

ARTICLE XI¹:
REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF “THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH”

Henry W. Spaulding II, Ph.D.
Provost/Chief Academic Officer
Professor of Theology
Mount Vernon Nazarene University

Introduction

The Commission on the Doctrine of the Church was appointed to propose an article of faith by action of the 1985 General Assembly. It was my privilege to serve as chair of this commission along with George Lyons, Stephen Gunter, Morris Weigelt, H. Ray Dunning, and John A. Knight. I presented the results of the three meetings of the Commission to the Twenty-Second General Assembly in Indianapolis, Indiana in 1989. Approximately twenty years prior a gathering of Nazarene theologians expressed an interest in developing an article of faith on the Church. The call for a Doctrine of the Church in the mid-eighties reignited the desire first expressed twenty years before. The following essay represents my reflections on the theological issues that were at stake during our deliberations as well as the continuing significance of a Doctrine of the Church for the twenty-first century.

The first meeting on September 19, 1986 began with a question – “Why are we considering a Doctrine of the Church at this point in our denominational history”? Dr. John Knight, the Responsible General Superintendent, was quick to say that from his point of view the Church of the Nazarene was suffering from an identity crisis. Are we evangelical? What does it mean to be authentically Wesleyan? Is holiness a significant modifier for our understanding of

¹The numbering of the Articles of Faith arose by action of the Twenty-Second General Assembly. The Commission did its work designating the Article as XVI, since at the time of our meetings there were fifteen articles of faith.

the Church? How are we to be appropriately Protestant and yet celebrate the rich history of the Church? Is it necessary to justify our existence as a distinct church? Do we tend to define ourselves in opposition to other denominations instead of positively through an affirmation of scripture? How has denominationalism defined ecclesiology for the Church of the Nazarene? These and many other questions served as a backdrop for our discussions regarding a doctrine of the Church.

Background Influences

Our reflections on the nature of the Church were in many ways informed by Vatican II, which was a massive theological event with implications for all Christians. Clearly, the Roman Catholic Church had committed itself to thinking through its identity in the world. The documents arising from this ecclesial event were available for our use along with other doctrinal statements from the United Methodist Church, the Anglican Church, the Wesleyan Church and the Free Methodist Church. All of these documents suggested that other traditions had resources for addressing our questions of identity. While the commission did not spend a great deal of time looking at the documents of Vatican II it would not be too much to say that in a general way the documents deepened our conversations.

Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon were just beginning in the eighties to emerge on the theological scene. Hauerwas and Willimon authored an article in *The Christian Century* titled “Embarrassed by the Church: Congregations and the Seminary” in which they argued that the theological integrity of the seminary must be called into question because of its distance from the local congregation. Hauerwas and Willimon wrote “the curriculum of the seminary should

be determined by and reflect the liturgical life of, the church”.² While there is a natural tension between the local church and the seminary Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that the legitimacy of the seminary “depends on how well they help congregations to eat and drink with Jesus”.³ The next several decades have proven that the instincts of Hauerwas and Willimon were correct for the Church and for the seminary. Hauerwas and Willimon, along with many others, have been successful in placing ecclesiology at a more prominent role in Protestant theology and a few Nazarene theologians have followed this path as well. The identity of the Church of the Nazarene along with its association with its colleges, universities, and seminaries is linked to Article XI. The challenge of these reflections has always been concerned with how to think about the Church in non-defensive ways. The tendency for the seminary to defend its existence to the church or for the Church to justify its ethos lands ecclesiology at the same place – a second thought. Article XI might be a way for the seminary and the Church to underscore the necessity of a nuanced ecclesiology, not only for mutual understanding, but doing theology at the seminary and in the parish. Therefore, the deepest question that informed our work together is how to think about the Church in ways that are faithful to the scripture, reflective of the Protestant tradition, and authentic to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

Since the Church is an institution (an issue explicitly addressed in the fourth paragraph of Article XI) a persistent juxtaposition of self and institution was evident as we attempted to think about the Church. Perhaps, this more than anything else explains why it took so long to begin work on an article of faith on the Church. After all, Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the more important theologians in the early part of the twentieth-century, had developed a thesis which

²Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Embarrassed by the Church: Congregations and the Seminary,” *The Christian Century*, (March 5-12, 1986), 119.

