

## ON THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE CHURCH IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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### *Introduction*

Southeast Asia sees the Church as a foreign community with little impact on a predominantly Buddhist society. In this context the Church is emphasizing roles of pastors and leaders rather than shepherds and equippers that enable the whole Body to fully participate in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. Although God changed the structure of that participation throughout Biblical history, His goal of deep intimacy with His people remained. We will explore a Biblical framework for the Ecclesia found throughout scripture which provides for specific roles that serve to unify and equip the Body of Christ empowered by the Holy Spirit in relationship with God and others to fulfill God's mission in the world. Then we will identify key ways we in the Church of the Nazarene can develop a more Biblical structure of the Church in Southeast Asia.

### *People relating directly to God*

God wanted to open the love of the Trinity to humanity. In the Garden each person related directly to God without mediation (Gen. 1, 2). God as their constant companion would joyfully watch people grow and develop. He designed marriage, the first social structure, so humans would also enjoy intimate fellowship together. He enjoyed people exploring, creating new things, and loving each other. The world was a stage for fellowship with God. The people of God would be the whole of humanity sharing a universe with an unlimited God revealing Himself in relationship--a beautiful, exciting growing love!

In addition to physical death, sin brought death to our relationships, breaking intimacy, companionship, and fellowship with God and each other. God responded with a plan of reconciliation to restore things back to His original purpose. In that plan God in Jesus Christ fully participated in our feelings of pain, brokenness, and separation by entering fully into the sufferings and death that came from our rejection.

Between Eden and the Flood, each person still related directly to God without a mediator. For example, God Himself evaluated both Cain and Abel's sacrifices. After Cain murdered Abel God functioned as witness, prosecutor, judge and executioner of Cain's punishment (Gen. 4). God also accepted and rewarded the sacrifices of faithful individuals,

even personally redeeming Enoch's body (Gen. 5:24). Sinful people who rejected the voice of God became violent, and the faithful people of God were reduced to Noah and his family.

After the Flood, heads of families became the priests for their families. Human government was instituted as clans grew into nations or city states. God delegated the execution of murderers to human overseers. But when people attempted to rule themselves without God He scattered them (Gen. 11).

God still pursued relationship with faithful individuals. God chose and spoke to Abram. Abram believed God, followed and obeyed Him in faith (Gen. 12:2-3). Then God gave the first physical sign (circumcision) to mark the whole clan of His covenant people who participated in His promise and worshipped Him. While circumcision was not a guarantee of inclusion in God's covenant promise, no one could follow God without it. God's promise rested on the two elements of faith and obedience.

God governed this covenant relationship with Israel by establishing patterns of shared accountability and responsibility. For example, because God understood the people's need for visual tools to guide them, He gave them the tabernacle while they wandered in the desert. The articles of the tabernacle foreshadowed Christ, and the method by which God directed the people to set up and take down the tabernacle illustrated the united and full participation of the Children of Israel. Each time God moved the Israelites the Levites were assigned individual items to take down and set up, sharing equally the responsibility for the holy articles. This unique system of shared responsibility described in Numbers chapter 1-5 shows the following principles:

1. "No person would have had to work hard. . . . To be a part of community is to be a part of a service of joy."
  2. "God is a God of order.[and] allows large numbers of persons to be a part of meaningful responsibility."
  3. "Meaning [in the work] would have been found in whose home they were caring for and constructing."
  4. "They understood [how] to move with the Spirit and to follow his leading."
- (Brunk, 2013).

It is interesting that the community organized themselves under God's control, and thousands could participate in that obedience.

After nearly four hundred years of God's personal rule, there was a change. The nation of Israel rejected God as King and asked for a human king to lead them, showing they

did not love God with all their hearts (1 Samuel 8). God permitted this, but during King David's reign God promised an eternal kingdom rule (2 Samuel 7). God used prophets to foretell the Messiah; Yahweh used the dynasty of David as a bridge to restore God's direct kingdom rule. God's forming Israel into a nation did not deepen their responsibility toward each other nor toward surrounding nations illustrating the weaknesses of that nation-type of organization to accomplish that purpose. The coming of Messiah brought the call, "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

### *The Church, Bride and Body of Christ*

The Church was established by a new covenant based on Jesus' death and resurrection, with the triune God to fulfill His redemptive, reconciliatory, and restorative purpose in the world. The "Ecclesia" is first mentioned in scripture when Jesus responded to Peter's confession that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:17-18). Jesus confirmed His deity as the submissive Son of God, His Father. Then Jesus gave a new identity to Simon, changed his name to Peter (pebble), and established the solid foundation (bedrock) for the universal Church on Jesus' identity as God's Son.

