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God's Presence in the Church: A Critique of Extant Ecclesiological Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

The doctrine of the church has continued to generate interest among scholars since the early history of Christian theology. This interest has been facilitated by the fact that this doctrine is one that touches on several other doctrines such as the doctrines of God, Christ, Holy Spirit, humanity, salvation and eschatology. A prominent approach in ecclesiological discussions is the use of analogy in describing the church. This is because, often times, complex issues get clarified by the use of analogies. This article reviews a number of the different analogies that have been used to describe the church and finds them deficient in capturing the depth of God's relationship with the church. The article argues that a correct understanding of the nature of the church entails locating God in the church as a member and the head of the church. The nature of the church is not fully comprehended when God is not located within the church as its center and head. Other studies of the church ignore this important fact of the unity of God with the church. It is not enough only to emphasize the roles of God in the church which could leave room for perceiving God as a detached controller of the church. This article presents God contrary to this perception, as being in the church, the head of the church, indeed, a member of the church who orders and runs the church from within.

Keywords: Analogy, Church, Ecclesiology, God, Trinity.

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1.0 Introduction

Ecclesiology may be described as a well travelled path in the history of Christian theology. From the patristic period until now Christians have continued to reflect on the church and on its place in Christian thought. While these discussions have centered on various aspects of the church most of it have revolved around the nature and mission of the church. Whether one is reading the church fathers (Bausch, 1987, 377), the Reformers (Kerr, 1943, 123) or Vatican II documents (Flannery, 1987, 359), the doctrine of the church has continued to generate discussions among Christian scholars. These discussions have engendered different views about the church. For instance, while liberal theology tended to see the church as an association of like-minded persons to maintain order and achieve common interests (Kent, 1980, 534), Karl Barth's emphasis on the transcendence of God reintroduced the supernatural element in discussions on the church (Grenz and Olson, 1992, 65). The founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as the missionary movement which necessitated it again brought to the fore questions about the nature of the church (Minear, 1960). Today, with the proliferation of denominations and different ideas of church including the homogenous principle (Fong, 1996; Marti, 2015), the question remains as to what really the church is. Although much progress has been made in this theological inquiry, one observes a lacuna as ecclesiological discussions so far have not adequately captured the nature of God's relationship with the church. The concern of this article is to show that the closeness and intimacy of God's relationship with the church has not been adequately portrayed by theologians thus giving rise to serious inadequacies in the understanding of the church. I will propose a view of this relationship that, I think, helps supply the missing link in contemporary ecclesiology.

This article utilizes the historical research approach. Gary McCulloch (2011, 248) describes the historical research method as useful in three related areas. First, it facilitates insights into the past. Second, it reveals processes of change and continuity over time, including "the contestation and negotiation that is involved in these"... contexts (McCulloch, 2011, 248). Third, historical research, according to McCulloch, helps explain current structures, relationships and behaviors by delving into their origins in the context of recent and longer term trends. Similarly, this article attempts to state and discuss previous ways the doctrine of the church has been presented especially in terms of the analogies that have been used to portray the church. This will engage our attention in the first main section of the article. In the second section, an attempt is made to present via analogy of clan a view of the church that ameliorates the deficiencies in previous portrayals of the church earlier presented. The article concludes with some implications that arise from a proper conception of God's presence in the church.

2.0 Historical paradigms in the understanding of the church

The following are some of the ways in which the church has been understood over the years. The views discussed here are by no means exhaustive. Rather, they represent the general pattern in which the nature of the church has been conceived over the years.

2.01 Political society

Early in the history of Christianity the church was viewed as a political society. From around the second century A.D, some heretical groups arose within the church. Two of these groups were led by Montanus and Novatian, even Tertulian at some point was influenced by montanism (Robert and Robertson, 1951, 5). Montanus pronounced himself the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit and taught the imminent end of the world. Novatian propounded an understanding of the Trinity, which presented the Son and the Holy Spirit as inferior to the Father (Novatian, 1951, 611-644). The rise of these groups partly necessitated the conception of the church as an external institution ruled by a bishop as a direct successor of the apostles, and in possession of the true tradition. This tendency to emphasize the external character of the church continued throughout the patristic period leading to emphasis on the primacy of Rome.

The political society model, although having roots from the second century, was officially formulated by Cardinal Bellarmine (1542 –1621). Bellarmine viewed the church as:

The community of men bound together by the profession of the same Christian faith and by the communion of the same sacraments under the government of legitimate pastors and principally of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff (Bausch, 1989, 377).

