

THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH¹– A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This most current ecumenical statement on the Church is the fruit of decades of theological labors by many. Not only does it present a comprehensive testimonial to the common self-understanding of the widest circle of churches, and we must add, ‘ecclesial communities,’ it also discusses its ecclesiology in the concrete context of history. It does not claim to be exhaustive nor final. It is being formed and shaped, “a stage on the way to a Common Statement.” Its purpose is defined and is to be evaluated as such: to state what the churches can say together about the nature and mission of the Church with the quest for visible unity (#4-5). This theological reflection paper will mainly aim at appreciating and responding to the document as a whole and to a major theme of ecclesiology in the document, the theme of communion. And this reflection is done, as it will become clearer, from the perspective of an Asian Christian from a congregational ecclesiological tradition. Written as such, I hope, the paper is also responding to the gracious invitation of the document writers, however indirectly.

Responding to the document as a whole

The most important contribution of the document, I would venture, is that it is very enriching theologically. In giving the churches to give expression to what they can say together about the nature and mission of the Church, it helps all to taste the theological treasures in traditions of others. It achieves a wonderful level of balance. It clearly sets the Church of Jesus Christ in the relationship with the Triune God, and not to just one person of the Trinity. In treating the Church, it does not take off its eyes from the Kingdom.² It does not repeat the biblical metaphors of the Church (I.A.II) but attempts a systematic articulation of the theological nature of the Church (I.A.I). If *Lumen Gentium*, also a very comprehensive statement on the Church, construes the Church almost exclusively in christological terms before bringing in the Holy Spirit,³ the document unmistakably articulates the Church in both christological and pneumatological language right from the start, in the systematic description of the Church and also in the selection of biblical images of the Church. One can imagine that it is the result from the contribution of people like the great communion theologian of our day – John Zizoulas. Christians from traditions using only christological terms for the Church will certainly benefit from this. John P. Newport, for example, in writing about the article on the purpose of the church for the book on ecclesiology of “the People of God” tradition only describe the Church in such one-sided language: “From a broad theological perspective, the church can be defined as

¹ “The Nature and Mission of the Church.” Faith and Order Paper No. 198, 2005 (<http://www.oikoumene.org/?id=2617>). This paper will refer to this paper as “the document.”

² The ‘kingdom’ is mentioned 19 times.

³ As complained by several Eastern orthodox theologians. See Karkkainen, p. 98.

the whole body of those who through Christ's death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life."⁴ On the other hand, when verbal proclamation is lifted out in a document often mentioning proclamation in word and deeds together, one wonders if behind the following wording is the insistence of certain evangelical representatives: "*One of the greatest services Christians offer to the world is the proclamation of the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk. 16:15). Evangelization is thus the foremost task of the church in obedience to the command of Jesus (Mt. 28:18-20)*" (#110). Such priority for evangelism, in turn, calls for a depth of identification with Christ in his suffering and a width of social responsibility: "*The Church is called and empowered to share the suffering of all by advocacy and care for the poor, the needy and the marginalised. This entails critically analysing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation*" (#40).

The document is enriching because it does not base its statements only on Scriptures but also in the common historical tradition. The four traditional marks of the Church are set in contrasting contexts: oneness in contrast to the actual divisions (#53); holiness in contrast to individual and communal sin (#54); catholicity in contrast to the inadequate gospel (#55); and apostolicity in contrast to the shortcomings and errors of churches (#56).

