



THE ROLE MISSION DOES (OR DOES NOT) PLAY IN FAITH AND ORDER'S *THE CHURCH*

O papel que a missão exerce (ou não) em Fé e Ordem de A igreja

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson¹

ABSTRACT

Mission is a popular byword in ecumenical circles today, but it remains oddly lacking in content. An examination of the recent paper “The Church” by the Faith and Order Commission reveals how despite lip service to the concept of mission, its ecclesiology is dominated by an institutionalized, inward-looking, clergy-focused approach, which simply reinforces all of the most intractable divisions between churches. Notable too is the absence of any discussion of sin or interpretation of church history. It is suggested that deeper engagement with missional practice and theology could break up the current deadlock in ecumenical ecclesiology.

Keywords: Ecumenism. Mission. Faith and Order Commission. Koinonia. Sin.

¹ Sarah Hinlicky Wilson (Dr.) is Assistant Research Professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France; a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and the editor of the theological quarterly journal *Lutheran Forum*. E-mail: sarah.hinlickywilson@strasbourginstitute.org. A previous version of this paper was presented at a colloquium at the Istituto di Studi Ecumenici San Bernardino in Venice, Italy.

RESUMO

Missão é um jargão popular nos círculos ecumênicos de hoje, mas ainda permanece estranhamente vazio em conteúdo. Um exame do recente artigo “A Igreja” da Comissão de Fé e Ordem revela o quanto, a despeito do uso do conceito de missão, sua eclesiologia é dominada por uma abordagem institucionalizada, introspectiva e focada no clero, o que simplesmente reforça todas as mais intratáveis divisões entre as igrejas. É também notável a ausência de qualquer discussão sobre pecado ou interpretação da história da igreja. Sugere-se que um compromisso mais profundo com a prática e a teologia missionárias possa romper o atual impasse na eclesiologia ecumênica.

Palavras-chave: Ecumenismo. Missão. Comissão de Fé e Ordem. Koinonia. Pecado.

The Faith and Order convergence document *The Church* reflects the tenor of the times by starting with mission. Everyone knows that mission is essential to the church and is even perhaps the very being of the church. The introduction asserts, “The Church is essentially missionary, and unity is essentially related to this mission”². Recalling the origins of the ecumenical movement in the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910, *The Church* initially strives to hold together these two partners—mission and unity—which have, for all practical purposes, long since been put asunder.

As such, Chapter I is entitled “God’s Mission and the Unity of the Church.” The goal of all of God’s acts is *koinonia*, communion between God and people. The church’s mission is to draw all people into that *koinonia*, following the footsteps of Jesus, whose earthly ministry was teaching, feeding, and healing. All the Gospels conclude with a missionary charge, and the Acts of the Apostles records the beginning of that mission in detail. The ones who are sent out, the church, are already living in a kind of *koinonia* marked by witness, worship, and discipleship (§I.A.2). But here we get the first hint of confusion. Witness is characterized by proclamation and invitation, but worship is equated with baptism, while discipleship is equated with proclamation, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. It seems as though the order of a typical church service – preaching and sacraments – has been overlaid on the concepts. The failure to mention repentance or the forgiveness of sin anywhere in this section is startling.

Section B of this chapter then takes up “The Mission of the Church

² World Council of Churches. **The Church:** Towards a Common Vision. Faith and Order Paper N° 214. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013, p. 2.

in History.” It tries in a short space to wrestle with some of the real problems that have arisen in recent missionary experience. Thus it is admitted that “[o]ne challenge for the Church has been how to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a way that awakens a response in the different contexts, languages and cultures of the people who hear that proclamation.” The apostles conducted their mission by “drawing upon and, when necessary, transforming, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the cultural heritage of their listeners and serving as a leaven to foster the well-being of the society in which they lived.” However, “[a]t times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations.” The document goes on to express joy that the gospel took root in many such places nevertheless, and at the benefits that accrued to the wider church as a result. “Such diversity within the unity of the one Christian community was understood by some early writers as an expression of the beauty which Scripture attributes to the bride of Christ (cf. Eph. 5:27 and Rev. 21:2)” (§I.B.6). The challenge of religious pluralism is then mentioned, as well as that of “emerging churches” that want to respond “to today’s needs and interests in ways which are faithful to what has been received from the beginning.” Even historic churches admit to the need for “re-evangelization” in the face of a “global secular culture” (§I.B.7).

