

Who or what is the church? What stars (or satellites!) might we navigate by as we seek to be the church here and now? How might we name what has changed and what remains the same as we seek to live from the good things handed to us by those who went before, moving forward to the future Jesus Christ has promised?

The Nicene Creed offers four marks of the church: “one holy catholic and apostolic.” These, we affirm, are central marks or characteristics of the church – they are part of the church’s true self.

Knowing these marks of the church, however, may be no more helpful than identifying a few landmarks on a map. The most pressing question is not “where are the landmarks?” The most pressing question is “where are we and how did we get here?” Closely followed by “how do we get to our destination?”

The three essays gathered in this Occasional Paper are attempts to use the Nicene marks of the church as navigation points as we seek to answer those questions: “where are we?”, “how did we get here?” and “how do we get to our destination?”

Charles Wiley, Associate for Theology in the Office of Theology and Worship, thinks about the present situation of the PCUSA through the lens of the four marks of the church offered by the Nicene Creed. Wiley probes the PCUSA’s slide from the center of American culture and the ambiguous, challenging situation we’ve come to, in which some of the markers we thought were fixed and reliable for navigation have in fact moved. Wiley also considers some of the possible avenues for moving forward from this situation.

Kevin Park, Pastor of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Bloomfield, New Jersey and Adjunct Faculty member at New Brunswick Seminary, evaluates the Nicene Marks themselves, with an eye to helping us understand what they might tell us about who we are called to be today. Park calls us to particular attention to the diversity of cultures and peoples whom God is drawing together to the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:22-26 – a passage whose power is beautifully drawn out in Park’s homily on these verses, “Nations Shall Bring Their Glory”, posted on the Re-Forming Ministry website: <http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry/papers/parkhomily.htm>.)

Darrell Guder also evaluates the Nicene Marks, considering ways in which we might rethink the marks themselves to clarify what might come as we listen again to Christ’s call and command to us. Guder suggests that we understand the Nicene Marks best when we put them in reverse order: we believe the “apostolic catholic holy and one church.” Guder shows how reversing the order enables us to see how each characteristic both flows from and undergirds the previous characteristic. Darrell Guder is Henry Winters Luce Professor of Missional and Ecumenical Theology and Dean of Academic Affairs at Princeton Theological Seminary.

These three essays were originally given as presentations during the first meeting of the Core Cluster of the Re-Forming Ministry program, in June 2004.

Re-forming Ministry is an initiative of the Office of Theology and Worship, funded in its initial stages by a generous grant from the Lilly Endowment. Re-Forming Ministry brings together pastors, governing body leaders and professors to do theological work together as equals, engaging in discussion of pressing theological issues in an effort to help the denomination think its faith more deeply in order that we might be better able to articulate our faith as we bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. Re-Forming Ministry seeks to be one means by which we respond to Jesus' command to ". . . love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30).

At the present time Re-Forming Ministry groups are all reflecting on ecclesiology – the church. The essays printed here were early contributions to that on-going conversation.

Further information about the Re-Forming Ministry program can be found at the Re-Forming Ministry website: <http://www.pcsua.org/re-formingministryg>. I invite you to visit the Re-Forming Ministry site and learn about the program.

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## **We believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church: 4 Theses**

*by Charles Wiley, Associate for Theology, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

We begin by reading the creed:

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

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary  
and became truly human.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,

who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.  
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

A brief note before I begin: Usually when I speak as an Associate for Theology I must be very careful in representing the General Assembly Council. In a few weeks I will serve at our 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly as a resource person before a host of committees to represent the General Assembly Council. I will do my best to avoid controversy, to speak consistently with General Assembly policies, and to avoid making people unnecessarily angry. That is an appropriate role for me to take, and I have to admit that I take a fair amount of pride that I do it rather well.

Nonetheless, that is not my role today. Re-forming Ministry has a chance to succeed only if its participants are willing to take risks publicly: testing ideas before they're "perfected," working publicly together with colleagues, being willing to say "I was wrong about that" when helpfully challenged by others.

My presentation will consist of four theses about the one holy catholic and apostolic church, one thesis for each attribute of the church. After a previous incarnation of this presentation, one of the hearers remarked that it seemed very pessimistic. I am not a pessimist about the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In fact, I have great hope for it. However, I do believe that we are at a critical juncture in this church's history. And at this time we need nothing more than we need honesty. Better public relations will not carry us forward to a better place; speaking the truth in love just might.

