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ST 538: Ecclesiology: Current Trends Worldwide

*Amici in Commune: A Progressive Theologian's Reflections on The Nature and Mission of the Church*

## I. Introduction

This brief essay offers theological reflections on the most current ecumenical statement on the church and her mission, namely, the World Council of Churches document *On the Nature and Mission of the Church*. As a trained evangelical and ecumenical theologian and leader of a small emerging community my reflections concerning the document will inevitably derive from, be conditioned by, and formulated within these influences. My reflections will be delineated in a topical structure similar to the document. First, I will offer remarks on the nature and mission of the church in communion. Second, I will present reflections on what it means to be in communion in and for the world. Included in this section will be a succinct discussion of the sacraments, the ministries of clergy and lay, as well as ecclesiastical structure. In both sections I will proffer several challenges that I have encountered in my community *Amici Dei* and submit how I think they may be contributive for ecumenical dialogues as global churches seek to move toward a greater understanding of the universal church.

## II. The Nature of the Church as Communion and Mission in Communion

### A. *The Nature of the Church as Communion According to the WCC Document*

According to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* the church is a communion of believers who stand in relationship with the Triune God and consequently with one another (*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, #10. Hereafter will be referred to as *NMC*). It states that her communion, as well as her very existence, is predicated on the life of the Triune God (2 Peter 1:4).<sup>1</sup> What this means is that she is neither an aggregation of individual believers in communion with God or a corporate communion of individuals without God (*NMC*, #13). She *is* only in God. Her existence derives from the Triune God and her existential expression and identity imitates the Trinitarian relations. The document accentuates that this communion is constitutive of all things. It is both inherent in the creational order of all things (*NMC*, #25) and indicative of the eschatological consummation of these things (*NMC*, #26, #43, #49; Revelation 21). This is the good news that the church invites the world to exist and participate in (*NMC*, #30; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 2:9). And this good news is proffered and exhibited in the church's worship, service, and proclamation (*NMC*, #36).

### B. *Reflections on the Nature of the Church as Communion According to Amici Dei*

The concept of communion has been tremendously advantageous for not only ecumenical dialogues (*NMC*, #24) but also contemporary ecclesiologies and communities like my own – *Amici Dei*.<sup>2</sup> We value its holistic perspective and Scriptural basis so much that we have intentionally predicated our notion of who we are as a community on this communion conceptual framework. This is evident in our maxim; “We are friends of God and friends of God's friends.” We perceive the world, and creation in general, as previously being in communion, or as we like to articulate it “friendship,” with God, given that God brought it into existence.<sup>3</sup> We regard our role, being participants in communion with God and one another, to encourage and challenge the world to return to God its first love and friend.<sup>4</sup> So, as is evident, we

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<sup>1</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 90.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas P. Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 186.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1976), 178.

<sup>4</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Press, 1988), 6.

concur with the document that communion is significantly valuable for the church's understanding of her nature and mission. With that said, with reference to ecumenical dialogue, we see our vocation and function, as a particular communion of friends of God within a universal communion, as cultivating friendships with those who are God's friends in communion with Christ.

All of this noted, because communion is central to our conceptions and perceptions of God, creation, the church and the world, we encounter our fair share of epistemic conflicts. For example, we frequently reexamine and articulate what we mean by communion. We ask questions like, "what do we mean when we say that we exist in communion with God?" "What sort of correlation is there between our communion in the Triune God and communion with the world or other believers?"<sup>5</sup> "How do we adjudicate whether we are incarnating and expressing our communion with these others properly and according to our communion in the Triune God?"<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, "how can we ascertain that our conceptions of communion are constitutive of the copious conceptions articulated and expressed throughout the universal church in space and time?"<sup>7</sup> These are just a few of the questions that we struggle with as a community and I surmise that many other communities wrestle with them too. And it seems to me that it would have salutary for *The Nature and Mission of the Church* to explore or briefly address some of these queries given that they so easily emerge from one who espouses a communion notion of ecclesiology.

