

The Exercise of Our Churchly Character: A Modest Proposal
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Introduction

Albert Outler, in closing his seminal essay “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?,” reminds Methodists that, regardless of our own anti-institutional bent that makes us want to be a movement rather than a church, “since we *are* a church” we must “act responsibly in the exercise of our churchly character.”¹ In this paper I will propose that one step toward “exercising our churchly character” is to meaningfully engage our historic norms for articulating a doctrine of the church, namely, the Nicene Creed and Article XIII of the Articles of Religion.

After introducing the issue in the first section, we will turn to the ecclesiological claims of the Nicene Creed followed by the Reformation articulation of a doctrine of the church expressed in Article XIII. The fourth section will examine the Methodist use of both formulations. In the closing section I will offer a modest proposal.

I. Methodist Ecclesiology

United Methodists regularly engage in hand-wringing about whether we have a coherent doctrine of the church or even have one at all. The title of Outler’s essay almost 50 years ago says it well, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” Many have traced the movement of Methodism from society to church, often unfortunately limited by Troeltch’s categories, but rightly pointing to the distance in which current Methodism

¹ Albert C. Outler, “Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?” in *The Doctrine of the Church*, ed. Dow Kirkpatrick. Abingdon Press, 1964, 27-28.

stands from its historical roots as a *provisional* movement.² Much of the literature on ecclesiology of the last half century could be summarized as: “We are deeply ambivalent, even confused, about our ecclesiology. We have a rich heritage. We began as reform movement *ad interim*. We better figure it out!”³

At the same time, our denominational documents offer two key loci for an understanding of the nature of the church. The first is the Nicene Creed, published in the *United Methodist Hymnal* and used, though not widely, in worship. The second is Article XIII of the Articles of Religion published in *The Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, and largely neglected by most United Methodists.⁴ Still, however dormant, these two formulations have fueled competing ecclesiologies, each of which comes from and speaks to particular historical locations in the church’s witness. The first formulation is a confession, proclaiming the marks of the church: one, holy, apostolic and universal. The second formulation is descriptive, the church is that place where the word is purely

² Outler describes the Wesleys’ understanding “their enterprise as the effort to meet an emergency situation with needful, extraordinary measures. . . .the ‘emergency’ has lengthened and the ‘emergency crew’ has acquired the character of an establishment.” 27. Cartwright claims that the strength of Asbury’s statement “We were a church and no church” lies in the tension of the both/and. Cartwright goes on to convict current Methodism embracing only the former component of the phrase, conveniently forgetting that we were ever “no church.” Cartwright, “The pathos and promise of American Methodist ecclesiology,” *Asbury Theological Journal* 47 Spr 1992, p 5-25. Also see Geoffrey Wainwright, “Methodism’s ecclesial location and ecumenical vocation.” *One in Christ* 19, no. 2, 1983, p. 133; William J. Abraham, “Judicial Council Decision 1032 and Ecclesiology” p. 53, fn. 6.

³ While this is an unfair reduction and caricature of the conversation, it gets at the spirit of much of it. In addition to Cartwright, Wainwright, Abraham also see M. Percy, “Back to the future: a search for a thoroughly modern Methodist ecclesiology,” in *Unmasking Methodist Theology*, ed. Clive Marsh, Continuum, 2004; Owen Cummings, “John Wesley and Eucharistic Ecclesiology,” *One in Christ* 35 no 2 1999, p 143-151; William Abraham, “I Believe in On Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church,” in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism* ed Christopher R. Seitz. Brazos Press, 2001; David Carter, “A Methodist Contribution to Ecclesiology.” *One in Christ* 30 no 2 1994, p 161-175; H. Ray Dunning, “Toward a Wesleyan Ecclesiology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22, Spri 1987, 112-117; Greg Jones, “What Makes ‘United Methodist Theology’ Methodist?” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity* ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence. Abingdon, 1997, 88; Bruce Robbins, “Connection and *Koinonia*: Wesleyan and Ecumenical Perspectives on the Church” ?” in *Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission and Identity* ed. Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, William B. Lawrence. Abingdon, 1997, 210f.

⁴ See Appendix for text of each.

preached and the sacraments duly administered. The former an ontological claim and the latter more functional statement.

Each formulation, the Nicene Creed and Article XIII, emerges in a particular historical moment in the development of doctrine: the fourth century and the sixteenth, respectively. Each context offers its own crises and insights. We will not explore all of them here. However, a brief review of historical and theological context of each may help illuminate the appropriation of them within Methodism.

