



THE NICENE MARKS IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM CHURCH

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Dislocation and Opportunity

The issue that is either openly addressed or subtly at work in all our discussions about a denomination like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the fact that Christendom is over. Wherever one is located on the theological or ecclesial spectrum, this is the common ground that links us together. The grant proposal that led to the funding of the “Re-Forming Ministry” project put it very succinctly:

Mainline Protestantism is no longer the religious expression of American society, the culture’s *de facto* established church. The social and religious climate has altered dramatically, pushing denominations such as the PCUSA out of the center of American Christianity, and pushing Christianity itself to the margins of a culture that is increasingly secular, pluralistic, and indifferent to the institutional church.¹

The “Christianity” referred to in the last sentence is the Christianity of European Christendom, that partnership of church, state, and society initiated in the fourth century under the Emperor Constantine. This project resulted in the shaping and definition of western cultures as “Christian,” symbolized by the parish church at the center of every village, town, and city. The Christian churches of Christendom have been legally “established” and the Christian religion socially and culturally

privileged, to such an extent that the terms “European,” and later, “North American,” have been equated with “Christian.”

The proposal’s language is, I think, a good, clean summary of a broadly held consensus – at least among schooled observers of our context. It is debatable whether or to what degree the general membership in our Presbyterian congregations (or in any other main-line congregations) really grasps this paradigm shift. Christendom may well be over legally (disestablishment became the law of the land with the ratification of the Bill of Rights!), but the mentality and attitudes of Christendom still flourish in our churches, our popular imagination, and much of our public culture. The popularity of the song “God Bless America” witnesses to that cultural reality.

My concern is how we, within the Presbyterian Church, appreciate or work with this contextual change in which we find ourselves today. More pointedly, I would like to know how or whether we, in fact, see this paradigm shift as a theological opportunity. Can we understand that the end of Christendom is a way for us to begin to reassess the western theological tradition from the liberating perspective of the actual and unquestioned end of Christendom? Can we grapple with the very significant challenges and problems as well as great benefits inherited from this long, fascinating and complex history?

Why the Church?

It appears that the end of Christendom raises particularly unsettling questions with regard to the theology of the church. That should not surprise us. Both the institutional and intellectual shape of the Christian movement have obviously been profoundly

affected by the position of privilege and protection guaranteed across the centuries of Christendom. As we learn to look at what that project has done to us theologically, we also have to ask what can perhaps now be changed, or needs to be changed, as a result of that learning. This is no easy task, since ecclesiological issues are very complex and comprehensive. The wording of our grant proposal suggests that the end of the church's eminence and the decline of its influence, which we are all experiencing, have led to confusion about the church's identity. If legal establishment and cultural privilege should no longer define the church, then what should? What should be the criteria for our definition of both the purpose and the shape of the church? Should the church, because of its long history of cultural compromise and even captivity, distance itself from contemporary culture? Or should it find other ways to relate to its culture when it no longer has automatic access to cultural power? In light of the diminishing numbers of people on our rolls, should our theology and worship be shaped to attract outsiders, or should they focus primarily on the needs and wants of those who are still faithful members? Are these two strategies necessarily incompatible, and beyond that, are they even appropriate expressions of a biblical theology of the church? What forms of mission or faith articulation are appropriate in a changing world? What are the characteristics of leadership needed in the changing church and how are these characteristics identified and encouraged?

Ultimately, this massive paradigm shift confronts us with the most basic of questions: Why is there a church at all? That was the very same question that was formulated by Coulter, Mulder and Weeks at the end of their six volume study of *The Presbyterian Presence*, when they reviewed the theological agenda for the reforming of the

Presbyterian Church. The fourth question on their list was “Why, after all, is there a church—an ordered community of Christians?”²

Interpreting the Legacy of Christendom: Ecclesiology without Mission?

As a teacher of future pastors and leaders of our church, I am very committed to reading our Christendom legacy in a balanced and fair way. There is a great deal of reckless “Christendom-bashing” going on, so that we do need to be theologically attentive and responsible in the way that we read our legacy. It will not do to imply, somehow, that the Holy Spirit left the earth around the 4th century, when Constantine came to power, only to reappear in the modern group or movement with which we may now be affiliated. If God is faithful to his purpose and calling, then God has been present and at work through this very ambiguous history that we call Christendom, just as God was present and at work through one thousand years of kings in Israel, most of whom the ancient Chronicler found wanting.

