

THE CHURCH AT THE TABLE

Dick O. Eugenio

Assistant Professor of Theology, Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary

“I look upon all the world as my parish,” John Wesley claimed.¹ He would not have known that such a prophetic statement would find its fulfillment two centuries later through the commitment of his theological descendants. Born out of the womb of Methodism, the Church of the Nazarene contributes to what Thomas C. Oden describes as an age of “pan-Wesleyanism.”² But the Church of the Nazarene is a global denomination in its own right. After one century of mission endeavors, it boasts an imposing 2.1 million members in 159 countries, two-thirds of which are located outside North America, Canada, and Europe.³ “The sun never sets on the Church of the Nazarene,” Jerald D. Johnson brags.⁴ On the one hand, statistically speaking, this global presence which the denomination enjoys is a product of the “rapid expansion of the church on its international frontiers” since 1976.⁵ On the other hand, considering Hiram F. Reynolds’s vision and the early accessions in the history of the denomination, Stanley Ingersol is right to say that “the path to internationalization is a main theme in Nazarene history.”⁶ Internationalization is not a missional afterthought in the life of the denomination; rather, it is its DNA.

Johnson defines internationalization in two ways. It is (1) “no more than a contemporary application of the principles of the Great Commission,” and (2) the act of “simply accepting one another *horizontally* as brothers and sisters in Christ.”⁷ The second definition evidences that Johnson is not naïve. He knows that internationalization is not a mere geographical statement; it is also a statement of genuine *koinonia*. Internationalization constitutes some challenges,

¹ Wesley, “11 June 1739,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 19, *Journal and Diaries II* (1738-43) (Bicentennial edition; eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater; Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 67 [henceforth, *Works*].

² Thomas C. Oden, *Doctrinal Standards in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), 150.

³ *Church of the Nazarene Growth, 2002-2012* (Annual Statistics from the General Secretary’s Reports), available at <http://nazarene.org/files/docs/Manual2009-2013.pdf>.

⁴ Johnson, *The International Experience* (Kansas City: NPH, 1982), 26.

⁵ Floyd T. Cunningham, et. al., *Our Watchword and Song: The Centennial History of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2009), 11, 512.

⁶ Ingersol, “Nazarene Odyssey and the Hinges of Internationalization,” *WTJ* 38 (Spring 2003), 80.

⁷ Johnson, *The International Experience*, 10, 19 (italics original).

particularly to unity. Although change in terminology does not really address the challenges, Mario Zani's preference for "globalization" over "internationalization" is helpful. Following Zani, internationalization connotes "strategies and agreed administrative policies," while globalization is the "process by which we become sensitized and responsive to the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-national world of which we are apart."⁸ This means that the globalization of the Church of the Nazarene involves some sort of inculturation, which consequently resulted in distinct self-particularizations in the mission fields. Max L. Stackhouse explains this in terms of flowering: "The boundary between kernel and husk is less precise, and the emphasis is on the growth of new possibilities once the seed of the gospel is planted in a new location, inevitably in its old husk. But, once the seed is planted, it will interact with the soil into which it has been planted, and new forms of faith will spring into being."⁹ In short, this model sanctions Nazarenes to take on *new* and *unknown* forms, welcoming diversity within the denomination. However, we must admit that the church is not an essentially disordered movement. In the midst of diversity must be unity. The many local churches are a part of the Church of the Nazarene, and hence they are bound to denominational principles and boundaries. This is the challenge that a global denomination faces: how to balance diversity and unity, pluralism and homogeneity, self-particularization and universal consciousness.

CENTRALIZED HOMOGENEITY

Our Watchword and Song depicts the third phase of the life of the denomination, from after World War II to about 1975, as an era of the establishment of "efficient organization and professionalism" and when "leaders realized that they were living in an age that called for businesslike ways of reaching into the world."¹⁰ And when the church faced further global expansion after 1976, leaders chose to create structures that can maintain order within the denomination. This is the era where the word "internationalization" became a buzzword. On the one hand, the term "signified consciousness of a world made up of many national identities, and hope that ethnocentrism could be transcended while respecting cultures and celebrating

⁸ Zani, "Globalization Through the Cross," induction message, Nazarene Theological Seminary, 1999; quoted in Cunningham, *Watchword*, 531.

