

Church, church, big C, little c, who are we?

By Bob Young
March 2010

SELF-UNDERSTANDING

I read an increasing number of articles that ask important and hard questions about our self-understandings and self-identity as Christians. An appropriate self-understanding is essential to the task of being the missional, evangelistic body God intends. I am encouraged that we as a brotherhood are thinking again about what we mean when we use the word "church" or "Church." Such thinking is essential if we are going to become genuinely missional and escape the limitations of attractional models of doing church. (Have you considered how often we measure success by how many people can be attracted to our buildings?) Our tendency toward this false, attractional measure of success is reflected when we claim "success" based on the number of people at a funeral, the number who attend a secular program held at the building, or the number who come for special holiday activities, e.g. Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Easter activities. We have traditionally measured what we do as church by attractional standards, the primary question being: how many were present? We also want to know how many were baptized, especially in mission reports. We have seldom counted how many studies were taught, how many contacts were made, how many people were served, or how many evangelistic conversations occurred.

OUR SPEECH BETRAYS US

The pervasiveness of this attractional mentality was re-enforced for me when the church where I minister needed to replace the sign in front of the building. Interesting conversations ensued—conversations focused on identity, word capitalization, and schedules, among other things. We have correctly observed that the building is not the church; the church is the people. So we say, "church of Christ meets here" (little 'c'). Does that mean the congregation does not meet anywhere else? Does such terminology limit the use of our building in our own minds? What does 'meets' mean? Does this word refer to fellowship? worship? study? Churches often include a schedule on their signs. Are the times listed the only 'meetings'? I saw a church sign that read, "Home of the _____ Church". What does that mean? Is it accurate?

THE PROBLEM OF A "NAME"

In today's world, we feel compelled to 'name' a local congregation. We use the names of towns, streets, subdivisions, even intersections. What do those names say? Restrictive names among the denominations often signified parishes or limited areas of service. Before street addresses and 911, intersections gave directions. Some religious groups chose to number churches: First, Second, Third. A group in Lansing, Michigan had an interesting name: "The Original Church of God #2." Churches should ask themselves, "What does our name say?" Does it say what we want it to say? Does it say what it should say? Is it accurate? Is it meaningful? Does our name say where we are? Does it say who we are? Does it say whom we try to serve? Does it restrict us? Is it dated or is it contemporary? Is it welcoming or is it discouraging? Does it grab attention or is it trite?

CHURCH AS PLACE OR THING: FALSE UNDERSTANDINGS

Perhaps we have missed something in our insistence that the church is not the building but the people. Religious leaders, pastors and ministers in various religious groups, and church members in the pews, have known and said in recent years that the church is not a building. This means that the church is not a place! Being the church does not depend on being at a certain location. The church does not become something special when it meets at a certain location (the church I minister with is at the corner of Main and Oklahoma). The church is not a thing. The answer to the question, "Is there a church of Christ in such-and-such

city?" must not be answered by whether there exists an official institution, a regular meeting, or a meeting place. If there are faithful Christians living in the city, the church exists in that city.

In the Constantinian era and afterward, the church was institutionalized. That is, the church came to be thought of as something that existed based on a superstructure (religious leaders, buildings, official status) apart from the participants. Identifying the church with a specific place was an easy transition. Both of these concepts (church as institution, church as place) seriously weaken the church. Neither place nor organization (thing) provides a vitality and life which attracts others. Growing churches generally get a tremendous amount of identity from the people who are involved and always present to welcome, connect, and share life. "Place" and "thing" versions of the church eventually result in primary loyalty to self. Rethinking what we mean by 'church' has taken us down some strange and interesting roads. Some suggest that the church is to be defined as "a shared event"—the event most often cited is worship (often re-characterized as "celebration" in contemporary terminology). If the church is not to be defined by place or as an institution (thing), neither can the church be adequately defined by event, which is only another "thing". Eventually the church will revert to being a 'thing'—a different kind of thing than an institution, but nonetheless a 'thing'.

IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

We must rethink the vision and mission of the church. How do we communicate our purpose succinctly and clearly? What are our values and beliefs? The church must share conversations which ask these questions in order to understand its identity. In a recent conversation, a friend said that church's identity focuses around 'joy'. I thought of a similar identifying statement from Phyllis Tickle: "I believe both church and Church are 'a body of people, delighting in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.'" While descriptions of the church as a place of joy or delight are true, they are incomplete. The church is more than joy and delight.

To write a mission or vision statement is no easy task—it is in fact a daunting challenge. A church may find that differing views of mission (what the church is to go forth and do) or differing visions (the goals or objectives of the church) among its members are conflicted or contradictory. The problem of clearly stating the vision and mission begins in our self-identity. Who are we? What are we here to do? How will we do it? The order of the questions must be preserved.

We must find self-understandings that give us encouragement and demand action and dynamic living. Such understandings undergird the body of Christ in motion, fluid, changing, flowing into the crevices and corners of our society, our community, our nation, and our world. This church cannot be pinned down, located, or humanly owned or controlled. When anyone attempts to confine the church which Christ established, empowers and directs, the authentic church will simply rejoice and move ahead into the mystery of the future. (Such will require that we escape any understanding of church as tied to a specific location.) An appropriate (biblical) self-understanding based on God's calling allows us to be comfortable and even delight in and enjoy cultures and ways that are biblically relevant and acceptable but are not part of our traditions. Such a self-understanding is essential if we are to bring the saving gospel of Christ to our world.

A CASE STUDY

What gives a church its identity? How does a church get an identity? Where or how does the church where I minister get its identity? What is that identity? Main and Oklahoma church of Christ? Or, since it is a proper name, is it Main and Oklahoma Church of Christ?

What does the name say? Does it say who we are? Does it say where we are? Is it too limiting? Does it suggest the church is a place? Does it suggest that the church is an institution? If we are genuinely to be church, such cannot be! The name we use currently gives primary identity according to place—is that what we want?

One way to think about a church's identity is to ask concerning its self-understandings. How does it understand its purpose, vision, and mission? What are its values and beliefs? We currently use the motto or slogan, "Lighting the Way for Each Other through Jesus". We have also used the motto: "Sharing the Light, Shining the Light, Seeking the Light". Since I helped develop these mottos five or six years ago, I can critique them. (In fact, I feel compelled to critique them.) The first slogan is too much centered on "us". It is primarily "for us". We are lighting the way 'for each other.' We may mean for everyone, but it sounds like it is for us. Does the phrase appeal to others? We cannot know for certain unless we ask. It may appeal to a few previously churched people. It suggests there is a benefit in the church or church membership. It is inwardly turned and probably appears self-serving to an outsider. The second motto is also "for us". The three parallel phrases suggest our goals and objectives. These goals are worthwhile: fellowship, evangelism, worship and personal growth. What do they say about us? Do these concepts appeal to outsiders?

In an effort to sharpen our identity by asking what God sends us forth to do, and in thinking about our purpose as a church—our vision, our mission, our values and beliefs—I have been thinking about other mottos: "Where the grace of God touches human hearts." In identifying and developing potential mottos, I have tried to ask hard questions. Does this phrase imply that God's grace touches hearts at only one location? Is this motto too "place-oriented"? In recent months, we have as a church talked a lot about #1 and #2 (loving God, loving your neighbor). Another church in this community uses the motto, "Loving God, Loving People." Is that a sufficient identifying phrase? Another church uses the motto, "Passion for God, Compassion for people." I still have questions. What do these phrases say? Is church about us, or is it about God and Christ?

How would you answer the question, "Who are we?" When all is said and done, how do you briefly say what the church stands for, why we exist, and what is our God-given purpose? The answers to these questions will go a long way toward helping us forge a biblical identity: an appropriate vision, a God-given mission, and biblical values and beliefs.

My purpose is not to suggest there is one right answer; my purpose is to suggest the shape of a healthy conversation which the church needs to have. We must have this conversation if we are to survive as a viable body of believers.