So we have to learn a certain dialectical skill in order to read and interpret this legacy that shapes us. Having said that, however, my contention would be that the end of Christendom is exposing the fact that it is in the area of ecclesiology that we confront the greatest problems. To be sure, many have argued, as I have done, that Christendom’s Christianity is defined by pervasive reductionism, especially with regard to our understanding of God’s promised and completed salvation. There are reductionist problems in all of the classical, theological themes. Having granted that, it seems to me that the most profound issues arise out of salvation reductionism and its sweeping implications for the theology of the church. To concentrate a complex analysis in a brief

summary, the reduction of the gospel of cosmic salvation to the focus upon the savedness of the individual is directly linked to an understanding of the church that centers on the administration of that salvation to the individual believer. From the onset of the Constantinian project, this gradually expanding reductionism of the theology of the church has been institutionalized, supported by the various forms of the church's cultural adaptation and compromise that we now, I think, can see more clearly than we have for a very long time. The telling point for this reductionism is the place and importance of mission in any western theology of the church (ecclesiology).

Wilbert Shenk, the esteemed senior missiologist, has said famously, "The Christendom model of church may be characterized as *church without mission*."³ I have disagreed with Wilbert on this statement, because throughout the history of Christendom there has certainly been a great deal of missionary action. One need only mention Augustine of Canterbury, Patrick, Columba, Boniface, Methodius, and Cyril to document how much mission was happening under the aegis of Christendom. But it *is* fair to say that the ecclesiology of Christendom is an ecclesiology without mission. That is a fundamental theological problem for the western church. It puts this tradition in direct tension with the biblical understanding of the character and purpose of the church within God's mission. Based on the New Testament, it is abundantly clear that the fundamental assertion we must make about the church of Jesus Christ is that it is, in the words of Vatican II, "missionary by its very nature".⁴

The New Testament and the Missionary Nature of the Church

The character of the New Testament church was a community called and formed to be Christ's witnesses. Most of those wonderful images of the church that Paul Minear develops in his study of these images⁵ can be described as fundamentally missional. What does it mean to be Christ's letter to the world (2 Cor. 3:2-3)? That's a missional definition of the purpose of the Corinthian congregation. Luke's theology of the early church is summarized in the Ascension Day promise to the gathered disciples, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). John's theology of mission as sending reaches its climax in the Easter command of the risen Christ: "As my Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). The loss of a theology of mission at the heart of Constantinianism's ecclesiologies is a loss of the very heart of the New Testament's understanding of the church.

The church was from its very inception apostolic. It was sent to continue the ministry of the Apostles, the "sent ones," who had been the first missionaries, founding churches. Each congregation was formed with the express purpose of continuing the witness that had brought it into being. As heirs of Christendom, we have been reading this biblical witness regarding this church without any kind of missional lenses. As I tell my students, it has not made sense for millions of Christians in the western world to read in 1 Peter that we are "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11). As the privileged religious institution of Christendom, we could not have had the vaguest idea what Peter meant when he described the Christian community as alien in its setting. We are now beginning to learn it again because the end of Christendom is making that possible. Our sister churches in

the non-western world read this text with great clarity because in almost every context they are marginal, a minority, and they know that they are aliens and exiles.

Mission-less Theology and Confession

This lack of mission characterizes both the way we have written ecclesiology and the way we have done our confessions, these two forms of doctrinal enterprise in the church. One cannot find the theme “mission” in any classic, systematic theology written before the 20th century. Take, for example, Charles Hodge. Hodge was a highly respected professor of theology at Princeton Seminary, who regularly preached on mission, wrote brochures on the topic, was enthusiastically committed to the growing Presbyterian mission, sent his sons together with hundreds of missionaries who went out from Miller Chapel to become a part of the missionary enterprise of the 19th and early 20th century. Yet he wrote a systematic theology in which the word “mission” never once appears. Hodge wrote a classic Reformed ecclesiology that never deals with the church’s purpose as God’s missionary people.

