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'The Whole Church': Statement of the Lausanne Theology Working Group

KEY WORDS: *Church, Gospel, World, Mission, Apostolic, Holy, Catholic*

Introduction

'*Salvation* belongs to our God'
'You will be my *people*'
'*The earth* is the Lord's'

The starting point for our ecclesiology must be the same as for our theology of mission and for our understanding of the world. Mission, the church, and the world all belong to God. The concept of *missio Dei* reminds us that our mission flows from the mission of God, for salvation belongs to God. Similarly, the concept of *ecclesia Dei* reminds us that the church derives its identity and purpose from the God who called us and created us as a people for himself.

Mission is God's. The church is God's. The world is God's.

Our doctrine of God, in all its Trinitarian richness, must govern our ecclesiology. The opening of 1 Peter reminds us of our identity in relation to the work of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The rest of the epistle makes it clear that what we *do* as a church flows integrally and inseparably from who we are as church. Being and doing cannot be torn apart. *We are called to be who we are, and to live out what we are.*

Though our discussions around all the papers and case studies ranged very widely, we found it helpful to arrange our reflections and findings around the four great terms used to describe the church in the Nicene Creed, since it became clear that each one of them has strong missional significance:

> 'We believe in *one*, *holy*, *catholic* and *apostolic* church…'

We also found it encouraging that a more recent statement of faith includes mission strongly in its effort to define the nature and purpose of the church.

> The church stands in continuity with God's people in the Old Testament, called through Abraham to be a light to the nations, shaped and taught through the law and the prophets to be a community of holiness, compassion and justice, and redeemed through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The church exists to worship and glorify God for all eternity and is commissioned by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in the transforming mission of God within history.
> (from the new Tearfund Statement of Faith, adopted in 2007).

A. One

We give thanks that the one church is

God's church and not our own, and hence finds its identity and purpose in the one God and King who called it into being and reigns over it as Lord. Biblically, the church is *one in relation to the one living God* (for he alone is its creator, redeemer and Lord, sustaining, sanctifying and indwelling it by his one Spirit); *one in relation to Christ* (for it includes all who are in Christ); *one throughout history* (for it includes all whom God has called to himself in all ages, before and after the incarnation); and *one in all the biblical pictures of it* (there is, e.g., only one household of God; only one bride of Christ; only one vine; only one priesthood and temple; only one flock; only one body—the body of Christ). All of these truths we found illustrated again in 1 Peter.

1. Yet we confess that often we understand church according to our own limited perspectives. We easily approve of the congregation or tradition in which we participate, but fail to recognize the wider reality of God's church in many different cultures and forms, including those that are strange and even disturbing to us. We repent of this and seek to cultivate the spirit of Barnabas who, when confronted in Antioch with a new and cosmopolitan manifestation of following Jesus, 'when he saw the grace of God, he was glad' (Acts 11:23). *We urge Lausanne to go on being a forum where all kinds and ways of being the church in mission can be recognized, embraced and affirmed*, not without mutual critique and accountability, but certainly without instant rejection and condemnation of what is unfamiliar. We have most to learn from those who are most different from ourselves.
2. We give thanks that the one church that God has called into being in Christ is drawn from every nation, tribe, people and language, with the result that no single ethnic identity can any longer claim to be 'God's chosen people'. God's election of Old Testament Israel was for the sake of the eventual creation of this multi-national community of God's people, and the Old Testament itself envisages and anticipates it. We observed again how prominently 1 Peter applies terms and truths that were used in the Old Testament to describe Israel to the multi-ethnic community of those in Christ. It is vital that we strongly affirm, therefore, that *while there are multiple ethnicities within the one church by God's clear intention, no single ethnic group holds privileged place in God's economy of salvation or God's eschatological purpose*. For this reason, we strongly believe that the separate and privileged place given to Jewish people today or to the modern Israeli state in certain forms of dispensationalism or Christian Zionism, should be challenged, inasmuch as they deny the essential oneness of the people of God in Christ.
3. We confess that ethnocentrism still manifests itself in the global church, tempting us to consider our own cultural, national, or tribal identity as superior to others. This fundamentally denies the oneness of the church in Christ, and should be challenged with renunciation

and repentance, since it is the root of so much conflict even among Christians.

