

Theological Reflections on “The Nature and Mission of the Church”

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the Faith and Order Movement’s “The Nature and Mission of the Church” from the perspective of my own ecclesial tradition. As a starting point, I need to say that there is much to affirm about this document. Indeed, in the way it is expressed, and the sorts of statements it makes it resonates more with my own convictions than perhaps any other statement that I have read. Having said that, in what follows, I will focus on the few points of disagreement I have rather than the many points of agreement.

I frame my remarks against the backdrop of my Pentecostal heritage and convictions. I am aware of several limitations of this. Firstly, the term ‘Pentecostal’ is a broad category which includes many individual theologies, expressions and ethnicities. Thus it is impossible to speak for all Pentecostals and I do not claim to. Indeed I have no way other than intuition to know how many I speak for. Secondly, like many in the Pentecostal movement I grew up in another tradition and ‘converted’ as a young adult. Thus the perspective that I bring cannot be said to be a purely Pentecostal one but is colored by my Seventh Day Adventist upbringing. For me this certainly includes a tendency towards biblical literalism and prima facie distrust of the Roman Catholic Church.¹ Finally, until very recently Pentecostals have tended neither to write theology, nor engage other theologians. For this reason there are very few resources available on Pentecostal Ecclesiology. Thus my reflections here are not based on the written work of Pentecostal theologians, but on my own instincts and experience as a Pentecostal minister.

The challenging aspects of this document from a Pentecostal perspective involve not the conclusions it draws, but what it assumes. I have chosen three areas of discussion which will demonstrate I hope, the sorts of rethinking that may be necessary in order to garner broad affirmation amongst Pentecostal readers. The first is the institutional hierarchy which is assumed, the second is the sacramental framework and the third is the ultimate goal of ‘visible unity.

Ordination and Universal Primacy

Most Pentecostal churches that I am aware of recognize a ‘clergy’ in at least some sense of the word. Each congregation has a leader for example (usually designated the ‘pastor’). However, many place little value on ‘ordination.’ My own congregation does not ‘ordain’ ministers, but appoints staff as and when it needs to. As far as I can tell, there are at least three possible reasons for this. The first is a practical one. The modern Pentecostal movement began and subsequently developed in an organic way. Thus, while it is difficult to disagree with the likes of Zizioulas who insists that “the Church...must herself be an image of the way in which God exists. Her entire structure, her ministries etc. must express this way of existence,”² much of the structure and methodology of Pentecostal churches has arisen not from deep theological

¹ In fairness to myself, this distrust is decreasing with study, but it needs to be acknowledged nonetheless.

² John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 15.

reflection but purely pragmatic concerns. The second reason is a historical one. Many of the early Pentecostals, having come from other traditions were reacting against theologies and structures which they believed inhibited the flow of the Holy Spirit. Because the movement spread most quickly amongst those with little formal education these reactions often went uncriticized and became part of the Pentecostal ethos as the movement developed.

However, there is a third reason which undergirds the ambivalence of Pentecostals towards the presence and role of a clerical ruling class in the church, a theological one. In the Pentecostal understanding, the Church was not 'instituted' by Christ through the apostles at some point *before* the ascension, but spontaneously generated by him *after* the ascension through the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. This is perhaps why the discussion of 'apostolic succession' makes so little sense to a Pentecostal since the Holy Spirit who generated the first Church is the same Holy Spirit who generates the Church today. Jesus is the Lord of His Church and leads and nurtures it by the Holy Spirit through the giftings that He has placed in the Body. The consequence of an atmosphere in which the 'supernatural' gifts of the Spirit are encouraged and expressed is a recognition that it is not we, but He who leads His Church. Thus if somebody's *gift*, is Leadership, that one should lead, if one's *gift* is shepherding, that one should shepherd, if one's *gift* is teaching, that one should teach. These gifts are not confined only to the 'ordained' (ie the Church staff). Indeed, there is no responsibility which is confined to the 'ordained.' Men, women, old young, 'clergy,' 'lay,' alike may preach, prophesy, pray, lead, shepherd, (not to mention, administer Communion) depending on their godliness and giftedness (Rom 12:6-8).

