

Society for Pentecostal Studies 2006

Response to Wolfgang Vondey, "Pentecostal Perspectives"

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I want to begin by thanking Dr. Vondey for his paper outlining several Pentecostal responses to the "Nature and Purpose of the Church" (now "Nature and Mission of the Church"). I want to pick up one line of discussion that he points us toward in his paper's constructive section, regarding the missional understanding that Pentecostals bring to their ecclesiology. I think he is correct, furthermore, in identifying the Pentecostal emphasis on mission as being primarily evangelization. I want to affirm this as well, but then immediately warn that this can be reductionistic if we do not recognize evangelization in its fuller meaning. Evangelization, like mission, belong to the very nature of the Church because they belong to the very nature of God.

The last several decades have seen a profound level of reflection on *koinonia* as a central ecumenical theme and practice.¹ *Koinonia*, or communion, has come to be seen as expressing the very essence of the church. This is so, in turn, because *koinonia* or communion describes or expresses the very life and nature of the Triune God. A similar level of theological reflection in the ecumenical movement has not accompanied the concept and practice of mission, or sending forth, however.

The church is *apostolic* in its very essence and nature (from *apostellō*, "to send forth"). To be apostolic is the same as to be missional, and all missionaries can be said to be carrying on the apostolic commission.² This is so, in turn, because the Triune God is missional in eternal essence. According to classical orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, the Father begets the Son and breathes forth the Spirit not just in time, but in eternity. This is a critical theological point for it means that God exists in the begetting and breathing forth. Mission is not just what God does in time, in other words. Mission is who God is in eternity, in God's own self.³ Hence mission and communion are both ways of naming the eternal essence of God.

The manner in which the theologians of the ancient church emphasized that the begetting of the Son and the breathing forth of the Spirit were not in time, but in eternity, so that there never was a time before the begetting and breathing forth, is critical here. The divine processions of begetting and sending forth cannot be confined to their historical expression. The divine mission is to gather all creation into communion, while communion with the divine is both the result and the inner expression of mission.⁴ Communion and mission are both signs and instruments of God's redemption in the world, for they are both ways of naming God's eternal nature.

This close relationship between communion and mission has been more fully recognized in recent Roman Catholic theology. The church is missionary by its very nature, stated Vatican II in paragraph 2 of its "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity" (*Ad gentes*). Communion and mission mutually imply one, said John Paul II, noting that the Spirit both unifies the church and sends the church forth to the ends of the earth.⁵ Morris Pelzel notes that the Catholic term for the eucharist, "mass," comes from the words of dismissal at the end of the liturgy and is of the same root as "mission."⁶

Communion and mission represent the inner life and the outer life of the church, Pelzel argues.⁷ Both have their proper liturgical dimensions, and both have their proper ethical dimensions as well. This is why the reduction of mission to ethics fails to do justice to the concept and practice. Mission is not *just* service to the poor even when it is immediately or even seemingly exclusively concerned with service to the poor. This is because service to the poor is always and everywhere also service to the Christ who identifies himself with the poor (Matthew 25:36-42). The "liturgy after the liturgy" continues worship in the world by offering the sacrifice not on the high altar of the church but, according to John Chrysostom, on the altar of the neighbor's heart.⁸

One can even argue that this liturgy of service in the world is the primary meaning of mission, counteracting the tendency in some circles to see mission primarily or even exclusively concerned with evangelism and proselytism. Mission understood as liturgy of service is not a reduction of mission to its ethical dimensions, but brings the ethical dimension more fully into view in the mission of the Trinitarian life.

Pelzel's analysis of mission as the outside life of the church and communion as the inside life of the church can still leave us with mission and communion being unintegrated. The argument could be advanced that in the final eschatological event of God's new creation, when God is all in all and there is no longer an "outside" of the church or of God, mission will then come to an end while communion will continue on. Mission would thus be confined to history, while communion is eternal and thus ultimately to be identified with the *ousia* of the Triune God alone.