When we look through our *Book of Confessions*, the most missional statement we find before the year 1903 is the Nicene Creed, with its emphasis upon the apostolicity of the church. The themes that are formative for our Reformation confessions include the universality of the church; the church as the community of the elect, thus the community enjoying the benefits of the gospel; the community of salvation; the distinction between the visible and the invisible church; the criteria for the true church; the marks of the church as Word and the Sacrament, and the ministry appropriate to the true church. There are a few mentions, very few, as we scan those documents, about the church

having something to do with the service of God. There is a great deal of polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and its misunderstandings of the church woven throughout.

I often ask groups of pastors or my own students, “When is the first time that the theme ‘mission’ actually occurs in the *Book of Confessions*?” and I have yet to have anybody give me the answer to that question. That is because most people are not aware of the process in the northern stream that added paragraph XXXV to the Westminster Confession in 1903, entitled “Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions.”

Significantly, this paragraph is placed at the end of the Confession, not in the section that deals with the theology of the church. This illustrates how our thinking continues almost automatically to separate mission from the theology of the church. That parallels the history of modern mission as a largely non-ecclesial movement, carried out by lay-dominated mission societies rather than established churches – for at least its first century. Thus, we inherit a very Christendom-shaped interpretation of mission, rooted in the assumptions of established Christianity. It is really Thesis 6 of the *Barmen Declaration* that first signals the entry of “mission” in its fully ecclesial sense into our *Book of Confessions*. It then becomes a major theme in the *Confession of 1967*. But in the *Brief Statement of Faith* it appears as “witness” among several functions of the church, with little definitive impact on the way our most recent statement frames its ecclesiology.

Addressing the Gap: Reversing the Nicene Creed’s Marks of the Church

To address this doctrinal and confessional gap, the discussion that has emerged within the Gospel and Our Culture Network has proposed that we read the Nicene Marks in the

reverse order, in order to restore missional purpose to our theology of the church. This suggestion actually emerged in a conversation in 1996 in my study at the Louisville Seminary when George Hunsberger and I were discussing the book *Missional Church*, which I was editing for publication. He said, “I wonder what would happen if we just thought Nicea in the opposite direction. Why don’t you think about that?” As a result of his suggestion, I did propose this reading in the book, and I have been pursuing its implications ever since.

Apostolic

It is a simple yet revolutionary proposal: What if we were to say that the church that we confess is apostolic, catholic, holy, and therefore one? By “apostolicity,” we do not merely mean “the church descended from the apostles,” as important as that is. We mean “apostolicity” in the active sense of the New Testament verb, meaning “to be sent out,” and the noun “apostle” as the “sent-out one.” The community formed by the Holy Spirit through the initial apostolic witness is called to be sent. It is apostolically initiated in order to continue the apostolic ministry. Its mission is rooted in its calling, its conversion, its submission to Christ as Savior and Lord, and thus is definitive of its very being. The canonic process that forms the New Testament is then understood as the acknowledgment of the apostolic and thus missional authority of these documents—all of them emerging out of the ongoing formation process of communities that exist to continue apostolic witness. These scriptures work in the church as God’s chosen instrument for the continuing formation of communities to be faithful to their vocation.

If we start our Nicene ecclesiology with apostolicity, then we end up defining catholicity and holiness and oneness in rather different ways – in ways closer to the

sequence of formation that we find in the Biblical documents. Our interpretation commences, biblically, with Pentecost, the event that is the necessary completion of Easter. The Easter story isn't fully knowable until the Holy Spirit equips the apostolic witnesses to make it known. And at that act of equipping, the apostolicity of the church is further defined as "catholic."

Catholic

The message is to be made known to the ends of the earth, as Jesus commands, and it will be translatable into the life and experience of every ethnicity, as concretely demonstrated at the first Pentecost. Yet this highly diverse, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-organizational extension of the witnessing people of God, takes place *kat holon*, that is, "catholically," centered on that which is the whole, the common ground of the Gospel. That *holon*, that center and common ground, is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the event that demonstrates God's love for and healing of all the world in Christ. It is history that can be translated and continued in every ethnicity ("nation" is not a strong enough translation of *ethnos*!). Justo Gonzalez has frequently emphasized this very dynamic understanding of catholicity as cultural diversity centered around the *holon*, as the once-and-for-all gospel event.

