

Signs of the Church's Identity

[This essay was written for the Commission on Theology of the Council of Christian Unity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in 1993 and published in *Mid-Stream*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (October 1994) pp. 377-389. While my definition of the church, in its earliest forms, goes back to my teaching in the early 70's, this essay expresses much of the final version of ecclesiology represented in my Grammar, chapter 11. Version here is edited.]

Presupposing the traditional marks of the church, there is also a theological need today to think more concretely and complexly about the signs of the church's identity. To facilitate this discussion, I propose the following working, normative, **theological definition of the church**:

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.

When we ask about the signs of the church's identity, we are asking a distinctively **theological question**. It is always the case that wherever the church truly exists it exists as some concrete, empirical, historic group of persons in some social location and world. Yet we are confronted with the fact that the term 'church' is not just something the church of Jesus Christ has under its control. It is also part of the nomenclature of cultures, and therewith is under the control of cultures. The powers of the world are always ready to identify what they call 'church' according to their interests. Legislatures, law courts, tax codes, news media, telephone directories, and many other principalities and powers name some empirical groups 'church' and allocate them a designated place among other social institutions. Hence, the theological definition of the church aims at being normative and in contrast to much of the contemporary culture-bound and culture conferred identifications of church. **Theologically, it is an ineradicable question whether any empirical group called 'church' by whomever is truly the church of Jesus Christ.**

In asking now about the **signs of identity of the true church**, we are seeking those **characteristics that are theologically essential to some community of persons actually being the church**. Our working definition of the church has already made it clear that the church is essentially a liberative and redemptive community of persons that is called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. **It is the type of community or *koinonia* that is called into life and given definition by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.** This being called out and assembled (*ecclesia*) by God's work in Jesus of Nazareth is foundational for the church. Empirical churches of even noble demeanor are continually tempted to be called out, identified, sanctioned, and justified by the various reigning spirits of the world and hence to serve other lords than Jesus Christ. **Being called by the self-revealing, gracious and reconciling presence of God in Jesus Christ through the movement of the Holy Spirit is the constitutive or foundational sign of the church's true identity. Where this call is not heard and heeded there is no church.**

Our definition goes on to say that the church is given a primary or **defining mission: to witness in word and deed to the living triune God**. This mission of witness is the most comprehensive context in which to characterize and understand the other signs or traits of the church. Everywhere in the New Testament the sense of being called to give witness to the wondrous and gracious mystery of God's self-communicating and redemptive acts in the history of Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth is either explicit or presupposed. Where this witness is absent today there is no church of Jesus Christ.

To explicate fully the witness of the church requires an understanding of the trinitarian essence and actuality of God, emphasizing that **God is self-identifying** in the history of Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the calling of the church. In this history of acts God discloses God's own actuality, and the church witnesses

to God on the basis of these self-disclosures. Hence, God's being or reality is not hidden behind these acts but is revealed in them. We can say that **God has God's own living actuality precisely in the triune being-in-acts as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of the world.**

So too the church is only truly the church when it is engaged in the concrete being-in-acts of witnessing to the full actuality of God's triune life. Where these being-in-acts of witness do not exist there is no actual church; the church has its actuality, its real life, only in the complex richness of its life of witness. So, where these being-in-acts happen, which are only possible as empowered by and in conformity with the being-in-acts of the triune God, there the church truly exists. **The fundamental signs of the church's identity will be found in the characteristic being-in-acts of the church as witness to God.**

Before moving on to further specifications of the appropriate signs of the church's living witness, we should note plainly that the church exists and witnesses to God for the **benefit of the world.** It is this contemporary world and its future that God loves with an unfathomably gracious love and intends to redeem. Therefore, the church does not exist simply for itself or as an end in itself; it exists for and moves towards the world as witness to God's loving life for the world.

It should be helpful here to note and distinguish three different but interrelated meanings of the term **'world'** in the church's discourse:

1. the world as the cosmos created by God;
2. the world as any human culture with its structures, relations and relationships, powers, values, meanings, and languages;
3. the world as human culture infected and skewed by human sin.

The church exists for the world in all three senses of the word. And the church itself is always some empirically locatable community of persons in some world in all three senses. In these senses, then, the world is in the church and the church is in the world. This means that the church is irremovably an **earthen vessel**, a worldly reality in all three senses of 'world', and therefore is itself always in need of **reform, renewal, and God's grace.** The critical and enduring question is **how** the church exists in the world without losing itself, without losing its fundamental identity. How does the church have a distinctive identity in the world, such that it is in the world but not of the world? The church only embodies its distinctive identity when it actually becomes a living witness to God for the benefit of the world in which it lives. The church is that liberative and redemptive community which lives for the transformation and redeeming of the world by the triune God.