4. We rejoice in the phenomenal growth of the church in the majority world of the global south, and for that reason we understand the intention of the statement that the 'centre of gravity' of world Christianity has shifted to the south. However, we strongly discourage the further use of this term, for two reasons. First, Christianity has no centre but Jesus Christ. We are defined by no geographical centre, but only by our allegiance to the Lordship of Christ, and he is Lord of all the earth. The 'centre', therefore, is wherever he is worshipped and obeyed. Secondly, any talk of a centre (other than Christ) undermines the fact that Christianity, even since the book of Acts, has always been fundamentally polycentric. Anywhere on earth can be a centre, and any centre can rapidly become peripheral. *The global nature of the church as 'one throughout the whole wide world' subverts the language of a centre—whether geographical, numerical, or missionary. Mission is from everywhere to everywhere*.
5. The church as 'one' also speaks of integration. Repeatedly in our consultation we found ourselves longing to move beyond the dichotomies that so often and sadly divide us. Or rather, in most cases, to move back behind them to an evangelical understanding of the church in which such dichotomies are seen as invalid in principle. These are some dichotomies we need to recognize as fundamentally false and damaging, or at best questionable. There are doubtless more.

- *Being and doing*. The Bible calls us to live out who we are.
- *Word and deed*. Both are essential parts of Christian life and witness, as our study of 1 Peter repeatedly showed (especially 1 Pet. 3). As Newbigin put it, the church by its life and actions is to be the hermeneutic, or the plausibility structure of the gospel. We will be heard because of our deeds as well as our words.
- *Evangelism and social action* (or any form of Christian 'action'). We believe that the struggle to articulate the relationship between these two was made necessary in the second half of the 20th century because of the mistaken separation of them that had taken place in the first half. That is why we say we need to go back *behind* this dichotomy. In our view, they are both integral to biblical mission—in the sense that while they may be conceptually distinguished, they cannot be separated. The relation between them is intrinsic and organic, as much as the relationship, say, between breathing and drinking in the human body. It makes little sense to speak of either having priority or primacy. Both are integral parts of what it means to be alive! Without either, there is death. *We therefore urge Lausanne to affirm an integral understanding of mission that*

inseparably includes both, rather than continuing chicken-and-egg debates about how they relate.

- *Church and para-church*: We wonder if there is more argument about this distinction among mission agencies and church bodies than exists in the mind of God, or in biblical concepts. While recognizing that there are valid pragmatic or functional distinctions that may be made for the sake of good order and administration, we need to affirm the biblical truth that 'where two or three are gathered' in the name of Christ, he is there, and the church is there—one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

6. The oneness of the church must also be seen as an integral part of the plan of God for the whole creation. It has a prophetic and eschatological dimension. *Paul sees the oneness of the church as the prophetic sign of that reconciled unity that will one day be true for all humanity and all creation in Christ* (Eph. 1:10, 22-23; Col. 1:15-20). Our concern for the unity of the church (and all the practical, ethical, ecumenical etc. implications of that), must therefore be seen as also intrinsic to our understanding of what we mean by 'the whole church' in its mission. It is significant that Peter includes the command to 'live in harmony with one another' (1 Pet. 3:8) within a chapter that refers to positive witness to unbelievers.

B. Holy

1. The holiness of God's people is both a fact *and* a duty. It is a given *and* a task. It is a status *and* a responsibility. It is ontological *and* ethical. The church is the community of those whom God has set apart for himself, and '*made* holy' (Lev. 22:32; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:2). But it is also the community called to '*be* holy', in every aspect of life on earth (Lev. 18:3-5; 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Sanctification (like salvation), thus has a past, present and future tense. Once again we affirm the integration of being and doing. We are to live what we are. In this respect, *holiness is also essentially missional, for it describes an identity and a life that is grounded in the character and mission of God*.