⁹ Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 107.

¹⁰ Cunningham, *Watchword*, 350.

diversity.”¹¹ In this sense, internationalization, as Johnson notes, entails both the propagation of the gospel to the corners of the earth and the mutual participation of global Nazarenes in horizontal camaraderie. On the other hand, internationalization is also a political term. For instance, the 1989 Gallup survey found out that “Nazarenes frequently understood ‘internationalization’ as something done by the American church to make it easier for non-American cultures to function within the denominational structure.”¹² Internationalization, understood this way, is the means by which the American mother church can impose order upon the whole denomination.

Global Nazarenes can potentially assume the shape of a global organization with centralized ruling powers. But the institution of a centralized government – like that of the World Trade Organization – to be effective, entails the surrendering of local churches of their sovereignty over their own lands on ecclesiastical and theological matters. The ruling global body will have the authoritative word, and their decisions will be imposed to local churches that do not have the capacity to make an appeal. In short, local autonomy is swallowed for the sake of the universal. There is no geographical center *per se*, but a center nevertheless exists to adjudicate all conundrums. The church becomes like Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, a prison organized around a central surveillance tower which sees everything but is not seen and which subjects everyone but is subject to no one. The problem with this tactic is that those who will be placed in the “policing” position are the same names found in the magisterium. In this sense, as William T. Cavanaugh assessed, globalization represents the hyperextension of an already established power and not really the flattening of the world.¹³ If there is to be unity, it will come at the cost of the powerful and influential becoming more powerful and influential, and the marginal more marginalized. Johnson realized this in 1982, writing that the greatest danger of internationalization is “to give way to an unwieldy and impossible centralized giant headquarters operation.”¹⁴

¹¹ Cunningham, *Watchword*, 506.

¹² Cunningham, *Watchword*, 530.

¹³ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 4, 6.

¹⁴ Johnson, *The International Experience*, 58.

AUTONOMOUS PLURALISM

Considering the pluralistic reality and attitude prevalent today, the establishment of an ecclesiastical-theological oligarchy will be met with angry resistance. This is to be expected from the representatives of the non-Western world, but even Westerners realize the inappropriateness of such a maneuver. Today, there is no scarcity of published literature evidencing paranoia of possible manifestations of imperialism and colonialism. Therefore, it is beyond doubt that the Scylla of centralized homogeneity will be intentionally avoided. The more pressing problem, however, is the Charybdis of autonomous pluralism. Holiness does not necessarily remove nationalism, paternalism, ethnocentrism, and parochialism, and their consequent effects on how we view church governance. Often times, our theological view of the church is eclipsed by political reflections, and the tendency for *everyone* is to side with the position which have significant beneficial ramifications in how we may dominate and how we may not be dominated. I wrote *everyone*, because the temptation to dominate is not only a Western problem. Much of the appeals towards autonomy from the rest of the world are actually political maneuvers that seek to be freed from control on the one hand and to replace existing authority with themselves on the other hand.

Power, Michael Foucault claims, “is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through net-like organization.”¹⁵ The prescription therefore is that every centrism and everything that bears traces of homogeneity in legal, civil, and even ecclesiastical institutions must be expelled. José Míguez Bonino describes this trend to autonomous pluralism as “partisanship,” or the “opting for one side, radical opposition to the existing system.”¹⁶ The promotion of the pluralist agenda, thus, includes a disturbing bashing of existing structures and leaders. In order to assert authority and dominance, rigorous fault-findings in existing leadership transpire, which ultimately aims to anathemize and supplant. The increased awareness and acknowledgment of the demographic shift of Christianity from North to South or West to East has also become the

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 98, 89.