Language-wise, the document achieves an amazing feat of deftly introducing the concept of sacrament to church traditions that are reserved about it by describing the Church as sign and instrument of God's intention and plan for the world: '*Already participating in the love and life of God, the Church is a prophetic sign which points beyond itself to the purpose of all creation, the fulfilment of the Kingdom of God. For this reason Jesus called his followers the "salt of the earth", "the light of the world" and "a city built on a hill" (Mt 5:13-16)*' (#43).⁵

However, because of the composite nature of the document, certain parts are highly abstract, especially when it is trying hard or too hard to accommodate contrasting views, such as: "*The relationship between sin and holiness in the Church is not a relationship of two equal realities, because sin and holiness do not exist on the same level. Rather, holiness denotes the Church's nature and God's will for it, while sinfulness is contrary to both...*" (box of #56). To be more helpful to connect to the churches, especially, the 'majority church' in the two-third worlds who are not used to this kind of abstract language, another language style, metaphorical perhaps, can be employed. One also wonders if it could be more concise, some concepts are repeatedly found in the document to the point of redundancy. The method of separating not-yet resolved issues (and put them inside the boxes) is recommendable so that the differences are recognized and seen in the perspective of other common grounds.

Responding to the theme of communion

The theme of communion is prominent throughout the document. One can even discern a basic communion ecclesiology scattered throughout. The Church is understood in terms of communion of those who have communion with God: "*The Church is the communion of those who live in a personal relationship with God who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response - the communion of the faithful*" (#10). That personal relationship with God is not a passing characteristic of one of those social clubs or organizations: "*It is not primarily a communion of believers with each other. It is their common partaking in God's own life whose innermost being is communion*" (#13). This communion is not expressed only among individual Christians but also among local churches in a holistic way (#64). The mission of the Church is presented in terms of communion and in a much larger biblical scope of the whole creation rather than the narrow emphasis of just "winning souls": "*God restores and enriches communion with humanity, granting eternal life in God's Triune being (#34)... It is the will of God that the whole creation, not only the Church but all, should realize communion in Christ (Eph 1:10, 4:1-16).*

⁴ Basden, P. & Dockery, S.D. eds. *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), p. 19.

⁵ I believe that the language of 'participating' and 'prophetic sign' are great for evangelicals to come close to the idea of sacrament. Underline in quote mine.

The Church, as communion, is instrumental to God's ultimate purpose. It exists for the glory of God to serve in obedience to the mission of Christ, the reconciliation of humankind” (#57).⁶

And so does communion belong to the nature of the church or the mission of the church? The document affirms it is both and makes it the basis for a strong call to unity and repentance: “*The mission belongs to the essence of the nature and being of the Church as koinonia. This makes the restoration of unity between Christians and the renewal of their lives an urgent task (#58)... The gift of communion in Christ is often restricted or only partially realized. The new life entails the constant need for repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration. It belongs to the essence of fellowship with God that there should be continual confession of sin (1 Jn 1:7)*” (#60).⁷ Such communion does not entail uniformity but makes room for rich diversity of expressions: “*The communion of the Church demands the constant interplay of cultural expressions of the Gospel if the riches of the Gospel are to be appreciated for the whole people of God.*” (#62).

And such communion is seen as the ultimate eschatological goal: “*The final destiny of the Church is to be caught up in the intimate relation of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to praise and to enjoy God for ever*” (#59).⁸ It is clear that the theme of communion, present in the Scriptures, the patristic and Reformation writings, is able to spell out a great ecclesiology that is healing to the scandalous divisions of the Church. The theme allows for different shades or degrees of fellowship, avoiding back and white positioning. It subsumes the whole language of hierarchy and is potential to cure excessive institutionalism, centralism and clericalism.

Appreciative of the strengths of the theme of communion, I'd like to raise a number of questions concerning the way communion is developed in the document.

How far should a church body go to preserve the unity, “to be in communion,” when it feels that its faithfulness to the Triune God is threatened? Aren't there times when visible unity has to be put aside in order to be faithful to God? When is the call to visible unity immature and requiring too much sacrifice on issues of truth and convictions? In the box section of #63 called *Limits of Diversity*, the document tries to set some limits to the differences that could be called ‘diversity’ but it never touches the issue truth and faithfulness. What have we learned from the Reformation about this and what can a document like this offer to, for instance, the present crisis of the Episcopal communion in the US?⁹

Not only a communion ecclesiology should allow room for limits of visible unity in history, I would venture, it could also point to guidelines for church bodies in needed *temporary* division before the eschatological consummation of the Church.