Against this backdrop, it is fairly easy to see why Pentecostals while enthusiastically affirming the priesthood of all believers which is so eloquently laid out in paragraph 19, and rejoicing at the discussion of the distribution of gifts for ministry (#83) would be puzzled by the assumption that the ordination of a special class is universal and biblical, which appears to undergird section E. Furthermore, given a framework where the Holy Spirit leads the Church through the distribution of gifts, it is difficult to justify the assertion that only one particular class of people have the responsibility to "assemble and build up the Body of Christ by proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, by celebrating baptism and the Eucharist and by guiding the life of the community in its worship, its mission and its service" (#88).

Of course, if the category of 'the ordained' is assumed, that is, if God leads his Church through a priestly caste, then it is only natural to discern a hierarchy which ascends to the point of requiring some sort of 'universal primacy.' Given the Pentecostal framework however, this question is totally foreign since it is Jesus who exercises lordship over His Church with no one individual 'above' another in 'rank' (except perhaps in a practical sense and at a congregational level). It is granted that the question of universal primacy is of vital importance to Roman Catholics, and to the extent that such are engaged in ecumenical dialogue then it must be conceded that the need for this ministry will continue to be discussed. However, given Pentecostal ecclesiology as I perceive it, any discussion of this ministry will always be perceived as an attempt by human beings to regain control of God's Church to its detriment.

Sacramental Framework?

It is granted that the two Christian practices of Baptism and the Eucharist are firstly fundamental to all Christians, and secondly that because of this, they hold much potential for the fostering of unity among Christians of differing confessions. However, there is nothing magic about either. Pentecostals (at least as far as I'm aware) use neither the term 'sacrament,' nor 'ordinance' to describe either experience.

Baptism for Pentecostals is not necessary to salvation, though it is ‘the very next step’ to take after one is saved. Pentecostals practice adult baptism and baptism by immersion. Indeed it would be ridiculous for us to practice any other ‘mode’ of baptism since we make so much of the ‘Baptism of the Spirit’ and would recoil at the suggestion that the Holy Spirit is merely sprinkled on the believer. Baptism is an ‘outward sign of an inward reality,’ specifically that the believer has through repentance come to faith in Christ and has become a new creation thus identifying with his death burial and resurrection.

Communion or the Lord’s Supper likewise is a sign. It is a reminder to the believer of what Christ has done. In the church that I am from, Communion is open to all. It is not just for members, and significantly not even just for Christians. Just as all are invited to participate in new life in Christ, all are invited to participate in the practice which symbolizes this. Communion is celebrated periodically in the large Church gathering, but in another sense, communion is celebrated every time Christians gather together over a shared meal in one another’s homes just as in the early Church (Ac 2:46).

Significantly, grace is mediated through neither experience as in sacramental theology. Reading the sections on Baptism and the Eucharist, it seems apparent that a sacramental framework is assumed which is foreign to a Pentecostal understanding of these practices. An underlying sacramental orientation is betrayed by the fact that only these two are discussed to the exclusion of other practices universally shared among Christians such as prayer which, it seems would also hold the potential to foster Christian unity. Furthermore, the subsequent discussion of the ‘ministry of the ordained’ includes the celebration of Baptism and Eucharist which is typical of churches with a sacramental orientation.

Thus the discussion in the explanatory box which follows paragraph 81 is somewhat foreign to the Pentecostal consciousness for at least two reasons. Firstly, since the Eucharist is the *Lord’s* Supper, it cannot be owned or controlled by any person or institution. Christians are *not* prohibited from sharing the Eucharistic meal with one another because no priest is required to ‘preside.’ Secondly no rule should prohibit any person from partaking of Communion which is offered in the setting of a formal Church service, whether they be from another church or from no church. A conversation I had with an Anglican lady several years ago serves to illustrate these two points. She told me of the mutual anguish of her and her Catholic friend that they were unable to share communion together. Because I’m a Christian, I simply listened and nodded, but because I’m a Pentecostal, two (unvoiced) questions immediately sprang to mind. The first was “What’s the big deal? If its so important to her, why doesn’t she just leave her church?” and the second was “Have you thought of inviting her over for a meal?”