We must remember that the doctrine of the church is not foremost in either of these historical locations, the early or the reforming church. As Outler aptly puts it, “Christians do not think unless they absolutely have to.” Christians of all periods simply take for granted the practices and teachings in which they have been enculturated as self-evidently authorized. Only when controversy appears are Christians required to think through the rationale, theological and ecclesial, for practices and teachings. Perhaps even Outler would admit, however, that in each of these historical moments Christians were doing plenty of thinking, though not about constructing an ecclesiology.

In the early church energy is focused on the development of key theological claims and arguments regarding the nature and work of Christ and the Trinity. In the reforming church, attention was focused on the theological development of claims regarding the nature of sin and grace, one’s agency in salvation and justification by grace through faith. Understandably, the questions surrounding these teachings created urgent, even crisis, conditions that required the full resources of those involved. Still, when the dust settles, all of these substantive theological matters beg the question: who can decide matters of faith, and by what authority? This question, in turn, begs the questions of

where authority resides in the body of Christ, and what is its ground? Only by engaging these questions does the church turn its attention to the nature and work of the church in each of these historical moments. And so, in the early church, it is not until nearly the fifth century that ecclesiology becomes a central concern. For the reformers, it is not the first generation but the second that will most potently take on the construction of a coherent ecclesiology in light of the profound ruptures occurring in the sixteenth century.

II. The Nicene Creed: 4 Marks of Church

For the first five centuries of developing Christianity, the Christological and Trinitarian controversies dominated doctrinal conversation, though not nearly so rarified as the terms suggest. These controversies occurred on the ground, in the concrete lives of real Christians struggling to be faithful. While creedal formulations were produced, the seedbed grew other conversations, too, and certainly the nature and work of the church was at the root of most of them. We might say that the nature and work of the church was so foundational, so embedded, as to not need articulation for some time. Indeed the Council at Nicea did not address the nature of the church in their creed. At Constantinople in 381, the predominantly eastern council articulated four marks of the church: one, holy, apostolic and catholic, now part of the creed.

Of course, these marks of the church emerge from a context of conflict and dispute about the content of the faith, the locus of authority, the canon and the monepiscopate. This landscape of early Christianity is littered with the remnants of Montanism, Marcionism, Gnosticism and Arianism as well as the writings of Hippolytus, Cyprian and Ignatius of Antioch on the nature of the church. All of these movements and

conflicts addressed, in one way or another, the nature and mission of the church. I will briefly treat each of the four marks as each spoke to the crises of the early church.

One

Concern for unity begins as early as Paul and is reiterated forcefully in Ignatius' letters. Ignatius hardly addresses the holiness of the church but returns to unity over and over throughout his letters. Oneness of the body was by no means an empirical reality at any time. Schism was a constant and serious threat, perhaps more so than heresy, to the church. We hear in Cyprian an anxiety about de facto schism as he deals with the lapsed.⁵ By the fourth century, oneness as a mark of the church is a longing professed. The oneness of the church is not a romantic claim about the church. Early Christians were too clear-eyed for such. Neither is oneness a goal to be achieved in the future. This claim is ontological, oneness is a deep reality that must be claimed again and again in the face of empirical evidence otherwise.

We do see increasing concern throughout the early church about whether the oneness of the faith can be known through oneness of doctrine. The question of whether doctrinal agreement is constitutive of the church's unity is a live question throughout the history of Christianity. Confusion of doctrinal agreement with church unity pervades many conflicts and crises.

Holy

Like oneness, holiness as a mark of the church is problematic at best. While there are brief moments in the early church's life when claims to holiness were made, they are

⁵ Cyprian, *On the Lapsed*.

increasingly rare.⁶ Holiness is a mark of the church as the body of Christ, not of its individual members. Augustine clarifies this in the Donatist controversy. The Donatists insist that holiness resides in purity of clergy and, thereby, sacraments. Augustine shifts the mark of holiness away from direct evidence. Because of the mystery of predestination, the empirical outlines of the church do not contain all the elect and, correspondingly, contains those who were not elect.⁷ The nature of the church as a mixed body (*per mixtum*) does not violate the claim that the church is holy. Holiness, by its very nature, cannot be measured empirically, for one who appears holy can always harbor evil in the heart. We simply can never know the heart of another. So, according to Augustine, the holiness of the church must belong to Christ as guarantor and is dispensed through the grace of the sacraments. For Augustine and for early Christians, the holiness of the church is not a description but a confession. Holiness is an objective reality, if not an empirical one. Pelikan puts it best, the holiness “as a moral condition was not constitutive of the church, but was derivative from its ground in the grace of God.”⁸ Ironically, the historical movements concerned most about holiness of the church have tried to achieve it through schism, the very act of which removes them from the objective reality of holiness.

