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SPECIAL REPORT:
PREPARING FOR GENERAL CONFERENCE:
TRULY RETHINKING CHURCH

*General Conference preparation must — must! — have a theological dimension. Especially General Conference 2016. The following brief essay by Bishop Timothy W. Whitaker (retired) should be considered essential reading in preparing delegates and non-delegates alike for General Conference 2016. As Bp. Whitaker has written in another place: "What it means to be the church. This is the real issue at stake in the dispute in The United Methodist Church concerning human sexuality."
(PTS)*

GOD'S OWN PEOPLE

Bp. Timothy W. Whitaker

"Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

"Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: 'See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.' So you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,' and 'A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall.' They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people; but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge." —I Peter 2:1-12 (NRSV, emphasis added)

ECCLESIOLOGY:

"THE DOCTRINE THAT DEMANDS OUR ATTENTION"

Over the past several decades, many theologians have suggested that the primary doctrinal issue of our era is the doctrine of the church or ecclesiology. During the first five hundred years of church history, the primary issue was the doctrine of the Trinity which is necessarily connected with Christology or the identity of Jesus Christ as the one person who is both truly human and truly divine. The orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and Christology were established by the first four ecumenical councils of the ancient Catholic Church. A thousand years later, the primary doctrinal issue was the doctrine of salvation or soteriology when the Protestant Reformers and the Catholic Church debated the meaning of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Only in our time have Catholics and Protestants formally reconciled their differences in the "Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification." Now, five hundred years after the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine that demands our attention is ecclesiology. What is the meaning of "church," and how should Christians in the many different communions seek to be the church now and in the future?

The original impulse to address the doctrine of the church with fresh vigor arose during the ecumenical movement in the twentieth century. The existence of so many different communions was seen as a scandal and a hindrance to a common Christian witness to the world. My Muslim guide to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem sneered at the division of

the administration of this historic site among competing churches, and he proudly announced to me that, " whereas the Christian churches are divided, we Muslims are all one people." An advance toward an ecumenical understanding of the church was made during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) of the Roman Catholic Church and the publication of "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (1982) by the World Council of Churches. But the search for greater unity among the churches as one worshipping and witnessing communion or koinonia continues.

While the doctrine of the church emerged as an urgent theological issue in the search for visible unity among the many churches, it is now clear that this issue is even more important because of the collapse of Christendom across Europe, North America, and the other westernized regions of the world. The Christian tradition was first assimilated into Greco-Roman culture as early as the fourth century, and, during the medieval period, the Catholic Church dominated the culture and institutions of Europe. While the Protestant churches separated from the Catholic Church, they continued to serve the same role in society that the Catholic Church had served in the regions which were then predominantly Protestant. Within a few hundred years, a process of secularization began by which societies freed themselves from the domination of churches in government and broad dimensions of culture, including the natural sciences and the arts. Even though secularization freed societies from control by churches, the churches were still considered to be the bearers of western ideals and values. Yet even this cultural establishment of the church — the final vestiges of Christendom — began to crumble, first in Europe in the twentieth century and now throughout all westernized societies. Now westernized societies are not only secularized, but also increasingly secular. The churches are no longer seen or valued as the "religion" of the culture, but instead they are viewed by the opinion-makers, especially in the universities and the mass media, as being on the margins of the mainstream of society.

It is the reality of the cultural disestablishment of the churches in westernized societies that really makes the doctrine of the church the crucial issue of our era. Ecumenism is not forgotten because the more all the churches are marginalized in the culture, the more they become aware of how much they have in common and how much they need each other to make a common witness to the world. Even so, what matters the most is how all the churches together should adjust to the new reality of their relation to society. Since churches no longer play the role of being the "religion" of the culture, they are faced with the issue of rethinking their identity and purpose in westernized societies.

"DEFECTIVE DOCTRINES OF THE CHURCH"

There seem to be several responses to this new situation that are being proposed today.

One response to the new reality of the cultural disestablishment of the churches is to try to fit in better by accommodating to the culture. This is the attitude of many Christians who consider themselves to be "progressives."

Another response is to try to alter the new situation by converting the culture so that the churches may once more be the dominant cultural influence. This is the attitude of many evangelicals and others who consider themselves to be "conservatives."

What both of these responses by "progressives" and "conservatives" have in common is an underlying belief or hope that some version of Christendom can be recovered. The "progressives" hope that by accommodating to the culture the churches will be reintegrated into the mainstream of society and continue to serve as the "religion" of the culture. Their accommodation is accompanied by a renewed commitment to strategies that they believe can increase the number and cultural influence of congregations and members. The "conservatives" hope that they can convince many people, including influential opinion-makers, that the root of western societies lies in the Judeo-Christian heritage and that the well-being of society depends upon relying on the churches to provide the ideals and values which will shape the worldview, institutions, and public policies of society. They pray for a "revival" that will restore the church to its former status as the "religion" of the culture.

Everyone knows that today the obvious difference between "progressives" and "conservatives" is manifest in their different attitudes toward all things pertaining to human

sexuality — abortion, the moral boundaries for sexual conduct, the significance of male or female bodiliness for personal identity, and the meaning of marriage. The "progressives" are willing to go a long way to accommodate to the culture on these matters, and the "conservatives" would like to see a cultural conversion to a more traditional Christian approach to these same matters. It seems odd that sex is such a prominent and divisive issue in society and in the church. However, if we think about it, it is obvious that the one thing that matters in a society that is attempting to be free from the legacy of Christendom is freedom to do what one wants with one's sexuality. If we are not free here where things are so personal and physical, then we are not really free to be who we want to be and do what we want to do. Of course, what many people in modern western societies consider "freedom" is quite different from the meaning of freedom according to the gospel of Jesus Christ, where true freedom is to know the truth revealed through Jesus Christ and to be delivered from slavery to sin and death. Israel, Jesus, and the apostles were all concerned about the way we should order our sexual behavior because they knew that sexuality is one of the most basic dimensions of human existence where our understanding of freedom is performed.

