

A Theological Understanding of the Nature of the Church

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Introduction

The word “church,” like many other English words, has a variety of meanings depending upon the context in which it is used. “Church” may refer logisitically to a piece of real estate, an everyday building. Similarly, it could be used to denote a particular and local group of people who meet in this building. Those who meet in the building may use “church” to indicate activities occurring there (“we are having ‘church’ now!”). “The Church” can signify a particular denomination or stream of faith, or at times even the whole Christian association. Multiplicity of use is common for English words, yet “church” is no ordinary word. Vernacular usage of the word does not do justice to its true theological nuance; the Christian pilgrim whose view of the church is based on one or more of these vulgar¹ meanings will not enjoy a true panoramic vision of the theological nature of “the Church.”

Given the complexity of the concept, any effort to comprehend the theological nature of the church is inherently multi-faceted. There are those in the theological community that devote their entire lives to the discipline of its study. This brief survey will only begin to highlight areas that require much further study by the reader. In searching for the theological nature of the church, this work will introduce: the origin of

¹ “Vulgar” is here used the sense of common or ordinary.

the word “church” in the Biblical material, major scriptural images of the church, and the defining marks of the church set forth in the Nicene Creed.

The Biblical word Ekklesia

The word New Testament writers commonly used to designate church was *ekklesia*. This term arises from the Greek assemblage of the verb *kaleo* (“to call”) and the preposition *ek* (“out of”) resulting in the noun *ekklesia*, etymologically depicting the idea of “the called out ones.”² This grouping of words was not created by the New Testament authors; it was frequently used in the first-century Roman culture to indicate an “assembly” of citizens called together to tend to city affairs. In addition, early Jewish scholars, translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Septuagint), chose *ekklesia* to render the Hebrew word *qahal* (“assembly”).³

In the context of the Old Testament the “assembly” of Israel was a people of God’s own possession. God claimed his people through the covenant at Mount Sinai; the use of the term *ekklesia* in the New Testament “looks back on that event.”⁴ Thus when Jesus speaks of the “church,” (Matt. 16:18; 18:18) he uses a term steeped with the Old Testament meaning.⁵ Following the Old Testament as well as secular usage, early

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 464.

³ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church*, *Contours of Christian Theology*, ed. Gerald Bray (Dowers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1995), 29-30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

Christians saw themselves as a people belonging to God, the called out, together in Christ for the proclamation of the gospel.⁶ The *Ekklesia* is “the called out” people of God.

Scriptural Images of the Church

The New Testament word *ekklesia* is filled out scripturally through the use of inspired images in the Bible. There is a plethora of images relating to the church in the New Testament corpus. Arguably, the most complete catalog of these images has been made by Paul S. Minear in his book, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, identifying 96 images of the church, each explained in their biblical context.⁷ One third of these are called minor images. The other sixty-four grouped into four major sets: the People of God, the New Creation, the Fellowship in Faith, and the Body of Christ. Minear, while cautioning that the minor figures are not insignificant, notes the major classifications express a conviction that dominates a broad sector of early Christian thought.⁸ Within the confines of this paper, three of Minear’s four major groups will be considered: the People of God, the Fellowship in Faith, and the Body of Christ.

The People of God.

Images that convey the conception of the church as the people of God tie the contemporary Christian community to the historic community which originated in God’s

⁶ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 464.

⁷ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960; repr., Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2004), future page references are to the reprint edition.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

covenant promises.⁹ Scripture demonstrates this in 1 Peter 2:9-10, stating, “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people.” Here the church is seen as God’s chosen people, a “treasure-people” of God’s own possession; an assembly called by God.¹⁰ John Calvin regarded this passage as the New Testament warrant for his systematic of God’s people as priestly, prophetic, and kingly.¹¹ Noted Catholic theologian Hans Kung concurs, proclaiming in reference to this passage, “The Church is always and in all cases the *whole* people of God, the *whole* ecclesia, the whole fellowship of the faithful.”¹² In the same way, as we are transformed into a people of God, a royal priesthood, we are called to the vocation of declaring God’s wonderful deeds.¹³ The church as the image of the people of God reveals a *whole* historical fellowship of God’s own possession; a people assembled out of darkness to proclaim the Divine message of transformation.

