

On Being the Church of Jesus Christ

Joe R. Jones

[This essay was written for a special issue of *Leaven: A Journal of Christian Ministry* on the topic of ecclesiology as part of a conversation among persons in the Stone-Campbell Movement. It was written in February 2006 and was published in *Leaven*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (First Quarter 2007), pp. 6-11. Numbers in brackets in the text refer to endnotes found at the end of the essay. Posted here 4/29/07.]

It is indeed a happy occasion for me to be invited to contribute an article on ecclesiology in collaboration with other brothers and sisters from the Stone-Campbell Movement, otherwise called the Restoration Movement. That folk involved in the Movement could identify themselves as part of a movement presupposes that the Movement had some discourses and practices that gave definition to the Movement itself. I think the following self-designations were central to nineteenth century folk's capacity to speak of a new and particular movement of restoration.

First, the intent to *restore* [1]New Testament Christianity expressed itself in such discourse as “Where the Bible speaks, we speak, and where the Bible is silent, we are silent.” Of course, that was mainly understood as “Where the NT speaks...”

Second, implicit—and often quite explicit—in this intention to restore NT Christianity is the belief that the history of the church since NT times had been a steady and disastrous decline from and corruption of the distinctive and normative NT discourses and practices.

Third, not the least of the reasons for restoring NT Christianity was the desire to recover the real Jesus, uncluttered and obscured by centuries of creedal statements and controversies. Hence, the slogan, “No creed but Christ,” served the purpose of putting Jesus at the center of the faith, and yet now a Jesus apparently detached from any ecclesial creed.

Fourth, the intent was also to restore the organization of the NT church, believing earnestly that there was one administrative pattern evident in the texts. Already imbued with the “Free Church” trajectory of American individualism and anti-clericalism, the Movement identified the church as comprised of baptized adult believers who have confessed, “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and my personal Savior and Lord.” Hence, the church is not dependent for its reality on any ‘apostolic clerical successors,’ who are given the authority to guide and teach the church and to baptize.

Given that these four passionate trajectories were there in the originating decades of the Movement, it should be intelligible to us now that some inevitable perils were lurking therein and would lead to the later fragmentation of the Movement. The assumptions that the NT discourses and practices contained one and only one pattern of belief and one and only one pattern of authoritative church organization were simply unsustainable by increasing historical scholarship.[2]

However, the emphasis on the church as a voluntary community comprised of baptized believers was commensurate to the taken-for-granted way in which the church existed in the first three centuries of its life. It was only when the church came under the protection and promotion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century—becoming thereby ‘established’ by the governing authorities—did the possibility even exist that a person might become or be called a ‘Christian’ as a matter of governmental geography.

Yet, by discounting later church traditions, including creedal developments, the Restoration Movement deprived itself of the capacity to deal with differences within the NT discourses and practices. This became particularly painful with regard to how to interpret Jesus Christ. Wanting a Jesus without any creedal identification led to the Movement's most divisive issue: in what sense is Jesus divine and in what sense

human and in what sense our Savior? Incapacitated to develop and affirm any common confessional or creedal statement about Jesus, the Movement was left either to the dogmatic declarations of individual pastors and professors or to the dogma that only the individual believer can decide for herself who Jesus is—Jesus dissolved into the private preferences of the individual believer! Is it any wonder that a restoration movement of this character would find itself breaking apart into differing traditions?

It is my hope that this issue of *Leaven* will lead these differing wings into a robust and self-critical ecclesiology that might reaffirm some of the admirable concerns of the Movement's earlier forebears, and yet lead to rethinking theologically some of the disagreements that have plagued our past conversations.

Let me confess at the outset of this essay that I was raised in what is known as the 'Disciples' branch of the originating Movement. And I spent twenty-five years teaching in and administering two Disciples institutions of higher education. It seems commonplace these days to refer to the Disciples as the 'liberal' wing of the Movement, and however problematic that moniker might be, it is the Disciples wing that has deliberately pursued ecumenical discussions and relationships to other church traditions. Yet, the state of ecclesiology among Disciples, either as an explicit theological statement or as actually discussed and practiced in congregations, regions, and the general manifestation, seems to me cluttered with confusion and bewilderment.[3] Yet it may be that the roots of these problems are present even in the Movement's originating decades and therefore may be common to all three wings.