The chapter ends with a section on “The Importance of Unity,” which refers briefly to the Jew-Gentile tensions in Acts 15 and Galatians 1–2, suggesting that the ecumenical movement is “reliving the experience” of the early church. What is not explicitly noted is either the ultimate refusal of the apostles to impose cultural change on the new converts, or the radical theological overhaul implied by Jew-Gentile unity in the early church³. We are left to wonder: Is the ecumenical movement a response to cultural clash? Or does it suggest a need for serious theological change by all parties? The latter seems to be favored in §I.C.9, which suggests that mutual recognition of the churches “may in some instances depend upon changes in doctrine, practice and ministry within any given community.” Which are to change is never said, and the issue of cultural change and colonization

³ For an illuminating discussion of this topic, see WALLS, Andrew F. Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church. In: **International Bulletin of Missionary Research**. New Haven, Connecticut, USA, v. 28, n. 1, 2004, p. 2-6.

is simply dropped from this point on. Mission ultimately seems to be a matter of internal housecleaning for the church and improvement of internal relations.

In Chapter II, “The Church of the Triune God,” difficulties that were signaled in the first chapter and that will continue to trouble the rest of the document surface once more. A concession is made already in the second sentence that “the New Testament provides no systematic ecclesiology” (§II.A.11). Unfortunately, this insight is almost immediately dropped. Rather, it is asserted that “[t]he same Holy Spirit who guided the earliest communities in producing the inspired biblical text continues, from generation to generation, to guide later followers of Jesus as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel.” Indeed, this is a statement that all Christians dearly wish to be true. But the evident refusal of various churches to recognize the truth of this assertion in the case of others and the very fact of division are simply ignored. The difficulty is signaled again by the recurring phrase “legitimate diversity.” This is “not accidental to the life of the Christian community but is rather an aspect of its catholicity” (II.A.12)—yet again, the whole ecumenical-ecclesiological problem is the very denial of the legitimacy of diversity as it is actually encountered. Nor again is the cultural or theological content of such diversity ever explained.

Resolution of the confusion is attempted with recourse to the favorite concepts of *koinonia* and mission once more. “The biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church.” Sharing and mutual participation are the key features of *koinonia*. But we begin to see the tension in this attempt at a definition of the church based on *koinonia*: “As a divinely established communion, the Church belongs to God and does not exist for itself. It is by its very nature missionary, called and sent to witness in its own life to that communion which God intends for all humanity and for all creation in the kingdom” (II.B.13). Which is it? Is the church sent out? Or does the church retract into “its own life,” hoping thereby to draw others in as well? Ideally, there would be no necessary contradiction between the outward-directed and the inward-directed life of the church. As the idea plays out in this document, however, the latter wins and the former vanishes.

It is no surprise, then, that the conversation moves so quickly to the ordained ministry—the most divisive subset of the most divisive doctrine. The usual reassurances are made that “the whole people of God” are prophets, priests, kings, ministers, servants, and so forth. But it is startling how quickly the

universal missionary ministry its identified with ordained clergy. Inserting a quote from a Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue, *The Church* asserts, "The mission which Jesus entrusted to the eleven in Matthew 28 entails 'a ministry of word, sacrament and oversight given by Christ to the Church to be carried out by some of its members for the good of all. This triple function of the ministry equips the Church for its mission in the world'" (§II.B.20). There is a passing mention again of cultural differences, which ought not be "allowed to develop into division" in contradiction of the church's catholicity, indicating again the discomfort that the whole document feels at cultural variety. Then the apostolicity of the church, which is grounded in the Father's sending of the Son and Spirit, is linked to "the apostles and prophets, empowered with the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to serve as its foundation and oversee its mission... Apostolic succession in ministry, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is intended to serve the apostolicity of the Church." Again, mission and ordained ministry are yoked as nearly logical equivalents. The missional problem is thus the existing churches' disagreement on how to order their ordained ministries. It has nothing to do with those yet to be reached by the gospel at all⁴!

