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MODELS OF THE CHURCH IN CHURCH HISTORY

Maen Pongudom

What is the ultimate purpose of the existence of the church in the world? What is the reason for the church's existence in a particular time and a particular community? Answers are varied, but they could be summarized as follows: The ultimate purpose of the existence of the church in the world is to carry its God-given mission, to live Christ's life, and to die Christ's death. St. Paul's analogy of the church as the body of Christ is still meaningful as long as it is not merely the body but the whole life and mission of Christ. Through the church the redemption of God must be felt by all human beings as well as by the whole of creation. In this sense the church does not exist for its own sake, even for those in the church.

Since Jesus Christ incarnated himself in a particular time and a particular community, the church likewise located itself in particular times and particular communities, as a continuation of Christ's incarnation. Times are made different by human issues and communities are made different by cultures and historical events. The church must incarnate itself in "different" forms to live and die a Christ-like redemptive death. Incarnation is the opposite of foreignness. The church is not to be foreign to its community and its historical context.

Ecclesiology becomes a serious issue in Asia today because the ecclesiastical heritages passed on to Asian Christians by the missionaries and older generations of Asian Christians hinder rather than support the church's mission. Within the inherited ecclesiastical structure and theology, the church is not enabled to incarnate itself and walk to Golgotha. It is important and necessary to reconsider present ecclesiology and search for a dynamic living one. While searching, some significant church models in history may render valuable assistance.

1. The Church as the Community of Loving Care for the Unfortunate

It is true that during its first three hundred years the church suffered persecutions beyond description and was neither wealthy nor powerful. Yet the most striking image of the church in its own community was that it loved and cared for the unfortunate both in and outside the church; that was beyond its neighbors' expectation. The church was but the "organization of alms" which was so impressive to the Emperor Julian that he imitated Christians by establishing "numerous hostels in each city so that strangers may enjoy our benevolence, not only our own people but also others who may need money" (R.M. Grant, p. 144). The Christian community may have inherited the tradition of alms-giving from the Jews. Moreover, the united charitable performance during the Palestinian famine in the middle of the first century was impressive. In the late first century and early second century, alms-giving was regarded as equal to repentance from sin and "better" than fasting and prayer (Grant, p. 128). In the church the rich and the poor lived together interdependently as one body. The rich supplied the poor with material needs and the poor prayed for the rich. In the Shepherd of Hermas, we read: "when the rich man rests upon the poor and gives him what he needs, he believes that what he does for the poor man can find a reward with God, for the poor is rich in intercession and confession, and his intercession has great power with God" (Grant, p. 130). In the second and third centuries Christian charity was rather highly organized and the president or bishop of the church played the role of protector or guardian of all the unfortunate. In short, one could say that the early church was the church for the unfortunate.

From the structural institutional point of view, the early church was "the house-church" (Foster, p. 20). The house-church pattern allowed more freedom for the church to fulfill its mission in a particular given situation. It can move easily in accordance with the circumstances. More importantly, the house-church implies the truth that "the church is the place for life". It implies further that religion is for the whole life of human beings as necessary as a house, as simple as a house, and as intimate a place for human relationships as a house.

The house-church faded away quickly during and after the Constantinian period. The church having gained favour from the govern-

ment, gradually became institutionalized. To be Christian was not always "to be ready for Christ at any cost" as before, but rather "to be privileged in the church and government". The church became a powerful institution and rigidity prevailed. To be in the church one had to conform to the institutionalized church. This fact is seen in the process of the development of doctrine. At the same time, the church continued to exercise loving care for the unfortunate. This may be clearly seen in the monastic life of the church, as evidenced by Basil the Great and his works in the fourth century. During the so-called Dark Ages of European history, the church became in fact the refuge of the people (Foster pp. 151-2).

2. The Church as Institution

The early church became institutionalized not only because of its natural expansion, which required a certain degree of administration, but more importantly because of its gaining recognition from the state and the consequent position of power. The president or bishop was not merely a chairperson of the meeting but rather a center of ecclesiastical authority. Cyprian in the third century, for instance, boldly stated that the church is based on the unity of its bishops, saying, "Whence ye ought to know that the bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop; if anyone be not with the bishop, that he is not in the church" (Walker, p. 67).

Ecclesiastical authority was exercised in early stages at the local level and was gradually expanded to include the region. This was seen in the claim of the primacy of Rome (Walker, p. 82 or pp. 60-62). The institutional authority of the church was at first exercised in connection with the problem of the reinstatement of lapsed members and then more strongly in the time of doctrinal formation. This fact may be found in the early ecumenical councils. However, the focus of interest was still strongly within the area of ecclesiology rather than hierarchical. That is to say, the church was more concerned with theological stability than with the security of the church's leaders.