This analogy derives the appellation “political society” from Bellarmine’s addition that the church is ‘as visible and palpable as the community of the Roman people, or the kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice’ (Dulles, 1976, 31). This understanding of the church excludes unbelievers by the clause ‘profession of the same Christian faith’. It excludes Catechumens and those that are excommunicated by the use of sacraments. It also excludes from the Church schismatics such as the Greek Christians and Protestants by the phrase “obedience to the Roman Pontiff”.

The political society analogy places emphasis on the institutional character of the church. It presents the church simply as a visible social entity, totally ignoring its spiritual nature. Thus, its thorough institutional approach coupled with its exclusive tendencies make it a deficient expression of the nature of the church.

2.02 Mystical body of Christ

Another analogy presents the church as the mystical body of Christ. The mystical body analogy stresses the things that are missing in the political society model. It stresses the idea that the church is not just an organization, it is an organism, and it is alive. The church lives from the fact that Christ is in our hearts (Ratzinger, 2001). Each member of the church is important since as a part of Christ’s body, he or she has spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit to contribute to the overall well being of the body.

One of the people in recent times to adopt the mystical body image is Anders Nygren. In his use of this analogy, Nygren develops a Christology, which emphasizes the messiahship of Christ as being the content of the gospel, and only then does he move to discuss the church as the body of Christ. He premises that ecclesiology is a direct consequence of Christology for “there is no Christ without the church – no church without Christ, a view he also expresses in an earlier publication (Nygren, 1957, and Nygren, 1952, 89). By stating the relationship between Christ and the church in this way, Nygren means: “The church is Christ as he is present among and meets us upon earth after his resurrection” (Nygren, 1957, 96). The presence of Christ is mediated through the word and the sacraments and the church has the responsibility to be “Christ” in the world and to carry on with his ministry to the world (Nygren, 1957, 96).

The analogy of mystical body of Christ introduces a certain amount of freshness and zest to the understanding of the church. It frees the concept of church from being understood simply as an organization. It portrays the relationship, which exists between Christ and the church, as well as the fact that the life of the church is a given life.

However, the benefits of the body analogy are weakened by its failure to recognize the Trinitarian foundation of the church (see Clowney, 1995, 27, 37, 49), giving rise to a tendency that fails to acknowledge the involvement of other members of the Trinity in the church. Second, the analogy makes it difficult to show the connection between God’s redemptive work in the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a direct line that runs through the Old and New Testaments, namely, the idea that God is gathering to himself a people among whom he will dwell and through whom his glory will be portrayed. There is need to present the church in a way that will crystallize this truth. Third, Nygren’s emphasis that the church is Christ as he is present on earth is problematic in that it tends to lead to the deification of the church. The church is ‘deified’ when it is equated with Christ and every criticism against it is understood as a criticism against Christ (Ratzinger, 2001).

2.03 Communion of Saints

The reformers (e.g. Martin Luther and John Calvin) viewed the church as the communion of saints. Luther, for instance, writes of the church thus:

I believe that there is on earth, through the whole wide world, no more than one holy, common, Christian church, which is nothing else than the congregation, or assembly of the Saints i.e. the pious, believing men on earth which is gathered, preserved and ruled by the Holy Ghost, and daily increased by means of the sacraments and the word of God (Kerr, 1943, 123).

Luther was concerned to maintain the unity of the church in spite of the escalation of the plurality, which the reformation had produced. In view of the plurality of denominations that had resulted, the unity of the church was not served by the use of the institutional model, which recognizes only those churches in fellowship with Rome. Thus, Luther points to the spiritual nature of the church when he defines it as a “congregation of Saints”. This line of thought is reflected in the Augsburg Confession adopted in 1530 by the Lutheran church (Augsburg Confession, 1959, 24). According to this confession, the church is not an external society with a visible head, the essence of the church is to be found in the sphere of the invisible, that is, in faith, communion with Christ and in participation in the blessings of salvation through the Holy Spirit (Augsburg Confession, 1959, 32).

John Calvin had a similar idea of the church. He sees the church as a communion of saints:

Collected out of all nations, who though dispersed and far distant from each other, agree in one truth of divine doctrine, and are bound together by the tie of a common religion. In this way it comprehends single churches, which exist in different towns and villages, according to the wants of human society, so that each of them justly obtains the name and the authority of the church (Calvin, 1989, 289).

By identifying members of the church upon agreement ‘in one truth of divine doctrine’ and ‘common religion’, Calvin sought to free the concept of church from institutional imprisonment. He thus, hoped by this, to obtain for the reformation churches, the ‘name and authority of the church’.

