminate God and illustrate the dependence of the church on God (12). Though not intended to be prioritized or taken out of context, different churches have emphasized each of the attributes with varying degrees of effectiveness. The Roman Catholic Church acknowledges the creedal formula and agrees with the majority of churches on the oneness, holiness and catholicity of the church. On the attribute of apostolicity, Roman Catholics differ because of the emphasis on apostolic succession and the necessity of a properly ordained (laying on of hands by one who can trace ordination back to the original apostles) pastor or bishop to administer the sacraments. Other churches in the holiness movement call the church to first be the moral pure people God calls us to be with the assumption that once the church is the spotless bride of Christ, the other attributes will naturally follow. The issue with prioritizing or even giving special emphasis on one attribute over others is that theological arguments become doctrinal statements and those statements form the basis for distinctives that supersede the original intent of the attributes. None of them can be properly expressed outside of the meaning the Apostolic Fathers gave them. Thus, the emphasis on apostolicity by the Roman Catholic Church became doctrine emphasized in even the most ecumenical statement of the church to date, *Lumen Gentium*, and by which the Roman Catholic Church defines true, perfect or complete expressions of the church and imperfect ones. By maintaining the requirement for apostolic succession, the Roman Catholic Church has negatively affected the oneness attribute of the nature of the church. The responsibility for maintaining unity falls on other churches to accept the position of the Roman Catholic Church or fall short of the goal of oneness.

How the church handles the issue of unity while allowing diversity is a pressing issue today. In an increasingly pluralistic and relativistic culture, the church finds itself searching to allow local expressions of culture and at the same time, keeping with the historical tradition started with the original twelve disciples. The church has been entrusted with the message, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but has not been given the exact words that go along with the Gospel. It is left to each local church to best express the essentials of the Gospel in a way that is contextually relevant. Defining the essentials of the Gospel becomes more difficult when the goal of unity is kept in the forefront. What one person or church finds essential, others do not. The NMC document fails to address this question directly and this oversight is a serious issue if the document is going to be meaningful for churches going forward. Focusing on the essentials comes down to what does one person need to know about the person and work of Jesus to come to faith in Jesus. The list no doubt starts out very long with many so-called essentials, but when subjected to careful scrutiny and study, only a few essentials remain:¹

- Jesus is God and the Gospel message seeks to affirm His deity
- Jesus is also fully human having emptied Himself and dwelt among humans bringing the in breaking of the Kingdom of God
- Jesus came to fulfill the promise of God to the people of Israel who rejected Him and therefore His mission is now directly to the world
- Jesus' message of belief and repentance offers hope to all, with His own particular emphasis on the traditional outcasts of society

¹ The list is not intended to be an all-inclusive list, nor does it reflect a consensus of WCC documents or other literature. The list is simply one attempt to distill the Gospel down to what experience and study could be true.

- The Spirit offers regeneration and new birth to those who believe Jesus was arrested, was crucified and was resurrected by God on the third day
- Jesus made post-resurrection appearances and His final ascension to the right hand of God brought forth the Spirit at Pentecost

Certainly, Jesus said, taught and did far more than the essentials listed above. The Sermon on the Mount provides tangible examples and demonstration of how a disciple of Christ can live in the Kingdom of God. The foot washing in John 13 highlights humble service. The list is very long, but the church need not have theological arguments and dissention over items that God intended to be good. By focusing only on the essentials and allowing differences to be humbly and honestly expressed, the church can maintain its unity. Once the church finds unity in the Gospel, other differences, whether spiritual, physical, social or cultural, fall into their proper place. The differences still exist and in some instances are legitimate differences; however, legitimate, non-essential differences are respected and honored with focus on unity.

