

Addendum: More On the Total Christ Thesis And Five Mark Vision

Is it too much to want *all* of Him? Is it naïve to expect that we can transcend the recent history of “either/or” pendulum swings in Christian spirituality that often pit “grace centered gospel” against “organized church,” or that reduces Christian spirituality to *either* “teaching oriented” (prophetic) *or* “contemplative oriented” (priest) *or* communal oriented (King)?” With the intent of rediscovering a “total Christ” Christianity and mission strategy, we have observed in scripture five essential marks that are consistently present throughout all of redemptive history as culminating in the design of the apostolic foundation with Christ as the cornerstone (Eph 1:22-23, 2:1-22). The first two marks are *definitional* as to define the purposeful character and nature of healthy Christianity and Christ centered churches. The second three are *instrumental* as to represent the methods, or means, by which Christ is present and active to fulfill the intended character of Christ’s church. All together, we believe that Christ is present, “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23) such as to make good his great promise, “And behold, I am with you until the end of the age!” (Mt 28:20)

The “Total Christ” Thesis

The “Total Christ” thesis is not new! It is an ancient thesis rooted in the apostles teaching. For instance, the great 5th century pastor-theologian St. Augustine described the relation of Christ’s incarnational ministry (past) to his ongoing ascension ministry (present) as “the Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made *total Christ*, both head and body.”¹ The Christological mystery inherent to this thesis is profound. Even as Christ’s divinity is distinct, but never separate from Christ’s humanity, so in the present age Christ’s presence in heaven is distinct, but never separate, from Christ’s local presence on earth as mediated by the Holy Spirit and fleshed out in the body of Christ. This “body” is explicitly define by the apostle Paul as the local church whose spiritual architecture is carefully designed “upon the foundation of the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone” (c.f.Eph.1:22-23 and 2:19ff).

The same “total Christ” thesis was again reaffirmed by 16th century reformer, John Calvin when he described the local church as a place wherein *no extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ*. Calvin concluded:

We expect salvation from him — not because he stands aloof from us, but because engrafting us into his body he not only makes us partakers of all his benefits, but also of himself... From her womb we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are animated... Whoever is separated from the Church is separated from the gospel promises to the Church... the paternal favor of God and the special evidence of spiritual

¹ St. Augustine, On the Epistle of John and especially his reference to John 1:14.

*life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal?*²

It is therefore our conviction that the local, apostolically designed church of Jesus Christ is an essential element of the gospel, no less so than the body is an essential element of the head! As to the apostolic design itself that function to guide the kind of churches Mission *Anabaino* seeks to plant, we see five mutually interdependent marks that together make for a Total Christ church and Christianity.

The Five Mark Vision of the *Total Christ* Church

Two Definitional Marks:

The great commission according to John says “Just as the Father sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21). The significant “just as... so” formula harkens back to John’s presentation of Christ as “the word became flesh and templed among us” (John 1:12). Throughout then John’s gospel, the missionary strategy of God is carefully presented as BOTH a declarative venture (“word”) but also as a participational venture in Christ’s fleshed out presence (“temple”). As it happens, there is never a time in all of redemptive history wherein BOTH Word (Covenant Gospel) and Temple (Missional Presence) are not vital elements of Gods’ plan of salvation. In relation therefore to our mission strategy, we are as much committed to being gospel centered in proclamation (“Word) as we are committed to an apologetic of participation by means of Christ’s fleshed out presence through the church (Temple).

- 1) *Gospel Centered* Church—Christ THE WORD according to John is a word of “truth and grace! And to be clear, not “truth vs. grace,” but a kind of truth that brings us to grace—or “grace upon grace” in the clarifying words of John (Jn 1:14, 16). And for grace to BE grace, our lives and ministry must be Christ centered rather than human centered in regards to the way God is glorified and the way our salvation is accomplished and applied. More than a mere ticket into heaven (though it is that), the gospel is a transformative power that brings life and liberty to every aspect of our lives. It is, in the words of Tim Keller, “not just the A-B-C’s but the A to Z of Christianity!”

At its core, the gospel teaches that in Christ we have a new Christian identity wherein we relate to God not as mere servants whose worth is in our production, but as adopted sons and daughters whose worth is in our new identity in union with Christ by faith. The gospel sets us free from the oppressive fear of condemnation or rejection—both in regards to God and therefore all of God’s people—wherein the gospel centered church is a safe place for people who are morally flawed or broken.

² First quote: Second Quote: John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37:4. Second Quote: Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion 1559*, ed. J. T. McNeill and F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.2.24. Third quote: *Institutes* 4.1.4 in reference to Cyprian’s famous “from her womb” quote. (c.f. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, On the Unity of the Church, circa AD 250)

The gospel also sets us free from the kind of oppression that attaches itself to various secular and/or religious idols that promise more than they can give with respect to human flourishing, but then blame our lack of flourishing on our not working hard enough, which then begins a cycle of asking more and more from us with diminishing human resources. And so the gospel centered church is always “working out” the gospel into every relationship and situation. It is the focus of every sermon and activity in the church as the “power of God unto salvation.” (c.f. Rom 1:6). It teaches us that “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1).