The Reformation analogy was helpful in freeing the church from the extreme institutional garb, which the Roman Catholic model had placed upon it. It made it possible for churches that were not in fellowship with Rome to be considered church in the true sense of the word. However, presenting the church as the congregation of the saints, does not adequately account for the presence of God in the church. The church is not merely a human community. To view the church this way tends to suggest that it is simply an association of like-minded persons, or of persons who have similar persuasions. On the contrary, it is important to view the church as a community in which God has brought humans into an intimate union with himself. This perspective will serve to put the boundaries of the church beyond denominational lines, and yet maintain the important notion of God’s union with his people.

2.04 People of God

The people of God was the image adopted by the Second Vatican Council to describe the church (Flannery, 1987, 359, 515, 998-999). In the aftermath of the criticisms that trailed the image of body of Christ, especially its identification with the Roman Catholic Church, people of God represents an opening up of Catholic ecclesiology as non-Catholic Christians could now be described as “in communion” with the Church. Writing along this same line, Ernst Kasemann, viewed the church as the people of God. Kasemann particularly gave this model a pilgrim focus when he presented the church as the wandering people of God (Kasemann, 1984, 17). He sees this as the overriding theme of the letter to the Hebrews:

Hebrews intends to show the Christian community, the greatness of the promise given it, and the seriousness of the temptation threatening it. For this reason, it sets before its eyes

the picture of Israel's wandering through the wilderness. From such typology the possibilities of Christian existence can be perceived (Kasemann, 1984, 17).

Like Israel, the promise given to the church is to be the bearer of the divine revelation, which requires the church to assume the posture of a wanderer (Kasemann, 1984, 20). The 'temptation threatening' the church according to Kasemann, is the 'weariness and weakness of faith' (Kasemann, 1984, 25).

Kasemann understands the danger facing the church and that which confronted the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews as the same. However, by presenting it as 'weariness and weakness of faith', he deviates from the usual understanding of what the threat in Hebrews consisted of. Traditionally, the recipients of Hebrews have been thought to be confronting the danger of apostasy towards Judaism (Kasemann, 1984, 24). Kasemann thinks the danger confronting the recipients of Hebrews is the temptation to become lax and cold in faith and in hope regarding the promise. The writer encouraged the believers to maintain their pace in the wandering through the waste lands of this world. However, the fate which befell the community in the Old Covenant – that is, rejection of the entire people, is not going to be repeated in the New Covenant. The danger now continually threatens only the individual member who is constantly called upon to remain among Christ's companions and to preserve the initial firmness to the end. Thus, Kasemann affirms the observation that this analogy emphasizes the concept of the Church as a community.

The church as the new people of God, following the Old Testament concept of this community as it does, highlights the communal elements of the church. It is also an ecumenical model which can help us to see all believers as part of this 'people'. However, the "people of God" as used by Kasemann does not effectively capture the true nature of the church. By presenting the church only as a people belonging to God, the impression created is that God is aloof from the church and that the church is related to him like a property. This, therefore, is not efficient in presenting the church as a community in which God and humans are members.

In the second place, Kasemann's view of the church as the wandering people of God raises a further problem. The problem is the word 'wandering' which gives the impression of aimlessness or lack of direction. It is true that the church is a community en-route to perfection and consummation, but this journey is not an aimless, directionless wandering through the wastelands. The church is on a journey, it is true, but the journey is guided and directed by God who is in the church. Thus, for all its benefits, the people of God analogy does not fully capture the essence of the church.

2.05 Servant

A number of theologians have presented the church as servant. According to Dulles, the servant concept of the church is traceable to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dulles, 1976, 87). In this work, Bonhoeffer presents Christ as the man for others and proceeds to call on the church to become a servant church sharing in the problems of human life, not dominating, but helping and serving, after the example of Christ (Bonhoeffer, 1953, 166). Writing against the background of the struggles of the Confessing Church in Germany with Nazism, and informed by his own conception of Christianity as a selfless faith, Bonhoeffer sees the church as given to the service of needy humanity. The church, like Christ, is a servant, and this it must be even if it entails physical danger or harm. For Bonhoeffer, it is by living for others that the church discovers its true identity (Bonhoeffer, 1963, 40-41).

