Marks of the church

A while ago, CarolSue and I attended a workshop, and, as part of that workshop, Andre Gingerich Stoner, Director of Holistic Witness and Interchurch Relations for Mennonite Church USA, described what should be distinctive about the church, and it seemed good to CarolSue and me (and, I pray, to the Holy Spirit) to spend a few weeks meditating on what these marks of the church are. This is not unlike our series a while ago now on the six words of our church’s tagline, “Simplicity. Service. Peace. Worship. Community. Jesus” in that we don’t hope to open up a lot of new ground, but to go over some basic, important things about why we meet together. This morning, I will give an overview, and then, over the next weeks, we will dig deeper.

I called these “marks of the church,” and this might not be a familiar term to you. But I simply mean by it, by what signs or symbols or behaviors or beliefs do we hold to be essential to our understanding of what the church is.

There are lots of ways we could go about looking at this. Is the church the building we meet in? Of course, our particular answer is no, since we don’t have a designated building in which we meet. But is it just the activity that goes on in this particular building on Sunday mornings, or in the meetinghouses around the city and beyond?

Is the church primarily something that can be described sociologically? That is, here we are, a small group of mostly adults, mostly from a European background, mixed socioeconomic class, a little bit on the German side with respect to our history?

Or is the church primarily a product, something we get to pick and choose, like any other service, that lives or dies by meeting the felt needs of the market?

What is the essence?

Roman Catholics have primarily answered this question in two ways. First, you’ll find the church wherever an ordained priest serves the Eucharist. This is an interesting description, because it describes the church as primarily about right order and right worship. It’s possible to have *a* church where the only communicant is the priest himself; and, no how many people attend, it’s impossible to have a real church unless a priest is present and able to serve communion.

Secondly, the Roman church describes the church as having four distinguishing marks or attributes, as given in the Nicene Creed: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” That is one, holy, catholic, apostolic. “One” in that the church should believe and practice the same things. “Holy” in that it should be set apart for God’s use, and pay attention to its holy actions such as worship. “Catholic” in that it is universal, and for all people. And of course, as one and catholic, they mean the Roman Catholic church. Apostolic in that the leadership, in particular, the Pope, should be able to trace its legacy directly to the apostles.

These are a bit problematic for us as Mennonites, as least as understood in the particular Roman Catholic way. But we too, long to see God’s church one and universal. We too long to see our lives lived our in holiness, and God worshipped. We too desire to trace our authority to the early days of the church — but, frankly, we desire to go a little bit further back than the apostles and build on the foundation of Jesus.

For the other reformers, such as John Calvin, the marks were usually described as being either two or three. The first mark is that the true church is where the gospel is rightly preached. But this, they primarily, I believe, meant a right belief and correct in doctrine. The Reformers outdid the Anabaptists and even the Roman Catholics in the doctrinal statements they drew up. As Anabaptists, we too want to believe the right things, but I think our understanding of what “the gospel rightly preached” might mean. We would turn, for example, to the heart-breaking story in Matthew 11, where John the Baptist, discouraged and in jail, sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if Jesus were, in fact, the messiah John had predicted and anointed and baptized, or whether they should look for another. Jesus doesn’t reply, “Look at how orthodox I am!” Instead, he points to how the good news of the coming kingdom is being expressed: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosyare cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

The second mark of the Reformers was the true church was where the sacraments — meaning, for them, primarily, communion and baptism— were “rightly administered.” Again, this was primarily a correct belief about what was happening in when communion took place, and when children or adults were baptized, along with the right words and practices to go along side these. Again, we might point to Jesus’s story; or, perhaps, we would politely disagree over whether children should be baptized. And, if we believe our church is more correct in many ways than the other churches coming out of the Reformation, it cannot be that this particular understanding of right practice and belief must be a mark of the church.

Finally, many other protestants also believed that

Many Protestants: gospel rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered, and discipline”

“A community of people gathered together by Jesus Christ and sent into the world”

Seven marks —

* A worshipping community
* A voluntary community
* A community of commitment and accountability
* An alternative community; a sent community
* An everyday community
* A community of saints and sinners.