The Rhetoric of Christian Identity: A Biblical Perspective[1]

The Revd. Canon Dr. Dennis L. Stamps

Introduction

What are the marks of Christian identity? What qualities or characteristics distinguish a person as a Christian? Defining Christian identity has been an important quest from New Testament times.[2] The task in this paper is not to posit a definition for Christian identity. Rather it is to investigate the way in which the New Testament rhetoric shaped and shapes the particular identity known as being a Christian. In order to do that in any systematic fashion, first a definition of Christian identity from a modern theologian, Katherine Tanner, will be offered. Secondly, against this background definition of Christian identity, I will examine the Gospels in order to evaluate the way the rhetoric of discipleship affects our understanding of Christian identity. Thirdly, I want to explore the rhetoric of Christian identity in Paul's letters, looking particularly at the way in which the ideal reader is posited as an image of the ideal Christian looking specifically at 1 Corinthians. Finally, I want to conclude with some thoughts about the role of the biblical tradition in shaping Christian identity.

A Definition of Christian Identity

Kathryn Tanner in her seminal book, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology*, offers a range of reflections on Christian identity. She concludes, first, that from a socio-anthropological perspective there are no sharp cultural boundaries that give Christians (as a whole) group specificity.[3] In terms of social relations and social practices, Christians are quite willing to weave in and out of Christian and non-Christian social identities. In fact,

---

[1]A paper delivered at the The Newman Society, the Hertfordshire Circle, 18 January 2009.

[2]J. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).

[3]K. Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), pp.

it is important for most Christians that engagement with wider society is part of the individual and corporate expression of Christianity. Second, in terms of common or core beliefs and practices, there is no single set to which conformity is imposed nor of which corruption is resisted.[4] In fact, it is the diversity and openness of Christian communities to define them and refine them both with reference to tradition and to outside social developments which seems to be the identifying feature. Tanner concludes, 'What unites Christian practices is not, then agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship; but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out'.[5] She recognizes that there are a set of claims and ritual practices which preoccupy most Christians, but not exclusively enough to firmly create a distinct and unique cultural identity. Equally, Christians do not agree themselves regarding the claims and ritual practices which are essential, and even less regarding the significance and meaning of them. Tanner's observation is interesting, 'how the identity of Christianity should be summed up is an unanswerable question in that Christianity has its identity as a task; it has its identity in the form of a task of looking for one'.[6]

What I find most curious is Tanner's use of the word discipleship in discussing Christian identity: 'the meaning of discipleship--what it really means to be a Christian-- cannot be summed up in any neat formula that would allow one to know already what Christian discipleship will prove to include or exclude over the course of time'.[7] Discipleship is a distinctive Christian concept which stems from the Jesus story and individuals in that story who respond to the person Jesus. Christians continue to identify with those historical

---

96-119.

    [4]Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, pp. 120-51.

    [5]Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 153.

    [6]Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 155.

    [7] Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, p. 155.

persons in the story in a way that their response is paradigmatic for a Christian's response today. It is this rhetoric of discipleship which I want to explore next.

Discipleship as Christian Identity in the Gospels

The rhetoric of the Gospels functions at many levels.[8] Not least is the way individuals read or encounter the Gospel text in order to inform their own understanding of what it means to learn from and to follow Jesus Christ. This is what I mean when I use the word, 'discipleship'. Whatever the intention of the Gospel texts, they have come to be read, at least in some contexts, in these terms: to teach the Christian what it means to be a disciple. When the Gospels are read aloud in the context of Sunday worship the Church believes the Gospel is being proclaimed, and through such proclamation, the call and demand of the Gospel is issued to all who hear. In this way, the Gospels become persuasive in the task of creating a Christian identity, an identity particularly defined as discipleship.

It is interesting that when we use the word discipleship in the Christian community, it is often qualified. So we speak of 'true' discipleship and 'costly' discipleship. This suggests that there are perceived degrees to discipleship. This resonates with the Gospel stories in which there are the crowds, an unnumbered group of devoted followers, the twelve, the inner threesome (Peter, James and John), and the one disciple designated as the 'rock' and another one called the beloved disciple. The spectrum of discipleship from curiosity to sacrificial

---

[8]C. Clifton Black, *The Rhetoric of the Gospel: Theological Artistry in the Gospels and Acts* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2001).

devotion is endorsed. This allows the Christian disciple in search of an identity to traverse along a pathway. Discipleship as Christian identity is not an all or nothing identity.