It is now in the witnessing of the church that we seek those further signs of the church's authentic identity. The church witnesses in **word and deed.** While we cannot separate word and deed, and while we must even say that the witness in word is also a doing, an activity, a deed, we can distinguish between the linguistic and nonlinguistic practices of the church's witness. To be sure, word separated from deed is hypocritical, vain, deadly, and a lie, and deed separated from word loses its defining context, intention, and luminosity. But by calling these being-in-acts of witness practices, we draw attention to their concreteness as human acts and their historical and communal traditions and locations. It is in the distinctive practices of the church as a liberative community of witness that we find the further identifying signs of the church's essential reality.

To unfold these signs in an orderly fashion, we should also distinguish between the **nurturing practices** and the **outreach practices** of the church. The nurturing practices are those activities of the church that primarily focus on the nurturance of the community of faith itself. The outreach practices are those activities of the church that aim toward the transformation of the world. Clearly the distinguishing of these practices does not imply any sharp boundaries between them. Many concrete practices have dual faces: one toward the community of faith and the other toward the world. The church lives in the dynamic interaction between nurturing itself for witness and engaging the world in the concrete works of love for the benefit of the world. Put simply, in its nurturing practices the church is as such an important symbol of witness to the world, and in its outreach practices the church finds itself nurtured by the Spirit.

Looking now at the **nurturing practices of the church**, we can discern the spheres of inner-church life **in worship, in education, in communal care, and in administration**. These spheres cannot be segmented and separated sharply, but we can speak of them as overlapping moments in the life of the church. And these spheres of practice lead continually to and are shaped by the outreach practices of the church and of the individual Christian in and for the world.

In describing the **signs of worship**, we see vividly how word and deed are intertwined in the life of the church. The community called into life by the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a community of peculiar and distinctive discourse and self-understanding. The call it hears is a call of the Word of God, of God self-communicating with the church in the history of Israel and in Jesus Christ. The call of the Gospel is inseparable from the narratives of Israel, of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of the Spirit's call to the early church embodied in the Old and New Testaments. From these narratives and teachings the church is given a distinctive language of concepts, images, beliefs, and practices which both engender and critique the church's own life in word and deed. Therefore, among the distinctive identifying signs of the church are the multiplex practices of listening to Scripture as the Word of God and being called, authorized, shaped, and critiqued by this listening.

It is around the Scriptural witness that the church's worship is crucially formed. Fundamentally **worship is the act or activity of praising God as the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of the human world and the creation**. In communal worship the church enacts further identifying signs of its reality: it proclaims the Word heard in Scripture, it confesses its sin and embraces the forgiving grace of God, it celebrates God's gracious life in sacramental acts of Baptism and Holy Communion, and it communicates in prayer with the self-communicating life of God. In essence worship is the multi-dimensional practices of praising and conforming to the triune life God.

In the Protestant traditions the emphasis has been on the signs of Word and Sacrament as not only essential to worship but to the whole being of the church. We too affirm their essential character for the living church. But there is also a tendency to claim that Word and Sacrament are the only essential signs of the church. This we do dispute, for this tends to focus only on the nurturing practices of the church and thereby minimizing the outreach practices of the church as essential signs of identity.

Of course, the proclamation of the Word given in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the early church as attested in Holy Scripture, is critical to the church's life of witness. Yet such proclamation is not only in the sermon in worship, but also in the myriad ways in which the Scriptural word shapes the life of the church. Below we will attend to how the witness in word to the Word is elemental to the educational practices of the church.

Understanding 'sacrament' to mean 'sign', we regard the **sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper as visible, regular practices of conforming the church's life to the gracious life of God**. In baptism, the sign of the free human acknowledgement of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the human promise to live faithfully from that grace, the church acts as community to recognize a person's entry into the life of faith as life of witness in the church for the world. The baptismal act is not the purchasing of forgiveness of sin but is instead the open, public acknowledgment of the person's acceptance of forgiveness and justification in Christ. In baptizing the new believer the church confirms the believer's commitment to Christ and the church promises to nurture the person in a life of faith.