Many of us think that neither the response of the "progressives" nor the response of the "conservatives" will work. They will not work partly because they underestimate the hardening of the secularism and pluralism of western societies. Western societies simply no longer want to have any "religion" of the culture in any form. More significantly, they will not work because they have a defective doctrine of the church. Both approaches still presume that the identity and mission of the church is to be the "religion" of the culture. Indeed, one might even say that the cultural disestablishment of the churches is ultimately the manifestation of the will of God in history: while secular opinion-makers rejoice that they are casting away the fetters of the Judeo-Christian heritage, the living God has God's own plan of liberating the churches from their self-understanding and practice of being the "religion" of the culture so that they may become what God intended in the beginning when the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his apostles and constituted the church as "God's own people" (I Peter 2:10) by the power of the Holy Spirit.

NEW TESTAMENT ECCLESIOLOGY

The theological task of the churches today is to develop together a doctrine of the church that is faithful to God's purpose in constituting the church in the beginning. While it requires much fresh international theological exploration, this is not a merely academic endeavor. It requires a reformation of the whole life of the ecumenical church that involves learning together how to be a distinctive and alternative worshiping and witnessing community in the world.

Faithfulness to God's own plan for the identity and mission of the church requires a recovery of the meaning of the church revealed in the New Testament. Across all the writings of the New Testament there is a common understanding of the identity and mission of the church of Jesus Christ. The presentation of the identity and mission of the church in I Peter can be considered to be typical of that of the New Testament as a whole, even though it is also important to recognize the distinctive contributions of other writings in the New Testament.

This epistle was written to churches in what is now the nation of Turkey. The people to whom it was written are told that they are "aliens and exiles" (I Peter 2:11) in the world. They know that this is true because this is the way they are viewed and treated by others in their society. Besides being a sociological fact, their status as "aliens and exiles" is really the result of their call from God when they believed in Jesus Christ and were baptized. God called them to be a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people." (I Peter 2:9) Like the ancient people of Israel, the church understands itself as "God's own people" who are set apart from all other peoples by offering themselves as servants of God and living holy lives in accordance with God's good will.

The identity and mission of the church in the New Testament is that of a distinctive, alternative people in the world who view the world and live their lives according to the revelation and salvation of God that have been accomplished through Jesus Christ. What would

this doctrine of the church look like in practice for churches in westernized societies today and in the future?

WHAT CHURCHES SHOULD LOOK LIKE

For one thing, the recovery of a New Testament vision of the church would mean that the church understands itself according to the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than according to its status in the culture. This recognition would completely reorient churches that have been accustomed to thinking of themselves as the "religion" of the culture. No longer would they assume that who they are depends on what the society around them thinks of them. Instead, their one aim becomes being what God thinks of them.

Moreover, the recovery of a New Testament vision of the church would mean that the way of life practiced by Christians has to be distinctive and different from that of the people around them. Christians experience continual renewal by worshiping the one God who is the communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; they live their lives as members of a community of faith and love; they honor the vocation of the marriage of a man and woman as the representation of the union of Christ with his Church and for the purpose of rearing their offspring as gifts of God and as persons created in God's image and redeemed from slavery to sin and death through Jesus Christ; they also honor the vocation of celibate singleness; they resist consumerism and the vulgarities of popular culture; and they freely embrace their distinctiveness in the world as a liberation from the deceptions and destructive behaviors celebrated by the world around them.

While they consider themselves being distinctive from the rest of society and live differently from most of the people around them, at the same time they do not despise the world nor the people around them. They pray for "the emperor" — the ruling authorities — even when these authorities may desire to shame them or even to prevent them from being who they are. They welcome all persons as they are into their worship and communal activities, and invite them to be instructed in the beliefs and behaviors of Christians and to be baptized into the church. They are ready to serve the world in the face of every need, especially in times of personal, social, and natural disasters. They do what the church has always done by serving the poor, the sick, and those in prison. Their greatest appeal to those outside the church is their "honorable deeds" (I Peter 2:12) among those who are not Christians, even when those outside the church malign them for their beliefs and behaviors. They claim their freedom to speak to the whole society as Christian witnesses, recognizing that their witness may at times reinforce their marginal status rather than change the society, but also trusting that the Spirit of God is capable of using their courageous witness in surprising ways that affect the world.

It would be naive to expect all churches today to relinquish their attachment to some vestige of Christendom. Habits of mind do not die easily, especially when they have been institutionalized. We may expect that some churches with different approaches to the culture will persist to some degree or another for an indefinite period of time. In the immediate future, they will try to shape their identities around the way they choose to respond to the new attitudes in westernized societies toward matters of sexuality by either accommodating to the culture or by trying to convert it.

In the long term, we can count on events to disabuse most Christians from trying to reconstruct some imagined new form of Christendom. Westernized societies will continue to act in ways that will make it clear that they relegate the churches to the margins of society. In these events, God will be present to exercise God's own judgment and grace toward "God's own people." But if the New Testament is to be believed, then the future of the ecumenical church will look a lot more like the early church than the church most of us alive today have ever known. The church whose future is assured by the living God will learn to be a people that is distinctive in its identity from others in the culture and lives an alternative way of life in the larger culture while loving the world and all peoples, praying for the world, serving the world, and inviting people of all ethnic groups and social classes to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord and to become a part of "God's own people."

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