

This essay has been published in “Bearing the Marks of the Church”, the first Occasional Paper of the Re-Forming Ministry program. Copies of “Bearing the Marks of the Church” can be obtained from Presbyterian Distribution Service by calling 800-524-2612 and requesting PDS#70424-06-001. A shortened version of this essay was published by the Presbyterian Outlook, (September 4, 2006 issue) and appears on the Web at: <http://www.pres-outlook.com/tabid/1051/Article/2780/Default.aspx> (free registration required).



“One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”

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Immovable Inscriptions or Dance?

When I think of the classical Nicene marks of the church, I tend to think of four immovable inscriptions pointing to some very intimidating standards: “One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.” Somehow these marks seem very distant and removed from our church life. Pondering these marks we need to be reminded that the life of the church is rooted in the Triune God whose life is not marked by immovable, petrified divinity but by shocking, self-giving, other-embracing grace as revealed through the life, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need theological and contextual re-interpretation of these “marks” given the present situation facing the PC(USA). I will give a brief Trinitarian interpretation of the classic marks of the church using a framework of a theology of the cross.

Trinitarian theology, especially the so-called the “social trinitarian” theology, has been rediscovered and has become popular in recent years. Simply put, it says God does not exist in some kind of divine solitary isolation. The very heart of the divine life is life in community, in relationships of mutual self-giving love between the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Imagery of a dance rather than rigid hierarchy is appropriate for this model. This understanding of the communal, Triune God becomes the model for the life of the church. The church, too, ought not be a hierarchical, self-seeking institution, but a community of self-giving and loving people, called, gathered, and shaped by the Triune God.

Coziness and the Cross

But this way of thinking about the Trinity can quite easily generate an impression that the Triune God is having a nice, cozy time in eternity and we need only imitate that life to solve the many problems plaguing us. I remember hearing a story told by a Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama, of his teacher Kazoh Kitamori (author of *The Theology of the Pain of God*), who demonstrated what theology is like. In front of the

class he laid a silk handkerchief on a table and placed an egg on the center of it and then picked up the handkerchief with the egg nestled in it. Kitamori said, “Egg and handkerchief having a good time. But this is not theology.” Then he laid the handkerchief again on the table and this time he placed a large pair of scissors on it and picked it up, causing the scissors to rip through the handkerchief. He said, “Scissors and handkerchief not having a good time. This is theology.”

Kitamori reminds us that theology cannot be too neat because at the center of the Christian faith is the cross of Jesus Christ which rips through our comfortable notions of God, including our understanding of the Trinity. What I am proposing is that the Cross must be at the center of our understanding of the Triune God. At the heart of the Triune community is the self-giving love for sinners shockingly revealed in the pain, suffering, and death of Jesus on the cross. Without the cross our understanding of the Trinity can easily degenerate into an image of a divine, cozy community “having a good time,” resembling a dream of an American middle class family.

God Against Expectations

According to the theology of the cross, as articulated by Martin Luther and many of his interpreters today, although God is decisively revealed in Jesus Christ, the nature of this revelation is indirect—hidden under the suffering, humility, and weakness of the cross. The revelation is hidden because Jesus does not appear in ways of glory and majesty which correlate with characteristics humans usually associate with God. Rather, God is revealed in Jesus most powerfully in the humility and shame of the cross. And this knowledge of God—revealed indirectly, against all expectations—must be received by faith. There is no other mode of reception for this knowledge of God.

This indirect revelation of God points to the ungraspable nature of God. By affirming that God is hidden and revealed, the theology of the cross resists any attempt at domestication of God. It preserves divine freedom such that even in the decisive event of revelation, divine mystery remains. The cross of Christ becomes a critique against theologies which promote direct or indirect triumphalism, what Luther called the theology of glory. The consequence of Jesus’ cross for Christians is a complete break with their customary way of knowing God. The theology of the cross provides a particular way of knowing God from which to exercise self-criticism and from which to deal honestly with reality. Luther writes in the 21st thesis of his Heidelberg Disputation,

A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

So to summarize, I am proposing a Trinitarian model of the marks of the church with the theology of the cross acting as a theological corrective. Now to the actual marks of the church...

The first mark: Unity

With the triune God as the source of its life, the unity of the church cannot mean rigid and unchanging uniformity. It is a relational unity grounded in the triune unity of God that reaches out to reconcile sinners with God and with each other. The unity of the

church must move away from, and critique against, institutional systems that perpetuate a sameness and familiarity which deaden the call for a dynamic, creative, outward unity that gathers and empowers those who have been invalidated, ignored, and dismissed by society and by the church.

The unity of the church will mean that those in positions of power seriously listen and discern the voices from the margins. Acts 6:1-6 describes the first major potential conflict that faced the early church and gives a biblical example of *unifying action between those in power and a minority group*. When the Greek community complained to the Hebrews that their widows were being neglected in care, the apostles did not get defensive, nor patronize the minority group by doing things for them. They listened, discerned, chose leadership from among those who voiced the concerns, empowered them to do the needed work, all with appropriate accountability, encouragement, and prayer. The result was that the two groups from different cultures and languages were unified spiritually and communally and the “word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly...” (Acts 6:7). This is a proper work of a unifying church that welcomes the diversity of different ethnic peoples. The leaders listened to the voices in the margins, were able to reflect and were properly self-critical. They heard the voices of the minority without romanticizing marginality. They were able to see from the point of view of a people in the margins what they could not see by themselves. This is an example, I think, of a ministry of the cross. It is the unity of the church at work.