**THESIS ONE: The greatest future possibility for the Presbyterian Church is also its greatest challenge: to repent of our idolatry of our past for an uncertain future where the Presbyterian Church is no longer *mainline* nor a *denomination*. This painful path is the way we must take in order to develop a robust ecclesiology for a new day.**

I come as an outsider to the Presbyterian Church, having been raised Pilgrim Holiness. That has been a deficit for me in some ways. I do not have the natural networks that some have, but it also provides me with perspectives that are helpful. When I was in seminary as a new Presbyterian, I noticed the way that folks told the story of Presbyterianism. It almost always started something like this: "Presbyterians have featured prominently in United States history."<sup>1</sup> The story centered around the importance of the Presbyterian Church to the republic, e.g., that the governmental structure of the United States was modeled on Presbyterian polity. Did you know that nine US presidents have been Presbyterians (including a remarkable three-in-a-row streak of Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison and . . . well . . . Grover Cleveland . . . but that is still three-for-three)?

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from the account of the denomination's history posted on the PC(U.S.A.) website: <http://www.pcusa.org/101/101-history.htm>

Much of this history was indeed true, but it also became clear to me that it was much more than a listing of events—it was an identity-creating story. We Presbyterians are, in a word, important. And we can prove it to you by showing you how important we have been in our nation's history.

Whether you agree or not with Stanley Hauerwas that we Christians have never handled such success well<sup>2</sup>, it is no longer true that we are important as an institution. There are still important Presbyterians in American government: Donald Rumsfeld, Bill Frist, and Condaleeza Rice in the current administration, just to name a few, (although they seem to show a considered indifference to General Assembly social witness policy!). As an institution, that cultural power is at best a nostalgic memory.

Had you been a loyal reader of *Newsweek* on March 28, 1955 you would have seen Eugene Carson Blake, future Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (a predecessor to the PCUSA) on the cover. Just six years later *Time* readers would have spotted Blake on their cover, now the Stated Clerk of newly formed United Presbyterian Church. And in neither case was this coverage the result of scandal or crisis in the church. Even now we can still remember those heady times of Blake and Eisenhower, but the memory grows dim. Mark Smutny of Pasadena Presbyterian Church put it well in a sermon on January 20, 2002:

Nobody in power is really listening anymore to the mainline churches despite all the "God bless Americas" and faith-based initiatives from political officials. True, General Assemblies and their counterparts among Lutherans, Methodists and the rest continue to issue progressive resolutions, but nobody of influence is really listening. In the 1950s when Eugene Carson Blake was Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian General Assembly, he could pick up the phone and call President Eisenhower on a matter of church concern. He was the last Presbyterian to do so. Our clout as an establishment church is gone. The cozy alliance of mainline church and a benevolent government where the church helped shape governmental policy and promoted vague civic virtues is only a memory.<sup>3</sup>

I believe that Cliff Kirkpatrick is a fine man and a good Stated Clerk—a man I respect. The position he holds may have the same title as the one Eugene Carson Blake held, but it is a different job. Cliff is the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He is not, as Blake was, splitting that job with being a Protestant Pontiff and a member of the shadow cabinet.

The very descriptor *mainline* is now sociologically puzzling. This term, borrowed from the churches that lined the Main Line in Philadelphia, now appears to be as appropriate for Pentecostals as it is for Presbyterians—at least there are more of them in church on a Sunday than there are of us.<sup>4</sup>

But if this is the case, if we are no longer at the heart of the culture, we are blind to it. Hauerwas and Willimon put it well:

Mainline American Protestantism . . . [has] plodded wearily along as if nothing had changed. Like an aging dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and penniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her

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<sup>2</sup> Resident Aliens, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ppc.net/sermons/text/01-20-02.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.adherents.com/rel\\_USA.html#families](http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html#families).

family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continued to think and act as if we were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid.<sup>5</sup>

Yet it is precisely this analogy that helps to explain Presbyterian blindness to the situation clearly before us: we are not bankrupt and penniless. We believe that we still are the mainline—a belief sustained by riches. Frankly, as someone who has lived through three reductions in force over the past four years, we are starting to get the picture, but the financial stress we have been facing is primarily because our significant endowed funds have produced less income because of the stock market drop of 2000. It only goes to show how dependent we are, to put it bluntly, on dead people. If this building were run just on current giving, we'd only be in that four story building next door—or more likely in a mirrored office complex out on Hurstbourne Drive, sharing space with a temporary agency. Instead, even in hard times we can sustain an existence in this building that provides a sense of authority and prestige.

