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Reflections on Article XI (The Church) of the Articles of Faith for the Church of the Nazarene

By

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I. Introduction

This paper is a reflection on Article XI of the Articles of Faith for the Church of the Nazarene. The task assigned by the conference planning committee is "to comment from a theological, biblical and contextual point of view". This paper will explore the Article of Faith from primarily a contextual basis. It is important to acknowledge that my context is as an Australian with a Western educational background in both secular and religious institutions.

An Article on the church, one could suppose, is foundational to a denomination such as the Church of the Nazarene, having been established in relatively recent times (1908). However, it is interesting to note that the Church of the Nazarene did not have an Article that specifically addressed its ecclesiology until the General Assembly 1989 when it adopted an Article based upon the report of the "Doctrine of the Church Commission", a commission formed by action of the 1985 General Assembly. This paper gives a brief review of the development of an ecclesiology and then explores Article XI paragraph by paragraph using the focus applied by the original Doctrine of the Church Commission. Trends are suggested and their implications are briefly explored.

II. Development of the articulation of an ecclesiology

    A. Brief History

The emergence of a clearly articulated ecclesiology within Christian history appears to have been a slow process throughout its formative years.

> *In the three centuries following the first Christian Pentecost, the Church had gradually transformed itself from being a society of joyous penitents celebrating*

forgiveness and liberty to being a highly structured, clerically directed corps of

persons confessing the same dogma (Dunning 1988: 521).

According to Dunning (1988), Augustine of Hippo (AD 354 – 430) is attributed with articulating a doctrine of the church which was commonly accepted by the fifth century. The doctrine was developed in the context of the disputes, discussions and decisions of the previous centuries (e.g. Marcion, Pelagian, and Arian disputes). Specifically developed in the midst of controversy with the Donatists (who argued that the church was for saints only, and those who had succumbed during the Diocletian persecution of AD303 should not be readmitted to the church), Augustine eventually came to the position that salvation was only found in the church, but that the church would remain a mixed body of saints and sinners (McGrath 1997:21). The institutional direction of the church was confirmed and strengthened as a result perhaps making fresh articulations easier.

It is interesting to note that no particular structure of the church is understood as divinely prescribed. Bassett (Dunning 1988:521) shows that almost every structural component of the church has been borrowed from its surrounding environment. Clearly, the church is open to historical development through a variety of contemporary influences and the changes that result are not viewed as a change in the essence of the church.

Dunning (1988:537) significantly concludes his brief historical survey of the church by saying:

At this point in history, the fragmented nature of the church with deeply

entrenched divisions renders it little more than a Utopian dream. While the effort

need not be abandoned, since some progress may be made, it would seem wiser to

focus on those areas that would give most promise of fulfilling the New Testament

vision of the people of God. It appears to us that the local congregation is the most likely locus for the church to be the church. Pragmatically, while the body of believers in a limited situation needs connections to address the worldwide responsibilities laid upon it, it is truly possible for the marks of the church to be brought to maximum expression in this setting. Here is where spiritual renewal has its greatest impact.

The 39 Articles of the Church of England to which John Wesley subscribed as an Anglican priest appear to be just as fluid and formative in statements about the church prior to Wesley's time.

The Thirty - nine Articles of Religion were drawn up by the church in convocation in 1563 on the basis of the earlier Forty - two Articles of 1553. Subscription to them by the clergy was ordered by act of Parliament in 1571. Devised to exclude Roman Catholics and Anabaptists, but not to provide a dogmatic definition of faith - in many instances, they are ambiguously phrased - the articles were influenced by the confessions of Augsburg and Wurttemberg.

(mb-soft.com/believe/txc/thirtyni.htm Accessed June 29 2006)

For example:

XIX. Of the Church.
The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

As the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch, have erred, so also the Church of Rome hath erred, not only in their living and manner of Ceremonies, but also in matters of Faith.

XX. Of the Authority of the Church.
The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in

Controversies of Faith: and yet it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another. Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce any thing to be believed for necessity of Salvation.

This ambiguous approach suggests that the church itself is by its nature in the process of forming and as such has a historical trajectory. While outside the confines of this paper, it might be useful to explore some of the forces that have shaped this historical development to give insight into its present expression. At the very least this acknowledges the possibility that the present articulation of Nazarene ecclesiology may be the result of forces created by contextual issues that may not necessarily be theological or biblical in nature.

B. The Commission Report

The report of the Doctrine of the Church Commission to the twenty-second General Assembly in Indianapolis explains that the Article was developed around four aspects, namely: the nature, marks, mission and historical reality of the church (General Assembly Minutes, 1989). The four brief paragraphs of Article XI address each of these aspects in turn. It is claimed that

Copies of the proposal were distributed to our colleagues in all U-level institutions of the Church of the Nazarene. The comments of those from diverse cultural backgrounds were deemed important to an article that would be sensitive to the international church.

No indication is given in the report to indicate the actual number or whether diversity of respondents was actually achieved.