Faith in Jesus joins a person with God and brings them into the Ecclesia (Jn. 1:11-12). The Ecclesia unites each believer with other believers in love as the Bride of Christ. The relationship Christ revealed and shared with His Father, we are now to reveal to the world (John 17). We are a holy Bride (Eph. 4:12-16, 5:27) that is growing in trust and intimacy with our Bridegroom Christ even as we grow in fellowship and community together in the Church.

But to live this relationship as the Church we desperately need the power of the Holy Spirit to give us a new heart and to teach us to obey God's Word wholeheartedly (Ezek. 11:19, 36:23, 25-27; Mt. 22:37-40). The Holy Spirit activates the gift of faith for everyone who calls on the Lord by confessing and repenting of our sins (Rom. 10:9). He also indwells believers (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19), unites us in fellowship with the triune God as we draw near with pure hearts (Heb. 10:1, 22), and lives out the life of Christ through us in the world.

Membership in the Church is not dependent on religious ritual or limited by physical location but happens as each believer communes with God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). Personal intimacy with God is the foundation of true community fellowship (koinonia). God's work is, therefore, accomplished through His power, by His Spirit wherever believers united by faith in Christ live and gather as local bodies of the Church throughout the world.

But our citizenship is in heaven, from where we await our Savior who will one day come to take His Church, His Bride, to reign with Him forevermore (Phil. 3:20).

The Ecclesia is also the living Body of Christ which by its nature is organic, united, and empowered by love. Christ gave organic structure to His Body, showing that the people of God are both responsible for each other and accountable to God without a hierarchy of power. Christ is the Head (Eph. 1:22-23, 5:23; Col. 1:18); we are the parts or members of the body. Authority comes directly from Christ to all parts of the interdependent Body. In other words, the foot does not go walking off on its own. The hand cannot hold on without the rest of the body. This unity does not come from agreement but is intrinsic. We *are* members of His Body!

United with Christ as His Body, we are filled and empowered by His Spirit to be witnesses to God's power (Acts 1:8; Eph. 1:18-23; Col. 1:28-29). Within the structure of the Holy Trinity we see a core component of the structure of the Body of Christ--a unity with diversity. First, the Holy Spirit who came to testify to Christ (John 15:26) empowered the Early Church believers to live in unity to fulfill Christ's prayer, "that all of them may be one," (John 17:21). As they waited for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8) a diversity of disciples united in prayer. Next, on the Day of Pentecost they found themselves speaking in diverse languages "as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:4), which fulfilled prophecy (Joel 2:28-32). The Spirit led the disciples to scatter widely through the gathered crowd so the whole body of disciples participated in the evangelical effort on that day, not just Peter as spokesperson. The result was that the gathering of 120 members suddenly swelled at 3,000! The whole process was initiated and led by the Holy Spirit. This reflects a return to the original pattern of God's direct fellowship with humanity as seen in Genesis 1 to 8. Then the Holy Spirit gave diverse gifts to believers for the unified purpose of equipping the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Cor. 12, 14; Rom. 12:5-8).

The organic structure of the Body of Christ provides opportunity for fruitful service. Paul modeled varied approaches of exercising spiritual gifts within the structure of the Church. For example, Paul delegated authority for choosing elders and deacons (1, 2 Timothy, Titus). He and his team members appointed leaders in every place where they preached the Gospel. Paul intentionally trained others to take his place. Finally, Paul instructed others to imitate his ministry, implying that his patterns were reproducible.