2. So, we give thanks that God has called us, redeemed us and sanctified us to be holy in his sight. We observed in our study of 1 Peter (where we find the strongest New Testament echo of the Old Testament command to 'be holy, for God is holy'), that there is a very powerful emphasis on 'doing good' (the phrase, or equivalent 'doing right', occurs 10 times in this one letter). And this manifestation of practical holiness—even by suffering believers, or believers in oppressive contexts (such as slaves or wives of unbelieving masters or husbands)—was expected to be *evangelistically* fruitful. Holy living, through doing good, is integrated with 'giving an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason of the hope that you have'. In 1 Pet. 4:8-11, *speaking* the word of God is integrated with *serving*, loving, offering hospitality, and all as a ministry of God's grace, in God's

strength, for God's glory. In other words, *holiness is integral to mission. Good evangelism happens when Christians do good things as the fruit of holiness*. The integration of word and deed is powerfully visible in this scripture.

3. Yet we confess our failure in manifesting such missional holiness in at least the following ways:
   - We have failed to include the fact and the demand of holiness as an integral part of our missional outreach, when we put exclusive emphasis on evangelism and give insufficient attention to making disciples. Repeatedly 'the Great Commission' is understood only as an evangelistic mandate, when the explicit command is to 'make disciples', and the primary means is by 'teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'—i.e. practical obedience to the teaching of Jesus.
   - We tolerate within the church a whole range of unholy, ungodly, unChristlike behaviours, without recognizing that they pollute our ecclesiology and undermine our mission. There are many varieties of such unholiness across different cultures, but they need to be recognized and addressed in humility.
4. We give thanks that God's work of sanctification applies to every area of life, including (for example) our care of creation, use of money, gender relationships, our ethnic identity and political choices. Yet we confess that we have allowed ourselves to be captivated by idolatries and ideologies that militate against biblical holiness (which demands distinctiveness from the world around). Among these (but not exhaustively), we identified the following forms of idolatry that evangelical Christians often participate in, or find ways of condoning:
   - *Consumerism or materialistic greed* (when we exalt prosperity over generosity);
   - *Nationalism or patriotism* (when we prioritize our own nation's interests and agenda above the seeking first the kingdom of God);
   - *Violence* (when we forget Jesus' warnings about the sword and his commendation of peace-making);
   - *Ethnic pride* (when we let the blood of ethnic identity be thicker than the water of baptism in Christ);
   - *Selfishness* (when we ignore international and structural injustice that creates and perpetuates poverty, or put short term convenience above the needs of future generations);
   - *Gender injustice* (when we privilege male over female, and ignore the oppression of women within and outside the church).

   In all such matters, *we see the need for the church itself to seek repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation, and to pray for a more prophetic and missional holiness of life and witness*.
5. To speak of the holiness of the church is to speak of the eternal purpose for which God has created it—namely to be his people, for his glory, for all eternity in the new

creation; and also it is to speak of the historical purpose of the church, which is called to participate as God's holy (distinct) people in God's mission within history for the redemption of humanity and creation.

However, we confess that we often reduce that teleological understanding of the church (that the church exists for the eternal and historical purposes of God for his whole creation), into an instrumental understanding of the church, as if churches exist only to serve an agenda that is all too often imposed upon them by other agencies.

Of course every church ought to understand and live out its essentially missional identity as God's holy people in the world. But we want to stress that the church exists for God, and should not be used as a convenient local franchise for the delivery of external strategies, objectives and targets.

C. Catholic

1. The word 'catholic' in the creed speaks of the universal church, or the church 'as a whole'. It is an appropriate word to have in mind when we use the Lausanne expression 'The whole church', for 'wholeness' is intrinsic to catholicity.

   We rejoice to affirm the biblical truths that the church of God is *universal in its membership* (for it is open to people from any and every nation); *universal in its extent* (for it knows no geographical boundary); *universal in time and eternity* (for it includes all God's people drawn from all generations of human history who will populate the new creation); and *universal in the eyes of God* (for the Lord knows those who are his, whether they are visible to us or not).

2. We give thanks for the rich diversity that God has built into the whole church. Such diversity frequently stretches us beyond our relatively narrow experience or understanding of church, but it is a vital biblical part of the church's catholicity.

   Yet we confess that often we fail to recognize the full contribution that is brought to the church by all those whom God has called to belong to it. In our consultation we particularly considered the following, whose contribution may be undervalued, diminished, overlooked, or even prevented:

   - women;
   - persons with disabilities (or 'differently-abled');
   - immigrants;
   - indigenous or primal cultures;
   - 'insider movements'.

   Case studies concerning these groups or movements stimulated our reflection and some will be published later.