How, then, do we get back on track in developing an ecclesiology? Here I want to make some proposals that might help.

First, I propose that we recognize that any community, but especially the church, lives and has its practical identity in and through its characteristic and distinctive *discourses and practices*. It is within these discourses that the community identifies itself, acknowledges a common purpose, and devises procedures and practices—a politics—that facilitate and even constitute the community as just this community among many other communities. When those discourses and practices are lacking in basic agreement and flounder in disarray, we can understand why the community itself might be suffering profound confusion about itself and its identity.[4]

Second, I propose we embrace our early Movement's desire to give primacy to the NT witness, but I propose that we study the NT as the emerging *discourses and practices* of the Jesus movement. And we must understand these discourses and practices as throughout *theological*: they intend to witness to Jesus as the Savior of the world and they intend thereby to identify him as bound-up-with and/or tethered-to and/or one-with the reality of the God of Israel. When the post-apostolic church sorted out the NT texts as authoritative canon, it primarily meant that the discourses and practices in these texts are authoritative and informative for succeeding followers of Jesus. Put another way, the witness and conversations manifest in these texts are the conversation-partners for all future conversation that should be forming and informing that emerging social reality called *ekklesia*—the summoned and assembled and gathered people of God.[5]

One consequence of this proposal is that we can affirm that the NT discourses are already theological and therefore we can give up the notion that *doing theology* is somehow a misleading practice for the church. If the NT discourses are to live in the church today, then the church is itself constituted by its peculiar theological discourses and the peculiar practices that are both represented in and formed by the NT discourses.

Third, we can now admit that our own contemporary Restoration tradition could not exist without the discourses and practices of the church in the succeeding centuries after the NT. We can, therefore, engage these previous traditions and their contemporary descendants in serious theological discussion without fear that we are somehow forsaking the NT witness.[6]

Fourth, apparently without sustained consistency and clarity of intention, the Movement did seem to identify being-the-church with being-disciples-of-Jesus. In this way it might be possible that discipleship to Jesus would entail *doing church* differently as an *alternative community* to the ways of other churches and to the ways of the world.

To further this discussion of an ecclesiology in which the church is an alternative community, I will now propose a theological definition of the church, which I have been using for over two decades.

***The church is that liberative and redemptive
community of persons
called into being
by the Gospel of Jesus Christ
through the Holy Spirit
to witness in word and deed
to the living triune God
for the benefit of the world
to the glory of God.***

What then is the church as a social reality in the world? It is a *liberative and redemptive community of persons*. It is a community—a *koinonia*—in which persons are being liberated and redeemed from those conditions in their lives that prohibit and inhibit the love of God and the love of neighbor. Here we can affirm that the church is throughout its life and work a *soteriological* community: responding to God's salvific work in and for the world. The church's distinctive discourses and practices are themselves the *means of grace* through which the church and the world receive and learn how to live under the grace of God. They are not, however, the means by which we are to earn God's grace. The prior grace of God in Jesus Christ empowers the church to be liberated by grace and to be liberating in communicating that grace and forgiveness.

But it is a community that is *called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ*. Clarity about who or what calls a community together is essential, and the way we have put the call of the church is such as to deny that the church is called into existence by any other agent or cause than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the Gospel that summons the church into existence, and when some church community can no longer agree as to who calls it or even what the Gospel is, there we have a church community that has lost both its calling and its purpose.[7]

In the Restoration tradition, there has been continuing agreement, even in the midst of our disagreements, that there is a Gospel that is rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is, however, my hope that all wings of the Movement might agree that Jesus is the very reality of God-become-flesh and moving among humans in reconciling patterns of speaking and living. While the Disciples wing has not been able to sustain a common trinitarian understanding of God, and the other wings are hesitant at the prospect, a nontrinitarian understanding will miss the mark and Jesus will be reduced to a prophet of some importance but not the incarnate life of God reconciling the world to Godself.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ summons the church into being and through the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit gives the church its *defining purpose and mission: to witness in word and deed to the living triune God for the benefit of the world*. In all that it is and does, in its words and deeds, in its discourses and practices, the church is bearing witness to the reality of God as the One who created the world and covenanted with Israel, as the One who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth for the salvation of the world, and as the One who moves within creaturely life to redeem the world. There is no other God than this triune God, and the church exists to witness to what this God has done as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of the world.[8] Hence, the church itself exists for the *benefit of the world*— as that creaturely world God is intent on redeeming.