Dulles has pointed this out interestingly: "... Catholic theology in the Patristic period and in the Middle Ages, down through the great scholastic doctors of the thirteenth century, was relatively free from institutionalism. The strongly institutionalist development occurred in the late Middle Ages and the Counter Reformation, when theologians and canonists, responding to attacks on the papacy and

hierarchy, accented precisely those features that the adversaries were denying" (p. 33).

The church was conceived as the perfect society which was distinct from all human societies and stood far above them. Doctrinal, sacramental, and governmental structures were believed to be founded on divine revelation; or more precisely on the Lord Jesus himself who gave form and existence to the church. It was very difficult for any faithful Christian to take a different position to or to challenge the structure.

The reformation in the sixteenth century and later may be understood as an attempt to free the church from institutionalism and hierarchical structure. However, the church which emerged from the Reformation, alongside of the Catholic Church, was still an institutionalized church in many ways. This church was still hierarchically minded in structuring the church's administration and mission.

The institutional model of the church regards the higher clergy as the source of all power and initiative. The administrative pattern is pyramidal: all power is conceived as flowing from the top while at the base the lay members play a passive role. The church as the institutional model tends to emphasize law and penalties. It follows the pattern of jurisdiction in the secular state. Not only ruling power but teaching and sacraments are also centralized. Within the institutional model it seems that no one dares to say anything against the church.

The church as institution model tends to exist for its own members. It acts as a school to instruct its own pupils for eternal life: as an inn where they are nourished and taken care of; as a hospital where they receive healing. The church can be compared with a good loving mother who loves and cares for her own infants. All must be in the church if salvation is desired.

The institutional model tends to be a triumphalistic church. It is "crusade minded" rather than "crucified minded" (Koyama, pp. 209-224). It leaves no room for the idea of the "people of God as little flock following the humble shepherd Lord Jesus of Nazareth".

3. The Church as Incarnating and Suffering Community

The founder of the church is the incarnated and suffering Lord Jesus. Jesus of Nazareth, son of a humble carpenter, who took

human form and lived with the outcasts and died a cruel death on the cross in the midst of human beings whom he was to redeem. The early Christian community realized this truth and made a great attempt to live accordingly. The early Christians were accused of awakening the women, children and slaves to a new consciousness of their condition. This fact implies that the early Christians showed concern for people of low social status. They suffered with the people. But on the other hand, they were accused also of being separated from the whole community. This points up the fact that the early church did not regard itself as a part of the whole community but rather as a distinct community. From the political, social, and religious point of view the early church was rather aloof from society. But in the philosophical area several church leaders made serious attempts to see Greek philosophical teachings as a bridge between the Hellenistic world and the Hebraic world. The philosophic theologians, for instance, Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, attempted to plant the Hebraic Gospel seeds in the Hellenistic philosophical soil. Accordingly, one can say the church did incarnate itself into the world of ideas. The early church in the hands of the "converted philosophers" conceived and proclaimed truths that the invisible Greek philosophical Logos had now become visible in the man called Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The church did not minimize the significance of local heritages where the Gospel was brought in, but rather enlivened them. In this sense, the church was enabled to see God's involvement in all human cultures and histories. In the process of the so-called Hellenization of Christianity, we can see the incarnating reality. The theological formation of the first five centuries was in fact an incarnating process of the Gospel to the mind of the Graeco-Romans.

On the other side, the church is a suffering servant. The Lord Jesus incarnated himself in human history not by being the master of those in that history, but rather the servant or even more precisely the suffering servant. He came not to be served but to serve until his death on the cross. The incarnated church, therefore, is none other than a servant or suffering servant in society.

The story of persecution tells us that the church of the first five hundred years was a persecuted church or the suffering servant. The story of monasticism is not merely the story of aloofness of the church from a society but rather the story of the servant church. The monks were called to live and work together not for themselves but

for others. Basil the Great is an explicit example of "monks united for service . . ." "Still more important," writes John Foster, "Basil linked the monk's life with service of the needy. Basil tells us that after he became bishop of Caesarea he provided a series of great buildings just outside the city for the work done by monks. There was a guest house for travellers, a hospital with doctors, nurses, and attendants a poor house where men could learn a trade, and even a home for lepers. There were so many of these buildings that people called them 'the New City' " (Foster pp. 51-52).

However, the problem arose when the church became wealthy and the people around were getting poorer, particularly during the Middle Ages. John Wyclif attacked the church because of its exceeding wealth and irresponsibility of utilizing it. The church was not the serving church but rather the exploiting church. The church was no longer the voice of the poor but rather the collaborator with the powerful noble rich. The church was no longer standing side by side with the poor beggar Lazarus, but rather sitting at the table with the rich, clad in purple. The church became a tax collector and its members the tax payers. The forgiveness of sins was something to be sold and bought.

