

Ecclesiology 101

Ecclesiology begins with the fact that the Apostles' creed calls us to believe *in* the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Why are we to believe *in* the church? Why is the church an object of faith as are the Father, Son and Spirit?

The creed is telling us that the church is more than an empirical, historical reality. It asserts that the church is not simply a collection of human beings with their beliefs, practices and institutions but is something more.

New Testament Images of the Church

One way of grasping the church's additional dimension is to attend to the New Testament's images of the church. Each of them declares some aspect of the church's trans-human reality.

Take, for instance, the affirmation (found in Ephesians 5), that the church is the spouse of Christ. This is a picturesque way of stating that Christ and the church are one just as husband and wife become one flesh. This is surely, for Ephesians, more than a metaphor. The church, as a corporate entity, is truly united to Christ as in a marriage. The church is an object of faith because it shares in Christ's resurrection being and glory.

Or, think about the teaching that the church is Christ's body. This asserts the organic unity of Christ and the church even more strongly than does Ephesians' image of marriage. According to this image, Christ is a corporate person, whose head is in the heavens and whose body resides on earth. Uniting head and body is one Spirit, which emanates from the head and enlivens the rest of the body. The church, then, is an object of faith because it participates in the life and Spirit of the resurrected and exalted Jesus Christ.

Taking a different tack, the Pauline tradition saw the church as the Holy Spirit's temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21-22). The church is, as it were a building. But not just any building, for the Holy Spirit dwells in the church as its home. As a result, the church is holy. Although this image does not, like the previous images, declare the church's unity with Christ, it does powerfully place the church in the category of holy things, things that are sacred because of their intimate relation to God. The church is accordingly an object of faith because it shares in God's holiness.

These images and others in the New Testament point us to the church's existence in and unity with God. It is true that, in one sense, the church is a human (and all-too-human) reality. The church's history provides us with plenty of opportunity for disappointment and skepticism. As Augustine noted, the church is like the field in the parable of the wheat and tares, for in the church we find saints and sinners and saints whose conduct often borders on the sinful. The creed, however, without denying any aspect of the church's empirical failings, calls us to remember that the church is something to believe in. Not because of the human beings in the church, but because of the church's status as Christ spouse and body, its status as the Spirit's temple, and its calling to realize that status in its historical existence.

The Classic Features of the Church

So what is the church in which we are to believe? The creed describes the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

The church is apostolic because it is a building whose foundation is the prophets and the apostles (Ephesians 2:20). The church is that people who, among other things, remain faithful to the apostle's teaching (Acts 2:42). This is the origin of the idea of orthodoxy. To be orthodox is to accept and affirm the apostolic tradition. Heretics, by definition, are those who refuse to do so. Over time, the church found it necessary to state the apostolic tradition with creeds and to identify its classic form in the canon of scriptures. To believe in the apostolic church, then, is to identify with the church that stands in historical and doctrinal continuity with the apostles. Of course, in these days of denominational proliferation, it can be difficult to offer precise formulations of Christian doctrine that will find universal agreement; each branch of the Christian tradition has distinctive ways of understanding the church's doctrinal heritage. Nonetheless, we can be encouraged by John Wesley's conviction that, differences of understanding aside, there is a stable core of essential doctrines that all authentic branches of the Christian tradition affirm.

The church is holy because it is the elect people of God. In the old covenant, Israel was chosen from all the people of the world to be God's special possession. This act of choosing, or election, was in fact a consecrating event. Israel was thereby separated from the nations and devoted to God. This act of election and consecration thus constituted Israel as the holy people. What is true of Israel in the old covenant is true of the church in the new. The church is a chosen nation, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation (1 Peter 2: 9; see Exodus 19:6). As noted above, the church's holiness is not a function of the piety and holiness of its human members. It instead results from the fact that the church is the object of God's election. God has chosen the church and thus separated it from the world and brought it into a special relation to God. This act of election creates the church as a holy people. There is, accordingly, an important sense in which holiness has a corporate sense. Christian disciples are holy first of all because they are members of Christ's church and thus share in its corporate holiness.