Unity in the Spirit was absolutely essential to the growth and spiritual fruitfulness of the Church. The Early Church guarded this unity as they practiced daily fellowship and

service to others in the Body (Acts 2:41-47; 4:32-37). But as Paul explained more fully, unity did not mean conformity, but was fueled by humility, gentleness, patience, love, forgiveness, and peacemaking (see Eph.4:2-3). The evidence of the indwelling Spirit living Christ's life through us is the fruit of the Spirit: love in its many expressions (Gal. 5:22-23). Unity in the Spirit will therefore be evidenced in Christlikeness, demonstrated both in communion with God and in peace-keeping relationships with others. Holiness in heart and life demonstrates the life of Christ in our daily context and relationships (Heb. 12:14). The governing principle in the structure of the Body is love (1 Cor. 13; Eph. 4:17-6:9; 1 Pet. 4:8). As Christ's love is demonstrated throughout all levels of relationship in the Church, trust is built and accountability is strengthened, which then deepens each believer's communion with God. Collectively a shared dependence on God's provision and power decreases an overreliance on human systems which often manipulate or pervert true authority. In these ways and more the Holy Spirit empowers the Church to fulfill Christ's mission in the world.

*The Missional Purpose of the People of God Called Nazarenes*

While the Church finds identity in Christ and structure in community relationships, reconciliation with God is the purpose that unites the members of the Body of Christ. A reconciled sinner becomes an obedient disciple. As the spiritual "Israel" the Church demonstrates restoration to God's created purpose under the Lordship of Christ for eternity (2 Cor. 5:14-6:2; Phil. 2:5-11; Heb.10:5-18). We are stewards of Christ's blessings of creation and gifts of His Spirit--which we share freely to equip and build up others in the Body of Christ (Rom. 8:18-23; Eph. 4:11-16). As stewards of God's delegated authority we exercise His kingdom rule as we fulfill the good works which God ordained for us to do (Eph. 2:6-10), through His Spirit's power (Eph. 1:13-14) in victory over sin to fulfill His kingdom priorities which will restore broken people and parts of this world to God's purpose. (See Mt.4:19, 16:19; Mk.3:14-15; Lk.9:1-6, 10:1-12, 16-24; Jn.13:35.) We do this by intercession in Christ's name (John 15:7; Rom. 8:26-27; Eph.2:4-10, James 5:14-20; 1 Pet.4:7) and by submission to the authority of Christ and other governing authorities God places over us on this earth (Eph. 5-6; James 4; 1 Pet.2:13-4:19).

Christ's Lordship is proclaimed by His Body, His ambassadors, as we represent His authority over every level of created existence and power, including the power of evil and darkness intent on destroying God's creation and thwarting God's plan of reconciliation (Eph. 3:10-12; Jn. 10:10; 2 Cor. 4:4, 5:17-21). Christ came to conquer sin by destroying the devil's

work (1 John 3:7-10). Through the Church Christ proclaims freedom to captives of sin, evil, fear, the world, and death (Is. 61; John 8:31-36; 1 John 4:16-18; 1 John 5:4-5; 1 Cor. 15:42-58) by giving abundant life (Jn. 10:10). God's people enter this abundant, victorious life by seeking His cleansing fire to purify our hearts by faith and by surrendering fully to Christ's Lordship. We grow by obeying His Word directed by His Spirit, demonstrating holiness in the fear of God and proclaiming the truth of the gospel of Christ as we actively engage others to be reconciled to God and restored to His created purpose.

“The objective of the Nazarene movement is the formation of holy character. We have not inaugurated a reform movement in customs or costumes, forms or formalities—rather an evangelism which promotes a transformation of the whole being into holy manhood and womanhood, and which radiates the divine life in all departments of holy living” (Goodwin, ND). The Manual of the Church of the Nazarene provides a platform for disseminating the Biblical call to holiness and covenant we collectively commit to keep before God. The Manual also provides a structural framework of shared authority and accountability intended to fulfill this outcome of proclaiming holiness. Nazarenes divide responsibility at the General or International/Regional level, the District level, and the Local church level. The Manual usually gives specific guidance based on scriptural principles like New Testament writers who implied a broad rather than overly detailed and prescriptive structural context. Scripture gives freedom for how to organize overseers, shepherds and leadership in the Church and provides examples for how to resolve specific issues. We see evidence of shared decision making by the Jerusalem council concerning doctrine for a specific cultural context. But Paul gave clear and specific instructions for dealing with sin in the local body of believers (1 Cor. 5 -6) or keeping order in worship in a particular cultural context (1 Cor. 11-14).