The focus continues to be directed inward as the document further unfolds. Section C on "The Church as Sign and Servant of God's Design for the World" notes that God's mission is to draw all humanity into communion under the Lordship of Christ, and the church fulfills its own role in the divine mission through its members by "the witness of their lives and, when possible, through the open proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ" (II.C.25). Note that it will be the outsiders' observation of internal Christian life and culture that is the primary point of contact, with "open proclamation" remaining a merely contingent possibility. There is a moment of concern that this strategy is somewhat flawed, since "the Church enjoys a spiritual, transcendent quality which cannot be grasped simply by looking at its visible appearance." But this is thought chiefly to suggest a need for internal reform: "The organizational structures of the Christian community need to be seen and evaluated, for good or ill, in the light of God's gifts of salvation in Christ, celebrated in the liturgy." The implication remains, however, that the church is complete in itself and already possesses the

⁴ See the forthcoming book *Apostolicity: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective* by John G. Flett (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, USA), to which the present essay is greatly indebted.

necessary resources for clean-up or change. As this paragraph concludes, “The Church, embodying *in its own life* the mystery of salvation and the transfiguration of humanity, participates in the mission of Christ to reconcile all things to God and to one another through Christ” (II.C.26⁵).

Section D on “Communion in Unity and Diversity” assumes a problem; it is worth asking whether the problem really exists. §28 speaks warmly of “legitimate diversity” as a “gift from the Lord,” as in the variety of spiritual gifts or different cultural and historical images and languages that make the gospel relevant in different places. Christians are not to consider their own cultural forms as the only authentic ones (though, since no specific examples are given, it is very unclear what would and would not qualify as such). But §29 begins with the contrastive, “At the same time, unity must not be surrendered.” In what way should we expect it to be, after §28? An anxiety about difference is betrayed here, and the solution is a pastoral ministry. The “limits to legitimate diversity” (§30) are mentioned but not explained in any detail, and the concluding italics sections asks for better criteria for distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate diversity as well as “mutually recognized structures” for doing so. This is begging the whole question of ecumenism itself⁶.

It is no surprise by now that the final section of the chapter on the “Communion of Local Churches” gives a self-referential definition of church, devoid of any missionary activity at all, with a heavy emphasis on *episkopé* as the uniting structure between the local bodies. The intended contrast is with a hierarchical structure as alone defining the church, yet the result is nevertheless an inward- rather than outward-focused ecclesiology.

And, of course, that is where the document has been leading us the whole time. Chapter III briefly treats of faith; at somewhat greater length of the sacraments; but overwhelmingly of the ordained ministry, including the threefold ministry, the “gift of authority,” the ministry of oversight, the authority of the councils, and papal primacy. It is an inevitable if still depressing result. The internal structure of the church remains the center of focus as well as the source

⁵ Italics: Sarah H. Wilson.

⁶ For invaluable reflections on culture and Christianity through a missional lens, see again WALLS, Andrew F. *The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture*. In: Walls, Andrew F., **The Missionary Movement in Christian History**: Studies in the Transmission of Faith. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, p. 3-15.

of division.

Chapter IV, much shorter than the foregoing, chiefly gives advice on how to behave in evangelization—respectfully, attentive to ethical and social justice issues, responding to the needs of society, eschewing collusion with evil powers. The church's mission work is thus defined chiefly in activist terms. The world is to be improved, but ultimately the divine *koinonia* is already practiced internally through the church's liturgy and eucharist, "a dynamic paradigm for what such *koinonia* looks like in the present age. In the liturgy, the people of God experience communion with God and fellowship with Christians of all times and places. They gather with their presider, proclaim the Good News, confess their faith, pray, teach and learn, offer praise and thanksgiving, receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and are sent out in mission" (Conclusion, §67). Note how all the distinctive churchly activities are contingent on the first step of having a presider present; and how all of them are severed from being "sent out in mission." However much Christians may have learned to parrot the fact that the church is *essentially* missionary, in the actual formulation of this ecumenical ecclesiology the church is, in fact, anything but. Mission is a task separate from and subsequent to an already complete and intact church.

Having reviewed the logic of the document overall, I would now like to offer more specific critiques of *The Church* in three particular areas from a missional perspective. These deal far more with what is not said in the document than what actually is said, but the omissions are telling in their own right.