The church's unity and catholicity belong together. Christian writers in the early centuries described the church as one and catholic in contrast to the schismatic and heretical groups. The latter were portrayed as small, divisive and regional; the church was depicted as large, united and geographically universal. To confess belief in one catholic church is thus to hold that Christ has one body and one spouse. It is to confess as well that spiritual truth is found in the consensus of the church and not in the opinions of schismatics and heretics. This affirmation of the creed is probably the most problematic for us, because unity and catholicity seem contradicted by the empirical reality of the many denominations that make up the church today. The lack of real unity seems apparent and no denomination seems more catholic than any other. So, what are we saying when we affirm the creed? We are saying two things: First, just as with the church's holiness, the unity and catholicity of the church is a matter of faith, not sight. As the body and spouse of Christ, the church possesses a transcendent unity alongside its empirical disunity. Second, we are saying that unity and catholicity is a reality which we are called to realize in the church's historical, empirical existence. The church's task is to translate its transcendent unity and catholicity into a visible unity and catholicity. To this end, churches should nurture cooperative endeavors and ecumenical events that promote mutual understanding and love.

Although the first generation of Protestants had no problem with affirming the church's unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity, they did take issue with the medieval understanding of the church's visible character. According to this understanding (which prevailed in the Roman Catholic tradition until the second Vatican council [1962-1965]), the church is first and foremost a visible and hierarchical institution. Resting on a tradition reaching back to Ignatius of Antioch, the Catholic tradition defined the church largely in terms of its bishops: the church is the bishops and the faithful who are in communion with the bishops.

In response, Protestant theologians proposed a two-fold understanding of the church. On one hand, they thought of the church as the body of the elect—those who had been predestined for salvation. Since only God knows who is elect, the true church is invisible to us. In any given congregation, some members will belong to the true church and some likely will not. On the other hand, Protestants thought of the church in terms of individual congregations. A church in this sense was a congregation in which God's word was preached with purity, the sacraments were properly administered, and authentic worship was offered.

At the same time, Anabaptist groups were attacking the idea of the national church. According to this idea, baptism makes one a member not only of the church but also the nation. Additionally, the nation supports the church (for example, by proscribing heresy) and the church supports national policies. Protestants, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, affirmed the idea of the national church. Lutherans avidly embraced this model; Reformed churches were more interested in keeping church and state distinct. Anabaptists, however, rejected the idea of the national church without qualification. For them, the nation and its state were under the control of Satan; accordingly, there could be no positive relationship between church and nation. Anabaptist churches were therefore "gathered" congregations. Membership in their churches was strictly voluntary and not automatic through membership in the nation.

Post-Reformation Developments

In certain respects, the Reformation was more about the doctrine of the church than it was about anything else. However, this does not mean that Protestants emerged from the Reformation with all ecclesiological problems solved.

By the late 1600s there were movements within the Protestant world expressing dissatisfaction with the life of the church. These movements are collectively referred to as Pietism. The point of dissatisfaction was that, while the Reformation had brought about a needed reform of doctrine, it had failed truly to renew the church. In the Pietists' view, the vast majority of Protestants took as little interest in real Christianity as did Roman Catholics. They complained that the typical church member had only an occasional and formal relationship with the church, a relationship consisting primarily in celebrating rites of passage (birth, marriage, death) in the church. Otherwise, to be a Christian meant little else than to believe approved doctrines.

The Pietists believed that, in order to restore authentic Christianity, changes in church life were required. They had various prescriptions, but one of the most important was the formation of small groups (called *collegia pietatis*) within congregations. These groups met for purposes of Bible study and edification and were specifically intended for laypeople. Under Pietistic influence, small groups began to appear in England under the name Religious Societies. Like the *collegia pietatis*, the Societies

were voluntary associations. However, some of the Societies existed for purposes other than Bible study and edification; some engaged in charitable and missionary work. Nonetheless, many Societies reflected the ideal of the *collegia pietatis* as congregationally based small groups for lay people. As is well known, John Wesley's mother, Susanna, organized such a small group in her husband's parish during one of his absences. Similarly, the Holy Club at Oxford, of which John and Charles Wesley were members, resembled a *collegia pietatis* in many respects.