But this affirmation of a discipleship pilgrimage or journey sits alongside the qualifications of degrees or levels of discipleship which are value laden. Is the converse of true discipleship, false discipleship; or the converse of costly discipleship, cheap discipleship? Yes. This is often the intent of such descriptive qualifications, to impose a judgement on what it means to be a disciple. This likewise resonates with the discipleship instructions which we often isolate from the Gospel stories. 'If anyone comes after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me' (Mk 8.34). Or even harsher, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even their own life--they cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14.26). These injunctions to discipleship are difficult to classify as identity markers. They are not measurable beliefs or actions in the usual sense. Is Christian discipleship measurable by one's will to martyrdom? Is Christian discipleship identifiable by one's deliberate alienation from family? Perhaps at one time and in different contexts. Yet, we still proclaim these calls to discipleship in the faith community to engender devotion. They are challenging because their challenge always confronts the status quo; the status quo is never sufficient. The challenge is not literal, but more metaphorical or symbolic. Whatever degree of costly or true discipleship one may feel one has achieved, these words always ask for a bit more. They stand as ultimate demands which do not allow a final set of identity markers. These calls to discipleship ask on every hearing for the hearer to reconsider their devotion and to press on in the journey.

More significant for Christian identity and discipleship has been the moral imperatives for the Christian life which we find in the Sermon on the Mount and such similar Jesus instruction. Among most persons who use the identity, 'Christian', the Sermon on the Mount stands out as a well-known set of teachings which are suggestive for Christian

identity. But from a biblical interpretation perspective, the Sermon is a complicated text both in its context within Matthew's Gospel and as an isolated, independent textual unit.[9]

The text opens with an important interpretative issue, to whom is the sermon addressed, the crowds or the disciples? 'Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside, and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying' (Matt. 5.1). If we take the Sermon on the Mount as addressed to the disciples (whatever level of discipleship), it calls for a Christian identity marked by doing a certain kind of righteousness.[10] But before the Sermon gets into specific moral guidelines, it requests the listener to reorient their identity. The Sermon opens with the beatitudes. These are richly suggestive that the divine perspective on cultural and social values is different from the usual understanding and practice: for instance, it is the meek who inherit the earth. Christian identity has been shaped by this inversion of values. The opening introduction proceeds to suggest that disciples have a particular role to play in relation to society at large as they act out this new value system: they act as salt and light, 'let your light shine before all people that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven' (Matt. 5.16).

As the Sermon moves into instructions regarding specific moral issues, such as murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, revenge, charity, prayer and fasting, etc., the general understanding of Jesus teaching is to intensify the traditional moral regulation: for instance, 'You have heard it was said, "Do not murder". . .But I say to you that anyone who is angry with his neighbour will be subject to judgment; 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy". But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'. In fact, the intensification proceeds to an extraordinary demand, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5.48). The rhetorical effect of this

---

[9]W. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1976).

[10]Righteousness is the overarching theme of the Sermon.

intensification process is to create personal assessment and reorientation at every hearing until perfection is achieved.

The rhetoric of discipleship in the Gospels has shaped and continues to shape Christian identity. But the rhetoric itself seems to confirm that one cannot sum up a specific set of identity markers which exist for every stage of a disciple's journey. The Gospels do suggest the centrality of Jesus as the object of discipleship in terms of following and learning from. But for disciples today in which there is no physical person to focus upon, the whole endeavour becomes rather curious and mysterious.

The Rhetoric of Christian Identity in the Pauline Letter

When one turns to the Pauline writings there are many ways into the task of assessing a definition of Christian identity.[11] You could look at the essential beliefs common to Pauline theological discourse. You could examine the way of life or the duties of the Christian which Paul exhorts his readers to follow or adopt. But either of these approaches is subject to infinite permutations and is essentially content based. I believe a potentially insightful way to examine the rhetoric of Christian identity in Paul's letters is to look at the epistolary situation he constructs in these letters.

In the letters, Paul uses a Greco-Roman friendly letter format. In that format, in the letter opening, the sender is named first, then the recipient(s). It is in these addresses where one finds some interesting attempts to construct Christian identity. In literary terms, through the way the letter writer specifies the recipient(s), the sender constructs the ideal reader/recipient. The actual reader is forced by the textual specification of the ideal reader to either assent to this textual identity or to dissent. A letter's communication dynamic requires a reader to decide if they are the recipient, the one to whom the letter has been sent. If one

---

[11]W.S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

decides that they are not the identified recipient to whom the letter is addressed, they can still read or listen to the letter, but they are over-hearing a designated conversation to another party. A person who cannot assent to the named recipient stands outside the epistolary situation created by the letter text where the sender and the recipient meet.

I believe a key insight into Paul's persuasive attempt to define Christian identity for his readers occurs in the rhetorical dynamics created by the epistolary opening. In what follows I analyse the letter opening of 1 Corinthians in order to show how the identification of the recipient or the addressee is an attempt to construct a Christian identity for the reader.

