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The Nature of the Church

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The Spirit and the Church

In the 2001 WEF General Assembly *Event Guide*, Jun Vencer described the central question for the sub-theme on the church in the following way:

What is the nature of the church and arising out of that nature, what would be our mission? After all, ecclesiology determines missiology. How is the church to live and function as a community of believers in the midst of a larger community whom the church is commissioned to reach for Christ? These are not new questions. What new formulations should be made that would input new developments? What new images would describe the churches today?

These are the questions and challenges that occupy us now.

What is the nature of the church? To answer this question you cannot look at the church simply as a social body, as if you were examining any social entity—a club, a corporation, a nation—to determine its nature. To answer the question about the nature of the church you must look beyond the church as a social body and examine the relation between the church and Jesus Christ. The New Testament uses many metaphors to describe this relationship. You are familiar with them: the church is the body—Christ is the head; the church is the bride—Christ is the bridegroom; the church is a servant—Christ is the Lord; the church is the company of the redeemed—Christ is the Redeemer. It is the *presence of Christ* that makes the church to be the church. If Christ is *not* present, a group of people may look like a church, sing like a church, preach like a church, even heal the sick like a church, but is not going to be a church. But if Christ is present among the people, you've got the church. As an ancient church father, Ignatius of Antioch, famously put it:

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where Christ is, there is the church.

And yet we are missing something profoundly important about the church if we talk only about the relation between Christ and the church. Equally important is the relation between the Holy Spirit and the church. There are two reasons for this. First, Jesus Christ is the *bearer* of the Spirit. All the Gospels are agreed on this: Jesus was the Christ because he was anointed by the Spirit; who Christ was and what Christ did were shaped by the Spirit who rested upon him and empowered him. Second, Jesus Christ is the *giver* of the Spirit. The ascended Christ sent the Spirit upon his disciples; the church was born out of the womb of the Spirit.

Here is how Luke the Evangelist describes the relation between the Spirit, Christ, and the church: The one whose baptism marked the start of his mission under the anointing of the Spirit¹ poured out on his disciples, after his resurrection and exaltation, the prophetic Spirit through whom all God's people would be gathered and empowered to proclaim God's reign in word and deed.² You can find a very similar description of the relation between Christ, Spirit, and the church in John's Gospel: The One upon whom the Spirit descended and remained,³ the One to whom the Spirit was given 'without measure',⁴ was the One who after his death, resurrection, and exaltation breathed the Spirit

upon the disciples as he sent them into the world.⁵ Clearly, Luke and John believed that the emergence of the church was bound up with Christ's sending of the Spirit, who anointed the disciples to continue the mission of Jesus.

These theological affirmations concerning the relations between Christ, the Spirit, and the church are well summarized by Raniero Cantalamessa's metaphorical claim that 'the last breath of Jesus [on the cross] is the first breath of the church'. Here, then, you have a definition of the church that is capable of providing impetus for new and fruitful developments: *the church is the continuation of Christ's anointing by the Spirit.*

One important consequence of this way of understanding the church is that the identity and the mission of the church became inextricably intertwined. The church's identity is its mission and church's mission is its identity; the church is what it does in the world and the church does in the world what it is. Put slightly differently: the identity of the church is the face of its mission turned inward; the mission of the church is the face of its identity turned outward.

Let us look first at Jesus' mission in the power of the Spirit and then turn our attention to the church's mission in that same power.

Jesus and the Spirit

Jesus, the Kingdom of God, and the People of God

This much seems quite clear in the

¹ Acts 10:38.

² Acts 2:33.

³ Jn. 1:32-33.

⁴ Jn. 3:34.

⁵ Jn. 20:19-23.

Gospels: Jesus did not come proclaiming the church; Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God. Some scholars have therefore concluded that the emergence of the church had little to do with the mission of Jesus. The church is what came about after the proclamation of the kingdom had failed. Is the church therefore simply the result of the failure of a grander plan? Certainly not. Why did Jesus call the twelve apostles? Why not thirteen or eleven? The twelve symbolized the gathering of Israel's twelve tribes as the eschatological people of God. The people of God is inseparable from the kingdom of God. Why? The kingdom of God is coming and is the final presence of God with God's people.