Once the evangelical revival was underway, John Wesley adapted the Pietists' *collegia* to Methodism in the creation of the classes and bands. Like the *collegia*, these meetings were voluntary and intended for laypeople. However, they were not primarily for Bible study; they were instead focused on mutual support in living the Methodist life.

Within 150 years after the beginning of the Reformation, then, there was a perceived need to supplement congregational worship with small groups created for varying purposes. In each case, the intention was to revitalize the church and to create informal structures that would nourish the practice of authentic Christianity.

Authority

The church's apostolic character raises the issue of authority. If the church is to be orthodox—in agreement with the apostles' teaching—then there must be doctrinal standards and members of the church charged with the responsibility of overseeing its faithfulness to the apostolic tradition. That is why Ephesians declares that the church is built on the foundation of the prophets and apostles. In some churches the function of overseeing doctrinal integrity is assigned to bishops; in others, it falls to assemblies and conferences. However it is done, it is essential that churches have effective ways of guarding the apostolic tradition. Of course, while performing this function it is vital as well that churches state their doctrines in a spirit of ecumenical agreement and cooperation.

The church's authority, however, goes far beyond maintaining doctrinal integrity. Matthew's gospel portrays Jesus as delivering to the church the keys of the kingdom, with the power of binding and loosing (Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. See also John 20:23). This power has been variously interpreted in Christian history, but it seems to imply that the church is an agent in salvation. The church, in other words, is not simply the assembly of those who are saved; it is also a community that is instrumental in salvation. In the Roman Catholic tradition the power of the keys has been interpreted in terms of the church's authority in the practice of penance (today called the sacrament of reconciliation). Perhaps, however, we should think more broadly and think of the power of the keys as a way of affirming that the church is the custodian of God's grace—that God customarily offers grace to people in and through the church.

This explains why the early church rather quickly decided to ordain some of its members to have special authority in the offering of baptism and the lord's supper. The church, in other words, felt that baptisms and celebrations of communion could not be led by just any member. On the contrary, the church decided it important to have members in charge who knew the apostolic tradition and whose faithfulness to that tradition was assured. Otherwise, the church could well be infiltrated by heretics and unsound doctrines and practices. Although the church acknowledged that those not ordained could perform baptisms in emergencies, the church's rule was that, in the ordinary course of things, events of the greatest significance such as baptism and communion must

be conducted under the supervision of members specially ordained to maintain continuity with the apostles' teaching and practices.

To speak about authority, then, is to speak of ordination. Although, in an important sense, every Christian disciple performs acts of ministry, the church does not expect every member to be schooled in apostolic teaching and practices and to be able to distinguish authentic teaching and practices from inauthentic. For this purpose the church must have specially trained and qualified members who are consecrated to perform the church's most vital functions.

Sacraments

One of the church's most important functions is the offering of sacraments. As a religion, Christianity is notable for its use of sacraments. Every religion has ceremonies; however, a sacrament is more than a ceremony. A sacrament is a means of grace, an avenue by which God's grace is customarily given to us.

Augustine provided one of the classic definitions of a sacrament: a visible sign of an invisible spiritual reality, grace. Several points are notable. First, sacraments involve something material, whether the water of baptism or the bread and cup of communion. Without this material element, there is no sacrament. Second, the material element of the sacrament is a sign—it points to the work of God within the soul. Although God can work in the soul without a sacrament, sacraments are the normal sign of God's grace.

Martin Luther offered a complementary view, according to which sacraments and the sermon are two forms of the church's proclamation of the gospel. The sacraments, in other words, enact the proclamation of God's word in act, just as preaching is a proclamation of the word in verbal form. This is why Protestants have typically considered a congregation to be authentically Christian if it preaches the word of God and it properly administers the sacraments.

Why are sacraments necessary? It is because human beings are bodily creatures and not pure spirits. We relate to the world around us through the body and its senses; we think and feel in concrete, bodily images. God's grace is accordingly accommodated to our bodily nature. When God approaches us, God does so by means of physical realities. The incarnate Son of God is the principal illustration of this—God comes to us as a fellow human being. The sacraments are an extension of this principle of the incarnation; here God once again comes to us in something physical. We can extend the incarnational principle by noting that many other things, such as the Bible and preaching, have a sacramental character, for in them something physical becomes a means by which God comes to us. That is why the Roman Catholic tradition has developed the idea of "sacramentals," physical realities that, although not sacraments in the narrow sense of the word, nonetheless have a sacramental character and function.

