

THE GOSPEL AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH: SIGNS OF THE CHURCH'S TRUE IDENTITY

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Certainly it goes without saying that all of us gathered for this important Focus on Ministry program find ourselves deeply concerned about the life of the church in North America in these perplexing times. Our being here is an indication of our concern. And we are perhaps eager to move beyond the various loud laments about the church that fill the air these days. Surely there are signals here and there of congregations that show vitality and clear purpose and faithfulness. Let us celebrate these congregations where we find them and praise the undefeatable Holy Spirit for moving decisively beyond our self-imposed *cul de sacs*.

In the interest of moving beyond the laments, it is my contention in this lecture that the desperate situation in the life of the church today is essentially a function of **concrete, practical theological confusion in the church's self-understanding**. The confusion is basically rooted in the various ways in which the church has allowed the surrounding culture, both in its social and intellectual dimensions, to define *what* the church is. With the overwhelming power of social forces to dictate conditions of identity and meaning, the church has succumbed to the ritualized self-understandings of its culture. In particular this means that the empirical church is defined by sociological and historical categories of pluralist social location, whether this is achieved subtly and practically or by self-conscious intellectual justification and explanation. The net effect is that the empirical church has little capacity to identify itself theologically over against and in independence of the social powers of definition and sanctification. This is a theological failure of nerve and an abdication of theological responsibility.

I propose to advance the discussion today with a working theological definition of the church, in terms of which the fuller statement of the reality of the church can be developed and explored in conversation with some options currently present in the life of the church. My working, normative theological definition is:

**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.**

Using this definition, today I want to ask about the **concrete signs of the church's true identity**. Here I am 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

overwhelming fact today 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 seems to be 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.

While not all aspects of this definition will be pursued in this lecture, the initial focus will be on church as **called into being by the Gospel of Jesus Christ**. If the church is to have any leverage in self-definition in the midst of the reigning cultural powers, it is necessary to recover the sense of the church as *called* into being by the Gospel. The church is not called into being by the world or by itself as a democratically self-constituting society: it is called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whenever this sense of definite call is diminished, the church loses its grounding and identity and is easily subject to the identities which are culture-conferred and culture-bound. But the church's identity will only be clear when it is clear about what it means by the 'Gospel of Jesus Christ'.

Asking about the content and meaning of the Gospel is a task for every generation and locale of the church. I think we are especially confused in North America as to what the Gospel is. I am arguing that the Gospel cannot be separated from Jesus Christ, and I would propose the following questions to our contemporary theological discussion within the church:

1) Is Jesus Christ the very *essence* of the Gospel, or is Jesus the *bearer* of a Gospel that can be identified on other grounds quite independent of his historical actuality?

2) Is Jesus Christ the *unsurpassable* Savior of all, or is Jesus Christ only the *functional* Savior of the Christian church (or of the Gentiles, or of western people)?

3) Is Jesus Christ the *definitive* revealer of God and of humanity, or is Jesus Christ but a compelling *example* of God's saving disposition toward humanity and an attractive example of human right-response to God?

4) Is Jesus' particularity *essential* to the understanding of God, or is Jesus useful only as an *illustration* of general metaphysical or mytho-religious ideas that we have or can find credible on grounds quite independent of Jesus?

It is my contention that the church is most faithfully the church when it answers these question in terms of the first alternative in each question: that is, **Jesus Christ is the very essence of the Gospel, the unsurpassable Savior of all, the definitive revealer of God and humanity, and essential to the understanding of the reality of God**. When the church wavers on these matters and finds its grounding in some other 'gospel', then its practical theological self-understanding will always be suspect.

Hence, the church's own inquiry concerning its Gospel requires it to provide a diagnostic statement of that Gospel. Of course, the whole of the church's theology can be understood as the attempt to identify and interpret the Christian Gospel. Yet this whole of theology will be whole in terms of the content of the 'gospel' being explicated. The succinct statement of this gospel will then function as the 'material norm' of the theology and will be what I call the 'Presiding Model of the Gospel'. This model of the Gospel will then shape every aspect of the church's self-understanding. The model which I propose for a dialectically confessional church is:

**The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News
that the God of Israel, the Creator of all things,
has in freedom and love identified God's being and life
with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,
God's Son, to enact and reveal God's gracious reconciliation
of sinful humanity to Godself,
and calls humanity through the Holy Spirit
to participate in God's liberative and redemptive work
by acknowledging God's reconciliation,
repenting of its sin,
receiving the gift of freedom,
realizing authentic community by loving the neighbor and the enemy,
caring for the whole creation,
and hoping for the final triumph of God's grace as the Ultimate Companion of
all creatures.**

Working now with this definition of the church and this proposed Presiding Model of the Gospel, I want to inquire about the *signs of identity of the true church*. We are seeking those *characteristics* which 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** which 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, in conformity with the being-in-acts of the triune God, the church truly exists where these being-in-acts **happen**. 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 which 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 in 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 a 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. I 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 and constitutive signs of the church. This I want to question, for it 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', I 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 to 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** will pervade the life of the true 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 more deeply and richly, and therewith also to understand itself and the world. *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 which 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. What I am calling the **ethics of grace** are the imperatives of Christian living which spring from the forgiveness of sin and the justification by grace in Jesus Christ and which live 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 can see signs of the identity of the church. But the **signs are in the servant practices**, not in the static traits of persons or of occupied offices.

These ordained leaders, variously called by Scripture and tradition 'pastors', 'elders', 'bishops', and 'deacons', or simply 'ministers', 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 gender. 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 **serviing**--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 leaders** and the **nonordained-but-called** 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 is called by the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ. This being liberated in Christ is rooted in the acknowledgement of God's reconciliation and justification of the sinners in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ God's judgment is accomplished and revealed 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 this sense, then, the church is always engaged in the liberative praxis or practice of witnessing to God's liberative and redemptive work. 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 **liberative 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 aver 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, ethnicity, or gender. 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 liberative 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 professes** the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world and is not ashamed, and the church **enacts** the Good News in humble liberative 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 I am 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 in themselves 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 is also in this third sphere of outreach practices that we must locate the **prophetic practices** of the church. In these practices the church engages the principalities and powers of the world---especially the world infected by the distortions of sin---in a continuing diagnostic critique and naming of the oppressive and unjust

arrangements of those powers. But these prophetic practices must always be those authorized by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for sheer prophetic denunciation independent of the Gospel seldom leads to human reconciliation and redemption. The prophetic church speaks best for the oppressed when it seeks freedom and justice for both the oppressed and the oppressor. Being an oppressor is surely slavery of the most virulent kind, for it parades itself under the illusion of having the power to **save**; it is not good for anyone, though, to be an oppressor. Further, as prophet the church engages in continuing self-critique of the various ways in which it collaborates with the powers of injustice and oppression.

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 I 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.

In conclusion, I have tried to argue for the recovery in the church of a keen sense of being called by the distinctive content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to live wholly as witness to the gracious self-communicating triune life of God. Such witness is always concrete practices of living for this contemporary world---the world for whom God came in love to redeem. Only where this concrete witness is recovered will there be, however fragmented and frail, the church of Jesus Christ.

Dear friends gathered as ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I hope these brief and compact notes might prove encouraging and empowering as you continue your many paths of giving leadership to the church's recovery of its mission as the **witnessing church of Jesus Christ**.

FOM Lecture 2; 11/94