¹⁶ Bonino, “Reflections on the Church’s Authoritative Teachings on Social Questions,” in *What Should Methodists Teach?* (ed. M. Douglas Meeks; Nashville: Kingswood, 1990), 67.

platform for the crusade to replace “the Old World Order.”¹⁷ Vinoth Ramachandra encapsulates: “If European powers justified their imperial conquests with claims of progress and enlightenment, Asian rulers translated those same Promethean claims into brutal nationalist projects.”¹⁸

Ironically, globalization, instead of producing a common sense of accountability, has ushered an era of competition for recognition and dominance. As Cavanaugh discerns, “the compression of space in the ‘global village’ has not only exacerbated but produced insecurity and conflict in the late twentieth century, since global mapping brings diverse localities into competition with one another.”¹⁹ Geographic and cultural shifts, along with the spirit of the age hijacked by nationalism and parochialism, resulted in a plethora of unprecedented new local forms and expressions competing for recognition. Sadly, therefore, this “theological ethnification”²⁰ is leading towards increasing isolationism. Parochialism remains challenged as “how to ensure that differences in strategies and tactics do not become the sources of permanent and bitter divisions,”²¹ for if this persists, globalism “produces fragmented subjects incapable of telling a genuinely catholic story.”²² We can become uncritically engrossed with our own particular socio-political and cultural setting and become “romantic folklorists,”²³ self-engrossed and alien to all.

EUCCHARISTIC ECCLESIOLOGY

Ecclesiastical and theological politics are not immune to violence. The global nature of Church of the Nazarene, on the one hand, can pave the way for the existing powers to dominate the landscape. On the other hand, however, in the name of disguised pluralism, it can produce an

¹⁷ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2002), 108.

¹⁸ Ramachandra, “Globalization, Nationalism, and Religious Resurgence,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (eds. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 215.

¹⁹ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 107-108.

²⁰ Vanhoozer, “‘One Rule to Rule Them All?’: Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology*, 104.

²¹ Walden Bello, *The Future in the Balance: Essays on Globalization and Resistance* (Quezon City, Philippines: U. of the Philippine Press, 2001), 229.

²² Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 98.

²³ Stackhouse, *Apologia*, 100.

overabundance of diverse competing zealots for recognition, power and authority. Both colonialism and parochialism must be avoided,²⁴ but it is the latter beast that needs more taming, for it is this force which is gaining worldwide momentum. Philip Jenkins's alarming prediction must serve as a warning: "The story of Christianity over the coming decades will be marked by new schisms that broadly follow the North-South division."²⁵ A future marked by schism is certainly not the ideal shape of our global church, but what is? What is the narrow way between the Scylla of centralized homogeneity and the Charybdis of autonomous pluralism that we must tread? What perception of the church can sustain the balance between unity and plurality, control and autonomy, uniformity and diversity? Unfortunately, these are political questions in the midst of our search for a doctrinal statement on the church. The problem, therefore, is that we want to address an issue of politics, but we also want a solution that is both biblical and theological. We do not want a response grounded solely in social sciences, for the logic of church government runs contradictory to many (if not all) secular agenda (e.g. servanthood *versus* boss). We are thus challenged to construct a unique theo-political ecclesiology. My proposal is that such an ecclesiology is Eucharistic.

The church, according to Brent Peterson, is the eschatological *polis*. Hence, "the communal gathering of the church is political worship," and "the Eucharist is the most political act of the church."²⁶ In the Eucharist, everyone is gathered by a mutual participation in Christ and with one another. This participation does not necessitate symmetry or uniformity. In fact, as Ellen K. Wondra highlights, following Levinas, all earthly relationships are asymmetrical.²⁷ We all come to the Table with our cultural baggage, economic status, denominational bias, and reservations. And yet, in the midst of all these, there is a realization that we are one, that even in the paradoxical mixture of my superiority and inferiority, I am no better or worse than the one

²⁴ Paul Hiebert, "Beyond Anticolonialism to Globalism," *Missiology* 9 (1991), 263-82; and *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 93-103. R. Larry Shelton argues that "a fresh exposition of a Wesleyan paradigm should be biblically-centered and not encumbered by either fundamentalist leavening or an indiscriminating canonization of pluralism," in "A Wesleyan/Holiness Agenda for the Twenty-first Century," *WTJ* 33 (Fall 1998), 67-100.

²⁵ Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2006), 190.

