Back to basics: Rx for congregational health

by Anthony B. Robinson in the July 26, 2003 issue

What is a healthy congregation? For some clergy and laity, health is simply the absence of conflict. But we may be confusing a healthy congregation with a placid one. While conflict is seldom fun, its absence may be less an indication of health than of an insufficient sense of urgency or challenge about being the church.

I believe that a root cause of disarray, confusion and acrimony in congregations is theological amnesia, and that the origin of some of the unhealthiness that afflicts congregations is a lack of theological clarity, confidence and conviction. Time and again, when facing challenges or issues in congregations I have served, I have turned to basic Christian teaching in order to see what light our faith can cast into the current state of murkiness. Not only did this deepen the congregation's theological foundation, it also cast me, as a pastor, in the right role. Rather than masquerading as organizational consultant, conflict mediator or resident therapist, I endeavored to be a teacher of the faith. More often than not the church was strengthened, its conflict resolved and healing effected when we turned to the core convictions of our faith as a primary source of instruction.

But all too often pastors and congregations do not respond with a theological perspective to the joys and travails of a congregation. Instead we tend, as it says in Deuteronomy 30, to look in far places for help and edification when the word we need may be very near, in our hearts and on our lips. Pastors can strengthen the links between theological conviction and congregational health and vitality.

Taking the categories of a traditional systematic approach, I'll begin by exploring the implications of several of our affirmations for congregational life and health.

First of all, our affirmation of Christianity as a revealed religion can help congregations define a clear center. "We're not sure who we are or what we believe" is a frequent lament in mainline congregations. This is almost always followed by a rejoinder that pulls the other way. "Attempts to define what we believe make me

nervous!” Many congregations find it difficult to define their center, and the consequent vacuum results in a lack of purpose. Energy for mission is sapped. Endless amounts of time are spent trying to establish direction and priorities. Or congregations are spread so thin that their lives and ministries lack depth and coherence. Congregations wander in various wildernesses when their sense of appropriate authority is lost or absent.

Many are helped to learn or be reminded of the distinction between natural and revealed religion. Natural religion holds that God is everywhere and in all things—a blade of grass, the morning paper, a homeless shelter, a stirring concert. Christianity affirms that God is potentially present everywhere and in all things, but not equally present in all things. In our revealed religion, God chooses to reveal the divine self more in some events, lives and books than in others. Specifically, the church affirms that God has revealed the divine will and way in the Exodus events, in the prophets, in the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In these we see the patterns of God’s activity: liberation from bondage, comfort for the afflicted and affliction of the comfortable, life overcoming death.

This may strike some as so obvious as to hardly merit mention. And yet Samuel Johnson advised, “Never hesitate to remind people of the obvious—it is what they have most forgotten.” The point is that Christianity does have a specific and particular content. It is wide but not limitless, open but not without a center.

The doctrine of revelation has two implications for congregations seeking clarity. First, that there is an actual content to Christian faith that cannot be overlooked, gainsaid or surpassed by more current or compelling “revelations.” And second, revelation entails a certain humility on the part of its recipients. Revelation, by definition, comes not from us but from beyond us, from God. It is not something we find, figure out, get or achieve. It is given. It is grace. It is revealed to us.

Thus, revelation can help a congregation be clear not only about what is conceptually central, but also about what is existentially central. Congregations that forget the meaning of revelation and revealed faith tend to become self- focused and self-preoccupied. Everything is about “us”—about what wonderful people we are, or our proud history as a church, or our sense of being a special community. Revelation reminds the church that in a very basic and crucial sense it is not about us. It is about God, what God has done, is doing and will do. “We have this treasure in earthen vessels,” said Paul, “to show that the transcendent power belongs not to

us, but to God.” There lies our center.

Closely related to revelation and revealed religion and also important to questions about the center and purpose of the church is our understanding of scripture. Questions about the role and status of scripture may not be a problem in the fundamentalist or evangelical churches, but in the theologically mainline or moderate to liberal churches, questions abound. Why do we read every week from the Bible and not from other books? Couldn’t we hear from the Qur’an or a Zen philosopher or the Upanishads? Aren’t they sacred books too? Our ability to respond to such questions with clarity and conviction is crucial for the church’s identity and vitality.

Why this book indeed? And what role do the scriptures of our faith play in the church? I sometimes draw an analogy to the Constitution of the United States. We in the U.S. may find the constitutions of other nations to be interesting and instructive, but they aren’t ours. We have a special obligation to our own constitution. We grant it an authoritative status so that we can remember and know who we are. It is crucial to our identity. In a similar way, while there are undoubtedly many beautiful and inspiring books, the Bible is “our” book in a twofold sense. One, it is the creation of the church, of our forebears in the faith. Two, it reminds the church who and whose it is, and who and whose it isn’t.