If our future lies in no longer being mainline, it also must like in no longer being a denomination. *Denomination* is clearly one of the slipperiest words in this discussion. I have been working on it for a couple of years, and I have yet to find a completely satisfying description. There are a lot of nuances to the question that demand a separate hearing, but to put it simply:

- when we are considering the spiritual life of our children over 18, *denomination* does not mean church in any way. If our children attend worship of almost any Christian tradition, as long as it does not practice human sacrifice, we jump with joy and do not consider them to have abandoned the *church* when they affiliate with a denomination other than the PCUSA.
- when we are considering congregations and their property, we use words like schism and consider breaking fellowship with the PCUSA nigh to breaking fellowship with the church universal.

There may be good reasons for both of the above, but it does point to what I believe is a basic incoherence in our understanding of the status of being a *denomination*.

The best that I can come up with so far is that denomination is the form of social relation that Christian traditions have in a market-driven culture where each is simply one of the choices that people have. As Amy Pauw noted yesterday<sup>6</sup>, voluntary association may be a better model for the church than some. Nonetheless, there is a deeper understanding of church that we must claim. Part of the way we conduct ourselves now is to recognize that we are both:

- a. competing with other faith traditions for adherents, and,
- b. open to suggesting more compatible forms of Christianity for those that give us trouble

I wonder if either of these gives us a very good model of “church?” Our future lies in being church, not just another option on the religious landscape.

**THESIS TWO, holy: The greatest challenge to our polity is that while most Presbyterians find their experience in congregations life-giving, they find their experience, or at least their perception, of governing bodies life-draining. Members**

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<sup>5</sup> *Resident Aliens*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> In her response to an essay by John Burgess.

**experience the church beyond the life of the congregation as no longer dealing in holy things.**

The significant exception this thesis, as far as my experience goes, is General Assembly commissioners. The vast majority of those I have spoken with at the Assembly find it an exhilarating, faith-building experience. They would not trade it for the world. But of course, they don't have to attend it 6 times a year! For many, especially those in vital churches, the work of governing bodies has become a distraction at best, and a life-draining burden at worst.

This is no one's fault in particular, as if the fault could be laid at the feet of presbytery executives or the like—it goes way beyond presbytery leadership. It is the natural reaction of people within a failing institution. We become focused on internal, structural issues and forget our true purpose. And while this may be a strategic problem for many kinds of institutions, it is fatal for the church. The problem for us is ecclesiological: we mistake the quite necessary institution of the church that supports a greater purpose for the end itself.

Reformed ecclesiology always is on this knife-edge in relation to the institutional life of the church. The church cannot help but take a visible, institutional form. That the church is institutional is not a problem. But the church errs when its institutional life becomes the focus of its vision and energy. When this happens, life in the church ceases to be holy.

**THESIS THREE: catholic: The greatest challenge to local congregations is the rate of cultural change, specifically related to music, that makes conversations about worship the most divisive issue in local contexts. What does it mean to call the church comprehensive and universal when cultures even within congregations seem incompatible?**

We live in a time of unrivaled musical change and differentiation. After a long period in which the organ (and piano) have almost defined church music, we are moving into a time when the organ is a niche instrument. That there is a variety of music used in Christian worship is nothing new, but that it is stratified intergenerationally is new.

Homosexuality is usually cited as the most church-dividing issue nationally. Music in worship is the most church-dividing issue within congregations.

It is not a crisis that there is a wide variety of music out there. I would argue that it is a good. We are enriched by new and interesting music—often from other cultures. It does become a problem when worship is so identified with particular genres of music such that common worship becomes an oxymoron.

Church buildings are becoming “branded” by type of music in worship. Cathedral type spaces have indicated their genre for a long time. One walks in, sees the giant rank of pipes, and one knows what one will hear in worship. Increasingly, this is happening across many types of churches. One recent trend is that churches that have had their organ pipes discreetly hidden behind screens are putting them out in the open. Churches that have bands are setting up their space for that. More and more, when you walk into a church, without anyone saying a word, you know: “This is an organ church” or “This is a band church.”

I hate sounding like a Luddite, and in the interest of full disclosure you should know that, while I think while much contemporary Christian music is drivel, I think some of it is outstanding and beats the pants off some of our traditional and recent hymnody. Further, I dislike the performance aspect of much that goes under the umbrella of “contemporary,” but if

you really want to see performance in worship, visit one of our tall steeple churches with world-class organs and paid choirs. Such alien features to authentic worship are not restricted to the synthesizer and “let-me-emote-in-front-of-you” praise band leaders.

Worship music has evolved since its introduction in public worship. That is not a problem. What is a problem is a theologically and liturgically coherent account of worship when it is directed to such narrow sociological bands defined by race, class and increasingly by age.

What does it mean our notion that the church is catholic (universal and comprehensive) when we cannot find a way to sustain worship together?