³*Ibid.*, 120.

argued that human beings were less likely to behave virtuously in a group than as individuals. A steady stream of institutional suspicion in general managed to work its way into the Church. So at eye level, it was completely natural to assume that the Church was as much a problem as a resource for spirituality. When this institutional suspicion developed it included the sense that so long as one kept his/her eye on Jesus and off of people, then it might be possible to live a victorious Christian life. Since the German Reformation was a movement largely in opposition to the institutional church the suspicion of the Church seemed justified. There was even some debate as to whether the Church of the Nazarene was supposed to be anything more than a fellowship of renewal within the church. Some argued that when the holiness movement ceased to be a movement it lost the power to be effective. These forces of anti-institutionalism fueled by the currents of pragmatism and experiential/expressivism tended to necessitate careful reflection upon the nature and importance of the church.

As the Commission met there was little discussion of Hauerwas and Willimon, but it is clear in retrospect that much of what was driving our work was consistent with the concerns being raised at Duke Divinity School as well as other seminaries regarding ecclesiology. Ecumenism certainly informed the work of the Commission as well. Albert Outler had been one of the main conduits of Wesley for the Church of the Nazarene and it was equally obvious that Outler's work was consistently informed by ecumenical concerns. None of us would have seriously considered recommending that the Church of the Nazarene join the World Council of Churches, but we were aware that the existence of such an organization challenged us to think more seriously about the Church. Even as we were discussing the nature of the Church in the Commission representatives from the Wesleyan Theological Society were beginning to think of ways to engage the World Council of Churches. James Gaughan wrote the following in 1985,

“To many, it does not seem to matter that the weekly celebration of Christ’s resurrection was the universal tradition before the reformation”.⁴ The challenge of framing Article XI was to ask the question – How ecumenical should we be as we think about the Church? There was a strong desire on the Commission to avoid sectarianism, but there was no discussion of the famed *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* document in our sessions. Perhaps, such discussions go well beyond the purpose of a Doctrine of the Church and call for a nuanced ecclesiology, which is clearly an issue worthy of consideration.

Article Development

The so-called crisis of identity along with ecumenism was part of the very ethos of the Commission. Perhaps, these issues pushed many to question some of the early formations of Article XI. A comprehensive proposal for Article XI hammered out in our first meeting was replaced with a brief statement in our second meeting. After further reflection, the members of the Commission thought it would be wise to return to a more robust doctrinal statement. These transitions reflect a tension that placed some pressure on the work of the commission to define a Doctrine of the Church without pretending to work out a full blown ecclesiology. Admittedly, a Doctrine of the Church and an ecclesiology share significant theological space, but the difference was always in view. The purpose of an article is to provide those affirmations arising from the scripture in conversation with our theological tradition, which could provide the parameters for a more fully nuanced ecclesiology. The Commission was keenly aware that many of the pressures which had been formative for the Church of the Nazarene were related to ecclesiology, but we were also aware that our task was to propose a doctrine and not a fully worked out ecclesiology. There is nothing in the article of faith that answers the question of how the Church is involved in

⁴James Gaughan, “How Ecumenical Are We?,” *The Christian Century* (January 16, 1985), 77.

salvation other than “to continue the redemptive work of Christ in the world”. We did not intend to answer the question of how the Church is related to the world religions in any explicit sort of way. We did not attempt to ask how or whether the Church is the “mother of salvation”. We did not explicitly answer how the Church of the Nazarene is related to Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodoxy in the article. We did attempt to provide the cornerstones for the theologians of the Church to develop an ecclesiology in order to address these concerns. Therefore, the Commission in a considered manner refrained from attempting to use the article in order to answer every ecclesiological question raised by the worldwide church. This meant that we saw the article of faith on the Church as the attempt to provide a language for such a theology and for such questions. This allows theologians the liberty to be in conversation with church doctrine and remain faithful to that doctrine while addressing contemporary issues.