From the very beginning, the New Testament churches had to be "catholic" if they were to be truly "apostolic." They were by God's intent multi-cultural, but proclaiming always the same Christ in every context. They were multi-organizational, but in common submission to one Lord, rather than to any human hierarchy (there was not any headquarters in the New Testament church!). Lamin Sanneh has constantly pointed out that the gospel is from the very outset fundamentally translatable.⁶ Every culture is

“destigmatized” by the gospel, so that every culture can become a vessel within which Christ can be confessed, the church can be formed and witness can be made. But no culture is normative for the church catholic. That is classically addressed in the Jewish-Gentile struggle of the Jerusalem church in Acts. The Jewish Christian movement is converted to the understanding that, by divine design, there was to be catholic diversity as a hallmark of the apostolic church.

It is difficult to find organizational language for the apostolic and catholic church of the first century. The church’s engagement in political and social power, a process played out over centuries, has made it exceptionally difficult for us to imagine a way of existing organizationally that is faithful to the biblical intention. The “church that Jesus intended” clearly differed intentionally from the structures of power, both in the Greek and the Jewish world, that characterized that context.⁷ Thus, our polity vocabulary is handicapped by the Christendom legacy: terms like ‘voluntary association,’ ‘established church,’ ‘national church,’ ‘territorial church,’ ‘denomination’ all fail to convey the concrete reality of the apostolic and catholic church which is our common source. How do we aptly describe the character, the sense of “organized-ness” of the early Christian communities as reflected in scripture? Perhaps the current language of “network” might most readily correspond to what was in fact the organizational shape of the early church! Certainly one of the hardest tasks we face, as we labor through the implications of the end of Christendom, is the question of an institutional shape that continues the distinctive kind of community that Jesus intended and actually established.

Catholicity is shaped by apostolicity, with the result that there is in the New Testament and pre-Constantinian church a centered, focused diversity, expressed in

diverse approaches to catechesis, to church organization, and to liturgy and worship. All of the forms of the church's life were, in some way, related to its basic missional vocation. This centered diversity was reflected in the 'Rule of Faith' in the first centuries of the church's history, which functioned dynamically as an expression of the common ground, the center around which the church in its diverse expressions clusters. This understanding and practice of catholicity contrasts with contemporary pluralism which can be described as parallel tracks that never meet and have no center.

Holy

Catholic apostolicity expresses itself appropriately in the holiness of the church. "Holiness" defines the way in which God's Spirit equips the church to practice its vocation so that witness can be credibly made in the world. God's Spirit "sanctifies," makes holy, in order to create a community that can serve as "Christ's letter to the world." This understanding of holiness is not so much related to salvation, as evidence of savedness, as it is to vocation, as formation for obedience. It is the context within which we are to understand the imperatives of the New Testament, the "commandments" of Jesus which, according to John, we are to follow. Holiness has therefore to do with fitness for service, with usability for God's mission.

If we read the New Testament missionally, then among the many questions we ask the text are "how questions": how shall we witness; how shall we be light, leaven, and salt; how shall "the life of Jesus...be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10)? This questioning unpacks these texts in terms of their purpose, which was to continue the formation of these communities for their apostolic vocations. This is clearly illustrated in the over-arching theme of the Pauline epistles, which is the admonition to "lead your life

worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1; see 1 Thess. 2:11f.; 2 Thess. 1:11; Col. 1:9f; Phil. 1:27; Gal. 5:13). The calling is to apostolic witness, and to carry it out, the community is instructed to lead its entire life in ways appropriate to that calling.

Thus, every dimension of the community’s life is of importance because all of it relates to the vocation of an apostolic, catholic community. If it is missional by its very nature, everything it does, how it lives, how it administers its money, how people relate to each other, how it resolves its disputes, all are potential demonstrations or witnesses to the rule of God in Christ in its midst. The task of the post-Christendom church in the West is to learn to read the New Testament imperatives, these imperatives of holiness, from the perspective of apostolicity and catholicity.

