



The Dimensions of the Church

Acts 2.42-47

- How is the early church described in this passage? What kind of structure and form did it have?
- Beyond the basic structure of the church, describe what other things were happening in this passage?
- What do we learn from this passage about the church?

To respond to the needs of a changing world, the church remains what it has been called to be in Scripture while at the same time adapting to the context in which it is ministering. Avery Dulles in his book *Models of the Church* suggests that whatever dimension or model that a church takes in any age or context, several things need to be affirmed:¹

- ❑ The church is **one, holy, catholic, and apostolic** (The Apostles' Creed)
- ❑ The church is the mystery of **God's plan of salvation** as it comes to concrete realization in the person of Christ Jesus.

¹ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (New York: Image Books, 2002), p. 8-25

- ❑ The church is the mystery of Christ as realized in **the community of those who believe** in him are assembled in his name.
- ❑ Through the church, **Christ is carrying out his plan of redemption** in the world.
- ❑ Although every church has certain rudimentary elements, **every church will look different** and emphasize different aspects; the church is organic.
- ❑ The church should **heal and unify** rather than divide and destroy.

Five Dimensions of the Church²

◇ **Church as Institution**

- Tangible, outward structure and organization of the church
- Composed of those who outwardly profess faith
- Based on the deposit of the Apostles
 - *Teaching*
 - *Sacraments*
 - *Power of the keys / discipline*
- Authority and governing mechanism
- *Bonds*: doctrine, sacraments, submission to pastors
- *Beneficiaries*: members whom the church nurtures
- *Goal*: to bring non-believers into the church

◇ **Church as Body of Christ**

- Emphasis on communion with Christ and with each other.
- "Inner core" kingdom community centered on Christ that is distinguished from a sociological community; the people of God are the temple of God in union with Christ.
- Deep community life together; mutual interdependent relationships that characterize the communion of saints.
- The church is not just a vehicle to God, but is a picture of the attainment of union with Christ and with each other.
- *Bonds*: interior work of the Holy Spirit in the midst of the church
- *Beneficiaries*: members.
- *Goal*: to bring people into a deeper, authentic relationship with Christ because of contact with others.

² Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (New York: Image Books, 2002).

◇ Church as Sacrament

- The church is a sacrament and sign of the ultimately consummated kingdom of God.
- The church makes real for us the grace of Christ through the means of grace that it dispenses (Word and Sacrament).
- Through worship, liturgy, sacraments, art, and music, God becomes present to the body of Christ.
- The Church is a "sacrament" and source of living hope to those seeking and outside the church.
- Grace and power are given to the church; an excessively spiritual and individualistic view of the life of grace, leads to merely secular and sociological understanding of the Church as institution.³
- *Bonds*: the Holy Spirit working in believing Christians.
- *Beneficiaries*: those who are able to articulate and live their faith because of being part of the Church.
- *Goal*: to purify and intensify believers' response to God.

◇ Church as Herald

- The Church's witness to the focal point of history and redemption in Christ
- The proclamation always points to Christ first and foremost, and not the church⁴.
- The Church proclaims the kingdom of God.
- Evangelism and dynamic preaching are the means of heralding Christ through which people are called to accept or reject the gospel.
- *Bonds*: those who respond to the gospel.
- *Beneficiaries*: those who hear the word and put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior.
- *Goal*: proclaim the message in order to create a community of life and love (Matthew 28.18-20).

◇ Church as Servant

- As Christ came to serve, so the Church serves the world: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others."⁵
- The Church speaks into issues of justice, mercy, and power in the name of Christ and acts in compassion to help people.
- The Church is not a "humanitarian social agency or a group of like-minded individuals sharing a common perspective and moving here and there, wherever the action is."⁶ Instead The Church has a mandate to serve because it is the

³ H. de Lubac, *Catholicism* (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1950), p. 29.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), pp. 298-300.

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp.203-204.

⁶ R.P. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 98-99.

- universal bearer of salvation and the message and body of Christ. It always serves in the name of Christ.
- *Bonds*: mutual bonds of Christian brotherhood who join in Christian service toward the world.
- *Beneficiaries*: those in the world who hear a word of comfort, compassion, and encouragement in the name of Christ.
- *Goal*: serve the world, speak into evil, and help all men in the name of Christ.

Reflection:

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