## **B. The Mission of the Church in Communion**

### *A. The Mission of the Church in Communion According to the WCC Document*

As far as mission is concerned the document accentuates that mission belongs to the ontology of the church (NMC, #35). It constitutes her existence and identity. As subjects in communion with one another the Triune God calls and sends his church into the world to invite it back into communion and thereby redeem it (NMC, #4, #34, #40; Ephesians 1:10; Romans 8:19-21; Colossians 1:18-20). She is sent out to heal and reconcile broken relationships with God and with others (NWC, #40). This is accomplished in a manner similar to the Incarnation and Pentecost. Like Christ, she enters into human realities and provides opportunity for communion with God and like the Spirit she manifests the gift of this communion (NMC, #18; #111). By entering into the lives of the world she participates in their aspirations and sufferings (NMC, #31, #40, #112; 2 Corinthians 5:18-21) while simultaneously bearing witness to the eschatological communion and restoration of all (NMC, #111).

### *B. Reflections on the Mission of the Church as Communion According to Amici Dei*

I concur with and laud the document's emphasis on the missional ontology of the church. As a member and leader of an emerging community living in North America it seems ludicrous and at times incomprehensible to conceive and discuss the church in a manner that is not ecumenical and missional.<sup>8</sup> Although we are a small group and have limited resources we fulfill our calling and missional function within the world. Which, we believe, is to reconcile broken friendships. Because we live and gather here our center of attention is specifically in the Pasadena area. In this area we endeavor to restore broken friendships between believers and other believers as well as between unbelievers and God. When we meet and dialogue with unbelievers who do know what God has done in Jesus Christ and have no church communion to participate in we cultivate a friendship with them and participate in their life hoping that we are bringing God's communion

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<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 198.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *The Trinity and Christian Life* (Chicago, IL: HarperCollins, 1993), 402.

<sup>7</sup> Harding Meyer, *That All May Be One: Perceptions and Models of Ecumenicity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, "Response to 'Walking Worthily: Missional Leadership after Christendom.'" Payton Lectures, Fuller Theological Seminary, May 2-3, 2007 (Unpublished essay), 2.

to them. We conceive of our mission similar to the Incarnation; God came to us so we go to them.<sup>9</sup>

In the back of our minds as we seek this mission to the world we struggle with several questions. They all generate from the overall question of how we are missional in communion. That is, how we pragmatically reconcile and transform broken relationships and friendships in the world. Do we do it as individuals who are sent out into our own spheres of life?<sup>10</sup> Or, do we do it as a community as we share life together? Or, do we do both? How should reconciliation and transformation be pursued and is any approach more profitable for the community and the individual than another? Although we never arrive at definitive or precise answers to these queries when we submit them we are often reminded of our uniqueness within God's communion. We are God's *polis*, or city of friends, and have been given our own narrative, practices, and goal.<sup>11</sup> However we go into the world, either individually or collectively, it is important that those who we enter into relationship with and seek to reconcile with God are invited and encouraged to enter into our friendship as a community in order that they may truly experience communion with God.

### III. Communion in and for the World

#### *A. Communion in and for the World through the Sacraments and Ministry According to the WCC Document*

The document states that the church anticipates, proclaims, and bears witness to the eschatological communion through her particular activities (*NMC*, #37; Matthew 25:31). Specifically, through baptism she enters into communion and invites others to do the same (*NMC*, #21, #73, #75; 1 Corinthians 12:3-13). Through the Eucharist she participates in this communion and remembers God's work through Christ and hopes for his final completion of it (*NWC*, #21, #81; 1 Corinthians 10:16). The document emphasizes that both of these practices are foundational for communion because they receive and affirm it with God and with one another (*NMC*, #96, #78). It then goes on to affirm that those who have been baptized and participate in the Eucharist, and thereby have entered into communion with God, are given gifts to cultivate and deepen the communion that they share with others (*NMC*, #21, #76). However, as it notes, not all of these gifts are the same; some are different in kind (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6). It advises proper exercise of these gifts specifically with reference to clergy and lay. It suggests that those who have the gift of leadership should only lead with the other members in mind (*NMC*, #19, #89).<sup>12</sup> And those who are led should confer leadership to this individual and adhere to it (*NMC*, #19, #83, #86).<sup>13</sup> Both clergy and lay participate in the communion and contribute to its cultivation. Neither one is more important than the other.<sup>14</sup>