At the same time, in the midst of these problems the church by no means completely lost its uniqueness that is her servanthood. Martin Luther attempted to regain it in his phrase "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all and subject to every one . . . He is a servant because bound by love to bring his life into conformity to the will of God and to be helpful to his neighbour" (Walker, p. 309). The church is, therefore, a servant to its surrounding neighbors because it is bound by divine love. Some church theologians were always seriously concerned and insisted that the church must be the servant church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote: "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The Church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving" (Dulles, p. 88).

Harvey Cox in his *The Secular City* wrote, "The Church's task in the secular city is to be *diakonos* of the city, the servant who bends

himself to struggle for its wholeness and health" (Cox, p. 134). J.A.T. Robinson pointed out further that the church should not build (or maintain what has been built) its own institutional structures but rather incarnate itself into the structures of the world to do service. "The house of God," he writes, "is not the Church but the world. The Church is the servant and the first characteristic of a servant is that he lives in someone else's house, not his own" (Robinson, p. 92). The Church lives in the world and serves the world at any cost.

4. The Church as the Sacramental and Eschatological Community

The grace of God has drawn men and women together and they have formed the church. The grace of God binds them into one body regardless of their sinfulness because God's grace is more powerful than man's sinfulness. The grace of God is a mystical, invisible power which may be seen by the visible sign of the sacraments. As the Council of Trent states it: the sacrament is the visible form of invisible grace (Dulles, p. 161). The Roman Catholic theologian points out further that Christ is the sacrament because he is the grace of God toward mankind; consequently, the church as the continuing agent of Christ is the sacrament of Christ. The church is the visible form of God's grace through which its members receive undeserving grace. The church carries out this function through various forms of sacraments, especially Baptism and Holy Communion.

Through Baptism one is sanctified from sin, dies with Christ and rises to new life with Christ, and is made one with Christ. Throughout his or her Christian life, the mystical eternal-life food is necessary. He or she is supposed to be nourished through Holy Communion or Eucharist. These two sacraments are not to be celebrated by any one person for oneself. They must be celebrated by the church. No other institution can do it except the church. The church appears as the fellowship of those forgiven sinners.

Along with the reality of the sacramental church is the reality of the church as the eschatological community. The understanding of the church held by the early Christians is that the church is the bride of Christ. The church is the inbreaking Kingdom of God in the world moving towards its fulfilment. The status of the church on earth is not permanent. What is experienced by the church now is a foretaste of the true Kingdom of God. The feast at which the Lord Jesus fed thousands of people and the last supper exclusively attended by the

disciples are in fact the foretaste of the life of the church at the end. There is a continuity between the present church and the future church. Therefore, the content of the eschatology of the church is not purely future but rather present-future: the future that has been realized or inaugurated with the incarnation of Jesus Christ. C.H. Dodd calls it "realized eschatology" and J.A.T. Robinson, "inaugurated eschatology" (Dulles, pp. 102-103). The church here on earth is seen as a pilgrim church.

The sacramental church model may give valuable comfort to those with broken spirits and assurance to those who need spiritual refuge. The church becomes a powerful healing center. Yet it seems that the church is for those in the church only because sacraments are to be administered by ordained persons and participants are those who are willing to be or are already in the church. It is like the institutional church that is beneficial to its members only. On the other side, the eschatological church, even though we treat the reality of the Kingdom of God or the perfect church as a "here and now—and—not yet" paradoxical reality, we tend to lean heavily on the future. It turns out that way because the life of the present church is far from its ultimate perfection and the future is a long way off. "The Church", writes Dulles, "is a kind of cable car or sacred chariot that takes men to their destination, lifting them over the abyss. If they stay aboard and avoid serious misconduct unbecoming a passenger, they may be confident of reaching their destination" (Dulles, p. 103).

5. The Church as Prophetic and Liberating People Movement

The theme of prophetic and liberating church has become more and more common among churches in the so-called Third World (third is not in the sense of an inferiority or superiority complex, but rather one of the three). In fact, if we read the life of the church from a historical aspect, the prophetic and liberating characteristics of the church are not new but rather as old as the beginning of the existence of the church. If we stick to the idea that the church is the people movement of God, we can trace the prophetic and liberating characteristics of God's people movement back to the story of Moses. Moses acted as the prophet and liberator of his own people from the Egyptian oppression. His people, likewise under the leadership of Joshua, acted as the prophetic and liberating people movement for the oppressed people of Canaan. They in some ways "prophesied"

against the existing socio-political and economic structures and liberated the people from them. After the Israelites had settled down and become more established and oppression became a reality in Israel, God's people movement led by the prophets still performed the task of prophecy and liberation. Nathan was not afraid of the politically powerful King David. Micah and Amos bravely challenged the economically powerful rich.