In the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion or Eucharist, the church remembers the specific, historic act of reconciliation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and it encounters through the Spirit the living grace of the resurrected Christ. In this sacrament, as sign of Jesus Christ's prior grace and atonement on behalf of all humans, the church finds its worshipping center. But this sacrament neither repeats the sacrifice of Christ nor adds to that sacrifice; it celebrates what Jesus Christ has already done and his continuing life in the Spirit for the church. In the common, creaturely realities of the bread and the fruit of the vine, the church knows itself sustained by the body and blood of Jesus Christ's eternal life.

That the church prays incessantly is a decisive being-in-act of the church. Prayer is the individual and

communal practice of intentional communication with God's self-communicating life. Such practice is undertaken in the name of Jesus Christ and expresses the belief that God is a living Subject who solicits, hears, is affected by, and responds to human prayer. In the many moments of praying, the church gives thanks to God, praises God, confesses its sin, lifts petitions and supplications to God, seeks God's guidance and Word, makes intercession for the world, listens silently in reverent openness, cries out in pained lamentation, and groans in 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom 8.26). In these signs of prayer the church has its sustaining identity.

Hence, in the practices of worship the church finds its life nurtured by the triune life of God in all God's concreteness and richness. Without the practice of reading Scripture and proclaiming the Word heard therein, the church inevitably becomes ruled and authorized by some other supposedly life-conferring and life directing 'good news'. Without the confession of sin and reception of grace, the church is tempted to become presumptuous and self-righteous in its life. Without the celebration of baptism, the church forgets how radically renewing and converting the Gospel is and how it calls persons to a new way of living and self-understanding and to a resurrecting destiny. Without the regular celebration of the Lord's Supper, the church becomes forgetful of its being grounded in the reconciling life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God. Without prayer the church pretends to give itself its own guidance day by day and neglects to live intentionally before the loving Spirit who calls and directs the church into a redeeming future. In all these being-in-acts of worship the church truly happens, but it never happens in isolation from the being-in-acts of the outreach practices in which the church exists for the world.

The practices of educating and being educated pervade the life of the church. As a community of persons called into new creation by the Gospel and sent on a mission of witness, all the members of the community are called to being conformed in the totality of their lives to the triune life of God. Such conformity is the conformity of faith. It is intrinsic to faith to seek in all ways and in all times and ages to understand God, and therewith also to understand itself and the world, more deeply and richly. **Faith seeks understanding** both in the individual Christian and in the whole community. Hence, the church cannot live in faith without the multitude of practices in which it teaches both the **what** and the **how** of faith: *What* the church most fundamentally believes and understands about God, human life and destiny, and the world; and *How* persons live concretely a sanctified life of understanding and action under the call of the ethics of grace. The *what* and the *how* cannot be separated in vital faith, but there is no simple recipe as to their living togetherness. The *how* is aimless without the *what*, and the *what* is vacuous without the *how*.

No member of the church is ever beyond the imperative of grace to seek to learn more profoundly how to live before the Holy Triune God. Therefore, no member can ever dispense with or vacate the educating practices of the church. And the church can never assume that educating-in-faith is ever finished and completed short of the eschaton.

However true it may be that much Christian educating comes indirectly through loving relationships, it is essential to the identity of the church that it engage intentionally in explicit practices of **teaching the faith**. Such teaching is necessarily theological in character and is itself a witness to the triune God. *From* the enlightening and upbuilding power of preaching in explicating Scripture and engaging concrete human living *to* the intentionally designed classes and conversations *to* the silent but acute observations of saintly examples in its midst, the church educates and is educated by the Spirit. But distinctively Christian education would be rendered impossible without the church being a **community of theological discourse**, of a discourse in which all things are referred to and discerned in the light of self-communicating life of God. When this discourse becomes vacuous or vain or unfocused or dissipated by counterfeit substitutes, then the church loses its capacity to educate persons in the faith that lives from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The educative signs of the identity of the church are also evident in the discursive practices of being critically responsible for the church's witness. Such responsibility arises from the awareness that the church is called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thereby responsible to God and even questioned in its witnessing by the life of God. Herein the church confesses that it is put to **ineradicable questioning by God as to whether its witness in word and deed is:**

1) adequate and faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and

2) luminous, truthful, and transformative for the world.

This questioning and answering can never finally be put to rest in the time of the church. Meanwhile, in the life of the church, this responsible, theological questioning is a sign that the church is called, sent, disturbed, and enlivened by the Spirit of the living God.