**THESIS FOUR: apostolic: The greatest challenge to our mission is that we lack a cohesive and compelling account of salvation in Jesus Christ.**

A few years ago we, and by this I mean the PCUSA, had something of a triumph at General Assembly. After almost two years of vitriolic debate that seemed to indicate that we had no shared understanding of who our Savior is, the Assembly affirmed a statement that proclaimed the church’s broad faith in Jesus Christ in the document, “Hope in the Lord Jesus Christ.” As someone who helped write that document, I have to say that the standing ovation from the commissioners that day was the single most satisfying moment in my work on GAC staff.

But as we have moved away from that great day in Columbus, I have been left with a nagging concern.

As you know, the debate those 20 months surrounded the question, “Is Jesus Christ the only way?” The Assembly adopted the statement “Jesus Christ is the only Savior and Lord, and all people everywhere are called to place their faith, hope, and love in him.” So we stood together and proclaimed Jesus as *the way*. My niggling concern is that we have little shared understanding of *the way to what*.

In an earlier day we did have a shared understanding: sin condemned us to eternal damnation, and salvation consisted of being spared from hell and granted eternal life in heaven with God. Many in the church find this a less than satisfying answer, but we have replaced it with vague affirmations that we find difficult to articulate.

This makes the first great end of the church, “The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind,” a bit of a mystery. Recent work in the Pulpit and Pew research shows that most ministers are satisfied in their lives as pastors, but 80% find preaching the Gospel to be a significant problem in their ministry. This is worth repeating: most ministers are satisfied in their lives as pastors, but 80% find preaching the Gospel to be a significant problem in their ministry.

Without a Gospel to proclaim, we become an institution searching for a reason to exist. It is often said that without a mission, the church becomes like the Kiwanis club. Well, as a member of the Kiwanis once told me, let’s not insult the Kiwanians that way. As a civic club, the church is pretty pitiful. If we do not have a Gospel to proclaim, we better just close up shop.

I believe in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church



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## **“One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”**

**by Kevin Park**

**Pastor, Bethany Presbyterian Church, Bloomfield, New Jersey**

### *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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.



## THE NICENE MARKS IN A POST-CHRISTENDOM CHURCH

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### *Dislocation and Opportunity*

The issue that is either openly addressed or subtly at work in all our discussions about a denomination like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the fact that Christendom is over. Wherever one is located on the theological or ecclesial spectrum, this is the common ground that links us together. The grant proposal that led to the funding of the “Re-Forming Ministry” project put it very succinctly:

Mainline Protestantism is no longer the religious expression of American society, the culture’s *de facto* established church. The social and religious climate has altered dramatically, pushing denominations such as the PCUSA out of the center of American Christianity, and pushing Christianity itself to the margins of a culture that is increasingly secular, pluralistic, and indifferent to the institutional church.<sup>1</sup>

The “Christianity” referred to in the last sentence is the Christianity of European Christendom, that partnership of church, state, and society initiated in the fourth century under the Emperor Constantine. This project resulted in the shaping and definition of western cultures as “Christian,” symbolized by the parish church at the center of every village, town, and city. The Christian churches of Christendom have been legally “established” and the Christian religion socially and culturally

privileged, to such an extent that the terms “European,” and later, “North American,” have been equated with “Christian.”

The proposal’s language is, I think, a good, clean summary of a broadly held consensus – at least among schooled observers of our context. It is debatable whether or to what degree the general membership in our Presbyterian congregations (or in any other main-line congregations) really grasps this paradigm shift. Christendom may well be over legally (disestablishment became the law of the land with the ratification of the Bill of Rights!), but the mentality and attitudes of Christendom still flourish in our churches, our popular imagination, and much of our public culture. The popularity of the song “God Bless America” witnesses to that cultural reality.

My concern is how we, within the Presbyterian Church, appreciate or work with this contextual change in which we find ourselves today. More pointedly, I would like to know how or whether we, in fact, see this paradigm shift as a theological opportunity. Can we understand that the end of Christendom is a way for us to begin to reassess the western theological tradition from the liberating perspective of the actual and unquestioned end of Christendom? Can we grapple with the very significant challenges and problems as well as great benefits inherited from this long, fascinating and complex history?