- 2) The *Missional Church*— Christ THE TEMPLE is Christ fleshed out into a culturally specific local church by the Holy Spirit. As such, the temple –church is the “fullness of him who fills all in all” by Christ’s real, if mediated, salvific presence (John 1:14 Eph.1:23). In the words of the apostle Paul, the church that is carefully organized upon the foundation of the apostles is nothing short of the dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:20-22)! What this means strategically is that the gospel centered church, just by BEING the Church, is God’s missionary strategy to the world (c.f. Acts 2:37ff).

About the church, Peter says “you (pl) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood... that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1P 2:9). Evangelism as such is not only the Word proclaimed, but the Word participated in by means of making everything the church does hospitable to the whole world participating even while they are on a journey to faith. Christian conversion as such is the culmination of participation wherein a person is engrafted into Christ by means of Christian baptism into the life of Christ in the life of the church. Without compromise to the counter cultural nature of true gospel grace applied to the whole of life, the missional church seeks to rid itself of its Christian sub-culture in ways that make the gospel more accessible- much like the 1st century church that needed to rid itself of its Jewishness in order to reach Gentiles. Conversion in the missional church is as much a communal event as a individual event. It is the strategy observed in Acts 2 wherein it the power of a total Christ church. The missional church seeks then to do everything that she does in a way that is at once counter-cultural and yet hospitable to the world being present.

The Three Vocational Marks of Christ Being Mediated Through the Church

Christ’s real, if mediated, presence in the local church is experienced in the presence of Christ acting in three vocational roles or services in relation to being our prophet (declaration through teaching and preaching), Priest (sacramental participation through worship) and king (communal formation through mercy giving and shepherding). All together, the Christ’s gospel centered and missional presence in the church is mediated by the Holy Spirit such as to be a community that doesn’t only talk about the gospel, or bring people to the gospel, but that DOES the gospel. In the local church, the transformative power and presence of a holistic

gospel is accomplished through Christ bearing our outward and inward burdens in the context of the church's one another in love!

- 3) The Confessional Church (Christ as Prophet)—We seek not a movement of church personalities or socio-cultural identities, but a church whose spiritual identity and strategy is grounded in a transcending and never changing content of confessed faith delivered to the church of all ages and places (Eph. 4:14). While our only rule of faith and practice is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, we seek to interpret the scriptures communally with the living consensus passed down through the ages in creeds and confessions—or a living and “confessional” theology. The confessional church therefore treats theological study and thoughtful preaching as the friend of mission and gospel, even as our “dogma” is a vital part of our Christ centered “drama!” Theological formation on of three vital ways that Christ transforms us by the gospel.
- 4) The Sacramental Church (Christ as Priest)— Sacramental worship is more than worship that does sacraments. Sacramental worship is when the whole of worship and life is informed by the sacramental idea that Christ is really, if both spiritually and locally, present by the Holy Spirit albeit in the cultural flesh of the people. This means that we enter worship not merely to remember the gospel, but to actually participate in the gospel {1 Cor 10:16-17) as we are engrafted into Christ and renewed in his grace! Sacramental worship is at once *both* culturally transcendent as to enter into the four movement liturgy of heaven (Rev. 4-4), *and* culturally reflective as to assume the cultural flesh of the local church itself. In other words, while our churches may choose a scripted or non-scripted style of liturgy, different styles of music and leadership, all Total Christ churches will embrace the same four movement order: 1) The Rediscovery of God's Glory in Praise; 2) The Rediscovery of God's Glory in Grace Applied to Confession; 3) The Participation in Christ's Life Giving Presence as *Prophet* (expositional Gospel centered preaching), *Priest* (Grace Centered Sacraments of Baptism and weekly communion, and *King* (Christ's Presence to open and close the kingdom of God through Confession of Faith; (4) The Renewal of Christ Centered Coronation and Grace Centered Benediction. The result? An actual participation in the festal gathering of heaven itself (c.f. Heb 12:18ff)!
- 5) The Communal Church (Christ as King)- More than a church of small groups, we seek to be a church that is increasingly small under the shepherding care of Christ through life on life discipleship. Life on life discipleship is a context wherein Christ our beloved king provides for our inward and outward needs within the context of Christian “one anothering” by Christ's under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-5) and servant leaders (Romans 16:1-16). Even if to include systematic training and teaching, life on life discipleship is not ultimately about curriculum on life but about what happens through personal relationships formed in organic contexts like praying together, participating in life together and care giving together. Along with teaching and

worship, the heart of spiritual development is a relational process of one-anothering in, with and through the local family of God (Eph. 2:19).

The communal church that is gospel centered is likewise committed to holistic empowerment vs. enablement, especially as concerns the outward needs of people in the church. The key to empowerment is to distinguish and proactively target “chronic” from “crisis” issues and management such as to empower self-sustaining and systemic changes maximizing indigenous communal leadership and resources. Our commitment then is to an asset-based community development" (ABCD). ABCD takes seriously the gifts and talents of the organic body of Christ and seeks to do ministry *with* one another rather than for one another, thus protecting people's dignity (Rom.12:3-10).

Mission *Anabaino* Envisioned

Indeed, Mission *Anabaino* is Mission the greater things related to the incredible expectations that Christ promised for his ascension ministry today by the Holy Spirit through church planting (John 14:12). It is to continue in the tradition of the early church when in Acts 2, after describing a holistic participation in Christ's mediated ministry of apostolic word, sacrament and spiritual shepherding and government (Acts 2:42-43, in the context of a gospel centered and missional local church we read:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45).

And we encounter the “greater things” envisioned by Christ, even as the result is exactly as Jesus anticipated it would be wherein

day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).