

THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

FAITH AND ORDER COMMISSION, NCCCUA

2007

PREAMBLE

“... the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” (Matthew 9:6)

“Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.” (Matthew 10:1)

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

With joy the churches confess that Jesus Christ is the head of every rule and power and authority (Colossians 2:10). With a deep sense of responsibility, the Church receives the authority Christ has given it to preach the good news of salvation, to offer healing in his name, and to teach the world the way of God’s reign. With the humility of a people called to serve even as Christ came to serve, the Church exercises the authority of Christ until his return in glory.

Upon request from churches and other sending bodies, the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. offers this document to the churches, in hope that it may assist them in more clearly manifesting the visible unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ, in receiving Christ’s authority as a gift, and in fulfilling their calling to preach, teach, and heal in his name, for the sake of the world.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ is “to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and common life in Christ, and to advance toward that unity that the world may believe.”¹ To advance toward the goal of visible unity the Faith and Order Commission addresses the theological issues which continue to divide the body of Christ. Sometimes those church-dividing theological issues have a long and complex history. Issues such as the meaning of baptism and eucharist, the nature of justification, the nature of the Church,² and authority in the Church have divided the churches for centuries and have thus been the subject of many ecumenical discussions and documents.

¹ The mission statement of the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; Faith and Order Commission Handbook (<http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/FaithandOrderHandbook.pdf>), p. 6.

² Following recent ecumenical usage, this document uses “Church” (with an upper case “C”) to refer to the universal church, and “church” or “churches” to refer to particular churches, including particular national churches.

2. In recent times a number of issues have arisen which threaten the visible unity of the Church in the United States. Some of these are political and social issues, such as the practice of abortion, gay and lesbian unions (or marriage), the just distribution of wealth, and the war in Iraq. Others are internal issues within the churches, such as the historical-critical interpretation of Scripture and the ordination of non-celibate gay and lesbian Christians. Because a plurality of competing voices claim to speak authoritatively on these and other issues, individuals are left with a puzzling dilemma: who should be believed and why?

3. This concern is particularly pressing for the Christian churches, which have presumed to speak with an authoritative voice on issues of both personal morality and public policy. How can the churches teach and bear witness to the gospel authoritatively in a society in which authority itself is suspect and the churches are divided? The Faith and Order Commission offers this paper, on which many churches have collaborated, with the hope of expressing what the churches can say in common on the authority of the Church in the world.

4. As an abstract theological issue, the authority of the Church in the world may not seem all that critical to the faithfulness, or even unity, of the churches today. But when it comes to our common evangelistic task and our participation in God's mission in the world, then we have to see this as a critical matter. What is at stake is more than just the churches' several commentaries on moral issues. At stake is the ability of the Church itself to proclaim, in word and deed, the good news of Jesus Christ in the midst of a fractured society. Many of the churches are only beginning to struggle with the question of what it means to proclaim the gospel in a society that openly contests the legitimacy of the authority of any voice that claims to speak for Christ. Whereas it was once the concern of foreign missionaries to deal with questions of how to speak the voice of Christ in cultures often inimical to the gospel, now North American society seems like a foreign culture, even (and perhaps especially) to the so-called "mainline churches" which were once culturally established. The authority of the Church in the world thus becomes a disturbingly important question. It forces all our communions to see ourselves in new ways and, by the grace of God, just might provoke us to seek the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:21).

5. The Church in the United States finds its authority marginalized, both in law and in fact, for a number of reasons.

(a) Although in law there has existed a longstanding tradition of separation of church and state, the mainline churches have for most of United States history enjoyed a position of being in fact culturally established. That situation seems to be at an end. Where once many people could remain nominally Christian through the influence of cultural tradition (such as the celebration of Christmas) and civil policy (such as prayer in public schools in some parts of the country), those days are mostly gone. Most contemporary observers would now say that the cultural disestablishment is complete.³ Of course, some Christian communions in the United States were never part of the cultural establishment. For Mennonites, African-American churches, Orthodox, and even for Roman Catholics for much

³ It is perhaps important to say that while some Christians find this change disappointing, others rejoice in it and see it as an opportunity to claim an authentic Christian voice in our society.

of United States history, that “is not their story.”⁴ Still, to the extent that the “mainline” denominations set the tone for the churches’ relationship to society, the cultural establishment was real, and it significantly shaped the experience of all Christian communions. The cultural establishment of Christianity has not been replaced by another form of religious establishment. Rather the religious landscape of the United States has become one of religious pluralism, in which many different religious groups compete for people’s allegiance.⁵

(b) The central Christian narrative of creation, fall and redemption is increasingly under challenge from two disparate and contradictory sources. First, from a materialist philosophy, based on a naturalistic interpretation of science and evolution, which makes nature the ultimate reality and eliminates God. As Carl Sagan declared, in the introduction to his popular television series, *Cosmos*, “The cosmos is all that was, is, or ever will be.”⁶ Second, by the growth of post-modern philosophies which deny authority to any single overarching narrative, and often interpret the Christian narrative as oppressive and exclusionary.

(c) The disunity among the various churches has seriously eroded the authority of all the churches, both collectively and individually. How can the world be anything but confused when some churches ordain women to sacramental ministry, and others do not, or when some maintain a commitment to non-violence, while others teach that at times Christians may, or must, support the government’s call to arms? It is difficult for the Church to credibly proclaim the gospel on pressing social issues when the churches speak with many and often conflicting voices.

(d) The Church has sometimes misused its authority in the world. The history of anti-Judaism, crusades, witch trials, anti-Semitism, complicity in environmental destruction, and sexual abuse by clergy cast a long shadow over the Church. What do those failures of faithfulness, corporate and individual, mean for the way we think about the authority of the Church in the world?

6. The Church of Jesus Christ remains God’s “salt and light” in the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Although it is subject to the same finitude and sin as the rest of humanity, God works in and through the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. Throughout history the Church has positively contributed to the world spiritually, morally, and in other ways. In spite of its limitations, the Church exists as the body of Christ in the world (Ephesians 4:1-16) and promotes the kingdom of God in its present and eternal relevance. Christians rejoice in God’s creation and promotion of the Church. In this document we look forward to exploring the many ways the Church may continue to exercise authority in the world in ways that reflect God’s holiness, justice, and salvation.

⁴ There was also variation of experience by region; Lutherans, for example, have been “culturally established” in the Upper Midwest, but far from it in the South.

⁵ See “American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insight to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US. Select Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey, September, 2006” accessed May 22, 2007 at <http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/33304.pdf>.

⁶ For a response to the challenge of naturalism, see John Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); also Terence Nichols, *The Sacred Cosmos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003).

II. AUTHORITY IN CHRISTIAN TEACHING

7. “Authority” has many possible meanings; there are eleven listed in the latest edition of *The Oxford English Dictionary*.⁷ Often it is defined in terms of legality or power. But the authority of the Church in the world does not come from legal sanctions or coercive power, as is the case with state authority; it comes from the churches’ ability to legitimately or rightfully influence opinion and actions. This notion of authority is close to the original meaning of the word, which was “the ability to elicit voluntary agreement or assent.”⁸ It also is close to the etymological root of the English word “authority” and the Latin “*auctoritas*.” Both stem from “author” (Latin: “*auctor*”) and point to the idea of authority as the source of knowledge or truth.⁹ This is the authority of an expert, one who is acknowledged as possessing knowledge and wisdom, such as a guide, a scientist, or an experienced leader. This same resonance is found in the Greek “*exousia*” (authority), which literally means “out of, or from, [the] being.” Authority in this sense differs from political or legal power: one may have political or military power, but not the authority of genuine wisdom. It also differs from the ability to sell or merely persuade, for authority, in the sense of expertise, implies more than sales skills; it implies real competence and knowledge. It is therefore an intrinsic, not extrinsic, quality. “Authority” in this sense may carry overtones of power, but power in the older sense of the word “virtue” means power adequate to the production of a given effect, as “*virtue* went out of” Jesus.¹⁰

8. In this sense of authority, any authority the Church claims to possess derives ultimately from God and is manifested through Jesus the Christ (“All authority [*exousia*] in heaven and on earth has been given to me” [Matthew 28:18]). The Church, we might say, witnesses to the authority of God and Jesus in the world. Of course, the Church has also been vested with legal authority or legal power at various times and places in its history. This has happened principally through its association with the state. But such authority is extrinsic and may or may not be present in some situations (the Church may have no political or legal authority and may even be persecuted). Whether or not such authority is present, the Church’s intrinsic authority derives from and witnesses to the authority of the triune God. For concrete examples of this, we need to see how the authority of God is manifested in the Scriptures.

Authority in the Old Testament

9. There is no single word or definition for “authority” in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures). Various terms exist (including *memshalah*, *mimshal*, and *moshel*, all based on the verb *mashal*, meaning “to rule” or “to have dominion”), and these are translated according to context as “authority,” “dominion,” or “rule” in modern English versions of the Bible. The Hebrew Scriptures portray God as the source of all authority. This authority is manifested in a number of ways. First, God has the authority of the Creator. In Genesis 1-2 God creates the world and humanity. God is therefore the author of life, and has authority over life and death (Genesis 9:1-7).

