

Guiding this interaction with the World Council of Churches' document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* is the understanding that the nature of God informs the nature of the Church, both global and local. I hope then, to (1) illumine the presence of this understanding in the text by noting two conceptual threads, *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and the *perichoresis* of God, within the document and then to demonstrate how these inform the communal aspect of the document's depiction of the Church; (2) employ the ideas of John Zizioulas and Jurgen Moltman to further unpack claims made about the Triune God within the document; (3) with the preceding sections as a basis, outline the conceptual contributions made by my Free Church tradition to the understanding of visible unity.

(1): Within *The Nature and Mission of the Church* two important theological concepts are present, if at times latent. These concepts, *lex orandi*, *lex credendi* and the *perichoresis* of God, help who God is and thus who or what the Church is.

Lex orandi, lex credendi: Roughly translated 'the law of prayer is the law of belief', this maxim indicates that what we believe about God shapes who we become as a church community. Doubtless, this concept is present in *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, but especially in three places. First, it is most notable in the consideration of the classic marks of the church, especially oneness and holiness. "The church is one because God is the one creator..." (12) and again "The Church is holy because God is the holy one" (12). Secondly, that the Church is to imitate its God by sharing essential characteristics is also present in the document's treatment of the mission of the Church. The Church is a Church on a mission because it reflects the Triune God (34), and the content of this mission is in part to bear witness to God's will for transformation of this world (37). Finally, as Christ operates in the *munus triplex*, the church participates in them (19).

The perichoresis of God: By this concept, I mean the mutual indwelling or interpenetration that enables the Trinity to share a total oneness of being without blurring the distinction between them, by which we can conclude that the action of one person of God is also the action of the other two persons. In the document we see this concept most present in the biblical images used to describe the Church. The images are chosen because they depict the Church as having a distinct relationship to each person of the Trinity (14), but as we will see, each image, while focused on a single person of the Trinity, is not possible without the other persons.

The Church as People of God demonstrates that the Church is the result of God calling to himself a people (18). The Church becomes a people only in Christ, however, as he broke down the walls between groups of humans (19). Furthermore, the binding of humans together as a people is done by the power of the Holy Spirit (19). *The Church as Body of Christ* indicates that the Church is united under its head, Christ (20). However, this unity reflects a reconciliation to God (20), and engrafting into the Body is the work of the Holy Spirit (21). *The Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit* reflects the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community of believers, thus creating the Household of God (23). While the Christological aspect of this image is absent from the document, it need not be so: the Father sent the Holy Spirit as the behest of Christ (Jn 16:7). Thus, we see that an action of one person of the Trinity is an implicit action by the other two. Therefore a *perichoretic* understanding of the Trinity probably belies the document's understanding of God. We see then that God's oneness is *perichoretic*; he lives in community.

Koinonia: In line with our guiding premise - that the church is to imitate its God - we thusly see that because the oneness of God is a *perichoretic* oneness, community becomes an essential aspect of the Church. It should be clear then, that I am arguing that the imitation of God's *perichoresis* is social and communal relationships among believers; as we share our lives we mutually-indwell one another. This idea is present in the document as well. As humans are created in a *perichoretic* God's image, social relationships are part of the fabric of human life (25). However, it is in Jesus Christ that humans are able to have the truest form of *koinonia* among them (31).

For my Free Church tradition, the *koinonia* of social relationships is paramount. Thus, for our tradition paragraph 32¹ becomes like a refocused photograph; we bring the communal aspects of mutual prayer, service and participation in one another's lives to the foreground. Before we unpack the details of this social understanding of *koinonia* and its contribution to the ecumenical project, let us first consider two other claims made in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* about the Triune God.

(2): Two additional claims made within the document enable us to see further what kind of God we serve, and thus what the essential characteristics of the Church ought to be. The first claim, that God lives in community, is unpacked with the help of John Zizioulas, while the second, that God is on a mission, is investigated through the thinking of Jurgen Moltman.

The community of God: Because the oneness of God is stated outright within *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (12), and because the community of God is present only in the use of the word family of 'trinity' or in other places implied (25), it would be easy to assume that the oneness of God is primary, while the communal tri-unity of God is somehow second. This has been the treatment of theology proper through out much of western systematic theology,² and is a critical mistake both theologically and ecclesologically.