But this would only be the case if we could not locate *mission* and "sending forth" within the eucharistic liturgy itself, and not just at its end. Here again the inner logic of Trinitarian theology will be our guide. The "sending" of the divine life is always associated with Son and Spirit, or Word and Spirit. As Rahner noted, the Father utters the Word not only because he knows himself, but in order to know himself.⁹ In the liturgy the uttering of the Word is the moment of *kerygma*, or proclamation. Addressed to the faithful who are in communion as well as to the world beyond the walls of the church, preaching or proclamation is as much a part of worship as the eucharist or communion supper with the Lord.

The *kerygma* of the church, like its communion, will never come to an end. But where it is addressed now to the church itself in order to continue to missionize those inside as well as those outside, in eternity when there no longer is an "outside" the church it will continue to be addressed to God, in the form of praise and words of glory. The elders in the book of Revelation 7: continue to lay their crowns down before the throne, sending forth words of honor and glory through all eternity to God and the Lamb who sits upon the throne. The boundary that exists between creation and creator is one that is steadfastly maintained through all eternity by Christian and Jewish traditions. Creation will never be completely dissolved into the divine life. Its otherness than God will never be dissolved. Hence communion with God presupposes a permanent boundary between God and creation. Creation's sending of itself across this ultimate boundary in praise and worship is its ultimate mission, a mission that is grounded in and empowered by the very life of the Spirit sent into the world.

These last observations return us to the question of the relation between mission and church, or between mission and communion, in a fresh way. The current Faith and Order Commission's study on "The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement" (Faith and Order Paper 198) is seeking to grapple with them as well. The change in title from "purpose" to "mission" reflects in part the Faith and Order Commission's effort to respond to the need to integrate the language of mission more clearly into its reflections on unity. Unfortunately the new title has the effect of separating "mission" from the "nature" of the church by substituting the word "mission" for "purpose." It thereby leaves open the possibility that *koinonia*/communion can be identified with the nature of the church, while mission is identified with the purpose of the church. This implicit separation is reflected as well in the structure of the document still. *Koinonia*/communion is listed as one of the four foundational biblical images of the church being drawn upon in the study, while mission is the title of the section that follows.

A closer reading of the revised text suggests a more integrated understanding is emerging, however. A key moment in the text that signals this deeper integration at a methodological level is found early on in paragraph 4, which states:

The Commission especially encourages reflection based on actual stories of Christian life and witness in different parts of the world so that both the particular and the universal features of the Church can be more clearly understood. This is important above all from the perspective of mission, which is one of guiding themes of this study. Mission is not an abstraction but is lived in response to the

grace of God as God sends his Church in faithful witness in the actual situations of each society.¹⁰

Mission here is concretely connected with the diversity of the church in the world, and with actual stories. Mission thus results in the “particular” and the “universal” being more clearly delineated, for it reflects the lived experience of many situations to the grace of the one God.

The connections among grace, mission and communion are again made in paragraphs 9 and 10. Concerning the Church itself as a gift of God, paragraph 9 says, “Of its very nature it is missionary, called and sent to serve as an instrument of the Word and the Spirit as a witness to the Kingdom of God.” Then in paragraph 10: “The Church is centred and grounded in the Word of God ... The Church is the communion of those who, by means of their encounter with the Word, stand in a living relationship with God, who speaks to them and calls forth their trustful response; it is the communion of the faithful.” Grace is manifested in the calling of the Church and the calling that sends the Church; as well as in the communion that they enter. In communion, the faithful continue to be called forth in trustful response. Their response continues to be their mission even in full communion.

Four biblical images of church are drawn upon in the document: Church as people of God, Church as body of Christ, Church as Temple of the Holy Spirit, and Church as *koinonia* / communion. Here the danger of dichotomization of communion and mission returns. Yet even in these paragraphs one sees an effort to maintain a dynamic relationship between communion and mission at the fundamental level of the very nature of the church, thereby informing its purpose and work. The first of these images, the Church as people of God, brings together the image of Israel as a covenant people and a pilgrim people, a people journeying on in communion with God and one another. Covenant and pilgrimage mutually inform one another in these paragraphs. The second image, that of the Church as the body of Christ, joins the many and the one, or diversity and unity, as two dimensions of the one christological and thus ecclesiological reality. The third likewise joins the dimensions of indwelling life within and herald for transformation beyond, that is, the the inside and outside dimensions of the Church, as Temple of the Spirit.