III. The Church: Article XI

A. Paragraph one

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.

The stated aim of this paragraph is to express the *nature* of the church. Clearly the communal nature of the church is emphasized in such words as *community*, and the biblical imagery of the *Body of Christ* (I Cor 12:3, 12-31; Ephes 4:1-17). This theme is also given expression in each of the other paragraphs of the Article with such words as, *fellowship, mutual accountability, discipleship, local congregations* and *lives under His rule*. Clearly, then, the communal nature of the church is an important aspect to the original authors of Article XI.

The emphasis on individuals coming together in social relationships to constitute the church has been, with a few exceptions, consistent throughout the ages. In a reaction to the corruption and moral degradation of the Christian church through the Middle Ages, new monastic movements flourished. Most were communities of individuals who wanted to escape the corruption of the world and to protect the church from evil influences. However, some individuals tried to achieve the same thing by taking vows of solitude and practised their Christianity in more individualistic ways. Overall, these individuals

appeared to be the exception rather than the rule, so community played a significant part in the monastic movements as well (Constable 1996; Holmes, 2000).

Three main images used of the church in the New Testament are metaphors that engender communal images. These are, the *New Israel* (e.g. I Peter 2:9-10), which is based on the idea of a nation composed of its subjects; the *Body of Christ* (e.g. Ephesians 4:11-16) which highlights the sense of integrated unity in the midst of diversity of interaction of member parts; and *Ekklesia,* a Greek word which is often just transliterated into the English. This last term is the central term used in the New Testament and when translated is usually done so as "the called out ones". Thus, community, context boundedness, and interaction are images that emerge from such an understanding of the communal nature of the church.

B. Paragraph two

God calls the Church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of the Word, observance of the sacraments, and ministry in His name; by obedience to Christ and mutual accountability.

The stated aim of this paragraph is to articulate the Protestant marks of the church. This paragraph suggests a theme of Luther who said the church is,

the gathering of all believers, in which the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accord with the gospel (Karkkainen 2002:40).

To quote Gritsch and Jenson, *the church is something going on in the world (Karkkainen 2002:40).* It is important to recognize the dynamic and fluid quality that results from such activity. There is the creation of church through worship, preaching of the Word,

celebration of the Lord's Supper, and of course the very Wesleyan process of mutual accountability. This creativity is illustrated in the activity of preaching.

> *Preaching does not only transmit content; it also shapes relationships. God speaks to his creature and thus creates community with him. God speaks to the human being in order to participate in his [sic] life, not to provide him [sic] with information. What preaching communicates is not something like the latest news; its intention is rather to create or further relationships: relationships between God and us, relationships among us and also our relationship to ourselves. The faith which is awakened and strengthened by preaching is therefore not the expression of affirming or accepting the truth of incredible information; on the contrary, the faith which results from preaching, and at which it aims, is the expression of relatedness and – in that connection – of a new existence (Engemann 2001: 3).*

> *Preaching that centres on the biblical message is the theological centre of Christian worship …. (P)reaching is both informing and performing. The British philosopher John L. Austin makes a helpful distinction between performative and constative utterances. A constative utterance refers to an event that has already taken place. It is there apart from the utterance. The utterance says what already is. … (F)or instance it may state that in Jesus' death God has saved us; we only need to be informed about it. Preaching would be imparting the information that God in and through Jesus' death has saved us. Faith would mean accepting this information as true. A performative utterance, on the other hand, does not merely point to an event but performs an event. The utterance is a constitutive part of the event of which it speaks. The event is not complete without the utterance. … The hearer is not simply informed about what happened in the past, but the hearer is changed by being drawn into a language event that tells the story of Jesus as the story of God's unconditional love (Lorenzen 2004:14)*

This fluidity is mediated action and relational in context expressing all the characteristics of an organism that has life and development.

C. Paragraph three

The mission of the Church in the world is to continue the redemptive work of Christ in the power of the Spirit through holy living, evangelism, discipleship, and service.

At this point, this is where most of us probably feel most comfortable. It is because of the mission of the church (as expressed through the activities of the Church of the Nazarene in this instance) that we are involved as we are. However, the very strength of the mission and the passion of the people involved in the mission have a countering weakness. So involved has the church been in God's mission to reach the world with the good news of the Gospel, that other aspects of church may not have been developed to the same extent as that of mission. For example, in my part of the world we have been heavily influenced by the missionary arm of the church as it sought to expand its influence throughout the whole world.

Perhaps despite the rhetoric, the communal aspect of the church has not been understood or developed, and certainly the diversity of expression that is assumed in our ecclesiology, is not experienced to any large degree. One might conjecture as to the reasons for this but one area worthy of further investigation is that of the militaristic imagery and perspective that often accompanies aggressive, passionate mission, or more specifically evangelism. For example, the labels we use in our organizational structure such as *Regional Director* and *Field Strategy Coordinator* lend weight to a command structure that is authoritarian and adds to a presumption of a narrowly focused task. Such

imagery is played out in the concentration of resources around unified strategies and

unified articulation of objectives. There appears to be little room for diversity of opinion,

expression and methodology when the resources are so limited and the focusing of

mission is so needed.