Once again we must grasp the importance of the discourses and practices of the church: it is in the words of the discourses that the church *construes* for itself and for the world who God is, what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is, what it means to be God's beloved creature graced and loved by God, and what the church can hope for in the future before God. Yet, we must not forget that the discourses live in and through the distinctive practices of the church.

The ecclesiology that I am unfolding now aims to identify the sort of communal body the church is as the

body of Christ in the world—a new *social reality* in the world intending the transformation of human life and the worlds in which they live as the worlds that God loves and is intent on redeeming. Herein being the body of Christ centers on discipleship to Jesus as the one who proclaimed the kingdom of God, who advocated love of neighbor and enemy, and who commanded a nonviolent way of life. *This is the body of Christ as an alternative community living an alternative way of life to the ways of the world.*

Consider how the witness of the church in discourses and practices can be understood in three interrelated spheres of the church's life. These spheres are what I call the *Sphere of Church Nurture*, the *Sphere of Church Outreach*, and the *Sphere of Church Administration*. Let us be clear: the church is witnessing to the triune God in all three of these spheres and not just in the Outreach sphere. In each of these spheres there is a host of distinctive practices that are essential to the church being the sort of community the Gospel of Jesus Christ summons it to be.

Briefly, in the **Sphere of Nurture** the church engages in the distinctive ways of *worshipping* God, of *educating* itself and passing on the faith, and of *communal care* in the practices of love that see to the needs of the gathered folk. The church is that community that practices baptizing persons in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the gracious good news that their sins have been forgiven and they are called to live a new life of neighbor love. The church practices the celebration of the Lord's Supper as the encounter with the living Jesus Christ as the Lord of History and hope for the world. The church practices reading the Bible as Holy Scripture and preaches and teaches the Word known in the Bible. Without these concrete practices in which the nurture of the church itself takes place in and through its distinctive language, the church flounders in its life. Throughout these practices, of course, the church is embodying a witness to the world, declaring that God is graciously summoning the people of the world to receive God's grace and live in peace with one another.

In the practices of the **Sphere of Outreach** the church aims directly to act upon and within the world for the world's transformation. Such practices include *evangelism*, being at the side of the neighbor as one who needs to hear of God's reconciling life in Jesus. The church also engages in the practices of *prophecy*, intending to identify those principalities and powers in the world that subjugate human beings and exclude them from the goods of life that encourage hope and generosity. In the practices of *emancipation* the church, often in cooperation with other similar spirits and groups, seeks to perform works that seek to emancipate the least powerful of our human brothers and sisters from those social conditions that enslave them. In the practices of *vocation*, in and through individual Christian lives in the world, they seek to inhabit places of home and neighborhood, of economic work, of citizenship, and of recreation as places in which God is at work and summoning them to truth-telling, promise-keeping, and non-violence.

What then are we to make of the **Sphere of Administration**? While I think our forebears searched for a simpler organization in the NT than is actually there, there are some definite beliefs and practices we in the Free Church tradition can clearly embrace. First, we must acknowledge that how the church organizes itself, how it has a polity and a politics, is itself a form of witness to the world. Second, the church can never forget that any organizing it does within itself is subject to the criterion of whether it facilitates the mission of witness. In that respect, the processes and practices of administering the life of the church are not ends in themselves; they are means to the end of the faithful and truthful witness of the church in the totality of its life. Thirdly, the Restoration tradition should refuse to relinquish its belief that the NT church is not a hierarchically ordered community dependent on its 'overseers' for its ongoing identity and legitimacy. Whatever we might make of the distinction between ordained ministers and laity, we should never construe it as a hierarchical distinction essential to the life and witness of the church.