⁷ *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 20 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 1:798.

⁸ Leonard Kreiger, “Authority,” *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. Philip Wiener, 5 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973-74), 1:141.

⁹ Cf. the statement of St. Augustine: “And, surely, the highest authority is that of truth itself, when it is clearly known.” *On True Religion*, 24.45; cited in Joseph Lienhard, *The Bible, The Church, and Authority* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 75.

¹⁰ The usage is in the fourteenth century Wycliffe translation of the New Testament at Luke 8:46.

Thus when God answers Job from the whirlwind, God's authority is established by referring to the works of creation: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" (Job 38:4). God's authority is also manifest in holiness: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 19:2). This is the source of God's moral authority. Finally, God's authority is manifested as liberator of the Israelites during the Exodus and of those who put their trust in God. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures testify to God's saving power. This aspect of God's authority does entail power, for God could not save without the power to do so. God is more powerful than other gods, spirits, or earthly forces: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea" (Exodus 15:21). But God's power is employed for deliverance and freedom, not for oppression. The ultimate manifestation of God's power will be in the eschatological dominion of the Messiah: "His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed" (Daniel 7:14).

10. In the last analysis, however, God's authority is rooted in God's transcendence. God is not just more powerful than humans as, for example, Zeus was thought to be. God is absolute reality or absolute being, and utterly transcends humanity, whose reality is contingent, temporal, and evanescent: "Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8; cf. Psalm 90). This is an authority that is difficult to express in language, and so the Bible uses metaphors: God is rock, God is warrior, God is Father, God is Mother, God is everlasting. Before God, humans are perishable and insignificant. As Abraham says in addressing God, "I who am but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). God's very presence commands overwhelming awe, reverence, and worship, and it manifests what Rudolph Otto called the "Holy" and Mircea Eliade called the "sacred."¹¹ God's authority is therefore self-validating. In any personal encounter with God, such as Moses' encounter at the burning bush, God's authority is absolute even when questioned. Indeed, one cannot look on the face of God and live (Exodus 33:20). So God manifests what might be called an authority of being, of transcendence, or of divine presence.

11. God's authority is manifested through the calling of the people of Israel, prophets, kings, priests and judges, women and men. It is also expressed in covenants and in miracles (e.g., the crossing of the Red Sea). Prophets speak God's word of moral authority and the authority of judgment (e.g., Nathan's rebuke of David in 2 Samuel 12:1-25, Isaiah, Amos, *et al.*). Anointed kings rule in God's name (Psalm 2:7), though not without the ratification of the people (1 Samuel 11:15; 2 Samuel 2:4, 5:3; 1 Kings 12). Good kings rule as God would rule and bring the blessings of political order and justice. The priests' main function was to offer sacrifice for the sins of the people. According to Walther Eichrodt, the priest was "the indispensable mediator of access to the divine realm."¹² Thus priests mediated God's forgiveness of sins and God's presence. To do this, they had to be consecrated and holy, i.e., without uncleanness. Finally, God's will was mediated through covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. The purpose of the covenant is salvation: it calls the people back to a right relationship with God, without whom they will perish. Here we can see God's authority as the authority of truth and life: God reestablishes the people in the way of truth, so that they might have life.

¹¹ Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1923; reprinted, 1958); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 9-18.

¹² Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961-67), 1:403.

12. Finally, God worked great miracles in Israel, usually through the intercession of prophets, but it is clear that the ultimate agent was God. This manifested God's sovereignty and authority over nature. On rare occasions God's authority of divine presence was communicated directly, typically to prophets, such as Hagar (Genesis 16:7), Moses (Exodus 3:1-14), and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8).

Authority in the New Testament

13. In the New Testament, the authority of God is uniquely present in Jesus: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). The authority of Jesus in turn is manifested through the Holy Spirit and thence through his disciples, who are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). Jesus, therefore, is the mediator of the New Covenant (Hebrews 9:15) and, for Christians, the sole mediator of God's authority. As a model for the authority of the Church in the world, then, we must look at the authority that Jesus exercised in the world.

14. Jesus himself submits wholly to the authority of the Father. Though he says "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30), he also says "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). He prays to the Father (Mark 1:35; Matthew 6:9, the Lord's Prayer), and sees his own authority as coming from the Father. He surrenders utterly to the will of the Father in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39). Jesus also resists temptations to misuse his authority. Satan offers him kingly power over the world, if he will worship Satan (Matthew 4:9). He refuses to use his authority to "prove" to himself that he is indeed God's Son (Matthew 4:5-6). He refuses to resort to his authority to mitigate his own sufferings (Matthew 4:2; 26:53).

15. Jesus expresses his divinely given authority in many ways: in his teaching, preaching, prophecy, healings, miracles, and exorcisms; in the forgiveness of sins, holiness of life, love and service, the power and shame of the cross, instituting the sacraments, and, finally, in eschatological judgment (Matthew 25:31-46).

Authority in the Early Church

16. Jesus' disciples are called to do what Jesus himself did. In Matthew 10, he sends out the twelve with these instructions: "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matthew 10:7-8). The disciples have no authority of their own apart from that of Jesus; they exercise authority in Jesus' name and are witnesses to his saving words and deeds. The risen Jesus himself says: "...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Peter's speeches to the crowds in Acts 2 and 3 are acts of witnessing to the life, teachings, deeds, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Insofar as they are witnesses, the disciples are also ambassadors of Christ, as stated by Paul: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20).

17. It follows from this that to be effective witnesses, the disciples are called to be Christ-like themselves: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5). Christian disciples are to be living icons of Christ himself, so that in them the world perceives the love and authority of Christ. The authority of the Church does not depend entirely on the holiness of its ministers—to claim otherwise would be Donatism.¹³ There is an authority to the word and

¹³ The Donatists were a schismatic group from the fourth into the eighth centuries who insisted that the church of the saints must remain holy, and that therefore sacraments conferred by unworthy or sinful bishops and priests were invalid.

sacraments that goes beyond the authority of the ministers, who are, in Paul's words, "earthen vessels" (2 Corinthians 4:7). Nonetheless, to the extent that Christian disciples are living icons of Christ, they will reflect his authority, and to the extent that they fail to resemble Christ, they will obscure Christ's authority. This is true both for individual disciples and for the Church itself. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" wrote Tertullian.¹⁴ The charity and holiness of life shown by early Christians was a principal source of the authority of the early church in its world. The authority of the Church is exercised properly in the communion (*koinonia*) that exists between the disciples and the triune God and with one another through the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). Breaking of either form of communion obscures the authority of Christ, as transmitted in the Church.

18. The authority of the Church in the world is not simply the authority of its leaders; it is the authority of the whole community of disciples who have the responsibility of considering and confirming the teachings and actions of church leaders (cf. Acts 15:25; 17:11). In the early church, the election of bishops was confirmed by the people.¹⁵ In this respect, then, the authority of the Church in the world transcends the authority of leaders within the Church.

Areas of Agreement and Disagreement

19. Agreement

- (a) The churches agree that ultimate authority comes from God, through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. "The root of all true authority is thus the activity of the triune God, who authors life in its fullness."¹⁶ Aspects of Jesus' authority, and the manifestation of that authority in and to the world, are emphasized in differing degrees by various churches and denominations.
- (b) Similarly, the churches agree that the authority of the Christian churches is derived from and ought to express the authority of Christ.¹⁷ Furthermore, "this authority is an authority governed by love."¹⁸ Christians are called into a community of disciples united by faith, hope, and love, and this love is a gift of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 13).
- (c) "Authority cannot be exercised without regard for community." At the same time, authority cannot be reduced to the common opinion of the community.¹⁹ Thus there is a dimension of collegiality and conciliarity in the exercise of authority in the Christian church. "Those who exercise *episkopé* in the Body of Christ must not be separated from the 'symphony' of the whole people of God in which they have their part to play."²⁰

¹⁴ Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 50.13.

¹⁵ Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition* 2.1-3.

¹⁶ *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III, An Agreed Statement by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission*, ARCIC (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1999), §7.

¹⁷ See the section on Ministry I & II in *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Ministry, §16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Commentary on Ministry, §16.

²⁰ *The Gift of Authority*, §30.

- (d) Authority is integral to the mission of the Church in the world. “The authority which Jesus bestowed on his disciples was, above all, the authority for mission, to preach and to heal.... Thus, the exercise of ministerial authority within the Church...has a radically missionary dimension.”²¹
- (e) Some agreement has been reached on the relation of Scripture and Tradition and, consequently, the authority thus conferred on the church. This is best expressed in the statement of the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, held at Montreal, in 1963: “Thus, we can say that we exist as Christians by the Tradition of the Gospel ... testified in Scripture, transmitted in and by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Tradition in this sense is actualized in the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments and worship, in Christian teaching and theology, and in the mission and witness to Christ by the lives of the members of the Church.”²²
- (f) Christians look forward in hope to eschatological vindication of the authority of Christ in the world (Matthew 25:31-46).