²⁶ Peterson, "Eucharist: Church's Political Response to Suffering," *WTJ* 43 (Spring 2008), 146, 148.

²⁷ Wondra, "Participating Persons: Reciprocity and Asymmetry," *AngThRev* 86 (2004), 57-73.

who sits beside me. The Eucharist transcends natural and social divisions (Gal 3:28). The members of the global village are not juxtaposed or compared with one another, but are simultaneously served and serving. In the words of Cavanaugh,

Juxtaposition situates diverse localities in competition with one another... In Eucharistic space, by contrast, we are not juxtaposed but identified. In the body of Christ, as Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26). This radical collapsing of spatial barriers accomplishes not competition, but says Paul, greater honour and care for the weakest member, who is identified with oneself.²⁸

In the Eucharistic fellowship, all divisions are transcended in Christ. Thus, it reminds us that catholicity does not rest upon human endeavors and even efforts to unite (or destroy) the Church. This is what John Zizioulas, following Nicholas Afanasiev, calls "Eucharistic ecclesiology."²⁹ Because there is no competition, the temptation of sectarianism is diminished. Distinctions are treated not as avenues of schism, but as reasons for *koinonia*. It is precisely because we are different that we have much reason to share. Alexander Schmemmann notes that *leitourgia*, in its original sense, refers to "an action by which a group of people become something corporately which they had not been as a collection of individuals."³⁰ In this sense, *ekklesia* and *leitourgia* are inseparable. The church, as the *coetus electorum*, is the gathering of people who are called out by God himself for the purpose of hearing and submitting to the gospel, sitting at the table with him, and being united with him in the Holy Spirit. They are people who are called out from (*ek + kaleo*) their previous diverse citizenship, belongingness and allegiance, into the one body of Christ. *Ekklesia* refers to the gathered assembly, but the actual gathering together is enacted in *leitourgia*. In coming together at the Lord's Table, the unity of the diverse crowd is both enacted and enforced. If unity is the primary politics of the *polis*, then the Eucharist serves both as reminder to the people of the sort of citizens we ought to be.

The Wesley brothers exuded a high regard for the Eucharist. John argued that "it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord's Supper as often as he can."³¹ The 1745 collection of

²⁸ Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination*, 120-121.

²⁹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 23-25.

³⁰ Schmemmann, *For the Life of the Word* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 25.

³¹ Wesley, *Works* 3: 428.

166 Eucharistic hymns they published also evidences the centrality of the Eucharist in their theology and ministry. It is no wonder, then, that writers like Eric S. Severson and William Crocket characterize the eighteenth-century revivals headed by the Wesleys as “deeply Eucharistic in nature.”³² In particular, two aspects of Wesley’s thoughts about the Eucharist is important in our current discussion. Firstly, Wesley inherited the *ethos* of the *Book of Common Prayer* of the necessity for self-introspection before Eucharistic participation.³³ In particular, Jesus’s emphasis on right relationships before *liturgy* is important: “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift (Matt 5:24, NIV). Our *Manual* spells this when it said that “only those who have faith in Christ and *love for the saints* should be called to participate therein.”³⁴ Second, Wesley taught that the Eucharist can be a converting sacrament.³⁵ If conversion is expanded to include the political-relational element of the Christian life – reconciliation – it means that the Eucharist is an act of unity that (1) *requires* reconciliation among communicants *before* its celebration and (2) *effects* reconciliation *during* its celebration. Bernd Wannenswetsch succinctly summarizes: “Worship is political when the ‘peace’ before communion is not merely practiced as a non-committal sign of general solidarity, but is also taken seriously as an act of reconciliation between people ‘who have something against each other’.”³⁶

Moreover, the Eucharist has catholicizing significance not only before and during its celebration. As Brent Peterson argues, the Eucharist births and empowers a political ethics that reaches out to others in incorporating embrace, precisely because those who participate in the *leitourgia* are people who understand and live out unity, co-suffering, and mutual service. As a

³² Severson, “Absence Transformed: The Eucharistic Site of Christian Theology,” *WTJ* 39 (Fall 2004), 197. William Crocket asserts: “It is not commonly known today either by Anglicans or by Methodists that the Wesleyan revival was as much a Eucharistic revival as an evangelical revival.” See *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1989), 199; quoted in Laurence Hull Stookey, *Eucharist: Christ’s Feast with the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

³³ James N. Fitzgerald, “What Table? What Guests? The Eucharist as Hospitality,” *WTJ* 42 (Spring 2007), 136-137.