It is interesting to note that the expression *holy living* is only mentioned once in Article

XI and it is here under the rubric of mission and suggests a rather utilitarian concept of

holiness. Significantly it is not mentioned under the marks of the church in paragraph

two. One wonders whether the nervousness within the Church of the Nazarene about a

perceived loss of holiness at the core of our identity is not nervousness at the variety of

expressions of holiness and holy living that are being developed outside the rubric of

mission. The conquest of holiness evangelism is easier to do and measure when its

expression and methodologies are the same around the world. If, however, holy living is

expressed as a mark of the church (and also placed in paragraph two) then a variety of

expression may be encompassed with greater ease.

D. Paragraph four

> *The Church is a historical reality, which organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms; exists both as local congregations and as a universal body; sets apart persons called of God for specific ministries. God calls the Church to live under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The stated aim of this paragraph is to affirm the historical reality of the church. This

statement places the Nazarene ecclesiology in the *free church ecclesiologies* as defined

by Karkainen (2002) and perhaps better known as a *believers' church*. While such

acknowledgement may be self evident, exactly what the church looks like is less so, particularly if the *culturally conditioned forms* are taken seriously. Frost and Hirsch (2003) give a useful description of the various ways congregations "do" church: namely, the bounded set, fuzzy set and the centred set. Typically, in my part of the world, the *bounded set* approach has been used as we seek to attract people into our group with its shared values and mission. This has meant the establishing of fences and boundaries to both keep people in and keep others out. In recent times there has been a move toward the centred approach where people become committed to a core with less rigid expectations and more emphasis on process than on decisions for Christ. Table 1 illustrates Frost and Hirsch's summary of the two perspectives.

The centred approach creates difficulties regarding measurement and description of the end results, but the wide distribution of the core values booklet by the Church of the Nazarene lends itself to the centred approach. The struggle the Church of the Nazarene has with its concept of internationalization is in many respects a struggle with ecclesiologies that result from different missiological approaches i.e. bounded set or centred set. As much as we might like to think that our mission is driven by our theology, pragmatic behaviour often shapes theology and hence expectations. The move from one perspective to another is not without pain.

Table 1: Comparison between Bounded Set and Centered Set Approaches
Frost & Hirsch (2002: 50)

Bounded-Set Approach	Centered-Set Approach
The evangeliser is the expert who has special knowledge regarding God that the lost person must take to be saved	Each person is the expert on his or her own life and has the God-given ability to seek for the truth. The evangelizer respects this.
The "lost" person is viewed as flawed in character and sinful	Each person is viewed as oppressed in the image of God – precious, valuable and loved by God
Seeing people as simply lost or saved, it tries to potentially "fix up" sinners and make them like us.	Seeing people as seekers it tries to stimulate others to ask, seek, and knock, while understanding we don't know it all ourselves.
The goal is to get them to sign on to profess belief to become part of our team	The goal is for the process of discovery of Christ and our search for truth to be furthered in the person
A cataclysmic change occurs in people called conversion	Conversion is a process that does not begin and end with the profession of faith in Christ but begins with the Holy Spirit's prevenient grace on the person's life and continues through repentance for a lifetime – the Kingdom comes
We Christians know and have the whole truth	We don't know everything about life or God – humility and wonder remain.

III. Concluding Comments

This brief paper should be understood as a work in progress and one that is meant to raise questions for further dialog, rather than give a definitive comment about Nazarene ecclesiology. It is my contention that the slowness of the Church of the Nazarene to articulate an ecclesiology is not without precedence in the Christian Church.

How diverse and informative the international input into the original formulation of Article XI actually was, is worthy of further exploration. I suggest that contextual and cultural issues from the culture that has dominated the Church of the Nazarene to this point in time may be as significant as any theological or Biblical forces at work in the formulation of this article due to the fluid, dynamic and mediated nature of the church itself.

Clearly, the community emphasis throughout Article XI is dominant, yet I suggest that through a passionate mission to see individuals find saving faith in Jesus Christ, our missional ecclesiology has narrowed to an individualism that has left much of the experience of the communal nature of the church unexplored.

It is interesting to note the omission of the word *holiness* from paragraph two, yet find it included in paragraph three that defines mission. I suggest that this has led to a narrowing of the concept of holiness to a missiological expression so that the broader understanding of holiness as an expression of who we are in Christ is minimised.

In a practical sense, with a missional understanding of church dominating in my area of the world, there has been a narrowing of our ecclesiology. A *centred* (Frost and Hirsch, 2002) understanding of the visible church may help in engaging a more wholistic view of holiness and in being the people of God.

Finally, these brief comments need further elaboration from biblical, theological and contextual points of view. Much more needs to be done to move these suggestions from anecdotal evidence to a robust analysis of Nazarene ecclesiology in Australia. It is my hope that these few thoughts will provide a way for further dialog.

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