20. Disagreement

- (a) There is considerable disagreement about the nature of authority, especially as exercised by human beings. Authority is multifaceted: it may be personal and charismatic, corporate and institutional, legal or extra-legal, supported by the power to enforce obedience, or not so supported. This alone contributes to widespread disagreement and confusion as to the definition, nature, and limits of authority.
- (b) There is substantial disagreement about the interpretation of Scripture, such as the role of what is commonly called the “historical-critical method” of scriptural interpretation.
- (c) There is disagreement about the role of tradition in the church, a point acknowledged in the Montreal Statement.²³ How do we discern what is authentic Tradition, expressing the mind of Christ, and what are merely human traditions?
- (d) Similarly, there is disagreement about the constitution and role of the teaching office in the church, and about who carries out that office.
- (e) There is disagreement on how much weight the authority of the Church has in relation to reason, experience, philosophical understandings, and scientific knowledge.
- (f) There is also a great deal of dispute about how authority ought to be expressed in the Church or churches. This will be considered under the section “Exercising the Authority of the Church in the World.”

²¹ *Ibid.*, §32.

²² *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: Montreal 1963*, ed. P.C. Rodger & Lukas Vischer, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (New York, Association Press, 1964), §45.

²³ *Ibid.*, §§38-76.

III. THE CHURCH IN AUTHORITY

21. Events like Vatican II, the ecumenical movement, and the rising significance of free church ecclesiologies evident in the southward shift of global Christianity have altered how the churches tend now to view the authority of the Church in the world. Also connected to such a change has been fruitful reflection on the nature and mission of the Church in a variety of contexts. It is important when describing the authority of the Church in the world that some notion of the nature of the Church be included.

Biblical Foundations

22. The Church's authority is rooted in the fact that it is the Church of God. The term *ekklēsia* in the New Testament refers to the gathering together of the assembly of Christians by God. The fact that the Church is the *ekklēsia* ("assembly") of God (e.g., Acts 20:28; cf. Psalm 74:2) distinguishes this assembly from secular forms of *ekklēsia*.²⁴ The Church recognizes its connection with the people of God in the Old Testament, since there is one olive tree created by God to be God's people (Romans 11:17-24). From the Christian perspective, Jesus Christ fulfills the promises of God (Luke 1:72) and institutes a new covenant (Luke 22:20), so that the Church finds its own election "in him" (Ephesians 1:4). Thus, the Church is also the *ekklēsia* of the Lord, for Christ is its foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11). The Church abides in Christ (John 4:4) and gathers in his name (Matthew 18:20).

23. The Church is also the new creation of the Holy Spirit who was breathed upon the disciples by Christ after his resurrection (John 20:22; 1 Corinthians 15:45) and poured out upon the post-Easter assembly in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost after the ascension (Acts 2). The Church is therefore the community of disciples that is united by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12). It is by the Spirit that the Church confesses Jesus as Lord to the glory of the Father and is graced to build itself up in love through multiple gifts as the body of Christ on earth (Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12). The Church is also empowered by the Spirit to proclaim the gospel and to bear witness to Christ in the world (Acts 1:8). The Church depends on the intercessory ministry of Christ for its grace (Hebrews 4:14-16), interceding also by the Spirit for a suffering world (Romans 8:26). The Church as a pilgrim people lives "between the times" from the first fruits of the Spirit while awaiting in hope the fulfillment of the reign of God (Ephesians 1:13-14).

24. Both baptism and the eucharist characterized the Church of the New Testament as participant in the death and resurrection of Christ and as the reconciled/reconciling community in which "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all... are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). The Church as the community of disciples thus lives from the *koinonia* of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, devoting itself "to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2:42). Paul placed great value on the foundational witnesses, having seen the risen Christ and having been entrusted with the tradition of the gospel to hand down to others (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). This tradition itself bore witness to the redemptive power of God to redeem and liberate humanity by the reign of God experienced through Jesus as God's anointed Messiah (Matthew 12:28). The Church finds its nature in the New Testament as the body of Christ's disciples, seeking to fulfill the will

²⁴Karl L. Schmidt, "ekklēsia," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1964-76), 3:505.

of the Father by the power of the Spirit so as to embody and to further the redemption, reconciliation, and justice of the reign of God in the world.

25. The Church includes many members with various roles. Paul speaks of the members as “saints” and also speaks of the many gifts of the Spirit given to various members (1 Corinthians 12:4-11). Scripture also refers to bishops, elders, deacons, deaconesses and other leaders in the church. There are different views of how these groups are constituted, how they minister, and how they understand the authority of the Church in the world. But all laity and clergy are members of the Church and all must be included in how the Church is understood and how it bears witness to the reign of God.

The Marks of the Church

26. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed affirmed the Church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These marks gain their substance and direction in the fact that the Church is the Church of God, elect of the Father, redeemed by the Son, and sanctified/gifted/empowered by the Spirit (1 Peter 1:2). The oneness of the Church is thus “of the Spirit” in the “one Lord” and the “one God and Father of all” (Ephesians 4:3-6). This unity of diversely-gifted members is also spoken of as given by “the same Spirit,” “the same Lord,” and “the same God who activates all of them” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). Jesus prayed that the company of disciples who would follow him be one, stating, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). This unity is thus based in the *koinonia* of God and is active, vibrant, and visible or able to serve the Church’s witness to the gospel. It is also a goal worthy of intentional prayer and action.

27. The holiness of the Church is rooted in Christ who set himself apart to fulfill the will of the Father in order that his followers be sanctified in God’s Word and truth (John 17:17-19). As such, the Church is to be in the world but not of it, because it remains faithful to the Word of life as it witnesses of this to others (John 17:14-16). Members of the Church are baptized into Christ’s death so that they may rise to newness of life in the power of his resurrection (Romans 6:4; Phil. 3:10). The Church is also “sanctified by his Spirit” (1 Peter 1:2) to follow Christ in the world and to obey his commandments, the chief of which is love. The Church is thus able to bear fruit that glorifies the Father (John 15:1-17). Holiness is love that does not compromise with evil and injustice but seeks in all things to rejoice in truth and in the hope for the fulfillment of God’s will on earth (1 Corinthians 13:6-7).

The Holiness of the Church and Its Members

Differences exist among theological traditions and churches concerning the meaning of “holiness,” whether it is applied to the Church itself or to its members. All would agree that the Church is holy, since it was founded by Christ, has apostolic origins, and is guided by the Holy Spirit. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy...so that she may be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:25-27). Beyond that, however, there are differences.

In the Orthodox tradition the Church is considered holy by virtue of the fact that it continues to have communion with the triune God through its liturgical rites

and that it has preserved apostolic tradition. The Church, though imperfect in its earthly sojourn, is constantly renewed by the Holy Spirit. The holiness of its members is established and nurtured by participation in the devotional and sacramental life of the church, leading to attaining a likeness of God (theosis), participating in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

In the Roman Catholic tradition the Church is considered holy since it is the body of Christ and the means of grace and salvation for the world. Although error may occur within the church, God preserves the Church from ever falling from divine grace and promise. All members of the Church are called to holiness. Holiness is the perfection of love (charity) of God and neighbor,²⁵ participation in the love and life of God, and a gift infused by the Holy Spirit, known as “sanctifying grace.” But holiness is also a task involving surrender and an active living out of the gift of love. Holiness (or sanctification) is an aspect of justification that depends on faith, but also on the gifts of hope and love, without which one cannot be fully united to Christ.²⁶

In Lutheran teaching the Church is considered holy because the Holy Spirit gives it life, renewal, and guidance as the Word is proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered. The Church is holy on the basis of Christ’s redeeming work and its being called into being by God as a people set apart (1 Pet. 2: 9). Its members, called to be saints (Romans 1:7), are holy because they have been born anew through baptism and are in communion with Christ and his saints. By grace alone they have been accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews their hearts, equips, and calls them to good works.²⁷ Good works come forth as fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25).

The Reformed tradition continues the Reformation teaching concerning the holiness of the Church. But the members of the Church, while made holy by the work of the Spirit, do works pleasing to God, as acts of praise and thanks to God, as well as evidence of their faith.

The churches that stand in the tradition of Methodism and the Holiness Movement consider the Church itself as holy, as affirmed by Scripture (1 Peter 2:9), but their emphasis is also upon the holiness of the Church’s members. For Holiness churches, sanctification (the process of becoming holy) may take place in a dramatic and memorable experience of Holy Spirit baptism which leads to avoiding worldly behavior, the elimination of sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, and a life that fulfills the will of God.

In more recent times the idea of the holiness of the Church, while still important for its internal life, has included its action in the world, and that is whether or not it has a concern for justice. When the churches fail to attend to social needs, they

²⁵ *Lumen Gentium* §40. For text, see Norman P. Tanner, S.J., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* Volume II (London & Washington, D.C.: Sheed and Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 880-881.

²⁶ Council of Trent, *Decree on Justification*, Section 7. For text, see Tanner, 673.

