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Reflections on “The Nature and Mission of the Church”: A Stage on the Way to a
Common Statement

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Introduction

Robert Welsh commended the study of this FO 198 for reflection in the CC(DOC). FO 198 builds on earlier documents like BEM, *Confessing the One Faith*, and *Church and World*. Its sister document is *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, FO 181 (1998). The focus of FO 181 was on the purpose of the church, namely to praise and glorify together the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The reception of this document including a common suggestion to strengthen the documents emphasis on mission (7).¹ FO 198 succeeds in offering a missional ecclesiology. However, it does not adequately explain the way that liturgy is primary source of social ethics.

Convergence

We Disciples affirm the Trinitarian basis of the church based on the Nicene creed. While we do have a stream of Unitarianism in our heritage, for our ecumenical work it is vital that we continue to develop our Trinitarian theology. FO 198 demonstrates how the Trinity can also help deepen our ecclesiology and missiology.

While the purpose of the church is to worship God, its mission is to make disciples. These two come together in the church as a worshiping and witnessing communion. Three important dimensions of disciple making including the following ministries of the church: evangelism (110), unity (66), and justice (references below).

FO 198, helps us deepen our thinking regarding the relationship between our work for unity and justice, given the deeper interconnections between CCU and our anti-racism ministry. The document begins in paragraph 61 with a discussion of culture, as well as a critique of the hegemony of a mono-culture (white supremacy is implied, as I read between the lines). References to justice abound in the document (4,12, 18, 28, 73, 77, 80-85, 99, 109-115). Given our Acts 2 Christianity, we need to think more about the early Christian’s call to “hold all things in common.” This call to economic democracy is found throughout the text (28,30, 64, 81). Our reforms of Disciples pension and health plan with more accountability is an expression of us trying to live more interdependently.

We need to deepen our theology of justification in order to help ground our current discourse of justice. I fear that we will reinforce the worst utopian and Pelagian impulses of the early 20th century social gospel if we are not alert. Paragraph 113 says: “The Church does not rest on moral

¹ All parenthetical numbers refer to the paragraphs of Faith and Order Paper 198, WCC, Geneva.

achievement but on justification by grace through faith. It is of no little importance for the unity of the Church that the two communities whose separation marked the beginning of the Reformation have in recent years achieved consensus about the central aspects of the doctrine of justification by faith, the major doctrine at issue in their division. It is on the basis of faith and grace that moral engagement and common action are possible and can even be affirmed as intrinsic to the life and being of the church” (113).

Criticism

FO 198 does not adequately describe how social ethics flows out of liturgy. This is a concern that has been lifted up in many recent theologians including Geoffrey Wainwright, John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas, and Alexander Schmemmann. As we “restructure for mission” I think it is important that we deepen our liturgical theology, and theology of the sacraments in particular, since structures are provisional. FO 198 reminds us that “the visible organizational structures of the Church must always be seen and judged, for good or ill, in light of God’s gifts of salvation in Christ, celebrated in the Liturgy (cf. Heb. 12:18-24).” (45).

FO 198 has a problem developing a theology of justice from the four essential attributes of the churches: oneness, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity (52-56). The closest it gets is in its discussion of holiness, implying a social dimension: “Responding to this call means fuller visible embodiment of the holiness that belongs to its nature” (54).

I think the language of the church as “instrument” is problematic because it is too utilitarian and shaped by the discourse of modernity.

Proposals

The following proposals are most directly to CCU’s first two long-range goals: (1) Becoming a multi-cultural and inclusive church; (2) developing a deeper and more dynamic ecumenical spirituality.

Disciples need more sustained theological reflection on the relationship between unity and justice in the one mission of the church. We need to prepare a study document for the 2009 Assembly on the topic.

Disciples should reflect more on the cruciform nature of the church. As Christ’s body, the church bears Christ’s wounds. Our churches should embody rigorous practices of life-long catechesis to ensure that we are nurturing radical disciples. A radical disciple is one who participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This form of costly witness often ends up in martyrdom, like the recent martyrdom of our mission partners in the Philippines (cf., 19-20, 31, 37-39, 75). Especially relevant here is the statement in paragraph 31: “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.” One expression of this cruciform ecclesiology can be in our reflection on the Lord’s Supper: “Because the Lord’s Supper is the Sacrament which builds up community, all kinds of injustice, racism, estrangement, and lack of freedom are radically changes when we share in the body and blood of Christ” (81).

Disciples need to more fully engage current discussion on missional ecclesiology, especially as they are being manifest in the emerging church movement. I propose an initial dialogue between Disciples and the Emerging Church movement. I think both churches have much to learn from each other. The Emerging church can help deepen Disciple’s missional ecclesiology, while

Disciples can help the emerging church think through baptism, Eucharist and ministry in the context of a “restoration-like” ecclesial movement. It is vital that the Emergent church movement learn from the Disciples story and the Stone-Campbell dialogue. Given young Disciples interest in the emerging church, this is also an opportunity to encourage their participation.

Disciples can implement all three of CCU’s Long-term goals through common justice work with people of faith: “Even now, divided Christian communities can and sometimes have carried out this discernment together and have acted together to bring relief to suffering human beings and to help create a society more in keeping with their dignity and with the will of their loving Father in heaven”- (112).