The structure of the Church found in the Gospels and the letters was designed to form the Bride of Christ into the image of Christ by building up the Church in love (agape), bringing accountability through corrective rebuke, and reducing pride and arrogance. This broad structure prevented the concentration of authority in a few leaders (3 John), allowed freedom for individuals to express spiritual gifts, and prevented perversion of the gospel. Any ecclesiology which either structures too loosely or governs too tightly will harm the outcomes of shared accountability, unity and freedom in Christ. These extremes suppress the exercise of spiritual gifts, enhance pride of those in authority, and increase conflict. In

Nazarene ecclesiology, generally the Manual balances authority and freedom. Specific roles and responsibilities are clear, authoritarianism is suppressed, and varied expressions of spiritual gifts are encouraged. On the other hand, addressing each problem with a new Manual policy tends to weaken more than strengthen accountability. When we make the Manual more prescriptive rather than descriptive of the goal of Christlikeness we revert to legalistic righteousness and violate the heart of holy love that calls all people into relationship with our holy God. When, however, we acknowledge our interdependence on the Holy Spirit as our Helper and Communicator with our triune God and we pursue accountability with shared responsibilities in our church structure, we enhance unity with God's heart and extend freedom not as a license to sin but as expression of His holiness through exercising our diverse spiritual gifts within our unique cultural contexts.

*Being the Church of the Nazarene in Southeast Asia*

*Establishing a relational structure based on holy love and reconciliation:*

As Nazarenes committed to growing as Christ-like disciples, we desire a deeper communion with the Holy Spirit and dependence on His power. Many believers in Southeast Asia, however, see little evidence of this holy life impacting their communities. Despite attending worship services and prayer gatherings few hunger for God's Word to direct their daily lives. Holiness Christianity is to them a static religion, not a dynamic relationship. They need to experience the unconditional love of Christ that draws them to repentance rather than to guilt or shame. New believers are often isolated from their families who perceive faith in Christ as disrespect and disloyalty. This implies that the believer discarded the family for the Church, plants deep roots of bitterness, and confuses their community identity. Southeast Asians can be set free from these relational barriers by being reconciled to God through Christ and extending that same ministry of reconciliation to their families.

*Developing Christ-like disciples deeply in love with God's Word:*

As we develop Christ-like disciples, we need to facilitate a worshipful environment in which believers desire to personally draw near in deeper communion with God. Disciples of Christ grow to be like Him by enjoying His Spirit's presence, hungering for God in His Word, and praying--not out of duty or law but out of love. Obedience to Christ is the clearest reflection of love (John 14:21). We need to model Christ's love by caring deeply and interceding passionately for others. The places where prayer and fasting is most welcomed

are in areas where believers are aggressively persecuted for their faith. Passion for what Jesus desires has to be caught by time spent with Jesus, desperately waiting with an open heart and mind for the Holy Spirit to teach us the truth of God's Word.

*Growing a faith-community of servant-leaders:*

Holy love grows through serving the local community. Southeast Asians value a group-centered identity. A leader is honored and "saves face" by providing for others' needs in the group. "Servanthood" is easily misunderstood in Southeast Asian culture. Decades of perverted political power structures have left an undercurrent of fear and shame that prevails even in parent/child or teacher/student relationships. Combined with Buddhist merit-making to improve social status in the next "life cycle," this explains why willingly choosing a lower status on behalf of others' needs is unthinkable. Even church leaders struggle to serve by denying self. Pastors who see their calling as a responsibility often work tirelessly serving others in human effort but miss the Spirit's leading. Other pastors pursue higher degrees or titles to ensure their own success but forget how to care in Christ's name. We can help our pastors at both extremes by communicating and modeling the interdependence of our church structure. For example, we can demonstrate how the district helps the local church or how the local church giving to the district, theological education, or international missions is empowering others to bear eternal fruit. Then as we mobilize believers in pairs or small groups to serve their communities we can support them together as the Body of Christ.