#### *B. Communion in and for the World through the Sacraments and Ministry According to Amici Dei*

One of the primary questions that this section raises but does not proffer an answer to is the essence and direct function of the sacraments. What do the sacraments do? It mentions that many traditions have had contentions over questions such as these culminating in denominations

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<sup>9</sup> Here we have been most influenced by the Reformed Pentecostal philosopher James K. A. Smith not simply because of his accentuation of the missional aspect of the incarnation but with his entire incarnational understanding of the church. See, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 248.

<sup>11</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 239.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 298.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985), 137.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology Volume 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 405-20.

within Protestantism disputing over whether the Eucharist confers salvation or represents it (NMC, #81). Questions such as these are ubiquitous in Christian traditions. There have been several occasions in which our community has disputed questions such as these. Thankfully, we all, in the course of time have perceived some of these queries for what they are, namely, false dichotomies. Instead of embracing these false dichotomies we have sought to expose and surmount them by formulating a more holistic understanding of baptism and the Eucharist. As a community we have concluded that God mediates salvation to the individual by means of *both* the participants and the elements.<sup>15</sup> So, on the one hand, we affirm that as the participant takes in the elements he or she is received by God and the community and thereby receives salvation and communion. While, on the other hand, we affirm that the elements are only representations of this communion but without them the communion would not be expressed and cultivated.

Another question that this section raises but does not answer is what it means to belong in communion or in a church. In such a fragmented culture like North America how is one to determine what communion is and who is experiencing it? Typically, communion is conceptualized and articulated in ways that center on the commitment of the individual to the group. But in locations like North America, where a person's lifestyle is so transient, this notion of communion and commitment is almost entirely obsolete. One has to wonder if communion can be discovered and maintained outside of a formal gathering of church and if it can what it looks like. Can one experience the necessary communion with God and others in transient ways that do not require one's verbal commitment or physical presence? It seems to me that we are behooved to respond to these questions given the recent surge of global emerging churches with their suspicion of structures that demand allegiance and experiments with technological networking. As a leader of one of these communities I find myself encountering and musing over these questions again and again. I have encouraged our community to see that commitment and allegiance are important and should be important. But they should not be given to institutions and structures. Rather, they should be given to relationships.<sup>16</sup> We as a community try to embody this and each of us has made a commitment, not to our group, but to each other and the friendship and communion that we share. So, meeting together formally to worship is not our primary interest and devotion. Instead, our commitment is to each other as friends and sharing our lives together. We have discovered that this conceptual framework is extremely salubrious and transformative in our late modern culture. It creates space and encourages us to bring communion to each other not only when we formally gather but also whenever we are together. In turn our communion shifts from an event to a lifestyle. We become *Amici in Commune* – Friends in Communion.

#### IV. Conclusion

In the introduction to *The Nature and Mission of the Church* the commission states that it encourages readers to reflect on the document in light of their particular experiences in order that the universal features of the church can be more clearly understood (NMC, #4). This is what I have attempted to do in this essay. While my reflections and experience are particular I am confident nonetheless that they are reflections and experiences of the universal church.<sup>17</sup> If not, I am confident that they are a valuable contribution to the search for a greater understanding of the universal church. While there is a plenitude of topics and claims in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* that should be engaged I chose specifically to focus on a few and present some reflections on them. In each section I presented the challenges that we, *Amici Dei*, have encountered as an

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<sup>15</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Academic: 2002), 31. Cf. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 60; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 181; Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church*, 84.

<sup>16</sup> For the implications of this consult of the work of LeRon Shults, especially, *Faces of Forgiveness: Searching for Wholeness and Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 218-9.

<sup>17</sup>Meyer, *That All May Be One*, 7.

emerging community as well as proffered challenges to the document and implicitly to the ecumenical movement at large as it seeks a greater understanding of the nature and mission of the church in the world today.