### *Why the Church?*

It appears that the end of Christendom raises particularly unsettling questions with regard to the theology of the church. That should not surprise us. Both the institutional and intellectual shape of the Christian movement have obviously been profoundly

affected by the position of privilege and protection guaranteed across the centuries of Christendom. As we learn to look at what that project has done to us theologically, we also have to ask what can perhaps now be changed, or needs to be changed, as a result of that learning. This is no easy task, since ecclesiological issues are very complex and comprehensive. The wording of our grant proposal suggests that the end of the church's eminence and the decline of its influence, which we are all experiencing, have led to confusion about the church's identity. If legal establishment and cultural privilege should no longer define the church, then what should? What should be the criteria for our definition of both the purpose and the shape of the church? Should the church, because of its long history of cultural compromise and even captivity, distance itself from contemporary culture? Or should it find other ways to relate to its culture when it no longer has automatic access to cultural power? In light of the diminishing numbers of people on our rolls, should our theology and worship be shaped to attract outsiders, or should they focus primarily on the needs and wants of those who are still faithful members? Are these two strategies necessarily incompatible, and beyond that, are they even appropriate expressions of a biblical theology of the church? What forms of mission or faith articulation are appropriate in a changing world? What are the characteristics of leadership needed in the changing church and how are these characteristics identified and encouraged?

Ultimately, this massive paradigm shift confronts us with the most basic of questions: Why is there a church at all? That was the very same question that was formulated by Coulter, Mulder and Weeks at the end of their six volume study of *The Presbyterian Presence*, when they reviewed the theological agenda for the reforming of the



Presbyterian Church. The fourth question on their list was “Why, after all, is there a church—an ordered community of Christians?”<sup>2</sup>

*Interpreting the Legacy of Christendom: Ecclesiology without Mission?*

As a teacher of future pastors and leaders of our church, I am very committed to reading our Christendom legacy in a balanced and fair way. There is a great deal of reckless “Christendom-bashing” going on, so that we do need to be theologically attentive and responsible in the way that we read our legacy. It will not do to imply, somehow, that the Holy Spirit left the earth around the 4<sup>th</sup> century, when Constantine came to power, only to reappear in the modern group or movement with which we may now be affiliated. If God is faithful to his purpose and calling, then God has been present and at work through this very ambiguous history that we call Christendom, just as God was present and at work through one thousand years of kings in Israel, most of whom the ancient Chronicler found wanting.

So we have to learn a certain dialectical skill in order to read and interpret this legacy that shapes us. Having said that, however, my contention would be that the end of Christendom is exposing the fact that it is in the area of ecclesiology that we confront the greatest problems. To be sure, many have argued, as I have done, that Christendom’s Christianity is defined by pervasive reductionism, especially with regard to our understanding of God’s promised and completed salvation. There are reductionist problems in all of the classical, theological themes. Having granted that, it seems to me that the most profound issues arise out of salvation reductionism and its sweeping implications for the theology of the church. To concentrate a complex analysis in a brief

summary, the reduction of the gospel of cosmic salvation to the focus upon the savedness of the individual is directly linked to an understanding of the church that centers on the administration of that salvation to the individual believer. From the onset of the Constantinian project, this gradually expanding reductionism of the theology of the church has been institutionalized, supported by the various forms of the church's cultural adaptation and compromise that we now, I think, can see more clearly than we have for a very long time. The telling point for this reductionism is the place and importance of mission in any western theology of the church (ecclesiology).

Wilbert Shenk, the esteemed senior missiologist, has said famously, "The Christendom model of church may be characterized as *church without mission*."<sup>3</sup> I have disagreed with Wilbert on this statement, because throughout the history of Christendom there has certainly been a great deal of missionary action. One need only mention Augustine of Canterbury, Patrick, Columba, Boniface, Methodius, and Cyril to document how much mission was happening under the aegis of Christendom. But it *is* fair to say that the ecclesiology of Christendom is an ecclesiology without mission. That is a fundamental theological problem for the western church. It puts this tradition in direct tension with the biblical understanding of the character and purpose of the church within God's mission. Based on the New Testament, it is abundantly clear that the fundamental assertion we must make about the church of Jesus Christ is that it is, in the words of Vatican II, "missionary by its very nature".<sup>4</sup>

*The New Testament and the Missionary Nature of the Church*

The character of the New Testament church was a community called and formed to be Christ's witnesses. Most of those wonderful images of the church that Paul Minear develops in his study of these images<sup>5</sup> can be described as fundamentally missional. What does it mean to be Christ's letter to the world (2 Cor. 3:2-3)? That's a missional definition of the purpose of the Corinthian congregation. Luke's theology of the early church is summarized in the Ascension Day promise to the gathered disciples, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). John's theology of mission as sending reaches its climax in the Easter command of the risen Christ: "As my Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). The loss of a theology of mission at the heart of Constantinianism's ecclesiologies is a loss of the very heart of the New Testament's understanding of the church.

