Nazarene Manifesto - Chapter I

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The Church of God in General

God is composed of all spiritually regenerate persons, whose names are written in heaven." So reads paragraph 21 of the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene. If this be a true statement about the Church in general, then the Church is not of a dual nature--composed of saints and sinners. This is in line with Wesley's declaration that "none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church."[1] Those who think otherwise often appeal to Jesus' parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) to substantiate such a dual composition for the Church. But Jesus expressly says, in His interpretation of the parable, "The field is the world" (Matt. 13:38). That being the case, the parable does not refer to conditions within the Church but to conditions in the present world, where we find both saints and sinners, believers and unbelievers.

Only spiritually regenerate persons compose the one Church of God, and "the Lord knoweth them that are his" (II Tim. 2:19). Jesus declares that there will be religiousists in the judgment who will be told,"I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23). God knows the regenerate because their names are written in heaven, and their character is in the image of His own, but whosoever name is not thus written is destined for the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). It cannot be said of God's true Church, "You are," and, "You are not." There is a basic character distinction between the Church and the world. Wesley's position is valid when he reasons: "If the Church, as to the very essence of it, is a body of believers, no man that is not a Christian believer can be a member of it."[2]

The Church is the therefore the objective economy wrought by the Holy Spirit, comprised of those "called out" of the world, and who, by divine grace, have become such as can be designated kuriakos, "of and pertaining to the Lord." As Wiley has noted: "The Church, therefore, may be regarded as at once the sphere of the Spirit's operations, and the organ of Christ's administration of redemption."[3]

So it is that God alone really knows who comprise His true Church, and hence its reality of being is that invisible and mystical body of Christ, animated by His Spirit. As such it transcends all human divisions as to denomination, race, sex, or age (Joel 3:28-29). It involves the old man and the young man, the youth and the maiden, the servant and the master--yea, "all flesh," just as Joel saw it in prophecy and as Peter saw it in fulfillment (Acts 2:17-18). Of it Paul could declare: "There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11).

The Church of God is therefore trans-temporal, trans-racial, trans-social, trans-cultural, and trans-ritual in its nature. It comprises the blood-washed out of every nation, kindred, people, and tongue (Rev. 7:9, 14), or as Wesley has it: "all the Christians under heaven."[4]

1. The Church is the assembly of "called out ones," the true ecclesia composed of the divinely adopted sons of God. It is not, and therefore cannot be, a merely human organization. Its life is in Christ, its divine head. Its unity and apostolic succession are through the Holy Spirit's administration alone. Wesley, in answer to the question, "What is the Church?" replies: "The Catholic or universal Church is, therefore, may be regarded as at once the sphere of the Spirit's operations, and the organ of Christ's administration of redemption."[3]

A company of persons called out from a state of (animalis) natural life and of sin, by God and Christ, through the Spirit of both, to a supernatural life to be spent according to God and Christ in the knowledge and worship of both, that by participation with both, they may be eternally blessed, to the glory of God through Christ, and of Christ in God.[6]

Arminius also insists that:

... a distinction must be made among the men or congregation, as they are men, and as they are called out and obey the call; and they must be so distinguished that the company to whom the name of "the church" (aliquando) at any time belonged, may so decline from that obedience as to lose the name of "the church," God "removing the candlestick out of its place," and sending a bill of divorce to his disobedient and adulterous wife.[7]

Again, as to the Church in general, he says:

The Catholic church is the company of all believers, called out from every language, tribe, people, nation and calling, who have been, are now, and will be, called by the saving vocation of God from a state of corruption to the dignity of the children of God, through the word (gratuiti) of the covenant of grace, and ingrafted into Christ, as living members to their head through true faith, to the praise of the glory of the grace of God. From this, it appears that the catholic church differs from particular churches in nothing which appertains to the substance of a church but solely in her amplitude.[8]

2. The Church is also the international and inter-epochal "brotherhood of believers," acclaiming Christ as Lord by the enabling Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:3), crying, Abba (Rom. 8:15), to our one God and Father Almighty, who is the Maker of heaven and earth. The faith that unites a man to Christ unites him also to other Christians. Thus the Church is more than an aggregate of Christians; it is a fellowship, the social organism of Christ's incarnation. Wesley however allows for what he calls "a National Church," of which he says: "That part of this great body, of the universal church, which inhabits any one kingdom or nation, we may properly term a National Church; as the Church of France, the Church of England, the Church of Scotland."[9]
But in spite of Wesley’s contention we must insist that the person who belongs to Christ belongs primarily to a worldwide community, and only secondarily to a local or even national manifestation of it as a congregation in any particular place or nation. Wherever he travels he is to be received in the local congregation as a brother in Christ. Thus the Church is a universal society of interrelated Christians, and there is a real solidarity of all believers in Christ.

3. The Church is the body of Christ, the mystical extension of His twofold nature—His deity, and His humanity—and thus it is comprised only of those who have been made partakers of that divine nature. In this blessed organic relation to Jesus Christ, the Church is the means by which the Holy Spirit supernaturally extends to men the redemptive work of Christ, and through it He extends His life-giving and sanctifying offices among men. As the body is the man in his outward being and manifestation, so is the Church in the world for Christ. And just as a personality is never divorced from a body but pervades the whole and cannot be localized in any of its parts, so the whole Church is in each part of His corporate personality indwelling each individual believer.

