
Making Sense of the Church

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The most pressing theological issue before the church may be *the church*. While the central vision of the ecumenical movement continues to be “the visible unity of the church,” there has been a slight shift away from attention to “unity” toward attention to “the church.” *Who, what, when, where, why, how* is the church? The answers are not apparent to all.

The end of western Protestantism’s cultural eminence and the decline of its social influence have contributed to confusion about the church’s identity. Primary questions are met with uncertain answers: What is the ecclesial identity of the church in a culture that disparages institutions while prizing personal fulfillment? What is the meaning of church membership in a consumer culture? Which gifts and qualities are needed for church leadership? What is the relationship of “denomination” to congregation? . . . to the church catholic? How should the church proclaim the Gospel in contemporary European and North American culture? Uncertainty about the church’s character and mission creates confusing purposes and strategies at every level, accompanied by doubts about most forms of church life.

The end of a long and rich Pontificate and the unfamiliar course of a new one pose questions for the Catholic Church. How will it understand the relationship between universal church and local church? How will it live out its relationship with “sister churches” and “ecclesial communities”? What will be its response to calls for more episcopal collegiality and to the worldwide shortage of priests? What will be the impact of the shift in the Church’s center of gravity from the north to the south?

Many Orthodox Churches are still adjusting to the new situation created by the fall of the Soviet empire and the emergence of a global market economy. How will Orthodoxy understand its role in the new societies of eastern Europe? How will Orthodox Churches respond to the presence in their midst of Catholic dioceses and evangelical Protestant mission churches?

And then there are the Pentecostals. Pentecostalism is growing throughout the world, winning converts from Protestant and Catholic churches as well as from the unchurched. Will developing Pentecostal churches understand themselves within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, or will they view other Christian churches as deficient, Spiritless, or even sub-Christian? Will Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches hold Pentecostals in disdain even while

borrowing elements of Pentecostal worship? Or will they recognize the need to “discern the spirits” in their relationships with Pentecostal churches?

THE NATURE AND “?” OF THE CHURCH

Even a hasty glance at the life of the churches reveals an array of challenges accompanied by a lack of theological consensus about the nature of the church itself. What may have seemed clear in the heady days of Vatican II, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, denominational unions, and the establishment of the Consultation on Church Union is no longer self-evident. “Church” has become a pressing, and sometimes contentious issue. This should not be viewed as a descent from ecclesiological clarity into ecclesial disarray, however. Rather, it is precisely the significant ecumenical advances of the middle decades of the twentieth century that have made possible a deeper common exploration of foundational ecclesiological issues.

The World Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission continues to work on *The Nature and Purpose* (now *Nature and Mission*) of the Church. Its methodology - distinguishing “common perspectives” from areas where “differences remain” - encourages a significant measure of theological honesty. Even so, responses to the study indicate that the study’s articulation of common perspectives may have been too confident, and its identification of differences too gentle.

The Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC devoted a major section of its final report to ecclesiology, identifying “two basic ecclesiological self-understandings.” Some churches, such as the Orthodox, *identify themselves* with the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, while others, such as many Protestant churches, see themselves as *parts* of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. How, then, do the Orthodox understand the ecclesial significance of Protestant churches? And how do Protestant churches understand their belonging to the one Church?

The issue is not simply how churches understand their differences and work for their visible unity, but how churches understand themselves and others to be *churches*. Thus, the 2002 meeting of the World Council of Churches Central Committee, in response to an address by its moderator, H.H. Aram I recommended that Faith and Order be asked to arrange for the preparation of a brief statement on ecclesiology be developed for discussion at the Ninth Assembly [2006 in Porto Alegre, Brazil]. The statement was to take into account the relation between the church as local community and universal reality, and of both the church’s diversity and its oneness. The Standing Commission of Faith and Order determined that the “brief statement” was to be truly brief: no more than two pages!

I was part of a small but representative consultation of fifteen participants that met in Nicosia, Cyprus in March 2004 to prepare a draft statement on

ecclesiology, with the understanding that it would be reviewed at several levels, including the Faith and Order Plenary Commission, the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation, the Central Committee, and the Ecumenical Officers meeting. On the basis of extensive comments, revisions have been made by a sub-group of the consultation, of which I was part, meeting again in Nicosia in May 2005.

The task before the consultation has been complex. First, since the statement is being prepared for discussion at the WCC Assembly, it demands both substance and precision. Second, substantive precision has to be achieved in a two-page document - a difficult charge even with A4 paper and 10-point type! Finally, the statement has to be agreeable to all parties, an intricate undertaking since ecclesiology is at the heart of Orthodox and Catholic self-understandings, and becomes increasingly important to Protestants as they engage Orthodox and Catholics on the issue.

CROSSROADS

The issue at hand is ecclesiology. At its best, ecclesiology occurs at the crossroads of theology and sociology. Of the classical theological loci, "the doctrine of the church" is the most *visible* - it refers to a social reality that can be observed and appraised. Yet, all too often, theological claims made for the church are not evident in the actual life of the observable church. Normative declarations are presented as if they were descriptions of reality: "the church experiences itself as the messianic fellowship of service for the kingdom of God in the world." Alternatively, analysis of the church's life often takes place without reference to theological categories. Description displaces theological wisdom: "the church is a powerful institution in our society because it encapsulates the individual in a community that becomes an essential part of the individual's own identity."

The disjunction between the theological construct, "church," and the sociological entity, "church," often leads to a conceptual distinction between the ideal church and the real church. The distinction is couched in a variety of dyads: visible/invisible; empirical/essential; external/internal; real/ideal; etc. The strong version of the two natures strategy leads to the collapse of the actual church into the ideal church. The theological construct becomes what really matters and observable realities are not permitted to mar the portrait. The weaker version of the two natures strategy leads to minimizing theological categories by concentrating on the actual church. The theological construct is retained, but played down as an abstraction that diverts attention from the church's existence in this time and place.

The disjunction between theology and actuality is debilitating to congregations, denominations, and the church catholic, as well as to the

ecumenical movement. Too many congregations exchange the perceived unreality of theological abstractions for the market-driven assumptions of a consumer culture. Too many churches are obsessed with technique, desperately seeking a managerial-entrepreneurial answer that will produce success or retard decline. On the other hand, ecumenical engagements take place as if the churches' confessional and ecclesiastical norms were the only ecclesial realities. Much formal theological work is done with an eye to norms of the academy and the ecumenical establishment rather than the life of the church. Too often, then, the church's theological self-understanding and its programmatic life move on parallel trajectories, progressing separately without intersecting.

THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

Both the problem and the promise of current ecclesiological discussions is located in the intriguing reality that all the churches, existing in their own structures, believe that they live out the nature and purpose of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Yet each church may perceive problematic features in the faith and life of other churches. Self-affirmation coupled with small or large reservations about other churches suggest that each church could be called upon to give account of its own faith and order and the relation of its faith and order to the faith and order of other churches. Such accounts would be far more than "comparative ecclesiology," for their aim would be gracious honesty coupled with genuinely mutual accountability and responsibility. How does each church discern in itself expressions of apostolic faith and life, and where does each perceive fidelity to Christ in the faith and life of others? How are perceived "problems" in the faith and life of others understood, and how can forthright conversation and common confession be pursued? Such "mutual affirmation and admonition" would require both commitment and patience, but would not be clouded in a premature search for generalized consensus.

A "brief statement on ecclesiology" will only be helpful at Porto Alegre if it moves the churches beyond theological generalities, and beyond sociological necessities, to genuinely mutual ecclesial engagement. Maintaining "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" is a Gospel imperative, for "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:3-6).