*Building accountability on trust rather than power:*

As Nazarenes in Southeast Asia our church structure must build accountability based on trust rather than power or authority. When mission leaders model trust and strength in God, national leaders can see that we are not self-sufficient but secure in God as our faithful Provider and Sustainer. We serve because of love for Him rather than for approval by the majority. When we are accessible and present with them throughout the seasons of life they may be more willing to risk challenging cultural norms in order to follow Christ's principles of love and integrity. As the Church we can reward with further trust and autonomy in decision making those who follow Biblical principles. Those who do not follow Christ's commands need to be quietly disciplined or removed from leadership. The Apostle Paul's cross-cultural servant-style of leadership can help us build local church accountability without using a top-down chain of command. Instead of directly confronting local pastors



Paul wrote to the church community, appealing to them as a body to apply scriptural principles to the problems (1 Cor. 5,6; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). As we build trust and accountability we will also teach that holiness and Christlikeness are the DNA of our structure.

*Developing stewardship and financial accountability:*

Before we begin to apply the group-centered identity toward financial stewardship, we need to first repent for instilling a dependence on man's resources rather than God's provision. Then we need to develop corporate trust in God by expressing public gratitude for His faithfulness to provide for financial needs. By acknowledging God as the Owner of everything and trusting His provision we will develop faithfulness as His stewards. By building a cultural understanding of stewardship we can instruct local churches that as part of the global church culture, our tithes and offerings show our care for others in our communities, districts and around the world. As we emphasize giving as a sacrifice seen and rewarded by God rather than man, the cultural value of giving for buildings and honoring givers can be replaced with view of Biblical stewardship that strengthens financial accountability and expresses gratitude to all.

*Living in victory and freedom in the Holy Spirit:*

God's Word testifies to victory over sin and death that is ours in Christ through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. But our church structure in Asia seldom points to that power. Southeast Asian Buddhists and Muslims practice more rules or laws than we can count to "be holy." They need to see that the Holy Spirit empowers us to overcome our weaknesses to live like Christ in this world. Thai people pride themselves in their freedom, having never been colonized, but most lack the freedom from fear and evil spirits that hold them captive to spiritual darkness, deception, idolatry and cross-gender identity. The Church of the Nazarene has in our doctrine of holiness a key to unlock these hidden prison doors. As we open our hands, hearts and minds to the diverse ways that the Holy Spirit may choose to heal, to deliver from evil spirits, to communicate and verify the truth of God's Word; and as we actively care for the poor, marginalized, trafficked, exploited, and even power-hungry elite of society, lives will be transformed!

*Developing and measuring fruitful, reproducible district leadership:*

In the Church of the Nazarene we acknowledge 3 phases of district development. As a district develops accountability and sustainability they are entrusted with more autonomy in field, regional and global decision making. The fact that in Southeast Asia some districts organized for more than 20 years have not yet developed beyond the initial phase shows that some of our district leaders do not know how to reproduce themselves by discipling others to lead after them.

Are numerical and financial benchmarks the best indicators of church growth in Southeast Asia? How can we best measure growth in Christlikeness? While numbers do give perspective on some factors of church growth, perhaps a more qualitative approach would better measure a lifestyle of holy love lived out in servant leadership as the basis of the growth of the Church of the Nazarene in Southeast Asia. Questions such as, How many believers are growing in faith and holiness? How many times did members initiate reconciliation in their relationships in the past year? How many families are serving their communities sacrificially? Eternal fruit should be evident from our labors in Christ's Church (Mt. 7:20) showing ourselves to be Christ's disciples (Jn. 13:35).

*Conclusion*

God initiates relationship with us as His people, unites us in holy love as the Body of Christ, and empowers us by His indwelling Spirit as His witnesses in this world. Southeast Asia's hope lies in returning to a Biblical balance of relational holiness and the ministry of the whole Body of Christ. Paul's example of genuine repentance and full surrender to Christ shows us that the merit system is empty and useless. Paul laid aside legalistic righteousness in order to know Christ (Phil. 3:7-14). Like Paul, may God use us to develop the whole Body of Christ to proclaim His Kingdom and to prepare a reconciled, holy Bride of Christ that loves Him supremely and relies fully on the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

*Bibliography:*

- Brunk, Kevin (2013) quoted from "Numbers Devotional" as presented at Field Strategy Coordinator's Meeting in Manila, Philippines in April, 2013.
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