²⁷ Cf. the Lutheran-Roman Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* 3:15. For text, see *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification: The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), §15.

become “unholy.” The ways that they attend to those needs, however, differ and are sometimes a matter of concern and disagreement.²⁸

28. The term “catholic” has historically taken on both qualitative and quantitative implications. Qualitatively, the term can denote the fullness of grace, truth, and spiritual gifts. Quantitatively, the Church is “catholic” as “the whole Catholic Church throughout the world.”²⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem combined the qualitative and quantitative by stating that the Catholic Church “is called catholic because it is spread throughout the world” and because “it teaches universally and completely all doctrines,” “subjects to right worship all humankind,” and “possesses in itself every conceivable virtue, whether in deeds, words or in spiritual gifts of every kind.”³⁰ Catholicity is an ecumenical issue, especially as it relates to the unity of the Church and the Church’s eschatological orientation toward the fullness of redemption yet to come.

29. The apostolicity of the Church is rooted in the nature of Christ and the Spirit as sent of God to bring about redemption in all of creation. The apostles were “sent” to represent Christ in the power of the Spirit (John 20:21-22). The entire Church is apostolic since it is sent to witness to Christ in the power of the Spirit as well. Issues surrounding the apostolicity of the Church involve the life of the Spirit, faithfulness to the Word of God, and apostolic succession, both its nature and role in history.

Apostolicity

When the Church confesses itself to be apostolic, it is referring to its continuity with the Church of the apostles. That includes “witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy and suffering, service to the sick and needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each.”³¹

The various churches differ in the degree of importance “the transmission of ministerial responsibilities” has in regard to apostolicity. While most would agree that “apostolic succession” is necessary, they do not agree concerning the form that must take.

Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches practice that succession largely, but not solely, through the “historic episcopate,” the view that from the post-apostolic era the succession of bishops in ministry has preserved the historic, apostolic tradition. Some other churches (Lutheran and Moravian, for example) have maintained or adopted the historic episcopate, but do not affirm it as essential for apostolicity.

²⁸ Daniel Olivier, “Holiness,” *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd Edition, ed. By Nichols Lossky et al. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), 529.

²⁹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 8:1 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Kirsopp Lake, *The Loeb Classical Library*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2:323.

³⁰ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 18:23 in *Works of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1970), 2:132.

³¹ *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Ministry, §34.

Some churches consider a succession in ministry as important for an orderly transmission of the office of preaching and teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, but tend to emphasize the whole people of God as the means by which apostolic succession, and therefore the apostolicity of the church, is maintained. The true succession is the transmitting of the gospel and sacraments from generation to generation.

Some churches claim that apostolic authority and ministry is given to individuals who then lead the Church in the same way as the first-century apostles. For still other churches, apostolicity involves their participation in specific apostolic practices (such as pacifism or the exercise of charismatic gifts) or ecclesiologies in which all members are empowered for ministry without distinction.

Some nonconfessional churches reject historic creeds and confessions. Many claim Scripture alone as being divinely authoritative. Thus, they do not describe themselves in terms of apostolic succession.

In recent years those churches which have maintained the historic episcopate have come to recognize that the succession in ministry in other churches has in fact preserved the proclamation of the gospel; and some churches without the historic episcopate have come to regard episcopacy as “a sign, though not a guarantee” of the continuity and unity of the church.³²

According to the WCC Faith and Order consultation at Chantilly (1985), the Church is apostolic in that it (1) recognizes its fundamental identity with the Church of Christ’s apostles, as presented in the New Testament; (2) is faithful to the Word of God lived out and understood in the apostolic tradition, guided by the Holy Spirit throughout the centuries and expressed in the creeds; (3) celebrates the sacraments instituted by Christ and practiced by the apostles; (4) continues its ministry, initially taken up by the apostles, in the service of Christ; and (5) is a missionary Church which will not cease to proclaim the gospel to the whole of humankind until Christ comes again in glory.³³

Views of the Church in Ecumenical Discourse

30. Prior to the fourteenth century, attention to the Church as a topic of theological discourse (ecclesiology) had been episodic. Indeed, it was only after schisms (between East and West and within the Western church) “that the church as a doctrine became the subject of explicit theological concern and then of confessional formulation.”³⁴ Not until the dawn of the modern ecumenical movement, however, was there undertaken a somewhat sustained and thorough comparative study of the nature of the Church. Such comparative ecclesiology has had to explore the very different ecclesiological perspectives from which Christians have related to God and formed their outlook on the world.

³² Ibid., §38.

³³ Adapted from the article by Peter Staples, “Apostolicity,” *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd Edition, 50.

³⁴ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (Since 1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 288.

31. Comparative ecclesiology and other forms of ecumenical exchange on the nature of the Church have served to sensitize Christians to the ecclesiological issues that divide them.³⁵ The renewed appreciation for the Church as a *koinonia* or communion with the life of God has especially done much to inspire the insight that our divisions, no matter how serious or scandalous, do not reach to heaven. It is still possible to arrive at certain common understandings of the nature and mission of the Church in the midst of our differences. We shall begin, therefore, by discussing the Church as *koinonia*.

32. Though some have come to wonder whether *koinonia* or communion “is being called to bear more weight than it is able to carry,”³⁶ it is also clear that this concept in ecumenical documents “has become central in the quest for a common understanding of the nature of the Church and its visible unity.”³⁷ A World Council of Churches’ statement adds: “Koinonia is the fundamental understanding of the Church emerging from the bilateral dialogues,”³⁸ and the World Council of Churches-Roman Catholic Dialogue confirms that “[m]ore and more, the concept of koinonia or communion is seen as having great value for understanding the multiplicity of local churches in the unity of the one church.”³⁹ The Anglican/Roman Catholic Dialogue of 1990 noted three advantages of communion ecclesiology: (1) it enables us to affirm the communion that is already realized in the church; (2) it implies “that the Church is a dynamic reality moving towards its fulfillment”; and, (3) it affirms “both the visible reality of God’s people and its life-giving source.”⁴⁰

33. The communion that is already realized in the Church and that is the future goal of the Church has its source in the very being of God. *The Nature and Mission of the Church* elaborates: “The Church is not merely the sum of individual believers in communion with God, nor primarily the mutual communion of individual believers among themselves. It is their common partaking in the life of God (2 Peter 1:4), who as Trinity, is the source and focus of all communion. Thus the Church is both a divine and human reality.”⁴¹ The Final Report of the Pentecostal/Roman Catholic dialogue echoes *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* and other ecumenical documents in agreeing that “the koinonia between Christians is rooted in the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁴² Thus, the communion of the Church is fundamentally drawn from the trinitarian life of God. There is in the New Testament a “trinitarian structure” in comments about the church’s life, unity, and mission, although nothing in the context of these

³⁵ *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness: A Discussion Paper*, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 161 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 35-43.

³⁶ This phrase originally appeared in *The Nature and Purpose of the Church*, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 181 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998) in a box entitled “Koinonia” after §60. The later document, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 198 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), notes a similar critique in relation to “Eucharist” in a box after §81.

³⁷ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §24.

³⁸ “Fifth Forum on International Bilateral Conversations Report,” WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 156, in *International bilateral dialogues: 1965-1991* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991), 46.

³⁹ “The Church: Local and Universal,” in *Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, Sixth Report* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), p.25 (§5).

⁴⁰ *Church as Communion: An Agreed Statement by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, ARCIC II* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1991), §3.

⁴¹ *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §13.

⁴² “Perspectives on Koinonia: Report from the Third Quinquennium of the Dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and Some Classical Pentecostal Churches and Leaders, 1985-1989,” §29. For text, see “Perspectives on Koinonia: Final Report of the Dialogue (1985-1989),” *Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity Information Service* 75 (1990): 179-191.

texts requires it (Ephesians 4:1-6; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6). The implication is that the Church draws its nature centrally from the *koinonia* of God. The *koinonia* of God, however, has taken humanity and creation into itself by way of a salvation history featuring the mutual redemptive work of Christ and the Spirit as the left and right hands of God (Irenaeus).

34. The authority of the Church in the world, therefore, seeks to bear faithful witness to the authority of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. How this authority is received and witnessed to varies according to how *koinonia* has been understood from the vantage point of different models of the Church.⁴³

Models of the Church

We can take note of at least six major models of the Church.

(1) The Church as a gift of the word of God and the Holy Spirit witnessed in the Scriptures, incarnated in Jesus Christ, and visible through the gospel in preaching, in sacraments, and in service.

(2) The Church as mystery or sacrament of God's love for the world in which the word and the sacraments of Jesus Christ are the means of God's real and saving presence.

(3) The Church as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:1-31).

(4) The Church as the pilgrim people of God who have already received a foretaste of the redemption to come but who are still provisional and incomplete.

(5) The Church as servant and prophetic sign of God's coming Reign that resists self-centeredness, triumphalism, and complacency and directs itself instead to service, justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

(6) The Church as community of disciples who proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Church as Authoritative Body in the World

35. Various issues surround the question of the Church as an authoritative body in the world. They are rooted deeply within the ecclesiological traditions of the churches. These issues must be borne in mind on the way to speaking of the Church as authoritative.

