

## The Nature and Mission of the Church (2005)

Paul M. Collins

### Introduction

Reading the Faith and Order paper, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* (2005) I have been struck by the appeal to the lived experience of the Church which is to be found in the text. This had lead me to consider different ways in which the text might be received and in this paper to offer some reflections on possible methodological approaches to the text itself and towards the possibility of taking the text towards a next 'stage'. An explicit ecumenical method is set out in the text [paragraphs 5-7] in which areas where agreement is already possible are dealt with in the main text and areas of on-going discussion are outlined in 'shaded boxes'. I want to suggest that within the text there are other implicit methods being used. What is of particular interest to me is the way in which the text brings together what might be seen as different approaches to the statement of doctrine. Indeed it might be argued that there are different genres within the text, sometimes within the same paragraph. One way in which to name this difference might be to draw upon the distinction between theory and practice or between theoretical and experiential knowledge. In the text explicit appeal is made to experience,<sup>1</sup> practice<sup>2</sup> and context<sup>3</sup> as well as inferring an appeal to these in numerous other paragraphs. I want to propose that the development of a method which explores the inter-play between different ways of constructing doctrine could be used to seek a resolution of Church-dividing issues.

This approach is by no means a new phenomenon. There are examples of this appeal in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) in relation to different church practices and experiences associated with the celebration of Baptism and the exercise of Ministry. There was a recognition in *BEM* that 'although the language of the text is still largely classical in reconciling historical controversies, the driving force is frequently contextual and contemporary.'<sup>4</sup> However in *TNMC* the appeal to experience, practice and context is much more extensive and it has been woven into the text in ways which make the lived reality of the Church as much a focus as 'creedal statement' or 'doctrinal dispute'.

Different church traditions approach reflection upon the theology of the Church in different ways. In some traditions the preference is to use language in order to indicate what the community and practice of the Church should be like. Such an approach is idealistic and aspirational and looks towards the eschatological goal of God's purposes. In other traditions the preference is to use language to describe the lived reality of the Church's practice and communal living, often recognising the mixture of holiness and sinfulness. These differences of approach can be seen in text of *TNMC* where some sentences are written using 'indicative' language evoking a sense of aspirational calling, while others are written using 'descriptive' language evoking a sense of the experience of God and of Church life 'now'. These differences have been

---

<sup>1</sup> Experience is referred to in paragraphs: 2, 3, 28, 51, Box following 63, Box following 66, 76, Box following 77, 97.

<sup>2</sup> Practice is referred to in paragraphs: 15, 51, 102 and in boxes following: 63, 77, 81.

<sup>3</sup> Context is referred to in paragraphs: 3, 4, 5, 17, 61, 69, 72, 87, 89, 99, 112.

<sup>4</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No.111, p. ix.

variously labelled by theologians. The aspirational approach to doctrine has been designated as 'objective' or 'cognitive', while the experiential approach has been designated as 'subjective' or 'aesthetic'.<sup>5</sup> This latter approach echoes John Wesley's appeal to 'experience', as a fourth element to be set alongside the triad of Scripture, Tradition and Reason in the 'doing' of theology. Schleiermacher in his use of the language of 'God-consciousness' and of feelings of 'absolute dependence' creates a paradigm for construing an 'aesthetic response' to the lived realities of Christian living and believing.<sup>6</sup> The acceptance of 'experience' as a core element in the construction of doctrine suggests that God's revelation is received through the individual experience for the believer and the collective experience of the Church, as well as being concretely or 'objectively' encountered in the Person of Christ. An example of holding together the appeal to the objective and subjective can be seen in Barth's construal of revelation in Trinitarian terms framed in terms of the 'objectivity' of the incarnate Son and the 'subjectivity' of the Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup> My reading of the text of *TNMC* suggests that there is already this kind of holding together of different kinds of approach to the reception of revealed beliefs and the experience of the lived reality of the Church.

I will refer to the more 'objective' written style arising from aspirational understandings as 'indicative', and the more 'subjective' written style arising from experience as 'aesthetic'. This is not to suggest that one sort of claim produces more reliable knowledge than another. Each is valuable in its own right and in complementing the other. Indeed Stanley Samartha takes us beyond the categories of objectivity and subjectivity and argues that, 'True knowledge is ... a transformation of the knowing subject.'<sup>8</sup> Such an understanding of the knowing points to an attitude towards knowledge and theories of knowing which is rooted in a value base distinct from the value base of a rationalist approach to knowing which emerged within the Enlightenment of Western Europe and North America. Rather the person and the values of the knowing subject are themselves transformed in the activity of knowing and its outcomes. So I will apply the distinction between the 'indicative' and the 'aesthetic' as a tool in the task of analysing and responding to *TNMC*. The title of the text itself suggests this possibility: the 'nature' of the Church suggesting an 'indicative' approach to ecclesiology, while the 'mission' of the Church suggests an experiential or 'aesthetic' approach to ecclesiology. I am particularly interested to discern how an aesthetic approach to understandings of the Church is expressed in *TNMC*; i.e. how an appeal to experience is used to describe the Church, its reality, its members and its praxis.