Compare the scriptures of the church to a library. Just as law firms, towns and universities have their own libraries with collections that reflect their histories, identities and priorities, so the Bible constitutes the church’s library. The scriptures remind of us of our particular identity as church and, as a living text, mediate God’s presence and confer power for ministry and mission. Thus we return week by week to our library or constitution both to remember who we are and to tap into our power source.

This role of scripture in the church has implications for issues of congregational health. When churches have reduced Christianity to tired and predictable moralizing, a sound understanding of the scriptures is a powerful antidote. As biblical scholar James Sanders reminds us, when interpreting the scriptures we are to “theologize before [we] moralize.” In other words, the first question is not, “What should we do?” but “What has God done, and what is God doing?” This is the way the Bible works, and that’s why it is the church’s best protection against becoming merely moralistic. Another way to put this is to say that for us theology precedes anthropology.

Because the scriptures are God's story, they protect the church and individual Christians from dangerous self-preoccupation and from the reduction of Christian faith to mere moralizing. When Christianity is reduced to moralistic nostrums, it becomes boring.

Our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is another key to congregational health. When we get too comfortable, when church becomes too settled and too predictable, people assume that anything that causes discomfort is wrong, out of place or illegitimate. The church must offer both comfort and discomfort, not one or the other. We ought to want the church to be safe yet challenging, even at times disturbing. While we often look to the biblical prophets to disturb the comfortable, we can also look to the doctrine of the Trinity.

We know God as three in one: God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or, in another formulation, God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. As creator, God is God of history, nature and cosmos. This God is vast and not to be identified with any one nation, religion, race, epoch, class or culture. And yet the vast, often hidden God is made particular in the life and person of Jesus of Nazareth. Our claims about God and for God are illuminated and tested by God's decisive revealing in Jesus Christ, his life, teachings, death and resurrection. Nor is our cosmic God, while revealed in a particular time, place and life, stuck in the past. The Holy Spirit, as the active presence of God, continues in the world, in the life of the church and in the life of the believer.

H. Richard Niebuhr observed that most churches tend to be churches of one person of the Trinity or another. So a congregation that is comfortable with the vast, mysterious, sovereign and transcendent God may find growth by exploring Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question, "Who is Jesus Christ for us today?" Or, if there's a great deal of emphasis on Jesus and the cost of discipleship, a congregation may need to hear about the Spirit's joy, power and capacity to transform disciples into apostles.

In other words, the Trinity serves as a system of checks and balances in the face of various unitarianisms. When we imagine we've got God figured out, comprehended, fitted for our favorite category, it turns out to be not so simple. During the 1930s, when God became so vast, vague and ill defined as to be easily correlated with nation and race in Nazi Germany, the Confessing Church protested by pointing to Jesus who alone is "the way, the truth and the life." When a kind of Jesusolatry sets in with Jesus becoming "our special guy" and the exclusive property of our group or

church, God the Creator and God the Holy Spirit broaden and correct our understandings. When it's all about being filled with the Spirit, the second person of the Trinity reminds us of the cost of discipleship. The doctrine of the Trinity keeps us from settling for a God who is too small or, as in much contemporary spirituality, so big or vague that God becomes what a friend once dubbed "the Sacred Blur."

When the church becomes too settled, predictable or comfortable, and at ease in Zion, it needs the challenge of basic Christian teaching about Jesus Christ. We dare to affirm a remarkable thing: Christ is both fully human and fully God. How can this be? My observation is that in practice we often take apart what the church's historic faith has held together.

For some, Jesus is fully but only human. He was a great spiritual person, on a par with Buddha, Muhammad or Gandhi. Or he was "the greatest teacher who ever lived." Or he is only divine; he didn't really mean it when he cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" because he knew what lay ahead. If he is divine, all-knowing and beyond suffering, he didn't really weep or get angry or enjoy a good party. We break apart the paradox, resolving it in favor of one pole or the other. But as Parker Palmer points out, paradoxes are like batteries: without both poles there is no charge. If Christ is only divine, our human lives are not embraced, known, hallowed and blessed by God. If Jesus is only human, then we know nothing finally, fully or decisively of God. Holding the paradox, we never have Jesus Christ fully figured out, explained or put into one box or another. He is the fully human one who redefines what "human" means. He is fully God who redefines all our notions of deity.