In typical Greek letter form, the addressee is named after the sender in 1 Corinthians 1.1-2: *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints/holy, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours*. The address is the textual presentation of the recipients by the sender. In most Greco-Roman friendly letters, the address merely contained a name with family letters often adding an epithet expressing the familial relationship ('to James, my brother'). The address in 1 Corinthians reflects the Greek family letter form with several significant deviations from the letter form.

The first deviation from the addressee convention is the community nature of the address, 'to the church of God that is in Corinth*'*. Greek and Jewish Hellenistic letters addressed to a community usually singled out one or more individuals.[12] Yet, 1 Corinthians addresses the whole community. With Corinth being primarily a gentile, Greco-Roman community, the word, *ekklesia* (church), would most likely conjure up the image of the assembly of the local political body.[13] This possible image is recast by the prepositional

---

[12]A Pauline example is Phm. 1b, 'To Philemon...to Apphia...to Archippus...to the church at your house'.

[13]L. Coenen, 'Church', in New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), Vol. I, p. 291.

phrase, 'of God'. The resulting image is a powerful metaphor which draws upon the secular image, an assembly gathered to conduct certain specified affairs of state, with the phrase, 'of God', distinguishing the image from the secular, thereby constituting an assembly gathered to conduct the affairs of God. The second prepositional phrase, 'in Corinth', gives it a specific location against the implied background of other churches in different locations. The addressee phrase, then, identifies the individual reader/hearer as a member of a community whose identity is specifically related to their new religious affection, God. This role assignment delineates and designates the textual relationship for the epistolary situation, apostle (sender) to the church of God in Corinth (recipients). In rhetorical terms one could say the audience is constructed according to the necessary terms of the argument which follows.[14]

The initial descriptive phrase for the addressees, 'the church of God which is at Corinth', is expanded by three different grammatical phrases, all of which are derivative and elaborations of this basic designation. Epistolary convention allows descriptive elaboration of the addressee, but the extent found in this address is unusual by the extent and nature of the expansions. In addition, the elaborations pertain to the community, and the elaborating terms are not stereo-typically familial descriptors, but distinctly religious.

The first phrase, 'those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus', draws upon several different possible perceptions. In common Greek parlance, the idea of sanctification refers to high ethical morality.[15] Yet, in Christian circles the term came to refer to God's work of making holy, possibly drawing on the Old Testament concept of setting apart.[16] So, a fuller picture of this 'church of God' emerges: it is an assembly who in relation to God is holy. The

---

[14]Ch. Perelman, The Realm of Rhetoric (trans. By W. Kluback; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1982), pp. 9-20.

[15]H. Seebass, 'Holy', in New International Dictionary, II, pp. 223-24.

[16]New International Dictionary, II, pp. 224-27.

qualifying prepositional phrase, 'in Christ Jesus', focuses the quality away from any self-achievement and locates it within the person and work of Jesus Christ.[17] As a result, the relational description is compounded: the church of God is holy in and through its relationship with Christ Jesus.[18]

The second elaborating phrase, 'called to be saints', emphasizes a quality of being that is a product of ones ethical action, action engendered from the new self-identity designated in the previous phrase, 'sanctified in Christ Jesus'. This second elaborating phrase makes explicit what is implied in the previous phrase, that holiness is an aspect of being called. Such a self-identity implies an obligation to demonstrate or display that quality, hence the ethical constraint.

The next designation, 'called holy one/saints', is plural, making it a community designation. The phrase is an obvious parallel with the titular description of the sender, making it a titular designation of the recipients: Paul, called to be an apostle; the church of God in Corinth, called to be holy ones.[19] This parallelism establishes solidarity since both share the privileged status of being called, but emphasises the distinction in that each have been called to a different role. By making the phrase a titular designation, the audience is informed of the sender's perception of their ideal identity as the recipients. In sum, this phrase designates the community's spiritual status or identity as both 'called ones' and 'holy ones'.

---

[17]The preposition, 'in', is complex in its signification. Its ambiguity as both locative and instrumental is attested to in the grammars, M. Zerwick, <u>Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples</u>, trans J. Smith (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), pp. 33-37; C.F.D. Moule, <u>An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek</u> (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959, 2nd ed.), pp. 75-81; hence I suggest the 'in' phrase here includes both the person (locative) and the work (instrumental) of Christ.

[18]The word, 'relationship', is used deliberately to imply the full sense of what it means to be 'in Christ'. This is similar to S.E. Porter, <u>Idioms of Greek New Testament</u> (Biblical Languages: Greek 2; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), p. 159. See A.J.M. Wedderburn, 'Some Observations on Paul's Use of the Phrases "in Christ" and "with Christ"', <u>JSNT</u> 25 (1985), pp. 83-97, for review of alternative interpretations.

[19]C.K. Barrett, <u>The First Epistle to the Corinthians</u> (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 32.