Apostolic

Whereas the earliest community of the first century had looked to the future, an expectation of Jesus’ return, the later second and third century church looked to its past,

⁶ E.g., see Didache, 10.5; Anonymous Sermon Commonly Called Clement’s Second Letter to the Corinthians, 14.

⁷ *On Baptism* 4.3.4.

⁸ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. University of Chicago Press, 1075. I:311.

its apostolic witness to authorize its existence and identity. The apostolicity of the church was articulated in the canon, the creed and the apostolic episcopate.⁹ The apostles were the self-evident carriers of the witness from Christ, and so it was axiomatic that the church resided within the apostolic witness. Indeed how could the church even exist outside of apostolic witness to the good news of Jesus Christ?

Indeed, apostolicity serves to check the rise of new movements, heretical or otherwise. In the face of Montanist claims to possess exclusively the working of the Holy Spirit, the church presses its claims to apostolicity. Increasingly, early Christian leaders point to the apostolic legacy as authorizing the work of the Holy Spirit. The spirit of truth would not lead one to heresy. The guarantor of truth was the fount of apostolic witness taking form in canon, creed and episcopate. More than a thousand years after Nicea, the mark of apostolicity of the church will be a lightning rod in the Reformation.

Catholic

Only at Nicea could the church begin to think of itself as truly catholic, one body spread across the earth. The experience of far flung Christians gathering face to face in the light of day, not the cover of darkness, must have been a powerful proclamation in itself of the universality of the church. At Nicea, the catholicity of the church was made visible for many for the first time. The body of Christ cannot be limited to one location or contained within geographical or political boundaries. As Jerome colorfully puts it in describing the universality of the church, “all the churches...are one great horde of people from Palestine to Chalcedon with one voice reechoing the praises of Christ.”¹⁰ No local doctrine or community can claim to contain the whole church. In the century

⁹ Pelikan I:107.

¹⁰ Jerome, *Against Vigilantius*, 5.

following the Council of Constantinople, the claim of universality will emerge in Vicent's notion of consensus: *ubique, semper, ab omnibus*.

It is necessary to remember that the catholicity of the church is in both time and space, the presence of the church throughout history as well as throughout the world. The communion of saints resides in the catholicity of the church. Intercessory prayer of the saints relies, in part, on the claim of the catholicity of the church in time.

In closing the discussion of the creedal marks, all four mark of the church – unity, holiness, apostolicity and catholicity-- reinforce and authorize each other. All are necessary, none sufficient in isolation. No mark can exist without the others and each finds its fullest expression within the others.

III. Reformation Formulation

One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic

For reformers, it is the “*primitive catholic and apostolic church*” which could lay particular claim to these marks, not the Roman Church of their day. Of course, this only begged the question of which doctrines, practices, polity and canon counted as *primitive*. At base was the controversy regarding the relationship of scripture and tradition and the relative authority of each. Even reformers understood that the distinction between scripture and tradition was a category confusion.

During the late middle ages the question of holiness becomes acute as calls for reform, including calls to evangelical poverty, become more insistent. Debates regarding the holiness of the church, the criteria and evidence of such, move beyond the scholastic to the practical with real consequence. The controversy between Augustine and the Donatists is recapitulated in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with the

reiteration of the Augustinian view that the holiness of the church resided in the holiness of the sacraments, guaranteed by Christ, not by any demonstrable holiness of priests or bishops, much less by the laity. Still, the mark of holiness of the church stands in such stark contrast to the moral character of the clergy and church hierarchy as to convict it in the most profound terms by the sixteenth century.