I witnessed firsthand the integral connection between the kingdom and the church as I was growing up in communist Yugoslavia. I was the only professing Christian in a high school of 3000. Moreover, my father was the pastor of a small congregation of Pentecostals, a Protestant minority that did not have even the cultural legitimacy of the dominant Catholic and Orthodox churches. As I reflect back on those times, I realize that I learned two important lessons about the church even before I possessed the theological language to express them.

The first lesson: *no church without the kingdom of God*. The church is part of something greater than the church itself. When the windows facing toward the kingdom of God get closed, darkness descends upon the churches and the air becomes heavy. When the windows

facing toward the kingdom of God are opened, the life-giving breath and light of God give the churches fresh energy and hope.

Second lesson: *no kingdom of God without the church*. Just as the life of the churches depends on the kingdom of God, so the vitality of the hope for the kingdom of God depends on communities of faith. We come to recognize the fresh breath and light of God that renew the creation only because there are communities called churches—communities that keep alive and embody the memory of the crucified Messiah and hope for the Coming One. Without communities born of and sustained by the Spirit, hope for the kingdom of God would die out.

Jesus and Unconditional Grace

In the power of God's Spirit Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and gathered the people of God. But what was the content of his proclamation? Much can be said about this. Jesus offered divine forgiveness to sinners, fellowship to the outcast, care for the sick and downtrodden, and much more. Central to Jesus' mission was the making whole of bodies, persons, and relationships. But in what way did he go about doing this? Everything depends on how we answer this question.

Jesus' immediate predecessor, John the Baptist, was a preacher of judgement. In contrast, the most striking feature of Jesus' words and actions was unconditional grace. Jesus did not come with the axe of God's judgement, but with the open arms of divine embrace.

Two misunderstandings of uncon-

ditional grace must be cleared away before we can understand Jesus' mission.

The first misunderstanding: *unconditional grace is cheap grace*. It is most emphatically not. This can best be illustrated by attending to the nature of forgiveness. My former teacher and later colleague at Fuller Theological Seminary, Lewis Smedes, used to put it this way: to forgive is to blame. Just imagine hearing someone you have never met forgiving you for what you have never done. 'What do you mean, you forgive me?' you would respond. 'I have never seen you in my life! How could I have done you anything wrong?' Forgiveness does not ignore evil; it does not treat sin as if it were not there. Rather, forgiveness always includes naming the wrong that is being forgiven.

The second misunderstanding: *grace concerns only individuals*. As Jesus saw it, his proclamation and enactment of God's reign was the fulfilment of prophetic promises that God's Spirit-endowed servant would bring forth justice to the nations, preach good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken-hearted, provide comfort for those who mourn, proclaim liberty to the captives, and announce the year of the Lord's favour. Jesus' mission was inescapably and deeply social, even political. And yet it was not political in the usual sense. Why not? Because at its centre lay neither naked power nor strict justice, but unconditional grace! Jesus was not an advocate of the ruling establishment enforcing stability through sub-

jugation. Neither was he a revolutionary prophet advocating victory through violence. Jesus' message and actions were profoundly incompatible with ruling and revolutionary programmes alike. That is why he had to take the path of suffering and death. Jesus Christ died because he proclaimed grace; and because he died, the church must proclaim God's unconditional grace.

The Church in the Power of the Spirit

In the power of the Spirit, Jesus announced the kingdom of God. In the power of the Spirit which the risen Christ poured upon his disciples, they continued his mission in the world. I want to highlight three crucial aspects of their mission and therefore of our mission: first, the rebirth of persons; second, the reconciliation of people; and third, the care of bodies. In all three, grace is central.

Rebirth of Persons

The church is called to proclaim that 'through the Holy Spirit' God seeks to pour 'his love' into the hearts of those who are 'weak', 'sinners', and 'enemies'.⁶ At the cross we see that the reach of God's love cannot be limited or confounded by ungodliness; as God lets the sun shine on good and evil alike, so God bestows grace on all. No deed is imaginable which could put a person outside the scope of God's love. Hence God's self-giving on the cross on behalf of all humanity. Now, like forgiveness, atonement presupposes blame. Far

⁶ Rom. 5:1-11.

from treating human sin as if it were not there, in atonement God names deception as deception, injustice as injustice, violence as violence. The good news is not that human sin does not matter, but that, the reality of the most heinous sin notwithstanding, God's arms are outstretched toward us to embrace us.