The ideas of Zizioulas are instructive here. He observes that communion is the primary categorical ontic; nothing can exist without being in relationship to something else.³ Thus, "outside the Trinity, there is no God."⁴ In other words, community is a central aspect of God's character. In fact, God only exists as free and loving relationships between three unique persons. Personhood, then, is defined as a being in relationship. Therefore, while unique and separate persons, each member of the Trinity could never exist alone.

The ecclesiological implications of this understanding begin with the claim that Christ is the ideal person as he exists in two relationships; to the other members of the Trinity as son, and to the Body as head.⁵ In the Eucharist, where the church community is assembled as a synaxis, Christ is fully present. Here the individual, or being outside of relationships, is grafted into Christ and joined to the other members of the Church. They therein become persons. Thus, salvation in this paradigm is gaining personhood in Christ.⁶ Finally, there is a clear element of *lex orandi, lex credendi* as the Eucharistic synaxis is impossible without the iconic shape of Christ; a bishop as the head, and a body without division.

Zizioulas, then enables us to see that not only is the communion of the God-head primary, God cannot exist outside of this communion, and thus neither can his Church. We can conclude from this, that not only is the diversity of the Church a gift from God and part of his design (16), but that diversity is also a fundamental part of his being; at the most basic level God is the communion of three unique persons.

The Mission of God: The reasoning of paragraphs 34 and 37 seem to indicate that because God is on a mission, we are too. That God is in fact on a mission is buttressed by the fact that his Son was sent (1, 18, 36). Indeed, the Greek *pe-mpw* indicates being sent on a mission.⁷ We must then ask with Moltman, what is the origin of this mission?

¹ Visible and tangible signs of the new life of communion are expressed in receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles; breaking and sharing the Eucharistic bread; praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world; serving one another in love; participating in each other's joys and sorrows; giving material aid; proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace. The communion of the Church consists not of independent individuals but of persons in community, all of whom contribute to its flourishing.

² John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 40.

³ Ibid, 17.

⁴ Veli-Matti Karkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 96.

⁵ Zizioulas, 84f.

⁶ Ibid, 53.

⁷ Jurgen Moltman, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 53.

Because we hold that Christ was in fact God, we must hold that his actions and characteristics correspond to God the Father, rather than diverge from him, as divergence would signal a disunity within the God-head.⁸ Therefore the sentness of Christ corresponds to and reveals the inner nature of the Triune God. The nature of God as sender/sent indicates that he is in fact open to history, time and suffering, not in a deficient way, but instead in a mode of profound self-communication.⁹ Or rather perhaps, because he is open in a self-communicating way, he then is open to history, time and suffering. This is the history of the Trinity.

The future of the Trinity is indicated by the resurrection of Jesus.¹⁰ Because Jesus was resurrected by and for the Glory of God, we can see that his resurrection points forward to the final eschatological glorification of God. The mission then of Christ is the glorification of God. This too is the mission of the Spirit, who joins humanity to Christ and allows them to participate in the mission of Christ.

But what is the content of this final glorification of God that is the mission of Christ and the Spirit? At the end of time, once all has been brought under the lordship of Christ, the Son turns the power granted to him by the Father back to the Father, so that God will become 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:18). This is the final glorification of God.¹¹

Though Moltman does not use this language, it is interesting for our purposes to note that the final goal of God is the *perichoretic* indwelling of all things in God, and God in all things. In this truncated depiction of Moltman's theology proper, there is then an intimate relationship between the *perichoresis* of God and the mission of God. While the relationship between mission and *perichoresis* is hinted at in *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (57), it is by no means explicit. We must then find the *perichoretic* nature of our conceptualization of the mission of the Church, if we are to imitate the *perichoretic* mission of God.

(3): Before we delve into the content of my Free Church view, as well as its contribution to the document under consideration and the ecumenical project in general, perhaps a summary of findings to this point is in order. We first observed that inherent within *The Nature and Mission of the Church* are the understandings that the nature of God dictates the nature and essence of his people, the church, and that the nature of God is *perichoretic*. I then contended that the *perichoresis* of humans occurs in community, and that this element should be the center of the Church. This claim was supported as we then saw that the *perichoresis* of God is not peripheral to his being, but at the very center of it. Therefore, diversity is not only a gift from God, but a central part of him. Furthermore, if we are to talk about the mission of God and thus the mission of the Church, we must then also talk about *perichoresis*. That is to say, if God's mission is *perichoresis* then our mission is too. On this basis, then we can consider the content and contributions of my tradition.