Perhaps more than other marks, apostolicity becomes the most contentious as the centuries unfold. On the eve of the Reformation, Where did apostolicity reside? In the apostolic pope or apostolic prelates or apostolic council or apostolic canon or apostolic tradition? Could one be consonant with the apostolic witness in Scripture and yet disobey the apostolic pope? The standard criteria for the claim to apostolicity by the church were 1) that it was founded by the apostles; 2) that the apostles had extended it throughout the world through their ministry (and through their successors); and 3) the apostles had governed and administered it (and so through their successors).¹¹ In the face of the long-held assumption that apostolic equals papal, the reformers shifted the ground of these claims to apostolicity. If, indeed, an apostle was one sent by Christ specifically to preach the good news of his resurrection then Mary Magdalene would certainly have been the first!¹²

The catholicity of the church was another matter. Even the reformers were so convinced of the necessity of the catholicity of the church, that they defend their reforms from accusations of violating catholicity.¹³

A Congregation of Believers

¹¹ Pelikan IV:112.

¹² As Thomas a Kempis calls her “the apostle of the apostles.” *Orationes* 15.

¹³ Pelikan IV:99.

For the reformers, the conversation regarding the nature and work of the church was increasingly located on Scripture. All four marks were tied to the authority of the word of God as their ground. Only the church in communion with Scripture was united, holy, apostolic and catholic. Article VII of the Augsburg Confession sets out the formula that will ground the nature of the church in the teaching of Scripture: The “one holy Church ... is the congregation of believers, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered [according to the Gospel].” Luther could very straightforwardly claim that “where the word is, there the church ... where the word is not, even though the titles and the office are present, there the church is not.”¹⁴ Similarly, from the *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England, Article XIX, “Of the Church,” reads, “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”

The Augsburg formula, like the use of “primitive church,” begs the question of what counts as “rightly taught” and “rightly administered.” Certainly among the wide spectrum of reformers the more radical wing attacked doctrines of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ as unbiblical.

The distinction between the church visible and invisible was a strategic distinction for many reformers but ultimately not satisfying if it suggested that the church was “some Platonic republic.”¹⁵ Neither was the church synonymous with the behemoth of the Roman Church. Above all, the church was *real*, and could be known by word and

¹⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* 11:10.

¹⁵ Melancthon, *Sermons on Romans* 9.

sacrament. With Jaroslav Pelikan we can describe this move of the reformers as a “substitution of a functional for an institutional definition of the nature of the church.”¹⁶

This functional definition had to address competing claims from opposite sides. From Roman Catholics, reformers heard claims that the visible church resided in historical and institutional continuity with the apostolic witness, namely, the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, reformers had to fend off the claims from the radical wing that the true church was invisible, residing in heaven alone, so that no visible body could or should claim the status of “church.” The functional definition of the church offers a concrete location, a description more than a confession, centered on the word of God. We might call this a logical positivist doctrine of the church.

As we turn from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, it is fair to say that we have at least three major notions of the church at work across various communions. H. Ray Dunning summarizes them this way: “By Wesley's day, three major ecclesiologies had emerged. There was the Catholic view which defines the church in terms of ministry and which insists that the true church is in the Apostolic tradition. This approach emphasizes the objective holiness of the church and the presence of Christ maintained in the church through the sacraments. There was also the Classical-Protestant interpretation which emphasized the Word and the sacraments as creative of the church. Third was the Believer's church position where the emphasis was upon the personal experience and holiness of the individual believers who then constitute the church.” While Dunning goes on to say that all three find their way into Wesley's thought, we might add that the uncritical appropriation of these streams in the Methodist tradition has led to deep ecclesiological confusion.

¹⁶ Pelikan IV: 178.

IV. Methodist Use of Both Formulations

For United Methodists, this tension between the ecclesiology embedded in the Nicene Creed and the ecclesiology embedded in the Reformation confessions, and an often concomitant confusion, is reflected in the profession of each formulation in each of the most used denominational documents, respectively: The Nicene Creed in *The United Methodist Hymnal* and Article XIII: On the Church in *The Book of Discipline*.

The reception and use of the Nicene Creed in Methodism has been ambivalent at best, especially when compared to the reception and use of the Apostles' Creed. In one of Wesley's rare references to marks of the church found in the Nicene Creed, he expounds upon the church as catholic and holy.¹⁷ In a letter of 1761 to Roman Catholic Bishop Challoner, Wesley describes the church as "ever one," "ever holy," and "ever orthodox," but ignores any mention of the church as apostolic.¹⁸ Both occur in the context of his conversation with Roman Catholics. There is no mention of the use of these four marks in his in-house Methodist conversation as far as I can tell (I invite corrections on this).