The Fellowship in Faith

The group of images surrounding the church as a fellowship of faith expresses the concept of interdependence within this fellowship. A fellowship characterized by mutuality of gift and vocation by those who were at the same time both saints and

⁹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, "Toward a Biblical Doctrine of the Church," *Westminster Theological Journal* 31, no. 1 (November 1968): 32.

¹¹ Mark Heath, "Church and Ministry: A Roman Catholic Perspective," *Review and Expositor* 79, no. 2 (Spring 1982): 328.

¹² Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 2002), 107.

¹³ Minear, *Images of the Church*, 69.

slaves.¹⁴ Minear observes the prolific use of the description “saints” in reference to the church. In a large number of cases he states, “to say ‘the saints’ was equivalent to saying the ‘Ekklesia.’”¹⁵ Yet the holiness of the community is not dependent upon themselves but on “the continuing activity of God;” “it is in his holiness that the church shares.”¹⁶ These principles are best represented in 1 Peter 1: 15-16, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” This “partnership” with the Holy Spirit has clear implications for the church; the task of witnessing to the world, erasing the distinction between “us and them,” the use of spiritual gifts for the common good, the fair arbitration of disputes, and participation in the common good as measured by fruit of the Spirit.¹⁷

Although the church is called to be “saint” it is also called to be “slave.”

Frequently the New Testament refers to the church as slaves of God and of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Minear acknowledges this vision of the church as very antithetical to men and women of both the first-century and our modern era. Our deepest sense of human dignity and greatest longings for the future center around the word “freedom.”¹⁹ Yet this image of the church is not a movement from freedom to slavery, but rather a progress from serving multiple masters to the one Holy Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).²⁰ Serving the new master produces

¹⁴ Ibid., 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., 136.

¹⁶ Ibid., 137.

¹⁷ Ibid., 138-138.

¹⁸ Ibid., 156.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 157.

community; through Christ's death on the cross, his love turned us into slaves of one another (Gal 5:13).²¹ Members of the church, who were both saint and slave, melded together in mutuality that "flowed from the Master's life into all the interstices of human relations" (2 Cor. 7:3).²² The church portrayed as the image of the fellowship in faith is drawn together in "partnership" with the Holy Spirit; producing a holy people who mutually share in the service and vocation of their new Master.

The Body of Christ

The church as the image of The Body of Christ, is grounded in redemptive history; "the body in which our reconciliation is accomplished is the crucified body of Christ."²³ Minear summarizes this formation as "redemption from the body of death (Rom. 7:24) through the body of Christ (Rom 7:4)."²⁴ In this image a transition from death to life is notable; a transition that is made by a fundamental choice, either a "living death" or a "dying life."²⁵ The function of this "a dying life" is to "bear fruit for God" (Rom 7:4); being a part of the Body of Christ is to partake in his redemptive work.

Among the many other distinctions of the image of the church as the Body of Christ is the unity and inclusivity of its members. Paul reminds us that the body of Christ is composed of "Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (1 Cor. 12:13). All are united in one

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 163.

²³ Clowney, "Toward a Biblical Doctrine of the Church," 61.

²⁴ Insertion of the scriptural references are mine, see Minear, *Images of the Church*, 174.

²⁵ Ibid., 178.

body without differentiation of status or earthly importance (1 Cor. 12:12-31). The concept of Christian unity is driven home in the image of the Body of Christ. Being a part of one body, the church is also one in: hope, Lordship, faith, baptism and position under one God and father of all (Eph 4:1-16). Spiritual gifts in this society of oneness are intentionally given for the ministry and building up the body of Christ; ultimately for “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:11-13). Mark Heath reflecting on 1 Corinthians 12 believes the image of the body of Christ can be used, “to arouse responsibility for assistance to those suffering.”²⁶ As the body of Christ, not only are we to suffer together, but also to abate suffering.

