
“What’s the Big Idea?”

The Church – I Corinthians 3:5-17

Sunday, October 23, 2005
Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

Dr. Douglas B. Skinner

Do you like your name? I have an uncle whose given name was Horace, and he absolutely hated it. He thought “*Horace*” way too odd a name for a little boy to have, and way too easy for other kids to make fun of. And so his parents, my grandparents, told him that he could choose any name he wanted to go by when he started to school. And that’s when “*Horace*” became “*Fritz*.” Oh, that’s better!

I happen to like my name – Douglas Byron Skinner. “*Douglas*” is Scottish and it means “*from the dark water*.” Now, I don’t have a clue what that really means, but I like its connotations of depth and mystery. “*Byron*” is English and it means “*bear*.” I jokingly tell people that my middle initial “*B*” stands for “*big*.” And technically I guess it does. “*Skinner*” is English as well. It refers to a worker or merchant of skins. But “*Skinner*” is also a Scottish sept of the McGregor clan, and that pleases me, for you see, I’m rather proud of my Scottish heritage.

Churches have names too, and they all mean something. Some churches take their names from their founders, Lutherans and Wesleyans for instance. Others take their name from their governance structures: Episcopalians from the Greek word for Bishops – “*episcopos*”; Presbyterians from the Greek word for elders – “*presbyters*”; and Congregationalists from the fact that they are congregationally governed. Some churches get their names from some distinctive belief that they hold or practice that they affirm, like Baptists for their form of water baptism, or Seventh Day Adventists for their practice of worshipping on Saturdays and promoting Christ’s second coming, or Pentecostals for their emphasis on the gift and gifts of the Holy Spirit. And some churches have names that leave me scratching my head, like the “*Two-Seed in the Spirit Predestinarian Baptist Church*” or the church with undoubtedly the longest name in all of Christendom, the “*National David Spiritual Temple of Christ Church Union Incorporated, U.S.A. (The Universal Christian Spiritual Faith and Churches for all Nations)*.”

You may have noticed that this church has two names. Northway is a congregation of the “*Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*.” We have two names because we are a union church. We are a 19th century merger of Barton Stone’s “*Christians*” and the Campbell’s “*Disciples*.” What’s interesting is that both of these names were deliberately selected by their founders from the Bible, “*Christians*” from Acts 11:26 where Luke tells us that “*it was in Antioch that the*

disciples were first called 'Christians,' and "*Disciples*" from the way that it gets used throughout the New Testament as the primary name given to those men and women who followed Jesus Christ.

One of the historic commitments of our spiritual tradition has been to "*use Bible names for Bible things, and to do Bible things in Bible ways.*" And so our founders turned to the Bible when it was time to figure out what we should be called, and we're not alone in this. Churches have taken such varied names as "*Friends,*" "*Brethren*" and "*Saints*" for this same reason. And just as I really like my given name, so I like churches that take biblical names. I like what it says about their commitment to biblical authority.

Back in 1960 Dr. Paul Minear of Yale Divinity School scoured the New Testament looking for every image it ever uses for the church, and he came up with 96 of them. That's nearly 100 different Biblical ways for thinking and talking about the Christian community of faith. In our Scripture lesson this morning from I Corinthians chapter 3 the Apostle Paul abruptly shifted from one metaphor of the church to another, and then to another in just 12 short verses.

Paul began his discussion of the church in our Scripture lesson this morning by comparing it to a field where one servant of God plants the seed and another servant of God tends the plot. "*You are God's field*" Paul told the Corinthians. And then "*bing,*" he was off in a different direction. "*You are God's building*" he told them. Somebody lays the foundation and then somebody else comes along and builds on top of it. Sometimes the building gets constructed with gold, silver and precious jewels that can endure the test of fire and sometimes with wood, hay and stubble that will not last. And then "*bing,*" Paul was off in another direction. He explained to the Corinthians that the specific kind of building they were as a church was a Temple, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit of God on earth. So what is it Paul? Is the church a field, a building or a temple?

I know for a fact that Mrs. Tidmarsh, my seventh grade English teacher at Woodrow Wilson Jr. High School out in California would have scribbled in big red letters on this paragraph: "*Young man, you're mixing your metaphors,*" and graded it down accordingly. But Paul just couldn't help himself. Everywhere he looked Paul found useful ways for talking about what the church was and for thinking about what the church does. He drew his images of the church from the everyday world around him. He didn't invent them, he borrowed them. You see, the Bible has no special language to teach us its truths. To express what they knew about God, Christ, salvation and the church, the inspired Biblical authors borrowed freely from the world around them to find analogies that made sense. And so the New Testament tells us that the church of Jesus Christ is like a Kingdom, and a Body, and a Building, and an Army, and a Bride, and a Vineyard, and a Temple, and a Ship, and a Fortress, and a Family, and on and on it goes through nearly 100 different word pictures; each image telling us something uniquely important about the church and no one image exhausting the subject of the church completely.

Several years ago in one of the journals that I regularly read, popular Christian author Philip Yancey called the Apostle Paul "*the master of metaphor*"

and then he showed how Paul used “*a string of metaphors*” to talk about the church. And then, following Paul’s example, Philip Yancey let his mind “*roam over what existed in his neighborhood, searching for some metaphors that he might apply to the church*” today. And so it was that he compared the church to a Driver’s License Office, a commuter train, a championship basketball game and 24 hour emergency medical care center.