Communion and Visible Unity

Of particular interest to me as a Pentecostal reader of this document is the discussion of the goal of ‘visible unity’ amongst the churches in the very first paragraph. Pentecostals do not talk an awful lot about ‘visible unity.’ I see three possible reasons for this. The first is that the contemporary Pentecostal movement began early last century with a group of people who because of the extreme nature of the phenomena which occurred amongst them and the attendant disapproval from the more ‘proper’ church going public tended to be excluded from mainline denominations. This unfortunately seems to have led to a sectarian spirit from which the movement is still recovering³. Many including myself who currently identify themselves as

³ From the 1940s onwards Pentecostal phenomena began to find acceptance within denominations giving rise to the ‘Charismatic movement’ within mainline denominations. Still however, the presence of Pentecostal phenomena in mainline churches has often caused tension, division and factionalism. That this tendency continued into the (so-

Pentecostals have separated themselves from denominations and churches which they believed to be lifeless, over-ritualized or devoid of genuine Spiritual presence. Though many (again including myself) have hope that the Pentecostal movement will soon outgrow these immature and unhelpful characterizations, it remains that intra-Christendom Pentecostal converts will inevitably seek further definition of precisely what is meant by 'visible unity,' and may even seek to limit the expression of that unity, particularly where it concerns the Church or movement from which they came.

A second possible reason why broad-based 'visible unity' may not necessarily be at the forefront of the Pentecostal agenda stems from the focus on transcendent experiences and invisible realities. Sincere Pentecostals may thus wonder to what extent 'visible unity' is really necessary with different families of Christians since the 'unity of the Spirit', after all, has more to do with the absence of interpersonal conflict at the congregational level for us than it does with desiring 'communion' between denominational movements. As long as the individual Christian does not hold any grudges against fellow Christians in his/her heart, he/she will not be blocked from receiving God's blessing.

The third reason as far as I can see that the goal of 'visible unity' between the Churches is one which may be foreign to Pentecostals is ecclesiological. Whereas Catholics would tend to see the centralized structure of the global hierarchy as *the* Church of which particular local churches are constitutive parts, and Eastern Orthodoxy affirms both the local and the universal expression as together constitutive of the Church,⁴ Pentecostal Churches are characterized by autonomy at the local level and voluntary association at the regional, national or global level. Pentecostalism is made up of many autonomous congregations such as my home church and even Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God in Australia are much less centralized than other denominations emphasizing the autonomy of the local church and voluntary association with the national body. Unity then, is seen in terms of the presence of a unified vision within a single congregation rather than confessional uniformity, and association with a larger movement or organization is on the basis of shared vision rather than shared history.

From the Pentecostal viewpoint, then, it is puzzling why the need to achieve "visible unity in...one Eucharistic fellowship...in order that the world may believe" (#1) is felt so passionately and expressed so urgently, for though Pentecostals certainly resonate with the goal "that the world may believe" this is achieved through Christ's presence through His Spirit in our proclamation (Matt 28:18-20, Mk 16:15-19 Lu 24:49) rather than our own human attempts to unify doctrinally. All this is not to say that Pentecostals care nothing for unity. Quite the contrary. However, Pentecostals tend to see the goal of unity being at the interpersonal or congregational level, and to be wary of diluting the mission, vibrancy and fruitfulness of the local church with considerations beyond these. For Pentecostals, an alternative to trying to hammer out unity at a theological level is to unite with other Christians in shared mission.

It has been suggested that Communion Ecclesiology has much ecumenical potential (#24)⁵ since the characterization of the Church as Communion is something upon which all can agree. Certainly Pentecostals would affirm the notion of Church as *ekklesia* though they have tended to render this term 'fellowship' rather than 'communion.' Indeed the congregation which I am from used this term in its title as do many Pentecostal Churches. However, while the broad

called) 'Third Wave' is evidenced by the fact that the very term ('Third Wave') seems to have been coined by those wishing to embrace Pentecostal type phenomena without embracing Pentecostal denominations and movements.

⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 257-260.

⁵ See also Susan K. Wood, "Communion Ecclesiology: Source of Hope, Source of Controversy." *Pro Ecclesia*, 1993: 2.4, 1-9 and Avery Dulles, "The Church as Communion." In *New Perspectives on Historical Theology*, by Bradley Nassif (ed.), 125-139. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

semantic domain of the biblical *ekklesia* has much potential for unifying the Churches, it is this imprecision inherent in the term which also presents the greatest challenge for the ecumenical movement. Simply put there is a huge difference between the fairly practical usage of the term with which Pentecostals would be familiar (the ‘fellowship’ sense) and the more technical usage by which Roman Catholics exclude as second class Christians those who are not ‘in communion’ with the Bishop of Rome.⁶ Perhaps the clarification offered by Moltmann that true biblical Communion is based on friendship can rescue this rather ambiguous term for the ecumenical cause.⁷

Conclusion

Pentecostals are not against unity and they are not against theology. They are *for* the mission of Jesus to reach the world with the message of the Kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit. There is much about “The Nature and Mission of the Church” that Pentecostals can enthusiastically affirm. However, they may not agree with some of the assumptions that appear to undergird it, specifically, that there is inherent in the nature of God’s Church a priestly ruling class, that baptism and the Eucharist somehow ‘mediate grace’ to the believer in such a way as to make the new birth through the Holy Spirit alone insufficient for salvation and that ‘visible unity’ is a legitimate and realistic goal. Nevertheless, I am sure I would speak for many Pentecostals when I say that I am extremely grateful for the ecumenical effort and optimistic that these issues can be addressed in future drafts of ‘the Nature and Mission of the Church.’

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⁶ Thomas Rausch, *Towards a Truly Catholic Church: An Ecclesiology for the Third Millennium*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005) is a good example of this usage. Despite his magnanimous spirit and best intentions the inevitable logic chain is present, namely that the Eucharist is the foundation of Christian unity (Rausch 2005, 85), that the Eucharist requires the presidency of an ordained bishop (Rausch 2005, 107) who must be in ‘communion’ with the bishop of Rome (Rausch 2005, 107). Therefore, non-Catholics are not ‘in full communion.’

⁷ Moltmann identifies a progression of thought whereby the term ‘communion of saints’ as descriptive of the Church in the Apostles Creed was recast by the architects of the Augsburg Confession as ‘the assembly of all believers’ because it lacked sufficient clarity. The Barmen Theological Declaration in turn felt that ‘the assembly of all believers’ did not convey sufficient warmth to fully reflect the true fellowship enjoyed between believers and offered ‘a community of brethren as an alternative.’ Stressing the involuntary (and gender exclusive) nature of the relationship implied by the term ‘brethren’ Moltmann proffers his own alternative – a fellowship of friends. See Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1993), 314-315. His inspiration for this motif is Jesus’ own vocation as both a friend of sinners and a friend of the disciples (Moltmann 1993, 117).

Mission and Evangelism in Unity today (preparatory paper #1 – same website as nature and mission and mission as reconciliation).

Tasks of the missionary Church (VMK):

- Doxological → worship
- Kerygmatic → proclamation
- Diaconic → justice (social welfare and social justice)
- Therapeutic → healing
- Reconciliatory → peace/reconciliation

Spiritual gifts empower us to do all of the above.

BEM stands for Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

So – for the paper:

- NMC brings is a convergence of the contemporary ecclesiological discussion.
- In light of the course materials studied (have to drag in the other stuff as references).
- In light of the ecclesiastical tradition. Boldly bring your own perspective (but in dialogue with the material we have been studying).
- Bringing our own background is important given the purpose of contributing to the WCC.
- However, its an academic exercise and hence needs to be footnoted etc.
- So two basic things. Relate to what we have studied and reflect own cultural background.