- (a) *The Church as Visible and Invisible Communion:* Communion is not only invisible but involves visible elements of the church's life. As the Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue noted, "We can affirm together the indissoluble link between the invisible and the visible. There exists but one church of God."⁴⁴ The Church as a divine reality is thus not some Platonic ideal abstract from its visible

⁴³ The models listed in the text box are adapted from Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (expanded ed.; New York: Doubleday, 1987) and the article by Geoffrey Wainwright, "Church," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd Edition, 184-85.

⁴⁴ *Towards a Common Understanding of the Church: Reformed/Roman Catholic International Dialogue: Second Phase, 1984-1990* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1991), §126.

life. Instead, the visible Church lives from an inner divine mystery which, as 1 Timothy 3:16 notes, is Christ revealed in the flesh and vindicated in the Spirit. Communion ecclesiology thus encompasses many aspects of the visible life of the Church as §32 of *The Nature and Mission of the Church* indicates:

Visible and tangible signs of the new life of communion are expressed in receiving and sharing the faith of the apostles; breaking and sharing the Eucharistic bread; praying with and for one another and for the needs of the world; serving one another in love; participating in each other's joys and sorrows; giving material aid; proclaiming and witnessing to the good news in mission and working together for justice and peace.⁴⁵

As *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (§58) states, a lack of full communion among the churches hinders the Church's mission and the credibility of its authority in the world.

- (b) *The Institutional Church*: Because of the importance of the visible church, spiritual communion cannot stand alone in an adequate ecclesiology. The dangers of viewing the Church as primarily institutional are clericalism (viewing the clergy, especially in higher offices, as the source of all power and initiative even to the neglect of the church's charismatic structure and the needed input/ministry of the laity), juridicism (viewing authority after the pattern of the secular state and thus amplifying the roles of law and penalty), and triumphalism (an emphasis on conquering society for God).⁴⁶ In current ecumenical discussion, however, the tendency has been to view the institutional dimension of the Church in the broader context of the interior life, the charismatic structure, or the liberating mission of the Church, thus helping to avoid such distortions of authority. The recognition of the institutional dimension of the Church helps to provide the Church with its needed sense of historical continuity and corporate identity in the world.⁴⁷ Some recognition of the visible and institutional dimension of the Church can be widely affirmed, for the Spirit also works through the institutional Church. While affirming the unity of the Church present in communion as a divine gift, we can view visible divisions properly as scandalous and the quest for visible unity a significant goal in ecumenical discussion, even though understandings of this unity remain diverse. Though diverse, the Church can still strive to speak from the vantage point of visible forms of unity, and thus speak with credibility to a deeply fractured world. The challenge is to view the Church's institutional authority in the broader context of the Church as communion so as to avoid distortions of institutional authority.
- (c) *Prophetic Individuals*: All through Christian history, the Spirit has empowered prophetic individuals to speak God's word to the world. Like the Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself, these persons often challenge institutional structures to conform to gospel values more fully. Yet their witness is also an aspect of the authority of the Church in the world. Indeed, some of the clearest examples of the

⁴⁵*The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §32.

⁴⁶A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 43-44.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 42-43.

Church's authentic witness to the gospel have been inspired by prophetic individuals whose witness transcended any particular church body or institution. Some examples include Francis of Assisi, William Wilberforce, Dwight Moody, Martin Luther King Jr., Phoebe Palmer, Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, and Billy Graham.

- (d) *Christian Organizations and Para-Church Groups*: Various interdenominational and non-denominational groups and movements may also promote witness to the gospel and its values. Some examples are Campus Crusade for Christ, Intervarsity Christian Fellowship, National Council of Churches of Christ, and social action groups such as the Christian Children's Fund, Call to Renewal, and World Vision.

The Church in Relation to the World

36. The Church is to witness to revelation in word and deed. The authority of the Church that arises from *koinonia* is channeled to the world through *kerygma* and *diakonia*. How one conceives of the nature of the Church also involves how one relates the Church to the world. Such a relation is relevant to the authority of the Church in the world. We can note six ways in which the churches have historically related the Church to the world:⁴⁸

- (a) Eastern Orthodoxy tends to view the Church as a reflection of the mystery of the Trinity that is celebrated in the eucharist, a celebration that involves the whole of creation. Mission in the world would be undertaken not so much through activities but through the church's self-presentation as the living icon of Christ.
- (b) The Roman Catholic and Anglican models emphasize the synthesis and continuity of the Church and the created world with no fundamental contradiction between revelation and the tendencies in the life of creation. Generally a duality is assumed to exist in which Church and world have distinct responsibilities.
- (c) Based on the discontinuity of human sinfulness and God's grace, the Lutheran model assumes a fundamental distinction between the justified community of faith based on the gospel and the realm of public responsibility that organizes human life by restraining evil. Each realm has its own distinct responsibilities.
- (d) The Calvinist model assumes a constructive tension between Church and world as the world is being sanctified and transformed. Secular authority has its distinct function to perform in the encounter of revelation and society. This model can be found in later developments of Protestantism, such as in Puritanism, Methodism, and the Holiness Movement.
- (e) The model of the radical reformation sees an antithesis and confrontation between the Church in its mission and the worldly powers. Such could result in separation from the world or creative forms of prophetic confrontation or liberating witness.
- (f) Others focus on the role of individual believers within their local contexts. They therefore seek to engage the world, whether experienced as threatening or needy, through interpersonal relationships.

⁴⁸With some revision, this is taken from Libertus A. Hoedemaker, "Church and World," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, 2nd Edition, 190-93.

37. All traditions can agree that the goal of the Church's relation to the world is to bear witness to the salvation and Lordship of Christ by the power of the Spirit and to the glory of God the Father.

IV. THE WORLD

38. The term "world" (*kosmos* in Greek⁴⁹) as used in Scripture, Christian tradition, and contemporary language carries multiple and sometimes paradoxical meanings. Though it denotes both the natural world and the social-political world, when used in connection with authority, it relates primarily to social and political relationships rather than physical or metaphysical properties. The Gospel of John indicates that though Christ's followers are *in* the world, they do not *belong* to the world (John 15:19; 17:14, 16). This concept of belonging suggests that Christ was not referring to the natural world but the social-political world and the systemic values and evils apparent within it. Since members of the Church are part of the social-political order, the Church itself cannot be separated from the world, even though it is possible to distinguish between them. The myriad environmental, economic, and cultural crises that beset the contemporary social-political world impel the churches to respond. The growing awareness that the Church exists in an interconnected global community prompts reflection on the different ways Christians have emphasized either connectedness to the world or distance from it and how that has affected their understanding of prophetic compassionate witness in word and deed.

Biblical Perspectives

39. In the Bible the term "world" is used of both the natural world and the social-political world. The pattern of good (Genesis 1:31), cursed (Genesis 3:17-19), and restored (Ezekiel 34:25-29; Revelation 21:1) earth is paralleled by a pattern of good, fallen, and redeemed humanity. Insofar as the social-political world is comprised of individual humans, it displays the same pattern.

40. The goodness of the world appears most clearly in the Genesis account of humans in harmony with God and each other in the Garden of Eden. Following the Fall, remnants of this goodness appear intermittently in the text. Some examples include the leadership of Moses, the loyalty of Ruth, and the reconstruction efforts of Nehemiah. Such remnants are likewise apparent in the practical wisdom of Proverbs and depictions of loving human relations in Ecclesiastes 9:7-10 and the Song of Songs. Jesus himself did not remake every aspect of society but grew up in a family and participated in cultural celebrations (Luke 4:41-52; John 2:1). All these things illustrate that elements of the social-political order continue to display the goodness of God.

41. This goodness, however, is not the whole story. In biblical narratives, the fallenness of the world is apparent in individual acts and family conflicts displayed on a larger scale among cities, kingdoms, and empires. Later stories present a vivid picture of Samuel, Nathan, Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), and other prophets criticizing those who control the social-political world. Other passages describe the world explicitly as evil (Isaiah 13:11), a prisoner of sin (Galatians 3:22), turned away from God (1 Corinthians 2:12; Jas. 4:4), under the influence of spiritual forces of

⁴⁹ The Greek word *kosmos* appears 186 times in the New Testament and is translated "world" in most cases. It appears in the Septuagint to translate several Hebrew words. The most significant passages referring to the "world" (or even "universe") as background to the New Testament usage are in late and originally Hellenistic writings of the Septuagint (e.g., Wis. 7:17; 9:3; 4 Macc. 16:18). Cf. Horst Balz, "*kosmos*," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990-93), 2:310.

evil (Ephesians 6:12; 1 John 5:19) and ultimately subject to judgment (Psalm 9:8, 1 Corinthians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 11:32). The term “world” is used in this sense to designate identity in opposition to God (Psalm 17:14) and serves as an anti-exemplar to illustrate those things that detract or distract from Christian life (Colossians 2:8; James 1:27; 2 Peter 1:4). Jesus himself had authority to resist demonic powers, and he charged his disciples to resist them as well (Matthew 4:1-11; 10:5-16). Christians and churches vary in their views of Satan and demons, but Scripture speaks of the divine authority given to Christians to resist all manifestations of evil (Ephesians 6:11-18; 1 Peter 5:9).