The image of the body of Christ reflects a church open to all regardless of race or social status, grounded in redemptive history, and unified for the purpose of divine reconciliation. In the images studied, the People of God, the Fellowship in Faith, and the Body of Christ, similar characteristics about the nature of the church emerge. The church is seen historically a possession of God, assembled for purpose. Its vocation is the very redemptive work of God, made possible in partnership with the Holy Spirit. Leaving their differences behind, those involved in this noble task are called from every segment that divides earthly existence. Themes of possession, purpose, and unity are evident in all of these images.

The Marks the Church

The attributes of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic, are commonly confessed by Christians worldwide through liturgical use of the Nicene Creed. Officially

²⁶ Mark Heath, "Church and Ministry," 324.

known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, this statement was completed at the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381), and has been described as the most ecumenical of all creeds.²⁷ Traditionally these attributes have been regarded as a productive starting point for further study of ecclesiology; although questions are frequently raised as to whether these attributes describe an ideal church or are somehow already present in the existing churches of today. These four attributes, known as “marks” or “notes,” provide an excellent framework to consider traditional views of the nature of the church.

“One”

The confession of “one” church is an indication of unity in the Christian community. While the term “one church” does not occur verbatim in scripture, it is clearly implied in the great Biblical images of the People of God in the Body of Christ.²⁸ In Ephesians, unity is plainly directed when all the members are called to one hope, with “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all” (Eph. 4:4-6). The church as addressed in the book of Ephesians assumes unity not only for the local congregation but for all congregations; it is addressed as a microcosm of the church, not a portion of the church.²⁹

Yet this ideal intention appears to lack existential reality, both today and when the creed was first drafted. By the time of the Nicene Creed, the church had already suffered

²⁷ Avery Dulles, "The Church as 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic'," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 23, no. 1 (January 1999): 15.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ John Boonzaayer, "One Holy Catholic Church," *Reformation and Revival* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 30.

from several serious divisions and heresies (Arius, Marcion, Donatus, the Gnostics, and others).³⁰ The dichotomy between the ideal condition of unity and the reality of division was highlighted during the Protestant Reformation. In response, John Calvin developed his ecclesiastical contrast of the “invisible church” and the “visible church.” The invisible church represented the spiritual entity of God’s elect people; “the society of all the saints, spread over the whole world, and existing in all ages.”³¹ The visible church is actualized in history by all those who make a credible profession of faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.³² Thus for Calvin the ideal of “one church” is realized in the invisible church.

Jurgen Moltmann proclaims unity as an expression of freedom; unity must not be “confused with unanimity, let alone uniformity in perception, feeling or morals,” but rather is “a unity in diversity and freedom.”³³ Moltmann commends the ecumenical movement in making great strides to overcome conflicts over baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and ministry.³⁴ The sacraments of baptism and communion are intrinsic to Christian unity. Baptism is a mark of union with Christ; Lord’s Supper proclaims the unity of Christ’s church.³⁵ Hans Kung is of the same mind as Moltmann on unity in diversity,

³⁰ Ibid., 29.

³¹ W. Stanford Reid, “The Ecumenicalism of John Calvin,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 11, no. 1 (November 1948): 32.

³² Ibid.

³³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 343 (page references are to the reprint edition).

³⁴ Ibid., 346

³⁵ Clowney, *The Church*, 80.

understanding the unity of church as presupposing a multiplicity of churches.³⁶ Thus we see from these scholars and theologians, “unity” must not be understood as organizational but as theological. The creed describes the church as the Lord views her, as “one.”

