

SUMMARY ESSAY – THE BIBLE SECTION

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Dean Flemming, Monica Elizabeth Mastronardi-Fernández, Dwight Swanson, Richard Thompson, Eduardo Velázquez and Sarah Whittle investigate in their respective essays various aspects of the identity, purpose, character, and mission of the people of God found in the narrative of Scripture. Their essays, when taken together, offer us the biblical foundations of ecclesiology that are critical to our understanding of what it means to be the people of God, the church, in the 21st century in different world contexts.

1. The church is the expression of God's creation purpose in the world.

God's creation purpose reflected in the creation narratives in Genesis is the establishment of social and communal order of relationships. Swanson argues that the church is the expression of God's creation purpose in the world and that she is entrusted with the task of fulfilling God's creation purpose in the world where the power of sin destroys the social and communal order of relationship that God desires for his creation. The healing of creation is a key theme in Revelation. Flemming shows that the visionary writer of Revelation sees creation's brokenness through the lens of God's future; the church must capture this vision of God's future which is central to her identity and mission. Faithfulness to this vision demands the church to be a community that is in full fellowship with God and others, a healing, just, hospitable community, and a faithful witness of the re-creative power of God who is committed to making "all things new" (Flemming).

2. The church participates with creation in the worship of God

The social and communal order of relationships that God established through his work of creation clearly shows that God is a relational God and that blessing is the way he relates to his creation. The praise of God is the appropriate response of creation to the goodness of the creator (see Ps 19:1-4b). Israel not only worships God who dwells in her midst but also invites the whole earth to join her and sing praises to God (Ps 100) (Swanson). In Acts, the early Christian believers are first and foremost about the worship of God (Thompson). In Revelation, the church is a community that responds to the call extended to the whole world to worship God who sits on

the throne in heaven. Flemming describes worship in Revelation as a public and “political” act; the church’s worship is an announcement to the world that God alone is the sovereign Lord of the universe. The church that truly worships God does not share her loyalties with any political power in the world.

3. The church is a holy Community

The narrative of Scripture makes clear that the people of God are to be holy in their relationship to God and the world. Swanson argues that the broader context of the church as the expression of God’s creation purposes being lived in the world is critical to our understanding of holiness; emphasis on personal holiness needs to be understood and placed within the larger context of the communal life and mission of the church.

Flemming, Whittle, and Velázquez deal with the implications of holiness to the life and mission of the church. Revelation’s vision of the future, which shapes the identity of the church, portrays the New Jerusalem, the whole city, as holy like the holy of holies, sanctified by the presence of God and the Lamb. The church as a holy community does not share the idolatrous value system of the dominant culture; she has responded to the call to “come out of” Babylon (Flemming).

The holy church is a community of those who have made themselves weak for the sake of the gospel. The church that claims power in weakness clearly rejects the power systems and values of the dominant culture. The pattern of life for the holy church is Jesus Christ who emptied himself and took the form of a servant (Phil 2:6-11) (Whittle).

Power in weakness is antithetical to models of leadership in the church developed under the influence of cultural worldviews and models of secular management. Eduardo Velázquez calls us to think about ways of developing ecclesiastical leadership based on biblical models of leadership that demand holiness in life and commitment to personal and communal integrity, which is essential to the church to remain as a healthy and healing community fully engaged in the mission of God.

4. The church is a missional community

The church’s identity as a priestly kingdom, on the one hand, keeps her in solidarity with the people of Israel and the mission of the people of Israel to be God’s light to the world. On the other hand, the church as the priestly kingdom on earth owes its primary allegiance to Christ and

his rule (Swanson). In Revelation, the church both shares in Christ's rule and bears public testimony to that rule by living as an alternative to "the kingdom of this world." The priestly task of the church is to mediate between God and the world (Flemming).

In Acts, the church boldly proclaims and witnesses Jesus as the Christ/Messiah, and she fulfills her mission in the midst of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom (Thompson). In Revelation, the church is challenged to be God's faithful witness in the world by word and by her poured out life, by following the life of Christ, where ever that may lead to and whatever that may entail (Flemming).