By naming sins in the context of God's unconditional grace, the Spirit of truth frees human beings from self-deception rooted in conscious or unconscious efforts at self-justification. Facing God on the cross with his arms outstretched toward us, we dare to look into the abyss of our own evil and recognize ourselves as who we are—'weak', 'sinners', 'enemies', the 'ungodly'. Freedom from self-deception comes, however, not simply because we know that we have been embraced, but also because of the certainty that the embrace of God will liberate us from the enslavement to evil that has so profoundly shaped us. 'So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!'⁷ The grace that forgives is the grace that makes new.⁸

'New creation' is, of course, a future, an ultimate, an eschatological reality. This suggests that the good news of God's grace concerns not only our past and our present but also our future. Forgiven and transformed, we have been given 'a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the

dead',⁹ a hope 'that does not disappoint'.¹⁰

Summing up the three aspects of the proclamation about the rebirth of persons—forgiveness, transformation, hope—we can say that the church is called to proclaim the event of justification by grace through which God forgives, transforms, and promises to glorify sinful human beings, and thus take them up into God's own Trinitarian embrace.

Reconciliation of People

At the foundation of God's offer of grace, which remakes the sinner into a new creation, stands the cross of Christ as an act of God's self-giving. In baptism we are identified with the death of Christ and are raised as those who live 'by faith in the Son of God, who loved them and gave himself up for them'.¹¹ In the Lord's Supper, whose repeated celebration enacts what lies at the very heart of Christian life, we remember the One who gave his body 'for us'. We celebrate the Lord's Supper not only to reaffirm our communion with Christ but to be shaped in his image.¹² Since the very being of the church is grounded in God's self-giving, the life of the church must be modelled on God's self-giving.¹³ And since the mission of the church is nothing but the face of its identity turned toward the world, the church must engage in the ministry of reconciliation.

For the most part, the church has understood its ministry of reconcilia-

⁷ 2 Cor. 5:17.

⁸ Cf. Moltmann 1992, pp. 123 ff., 144 ff.

⁹ 1 Pet. 1:3.

¹⁰ Rom. 5:5.

¹¹ Gal. 2:20.

¹² 1 Cor. 11:24.

¹³ Cf. Johnson 1998.

tion to refer to the call for individuals to reconcile to God and their immediate neighbours. Reconciliation had a theological and personal meaning, but not a social meaning. On the other hand, for the larger world of social relations in recent decades, the twin categories of liberation and justice have come into special prominence. For many theological, socio-philosophical, and political reasons, I think that this is dangerously one-sided.

My unease with the liberationist perspective was born as I was trying to figure out what to do theologically with the war that was raging recently in my own country between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (and which continues today between Serbs and Albanians and Macedonians and Albanians). My original instinct, having been influenced early on by evangelical liberation theologians and later by my doctoral supervisor, Jürgen Moltmann, was to operate with the categories of liberation and oppression. Soon it became obvious that both Croats and Serbs—and later Muslims—perceived themselves as the oppressed who were engaged in the struggle for liberation! Moreover, if I tried to be somewhat objective, it seemed that all of them had at least internally plausible reasons for making that claim—namely that they were oppressed and engaged in the struggle for liberation. So, if I had offered them standard liberation theology, I would have provided only combat gear, and some new weapons to fight with. ‘Great,’ they would have said, Croats, Serbs, and Muslims alike,

‘God is on the side of the oppressed—our side.’ And so the war would have continued.

I needed a theological perspective that would recognize the depth of the evil that was being perpetrated. But it also had to offer the possibility of an end to the violence of mutual destruction and open the possibility of future reconciliation. Thus I concluded that any stress on liberation must be framed by the vision of reconciliation. Surely there are situations which cry for immediate liberation. Yet liberation can never be an end in itself, a goal independent of reconciliation. Liberation apart from reconciliation easily becomes destructive.

The church ought to pursue its social mission out of the heart of its own identity. We must retrieve and explicate the social meaning of the divine self-giving in order to reconcile sinful humanity. Though Paul describes the ministry of reconciliation as entreating people to ‘be reconciled to God’,¹⁴ that ministry for him has an inalienable social dimension because *reconciliation between human beings is intrinsic to their reconciliation with God*. At its centre, not only at its periphery, reconciliation has a horizontal dimension as well. It contains a turn away from enmity toward people, not just from enmity toward God, and it contains a movement toward the other who was the target of enmity. Hence the Pauline vision of reconciliation between Jews and gentiles, between men and women, between slaves and free.¹⁵ And

¹⁴ 2 Cor. 5:20.