Sin. It is simply extraordinary that a document that has devoted so much space to mission, the practices of the church, and the divine will for *koinonia* has nevertheless managed to say almost nothing about sin or the forgiveness thereof. Sin is at most noted as an error in Christians' own actions. But we never hear that *Repent!* was the first word spoken by Jesus in his preaching or the conclusion to Peter's missionary sermon on Pentecost; we never hear that our sin and the need to be forgiven for it were the reason for Jesus' death and resurrection, nor that they are at the heart of the frequently invoked sacraments. In preferring the inspirational term *koinonia*, the document (and much ecumenical ecclesiology) has voided reconciliation between God and humans, as well as between divided churches, from almost all of its meaningful content. Indeed, one might well ask, if God's purpose is to draw all creation in, what's stopping Him? *Koinonia* can provide no useful answer to that question, because it has simply collapsed

the category of redemption into that of creation. Forgiveness of sin through the costly cross is much too problematic, and accordingly it is avoided throughout *The Church*. Activism takes the place of reconciliation. And since creation is now forced to bear the burden of redemption, it can no longer speak meaningfully to a genuine issue of the doctrine of creation, namely that of cultural variety and diversity and the place they play within the church. Cultural difference has become merely a problematic obstacle to *koinonia* and is always treated in guarded terms, fearing the resulting disunity. Meanwhile, the church is never once supposed to be guilty in any meaningful sense of colonization—it is implied only to happen on the fringes of the church’s life, as the mistaken attempts of imperialistic persons accidentally associated with Christianity. But with both redemption and creation emptied of meaning, all that is left is the church, which is more or less equivalent to the world in its population. The only difference is that the church is aware of its relationship to God, evidenced by its own internal worship practices and the structure of its ordained ministry. Knowingly to participate in the *koinonia* of God is to participate in the pre-existing practices of the church. By any other name, such an ecclesiology would be called colonization!

History. A voided doctrine of creation will have enormous difficulty in dealing with the question of history. In some ways, in fact, it could be argued that the meaning of history is itself *the* ecumenical question. Why did the Parousia not come immediately? Why did the church split (or why did the Spirit allow it to split, or even *cause* it to split) after the Council of Chalcedon, over the Filioque controversy, during the Reformation, through independent start-up churches? Are all the initial decisions of the church permanently valid, or are none of them? If some are and some aren’t, how do we know which? Are some periods of the church more defining than others? If the Spirit led in crucial directions in the life of the church early on, when did that process stop and why? Is it of lasting significance that the gospel arose on the soil of the Roman Empire (and so absorbed its structures) and in the worldview of Greek philosophy (and so absorbed its conceptual vocabulary)? Or was the Greco-Roman immersion only the first of many mission encounters that need to be repeated in kind, not in detail, for example in India amidst Hinduism or in Africa amidst assorted tribal beliefs? Do the first peoples to encounter the gospel in time become the necessary mediators of it, are they more “mature” in the faith, are their cultural adaptations mandatory for those who receive it later in time? And at the bedrock of all of

these questions: Was the church already “complete” in its first days? How we answer that question, and about which aspects, will have enormous implications for our understanding of both the nature of the church and the meaning of mission. Though *The Church* does not offer any explicit commentary on the subject – other than its simple assertions that the Spirit guides – its evident tendency is to favor an already-completed church that draws others into its existing practices, structures, and habits, rather than an outward-moving church that seeks its own completion through the ongoing movement of history and reception of the gospel by new peoples. Yet recall Mark 13:10, “And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.”

Structure. The structure of the church and the ordained ministry are, for all intents and purposes, functional equivalents in this document. Furthermore, there is a strong drive toward the “threefold” pattern of ministry: deacons, presbyters, and bishops. The apparent historicity of the pattern commends it strongly. But here as elsewhere in the document, what is *not* said is of equal importance. None of the other offices identified in the New Testament is given any serious consideration, such as apostles, evangelists, prophets, teachers, shepherds/pastors (Ephesians 4:11) or widows (I Timothy 5). Nor is the fact that the pattern itself is, once again, focused on the church’s internal life. The threefold office is a matter of church structure and authority, not of mission. The unstable office of the deacon in church history bears this out: the diaconate has either become a stage on the way to the priesthood, completely losing its outward service-orientation; or it has disappeared altogether; or it has been revived to bestow an office on pre-existing activism and social ministry⁷. At the same time, *The Church* is unable to account for the “offices” that spontaneously erupt when the church actually does find itself in missionary situations: among others, the ubiquitous “evangelists” and “Bible women,” frequently indigenous persons, who are vital in every successful mission effort⁸. The fact that no ritual or official status is normally required of

⁷ Note that the recent Anglican-Lutheran dialogue made a breakthrough by deliberately choosing to set aside the “diaconate” understood as a church office in favor of “*diakonia*” understood as the service of the church to the world. The suggestion was made by African members of both delegations, notably less entangled in historic disputes over valid church office. See “**To Love and Serve the Lord: *Diakonia* in the Life of the Church**”. The Jerusalem Report of the Anglican–Lutheran International Commission. (ALIC III), Geneva, Lutheran World Federation, 2012.