As such a body of Christ, the Church knows the true organic unity and oneness produced by the dynamic "one Spirit." It functions as one body under its exalted Head. Its growth, as such, is through the vital ministry of that same Spirit, and by the individual contribution of its several members ministering as the same Holy Spirit enables. Hence we may insist, with Wesley, that the Church, as the Apostle Paul intends it under the term "one body" (Eph. 4:4), means "the saints, the holy persons, who assemble themselves together to worship God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ; whether in one or in several places."[10] As the universal Church it must surely comprehend "not only the Christians in the house of Philemon, or any one family; not only the Christians of one congregation, of one city, of one province, or nation; but all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer to the character here given."[11]

We may, therefore, contend that where Christ is not present as Lord, the Church is not present; and a body which does not possess Christ does not possess the fundamental mark of the true Church. Christ is the Life of the Church, its Sustenance, its Growth, and its Unity. It is therefore far more than the mere tool of Christ in the world, for He himself penetrates and animates the Church with His life in a way that no man ever penetrates a tool he is using.

4. Again, the Church is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the habitation of God. Ancient temples were not so much for worship as they were the housing place of the particular deity for which they were built. Worship took place outside the shrine or the temple. And so the Eternal dwelleth not in temples made with hands (Heb. 9:11). It is in His Church that the Almighty dwells and walks about (II Cor. 6:16).

The Church of God is therefore a spiritual entity—a spiritual assembly, a spiritual brotherhood, a spiritual organism, and a spiritual temple. There is no one within the Church but redeemed humanity. Actively it is the organ of Christ’s manifestation to the world, and passively it is the temple or sphere of the Holy Spirit’s operation. Humanly it is comprised of that new race of the redeemed; partakers of the new humanity instituted by Christ and destined for eternal life. "And they that are with him are CALLED, and CHOSEN, and FAITHFUL" (Rev. 17:14, my caps). Blessed and HOLY is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:6, my caps again); that is, throughout the entirety of the church age and its ministry.

No human being is saved, or can be saved, by membership in the visible organization. Salvation is only by personal and vital union with the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, as to the visible manifestation of the Church, Wesley correctly argues that the term church...

... may be taken indifferently for any number of people, however small or great soever. As "where two or three are met together in his name," there is Christ; so (to speak with St. Cyprian), "Where two or three believers are met together, there is a Church." Thus it is that St. Paul, writing to Philemon, mentions "the Church which was in his house"; plainly signifying, that even a Christian family may be termed a Church.[12]

Wesley continues:

Several of those whom God hath called out of the world (so the original word properly signifies), uniting together in one congregation, formed a larger church; as the Church at Jerusalem; that is, all those in Jerusalem whom God had so called. But considering how swiftly these were multiplied, after the day of Pentecost, it cannot be supposed that they could continue to assemble in one place; especially as they had not then any large place, neither would they have been permitted to build one. In consequence they must have divided themselves, even at Jerusalem, into several distinct congregations. In like manner when St. Paul, several years after, wrote to the Church in Rome (directing his letter, "to all that are in Rome, called to be saints"), it cannot be supposed that they had any one building capable of containing them all; but they were divided into several congregations, assembling in several parts of the city.[13]

And he goes on to point out that:

The first time that the Apostle uses the word Church in his preface to the [First] Epistle to the Corinthians: "Paul, called to be an Apostle of Jesus Christ, unto the Church which God which is at Corinth:" The meaning of which expression is fixed by the following words: "To them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus; with all that, in every place," (not Corinth only; so it was a kind of circular letter), "call upon the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." In the inscription to his second letter to the Corinthians, he speaks still more explicitly: "Unto the Church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints that are in all Achaia." Here he plainly includes all the Churches, or Christian congregations, which were in the whole province.[14]

Significant for Wesley is the fact that St. Paul...

..frequently uses the word [Church] in the plural number. So, Gal. 1:2; [reads] "Paul an Apostle,—unto the Churches of Galatia;" that is, the Christian congregations dispersed throughout that country.[15]
Wesley would further note:

In all these places (and abundantly more might be cited), the word Church or Churches means, not the buildings where the Christians assembled (as it frequently does in the English tongue), but the people that used to assemble there, one or more Christian congregations. But sometimes the word Church is taken in Scripture in a still more extensive meaning, as including all the Christian congregations that are upon the face of the earth... In this sense it is unquestionably taken by St. Paul, in his exhortation to the elders of Ephesus: (Acts 20:28) "Take heed to the Church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood." The Church here undoubtedly means the catholic or universal Church; that is, all the Christians under heaven.[16]

It will be seen from the foregoing that the Nazarene declaration about the Church in general is quite in keeping with the teachings of Wesley and Arminius, both of whom claim scriptural grounds for their positions.

[2] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., (Private Disputation 54), II, 132.
[12] Ibid., p. 392.
[14] Ibid., p. 393.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.