

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS:
THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A Course Paper

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by

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Introduction

To offer a current ecumenical statement on the Church and her mission it is imperative that one consider the current historical setting of the Church and discern the movement of the Holy Spirit “between the times,” that is, since the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus and the progressive movement of the Holy Spirit toward the eschatological hope of the realization of that kingdom.¹ The Faith and Order document entitled, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*,² offers a template by which all churches can draw upon to define their ecclesiology based on the movement of the Holy Spirit for their context. In this paper, it is my goal to present a brief historical overview of my own ecclesial context and attempt to discern the movement of the

¹ Marilyn J. Legge, “The Church in Solidarity: Liberation Ecclesiology.” In *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992): 160.

² *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order paper No. 198, 2005, <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2617>.

Holy Spirit in light of the needs of a particular faith community whose goal is to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus in their own context.

Current Church Context

Drawing from liberation ecclesiology studies³, my church context can identify with the struggle of those who are marginalized, ridiculed, and seen as outcasts because its dogmas and practices operate at the periphery of what is known and understood by the traditional Church. The name of my church is Lifeline Fellowship Christian Center (LFCC). LFCC is a non-denominational Pentecostal Church whose belief structure comes, in part, from the Oneness Pentecostal movement.⁴ As such, it does not embrace wholly the Trinitarian language of the early Church Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) and Chalcedon (451). The struggle, in part, resembles the struggle of feminist ecclesiologist in naming reality, starting with God. This act of naming one's identity and place in the world is seen as a human right that has been usurped by male dominated images.⁵ The struggle of Oneness Pentecostals includes the sacralizing of power by the traditional Church regarding images of God as Trinity. Tanner speaks of the feminist agenda to recover feminine images for God, speaking of God in feminine language. In particular, she raises questions regarding traditional categories of God in terms of masculine attributes of power and lordship and of the pattern of pyramidal hierarchy in the Trinity, and asks whether they are any longer useable.⁶

While some Oneness Pentecostals choose to involve themselves in iconoclasm of the Trinity, that is not the goal of LFCC. LFCC desires to engage in ecumenical dialogue concerning the possibility of other ways of looking at the relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit without being labeled heretical. Having studied, embraced, understood, and appreciated both Trinitarian and Oneness dogma, I would like to point out that participating in the worship and fellowship of Trinitarian tradition has been a non-issue for LFCC and its members. LFCC embraces in practice many of the same liturgical attributes including singing the same worship songs and praying the same prayers. While LFCC chooses to emphasize the unity of God (however, not over against the plurality of God) in doctrinal statement this does not mean that at the most practical level we do not engage with obvious texts of Scripture that speak to the communal nature of the Godhead as a sign to the Church to be in communion with God, one another, and the world. Like Tanner⁷, LFCC desires to search the Bible and tradition not to replace traditional language, but rather to recover the unitarian images for God, in order to find a balance and wholeness.

Nature and Mission of the Church

In articulating the nature and mission of the Church from an Oneness Pentecostal perspective I draw from communion and mission ecclesiology, which best situates the revisionist and Charismatic understanding of the Pentecostal Church as cast in Acts 2.⁸ The Church exists as the missionary people of God through whom the Spirit works to accomplish God's purposes.

³ Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987), also see <http://www.landreform.org/boff2.htm>.

⁴ See David Reed's, *In Jesus' Name: The History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals* (Deo Publishing, forthcoming). Reed, who is an Anglican, offers a historical theological analysis of Oneness Pentecostalism and a prophetic critique of the traditional Church's marginalization of this group of people. Also see Appendix A: Lifeline Fellowship Christian Center, *Statement of Belief*.

⁵ Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 5.

⁶ Mary Tanner. "On Being Church: Some Thoughts Inspired by the Ecumenical Community," *Ecumenical Review*, 53, 1 (2001): 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ See Appendix A for the Belief Statement and Mission of LFCC.

The theology of the Church emerges out of mission and mission determines the nature of the Church and its relation to the mission of God for the world.⁹

Communion ecclesiology draws from the concept of *koinonia*, which dates back to the New Testament.¹⁰ According to Zizioulas, the idea of communion or *ecclesial being* is always a way of being with God first, then with the world and others.¹¹ Although he casts this communion in light of the Trinity, this is not problematic for purposes of this paper. In fact, it highlights the problem with communion ecclesiology that it quite often means different things in different traditions. Therefore, universal markers are needed to evaluate what communion ecclesiology is and how it defines the nature and mission of the Church. Using the categories from the Faith and Order's preparatory paper entitled, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*,¹² I will look at two aspects of the Church to articulate the nature and mission of an Oneness Pentecostal Church from a communion and mission ecclesiological perspective incorporating the concept of unity.