   When such groups are allowed (or forced) to remain voiceless or invisible, then we lose the wholeness of God's church.

   In so many ways, we fail to appreciate the catholicity of the church by intentionally or unwittingly excluding from our consciousness those whom God himself has included within his church. To this extent, *our failure to appreciate and act upon the full catholicity of*

the church damages and diminishes the effectiveness of our mission.

3. We rejoice in the biblical teaching that God has given a great variety of differing gifts and callings and ministries to his universal church, for the benefit of all and for the equipping of God's people for ministry and mission (1 Pet. 4:10-11). We need to embrace this teaching more positively and avoid our tendency to elevate one form of gifting above another, or to relegate some forms of calling or ministry to secondary levels of importance—whether to God, or to God's mission through the church.

   Since the Spirit of God, the one who gives and empowers all gifts and ministries within the church, has been poured out on God's servants, 'both men and women' (Acts 2:18), *we affirm that ministry gifting and calling are not defined by gender, or by ethnicity, wealth, or social status. Since the whole church is called to mission, the whole church is gifted for mission*—though in many diverse ways under the sovereign distribution of God's Spirit.

4. We give thanks for the many outstanding and very visible leaders God has given to the church, in our generation as in the past. Yet we confess that we may be guilty of so honouring them that we have failed to recognize the full contribution of the multitudes of those servants of God who remain unknown and uncelebrated on earth. In this we need to repent of our seduction by the idolatry of secular celebrity culture. We must not fall into the temptation of equating the church with its most vocal and visible leaders. Such a mindset is very dangerous for those who are elevated and celebrated in that way, and very disabling for the rest of God's people. *Commitment to catholicity includes commitment to the priesthood of all believers, and priesthood is fundamentally missional, since it involves bringing God to the world and bringing the world to God. And that is a task for the whole church* (1 Pet. 2:9-12)

   We also need to remind ourselves constantly that the biblical prescription and pattern for leaders within God's people is not one of power and prominence, but of Christlike servanthood and humility (this point is most strongly emphasized in 1 Pet. 5:1-4). *The Bible in both testaments warns us that leaders who wield or seek power and wealth radically undermine and pervert the mission of the church*. Evangelical leaders are not at all immune to this temptation; many in fact fall into it, bring the church into disrepute, and disgrace to the name of Christ.

5. We speak and write as evangelicals within that historic tradition and its particular manifestation in the Lausanne movement. However, in affirming the catholicity of the church, we gladly recognize that God's people include many followers of the Lord Jesus Christ within other traditions. For that reason, *we pray for the renewal of older historic branches of the world church, particularly Roman Catholic and Orthodox, through the power of God's Holy Spirit, and through the reform-*

ing and missional power of the Bible at work within them.

D. Apostolic

1. We rejoice in the apostolic nature of the church, and affirm the biblical meaning of this: a) that the church is founded on the historic apostles of Jesus Christ, whose authorized witness to Christ, in word, deed and in the writings of the New Testament, along with their acceptance of the authority of the Old Testament scriptures, constitute the primary authoritative and final source of our ecclesiology; b) that we are called to be faithful to the teaching of the apostles, by our submission to the authority of Scripture; and c) that we are to carry forward the mission of the apostles in bearing witness to God's saving work in Christ. *The word 'apostolic', therefore, can variously refer to*
   - *our historical roots*,
   - *our doctrinal faithfulness, and*
   - *our missional mandate*.

   The apostolic nature of the church is thus once again an integration of being and doing, of identity and mission. The church exists as the community of faith in fellowship with the apostles; and we are called to live as those who are 'sent' in mission as the apostles were sent by the risen Christ.
2. To define the church as 'apostolic' is another way of saying that the church is missional by definition. It cannot be otherwise and be church. *Mission is not something we* **add** *to our concept of church, but is* **intrinsic** *to it*. For this reason, while we appreciate the desire that lies behind the growing use of the phrase '*missional church*', the phrase is essentially tautologous. What else can the church be but missional without ceasing to be church? Indeed, history (including contemporary history in some parts of the world, including Europe) would suggest that churches that are not missional will eventually cease to exist.
3. We rejoice in the zeal of many different strategies of evangelism that have arisen within God's church—not least under the umbrella of the Lausanne movement. We affirm and admire the commitment and energy of those who call the church's attention to those peoples and places where the name of Jesus Christ has never been heard yet, and who seek to mobilize effective ways of reaching them with the gospel. Such motivation and effort is wholly in tune with the church's apostolicity, for it reflects the heart of the apostle Paul himself, and it takes seriously the purpose of God that people of 'every tribe and language and nation', 'to the ends of the earth', will one day be gathered as God's people, worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ, in the new creation. *The apostolic church has to be the evangelizing church*.
4. However, as part of our reflection on the meaning of 'the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world', we are concerned that *it is possible to be driven by strategies of evangelism that lack adequate biblical ecclesiology, or that have implied but unexpressed ecclesi-*