The actual article of faith on the Church is organized into four paragraphs: nature, marks, mission, and the historical reality of the Church. The language of Article XI is carefully chosen and intentionally consistent with similar articles of faith in the Methodist tradition, but the most pressing concern was to be faithful to the scripture. The expression “covenant people of God” intends to name the relationship between Israel and the Church. It was important to explicitly signal the continuity of the Church with what God has always been doing in history. This formulation allows for theologians to explore the ways in which God is still at work in Israel while acknowledging that the Church is about what is “new in Christ”. Significant discussion centered on what the Church means in light of the history of Israel. Another carefully chosen phrase in the first paragraph affirms that the church is “called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word”. An earlier version of the article stated the Church is called together by the Holy Spirit, but further reflection led the Commission to add “through the Word” in order to avoid a

merely experiential interpretation of the Church. This formulation mirrors Luther's affirmation that the Church exists wherever the Word is preached, but does not add (at least at this point) where the sacraments are administered. There was little discussion around the question of how we might incorporate sacramental language into the article in the first paragraph. For example, it might have been beneficial to say that the Church is "the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit and the Word as it is sustained through the sacraments", but this was not discussed at this point. This remains a significant theological concern and should be the subject of theological conversation.

The second paragraph is in some ways the most interesting paragraph of the article because of the conscious attempt to avoid the so-called Catholic marks of the church: One, Apostolic, Holy, and Catholic. Instead of these, Article XI develops the Protestant Marks of the Church: living faith, biblical preaching, the sacraments, and discipline. It is important to note at this point that according to the Article XI "God calls the church to express its life" in specific ways. Therefore, the Church becomes incarnate in unity, preaching, the sacraments, and discipline. There is little doubt that these marks of the Church are central to the way the Church expresses itself, but avoiding reference to the Catholic marks of the Church is problematic. This was carefully considered in our meetings and the final decision to frame the doctrine of the Church in this manner has been a source of theological conversation.

Considerable discussion took place in the Commission around the ordering of the articles of faith in the *Manual*. While this turned out to be a significant discussion on the floor of the General Assembly in areas that were not anticipated by the Commission our work concerned the relationship between the Article IV – The Scripture and Article XI – The Church. The challenge of this discussion connects the difference between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic

understanding of the relationship. Even a cursory reading of church history makes it clear that the Church predates the canon. It might seem that taking this historical fact seriously implied that “The Church” ought to precede “The Scripture” in the ordering of the articles of faith. It was observed that while it was the church that hammered out the canon under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, once the canon has been affirmed, the Church freely and wisely submits to its authority. Still it is the traditions of the Church that serve as a basis for interpreting the scripture. This conversation finally led to ordering “The Scripture” before the “The Church”, so the order proposed to the General Assembly was “The Scripture” and then “The Church”. When the proposal came to the floor of the General Assembly another direction was taken as the *Manual* indicates.

The third paragraph gets at what the Church is to be about in the world. During the time in which Article XI was proposed the evangelical church was exercising considerable influence in the sphere of politics in the United States. The presence of the Moral Majority and the emergence of the conservative movement had convinced many that the time honored tradition of the separation of the Church and State might be outdated. Perhaps, the Church should become more politically savvy in its mission and thereby align itself with political movements espousing similar agenda. Harvey Cox, a Harvard Divinity School professor, who had written a book in the late sixties declaring that secularism had triumphed over the sacred, tended to see the Church in more political/sociological terms. He went so far as to argue that creation and even incarnation have essentially dissolved transcendence into immanence. Cox revised the thesis in the eighties in a book titled *Religion in the Secular City*. He acknowledged that the relevance of the Church and transcendence had emerged again in the wake of its seeming demise. Whether he was correct or not the book did signal a reason for those in the Church of the Nazarene to consider

the mission of the Church again. Article XI is part of the response made by the church to remind us that the Church's task/mission is "to continue the redemptive work of Christ in the power of the Spirit through holy living, evangelism, and service". While there was not a great deal of discussion around this paragraph, in retrospect, it seems important that in the political environment in the world and in America, the Church of the Nazarene sought to remind itself of what the church is to do in the world.

