

SUMMARY ESSAY – THEOLOGY SECTION

T.A. Noble

Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City

The six essays we have all read in the Theology section address a number of issues. Two of them address questions of the church's ministry, two address ecclesiology proper, particularly the doctrine of church and sacraments, and two address the particular issues of being a global fellowship. I propose to review them in that order: what the church *does*, what the church *is*, and how the church can be one and yet many.

1. WHAT THE CHURCH DOES

(a) Brower Latz: The Church and Urban Poverty

Archbishop William Temple remarked that the church of Jesus Christ is the only institution which exists for the sake of those who are outside its membership. Deirdre Brower Latz, writing out of her own experience as pastor of an inner-city church, focuses particularly on the church's ministry to the urban poor. Undoubtedly this is an integral part of our Wesleyan tradition. This paper then invites us to continue to engage in a debate that has reverberated for some decades across the evangelical world:

- *Should the church give priority to evangelism – 'saving souls' – or is social action also an integral part of its mission?*

However, this paper seems to me to raise wider questions about the church's relation to the world of work and secular employment where Christian lay people spend most of their lives. Pastors and theological professors are too often oblivious of this. But the best way to alleviate poverty is to engage in *wealth creation*. An additional question arising then from this paper is:

- *What is the role of the church in its prophetic and servant ministry to the world of economics and secular employment? How do we support Christians whose vocation is in business and industry?*

(b) Stanton: The Role of the Church in the Rehabilitation of the lev

If our first paper was concerned with what Wesley would call 'works of mercy,' this one is concerned with 'works of piety.' But it is not just concerned with the sanctification or (to use

another term) the ‘spiritual formation’ of the *individual*, but significantly with the *role of the church* in this. This paper makes us aware that William Temple’s dictum is only a half-truth. The church *is* concerned with the pastoral care of those who are *inside* its gates. Significantly, Stanton takes us right to the Old Testament understanding of what it is to be human. The Hebrew word ‘*lev*’, which we normally translate as ‘heart’, has a much richer and fuller meaning than it has in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Korean. But what Stanton explores is what my late friend and predecessor, Dr J. Kenneth Grider, called ‘the practical necessity’ of the church. Too often our preaching about sanctification has been too Western – too *individualistic* – challenging the isolated *individual* to make an *individual* consecration. But actually (I would argue) our Nazarene practice (in contrast sometimes to our preaching) has been very *corporate*. It was surely our experience of the love of God in the loving fellowship of the Church as family which brought each of us here today to our full consecration. The twofold question which arises then from this second paper is this:

- *How does the Church of the Nazarene which has always been family, stay family even while it grows bigger and bigger?*
- *And how do we highlight and enhance the necessary role of the church in the spiritual formation of all of our brothers and sisters?*

2. WHAT THE CHURCH IS

Here we come to ecclesiology proper – the doctrine of the church.

(a) Mann and Peterson: Voluntary Association or Body of Christ?

Mann and Peterson identify two contrasting doctrines of the church which co-exist in the Wesleyan tradition and particularly within the Church of the Nazarene. These two ecclesiologies exist side by side and unresolved in the Nazarene *Manual*. The first is in the paragraphs on ‘The Church’ which follow the Articles of Faith: ‘The Church of God is composed of all spiritually regenerate persons, whose names are written in heaven’ (*Manual*, 23). The Church of the Nazarene specifically ‘is composed of those persons who have voluntarily associated themselves together according to the doctrines and polity of said church....’ (*Manual*, 25). These paragraphs

have been in the Nazarene *Manual* since 1908, but they define the church totally in terms of *individual* believers. Christ is not mentioned!

But a different doctrine of the church is to be found in Article XI of the Articles of Faith, not added till 1989:

‘We believe in the Church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word’ (*Manual*, 15).

Historically, these two different ecclesiologies, the church as a voluntary association of individual believers and the church as the Body of Christ, issue in two different views of the sacraments. The Believers’ Church view seems to go most easily with a doctrine of believers’ baptism and with the memorialist view typical of the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions: the Lord’s Supper is simply a memorial of his death. This view tends to be highly *individualistic*. The opposite view may be labelled the ‘catholic’ doctrine of the Church. By that we do not mean simply ‘Roman Catholic’, but the view taken by the Lutheran, Anglican, and Reformed traditions, and therefore also historically by Wesleyan Methodism. It takes a *corporate* view of the Church as the Body of Christ rather than as a voluntary association of individuals, and it therefore extends the sacrament of baptism to the children of believers within the Christian family. It also takes the view that the Risen Christ is *present* at the Lord’s Supper, not contained in the bread and wine as in the Roman Mass, but present – *really* present – in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that the Lord’s Supper is truly ‘*communion*’ with the living Lord. Mann and Peterson are strong advocates of the latter view, as are most Wesleyan theologians today.