The fourth image is that of the Church as *koinonia*/communion. It is the image to which the most writing is devoted, 10 paragraphs in all. They are filled with references to the movement of the Spirit into the world, and the sending of Christ that brings about communion. The end or goal of these activities, however, is final resting place or indwelling. In other words, mission appears to be related to communion as a means to an end. Yet the document appears immediately to correct itself. Paragraph 31 reads: “Because *koinonia* is a participation in Christ crucified and risen, it is also part of the mission of the Church to share in the sufferings and hopes of humankind.” The Christ in whom the Church finally dwells is the crucified and risen one, the one who is known through his mission in other words.

Part B of the study is explicitly given over to a discussion of the mission of the Church. The inner connections between mission and communion are again made clear. Paragraph 35 states: Mission thus belongs to the very being of the Church. This is a central implication of affirming the apostolicity of the Church which is inseparable from the other three attributes of the Church – unity, holiness and catholicity. All four attributes relate both to the nature of God’s own being and to the practical demands of authentic mission. If in the life of the Church, any of them is impaired, the Church’s mission is compromised.

Paragraph 36 continues:

The Church, embodying in its own life the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-21; Rom 8:18-25). Through its worship (*litourgeia*), service (*diakonia*), and proclamation (*kerygma*) which includes the stewardship of creation, the Church participates in and points to the reality of the Kingdom of God. In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church testifies

to the divine mission in which the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world.

Mission combines preaching, repentance, baptism and service according to the study. These all are activities that can be regarded as essential to expressing ecclesial identity. Part C of the study document takes up these questions further, exploring the Church as sacrament, which is to say as both sign and instrument of salvation. Here again the integration of mission and communion, or better, of mission and unity, is achieved.

I will be bold and draw upon another treasured biblical image to suggest that “The Nature and Mission of the Church” offers us possibly the first shoots coming from the stump of an ecumenical tree that to many observers today looks to be dying, if not dead. I say possibly because it is yet too early to tell if the new shoot will live, or be allowed to live by those who would like to see the stump really dead. There is still much work to be done in Pentecostal settings in particular to keep from killing the life that we see coming from these older roots. We need among the Pentecostal churches in particular to keep from letting our passion for missions displace the quest to realize our unity. On the other side of the ecumenical coin, however, the one that is predominantly represented among those involved in the Faith and Order movement, we need to restore mission to its place alongside communion as being central to the nature of the Church. It is time to put back together the connections between communion and mission, and then to locate them both in the life of the Triune God. Only then will we be able to see a renewal of ecumenical life in and for the whole world.

Endnotes

¹ See Thomas Best and Gunther Gassmann, eds. *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993).

² John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), writes on p. 173: “...the term ‘apostle’ is thus applicable to all missionaries who possess the authority and the charisma of preaching the Gospel.”

³ This is one of the insights that emerges from Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁴ See the Faith and Order Commission, “The Nature and Purpose of the Church,” Faith and Order document 181 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998), paras. 17 and 27-34. The first drafts of this study document did not go far enough in identifying mission with the divine nature, and consequently end up minimizing the impact these paragraphs had in the overall study. The fact that the study was renamed after 2004 “The Nature and Mission of the Church” still indicates the willingness to separate mission from nature. Ethical service and evangelism are offered as the content of the church’s purpose or mission in the world, but this does not reflect back sufficiently upon the very nature of God. One hopes that the final version of this study properly arrives at the insight that communion and mission both characterize the nature and the purpose of the church.

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⁵ Morris Pelzel, *Ecclesiology: The Church as Communion and Mission*, Catholic Basics: A Pastoral Ministry Series (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2001), p. 4.

⁶ Pelzel, *Ecclesiology*, p. 4.

⁷ Pelzel, *Ecclesiology*, p. 93.

⁸ Ion Bria, *The Liturgy after the Liturgy* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1996).

⁹ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” *Theological Investigations vol. IV*, Kevin Smyth, trans. (Baltimore: Helicon / London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966), p. 236.

¹⁰ “The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement,” Faith and Order Paper 198 (Geneva: WCC, 2005). Hereafter all citations will be by way of paragraph numbers.