Look at the Christian movement or "New Israel" as Justin Martyr called it. No doubt that Jesus of Nazareth as the leader of the Christian movement was a prophet and liberator or even a revolutionary in the eyes of the Jewish authorities. In fact, many common people in the past and many others at present see him similarly but with different motives. The former regard him as the destructive enemy of the present establishment while the latter regard him as the sacrificial creative prophet and liberator or revolutionary against the present corrupt establishment. The church of Jesus Christ as people movement in early days in many ways threatened the stability of the socio-political and economic structures in that time. So much so, that the political philosopher Celsus attacked the Christians severely in his writings. The church could not ignore this and replied in "Contra Celsum".

The church challenged the various religious and philosophical cults of their time and liberated women, children and slaves from social inferiority to equality or "brotherhood". During the period of the feudalistic wars in Europe, the church was able to exercise a certain amount of control by issuing the "Truce of God" (Walker, p. 199).

In the church itself, there have always been some kind of reforming or revolutionary movements. For instance, during the Middle Ages there was the Cluniac movement that played the prophetic role in the church. It attempted to save the church from corruption and at the same time enable the church to liberate itself from state control. When the church needed a reforming operation, there were movements led by John Wyclif of England, John Huss in Bohemia, and Martin Luther in Germany. In the age of the industrial revolution, during which the Church of England seemed to be blind to the needs of the workers, there was a movement led by John Wesley. When Christianity first came to Asia, it played a prophetic and liberating role to a certain degree in the life of the community, where

it was to preach the Gospel. But when it became an established institution with the imported structures and ecclesiology in the societies of rapid change and development with technological aids, the church seems to be unequipped for the role of prophet and liberator. Technological achievement are so great and powerful to the life of mankind that the church seems to have a very light impact on it. It is time for the church to reassure itself that by nature the church has prophetic and liberating elements. The church exists to be the prophet and liberator of God; the voice of the oppressed and exploited. The church is the people movement of God, not a static established institution.

These five models of the church found in church history have their own strengths and weaknesses. None of them is self-sufficient as a model for any church. However, if we believe that the church exists in particular historical situations and particular communities and that the church must do Christ's mission fruitfully in its own time, then a degree of emphasis among the five models is necessary. For instance, in the Asian context, the following models may be more needed and attractive than the others: The church as the community of loving care for the unfortunate; the church as incarnating and suffering community, and the church as prophetic and liberating people movement.

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PARTICIPANTS

Ms Annathaci Abayasekera
 Methodist Manse
 88/2 Dunbar Road, Hatton
 SRI LANKA

Mr. Jeffrey Abayasekera
 Methodist Manse
 88/2 Dunbar Road, Hatton
 SRI LANKA

Dr. Kate C. Botengan
 Trinity College of Quezon City
 Cathedral Heights
 E. Rodriguez Sr. Blvd
 Quezon City
 PHILIPPINES

Rev. Dr. David Gill
 Uniting Church in Australia
 123 Clarence Street
 Sydney, NSW 2000
 AUSTRALIA

Rev. Dr. Phyllis Guthardt
 Knox Church
 28 Bealey Ave., Christchurch
 NEW ZEALAND
 (Submitted paper but could not attend)

Canon Hone Kaa
 Anglican Maori Mission
 10 Burleigh Street
 Auckland 3
 NEW ZEALAND

Prof Kim Byong-suh
 Ewha Women's University
 Shinchon, Suhdaemoon-ku
 Seoul
 KOREA

Ms Kwok Pui Lan
 The Theology Division
 Chung Chi College
 The Chinese University of Hong Kong
 Shatin, N.T.
 HONG KONG

Dr. T.V. Philip
 40 Brooklyn Tce
 Kilburn,
 South Australia 5084
 AUSTRALIA
 (Submitted paper but did not attend)

Dr. Maen Pongudom
 Theological Faculty, Payap College
 P.O. Box 161, Chiang Mai
 THAILAND

Bishop Victor Premasagar
 Bishop's House, Cathedral Compound
 Medak 502 110
 A.P., INDIA

Rev. Dr. Nicholaas Radjawane
 Sekolah Tinggi Theologia GPM
 Jalan Pancasila, Ambon
 INDONESIA

Prof Sohn Seung-hee
 Ewha Women's University
 Shinchon, Suhdaemoon-ku, Seoul
 KOREA

Dr. Fridolin Ukur
 Sekolah Tinggi Theologia
 Jalan Proklamasi 27, Jakarta
 INDONESIA

Bishop Lakshman Wickremesinghe
 Bishop's House
 Kurunagala
 SRI LANKA

Dr. Henry Wilson
 Director, BTE
 112/2 Nandidurg Extension
 Bangalore 560 046
 INDIA

Rev Katsuichi Yamazato
 1693-2 Itoman
 Itoman-shi, Okinawa
 JAPAN