Content: The *perichoretic* oneness of God and thus the *perichoretic* oneness of the Church in community is at the heart of my Free Church tradition. Rather than having community for community sake, we define community thusly: people joining their lives together in response to Jesus in order to share their lives and transformed by the presence of God among them. The content of this transformation is the formation of Christ within each believer. Thus, as Christ was sent, suffered and lived a new life, so do we. Much like the portrait of *koinonia* within the document (31), our community is vastly Christocentric. Thus, we refocus the list of elements that could be compiled as essential to the Church – community, sacraments and episcopal hierarchy for example – so that the gathered community being formed into Christ is in the foreground.

Contributions: I believe the contribution of my tradition is a conceptualization of the global unity of the Church as a *perichoretically* unified community, which is in part born out of a concern from my tradition that remains inadequately addressed in the document as it stands. That is a thorough discussion of worship and spirituality.

⁸ Ibid, 54.

⁹ Ibid, 56.

¹⁰ Ibid, 58.

¹¹ Ibid, 63.

Worship and spirituality may have gone without systematic coverage in this document for several reasons, among them that it is too divisive (63, box) or that it is too hard to define. The fact is however, that if we are to hold that the mission of the Church is related to the final glorification of God and the mutual indwelling of God in all things, indeed a worshipful event, then worship is closely related to the nature of the church.

In view of my tradition, worship and spirituality can be generally defined as connection to God and other believers. But perhaps more uniquely we add two other considerations. First, worship and spirituality also involve connection to the margin. Borrowing from Moltman, we consider this aspect of worship and spirituality to be the ecclesiological significance of Mt 25:31ff.¹² Furthermore, borrowing from our feminist friends, connection to the margin helps us to see in what actions and attitudes we sin against our brothers and sisters, locally and globally. In other words, connection to the margin allows us to see reality from a different point of view, thereby enabling us to see our sinfulness in a light we could not have before.¹³

Secondly, we see hospitality to be an essential part of worship and spirituality. For example, in our large Four Square church we take special place in our Sunday meetings to sing songs in both Spanish and Korean as an open door to those in our community who may feel like strangers because of issues of race or ethnicity. As hospitality was an important part of Israelite worship (Isa 58), it remained so in NT times and thus should be important today.

But I would also like to suggest that hospitality is not just welcoming a person outside of a community, but also an idea outside the community. Parker Palmer observes that “God is always using the stranger to introduce us to the strangeness of truth”¹⁴ Indeed, truth is strange, and we must make ourselves hospitable to it. As important to the biblical tradition as hospitality is, we must then be hospitable to new ideas. Furthermore, this hospitality reflects a God who was hospitable to estranged humanity. We must then imitate this in our ecclesiological structures.

I have contended that we must imitate the *perichoretic* nature of God in our Church structures by having community at the center. Community is the *perichoresis* of humanity, made possible by Jesus. We must imitate the *perichoretic* oneness of God at the global level as well. Based on the emphasis of hospitality to strange ideas, the content of this global *perichoretic* oneness is to learn what it means to follow Jesus from other traditions. In the global Christian community, all must become learners and all must become teachers. All traditions must become hospitable to the strangeness of other traditions. As we learn from other traditions, their ideas will become part of us, part of our worldview, and then indeed we will mutually indwell one another.

This, I believe, constitutes a new way to conceive of the global ecumenical dialogue and visible unity. Other suggestions for visible unity somehow present in this document include: intercommunion (102), a global hierarchy (22), as well as the discovery of common theological ground which *The Nature and Mission of the Church* represents. Certainly these are not mutually exclusive with my suggestion here. However, the voice of my tradition calls us to imitate the communal *perichoresis* of God at the global level. As God is a diverse unity, we must become a global diverse unity. The best way to become this global *perichoretic* community and thereby celebrate both our diversity and unity is to allow our traditions to mutually-indwell one another through hospitality to the strange otherness of a tradition different than our own.

¹² Moltman, 121-132.

¹³ See Letty Russell, *Church in the Round*, p 1-40, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 346.

¹⁴ Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 74.