I have not traced here, nor do I know, the history of the inclusion of the Nicene Creed in the Methodist Hymnal over the last 200 years. Such a trajectory may be illuminating. Suffice to say here that its inclusion in the *United Methodist Hymnal* should not be taken to indicate regular or widespread use. The Apostles' Creed, which identifies the church as holy and catholic, continues to be the more favored creed in use across the United Methodist Church.

¹⁷ John Wesley, "Letter to a Roman Catholic," in Albert C. Outler, *John Wesley*, Abingdon Press, 1964, p. 495.

¹⁸ *Journal*, February 19, 1761, quoted in Wainwright, 125.

In his most explicit treatment of a doctrine of the church, Sermon 74 “On the Church” Wesley both clarifies and complicates his discussion. Consider these excerpts:

[7] properly the Church of God: ...all the persons upon the face of the earth, who answer the character here given

[14] Here, then, is a clear unexceptionable answer to that question, "What is the Church?" The catholic or universal Church is, all the persons in the universe whom God hath so called out of the world as to entitle them to the preceding character; as to be "one body," united by "one spirit;" having "one faith, one hope, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in them all."

[19] Whoever they are that have "one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God and Father of all," I can easily bear with their holding wrong opinions, yea, and superstitious modes of worship:

[28] The Church is called *holy*, because it *is* holy, because every member thereof is holy, though in different degrees, as He that called them is holy.

... It follows, that not only no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker, no drunkard, no whoremonger, no thief, no liar, none that lives in any outward sin, but none that is under the power of anger or pride, no lover of the world, in a word, none that is dead to God, can be a member of his Church.

[30] By this let all men know whose disciples ye are, because you "love one another."¹⁹

In these lines from Sermon 74 Wesley covers the bases offering a universal image of the church (“all persons upon the face of the earth”) while maintaining serious demands of its members (“no common swearer, no Sabbath-breaker,” etc). In Wesley’s signature both/and approach he holds in tension the concerns of both the early church and the Reformation. Geoffrey Wainwright has described this tension in terms of “Wesley’s ecclesiological generosity,” even while holiness is “the key to all Wesley’s ecclesiology, theoretical and practical.” Wesley opens “broad terms of admission to the Methodist societies” even while he denies the membership in the church to those “that live in open

¹⁹ John Wesley, Sermon 74 “On the Church”

sin.”²⁰ Outler and others have described the Methodist church, in its originating trajectory, as “an evangelical order within the church catholic” to capture this both/and tension.²¹

The fullness of this difficult tension (objective but not empirical) seems best articulated in the Methodist ecclesiology of evangelical order within the church catholic. .

In an interesting echo of the tension between the two formulations, Nicene and Article XIX, Outler offers what he calls “*the classical Methodist* [Wesleyan] *ecclesiology*” [sic] in terms of the four Nicene marks of the church:

1. The *unity* of the church is based upon the Christian *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit.
2. The *holiness* of the church is grounded in the discipline of grace which guides and matures the Christian life from its threshold in justifying faith to its plerophory in sanctification.
3. The *catholicity* of the church is defined by the universal outreach of redemption, the essential community of all true believers.
4. The *apostolicity* of the church is gauged by the succession of apostolic doctrine in those who have been faithful to the apostolic witness.²²

Without explicitly identifying either the Nicene Creed or Article XIII as sources, Outler transposes both formulations several pages later as he describes what is “characteristic and ‘peculiar’” among Methodists:

The Church is ‘a company of faithful men’ (i.e., *men with a mission*) ‘in which the Word rightly preached [evangelism] and the sacraments duly administered’ [worship], together with everything else that is relevant and requisite to getting the rightly preached Word truly heard and the duly administered sacraments rightly received (Christian *discipline*, or nurture). Our *notea ecclesia* are, therefore, evangelism, worship, discipline.²³

²⁰ Wainwright, “Methodism’s ecclesial location and ecumenical vocation.” *One in Christ* 19, no. 2, 1983, 123.

²¹ Outler, 13f.

²² Outler, 19.

²³ Outler, 25.

In one deft move Outler employed both loci—from the fourth and the sixteenth centuries— to articulate what he believed to be the implicit Methodist ecclesiology of his day.