³⁴ Church of the Nazarene *Manual*, 2009-2013, Article XIII: The Lord’s Supper, page 36.

³⁵ Wesley, *Works* 19: 158-159.

³⁶ Bernd Wannenswetsch, *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (trans. Margaret Kohl; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 76.

political act of the reconciled community, the Eucharist “yields practices of allegiance for how one is to act, first in communal worship and then in the overflow in the world.”³⁷ It points both to the reconciled life, the ecumenical endeavor, and the reconciling mission of the church.

Eucharistic identity brings forth Eucharistic ethics. If reconciliation, understanding, and being at peace with one another are part of our responsibilities as Christians, then Wesley is right to say that “as our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and the blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: *This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection.*”³⁸ The Eucharist is a powerful statement or rhetoric about unity that demands application. Hence, Christians should sense the moral indictment in participating in it without actually living it.

CONCLUSIONS

The Eucharist is an *anamnesis*, a thanksgiving celebration and remembrance of God’s work in Christ and our history. It is also “a preview of the final consummation of all things, a foretaste of the Heavenly Banquet to which we are invited.”³⁹ But in the present the Eucharist is “the transformative event in which eschatology, the new heaven, becomes realized in the midst of the worshipping people.”⁴⁰ The sad reality, however, is that in our living in the “already-not-yet,” the major contributing factor for the “not yet” seem to be the resistance from the human side against the “already” of fulfillment from God’s side.⁴¹ In our Nazarene “global communion,” there need not be competition for power and recognition, achieved through self-assertions, whether these are from the West or East, North or South. This essay responds to the oppressive homogenizing tendencies inherent in centralized government and the pluralistic agenda. As shown, even what masquerades as pluralism actually embodies the same repugnant hegemonic ideal it rejects, as

³⁷ Peterson, “Eucharist,” 149. See also John W. Wright, and J. Douglas Harrison, “The Ecclesial Practice of Reconciliation and the End of the Wesleyan,” *WTJ* 37 (Fall 2002), 194-214.

³⁸ Wesley, *Works* 3: 429 (italics mine).

³⁹ Rob L. Staples, *Outward Sign and Inward Grace: The Place of Sacraments in Wesleyan Spirituality* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1991), 243.

⁴⁰ Dean G. Blevins, “A Wesleyan View of the Liturgical Construction of the Self,” *WTJ* 38 (Fall 2003), 13-14.

⁴¹ Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church? Toward a Theology of the People of God* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 139.

long as it exudes a reactionary and partisan politics. In this sense, pluralism and centralization are twin ogres.

What is needed is a Eucharistic ecclesiology that celebrates, enacts, and births a reconciling ethos. The only sanctified competition could be in bringing each other up and considering others better than ourselves (Phil 2:3). As we celebrate the Eucharist in our local churches, we glory in the uniqueness of the local, but we also celebrate our catholic belongingness to the global church. As the writers of *Our Watchword and Song* argue, the Church of the Nazarene is – and must be – “*Eucharistic*, focused on the breaking of bread together and the drinking of the one cup of Christian memory and hope.”⁴² In the celebration of the Eucharist, we gather together to eat and share, not to bicker as to who is the greatest (which was what the disciples did in Luke 22:24-30). We gather not for competition or for furthering our own imperialistic agenda, but for present fellowship, in celebration of our common past and future. In the Gospel of John, the Lord’s Supper is immediately followed by foot-washing, teaching us that we are one in Christ and one in our service and accountability to one another (13:1-17). In the Gospel of Luke, it is in the breaking of bread that the *stranger* is invited to share (24:28-32). The Eucharist does not impose but invites. These are what it means to be a church around the Lord’s Table.

⁴² Cunningham, *Watchword*, 605.