⁶ Humankind is presented as ‘communion-potential’ in receiving such mission: “*In the narrative of creation, man and woman are created in God's image, bearing an inherent longing and capacity for communion with God, with one another and with creation as its stewards. Thus, the whole of creation has its integrity in koinonia with God. Communion is rooted in the order of creation itself, and is realized in part in natural relationships of family and kinship, of tribe and people. The Old Testament displays the special relationship, the covenant, established by God, between God and the chosen people (cf. Ex 19:4-6; Hos 2:18-23)*” (#49).

⁷ Threats to such communion are identified with calls to rise above division: “*Within the Church divisions (heresies, schisms, political conflicts, expressions of hatred, etc.) threaten God's gift of communion. Christians are called to work untiringly to overcome divisions, to prevent legitimate diversities from becoming causes of division, and to live a life of diversities reconciled*” (#64).

⁸ Steps and stages are recognized in moving toward the ultimate communion: “*There will need to be the acceptance that, in moving by steps and stages, developments will occur which may appear inconsistent to other churches. Yet, if the churches accept to proceed along this way, they will be a sign and a gift, in and for a fractured world, of that koinonia which was God's intention for the whole of humanity from the beginning of time - a koinonia which through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is already a reality among us, and a guarantee of that which God will fully realize at the end of history*” (#125).

⁹ Obviously, this refers to the dilemma of splitting or not over the issue of consecrating gay bishops. Cf. http://www.gazette.com/articles/wounds_34250_article.html/split_remain.html. Touching briefly on the moral and ethical dilemma, the document points to some direction but the idea is unclear and not very developed: “*Koinonia in relation to ethics and morals means that it is in the Church that, along with the confession of the faith and the celebration of the sacraments (and as an inseparable part of these), the Gospel tradition is probed constantly for moral inspiration and insight*” (#117).

Would an in-depth communion ecclesiology expect visible unity when there is evidence of lack of faith in God, of cultural Christian identity? The document seems to treat the problem of “belong without believing” on the same par with “believe without belonging” (#51). For those in the evangelical tradition the former is utterly more serious, it is the matter of salvation itself. How automatic should there be concrete ‘communion’ between the official three-self Church and the underground churches in China?

Two-third world Christians must find it liberating to read of the sensitivity to different cultures, stating that: *“Problems are created when one culture seeks to capture the Gospel and claims to be the one and only authentic way of celebrating the Gospel; when one culture seeks to impose its expression of the Gospel on others as the only authentic expression of the Gospel; when one culture finds it impossible to recognise the Gospel being faithfully proclaimed in another culture”* (#61), but they would love to see more development. It is not that their views are “permitted” but that their views are taken into the articulation of the document. From my own perspective, issues like communion with God versus communion with idols/evil spirits/devil/world in Asian countries, among other, need to be articulated, incorporated. Many in certain cultures do not enter or refuse to enter the communion as individuals but as part of a complex network of loyalty, familial, communal, religious.... What is to be rejected and what is to be retained and how, in what degree, should also be brought into a common statement of self-understanding if we are not to perpetuate certain cultural biases against certain cultures.

The familiarization with the document has been enriching to me in a special way, coming from a church tradition that is very reserved when WCC is mentioned. It’s eye-opening to see the biblical basis, the theological richness and balance, the gracious tactfulness and wisdom shown in dealing with the differences. It is a hopeful “stage on the way” toward the unity God intends for His Church. The theme of communion shines throughout and compels all to strive toward that unity, trusting in God. At the same time, the document seems to emerge in the circles that have been steeped in the language and theological framework and problems of the Latin and Greek worlds. One hopes for the next stages on the way, it will be possible to incorporate more issues of more relevance to all the churches. The simplification of language would also help toward that goal. One lasting impact on this reader after engaging with the document is that it is impossible to separate the nature and the mission of the Church, not in this document, and not in what God intends for His Church.