What, then, are sacraments in the narrow sense of the word? Here we find disagreement among various Christian communities. The Orthodox churches have never settled on a specific number of sacraments. The Roman Catholic church affirms seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, communion, reconciliation, ordination, marriage, anointing of the sick); in response, Protestants limit the number to two (baptism and communion). For Protestants, there are two criteria: 1) there must be a material element (water, bread) and 2) the sacrament must have been instituted by Jesus.

So, although many Protestants practice confirmation, ordination and other rites that Catholics regard as sacraments, Protestants do not think of them as sacraments.

The Communion of Saints

The Apostles' Creed also enjoins belief in "the communion of saints." At one level, this is a simple affirmation that all Christians exist in a state of fellowship with each other by virtue of their status as members of Christ's body. However, this affirmation exists in a stronger form in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, which extend this communion to Christians who have passed from this life to the next. In these traditions, there is a lively and important interaction between the portion of the church that is still earthly (sometimes called the "church militant") and the portion of the church that is heavenly (sometimes called the "church triumphant"). In particular, these traditions believe that those in heaven have a keen interest in and concern for the church on earth. As a result, the heavenly church is portrayed as actively praying for the earthly church. The communion of saints, in other words, does not (for Catholics and Orthodox) end at death. Deceased Christians still participate in this communion and by their prayers contribute to the church on earth.

The Church in Contemporary Theology

The doctrine of the church has, in the last 30 or so years, attained new prominence as a subject of theological interest. As a result, the church has come to be understood in ways that respond to the challenges of today's theological situation.

For instance, the Roman Catholic church has (since the second Vatican council) formally portrayed the church as the people of God. It thereby overturned the previous emphasis on the church as a hierarchical institution and instead defined the church in terms of the whole people of God, both clergy and laity. By this shift in teaching the Catholic church aimed at enlarging the role of lay people in the church and recognizing the ministry that lay people perform in the world.

Similarly, some Catholic theologians have used the term *communio* to describe the church. The idea here is that the church is best understood as a fellowship that is, in a special sense, created in the celebration of the Eucharist (communion). The church, in other words, becomes a true communion in and through the act of communion.

The post-Christian situation of the church in America has prompted writers such as Stanley Hauerwas to portray the church as a community of resident aliens (drawing on the image found in 1 Peter 2:11) and as an alternative *polis*. The thrust of Hauerwas' ecclesiology is that, if we are to restore authentic Christianity, the church must follow the Anabaptist model and sever all ties with the nation and surrounding society. The church must become a distinct community with an ethos and practices radically different from the rest of human society.

Renewed emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity has also nourished ecclesiology. Writers such as Jürgen Moltmann have argued that the church should, as a community, reflect the character of the Trinity, the divine community. In the Trinity there is no hierarchy. There is unity, but it is a unity that allows for difference without subordination. The church, it is argued, should strive for this sort

of unity and should be a community of equals who, like the Trinitarian persons, dwell in and through each other.

Finally and in keeping with the results of trinitarian theology, some have emphasized the church's character as mission. By this they mean, not that the church has a mission, but that the church participates in God's mission—the Father's sending (*missio*) the Son and Spirit into the world for redemption. As the body of Christ and temple of the Spirit, the church is a part of this sending; in the power of the Spirit it is, so to speak, the visible presence of Christ in the world and thus continues the mission of Christ.

Conclusion

Ecclesiology is, in today's theological situation, one of the most vital of theological doctrines. It plays an enormous role in Christian ethics and constitutes one of the most important points of contact between church and world. Unfortunately, most Wesleyan churches have an underdeveloped ecclesiology, in spite of the rich heritage of Christian thought and John Wesley's own contributions. Like many Protestants, many Wesleyans conduct their lives as Christians as though the church hardly mattered. It is, accordingly, highly desirable that the Wesleyan churches devote themselves to learning why the Apostles' creed tells us to believe *in* the church.