The final descriptive characterization of the addressee by the sender in the address adds the more mundane horizontal plane of existence: '[together] with all those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, theirs and ours'.[20] The effect of the phrase is to associate the addressees with the larger Christian community.[21] The effect of bringing in the larger Christian community creates a relational tension. While the association of the Corinthian church with the church at large creates a sense of solidarity and possibly a sense of strength in numbers, it also evokes a need for conformity through such unity. This third elaborating clause expands the relational perspective entextualized in the address by making the audience not only accountable to the sender, but also accountable with other Christians designated as 'the church of God'.

To summarize, the address then, as a textual representation, works to create a textual characterization of the addressee or reader. The sender thereby both entextualizes his envisaged relationship with the recipients and prescribes the identity of the ideal reader. To dissent from this identity is to step out of the world of the text; to assent is to accept the relationship between the sender and addressee as entextualized and prescribed by rhetorical effect of the epistolary address.

The epistolary address in 1 Corinthians by its overt Christian vocabulary suggests a distinctive Christian identity which remains persuasive. The phrases, 'church of God', 'sanctified in Christ Jesus', 'called to be saints' are ideal and intangible group identity descriptions. Despite the possibility that the writer, Paul, had very specific ideas in mind in his understanding of the terms, the fact is that they engender a semantical openness. It is difficult to define the precise boundary for 'church of God'. It is difficulty to specific exactly at what point in the process implied by 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' one must be to be part of

---

[20]This literal translation is included because of the difficulty of determining the sense of this phrase.

[21]J.B. Lightfoot, <u>Notes on Epistles of Paul</u> (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1895, 1980 reprint), p. 145: 'We must suppose then that St Paul associates the whole Christian Church with the Corinthians in this superscription'.

the 'church of God'. Equally, what exactly qualifies a person or community to be a saint or holy? The rhetorical effect of these terms is to bring evaluation assessment according to a religious set of beliefs and practices associated with Christianity.

By way of brief comparison, listen to the opening addresses of some of Paul's other letters. Romans 1.2, 'To all God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints'; Ephesians 1.1b, 'To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus'; Philippians 1.1b, 'To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi'; Colossians 1.2, 'To the saints and faithful brothers [and sisters] in Christ in Colossae'; 1 Thessalonians 1.1b, 'To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ'. Notice the use of words like saints, faithful, in Christ Jesus. As ideal identity descriptions, they remain in the Christian vocabulary as open symbols open to a range of understandings and perceptions.[22] Rhetorically they are suggestive but not prescriptive.

Conclusion: A Rhetoric of Christian Identity

Stephen Sykes in his book, *The Identity of Christianity*[23], concludes after surveying the understanding of the essence of Christianity in modern theology that any such essential definition of Christianity must include three dimensions: 1) God is the Lord of creation; 2) the power of God was at work in Jesus Christ; 3) God is Lord over ends. But Sykes recognizes that any attempt to posit such an essentialist definition must be done within the context of Christian history which has been dominated by disagreement and conflict. So much so that Sykes suggests that conflict, in this particular case, doctrinal debate is inseparable from the form and content of Christianity. Sykes also recognizes that whatever external postulation theologians or communities of faith put forward there is always the

---

[22]P. Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1964).

[23]S. Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth* (London: SPCK, 1984), especially pp. 257-8.

internal process of appropriating these external forms. So at the end, Sykes finally says that the identity of Christianity is 'the process of interaction between this inward element and the external forms of Christianity'.[24]

There is a remarkable parity between Sykes and Tanner. Both see Christian identity in terms of a process of actualising an identity. This understanding seems to correspond with the rhetoric of identity found in the Gospel concept of discipleship and with the identity descriptions Paul uses to specify the ideal readers of his letters. In the biblical texts, at least the limited purview we examined, there seems a deliberate attempt to challenge identity by ultimate and undefined or non-prescriptive language. Certainly the centrality of Jesus Christ is there whether it is to follow Jesus as a disciple or be in Christ Jesus. While the biblical writers may have intended specific content to the language they used in the context of their wider texts at the time they wrote, the language has endured because of its openness to meanings and because this openness offers an invitation to forge a Christian identity.

This process of growing towards a Christian identity is aided the rhetoric of scripture. Scriptural language persuades, shapes, and moulds this process by the invective language of discipleship and by the Pauline choice of words for the ideal Christian and Christian community. This scriptural language becomes a conversation partner in the ongoing process of creating identity. The language of scripture through a conscious decision becomes part of the raw material which determines the process towards identity. My reading of the scriptural rhetoric suggests that the vocabulary itself suggests that it is meant to be a creative process, not a prescriptive process. But this is a reading situated in the context of the 21st century.

---

[24]Sykes, *Identity*, p. 261.