The church was from its very inception apostolic. It was sent to continue the ministry of the Apostles, the "sent ones," who had been the first missionaries, founding churches. Each congregation was formed with the express purpose of continuing the witness that had brought it into being. As heirs of Christendom, we have been reading this biblical witness regarding this church without any kind of missional lenses. As I tell my students, it has not made sense for millions of Christians in the western world to read in 1 Peter that we are "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11). As the privileged religious institution of Christendom, we could not have had the vaguest idea what Peter meant when he described the Christian community as alien in its setting. We are now beginning to learn it again because the end of Christendom is making that possible. Our sister churches in

the non-western world read this text with great clarity because in almost every context they are marginal, a minority, and they know that they are aliens and exiles.

### *Mission-less Theology and Confession*

This lack of mission characterizes both the way we have written ecclesiology and the way we have done our confessions, these two forms of doctrinal enterprise in the church. One cannot find the theme “mission” in any classic, systematic theology written before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Take, for example, Charles Hodge. Hodge was a highly respected professor of theology at Princeton Seminary, who regularly preached on mission, wrote brochures on the topic, was enthusiastically committed to the growing Presbyterian mission, sent his sons together with hundreds of missionaries who went out from Miller Chapel to become a part of the missionary enterprise of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet he wrote a systematic theology in which the word “mission” never once appears. Hodge wrote a classic Reformed ecclesiology that never deals with the church’s purpose as God’s missionary people.

When we look through our *Book of Confessions*, the most missional statement we find before the year 1903 is the Nicene Creed, with its emphasis upon the apostolicity of the church. The themes that are formative for our Reformation confessions include the universality of the church; the church as the community of the elect, thus the community enjoying the benefits of the gospel; the community of salvation; the distinction between the visible and the invisible church; the criteria for the true church; the marks of the church as Word and the Sacrament, and the ministry appropriate to the true church. There are a few mentions, very few, as we scan those documents, about the church

having something to do with the service of God. There is a great deal of polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and its misunderstandings of the church woven throughout.

I often ask groups of pastors or my own students, “When is the first time that the theme ‘mission’ actually occurs in the *Book of Confessions*?” and I have yet to have anybody give me the answer to that question. That is because most people are not aware of the process in the northern stream that added paragraph XXXV to the Westminster Confession in 1903, entitled “Of the Gospel of the Love of God and Missions.”

Significantly, this paragraph is placed at the end of the Confession, not in the section that deals with the theology of the church. This illustrates how our thinking continues almost automatically to separate mission from the theology of the church. That parallels the history of modern mission as a largely non-ecclesial movement, carried out by lay-dominated mission societies rather than established churches – for at least its first century. Thus, we inherit a very Christendom-shaped interpretation of mission, rooted in the assumptions of established Christianity. It is really Thesis 6 of the *Barmen Declaration* that first signals the entry of “mission” in its fully ecclesial sense into our *Book of Confessions*. It then becomes a major theme in the *Confession of 1967*. But in the *Brief Statement of Faith* it appears as “witness” among several functions of the church, with little definitive impact on the way our most recent statement frames its ecclesiology.

#### *Addressing the Gap: Reversing the Nicene Creed’s Marks of the Church*

To address this doctrinal and confessional gap, the discussion that has emerged within the Gospel and Our Culture Network has proposed that we read the Nicene Marks in the

reverse order, in order to restore missional purpose to our theology of the church. This suggestion actually emerged in a conversation in 1996 in my study at the Louisville Seminary when George Hunsberger and I were discussing the book *Missional Church*, which I was editing for publication. He said, “I wonder what would happen if we just thought Nicea in the opposite direction. Why don’t you think about that?” As a result of his suggestion, I did propose this reading in the book, and I have been pursuing its implications ever since.

### *Apostolic*

It is a simple yet revolutionary proposal: What if we were to say that the church that we confess is apostolic, catholic, holy, and therefore one? By “apostolicity,” we do not merely mean “the church descended from the apostles,” as important as that is. We mean “apostolicity” in the active sense of the New Testament verb, meaning “to be sent out,” and the noun “apostle” as the “sent-out one.” The community formed by the Holy Spirit through the initial apostolic witness is called to be sent. It is apostolically initiated in order to continue the apostolic ministry. Its mission is rooted in its calling, its conversion, its submission to Christ as Savior and Lord, and thus is definitive of its very being. The canonic process that forms the New Testament is then understood as the acknowledgment of the apostolic and thus missional authority of these documents—all of them emerging out of the ongoing formation process of communities that exist to continue apostolic witness. These scriptures work in the church as God’s chosen instrument for the continuing formation of communities to be faithful to their vocation.

If we start our Nicene ecclesiology with apostolicity, then we end up defining catholicity and holiness and oneness in rather different ways – in ways closer to the

sequence of formation that we find in the Biblical documents. Our interpretation commences, biblically, with Pentecost, the event that is the necessary completion of Easter. The Easter story isn't fully knowable until the Holy Spirit equips the apostolic witnesses to make it known. And at that act of equipping, the apostolicity of the church is further defined as "catholic."