The ecclesiology of active social involvement is also canvassed by liberation theologians. At Medellin, Colombia in 1968, the Latin American bishops meeting there proclaimed that the church should exercise a preferential option for the poor. The Liberation theology which developed afterwards is an expression of this proclamation. It is an attempt to interpret the Bible and Christianity from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. One of the movement's most erudite exponents, Leonardo

Boff, writes of the commitment to the liberation of the poor and oppressed as one of the true marks of the church (Boff, 1985, 117).

James H. Cone, who applied the same theological principles to the situation of African Americans in North America, writes in a similar vein. For instance, he defines the church as that community which has received 'the power of God unto salvation', which makes it impossible for them 'to sit as their neighbors are herded off to prison camps' (Cone, 1990, 129, also Bonino, 1975, 157-173). For him, participation in the historical liberation of the oppressed is the defining characteristic of the church. He presents the task in three ways (Cone, 1990, 130-131). First, the church is to proclaim the reality of divine liberation or freedom. In the second place, the church not only proclaims the message but also actively shares in the liberation struggle. Thirdly, the church as a fellowship is of necessity expected to be a visible manifestation of the reality that the gospel means freedom. Cone wants to show that the church cannot refrain from getting involved in the struggles of the oppressed peoples and still remain the church. Thus, it must proclaim the gospel of liberation, actively participate in the struggle, and itself be a genuine representation of truly liberated people in order to be the church in a true sense (Cone, 1990, 38).

The understanding of the church as servant makes an important point by calling attention to the fact that the church needs to be sensitive to human suffering and pain. It was used to rouse the church from the slumber of self-sufficiency and apathy, and to make it more responsive to the needs around it. However, the understanding of the church, which this model presents, raises some problems. First, it reverses the movement by arriving at the church's nature via its mission. The church is called to service but this service derives from the kind of community it is. Its true nature gives both meaning and direction to its service. Without first resolving the issue of what the church is, it becomes difficult to define what is, and what is not the true sphere of the church's role. Liberation theology, it seems to me, decides the issue of the church's mission and only after that does it seek to determine what the church is. Second, the peculiar political inclination of liberation theology creates an additional problem. The church has a duty towards the poor and the oppressed, but what are its responsibilities to other segments of society. The Marxist ideology that feeds this theological viewpoint skews its conception of societal need that the church is called upon to meet.

Undoubtedly, all of the ecclesiological patterns presented above have some things to contribute to our understanding of the church. Each analogy provides an angle to our conception of the church that others do not. There is, however, an aspect of the church's nature that all of them put together have not effectively conveyed. This will be the concern of the rest of this essay.

3.0 A new paradigm in the understanding of the Church

Vincent J. Donovan, years ago, reported of the Massai in East Africa who chose to call the church *Orporor L'Engai*, the age group brotherhood: 'The age group brotherhood, the Orporor, the most sacred notion in their culture. It was a word that could grip their hearts, set their hearts on fire, the single most important value in their tribe. And they had chosen it as the word for church' (Donovan, 2003, 71). Donovan goes on to make a convincing argument that the full potentials of Christianity will not be appreciated until and unless it is rediscovered in its non-Western encounter.

Similarly, I propose here that an adequate understanding of the nature of the church entails locating God in the church as a member. The nature of the church is not fully comprehended when God is not located within the church as its center and life. The notion of God's membership of the church being spoken of here can be illustrated with the analogy of clan. Like Donovan discovered among the Massai, there may be value in using such cultural symbols to describe our perception of the Christian faith.

This, however, is not the first time the analogy of clan will be used to describe the church. John Mary Waliggo, (1990, 111-127) used it to critique the hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church which he considered the weakest point in the structural organization of the Church at the universal, national

and diocesan levels (116). For Waliggo, understanding the church as a clan creates room for the involvement of all segments of the church in the decisions and policies of the church and also modifies the manner in which church leaders are chosen (125). Waliggo is right in using the clan concept to advocate change in the structural organization of the Catholic Church. Indeed, the analogy is valuable for emphasizing collective involvement in the church. However, the clan analogy can do much more to our understanding of the church than Waliggo's use of it. I argue here that this analogy can deepen our understanding of God's union with the church. Thus, the major difference between the use of the clan analogy in this article and Waliggo's usage is that here the emphasis is on God's involvement with and participation (membership) in the church.

Olatunde Odetola and Ade Ademola, define clan as "a group of people, male and female, who are believed to have descended in the male line from a common ancestor and share the same totemic and other ritual observances" (Odetola and Ademola, 1987, 43). Similarly, Victor Barnouw defines clan as "a unilineal descent group whose members believe they are related to one another through descent from a common ancestor or ancestress" (Barnouw, 1975, 404). The two definitions above, point to common descent as a crucial characteristic of the clan.