One

Thus we arrive at “oneness”. What would happen to our ecumenical concept of oneness if it emerged out of the apostolicity that is catholic and sanctified? What would the world see if the diverse forms of church presented a coherent and congruent testimony to the one gospel? If “unity” were understood missionally, then the focus would be upon the way that Christians, before a watching world, love one another, “being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:3). It is likely that the mark of “oneness” is stated first in the Nicene Creed because Constantine’s political interest was to restore the organizational unity of the church. In the sequence at the beginning of Ephesians 4, the oneness emerges out of our grappling with the task of living worthy of our calling, in which we are to be “eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). The diverse forms of witness and of

the organized church are to be perceived and experienced in the world as testifying to the same Jesus Christ. Their public witness is to carry out the same practices and disciplines of Christian discipleship in a great variety of ways: prayer, worship, praise, proclamation, reconciliation, acts of justice and mercy, endurance under persecution. When people in diverse cultures observe Christian communities in their midst living in these distinctive ways, they encounter the witness which points them to Jesus Christ. The unity of the church is expressed in that unified witness, all communities disclosing God's love for all creation, enfleshed in and through the story of Jesus. All apostolic communities continue the ministry of John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus, as illustrated by Grünewald's famous painting, the Isenheimer Altar.

Reading the Nicene marks in this way raises questions not only about the non-missional nature of western ecclesiology. It opens up a discussion about the strategies of the ecumenical movement, at least in the post-Christendom context, during the 20th century. The process appears to have focused on unity with little attention to the foundational character of the church's apostolicity, its "sentness." Thus, the efforts have largely been directed toward questions of organizational unity, which have revealed heavy baggage accumulated through centuries of Christendom compromises with worldly power. While visible unity is an essential aspect of the church's obedience to its calling, the way that we understand and practice that unity will be different if we approach it from the perspective of essential apostolicity, expressed in catholicity and holiness, for witness to the world. Are we not really in need of an entirely new definition of Christian unity, which is based on the missional vocation of the church and liberated from the Christendom preoccupation with power and influence? Do we know what such unity,

framed in terms of the witness seen and experienced by the world around us, would actually look like?

And Word and Sacrament

This discussion also raises questions about our interpretation today of the Reformation marks of the church, Word and Sacrament. It is important to remember that these formulations first emerged in the attempt of the disputing factions to find common ground at Augsburg in 1530. The definition of the “true church” in terms of the proper proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments was a minimal formulation, proposed by the Lutherans as a place at which the Catholics, Zwinglians, and the Lutherans could meet. It did not succeed, but the Augsburg Confession became the authoritative confession for the Lutherans, and the Word and Sacrament formulation became the common currency of the Reformation. It does not convey the fuller ecclesiology of the Nicene marks: one must argue rather carefully to evoke apostolicity, catholicity, holiness, and unity, from Word and Sacrament – although there are clearly connections. What is more problematic is that this more modern version of the marks of the true church has defined the church in largely clerical terms. It is ordained ministers who proclaim the word and administer the sacraments. The effect has been to solidify the non-missional cast of western ecclesiologies, at least in the magisterial Reformation traditions (the Radical Reformation goes a very different route).

One must wonder if the Presbyterian decision, at the time of reunion, to replace the older language of “teaching elder” and “ruling elder” with “Minister of Word and Sacrament” and “elder” has not contributed to continuation of a theology of the church

which focuses upon the clergy and diminishes if not neglects the missional calling which joins all members of Christ's Body into a witnessing community serving its Lord. Such issues can be fruitfully probed by means of the reverse order reading of Nicea. In the realities of our post-Christendom situation, such re-thinking of our basic ecclesiology is the urgent order of the day!

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¹ see <http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry/about/whyecclesiology.htm>.

² Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*. Presbyterian Presence: The Twentieth Century Experience, (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 283.

³ Wilbert Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 35, his italics.

⁴ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 372; cf. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 2.

⁵ Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, New Testament Library, Reprint of 1960 ed., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004).

⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *Translate the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

⁷ See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, tr. John P. Galvin, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). The original German title is *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?* = How did Jesus intend the congregation?