42. The New Testament provides glimpses of the redeemed social-political order in Jesus’ parables describing the reign of God. The community of disciples who shared their possessions in common exemplified many of these values (Acts 4:32-35). This perspective understands the world as the redeemable and redeemed object of God’s love (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 John 4:14). Christ’s redemptive work reverses the fallen state of both humanity (1 John 2:2) and creation (Romans 8:19-21) and holds out the eschatological hope of a new social-political order (Revelation 11:15). Within this description, the world is the place Christians illumine (Matthew 5:14) in imitation of Christ (John 1:9; 1 John 4:17) as they proclaim the gospel message (Matthew 13:38; 24:14; 26:13).

43. The distinction the Bible makes between the Church and the world clearly refers to the fallenness of the world and the systemic values and evils present within it rather than its eschatological redemption. Descriptions of Christians as citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20), strangers in the world (1 Peter 2:11), and ambassadors of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20) hint at this redemption and serve as important metaphors for being present in the world while refusing loyalty to its oppressive systems. They reiterate and expand on Christ’s assertion that his followers are in the world though they do not belong to it (John 17:11-16). This means that the Church may make use of existing social-political structures but also has the theological resources to challenge their fallenness on the basis of its connection to Christ.

Historical Perspectives

44. Historically, the place of Christians within the social-political world has shaped their understanding of the world. At times they have described the Church primarily in terms of separation from negative moral influences or anti-Christian governments. At others they have emphasized the transformative role of the Church as part of the social and political order.

45. The earliest Christian experience of indifference or opposition from the state led to a strong sense of separation from the social-political world. Among the diverse expressions of Christian community appeared conversionist groups working to transform individuals in the world by supernatural power, revolutionist groups seeking God’s action against the world to establish a just social order, and inversionist groups attempting to separate themselves from the world.⁵⁰ Though diverse, these responses share a common view that the world is fallen yet redeemable and presuppose a sharp distinction between the Church and the world. Intermittent persecutions under the Roman Empire contributed to an antagonistic attitude towards the world epitomized by

⁵⁰ John H. Elliott, “The Jewish Messianic Movement,” in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler (New York: Routledge, 1995), 83.

Ignatius of Antioch's sentiment that "the greatness of Christianity lies in being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it."⁵¹

46. The fourth century shift "from a suppressed church (*ecclesia pressa*) to a tolerated church (*ecclesia tolerata*), and then to a triumphant church (*ecclesia vincens*) within the Roman Empire"⁵² dramatically altered perceptions of the world. From the time of Constantine, the Church began to exercise pervasive political and social influence, using its vast resources to transform the world according to its own convictions, assumptions, and failings.

47. In the East, first in Byzantium (until 1453) and then in Russia (until 1917), much of Christianity existed in a context in which religious and political power were intertwined. Emperors used their power both to help and to hinder the church: Justinian gave the ecclesiastical regulations the force of imperial law but state interference in episcopal elections and synods was frequent. Alternatively, the church had a great deal of influence over the state, forcing emperors to do public penance and playing a part in creating a society that embraced Christianity.

48. In the West the desire to transform the world solidified into a portrait of a unified Christian society known as Christendom that remained a Christian ideal until after the period of the Reformation and the religious wars. To the extent that the Church successfully Christianized the political and social order, the world became less hostile to the Church. Ironically, diminished hostilities made the Church more susceptible to corruption by the social and political order and complicit in the colonialism, conquest, and slave trade of European powers.

49. Though reform movements have persistently arisen to challenge such corruption throughout church history, in the sixteenth century a number of convergent trends culminated in the dissolution of the visible unity of the Western church. This generated a plurality of established churches that competed for the authority to describe, and to some extent control, the world. When churches reasserted the ancient principle *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose the region is, his religion) at the Peace of Augsburg (1555) they tacitly accepted the reality that Christendom would not be realized on a grand scale. This did not prevent them from attempting to exert the same level of control over the social and political world, but forced them to do so on a smaller scale.

50. One of the trends that contributed to these cataclysmic changes in Western Europe was the rise of humanist interest in ancient texts and the subsequent development of historical criticism. In addition, devout scientists (e.g., Galileo) sometimes reached conclusions that appeared to be at odds with historical Christian doctrine. When key Enlightenment thinkers, for example, Voltaire, attacked the Church, it became clear that the authority of the Church was threatened not only by division within but also by secular scholarship. Undesirable social and political consequences of this additional threat became the focus of a renewed emphasis on the fallenness of the world and initiated a resurgence of the church-world tension.

51. The complexity of the relationship between the Church and the world is illustrated in the modern history of slavery. Slavery in the European colonies was instituted in the fifteenth century for economic reasons. But the Church was complicit in the practice of slavery in those

⁵¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Romans* 3:3.

⁵² *Called Together to be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998 – 2003* (Rome: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2003), §54.

colonies. Some churchmen, like Antonio Montesino in the Dominican Republic (c. 1511) and Bartolomé de las Casas in Mexico (c.1552), spoke out against slavery. These protests provoked heated discussion in Spain and led to the establishment of laws to protect the indigenous peoples (c. 1542). Yet for the most part, the Church and individual Christians did not oppose slavery, but cooperated with it, and many profited by it. This went on for centuries. The Bible was also used to defend the practice of slavery.⁵³

52. Eventually, however, persistent efforts by individual Christians resulted in the elimination of legalized slavery in the West during the nineteenth century. Due to the unflagging efforts of some British Christians (e.g., Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, and William Wilberforce), the slave trade was outlawed throughout the British empire in 1808. By the Abolition Act of 1833, the British Treasury paid West Indian slave owners to emancipate their slaves. The British government paid over one million pounds to Spain and Portugal to end the slave trade. And throughout the nineteenth century, British warships attacked slave traders in Africa and Zanzibar to force an end to slave trading. Eventually through moral persuasion and, in the United States, a civil war, slavery was outlawed in Europe and the Americas. This was accomplished at great cost and against entrenched economic and political self-interest.

53. In North America, Christians expressed the impetus to transform the world in unique ways. When attempts to challenge the dominant social and political order in Europe failed, some communities perceived the region as a gift from God for the purpose of establishing a new uncorrupted society—a city set on a hill. As this original impetus faded, revival movements emphasizing individual redemption, and voluntary social activism sparked the formation of new denominations and the modern missionary movement. These developments brought a renewed interest in the world as a place of proclamation and service but also made the concept of Church authority increasingly problematic in the face of an unprecedented proliferation of new denominations that sometimes competed for congregants within the same geographic region.

54. Furthermore, the tendency to use church and world as distinct categories was underlined in the United States by the no establishment clause in the Bill of Rights. Early proponents sought to avoid a repetition of Europe's wars of religion and declared enforced uniformity of religion anti-Christian.⁵⁴ While some advocates viewed such separation as a means of protecting the church from the influence of secular government, others viewed it as a means of preventing churches from interfering with affairs of state. The combined effect of diversity among United States churches and the idea of separation was that United States churches sought to influence the social and political world primarily through persuasion rather than any form of direct governmental control.

55. The twentieth century saw the widespread de-Christianization of Europe in the face of two world wars and the rise of atheistic communism. In the United States churches experienced an erosion of their ability to influence the social-political world in the face of secular materialism and religious pluralism—a phenomenon sometimes described as disestablishment. Some churches have responded to the challenges this presents by developing alliances that seem to polarize different segments of the Christian community. In recent times, sexual and financial scandals have led to a loss of credibility in the ethical sphere.

⁵³ See Peter Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: Avon, 1996), 84-101.

⁵⁴ This impulse is present as early as 1644 in Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience Discussed and Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered* (London: Elibron Classics, 2001).

56. Serious intellectual challenges have also emerged. First, the traditional Christian narrative of the origins of the world and humanity has been largely displaced in educated circles by a secular scientific account of evolution. Second, many philosophers have questioned the possibility of describing the world objectively. Some postmodern positions seem to indicate that there is no such thing as *the world* but only multiple, contextually constructed *worlds* that are ultimately subjective. This perspective is not merely another competing authority, but rather a fundamental challenge to the *possibility* of exerting comprehensive authority, since it regards all authority as a facet of individual or local contexts.

57. In the face of these challenges, a singular Christian narrative about the origin, nature, and destiny of the world seems to lack plausibility. It is apparent that the ideals of Christendom presumed a dominant narrative that subsumed all other narratives, with the result that alternative descriptions of the world were repressed, such as those of indigenous peoples and descendants of African and Asian peoples. For this reason, many communities whose descriptions of the world had previously been suppressed find such postmodern awareness of context liberating. Those who had previously exercised a monopoly on descriptions of the world have viewed these developments variously as a welcome change or a destabilizing threat. In this way, an accent on the Church as part of the world has reemerged as a positive value among some Christians, though they eschew the previous era's emphasis on controlling the social-political order. Among others, the perceived threat of post-modernity has further illustrated the fallenness of the world and therefore must be actively resisted.