Common origin suggests that clan members see themselves as children of the same parents. This understanding implies a biological tie which holds the members together. Such a tie shows clan members as related to each other at the deepest level of human relationship. It presents the connection that exists among them as arising from tracing their roots to a common origin. The common origin of clan members portrays the founder of the clan, the one by whom connection to the clan is defined, as a member of the clan as well. He is the foremost member of the clan and it is by him that other members are named. The analogy of clan also reveals that the founder of a clan is the necessary head and leader of the clan throughout his lifetime; every member of the clan looks up to him for direction and guidance. Issues are referred to him, and he determines the way the clan goes. Only after the death of the clan founder can another leader emerge to replace him. But as long as the founder is alive, there is no question as to who the head of the clan is.

The fact that the founder of a clan is himself a member of the clan is often easily glossed over, but it is vital in explaining the clan as analogy for the church. The reason it cannot be ignored is that the proper apprehension of this fact will transform our understanding of God's union and participation with the church. The analogy helps to illustrate the idea that the church is a universal clan which God is building around himself, comprising individuals to whom he has given birth through faith in Jesus Christ and who are indwelt and sustained by the Holy Spirit. To present the church in this way opens a floodgate of fresh ideas regarding the church's unity with God and God's headship of the church. By emphasizing the intimate union which exists between God and the church, the clan analogy deepens our understanding of the unity and fellowship which ought to exist among believers. Similarly, the analogy illustrates God's headship of the church. God heads the clan which he founded, that is, the church. Unlike the founders of other clans, God is immortal and eternal (Erickson, 2013, 244-246); hence he is a member of the clan in perpetuity and the head of the clan in perpetuity. His membership, headship and control over the church never end. God's membership and headship over the church is thus definitive in understanding what the church is. The notion of God's membership of the church is predicated on certain theological bases.

First, the idea that God is a member of the church is based on the nature of God as a relational being. God's relationality is conveyed by the doctrine of the Trinity. The idea that God is a Trinity is a core concept in Christian theology. A term coined by Tertullian but clearly discernible in Scripture, the church has consistently upheld the notion of God as a Trinity of one divinity as the bedrock of Christian belief ("Nicene Creed", 1956, 3; and Kasper, 1986, 316). The Trinitarian notion places the concept of relationality and community in the being of God. Stanley Grenz admits this when he writes: "Throughout eternity, God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the community of love" (Grenz, 1994, 628). Colin Gunton has also pursued a trinitarian ecclesiology in a different but complimentary way. Following the Cappadocian fathers he sees the relationship in the triune God as perichoretic in nature such that

the roles of subordination are not fixed but flexible. Gunton consequently views the trinity as the eternal and free communion of Father, Son and Spirit (Gunton, 1989, 69). Gunton's analysis affirms, among other things, the idea that God, by nature, is a relational being. God's relational character manifested with the creation of humans. God created humans to have fellowship with him. When this fellowship was ruptured by sin, God began the process for restoring humans to himself (Dearborn, 2003, 39-73; Volf, 1998, 198-200).

That God is a relational being is also manifest in the way that he related with Israel. God elected Israel to be his people and revealed himself to them: 'I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God' (Ex. 6: 7, NIV). This divine declaration is interesting because God did not elect to be their God from a distance; rather, he is the God who is in the midst of his people (Ex. 33: 3 – 16). God's dwelling in the midst of his people is an emphasis that recurs in the Old Testament (For instance, Ex. 33: 3 – 16; Deut. 23: 14; Ps. 46: 5; Is. 12: 6; Jer. 14: 9; Ez. 37: 26 – 28; Hos. 11: 9; Joel 2: 27; Zeph. 3: 5).

The idea that God is a member of the church is also based on the doctrine of incarnation. The incarnation represents for us the highest expression of God's desire to dwell in the midst of his people. To the extent that Jesus is Immanuel (that is, God in our midst), we can say that in Jesus God became 'one of us', identifying with us in a concrete way. In his prayer for the church prior to the crucifixion, Jesus made more obvious what before then seemed only apparent: 'That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us ... (John 17: 21, NIV).

The above passage is usually cited in support of the unity of believers while ignoring the idea of the believers' unity with God (Reymond, 1998, 839; Grudem, 1994, 876). However, God's unity with the church is a major idea in the treatment of the nature of the church. Jesus expresses here what has always been the bedrock of God's redemptive programme namely, the restoration to himself of a people among whom he will dwell. This is found in God's dealing with Israel. It is also clearly manifested in the incarnation.