5. The church is an inclusive community

Mastronardi-Fernández shows that the church as God's family is a well-integrated family which promotes the equality of all human beings as well as equality of genders. The mission of the church is to bring all human beings, without regard for their socio-economic conditions and without excluding anyone, with open arms and hearts, into a restored relationship with God. In Acts, the church is an inclusive community that fully participates in the plans and purposes of God's salvific work that extends beyond geographical, cultural, and social boundaries (Thompson). In Revelation, the church that worships God invites others into the worship of God. The vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation challenges the church on earth to be a community that embraces all nations, cultures and peoples, and thus to be an instrument of blessing to peoples from every corner and crevice of the earth (Gen 12:1-3) (Flemming).

Paul portrays the church as a welcoming community; it invites all – both the weak and the strong – to be the unified body of Christ (Whittle). Whittle recognizes that the church may never be free from asymmetrical relationships or hierarchies because of various functions within the church, but they are not to be viewed as a permanent part of the fabric of the church. Whittle argues that by exercising transformative power, the church can transcend unequal power relations, and create structures to eradicate gender privileges (and other boundaries) in leadership roles so that all the people of God may truly and equally share in the life of Christ.

6. The church is an empowering community that promotes the well-being of others

The church exists for the sake of others. Mastronardi-Fernández shows that God created the family, a biblical image of the church, to live in fellowship and unity, to give support to each

other, and to live in community. The church is the only human society that can truly demonstrate other-centered existence because it strives to have the same mindset of Christ (Phil 2:4-5). Christ-likeness in practice means for the church to be a place where the strong empowers the weak, mutuality and mutual obligations are kept, and fellowship is maintained through love, forgiveness, sharing of wealth, skills, and knowledge (Whittle, Mastronardi-Fernández). The communal existence through fellowship and unity requires the leadership to build consensus by listening to its members and empowering them to participate in the development of ministries that are appropriate to local contexts (Velázquez).

Citing the model of the church at Antioch Velázquez shows that a symbiotic relationship of mutual submission and empowerment is critical for the church and her leaders to fulfill her mission in the world. The church that entrusts authority to her leaders has a responsibility to be submissive and supportive of her leaders; in the same way, church leaders have a responsibility to exercise their authority by being submissive to the body of Christ, who in turn is subject to Christ, the head of the church.

7. The church is a transformed community engaged in the transformation of the world

The church is a transformed community that is involved in the transformation of the world. Acts clearly shows the transformed lives of the disciples of Jesus Christ who are engaged in the transformation of the world. The fullness of God's saving and restoring purposes for his creation is a clear theme in Revelation 21—22, which is more than the salvation of sinners but also their transformation into the holy character of Christ (Flemming).

Whittle shows that in Paul's writings, power in weakness is "transformative" in that its goal is to influence and transform others into living a life patterned after the life of Christ, which is a life of self-emptying and self-giving for the sake of others. The church can effectively fulfill her mission only if she herself embraces the self-emptying life of Christ.

Mastronardi-Fernández suggests that one of the functions of the church is the development of talents within the church for the purpose of the transformation of the world. A practical way for the church to be self-giving is to share our resources and talents, the gifts we have received from God, with the whole human family, both within our own tradition and those

outside the boundaries of the Church of the Nazarene, who are equally committed to the mission of transforming the world for the sake of Christ.

8. The church is a servant community

Whittle observes that Paul's life and ministry was shaped by his Christology, particularly, the downward movement of servanthood and humility he found in Jesus Christ. This was the expectation of Paul for the Christian communities. The church is not to follow a way of life patterned after the power structures of her social world but rather she should demonstrate within her mutual respect, welcoming of one another, humility, and servanthood – all hallmarks of life lived after the pattern of Christ.

Velázquez reminds us that Jesus' king-servant model of leadership marked by humility and service is a powerful reminder to those who desire to be leaders in the church today. True Christian leaders are servants of the community (Mark 10:45), called to respond to the needs of the community and live in a dependent relationship with the community they serve.

Questions for small group discussion

1. Discuss some specific examples of political, economic, social, cultural, religious perspectives of the dominant culture that the church of the Nazarene rejects (or, ignores through acceptance). Present an alternate reality from the perspective of God's future and his plans and purposes for the world?
2. What specific strategies do we need to develop and implement to be an inclusive community without any gender privileges and unequal power relations?
3. What steps do we need to take to develop human talent within the church and to expand the way we share our theological heritage within the church and outside the church in the global setting?
4. What are some specific examples of the influence of secular models of leadership on our current structure and exercise of leadership and authority in the Church of the Nazarene? What do you observe as the unintended consequences of the influence of secular culture on our ecclesiastical leadership structure?