Ecumenical Literature

58. Formal ecumenical dialogues have explored these trends as they have reflected on the meaning of the Church's unique status in relation to the world with particular concern for ethical implications. One of the earliest works, *The Presence of Christ in Church and World*, sought to address the crisis of credibility and help the Church "become more credible in the eyes of the world."⁵⁵ Its descriptions of the world carried a strong emphasis on redemption, including identifying it as the place where God leads humanity towards life and freedom⁵⁶ and the place of pilgrimage where the Church is to bear witness.⁵⁷ Though the 1975 Nairobi assembly asserted that the Church shared common membership in a "world community,"⁵⁸ it also noted a tension "between belief in Jesus Christ and unbelief" that divided Church from world.⁵⁹ The Baptist-Roman Catholic dialogue echoed the earlier emphasis on world as a forum for witness⁶⁰ and laid out criteria for doing so in a manner consonant with the gospel message: "witness must be given in a spirit of love and humility... it leaves the addressee full freedom to make a personal decision... it does not prevent either individuals or communities from bearing witness to their own convictions, including religious ones."⁶¹ The study document, *Church and World*, described

⁵⁵ *The Presence of Christ in Church and World: Dialogue between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, 1970-77* (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1977), §5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, §51.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, §60.

⁵⁸ Ans J. van der Bent, "World Community," *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky et al. (1st Edition, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 1081.

⁵⁹ E. G. Homrighausen, "World Council at Nairobi," *Theology Today* 33 (1976): 81.

⁶⁰ *Summons to Witness to Christ in Today's World: The Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversations, 1984-1988* (Rome: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1990), §24-28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, §35.

the identification of world and Church in terms of the Church consisting of the same “stuff” as the world⁶² and articulated possibilities for describing the world either in terms of hopes/opportunities or in terms of anxieties/dangers.⁶³ In doing so, it brought pessimistic emphasis on the brokenness of the world⁶⁴ together with optimistic reflections about the responsibilities entailed by an understanding of the Church as a “sign” of the reign of God,⁶⁵ demonstrating the perspectival nature of such descriptions.

59. These ecumenical discussions reflect shared exploration of the tension created by existing in the world without belonging to it. They indicate a trend towards thinking about the Church as a part of the world rather than merely in contrast to it that inculcates a sense of responsibility as well as humility concerning the fallenness of its members.

Ecumenical Action in the World

60. In light of the many historical distortions of authority, we approach the question of how churches have acted together with authority in the world with significant humility. Part of this humility includes admission of the epistemological difficulties this question presents. In general, it is easier to discern authoritative action *in history* than it is to determine it in the present day. There may be a recognition by the world that occurs over long periods of time, but some functions of the church’s authority bear witness to truths that will only be verified eschatologically. While there are no perfect expressions of authority in a divided church, there are certain times when the Church seems to speak with one voice in a way that is both intended and heard as authoritative. Looking back, those Christians who denounced slavery are widely recognized as having exercised authority, though in many cases that authority was not accepted by their contemporaries. While the exercise of authority depends ultimately on truth rather than the number of people who accept it, when many churches assert the same thing together, it lends greater weight to the assertion amidst the epistemological uncertainty of the immediate context. Thus, though we may struggle to see “in a mirror, dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12), when churches act together, we have greater cause to accept their assertions as authoritative in faith that they will eventually be verified. The validity of these ways of exercising authority are seen not only in the way diverse traditions do so together, but also in the “Amen” of the people on whose behalf the authority in exercised.⁶⁶

61. Times of national or international crises present special opportunities for the Church to exercise public authority in response to particular human needs. Ecumenical efforts to combat racism in the 1960s are a striking example of this.⁶⁷ Few who witnessed it would forget the image of Greek Orthodox Archbishop Iakovos marching with Martin Luther King Jr. that would eventually be emblazoned on the cover of *LIFE* magazine.⁶⁸ The presence of Iakovos brought all the gravitas of the perduring nature of the Church to bear on the urgency of present day concerns requiring decisive action. Similarly, efforts to build friendships between United States and Soviet

⁶² *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*, WCC Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), Chapter III: Kingdom – Church – Humanity, §14.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, Chapter I: Introduction, §§1-2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I, §9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, III, §25.

⁶⁶ *The Gift of Authority*, §8.

⁶⁷ See James F. Findlay, Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁸ *LIFE*, March 26, 1965.

church leaders during the worst periods of the cold war⁶⁹ displayed the Church acting with authority. The same could be said of the many times churches have responded *en masse* to provide relief from natural disasters. Currently this form of witness is especially significant with respect to the existence of systemic poverty, the devastating consequences of HIV/AIDS, and the real possibility of making large portions of our planet uninhabitable.

62. Though these times are obviously important, it should not be forgotten that since members of the Church are also members of the social-political world, the Church exercises authority in the world in profound and perhaps even more pervasive ways through its ongoing life of worship and prayer. Authoritative acts of the past bear continuous witness to God's presence throughout the ages and express connection with the great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) as they find expression in the contemporary practice of the churches. Through preaching, evangelism, and especially the eucharist, churches proclaim the normative value of Christ's life, the reconciling act of Christ's death, and the accessible power of Christ's resurrection as they are guided by the Holy Spirit to the glory of God the Father. The process of discipleship whereby Spirit-filled communities help people to live into the way of Christ; the practical valuation of every person as an embodiment of the image of God; the naming of certain actions and attitudes as "sin" in a way that both unveils their destructiveness and holds out the possibility for redemption; all these are ways in which the churches exercise authority together. Though their communion in this proclamation is imperfect, it is nevertheless real, so that authority is conveyed not merely in particular content, but in the whole life of the church.

Affirmations

63. In light of these reflections, we offer the following affirmations about the world:

- (a) *The world is the good gift of God.* God purposely created the world, declared it good, and continues to preserve it by providential power. This goodness included a solemn charge for humans, as bearers of the image of God, to care for the natural world (i.e., exercise dominion) and, by implication, to care for each other. Insofar as the social-political order serves these ends, it is part of the good gift of God.
- (b) *The world is fallen and therefore in need of redemption.* Conceiving of the world in terms of God's sovereignty provides context for thinking about the various biblical perspectives on the social-political world. Within this sovereignty it is possible to discern positive elements linked to the ordering of God, systematic evil arising from human fallenness, and the neediness of the world crying out for response. Insofar as the world restrains evil and promotes human flourishing, it is good. When the world ignores or challenges God's will, it expresses fallenness that poses a danger to the Church by presenting evil as an enticing alternative to Christian obedience or threatening its members directly. The redeemed world is portrayed by Jesus as the "reign of God," the main theme of his preaching, a reality to which the Church is called to witness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁶⁹ Paul A. Crow, Jr., "North America," *A History of the Ecumenical Movement: Volume 3, 1968-2000*, ed. John Briggs, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, and George Tsetsis (Geneva: WCC, 2004), 613.

- (c) *The Church is distinct but not separable from the world.* As a human community, the Church is inseparable from the world and at times learns from the world (for example, the Galileo case indicated the limits of theological claims). Though transformed by Christ, members of the Church sometimes act contrary to their identity—as if they belong to the fallenness of the world. Whenever these members organize in institutional forms, they can therefore participate in and perpetuate systemic evil. As the body of Christ, empowered by the Spirit, however, the Church transcends the world and therefore has an alternative to offer. This reality of being included but not contained echoes the incarnation. Just as it was necessary for Jesus to be both human and divine in order to atone for sin, so it is necessary for the Church to be both a member of the world subject to the same struggles and something beyond the world in order to counter the influence of its systems.
- (d) *The world is the arena of the church's prophetic, compassionate witness.* At different times the emphasis has fallen on the Church surviving amidst a threatening world or on the Church's responsibility to actively transform the world even though these perspectives are not mutually exclusive. When the world is conceived as the place that the Church is to live out its identity as the people of God bearing witness to the gospel in word and deed, it is clear that the Church grows in grace and obedience *precisely* by seeking to transform the world. This witness of preaching, teaching, and other ministries must be consistent with the prophetic and compassionate dimensions of the gospel itself. Proclaiming distinctly Christian narratives in a way that meets this criterion requires attentiveness to local context as well as global implications and repudiates attempts to establish the reign of God through unilateral control of the social-political order.
- (e) *The world is being transformed by God.* The Church lives in eschatological expectation that whatever part we have played in God's work to transform the world, God will one day bring that work to fulfillment by making all things new. This includes human individuals, the natural world, and the social-political order. Thus, we groan with all creation, as if in labor pains, for the reign of God to finally be realized (Romans 8:22-23). The promised deliverance from bondage to decay is echoed by a vision of an order of justice and peace mediated by the presence of God in which tears will be wiped away, death will disappear (Revelation 21:4) , and the nations will be healed (Revelation 22:2). When apparently insurmountable difficulties threaten our resolve to transform the world, this vision reminds us of God's promise to bring it to pass.

V. EXERCISING THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

64. In order for the Church to exercise its authority in the world today, particularly in the United States there are a number of considerations to bear in mind.