### *Catholic*

The message is to be made known to the ends of the earth, as Jesus commands, and it will be translatable into the life and experience of every ethnicity, as concretely demonstrated at the first Pentecost. Yet this highly diverse, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-organizational extension of the witnessing people of God, takes place *kat holon*, that is, "catholically," centered on that which is the whole, the common ground of the Gospel. That *holon*, that center and common ground, is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the event that demonstrates God's love for and healing of all the world in Christ. It is history that can be translated and continued in every ethnicity ("nation" is not a strong enough translation of *ethnos*!). Justo Gonzalez has frequently emphasized this very dynamic understanding of catholicity as cultural diversity centered around the *holon*, as the once-and-for-all gospel event.

From the very beginning, the New Testament churches had to be "catholic" if they were to be truly "apostolic." They were by God's intent multi-cultural, but proclaiming always the same Christ in every context. They were multi-organizational, but in common submission to one Lord, rather than to any human hierarchy (there was not any headquarters in the New Testament church!). Lamin Sanneh has constantly pointed out that the gospel is from the very outset fundamentally translatable.<sup>6</sup> Every culture is

“destigmatized” by the gospel, so that every culture can become a vessel within which Christ can be confessed, the church can be formed and witness can be made. But no culture is normative for the church catholic. That is classically addressed in the Jewish-Gentile struggle of the Jerusalem church in Acts. The Jewish Christian movement is converted to the understanding that, by divine design, there was to be catholic diversity as a hallmark of the apostolic church.

It is difficult to find organizational language for the apostolic and catholic church of the first century. The church’s engagement in political and social power, a process played out over centuries, has made it exceptionally difficult for us to imagine a way of existing organizationally that is faithful to the biblical intention. The “church that Jesus intended” clearly differed intentionally from the structures of power, both in the Greek and the Jewish world, that characterized that context.<sup>7</sup> Thus, our polity vocabulary is handicapped by the Christendom legacy: terms like ‘voluntary association,’ ‘established church,’ ‘national church,’ ‘territorial church,’ ‘denomination’ all fail to convey the concrete reality of the apostolic and catholic church which is our common source. How do we aptly describe the character, the sense of “organized-ness” of the early Christian communities as reflected in scripture? Perhaps the current language of “network” might most readily correspond to what was in fact the organizational shape of the early church! Certainly one of the hardest tasks we face, as we labor through the implications of the end of Christendom, is the question of an institutional shape that continues the distinctive kind of community that Jesus intended and actually established.

Catholicity is shaped by apostolicity, with the result that there is in the New Testament and pre-Constantinian church a centered, focused diversity, expressed in



diverse approaches to catechesis, to church organization, and to liturgy and worship. All of the forms of the church's life were, in some way, related to its basic missional vocation. This centered diversity was reflected in the 'Rule of Faith' in the first centuries of the church's history, which functioned dynamically as an expression of the common ground, the center around which the church in its diverse expressions clusters. This understanding and practice of catholicity contrasts with contemporary pluralism which can be described as parallel tracks that never meet and have no center.

### *Holy*

Catholic apostolicity expresses itself appropriately in the holiness of the church. "Holiness" defines the way in which God's Spirit equips the church to practice its vocation so that witness can be credibly made in the world. God's Spirit "sanctifies," makes holy, in order to create a community that can serve as "Christ's letter to the world." This understanding of holiness is not so much related to salvation, as evidence of savedness, as it is to vocation, as formation for obedience. It is the context within which we are to understand the imperatives of the New Testament, the "commandments" of Jesus which, according to John, we are to follow. Holiness has therefore to do with fitness for service, with usability for God's mission.

If we read the New Testament missionally, then among the many questions we ask the text are "how questions": how shall we witness; how shall we be light, leaven, and salt; how shall "the life of Jesus...be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor. 4:10)? This questioning unpacks these texts in terms of their purpose, which was to continue the formation of these communities for their apostolic vocations. This is clearly illustrated in the over-arching theme of the Pauline epistles, which is the admonition to "lead your life

worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1; see 1 Thess. 2:11f.; 2 Thess. 1:11; Col. 1:9f; Phil. 1:27; Gal. 5:13). The calling is to apostolic witness, and to carry it out, the community is instructed to lead its entire life in ways appropriate to that calling.