There is not space here to discuss *in extenso* that the administration of the church includes trying to understand how the church of Jesus Christ is *one* church, *one* body, wherever it might exist. By what criteria are we to recognize that the church existed in traditions prior to and outside of the Restoration Movement? Can any tradition properly administer its witness to the world if it abstains from the theological, and therefore the practical, *quest for Christian unity*? Let us not suppose that the unity of the church universal will await or even linger along the byways while the wings of the Restoration Movement worry how to recognize—how to construe—the living vitality of Christ's presence among themselves![9]

In concluding this essay I want to highlight a possibility—I would even call it a mandate—that the church so understands itself under the Lordship of Jesus Christ that it feels obliged periodically and publicly *to confess its faith in clear statements*. Such confessional statements must not be understood as infallible and irreformable, but they can be definite theological statements to the world of what the church itself regards as the essence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Unwillingness to produce such confessional statements, requiring, as they must, vigorous discussion within the church, is a sure sign that the church is willing either to suffer chaos in its public witness or to resort to less visible means of coercing and controlling that public witness.

Having an ecclesiology is simply to have a set of discourses and practices that identify what sort of community the church intends to be. The Restoration Movement's uneasiness about *doctrine* and *creeds* has unhappily obscured from itself that it does have—and must of practical necessity have—definite *teachings*. In linguistic fact, it would be an oxymoron to suppose that any community could claim to be the church of Jesus Christ in the absence of any particular teachings about who Jesus Christ is and what he does that is salvific for humankind, teachings about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and therefore some teachings about how such disciples live together and the purpose of their living and working together, and teachings about the purpose of their community they call 'church.' Let it thereby be clearly declared: *no community can be the church of Jesus Christ in the absence of definite teachings embodied in distinct discourses and practices that are constitutive of its communal life and purpose.*

So, abandoning the excuse that we have no doctrines, let us get on with the arduous but joyful task of identifying, critiquing, and testing the actual ecclesiology that already exists in the lives of the churches of the Restoration Movement and thereby assume responsibility for what we believe, teach, and do in our intention to be the church of Jesus Christ.[10]

Endnotes

[1] The reader should be aware that I use italicized words to emphasize points and to draw attention to that particular use of the word or words. Also, I will use single and double quotes in special ways. Single quote marks [' . . . '] are used to indicate one of three signals. (1) It can signal that we are talking about a word or sign, as in the sentence 'The word 'language' is used to refer to the natural languages of persons.' (2) It can signal that we are highlighting a special use of a word or locution, as in 'The actions of 'perichoresis' are crucial to church life.' (3) It can signal that we are talking about the meaning of the sentence itself that is included within the single quotes, as in the two sentences used above. Functions one and two of the single quotes can also be accomplished by use of italic type. Double quote marks [" . . . "] are used when I am actually quoting from another text or some person's actual speech. These writing practices may seem peculiar, but they are ways in which I am intending to remind the reader that words having varying uses that are often unnoticed in ordinary styles of writing.

[2] For an insightful discussion of the variety among the churches in NT times, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

[3] The Commission on Theology of the Council on Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), on which I served for more than two decades, completed a long-term study on ecclesiology in a report to the General Assembly in 1997. This final report and previous reports are contained in *The Church for the Disciples of Christ: Seeking to be Truly Church Today*, eds. Paul A. Crow Jr. and James O. Duke (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1998). That the report fell promptly into oblivion and neglect is but an understatement of the problems in current Disciples theological self-understanding. My recent book, *On Being the Church of Jesus Christ in Tumultuous Times* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), contains a wide range of reflections on the present state of Disciples; see especially the Introduction and chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 12, and 14.

[4] In my systematic theology, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), I discuss the importance of language to the life of the church (pages 1-19); see especially the ten theses on language on pages 17-18.

[5] In my *Grammar* book, chapter 11 is on the Doctrine of the Church. Pages 596-602 contain an account of the rich variety of images of the church in the NT, which I based on the work of Paul Minear.

[6] See *Grammar*, pp. 111-148, for a discussion of the authority of the Bible in relation to church traditions.

[7] It seems to me that every church must continually be asking itself just what the Gospel is. For my

statement of the Gospel, see *Grammar*, pp. 7, 112-14.

[8] See my *Grammar*, pp. 166-198 for an extended argument for the inescapability of trinitarian belief for any church that believes Jesus is divine and human.

[9] I sustain a consistently free-church theological perspective on administering the church in *Grammar*, pp. 634-48.

[10] Readers of this article might enjoy visiting my Web site: www.grammaroffaith.com.

Copyright©Leaven 2007