Worshipping and educating are inseparable from the totality of ways in which the community is itself a **community of mutual love**. Here love is that peculiar openness and self-giving to another, which wills the good of the other as one's neighbor before God. Christian love, and the practices of care that go with it, is always loving in particular, loving this person and that person. Called as it surely is to perform **works of love** in and for the world, the church can hardly intend such works in the absence of works of love within the community. In loving one another through mutual self-giving and care, the church is truly a *koinonia*, a fellowship and communion of mutual upbuilding. Such loving—empowered as it is by the self-giving Spirit of God—is what empowers love for the world of neighbors and strangers. This communal love is never exclusive or restricted, and in being open to the neighbor-in-the-church, it becomes the school in which one learns how to love the neighbor-in-the-world. In all these ways this communal love is an ethics of grace made possible by God's self-giving life in Jesus Christ who calls the church into being and life. The ethics of grace is Christian living which springs from the forgiveness of sin and the justification by grace in Jesus Christ and which lives in freedom for the neighbor and for God.

As a historical social group locatable somewhere, the church cannot avoid some **organizational economy** (*oikonomia*) in the pursuit of its mission. This administering of the household of the church is in general necessary, but it is always subordinate to mission. Historically the churches have disagreed as to the proper administration of church life. While selecting leaders and assigning duties and functions will always happen, **the church is not constituted as church by any particular arrangement of offices, officers, or process of selection or election**. Whatever administering relationships and structures may obtain in the church, they are all subject to the critical criterion of whether they facilitate concretely the mission of the church in its various social and historical locations. **Organization and administration are always subordinate to the mission of witness.**

The whole church—as the people (*laos*) of God—is organizationally involved in the ministry of witness to the reality of God for the benefit of the world. For the sake of this whole ministry, and in conformity to the servanthood of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God calls out particular persons to functions and tasks of *servant leadership*. Some of these servant leaders are formally ordained by the church to provide specific functions and assume ongoing leadership responsibilities. It is in the practices of ordaining-by-the-church and the practices of persons providing-servant-leadership that we see true signs of the identity of the church. But **the signs are in the servant practices** and are not static traits of persons or of persons' occupation of offices.

These ordained leaders, variously called 'pastors', 'elders', 'bishops', and 'deacons', or simply 'ministers', by Scripture and tradition, are entrusted by the church with leadership responsibilities that involve preparatory and continuing theological education, regular disciplines of spirituality, and bold and timely initiative in and with the people of the church. As an order of ordained ministry for the whole people of God, there are no criteria of exclusion by virtue of race, class, or sex. Called by the Spirit and examined and ordained by the church, these ministers are typically assigned servant-leadership roles in relation to many of the essential being-in-acts of the church's witness: leadership in worship, in education, in pastoral care, and in administering the organized life of the church.

They lead best by serving—serving first the Lord Jesus Christ and his Gospel—and then serving the church in its witness to the Gospel. In this serving, the ministerial leader is responsible also to the whole *laos* of the church. But such leaders must always resist the temptation to regard themselves as the Head of the church and the controller of its life. **They are servants of Jesus Christ who is the Head of the church and who has the church as his body.**

But the formally ordained leaders of the church are not the only leaders called out and necessary to the administering of the church's life. The Spirit from time to time calls others of the *laos* to short-term and

long-term tasks and functions for the sake of the church's witness in nurturing and outreach practices. These other real leaders in their work and ministry are signs of the identity of the church as people called to witness. The distinction between the formally ordained and the non-ordained but called and selected leaders, should remain fluid, open, and nonhierarchical in the life of the church. Pragmatic, servant hierarchies may from time to time serve the interests of the church's mission, but none is necessary to that mission as such.

The church must remember—as a sign of its theological faithfulness—**that its structures created for mission are not eternal or essential but are subject to continuous review and reform by reference to their adequacy to and fitness for witness.**

It must always be clear that the internal administering of the life of the church moves incessantly towards the administering of the church's **outreach practices** in the world. Obviously, these practices are not first the practices of ordained ministers: they must be the practices of the whole church and every member of the church. Before looking at the general shape of these practices, we must recall that the church is a **liberative community**. This sense of liberation has two distinct but interrelated meanings. First, the church is the community that it called by the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ and this liberating in Christ is rooted in the acknowledgement of God's reconciliation and justification of the sinners in Christ, which is God's judgment that sin will not have the last word in determining the meaning and destiny of humanity. Christians, the church, are the persons who say 'yes' to this liberation in Christ and who experience by the Spirit the newness of life and direction: they are free from the slavery of sin and its consequences. As the church celebrates this gracious liberation of God, it also is called and sent to take this liberating good news to the world. Hence, in the second sense of liberation, the church is the bearer of a liberative witness in word and deed for the world. In all its life the church is engaged in the ethics of grace: an ethics which lives from God's grace and justification, which does not seek just reward, and which takes shape as the works of love on behalf of the neighbor.