For Outler, and others of his generation, the problem was not with the Methodist church as an evangelical order but with the lack of “a catholic church within which to function” and thus their attention to the development of the ecumenical church.²⁴

However compelling the view of the United Methodist Church as “an evangelical order within the church catholic” may be, it has fueled multiple and sometimes competing ecclesiologies with Methodism. The history of Christianity is littered with ecclesiologies that pit one mark of the church against the other: e.g., the Donatists say we cannot be both holy and one. The competing ecclesiologies today show up as a confusion about whether Methodists can pursue both evangelism and discipline at the same time, as though evangelism and discipline are separate endeavors, even antithetical. One ecclesiology focuses on evangelical invitation that minimizes the demands membership in the United Methodist Church might make. The other focuses on the disciplinary demands of discipleship that both nurture growth and enact the church’s mission while minimizing the catholic character of sharing the good news. One assumption at the root of this confusion is the more energy we give to the disciplines of the Christian life the less inviting the good news of Jesus Christ is to the world, and conversely, that a universal invitation into the good news will not be burdened by disciplinary demands. When these ecclesiological languages are employed simultaneously without attention to the tension embedded, confused and even misleading claims can result. For example: Just join our church and you can believe whatever you want. We’re working for justice so we don’t have to think about saving souls, or vice versa.

²⁴ Outler, 27.

Calls for a recovery of the Methodist character over the last 50 years have typically called for the both/and tension of an “evangelical order within the church catholic” with a focus on the recovery of Methodist identity as “no people” (Cartwright) or as “a holy people” (Wainwright) or as “a provisional people” (Outler). Conveniently, we already have two historic documents, the Nicene Creed and Article XIII, that together express this tension and reality. We turn now to a modest proposal.

V. A Modest Proposal

We can “exercise our churchly character” by including in our ongoing construction of ecclesiology a greater conversation between these two professions about the church. Attention to these historic formulations can inform and even promote our search for a coherent ecclesiology.

To be clear, this is not a naïve suggestion that reading the Nicene Creed and Article XIII more frequently will lead to renewed ecclesial identity. Identity does not come from propositional statements but from the experience of the reality to which these historic formulations point.

That being said, I am proposing here that we take seriously (or more seriously than we have) these two confessions on the nature of the church, not merely by virtue of their historic weight, but because I believe they are teaching moments in the church’s life illumined by the fire of the Holy Spirit. We neglect them at our peril.

By take seriously, I mean, at the least, we make use of the formulations in our congregational life and conversations, particularly conversation on the nature and mission of the church. Moreover, I propose these documents receive a privileged place in the

conversation, along with Scripture. We can receive these historic witnesses as living voices at the table, rather than dead weight lying dormant in the past. An enduring ailment of modernity is a profound amnesia that leads to a thin ecclesiology.

Conversation with the Creed and Article XIII can thicken our ecclesiological constructions, rooting them in the ongoing witness of the Holy Spirit in the church.

I am not proposing a programmatic study of the documents, though that might be fruitful. Rather, I have something more organic in mind, something more like seeding our life together with these fertile ecclesial moments of clarity and wisdom. Just as planting seeds is messier than making flower arrangements, so conversation is messier than lecture, but usually more productive.

For example, I wonder if greater conversation with these two formulations would lead us to ask different questions about the nature and mission of the church, such as:

- How is God making known to us the oneness, apostolicity, holiness and catholicity of the church?
- How does our preaching of the Word and administering of the sacraments express the oneness, apostolicity, holiness and catholicity of the church?
- How does our preaching of the Word and administering of the sacraments form (make) disciples of Jesus Christ?
- Can “a congregation of the faithful” embody or participate in the four Nicene marks of the church? What would that look like?

Conclusion

Outler’s call nearly 50 years ago to “exercise our churchly character” required a reconsideration of our traditions, a reconsideration of our catechesis, and an acceptance of our liturgical and sacramental obligations.²⁵ In that spirit, I propose a reclamation and engagement of two historic statements on the nature of the church. Each is a blessing we already have. May we live in them more deeply. In fact, the more deeply we live in the

²⁵ Outler, 27.

reality to which these formulations point, the more we may “beware lest, in this business of having to be a church while ‘waiting’ for the Church that is to be, we should deceive ourselves by falling further into the fatuity that this business of ‘being a church’ is really our *chief* business!”²⁶

²⁶ Outler, 28.

Appendix:

The Nicene Creed²⁷

We believe in one God
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son
is worshiped and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism
for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

²⁷ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, 880.

Article XIII Of the Church²⁸

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

²⁸ *The Book of Discipline* 2004, 62.