Holding them together is the trick, and a clue to what makes faith and congregations exciting and alive. It is less a matter of deduced propositions and more a matter of lived paradox commensurate with life's own tensions and mystery. So Jesus is forever saying, "If you want to save your life, lose it; lose it for my sake and the sake of the gospel." Without the sense of paradox, we end up missing the delight and the disturbance of the gospel. As fourth-century desert abba Gregory of Nyssa observed, "Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything." Affirming a paradox-laden faith in Jesus Christ is essential to the health of congregations. If some churches are dying because they are too comfortable, others are in trouble because they lack the capacity to recognize and name evil and the abuse of power in their midst. These churches have lost a clear-sighted Christian understanding of human nature, and have replaced it with the inadequate understandings of human nature

offered by modernity.

Modern culture tends to affirm two related things about human beings: first, that we are autonomous individuals, belonging to ourselves and accountable only to ourselves; second, that we are basically good by nature. But Christianity claims something else altogether. We are not autonomous, self-created individuals. We belong to God, who has created us for fellowship with the divine self. We can rely on and turn to God, and we are accountable to God. Moreover, rather than being good, we are sinful creatures who are forever getting confused and believing the universe revolves around us.

Over the years many people have staggered into my office to pour out a story that includes the words: “I don’t understand how people can be like this, how they can be so mean and devious and hurtful!” Underlying their lament is the notion that people are basically good and that if we are nice and kind, everyone else will be too. “I thought that Christianity taught that if you just love people, everything will work out.”

A more sober understanding of human nature can help a congregation identify and properly name evil and the abuse of power. Churches tend to be vulnerable to people’s frustrated and distorted power hungers. There are people who seek power in order to diminish others. There are people whose needs for control and recognition are so great that they are toxic to others. Acknowledging these realities is the beginning of wisdom. It helps congregations say no, establish boundaries around behavior, and discipline some people out of consideration for the collective life of the church.

But the salutary effects of an informed Christian doctrine of human nature do not end with maintaining boundaries. These convictions can also soften the hardened positions that people move into during times of conflict. As Paul puts it, “All have sinned, all have fallen short of grace.” In a rip-roaring congregational fight, the two sides tend to see the splinters in the eyes of their opponents but nothing of the logs in their own eyes. To be reminded that “all have fallen short” and that “all stand in need of grace” is often a first step toward getting us down off our high horses and to the table together. An awareness of our common sinfulness and common need for grace helps congregational conflicts move from stalemate to productive discernment.

When we are divided and fractionalized, we need to reconsider the centrality of the Lord's Supper. Writing to such a congregation at Corinth, Paul noted that the way its members went about the Lord's Supper reflected the unhealthy state of their congregational life. In fact, Paul linked their confusion and distortions of the sacrament to illness. "For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment on themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died" (1 Cor. 11:29-30).

What does Paul mean by "discerning the body"? We tend to hear the phrase through the filters of Reformation debates about real presence and transubstantiation. But Paul meant that when you share the Lord's Supper, you are to be aware of others in the congregation and of their needs and hungers. "When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk!" Paul sees that the Corinthians' distortion of the sacrament mirrors their fractured life. His call to "discern the body" is a call to acknowledge the community as a whole and to effect healing within it.

Too often the sacrament of communion is individualized and privatized and overlooks this Pauline insight. Congregations that may be struggling to "strengthen their sense of community" or heal from factionalism might pay closer attention to how they celebrate communion. The sacrament of communion has everything to do with congregational health.

Finally, we need to deepen our understanding of ministry. One of the factors contributing to disease in the life of many congregations is our confusion about the respective roles and functions of ordained and lay Christians, all of whom have been called to ministry. In the Reformed tradition, the task of the ordained is to equip the church for its ministry through preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments and giving pastoral care. The role of the laity is to represent Christ in and to the world. Sometimes terrible disorder has resulted because each has tried to do the job of the other.

Clergy run around town trying to find something to do in the community. Laity try to run and lead the church. I am painting in broad strokes here; there is room for nuance and flexibility. But the arena for the ministry of lay Christians is the world: the workplace, office and classroom, home and street. The primary ministry of the ordained is to equip and sustain persons for ministry, and to form Christian disciples.

Instead, we have too many laypeople managing the church, and not nearly enough of them out in the world practicing their vocations as ministry or doing volunteer work to extend the ministry of the church to the world. And some clergy really want to be lawyers, politicians, social workers or therapists instead of pastors. There’s nothing wrong with being any of those—except that the church needs pastors to do the job to which they have been called.

Yes, congregations can pursue health by turning to contemporary leadership studies, organizational development theorists and family systems thinkers. But these efforts never eclipse or supplant the role of theology and theological conviction. Bernard of Clairvaux once observed that we must drink from our own wells. As we seek to guide congregations toward health and vitality, fundamental theological convictions will enliven and refresh us.