What are the **general spheres of these outreach works of love on behalf of the world?** The first sphere is that of **evangelism**. Evangelism is simply the whole of those activities in which the church conveys to the world the good news of Jesus Christ and invites the world to respond to this news with a renewal of life and a change of direction. While it is appalling that some practices of empirical churches have sullied and obscured the proper practices of evangelism, it would be an abdication of responsibility and theological identity if the church were ever to abandon or renounce the multiple practices of inviting, interpreting, and applying the Gospel of Jesus Christ on behalf of the world. Evangelism is not restricted to practices of Gospel declaration but also involves practices of persuasive interpretation of the Gospel in conversation with the world. The church dialogues with the world that God loves and calls into a redemptive relationship with God's own life. At least the church has to speak a language that the world can understand, even as the church retains its own peculiar content and message.

All the evangelistic practices of the church must continually be critiqued for their possible infection by the values and causes of a particular, hegemonic nation, class, race, or sex. Further, it is a healthy reminder to the church that the practices of evangelism, while often heavily weighted in linguistic practices, can never be separated from many nonlinguistic works of love on behalf of the world. However ashamed the church may be of past and present practices of an infected and distorted evangelism, the church can never be ashamed of the Gospel itself, and this Gospel beckons the church to share the news of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ with the world which God loves. The church confesses and announces the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world and is not ashamed, and the church enacts the Good News in humble service to the world.

The second sphere of outreach practice is the ways in which the individual Christian exists in the world on a daily basis and is called to witness to the reality of God in word and deed for the particular neighbors met day by day and for the particular social institutions in which we live in the world. Here we are talking about particular care for individual persons through practices of words and practices of caring presence. Here in the call to these projective practices the Christian is most vulnerable to being engulfed and dictated to by the practices and norms of the world, and then the church member is in the world only on the world's terms. These concrete practices of Christian life in the world are essential to the church happening for the world.

Here the Christian meets every person in his or her concrete otherness and knows and relates to this other as one created and loved by God.

The third sphere of outreach practices is those communal and collaborative practices of pursuing in and for the world the love, justice, and peace envisaged in the Kingdom of God. These **projects of social justice** may not be the leveraging of the Kingdom by human acts. But these projects are provoked and called forth by the Kingdom as the realization of historical human well-being before God in which mutuality and openness obtain, which are the signs of shalom. In collaboration with many others beyond the church, the church must pursue in its various concrete locations those projects which feed the hungry and empower the poor for full social participation in life's goods, which bring to the center of life those who are pushed to the margins by the principalities and powers of the world, and which capacitate persons to be nonviolent neighbor-keepers. While these practices cannot commandeer the Kingdom of God, they are *signals* of the God's reign, and they are *signs* of the identity of the church. Communities which omit these projective practices are hardly the witnessing community of Jesus Christ.

It should be clear then that the pitting against each other of nurturing practices and outreach practices, and of evangelizing practices and social justice practices, are inimical and confusing to the life of the church. These are no more mutually excluding alternatives than are witness in word and witness in deed. Ecclesiology, as the doctrine of the fullness of the church's life and being, cannot simply be about the nurturing practices of the church or merely about the administering practices in nurture. **Ecclesiology** is about the fullness of the church's life in the richness and complexity of the being-in-acts in which it witnesses to the richness of God's love for the world. It would not be misleading to say that ecclesiology properly comes to include all the other doctrinal topics of the church's theology and all the practices whereby the church enacts its witness for the benefit of the world.

Here we can emphasize what has been allowed to remain in the background in the preceding discussion: namely, the church witnesses to God for the benefit of the world to the **glory of God**. In that odd Christian sense, the world's true benefit, and therefore also its glory, is first and last prefigured and contained in God's glory. The glory of God—which the church knows and towards which it moves—is a glory which includes the glory of the world of sinners reconciled. God's glory is not God's selfish possession but is a glory shared with the world by the triune Subject who uniquely creates, reconciles, and redeems all things. Hence, it is not a glory on the world's terms, nor is it always a benefit on the world's terms. But **God's glory is finally the only eternal benefit which can save and redeem the world**. It is a sign of the church's identity that it witness to the glory of God as the reality from which and towards which all things move. In the absence of such witness the empirical church is drawn to its own transient and worldly glory or it becomes subservient to the glory of some other creaturely reality.