ologies that are biblically defective. It is a criticism often levelled at evangelicals that we lack clear and robust ecclesiology, and it is not without justification.

Examples of such defective ecclesiologies could be described as:

- *Container church*: If the governing objective of evangelism is thought to be getting the maximum number of people into heaven, then the church becomes the container where converts are stored until they get there. The glorious nature and purpose of the church in itself, in God's plans, gets little attention.
- *Harvest church*: If the governing objective of evangelism is to get the maximum number of sheaves into the barn before the harvest ends, then haste is of the essence. This sometimes goes along with reading the Great Commission as an 'unfinished task' to which we can bring closure if only we work harder and faster to 'achieve' it.
- *Lifeboat church*: If the governing objective is to save souls from a sinking world heading for imminent obliteration, then the church becomes a lifeboat, and there is no rationale, motivation (or time) for engagement with the world itself—culturally, socially or ecologically.

These are caricatures, no doubt, but once again history shows us that haste breeds shallowness. We all readily lament the fact of widespread contemporary nominalism in churches evangelized generations ago and the need for re-evangelism. To the extent that this may be due to a failure of in-depth discipling (which is in fact simple disobedience to the Great Commission), *we should be prepared to anticipate that haste-driven evangelism in the present without rigorous discipling will generate repeated nominalism in future generations. A robust biblical ecclesiology is essential to healthy and effective mission with long-lasting results. By contrast, to try to be* **apostolic** *in missionary zeal without commitment to* **holy** *discipleship, is to tear asunder two of the most essential marks of the church*.

5. Massive migration of many peoples, for all kinds of reasons, is one of the most notable features of our contemporary world. We recognize that God is using such migrations of peoples around the globe as the agents and means of his mission. We recognize (in line with Jeremiah 29, where the exiles of Judah were told to seek the welfare of Babylon and pray for it—i.e. to carry on their Abrahamic mandate of being a blessing), that migration may be a form of 'sending'—which, whether voluntary or enforced, may be one way in which God in his providence constitutes the apostolicity of the church. But we do not underestimate the profound suffering that such migration entails.

   And we confess that the church's attitude to such immigrant populations has not always been characterized by love, and that we have failed to recognize the way in which God is using these

movements to achieve his purposes. *We need to see biblical patterns at work in the way such migration movements, and the opportunities they present for the gospel, represent mission from the margins, mission out of weakness, and a radical subverting of the whole concept of 'centre' and 'periphery'.*

6. From our study of 1 Peter, we realized that the issue of persecution and suffering of the church called for much more attention than we were able to give it. Biblically there is no doubt that it is an essential element of the church standing in the tradition of the apostles.

Conclusion

So we concluded that every word in the classic creedal definition of the church has intrinsic missional significance: one, holy, catholic and apostolic. To speak of the 'whole church' is a lot more challenging than thinking merely of 'all Christians', but demands that we reflect on the church's identity and calling, its very reason for existence—in history and for eternity. And as we do so, we quickly discern those places where the church is far from 'whole' and we call for recognition, repentance and reformation—beginning with ourselves as those entrusted with theological leadership in the church of today. At the same time, we would not wish to give the impression that only a perfect church can participate in God's mission. If that were so, there would have been no mission throughout the whole history of God's people—Old and New Testament and beyond! We are 'jars of clay', in Paul's imagery (2 Cor. 4:7), and many of us are very cracked pots indeed. Yet God chooses to use us in the service of his glorious gospel. We commit ourselves to seek wholeness where we see brokenness, but at the same time to urge the church as a whole to live out the missional identity for which it has been created and redeemed.