This is important for the PC (USA) to hear. The largely White leaders of the PC(USA) need to hear the needs of the most vulnerable members whose cultures and languages are different from the majority and engage in the process of discernment together, not merely from a standpoint of “political correctness” only to fulfill a certain quota but really listen and discern. This work is particularly relevant in the PC(USA) which is still largely uniform in its ethnicity, falling far short of our nation’s diversity of peoples.

Second mark: Holiness

God set apart God’s church to do God’s mission in the world. The Church is the Body of Christ to carry on the work of Christ. As the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, suggests, we are God’s “called out ones.” The holiness of the church, then, is not about the church being the moral guardians, being self-absorbed by keeping a proper ethical code of behavior. Such inwardness is not the mark of the church.

In the context of our denomination, the Holiness of the church is not adhering to the letter of our polity in all circumstances. Rather, the holiness of the church must be rooted in the holiness of Jesus Christ who concretely demonstrated the love of God by embracing sinners and outcasts in the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness, too, then, is rooted in the Triune activity of God: the church, through justification and sanctification by the grace of God through the work of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, participates in God’s mission in the world, serving the poor and the needy and proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. In order to carry out that mandate faithfully, the church needs to be self-critical, and identify those elements that obscure and debilitate its mission and reform them, as well as courageously and prophetically speak out against all kinds of injustices.

We as a church are proud that we are moderate and open-minded in theology, inclusive in our outlook. But when we come to our polity we are still largely fundamentalists. The Triune God whose holiness is expressed in the radical, concrete shocking love of Jesus, who criticized the guardians of the Law of his time, also critiques our flawed perceptions of holiness today.

Third mark: Catholicity

The catholicity or the universality of the church affirms that God's church exists throughout the world and in all times. This mark affirms that the church of the Triune God is everywhere and always, including but transcending the local church. What would this mark of the church look like in our Trinitarian interpretation in the light of the theology of the cross, given our present context?

Rather than emphasizing the everywhere-always aspect of the church, catholicity, I believe, must now express the radical inclusive hospitality of the gospel of Jesus Christ as expressed by Paul in Galatians 3:27-28:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We need to remember the table fellowship of Jesus that deliberately and intentionally included sinners and tax collectors. We need to remember that radical inclusiveness of the New Testament church that invited gentiles without requiring circumcision. We need to recast the mark of catholicity in the light of the radical hospitality of the Triune God, who calls the church to demonstrate this characteristic by welcoming strangers who have been either directly or indirectly shunned from the church.

But emphasizing inclusiveness and hospitality does not mean that the church succumbs to an "anything goes" attitude. In the light of the cross of Jesus Christ, "we need to call a thing what it is." We need to be realistic about sin, and idolatry, which thrive in the guise of good intentions. Within the universal church there needs to be a recognition of what French philosopher Michel Foucault called a "regime of power" that is working subtly but powerfully, excluding people from experiencing true community rooted in the life of the Triune God. Because of this power dynamic within the church, minority communities within the church may need provisional space to have the freedom to cultivate their community in relative freedom from the majority.

Fourth mark: Apostolicity

An important scripture reference concerning the apostolicity of the church comes from Ephesians 2:19-20

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

Apostolicity, then, means the church's obedience to Christ Jesus, the cornerstone of our faith, in every area of faith and life, standing with the great cloud of witnesses who went before us. Therefore, we need to remember that the apostolicity of the church is not a status that the church possesses but a continual dependence upon the living Christ.

Death and Resurrection for Us?

When Peter confessed the true identity of Jesus by exclaiming, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," (Matt. 16:16) he did not and could not grasp the full understanding of his own confession. When Jesus spoke of his necessary suffering and death Peter rebuked him, conforming not to the living Jesus but conforming to his limited and erroneous understanding of Jesus. Jesus responds by rebuking Peter harshly and then says to him and others, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24).

Our small, provincial understanding of Jesus must give way to the living Christ who shows that an essential part of living the faith means going through the painful shattering of our images of Jesus and our preconceived notions of the Christian life and the church through obedience to the living Christ. This is a necessary aspect of the Christian life of cross. Luther called this process "spiritual assault," *Anfechtung*. He meant it in an individualistic, existential sense. But given our ecclesial context, we ought not be shocked that the church may go through a corporate spiritual assault/*Anfechtung*. For Luther, it is the Holy Spirit that leads us through this desert experience. And the purpose of *Anfechtung* is to put to death those things that get in the way of true discipleship so that a believer can emerge anew. The Holy Spirit may be leading the PC (USA) through a desert experience, to put to death those things that get in the way of true discipleship. But we know through our Lord Jesus Christ that death is not the final word but that through His death and our participation in it we will also participate in the new life of Christ's resurrection.