Thus, every dimension of the community’s life is of importance because all of it relates to the vocation of an apostolic, catholic community. If it is missional by its very nature, everything it does, how it lives, how it administers its money, how people relate to each other, how it resolves its disputes, all are potential demonstrations or witnesses to the rule of God in Christ in its midst. The task of the post-Christendom church in the West is to learn to read the New Testament imperatives, these imperatives of holiness, from the perspective of apostolicity and catholicity.

### *One*

Thus we arrive at “oneness”. What would happen to our ecumenical concept of oneness if it emerged out of the apostolicity that is catholic and sanctified? What would the world see if the diverse forms of church presented a coherent and congruent testimony to the one gospel? If “unity” were understood missionally, then the focus would be upon the way that Christians, before a watching world, love one another, “being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:3). It is likely that the mark of “oneness” is stated first in the Nicene Creed because Constantine’s political interest was to restore the organizational unity of the church. In the sequence at the beginning of Ephesians 4, the oneness emerges out of our grappling with the task of living worthy of our calling, in which we are to be “eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). The diverse forms of witness and of

the organized church are to be perceived and experienced in the world as testifying to the same Jesus Christ. Their public witness is to carry out the same practices and disciplines of Christian discipleship in a great variety of ways: prayer, worship, praise, proclamation, reconciliation, acts of justice and mercy, endurance under persecution. When people in diverse cultures observe Christian communities in their midst living in these distinctive ways, they encounter the witness which points them to Jesus Christ. The unity of the church is expressed in that unified witness, all communities disclosing God's love for all creation, enfleshed in and through the story of Jesus. All apostolic communities continue the ministry of John the Baptist, pointing to Jesus, as illustrated by Grünewald's famous painting, the Isenheimer Altar.

Reading the Nicene marks in this way raises questions not only about the non-missional nature of western ecclesiology. It opens up a discussion about the strategies of the ecumenical movement, at least in the post-Christendom context, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The process appears to have focused on unity with little attention to the foundational character of the church's apostolicity, its "sentness." Thus, the efforts have largely been directed toward questions of organizational unity, which have revealed heavy baggage accumulated through centuries of Christendom compromises with worldly power. While visible unity is an essential aspect of the church's obedience to its calling, the way that we understand and practice that unity will be different if we approach it from the perspective of essential apostolicity, expressed in catholicity and holiness, for witness to the world. Are we not really in need of an entirely new definition of Christian unity, which is based on the missional vocation of the church and liberated from the Christendom preoccupation with power and influence? Do we know what such unity,

framed in terms of the witness seen and experienced by the world around us, would actually look like?

*And Word and Sacrament*

This discussion also raises questions about our interpretation today of the Reformation marks of the church, Word and Sacrament. It is important to remember that these formulations first emerged in the attempt of the disputing factions to find common ground at Augsburg in 1530. The definition of the “true church” in terms of the proper proclamation of the Word and administration of the sacraments was a minimal formulation, proposed by the Lutherans as a place at which the Catholics, Zwinglians, and the Lutherans could meet. It did not succeed, but the Augsburg Confession became the authoritative confession for the Lutherans, and the Word and Sacrament formulation became the common currency of the Reformation. It does not convey the fuller ecclesiology of the Nicene marks: one must argue rather carefully to evoke apostolicity, catholicity, holiness, and unity, from Word and Sacrament – although there are clearly connections. What is more problematic is that this more modern version of the marks of the true church has defined the church in largely clerical terms. It is ordained ministers who proclaim the word and administer the sacraments. The effect has been to solidify the non-missional cast of western ecclesiologies, at least in the magisterial Reformation traditions (the Radical Reformation goes a very different route).

One must wonder if the Presbyterian decision, at the time of reunion, to replace the older language of “teaching elder” and “ruling elder” with “Minister of Word and Sacrament” and “elder” has not contributed to continuation of a theology of the church

which focuses upon the clergy and diminishes if not neglects the missional calling which joins all members of Christ's Body into a witnessing community serving its Lord. Such issues can be fruitfully probed by means of the reverse order reading of Nicea. In the realities of our post-Christendom situation, such re-thinking of our basic ecclesiology is the urgent order of the day!

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<sup>1</sup> see <http://www.pcusa.org/re-formingministry/about/whyecclesiology.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Milton J Coalter, John M. Mulder, Louis B. Weeks, eds., *The Re-Forming Tradition: Presbyterians and Mainstream Protestantism*. Presbyterian Presence: The Twentieth Century Experience, (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> Wilbert Shenk, *Write the Vision: The Church Renewed*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture, (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1995), p. 35, his italics.

<sup>4</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 372; cf. Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, New Testament Library, Reprint of 1960 ed., (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Translate the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> See Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, tr. John P. Galvin, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). The original German title is *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?* = How did Jesus intend the congregation?