“Holy”

In keeping with this understanding that the church is not a mere organization, is the second attribute found in the Creed; the church is “holy.” Here returns the theme of being the “people of God;” a possession “set apart” for His divine purpose (1 Peter 2:9). Holiness is an essential characteristic, and not a production of the church; it refers more to her identity rather than a trait.³⁷ Yet the church, whether regarded as visible or invisible, is composed of human beings who frequently do not demonstrate this attribute of holiness. This reality calls into distinction the difference between the holiness of the church the sinfulness of its members.

Augustine recognized this dilemma in his dealings with the Donatists in the late fourth century. The Donatists regarded lapsed bishops as apostate and no longer able to validly administer the sacraments. Augustine’s response reflects a view of the church not as a society of saints, but a “mixed body” of saints and sinners.³⁸ Basing his thought on two Biblical parables, Augustine concludes that the holiness of the church is not a question of its members, but of Christ. Eschatologically understood, this holiness will be

³⁶ Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 112.

³⁷ Boonzaayer, "One Holy Catholic Church," 30.

³⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 479.

perfected and realized at the last judgment, when the wheat will be separated from the tares.³⁹ Luther picks up this Augustinian thought regarding the believer as “just and sinful simultaneously;” the church of Christ is the communion of saints as well as the communion of sinners.⁴⁰ Contemporary theologian Moltmann harmonizes stating, “Holiness does not divide the church and Christians substantially from sinful humanity, and does not remove it to a position above the mass of sinners.”⁴¹ Yet, Moltmann captures the essence of the creed; “the church is holy because God shows himself to be holy in the grace of the crucified Christ acting upon it.”⁴² As the fate of our salvation rests in the grace of God, and not in our own merits, so the holiness of the church is founded on who it belongs to, and is set apart for, not on the actions its members.

“Catholic”

The word “catholic” is commonly understood to mean “universal.” This simple translation of the Greek word *kata’ holou* does not do justice to the depth of meaning involved in the word; “catholic” is rendered literally, “according to the whole, or complete.”⁴³ The term is not used in the New Testament content, but first appears in the writings of Ignatius of Antioch who said, “Where Christ Jesus may be, there is the

³⁹ Ibid., 480.

⁴⁰ Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 41.

⁴¹ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 353.

⁴² Ibid., 354.

⁴³ Boonzaayer, “One Holy Catholic Church,” 33 and 37.

catholic church.”⁴⁴ Moltmann finds this relationship to Jesus Christ a prototypical understanding of the nature of catholicity; being entirely related to Christ, the church is related to the whole world and subsequently related to God’s purposes of reconciliation. Thus, “catholic” does not refer to the church’s spatial, temporal, and inner universality; but rather to the “unlimited breadth of its apostolic mission.”⁴⁵ Thinking eschatologically, Moltmann sees the church as *related to the whole*, but not yet *the whole*.⁴⁶ Hans Kung is in accord Moltmann finding the catholicity of the church to be grounded in its identity, and not merely in space, time and numbers; its identity results in universality through its mission.⁴⁷

Themes found in the image of the church as the body of Christ are present in the conception of the church as “catholic.” The church has a mission to the whole world. This mission is to include everyone irrespective of race, nationality, sex, or other manmade divisive barriers. All individuals in the body of Christ are a part of the whole whose head is their Lord. Universality of the mission, inclusivity, and oneness in Christ are all characteristics of the whole and complete church known as “catholic.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Clowney, *The Church*, 91.

⁴⁵ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 348-349.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 349

⁴⁷ Clowney, *The Church*, 92-93.

⁴⁸ As a result of the confines of this paper, I was not able to include the concept of Sobornost. Originating from the Russian Orthodox Church, this term is closely linked to catholicity and unity. The reader is encouraged to delve more into this valuable contribution from the Eastern Church. See Todor Sabev, "The Nature and Mission of Councils in the Light of the Theology of Sobornost," *Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 3 (July 1993).