¹⁵ Cf. Gal. 3:28.

hence the grand claim that 'in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross'.¹⁶ The ultimate goal not only for the church but also for the whole of reality is a vision of the reconciliation of all things in the embrace of the triune God.

Care of Bodies

As we have seen, central to Jesus' mission in the power of the Spirit was the care of bodies. His programmatic sermon in Nazareth makes this plain: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'¹⁷ Attempts to spiritualize Jesus' care for bodies abound. Consonant with his soteriology, Martin Luther, for example, consistently translated accounts of Christ's healings of human bodies into reports on how Jesus liberates the conscience through forgiveness of sins. But this will clearly not do: Jesus forgave and he healed. The early church continued with the same kind of care for bodies: it healed the sick and it supported the poor so that 'there was not a needy person among them'.¹⁸ The apostle Paul, too, did not only

proclaim reconciliation to God and between people, he also helped the poor¹⁹ and healed the sick.²⁰

Why the care of bodies? Most basically because the rebirth of persons who live in this material world, and who with this world make up the good creation of God, cannot be complete without the redemption of their bodies. The new birth of persons through the Spirit is the beginning—the ambiguous but nonetheless real beginning—of the rebirth of the whole cosmos.²¹ Similarly, the reconciliation of people who live embodied lives will be complete only when the reconciliation of all things takes place; there can be no eschatological bliss for God's people without eschatological *shalom* for God's world.

If the mission of the church includes care for bodies and requires us therefore to address larger social and ecological issues, where does the Spirit come in? Often the work of the Spirit has been limited to the church, to gathering people into communities, giving them gifts, uniting them, and inspiring them to proclaim the gospel, which aims in turn at further gathering. But is such a 'centripetal' understanding of the work of the Spirit adequate? Even more, are the implicit ecclesiological assumptions that inform it correct—namely, that the church is only a church when gathered, but not when 'dispersed', and that the work of the church is therefore primarily liturgical, and not

¹⁶ Col. 1:19-20.

¹⁷ Lk. 4:18-19.

¹⁸ Acts 4:34a.

¹⁹ 2 Cor. 8-9; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1-4, Gal. 2:10.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 2:4; Gal. 3:5.

²¹ Cf. Mt. 19:28; 2 Cor. 5:17.

‘secular’? Properly understood, the church is not a ‘gathering’ but a *community that gathers*, and the church’s work therefore is done both when the community is ‘gathered’ and when it is ‘dispersed’ in the world. Since to live as a Christian means to ‘walk in the Spirit’,²² *all* Christian work is done in the power of the Spirit of grace—whether it concerns the rebirth of persons, the reconciliation of people, or the care of bodies.

As the community of faith reaches into the world to touch all dimensions of its life, it will find that the Spirit of Christ at work in the community is the Spirit of life at work in the whole creation. Anointed by the Spirit, the church is sent to go where the Spirit is always already to be found preparing the way for the coming of the reign of God.

In place of a conclusion

Finally, I want to draw your attention to a wonderful image of the church that we encounter early in Christian history. The church, it is said, is like the moon. The moon has no light of its own. All the light by which it

makes our nights so beautiful is reflected light, light borrowed from the sun.

Most of my talk was dedicated to underscoring that the church is called to participate in Christ’s mission by announcing and practically demonstrating God’s coming in grace. The impression could emerge that the church is simply engaged in a mission of the same nature as Christ’s and guided with the same goal as his. Christ would then be simply the authoritative model for the church to imitate. But Christ is more than that, much more. The church is engaged in *Christ’s own* mission; indeed, it is Christ by the power of the Spirit who takes the church up in the service of his own mission. The church has no power of its own and no goals of its own. Like the moon, all the light that the church possesses is the light of Christ shining by the power of the Spirit. And of all the things that church may have—beautiful buildings, successful programmes, political power, or economic wealth—none of them ultimately matter and all may even be detrimental. The only thing that truly matters is that the Church be reflection of Christ’s own light in that it continues his mission anointed by the Spirit.

²² Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:16 ff.