Another way that the church, local and universal, can maintain unity is through recovery of Scriptural understanding of what it means to be the church. The NMC highlights four themes, people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit and *koinonia*, and touches on many others (17). Two of the main themes serve a particularly important role in the expression of church experienced by the author. The most important is the church as the body of Christ. Taking its primary cue from the book of Ephesians, as well as selected portions of other New Testament texts (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12), the body of Christ highlights the vital role that each person in the community plays. The body, with Christ as the head, has a physical, social, psychological, emotional and spiritual function within the community at large and the function informs the mission of the church. Each member of the body, gifted uniquely by the Spirit, must use his or her gift for the good of the body. If one person chooses not to use his or her gifting, the rest of the body suffers. This view assumes that God brought each person to the community, endowed with specific gifts to use for the good or betterment of the body. The body functioning in a healthy way is safe for everyone and allows each person the freedom to express who God made him or her to be free from the fear of judgment. Conversely, a body where not all gifts are given and used or some gifts are used more than others is unhealthy or maybe even diseased. Using an analogy from the medical field, when cells in one's physical body do not work correctly dysfunction occurs. When cells are more active than they should, the result is cancer. Not surprisingly, some churches are highly dysfunctional or the behavior of certain people within a given church is cancerous. The goal of the body is clear in Ephesians 4. We are to grow up in all ways into Christ as the head so that we might be mature in our faith. A body can only reach the full maturity God intends when it is healthy. Finally, those who choose not to use their gifts, or are not given opportunities to use them, as well as those people whose behavior is toxic are allowed the same access to the grace of God we all are. The outcome should not be the cutting off of part of the body, but the full reconciliation and restoration of all parts of the body to full health. Only when all avenues of reconciliation and restoration are exhausted should removal of part of the body be considered (see primarily Matt. 18).

The other metaphor of particular importance is the church as the people of God. The world we live in is simultaneously more fragmented and closer together than any other time since the inauguration of the church era. The free flow of and free access to information highlights our differences in a completely new way. A white male in the United States can "talk" to a person across the planet in real time using the phone and Internet. It is possible to learn all about someone without ever putting a face to a person. Should we be shocked that more people feel isolated and alone than 10 years ago? Add the church to the milieu and you have people who don't speak the same language, live in the same context, have any shared experiences, and yet all profess faith in the same God and same Lord Jesus Christ. Together, despite all of those things that normally separate, each is part of the people of God. Walls that isolate such as religious and

cultural background do not matter nearly as much when placed in the context of the universal church. The people of God worshipping, seeking and serving the same God has real hope of showing the peace of God to the world that desperately needs it.

The Mission of the Church

So far, the focus has been on selected aspects of the nature of the church. The remaining pages will focus on the mission of the church. The NMC document notes the church is missionary by nature, both through the “sent-ness” of both Christ and the Spirit and in the traditional creeds affirming the apostolicity of the church. A church that chooses not to be missional in practice cannot be a true church and the validity of such an organization should be questioned.

Dividing the mission into the five traditional aspects of church, *leitourgia*, *diakonia*, *kerygma*, *martyria* and *metanoia*, the NMC highlights areas where God is already at work inviting the church to join Him. All five are equally important to the health and well being of the church, but are all five equally important for the benefit of the world? Some would answer that proper worship of God obviously benefits non-Christians for no other reason than God is given the worth He deserves. The statement is true and one cannot find much to argue with on the surface; yet, there is growing suspicion as well as growing evidence that the world cares less about what the church says and how it says it and more about what the church does. Thus, distinction between importance and effectiveness must be drawn. The proper teaching of the Gospel, right administration of the sacraments, etc., has reduced efficacy to allow the non-believing world to see who God is. The world most clearly sees the character and nature of God through the church that serves (*diakonia*). A serving church demonstrates that it is willing to get messy for the sake of those who need hope, healing, restoration and peace. A serving church demonstrates the transformed life is not just talking about changing the world, but is actively taking steps to do so. Finally, a serving church demonstrates the power of God to bring about change when those who are faithful engage with God in the work He has prepared ahead of time. After all, we are saved by grace to **do** the good works of God.

Unfortunately, the NMC does not directly address two significant items important to mission: reconciliation and shalom. It is understandable to exclude reconciliation because of the statement “Mission as Reconciliation” issued by the WCC only a couple of years prior, yet any statement on the mission of the church must draw attention to ministry of reconciliation each believer and each church is called to. Central to unity is our ability to heal past wounds and move forward together in healthy relationships. Additionally, as the church reconciles among itself, the members are freed to begin reconciling themselves to the world, demonstrating the power of forgiveness and restoration to broken humanity. Forgiveness and restoration leads to shalom, or the peace of God. Ultimately it is the peace of God abundant in the church that is the visible sign of the work of God in the world.