65. Within the United States there has been a lively tension between disestablishment of the church and an expected public function of it. In addition to the internal life that any ecclesial community may have, it is taken for granted that congregations, denominations, churches and councils of churches will also have an impact on the broader society. That impact has taken on visible form in many ways. Some of it is institutional, leading to the founding and support of hospitals, schools, social service agencies, colleges and universities, and more. More broadly, however, the impact of the churches on society has consisted of nurturing and sustaining persons in faith and ethics, habits, and behavior. Generosity and volunteerism are two of the most visible aspects of the lives of many individuals, and they are often attributed to a large degree to church membership. Moreover, the churches have been involved in social engagement since the founding of the nation. At one time or another various churches have supported such causes as the rights of labor, civil rights, and universal public education and have opposed such things as slavery, child labor, poverty, and capital punishment.

66. With the passing of time, however, noticeable shifts have taken place, and there may well be more to come. In terms of church-related institutions, while the churches continue to be credited with their founding and support, they actually have much less involvement in the institutions founded by them than they might seem to have. Government at various levels (federal, state, and local) provides much more support than the churches do, and that affects governance, policies, and personnel practices in those institutions. Consequently, the institutions have assumed a more secular appearance. The churches continue to evangelize and to nurture faith, ethics, habits, and behavior of their members, but their role in the public square is debated.

67. Changes in the wider culture are also highly significant. The competing authorities of the media, government, and economic life effectively rule the lives of many people. Secularism, pluralism, and globalization are factors that affect people's thinking, values, and activities in ways that previous eras and generations could not have envisioned.

68. In light of the new realities, the churches need to consider new ways of engaging the world, exercising an authority that is appropriate to the nature of the Church and effective in the public sphere.

- (a) The authority of the churches is founded in God, who has been revealed in Jesus Christ, and is present through the Holy Spirit—on this there is no disagreement. The church's fundamental mission is to call persons to a deeper relationship to the triune God, which entails discipleship in the world.
- (b) The authority of the Church is not only the authority of the Church's leaders, but of the whole community of disciples. The effective exercise of the Church's authority is evident when the world hears what the Church speaks on Christ's behalf and acts upon it.
- (c) In exercising authority the Church must practice vigilant discernment. At times the Church needs to listen to the world humbly before it speaks, in order to discover whether the Spirit has prepared the world's ears to hear the voice of Christ. At

other times the Spirit may call the Church to speak a word of judgment, whether or not the world is ready to hear it. And occasionally, God may also use the world to chasten the Church, recalling it to its own mission with its condemnations of Christians' failures.

- (d) For the Church to speak authoritatively, it must speak with the voice of him who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20: 24-28).
- (e) The churches need to work much further than they have toward visible unity. If the Church is divided, the voices of the churches will not be heard either in unison or separately. There can be no doubt but what visible unity among the churches would enable a more credible witness in the world.
- (f) In a world distrustful of institutions and authority generally, the personal witness of Christians to the transforming effect of the triune God in their lives may be more effective than doctrines and arguments. Christians need to be living icons of Christ, expressing his love and service to the world. The greatest failures in the expression of the churches' authority in the world have come from the failure of Christians to model Christ in their lives (one thinks of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the complicity of some of the churches in slavery and colonialism, scandals over sexual behavior, etc.). Conversely, some of the most convincing expressions of Christian authority have come in the witness of holy men and women, especially the martyrs.
- (g) The churches need to discern the difference between what constitutes core teachings of the Christian faith and what does not. There are many issues on which Christians and the various churches can legitimately disagree, since they do not embody core teachings of the Christian faith. There are other issues, however, that need to be addressed on the basis of moral mandates that arise out of the core teachings. It has become more and more clear in our study of the authority of the Church in the world that the churches need to achieve the "goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, and to advance toward that unity that the world may believe."⁷⁰
- (h) The churches need to clarify how they arrive at positions taken on particular issues. What are the sources and norms for Christian theology and moral teaching? Here the role of Scripture, scriptural interpretation, Tradition, traditions, reason, wisdom, natural and social scientific knowledge, and common human experience need to be considered. The various churches in the United States vary considerably on what role each of these sources can play in Christian thought. For example, those churches that grant authority to sources in addition to Scripture need to assure those that claim not to do so that Scripture is indeed normative for Christian teaching.⁷¹ Those that claim that their only authority is

⁷⁰ The Mission Statement of the Commission on Faith and Order, National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. See footnote number 1.

⁷¹ See *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, §15: "The biblical understanding governing the present text is based on the conviction that Scripture is normative and therefore provides a uniquely privileged source for understanding the nature and mission of the Church. Subsequent reflection must always engage and be consonant with the biblical teaching."

Scripture need to assess and recognize the actual role of authoritative traditions and teachers that inform their interpretations of Scripture.

- (i) The churches need to make credible arguments for any points of view adopted on an issue being faced. That is, they need to respect the “authority of truth” (see above). The time has passed when the Church as a whole, or the individual churches, can resort to authoritarian utterances without making arguments that are persuasive and related to life as it is experienced by ordinary people. In light of so many competing authorities in the culture, the churches need to make their case within the public arena. It is possible that a viewpoint having secular origins can prompt the Church to reflect upon it. The apostle Paul exhorted his readers to consider whatever is true, honorable, and just (Philippians 4:8). But a distinction must be made between adopting a particular political position and expressing a viewpoint or conviction that arises out of a Christian perspective, even when the latter coincides with a political position from a secular source.
- (j) The churches need to be open to the possibility that positions taken in the past need modification or even reconsideration in certain cases. The history of the Church is instructive here, for reconsideration has had to take place on a number of occasions (such as the development of just war theory over against pacifism, the condemnation of slavery, and various teachings concerning the relationship of the church to the state). Some issues may be truly new in light of new facts, circumstances, and perspectives, and when that is so, simply restating traditional positions is neither accurate nor adequate.
- (k) Jesus has commissioned the Church to evangelize, that is, to proclaim the gospel to all people and to make disciples of all who respond to his call (Matthew 28:19-20). Discipleship implies catechesis and the transformation of the disciple into an icon of Christ. As Paul says, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:19). Although they need to avoid cultural insensitivity and triumphalistic methodologies, Christians have authority to speak the gospel in the public sphere. The Baptist-Roman Catholic Dialogue has presented criteria for witnessing in a manner consonant with the gospel message.⁷² Both the disciples of Christ as individuals and the Church as the body of Christ in the world are commissioned to evangelize, to send out missionaries, to reflect God’s holiness, and to seek justice.
- (l) The matter of who has the competence to articulate the position of the Church (i.e., who “has the last word”) is exceedingly difficult to determine today. That is evident in both loosely and highly structured churches. The range of those who are designated as authoritative spokespersons, or who assume that role, ranges widely. In addition, there are persons and groups outside of church structures altogether who claim to speak with moral authority on behalf of Christians. The question of “Who speaks for the church?” is an old one, going back to the beginning of the church’s history. The question has been dealt with in various ways: the convening of councils, the investing of authority in particular offices, recognizing the authoritative voices of outstanding theological teachers, leaders of moral and

⁷² *Summons to Witness in Today’s World*, §§24-28, 35.

social reform, charismatic leaders, and the witness of martyrs. The history of the Church teaches that there is no one way that authority can or should be expressed. What may be distinctive to our time, particularly in the United States with its many denominations and voices, is that the churches need more than ever to listen to and engage one another. Both affirmation and admonition take on increasingly important roles.⁷³ These are ecumenical challenges for all the churches and should be attended to faithfully for building up the body of Christ.

69. The expression of the authority of the Church in the world is rooted in the self-understanding of the Church as a body that has been commissioned to witness to the will of God as it understands it. But it is also an activity that is rooted in the common humanity of all people. There are concerns that unite the Church and the larger world community in their common life together. As a living body, the Church cannot refrain from entering into that world and from engaging competing authorities that seek to dominate the world's people in ways that are dehumanizing and that denigrate God, in whose image all are created. The various churches agree on the need to express a divinely authorized and guided authority in the world. That authority can be exercised more credibly when it is authentically based in the sources and norms of Christian thought, and when it is thoughtful, clearly expressed, and unified.

70. The Commission on Faith and Order of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. is grateful to the churches for entrusting it with the task of studying the issue of the exercise of the church's authority in the world. The convergence statement reflects eight years of work by the Commission. The statements that are to follow were submitted by members of the several commissions offering their confessional perspectives in preparation for the convergence text. Throughout the process of preparing the convergence statement, the Commission has labored under the calling of the Holy Spirit, not only to live in such a way that in its very gathering it might live into the *koinonia* of the Spirit, but also to offer a timely word that might encourage the churches to draw ever nearer to one another in Christ. The Faith and Order Commission offers these reflections "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship expressed in worship and common life in Christ, and to advance toward that unity that the world may believe."

"Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen." (Jude 24-25)

⁷³ The language of "affirmation and admonition" is taken from *A Formula of Agreement—Between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ on Entering into Full Communion on the Basis of A Common Calling* (adopted in 1997). According to this document, "The working principle of 'mutual affirmation and admonition' allows for the affirmation of agreement while at the same time allowing a process of mutual edification and correction in areas where there is not total agreement."