The notion of God's membership of the church is also based on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Before his passion, Jesus spoke to his disciples about the Holy Spirit whom '... the world cannot accept ... because it neither sees him nor knows him, but you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you' (John 14:17). Jesus spoke of his going but promised he will not leave them like orphans. His promise to return to them (cf. John 14: 18 – 19) was fulfilled in the coming of the Holy Spirit, who today is 'God in our midst'. The Holy Spirit lives in every believer (cf. John 14:17; Eph. 4: 30; 5:18) thus making God's unity with his people more dramatic than ever before. Indeed, God's unity with his people is a truth that needs to be emphasized at all times.

It is pertinent to add here that God's membership in the church is not to be understood as suggesting human equality with God. God's membership in the church is not an ontological membership, but rather a relational one. To assert God's membership ontologically will be wrong since God, as he is in himself, is ontologically transcendent of all humans (Erickson, 2013, 285). The members of the Trinity share among themselves a sameness of essence or being in which humans do not and cannot participate ("Nicene Creed", 1956, 3; Smail, 1987, 56 and Torrence, 2001).

Still, the doctrine of God's transcendence, which emphasizes God's distinction from humans, has a counterpart in the doctrine of God's immanence which emphasizes God's presence within creation (Berkhof, 1958, 41). Besides his presence in creation, God is clearly a personal God. By "personal" is meant his character as a relational God. God lives among his people, interacts with them, speaks and listens to them and responds to their prayers and worship. God's personal and relational attributes are demonstrated in his action of bringing a people to himself, among whom he lives and through whom he accomplishes his purpose in the world.

Relationally, therefore, God can be understood as a member of the church. This seems to be the clearest way to capture the truth that God lives in the midst of his people and indwells them through

the Holy Spirit (Kirkpatrick, 2003, 62). God's membership in the church serves to express in a vivid way God's unity with the church. God is not related to the church from a distance. The church does not belong to him like a property. Rather, in the church God has brought men and women to himself and he lives among them. As they journey through life, the members of the church are guided by God who is in the midst of them. Beyond this life, God receives them into glory. Thus, God's unity with the church or his presence in the church is what makes the church different from other human institutions. For, contrary to other human organizations (Brunner, 1952, 10), the church is the community which God has built around himself and in it both God and humans have been united.

4.0 Conclusion

Several implications emerge from the emphasis on God's union with the church. This emphasis is crucial because without it the nature of the church cannot be adequately understood. The church has its origin in God and in his purpose in bringing humans to himself. God's presence, in fact, membership of the church, is so crucial in the understanding of the church that once it is destroyed other aspects of the church such as its unity and mission become hollow.

Thus, the idea of God's union with the church gives depth to our understanding of the nature and mission of the church. Presenting this union in a Trinitarian way helps us account for the involvement of the three members of the Godhead in the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose for humans. The Trinitarian emphasis also helps explain or include all of God's redemptive activity through different epochs of human history. It can, therefore, be said that the church as God's community now includes all God's people in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Emphasizing God's union with the church also deepens the traditional ideas of the oneness and holiness of the church. By 'oneness' is usually meant ecumenical unity of the church. How can we justify the claim that the church is one in spite of denominational, cultural and social differences among believers? The answer is found in the idea that the church is God's clan, comprising all of God's children from every denomination, tribe and language. Thus, human distinctions of denomination, tribe, race, language and social class are surpassed. Understanding the church in this way also reveals the inherent dangers in the principle that seeks to plant churches along ethnic lines, thereby casting in stone a difference that has been surpassed. As I have argued more extensively elsewhere, the homogenous unit principle is counter-productive in terms of achieving ethnic integration so much needed in the church today (Enyinnaya, 2011, 183-187).

The holiness of the church is used to indicate the inner and external purity of the members of the church. Sometimes, the idea of the church's holiness is difficult to understand in view of the human limitations and imperfections we so often observe within the church. God's union with the church throws light on the church's holiness. If it were for the human members of the church, the church will not be holy. But God is in the midst of the church, purifying, building and guiding the church to its eschatological end.

Finally, God's union with the church makes it imperative for all the members of the church to make effort to treat one another as brothers and sisters, irrespective of denominational, social or racial differences. The forcefulness of the notions of unity, communality and fellowship do not emerge when viewed only as socially appropriate things to do. That God is in the church, building and guiding it, makes it a divine mandate for all God's people to collaborate with God in making the church truly one under the headship and guidance of God.

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