### **Analysis of the text**

Paragraph 9 begins by making a series of 'indicative' claims, and then turns to the experience of being 'called and sent' and serving, which brings to a series of indicative claims an implicit aesthetic dimension to the statement:

9. The Church is thus the creature of God's Word and of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God, is God's gift and cannot exist by and for itself. 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.

---

<sup>5</sup> See: Lindbeck, G. *The Nature of Doctrine*, London: SPCK, 1984, pp. 16-17. George Lindbeck sets out a framework for understanding doctrinal statements or claims. He suggests three ways in which doctrinal statements can be received: Cognitive – Experiential-Expressive (aesthetic) – Synthetic. Alister McGrath in *The Genesis of Doctrine*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990, chapter 2, offers a critique of this understanding.

<sup>6</sup> See: Schleiermacher, F., *On Religion: Speeches to its cultured despisers*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1893; and *The Christian Faith*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928

<sup>7</sup> Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 1.1

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Samartha, in *Voices from the Margin*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah, London: SPCK/Orbis, 1995

In paragraph 10 we find a similar combination of claims which again is premised on an aesthetic reception of experience.

10. Thus the Church is the creature of God's Word (*creatura Verbi*), the Gospel, which, as a living voice, creates and nourishes the Church throughout the ages. This divine Word is witnessed to and heard through Scripture. Incarnate in Jesus Christ, the Word is testified to by the Church and proclaimed in preaching, in Sacraments, and in service.

A similar approach is to be found in paragraph 12, but in this instance the reception of experience is brought to the foreground, and so an aesthetic understanding of 'apostolicity' is set before us, which may provide the basis for overcoming a polarisation of understandings, over against a more indicative form of describing 'apostolicity'.

12. This word of God is made known to us through the Gospel primarily and normatively borne witness to by the apostles (cf. Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14), making the communion of the faithful a community that lives in, and is responsible for, the succession of the apostolic truth expressed in faith and life throughout the ages.

In paragraph 15 we find a set of claims rooted in [interpreted] experience, which are used to create an aesthetic ground for an indicative claim about 'tradition'. This again has the potential to overcome historic disagreements concerning the notion (and status?) of 'tradition'.

15. The same Holy Spirit who inspired the earliest communities guides the followers of Jesus in each time and each place as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel. This is what is understood by the living tradition of the Church.

Paragraph 32 is posited mainly on the experience of various activities predicated of the Church community and its members, and on this basis the claim for an inter-personal understanding of the 'communion' of the Church is made, again avoiding any polarisation associated with claims made on the basis of an indicative approach.

32. 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.

In paragraph 44 a similar approach may be discerned, but here the second sentence is clearly an indicative claim. This indicative claim is made on the basis of an aesthetic response to the Church's awareness of God and the activities which arise from this: worship and service and discipleship. Here there is perhaps a clear recognition of the subtle inter-play in theological reflection and statement between the aesthetic and indicative.

44. Aware of God's saving presence in the world, the Church already praises and glorifies the Triune God through worship and discipleship, and serves God's plan. Yet the Church does so not only for itself, but rather renders praise and thanks on behalf of all peoples for God's grace and the forgiveness of sins.

Paragraph 49 is a further example of a more nuanced set of claims in which the aesthetic root of various claims is crafted into an indicative formula: thus, the experience of faith, hope and love, of the Holy Spirit, and being in a personal relationship with God are brought together to assert the sophisticated claim of a 'realise eschatology'.

49. On the one hand, the Church already participates in the communion of God, in faith, hope, love, and glorification of God's name, and lives as a communion of redeemed persons. Because of the presence of the Spirit and of the Word of God, the Church - as *Creatura Verbi* and *Creatura Spiritus* (cf. §10ff.), as the communion of all believers held in personal relationship with God by God himself (cf. §11), as the people of God (cf. §§19-20) - is already the eschatological community God wills.

The claims of paragraph 59 are premised on a combination of indicative propositions, and core experiences, viz. distorted relationships, repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration, along with 'a genuine enjoyment of new life'. This combination of indicative claims and of experience and the aesthetic response to those experiences allows for a number of different claims to be made about the nature of the Church, and of 'communion'. Here this approach allows the perspectives of different ecclesial traditions to be expressed alongside one another without giving a full account of those differences, because the agreement is premised on an aesthetic rather than indicative description of the Church's life.