⁸ See TUCKER, Ruth A. The Role of Bible Women in World Evangelism. In: **Missiology**. Place, v. 13, n. 2, 1985, p. 133-146.

these people indicates the contemptuous attitude that “the Church” has generally held toward missionary endeavors. But even when the sending church’s own people have held such positions, it has struggled to know how to deal with them. Pastors and priests are traditionally tied to specific communities to oversee the activities of an already-existing church, so how to deal with a situation where, by definition, no community yet exists?⁹ The point for our purposes is that *The Church* hopes to resolve ecclesiological divergence by appeal to structures that are already established and gilded by historical precedent, even though these very structures are what insure ongoing division. Meanwhile, the structures and offices appropriate to mission are completely absent from the discussion, even though mission is claimed to be the fountainhead of the document’s argument, alongside unity.

At the end of the Introduction, several questions are asked, among them: “To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches? ... What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the ongoing work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?”¹⁰ It should be evident by now that the portrait of unity painted here is severely compromised by its lack of serious engagement with mission as a challenge to the inward focus of the definitions and descriptions of the church. Indeed, it is well worth asking if any such thing as a truly ecumenical model of the church even exists yet: all those on offer already are merely confessional models in ecumenical disguise. But this is to be expected, because they assume that the church is already complete in itself, possessing a valorized history that must be repeated. Recasting ecclesiology as something outward- and other-oriented, still developing and seeking in its fullness as the gospel moves out among the nations, would allow for an infusion of fresh thought into a domain notorious for its immovability.

“[A]greement on ecclesiology has long been identified as the

⁹ See the discussion in SCHULZ, Klaus Detlev *The Lutheran Debate over a Missionary Office*. In: **Lutheran Quarterly**. Princeton, v. 19, n. 3, 2005, p. 276–301, and Vincent J. Donovan’s reflections on ordained and missionary office from a Catholic perspective in his memoir: DONOVAN, Vincent J. **Christianity Rediscovered**. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003 [1978].

¹⁰ World Council of Churches. **The Church: Towards a Common Vision**. Faith and Order Paper N° 214. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013, p. 3.

most elemental theological objective in the quest for Christian unity”¹¹. But ecclesiology has also proven to be the most intractable problem: the point at which all convergence and consensus suddenly expire. It is necessary to ask whether the omission of mission from ecclesiology, which continues despite the elementary efforts at the beginning of *The Church*, is the disabling flaw that allows ecumenical efforts to fail again and again, as churches relapse into their inwardly defined self-expressions.

REFERENCES

- DONOVAN, Vincent J. **Christianity Rediscovered**. Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003 [1978].
- FLETT, John G. **Apostolicity**: The Ecumenical Question in World Christian Perspective. Illinois, USA: InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, [s.d.].
- SCHULZ, Klaus Detlev. The Lutheran Debate over a Missionary Office. In: **Lutheran Quarterly**. Princeton, v. 19, n. 3, 2005.
- THE JERUSALEM Report of the Anglican–Lutheran International Commission. (ALIC III)**To Love and Serve the Lord: *Diakonia*** in the Life of the Church. Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2012.
- TUCKER, Ruth A. The Role of Bible Women in World Evangelism. In: **Missiology**. Place, v. 13, n. 2, 1985.
- WALLS, Andrew F. Converts or Proselytes? The Crisis over Conversion in the Early Church. In: **International Bulletin of Missionary Research**. New Haven, Connecticut, USA, v. 28, n. 1, 2004.
- WALLS, Andrew F. The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture. In: Walls, Andrew F., **The Missionary Movement in Christian History**: Studies in the Transmission of Faith. Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996.
- World Council of Churches. **The Church**: Towards a Common Vision. Faith and Order Paper N° 214. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013.

¹¹ Op. cit., Preface, p.viii.