The question arising from this then is as follows:

- *Which doctrine of the Church and sacraments should we embrace, or can we somehow combine the best of both? If so, how?*

(b) *David Rainey: Reconciliation, the Eucharist and Mission*

David Rainey shares the view of most Wesleyan theologians today that we must recover our roots in Wesley's *corporate* doctrine of the Church, inherited from his Anglican heritage. Rainey's proposal is that Wesley's understanding of the Lord's Supper was developed from his early days as a High Churchman 'fencing' the table, to the later view shaped by his evangelistic mission after 1738, that the Lord's Supper was a 'converting' ordinance. It was the enactment and embodiment of the gospel of *reconciliation* – becoming 'One' in the Body of Christ. It was not therefore merely a memorial: it was a 'means of grace'. Or (to get away from the idea of 'grace' as a substance) it was truly the enactment of our incorporation into the one Body of Christ. It was not just each individual *individualistically* remembering the death and passion of the Lord, but the re-enactment of our *corporate* oneness in the Risen Lord. Rainey argues that this is closely connected with being a 'missional' church. He points to the revival of the 'passing of the peace' in the liturgical revival of the last century as a visible enactment of the note of *reconciliation* which lies at the heart of the service of Holy Communion.

This strong view of the centrality of the Lord's Table, which is widely held by Nazarene theologians, is something the Church of the Nazarene at large still has to come to terms with. Anabaptist 'low church' Protestantism ever since the Reformation has reacted very strongly against the abuses in the pre-Reformation Roman Church. With my background in Northern Irish and Scottish Protestantism, I fully understand that anti-catholic tradition. But is the perpetual reaction against Rome robbing us of understanding the full meaning and significance of the sacraments and their central role in *mission*?

This then is the question:

- *Does the life and mission of the Church of the Nazarene need the recovery of a deeper, richer theology of the sacraments as enacting and embodying the centrality of Christ in his church?*

3. HOW THE CHURCH CAN BE ONE AND YET DIVERSE

By definition, the church is one – the one Body of Christ. Nazarenes in every land must therefore identify with their Christian brothers and sisters in every fellowship. But given that we are called

together into our particular fellowship, how do we preserve and celebrate our unity within our particular Wesleyan tradition, and yet acknowledge our cultural diversity?

(a) David McEwan: Connectionalism

David McEwan addresses this question by turning our attention to a different aspect of ecclesiology, namely polity: how is the church organized and structured? He rejects both congregationalism and episcopacy in order to advocate the Methodist tradition of ‘connectionalism.’ In fact of course the Church of the Nazarene did not emerge directly from Methodism. Rather all of the main ‘holiness’ groups who came to together to form the Church of the Nazarene were in fact Congregationalist, but they accepted a form of superintendency (some reluctantly) as necessary for mission.¹ What David McEwan is concerned to stress however is that the church is not merely an organization or polity, but a fellowship, an interdependent community truly reflecting the Holy Trinity. He rejects the business model of the church as a machine and pleads that as a global family we need to listen to each other in order to correct those conflicts and distortions which emerge when any one culture is dominant. We need to listen hard to each other. This question then seems to emerge:

- *What procedures need to be in place in our multi-cultural, global family within the Church of the Nazarene so that we may truly listen to each other and keep our varied cultural perspectives in line with the gospel and the Scriptures?*

(b) Carlos Martin Abejer: Wesleyan Ecclesiology in Latin America

Carlos Martin Abejer looks specifically at Wesleyan theology and ecclesiology in the context of Latin America. Despite his context in eighteenth-century England, Wesley has an ecclesiology which is adaptable to every culture, and the reason for this is its flexibility and adaptability. While Wesley was true to the One Church of Christ and to the traditions he revered from the first three centuries and from the Church of England, Wesley was an innovator who adapted and devised new functional structures in order to serve the mission of the church and the coming of the kingdom. Abejer identifies fourteen dimensions of this authentic but adaptable ecclesiology.

¹ Timothy L. Smith, *Called unto Holiness* (NPH, 1962), 113, 154, 169f., 208

In Wesley himself therefore we see the Pietist focus on personal faith and holiness married to the ‘catholic’ ecclesiology of the Fathers and the Church of England. The question which arises then for us is this:

- *How do we remain true to the essential doctrine of what the church is in all cultures but at the same time adapt our structures and practices to further the mission of the church in each of our cultures?*