“Apostolic”

The final attribute specified in the creed is quintessential to our understanding of the nature of church. The church’s apostolic character signifies it as being sent out by another - Jesus Christ. In the same way it identifies Jesus Christ as the originator and cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:20).⁴⁹ Given this understanding, the church is not a mere movement that started with Christ and can reinvent and restructure itself at will. Its essential teachings are eternally founded on Christ who provided them (1 Cor. 3:11).⁵⁰ These teachings were given initially to the original apostles of the New Testament. Fundamentally, the term “apostolic” means “originating with the apostles” or “having a direct link with the apostles.”⁵¹

The Roman Catholic Church has traditionally viewed this element of the creed in light of their understanding of apostolic succession. Protestant traditions regard the Holy Scriptures, specifically the New Testament, as the apostolic witness. There are currently voices inside the Roman Catholic Church which are open to this Protestant interpretation. Noted Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles states, “The Scriptures of the New Testament are themselves apostolic and are a norm of the apostolicity that Catholics and Evangelicals seek to preserve.”⁵² Karl Barth accepts the four marks of the church as set forth in the creed, but adds emphasis to the apostolic. He finds apostolicity a summary of the other three marks; as “being in harmony with the teaching of the apostles, who were

⁴⁹ Boonzaayer, "One Holy Catholic Church," 40.

⁵⁰ Dulles, "The Church as 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic'," 22.

⁵¹ McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 503.

⁵² Dulles, "The Church as 'One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic'," 25.

unique witnesses to Jesus Christ.”⁵³ Barth’s emphasis on the apostolic attribute finds its genesis in his contention that the sole purpose of the church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ and the world. This is the key to Barth’s Ecclesiology; all other aspects of his thought regarding the church harmonize with his central insight.⁵⁴ Moltmann also finds the apostolic characteristic vital; he regards it as central to carrying out the apostolic proclamation and missionary charge, in essence the church’s foundation and commission.⁵⁵

The centrality of the apostolic witness, as reflected in scripture, was reaffirmed during the reformation. To the traditional four marks of the creed, the reformers added; the true preaching of the word, the proper observance of sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline.⁵⁶ Yet even without these additions, these four marks; one, holy, catholic and apostolic, have endured the test of time. Across the broad spectrum of Christian communities they have been regarded as faithful representations of the nature of the church.

The Church as Authentic Relationships

“Authentic relationship” is a helpful integrative motif around which to frame consideration of the theological nature of the church. The primary authentic relationship

⁵³ Craig A. Carter, "Karl Barth's Revision of Protestant Ecclesiology," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 37.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁵ Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 358.

⁵⁶ Clowney, *The Church*, 101.

can be seen in the eternal association of the Triune God. Extending beyond himself, God desires relationship with the creatures made in His very own image, humankind. While it is common to hear the phrase “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” this experience does not occur absent the church. When one enters into this “personal relationship” with Christ, they enter His body; subsequently they join in authentic relationship to all other believers. In this relationship with other Christians, they are called to unity, exemplified by fellowship, joint suffering, and service to one another.

The church however is not “called in” to a simple relationship with the Triune God and its own members; in fact it is “called out” to be in relationship with the world. Sent by Christ to apostolically engage the world, the church is part of God’s redemptive plan for the whole of humanity. Inclusively, the church seeks to proclaim the gospel to all people; holding fast to the truth of “authentic relationship” with God, the church challenges those who are in relationship with inauthentic other “gods.” In this relationship to the world, the church is called to be catholic, apostolic and holy, a people of God set apart for his purpose of bonding to all nations.

God’s created order is intrinsically relational. As his body, the church fashions its relationships according to the nature of God himself. God is unified, holy, self-sacrificing, and missional. These same attributes are found in the genuine church. A chosen people, set apart for authentic relationships, with God, each other, and the world; the *ekklesia*.

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