The Church as Sign and Instrument

Lohfink describes the biblical model of the Church from an Old Testament perspective and brings it into the New Testament with a discussion concerning Jesus and community. His overall theme is the gathering of God's people so that salvation is made possible to all. Lohfink clarifies the role of the Church stating the Church does not exist for itself but completely and exclusively for the world. Therefore, the Church cannot become the world it must retain its own identity. The New Testament community passed on Jesus' words and put them into practice. He states that the successful gathering of God's people is due in part because the reception of Jesus' praxis of the reign of God continued beyond the New Testament communities. In a larger context, the nations are drawn to the people of God as a work of God alone. The Church is seen as an eschatological gathering of God's people.¹³ It is not uncommon for the Pentecostal tradition to draw from Acts 2 to guide its ecclesiology. While some would state that the Acts 2 Church is not normative and argue from historical context, it remains the task of the individual community of faith to discern the work of the Spirit as did the Acts 2 Church. At LFCC Acts 2:42 becomes the central focus of our fellowship; to continue steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking bread, and in prayer.¹⁴

Based on the needs of the community that LFCC serves it is the discernment of LFCC that a theology and praxis of multicultural ministry is needed to help return to a biblical model of effective ministry in the forming and leading of God's people toward his purposes. Multicultural ministries follow the biblical mandate to preach the Gospel to all nations (Acts 1:8) and are representative of their communities as was the New Testament Church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11). It is a biblical model of ecclesia consisting of community (irrespective of ethnicity or culture), mission, and discipleship engaged in ministry to effectively carry out God's purposes.

This is the essence of incarnational ministry in carrying out the *Missio Dei* or mission of God. In this way the Church becomes a true sign and instrument of God's intention and plans for the world. It entails practices that demonstrate God's intent for the world. The pattern of the Church's life is in community and it is a demonstration of what God intends for the life of the whole world. It is here where both concepts of unity and diversity are needed and hence images

⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 52-58.

¹⁰ Jesus' encounters with his disciples in the gospels, in particularly at the Last Supper, shows the communal nature of the fellowship of believers as modeled and instituted by Jesus and later carried on by the Apostles. This notion of community is explicit in Acts 2 and in the Pauline accounts of The Lord's Table.

¹¹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 15.

¹² *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, Faith and Order paper No. 198, 2005, <http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2617>.

¹³ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁴ See Appendix A: Lifeline Fellowship Christian Center, *Statement of Belief and Mission*.

of the Oneness of God and the communion of the Trinity can be employed to work in synergy.¹⁵ The practices of the Church are communal and embody mutual care, reconciliation, loving accountability, and hospitality. A missional Church is indicated by how Christians behave toward God, one another, and the world.¹⁶

The Church that is missional minded is a community in which all members are involved in learning what it means to be disciples of Jesus. The Bible is normative in this Church's life. Biblical formation and discipling are essential for members of the congregation (2 Corinthians 4:13, 16). The missional Church understands its calling as witness to the Gospel of the reign of God and it strives to be an instrument, agent, and sign of that reign. As it makes its witness through its identity, activity and communication, it is aware of the provisional character of all that it is and does and its own need for completeness.¹⁷

The Church needs to move back to being a body of people sent on a mission. LFCC has accomplished this, in part, by shifting the structure of its church to a congregational structure as opposed to a corporate one where there is a shift to embodiment, teamwork, a laity-oriented ministry, and mission driven focus. Embodiment entails being wrapped up in what is happening. Christianity is about a way of life, a lifestyle change, discipleship, and commitment to serving something that is bigger than oneself. The shift to team connects with ministry and the use of ministry gifts as the apostle Paul describes they are for the edification of the body of Christ and the work of the ministry. The shift to a laity-orientation entails a shift from being a consumer of religious goods to a participant in ministry; everyone becomes involved with the mission of the Church. The Church's purpose is to grow people not numbers.