59. There remains by virtue of creation a natural bond between human beings and between humanity and creation. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17). The new life of communion builds upon and transforms, but never wholly replaces, what was first given in creation; within history, it never completely overcomes the distortions of the relationship between human beings caused by sin. Sharing in Christ is often restricted and only partially realised. The new life therefore entails the constant need for repentance, mutual forgiveness and restoration. It belongs to the essence of fellowship with God that the members of Christ's body pray day after day "Forgive us our sins" (Lk 11:4; cf. Mt 6:12). But the Father cleanses us from our sins in the blood of his son Jesus and, if we acknowledge our sins, we will be forgiven (cf. 1 Jn 1:7-10). Nonetheless, there is a genuine enjoyment of new life here and now and a confident anticipation of sharing in the fullness of communion in the life to come.

In this final example (paragraph 114) the practice of discipleship is predicated again on a combination of indicative theorisation and experiential practice. The aesthetic quality of informed choice and lived reality is brought together with an indicative view of claims about authentic humanity. This in turn leads to claims being made about the nature and quality of common life in the Church and its mission in the world. Here again church dividing notions are avoided through a subtle combination of claims based on experience and indicative claims.

114. The ethics of Christians as disciples relate both to the Church and to the world.<sup>25</sup> They are rooted in God, the creator and revealer, and take shape as the community seeks to understand God's will within the various circumstances of time and place. The Church does not stand in isolation from the moral struggles of humankind as a whole. Christians both can and should join together with the adherents of other religions, as well as with all persons of good will, in order to promote not only those personal moral choices which they believe essential to the authentic realization of the human person, but also the social goods of justice, peace and the protection of the environment. Thus Christian discipleship requires believers to give serious consideration to the complex ethical

questions that touch their personal lives and the public domain of social policy, and to translate their reflections into action. A Church that would want to be invisible would no longer be a church of disciples.

## Methods

It is my suggestion that a recognition of the differences of approach used implicitly in *TNMC* could be developed into an explicit method in which ‘indicative’ and ‘aesthetic’ claims are understood as different ways in which knowledge is assimilated and doctrine is constructed. A method might be developed in which different approaches to knowledge and doctrine are not only recognised but are understood as illuminating each other; indeed appeal could be made to the metaphor of perichōrēsis or inter-penetration in order to construe the different approaches in a dynamic relation to one another, or to Samartha’s construal of knowing as the transformation of the knowing subject and her values. Such a method might assist both in the reception of the document as well as taking the process forward to another ‘stage’. This may also assist the assessment of other dialogue documents as well as the process of dialogue itself and the crafting of ecumenical statements. The method may also assist in the process of re-examining the issues set out in the shaded boxes of the text of *TNMC*.

The first shaded box (between 13 and 14) highlights the need for aesthetic response to experiences of the Church’s life and mission to be interpreted and received. The question which emerges concerns how an indicative approach can be related to the interpretation of experience and of aesthetic response to it. The construal of indicative and aesthetic approaches in relation to each other in the pursuit of the interpretation of experience will also entail the recognition that both indicative and aesthetic approaches are sometimes based on axiomatic claims or ‘givens’. The first box, which is good example of the interplay between experience and indicative reflection on the Tradition, is concluded with the statement:

It remains for future theological work to find out whether these differences are real disagreements or mere differences in emphasis that can be reconciled with each other.

The focus on the need for the interpretation of experience and of aesthetic response in this box suggests that despite the successful appeal to aesthetic claims, the place for indicative claims clearly remains. This raises the question of how indicative claims themselves are constructed. Some indicative claims may emerge directly from reflection on experience, while others may be predicated on ‘reason’ alone. The understanding in some traditions that indicative claims are rooted in ‘objective’ revelation does not mean that they are separated from ‘experience’ indeed all revelation is surely rooted in an experience of some kind, at some stage (in the past?). The method developed to enable the process of interpretation will need to recognise the different origins of various indicative claims in order to facilitate the possibility of the reconciliation of differences. The following two boxes (between 48 and 49; and between 56 and 57) both raise similar issues concerning the reception and interpretation of experience: in relation to ‘sacrament’ in the first instance and ‘sin’ in the second. Again differences may be seen in terms of ‘emphasis’,<sup>9</sup> however the question of whether such difference is church-dividing again rests on issues surrounding the interpretation of experience.

The interpretation of ‘experience’ in the ‘raw data’ of ‘revelation’ and in the ‘lived reality’ of ‘ecclesial communities’ lies at the heart of the ecumenical project. The development of a method

---

<sup>9</sup> The appeal to ‘emphasis’ is found in the shaded box between paragraphs 13 and 14.

to allow different approaches to the construction of doctrine to inform and transform one another could provide a means of beginning the reconciliation of different understandings and approaches in the different church traditions. This would be premised on an appeal to the lived experience of the Church received and interpreted through such a method. The different understandings of experience and the different ways in which aesthetic response to experience is construed in the different traditions of the Church are already to be found in the text of *TNMC*. As the text is received and revised a recognition and analysis of these differences through the method of allowing different approaches to the construction of doctrine to inform and transform one another may enable the process of reconciliation of different traditions to develop.

Paul M. Collins

Chichester, September 2009