And I found the exercise to be both spiritually intriguing and Biblically legitimate. Just as the Biblical authors ransacked their familiar world looking for relevant ways to talk about spiritual truths with the people of their day, so we have the same task today to find meaningful ways of talking about God’s eternal truths in ways that make sense to our time and place. And so for the past few weeks I’ve been letting my mind wander around in my world looking for any images that might help us think and talk more clearly about what the church is supposed to be and do, and I’ve come up with four of them that correspond to the four historic spiritual “*identifying marks*” of the church.

First of all, because the church is supposed to be *one*, I find that the mall down the street is a helpful way of thinking and talking about it today. Malls are typically anchored by several department stores that have just about everything that anybody could ever want. And in between those big stores there is any number of much smaller specialty shops. Their appeal is more limited, more targeted and more specific. Unable to be everything to everybody, they try to be something to somebody.

Well, Christendom has its anchors too. The Roman Catholic Church would certainly be one of them today, as would the Baptist and Methodist Churches here in Texas. But Christendom also has its specialty shops; all those smaller denominations like us, the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*). And all of us, the anchors and the boutiques, have a particular identity and a unique mission. We all have something spiritually distinctive about us and something spiritually essential to offer. But just as a mall is always bigger than the sum of its parts, so is Christendom always bigger than our particular denominational labels.

Northway is a congregation of the denomination known as the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*). That matters. But what matters even more is that both Northway as a congregation and the Disciples as a denomination are part of something much bigger and more basic than that – Christianity itself. For all of our divisions and differences, the church of Jesus Christ is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one.

Second, because the church is supposed to *holy*, I find that an isolation room up at the hospital is another helpful way of thinking and talking about it today. When visiting patients in the hospital, it’s not uncommon to have to scrub up before going into a room, and then to have to wear a sterile gown and mask. Sometimes this is necessary because the patient’s immune system is just so depressed that they are susceptible to what you might be bringing in with you, and at other times it’s because what they have is so contagious that there is a real risk of you getting it and spreading it after you leave. And every time I have to scrub down and gown up before making a pastoral call I am reminded of the

unavoidable tension between holiness and mercy that the Gospel of necessity creates in the life of the church. The compassion that motivates the visit collides with the constraints of the situation.

In an important little book of sexual morality Presbyterian theologian Marion Soards compared the struggle that the church has on matters of morality to that of parents whose children reject their core family values. Some parents are all grace. Nothing matters other than the relationship. Anything goes. And other parents are all judgment. Nothing matters except their standards of right and wrong. Conform or else get lost. But in-between these two approaches are those parents who struggle to love their kids while at the very same time rejecting their behavior. Good parents know this familiar pull of grace and judgment. And so, just like a visit with a patient in a sterile room at the hospital, the church has to care and be careful simultaneously.

Third, because the church is supposed to be *catholic*, I find that that Cowboy Stadium over in Irving is another helpful way of thinking and talking about it today. I was at the Philadelphia game two weeks ago. And in that stadium full of 60,000 screaming Cowboy fans I saw people of every size, shape and description. There wasn't a section for men and another one for women. There wasn't a section for Asian-Americans, and another one for Mexican-Americans, and another one for African-Americans, and another one for Anglo-Americans. There wasn't a section for young people and another one for old people. We were all in there jumbled up together cheering and high-fiving one another when the Cowboys did something good and they did all afternoon long! And that's what the word "*catholic*" is refers to as a mark of the church. It's about everybody coming together and pulling in the same direction at the same time even though we couldn't be more different from one another in a dozen different ways.

And finally, because the church is supposed to be *apostolic*, I find that a jury box in the courthouse downtown is another helpful way of thinking and talking about it today. I had jury duty earlier this month, and it became clear to me in that nine hour process of selecting who would finally serve on the jury that what we were being asked to do was to listen carefully to the evidence that was going to be presented and to assess the credibility of the witnesses who were going to testify. And when we say that the church is "*apostolic*," we are saying the very same thing. You see, the church deals in truth. And that means that there is evidence to be presented and testimony to be evaluated. Faith is not "*a rash decision made without reflection or a blind submission in the face of an authoritarian claim*" (Pinnock 13). Faith involves a careful assessment of the credibility of the witnesses and a determination of the trustworthiness of the evidence.

Increasingly, even people who call themselves Christians find themselves at something of a loss when it comes to the church. The British poet Robert Southey spoke for many when he wrote, "*I could believe in Christ if he did not drag behind him his leprous bride, the Church*" (Willimon 3). Because so many people today are saying "yes" to Jesus and "no" to the church, we have to find ways to make a case for the church that is both cogent and compelling. When

somebody says “yes” to Jesus, they need to understand that the church is His idea.

The story of the Bible is the story of God calling a people and creating a community. The Bible knows nothing of lone wolf believers who live in splendid isolation from each other. The Gospel calls us into the church by the church, and so we need to get more serious about the church. Like the stores in a mall, we need to remember that the church is always bigger than its separate parts. Like visiting in a sterile room of the hospital, the church needs a serious commitment to both compassion and conscience. Like the fans at a Cowboys game, we need to see our individual differences disappear in our support of one overmastering passion. And like a jury in a courtroom, we need to determine and then speak the truth clearly and convincingly. A church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is a church that cannot be easily dismissed by the world, or by Christians. And isn't that the kind of church that Northway should be?

Sources

Minear, Paul. Images of the Church.

Pinnock, Clark. Reason Enough. IVP. 1980.

Soards, Marion. Scripture and Homosexuality. WJK. 1995.

Willimon, William. What's Right with the Church. Harper & Row. 1985.

Yancey, Philip. “*The Shape of God's Body*.” Leadership. Summer 1987. (88-94).