These shifts have also required a reconstruction of theological models of care so that LFCC now has a stronger presence in the community standing for issues of justice, reconciliation, and healing. A missional Church asks the question, where is there a need for the healing presence of a Christian community? A community that is missional will look like and represent Christ in its life, in its words, and in its deeds.¹⁸ Ecclesial practices that are established are to result in cooperative human activities that form the people in to a particular way of life. The purpose of all ecclesial practices is the cultivation of God's people for God's purposes. Dietterich offers examples of how certain ecclesiastical practices cultivates, trains, forms, and equips the people of God to carry out God's redemptive purposes in the world.¹⁹

The Life of Communion in and for the World

Drawing from Paul's imagery in 1 Corinthians 12, Ogden argues that the Church is an organism, interdependent and interconnected with the need to function cohesively to bring about a wholeness and strength to go onward. Ogden compares and contrasts the Church that functions as an organism and the Church that functions as an institution. The Church as an organism is described as the Body of Christ, the whole people of God in whom Christ dwells. Ministry is shaped by the gifts and callings distributed to the whole Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. All ministry is considered lay ministry and the people and the ministry are one. In contrast, the institutional model quenches the release of the Holy Spirit, the flow of energy and life in the Church, and the operation of the gifts of the Spirit. A Church that functions as an institution places importance on leadership offices in the Church and is a top down Church. Ogden views the institutional model as one of bondage and entrapment. However, he clearly states that every

¹⁵ A complimentary model of unity and diversity using images of Oneness and Trinity, while not impractical in certain areas of the life and practice of the Church, has many technical difficulties from a theological perspective.

¹⁶ Adapted from Lois Barrett's, *Treasure in Clay Jars* (Eerdmans, 2004).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ George R. Hunsberger, "Sizing Up the Shape of the Church". *Reformed Review*, 47, 2 (Winter 1993): 133-144.

¹⁹ Inagrace Dietterich, *Cultivating Missional Communities*. (Chicago, Illinois: The Center for Parish Development, 2002).

organism is in need of order and just as the human body has a system of order, so does the Church.

Ordained ministry finds its place within the ministry of the whole people of God. Ogden gives a practical example of how to implement an equipping model using the biblical example of Jethro and Moses. He also cites the Apostle Paul's functional language to describe the living organism under divine endowment where the people of God are given ministry gifts to edify the Body of Christ. The primary call he states is to Christ, community, and transformation to all who are in Christ. The secondary call is the application of the primary call into all spheres of life.²⁰

Once disciplined, God's people are a sent people. The people of God are to be formed based on New Testament Biblical practices which include worship, fellowship and the Sacraments, forgiveness, reconciliation, social relationship based on interdependence, gratitude and generosity, living in the fullness of God as an eschatological community living under the new order of God's reign.²¹ The LFCC *Belief Statement* gives examples of biblical practices it incorporates into the life of its community. The worship service is typical of the Pentecostal tradition with a set liturgy that is guided by the Spirit and invites the use of the charisms. The celebration of the Lord's Supper occurs at least quarterly and is typical of most Free Church practices. The unique aspect of the Oneness Pentecostal Church is its insistence on following the apostolic formation of baptism found in Acts 2:38 of baptism in Jesus Name.

In relation to the People of God, Ogden advocates a priesthood of all believers. The whole people of God are called to ministry to function as priests to one another and to the world. The Church is a living extension of Jesus' ministry; it is one ministry, the ministry of the people of God. Ogden speaks of a priesthood of all believers (1Peter 2:9), where all believers are priests before God and to one another and to the world. The Church exists as the missionary people of God through whom the Spirit works to accomplish God's purposes. It is imperative that God's people understand the theology undergirding ecclesia and ministry in order to get to praxis, which assumes effective ministry and the Church fulfilling its mission. A person can come to know God only in praxis discovered through action. God's ministry comes alive in the praxis of Spirit, first through Christ's ministry and then through those who are empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

Anderson defines Christopraxis as Christ present in the form of the Holy Spirit indwelling persons and empowering them for witness and ministry. This is where the theology of the Church emerges out of mission and mission determines the nature of the Church and its relation to the mission of God for the world. Anderson uses the mission theology of Paul because it represents the main focus of the book of Acts and the emergence of first century Christianity as a result of missionary expansion beyond Jerusalem.²²

Conclusion: Ecumenical Statement

Based on a theological reflection of the current ecumenical statement on the Church and her mission and my own Church context at LFCC, I offer the following nascent ecumenical statement. As the *People of God*, the *ecclesia*, the *called out ones*, LFCC desires to be a multicultural ministry reaching the needs of people and people groups that are in the surrounding communities. We partner with others to help fulfill our calling and mission to the communities we serve. Our hearts desire is that each and every person receives the gift of salvation that only comes through the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, our mission is to preach the Gospel, to set the

²⁰ Greg Ogden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003).

²¹ James V. Brownson, Inagrace T. Dietterich, Barry A. Harvey, and Charles C. West. *Storm Front: The Good News of God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003).

²² Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 52-58.

captive free, and to mend the broken hearted. We are here to help people and people groups come into a healing and loving relationship with Christ, to connect to God through the power of the Spirit and to receive all that God has promised them. LFCC is to function as a community of believers in communion with God, one another, and the world. We honor biblical practices that speak to the communion we have with God and others and as such advocate baptism as a sign of being grafted into the Body of Christ. We also partake of the Lord's Supper and the breaking of bread and fellowship. We actively engage in discernment of the needs of Christ's Church and the movement of the Spirit in the world around us. We implore the gifts of the Spirit for the edification of Christ's Church and for God's own creative purposes. LFCC is to be a sign of the eschatological hope of Christ's return for his people. As we wait for his return, we do so not by withdrawing but by engaging the world around us thereby ushering in the reign of God.

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Appendix A

Lifeline Fellowship Christian Center Statement of Belief

What We Believe

WE BELIEVE in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. We believe that He ascended on high and has sent his Spirit, the Holy Ghost, which was poured out at Jerusalem over 2000 years ago, and it is this same Spirit that fills the hearts of those who seek Him today. (Acts 2:22-24; I Cor. 15:20; Acts 2:4)

WE BELIEVE that the Bible is the inspired, infallible Word of God, written by holy men of God as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (II Peter 1:21; II Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4)

WE BELIEVE one God who is infinite in power, holy in nature, attributes and purposes as well as omniscient and omnipresent. We believe that He was revealed to us as Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Holy Spirit in His grace, never leaving those who trust in Him. (Deut. 6:4; Is. 45:18; John 1:1,14)

WE BELIEVE in a holy, sanctified life. We believe in divine healing, communion and foot washing. We believe also in the glorious catching away of the saints when Jesus returns in the clouds of glory to take His people to Heaven. (I Peter 1:16; St. Matthew 5:48; II Corinth. 7:1; I Thess. 4:16; St. Mark 16:17-18)

WE BELIEVE that in Jesus dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, for it pleased the Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell. (Col. 2:9; 1:19; Jn 14:8; 10:30; I John 5:7, Isaiah 43: 10-15)

WE BELIEVE in the Virgin Birth. Jesus was born both human and divine. (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; I Tim. 3:16)

WE BELIEVE in baptism in water by immersion in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and the infilling of the precious Holy Ghost. (Acts 2:38; St. John 3:3-8; Acts 8:16; 10:44-46; 19:5; Titus 3:5,)

Our Mission

Lifeline: To Proclaim Jesus as the Way, the Truth & the Life (John 14:6) A Lifeline & Refuge for All Souls (Matt. 11:28)

Fellowship: To Continue Steadfastly in the Apostles Doctrine and Fellowship, and in Breaking Bread, and in Prayer (Acts 2:42)

Christian Center: Equipping the Saints for Ministry (Luke 10:1-2)

1) Preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ

To proclaim Jesus as the Way, the Truth & the Life.

2) Praise and Worship

A time to focus on the goodness of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ from whom all blessings flow, we give thanks and glory to God for all things, according to Scripture let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

3) Christian Education

To continue steadfastly in the Apostles Doctrine and Fellowship, and in Breaking Bread, and in Prayer. Equipping the Saints for Ministry. We accomplish this mission through our Christian education programs consisting of Sunday School, Bible Study, New Member's Class, and Lifeline Academy.

4) Christian Counseling

At Lifeline Fellowship, under the divine direction of God's Holy Spirit led by the anointed man of God, we are on a mission to preach the Gospel, to set the captives free, and to mend the brokenhearted. We accomplish this mission through our Christian Counseling program, which deals with life's issues and how to seek resolution, reconciliation, and healing according to the Holy Scriptures.

5) Community Outreach

The Holy Scriptures compels us to go into the highways and the byways, freely we have received freely we shall give. Our outreach is three-fold:

(a) Helping people to meet their immediate needs such as with food, clothes, and shelter. This is accomplished by becoming a Knowledge Center of Resources for children in need, the elderly, abused, physically and mentally challenged, homeless, single mothers and fathers, and any and all who are challenged with life's problems.

(b) Providing Christian counseling on life issues that will empower people to rise above their current circumstances and set a course that will enable them to be self-sufficient and productive in society. This is accomplished through programs dealing with restoration, skill building, character building, problem solving, and integration.

(c) Through our New Creation and Discipleship Program we perform Assessment and Evaluations of the progress of individuals who are committed to improving their circumstances through the above-mentioned programs. This promotes the success of each individual through mentoring, counseling, friendship, and love, as was modeled by our Lord Jesus Christ.

6) Adult/Youth/Family Activities

Provide an avenue for alternative entertainment that is enjoyable, biblically based, creates a spirit of camaraderie, creates a bond of love and respect, and lifts self-esteem.