The final paragraph sparked a great deal of discussion because it affirms that "the Church is a historical reality". While this seems obvious the tendency to spiritualize the Church is often evident. When the Church is spiritualized in this manner, it is likewise diminished in importance. This paragraph explicitly states that the Church "organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms". The Church of the Nazarene was born in the United States of America, which is itself multi-cultural, but it has reached around the globe. How is the Church to ensure that it does not become an apologist for a particular cultural interpretation? This is an enduring question that brings to light the ways in which the Church can in unreflective ways be more "American" than Christian or more "conservative" than Christian. The cultural conditioning of the Church can be evident in its materialism and/or its militarism. How is the Church to be a prophet in a culture when it has unwritten that very culture? Paragraph four of Article XI raises this question and leaves the Church to respond. At another level, this paragraph seems to address the internationalization issues which continue to challenge the Church. What difference does it make that the Commission was composed of six American white men? These are issues that the Commission struggled with as it sought to frame a responsible Article XI.

The next phrase in the final paragraph of Article XI raised some significant issues. The church "exists both as local congregations and as a universal body" was actually amended on the

floor of the General Assembly. The original proposal place universal body before local congregations. The fact that the Church exists as a historical reality means that it is not “invisible”, but visible. When this visible/invisible dualism is evacuated the logic leads to the affirmation of the local congregation. The Church universal is a fellowship of local congregations. When one joins the Church, it is in a particular place and in the presence of a particular people. This means that there is a sense in which the Church at hand is the whole Church at the same time. Therefore, when one joins the Church it is at a specific address. Yet, from this specific address this same person is joined with all Christians now and in the future.

The last phrase of Article XI affirms that “God calls the church to live under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. Christ is present in the church, thus signaling the defeat of sin and the non-necessity of yielding to the power of sin, but this does not diminish the eschatological hope for the vanquishing of sin all together. This last phrase testifies to the role of the Church to live expectantly. Therefore, Article XI presents a call for the Church to accept its role as an Exodus People or as Resident Aliens.⁵

Conclusion

The vantage point of twenty-five years or so tends to blur the theological issues which were clearly in play in 1985 and those that have captivated the church afterward. When Dr. Knight stated that the Church of the Nazarene was in search of an identity he could well have been speaking of other faith communities as well. It is the task of the Church in every generation to discover what matters in conversation with what has mattered. While we Nazarenes see the challenge of defining ourselves as “Methodist” or “Wesleyan” or “Evangelical” or “Protestant” the issue is no less pressing for other faith communities. The need to balance “evangelism” with

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989)

“social justice” is something that every generation of the Church must do. Article XI creates the cornerstones upon which the church can begin to address these concerns.

The last decade has pressed the importance of ecclesiology for many reasons. One of these reasons is the attempt to confront decisionistic brands of spirituality which tends to place an emphasis on individuals while overlooking the place of the church in scripture. When Paul wrote in the New Testament it was most often to the Church at Rome or Corinth or Thessalonica and so on. There is even the sense that when individuals are addressed it only makes sense in the context of the Church. The presence of Article XI is also a call to the contemporary Church to locate itself as “the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord” which will also mean that it celebrates its history liturgically. The importance of ecclesiology cannot be overstated as the church seeks to be the community of the incarnation, which is to say, to be Christ in the world. William Willimon writes, “I keep fighting this fantasy that I can love Jesus without loving his beloved, that I can serve him without serving those whom he serves. But disembodied love is hardly love”.⁶ Article XI may yet provide a resource for challenging the self-centered vision of holiness that finally destroys authentic Christianity.

Ecclesiology did not begin with Article XI in the Church of the Nazarene. The article did not and could not have addressed every issue that led to the existence of the Commission. Yet, it does provide some sign posts for doing the kind of theological work that honors the Church, the self, and the holy mission of the Church of the Nazarene.

⁶William Willimon, “Corpus Christi: Carnal Thoughts on a Spiritual Day” *The Christian Century* (June 3-10, 1981), 635.