

5. Spirit Intimacy and Religious Commonality

Top-Down Ecclesiology has been the mode of communal life commonly practiced by Christian communities during the last 2000 years. **Spirit-Up Ecclesiology** is the mode of communal life that was there in the beginning, that has appeared intermittently in Christian history, and that now needs to be the standard model for the future.

from: Top-Down Ecclesiology		to: Spirit-Up Ecclesiology	
Commonality ↓	Economic Power Political Hierarchy Cultural Dogma	Economic Enablement Political Network Cultural Consensus	Commonality ↑
Intimacy ↓	neglected	Inclusive Compassion Consensus Processing Personal Meeting	Intimacy ↑
Singularity	Mental Indoctrination Emotional Control Prescribed Practice	Mental Thinking Emotional Sharing Elected Practice	Singularity
Spirit Being			

Top-Down Ecclesiology begins with an **economically empowered political hierarchy** protecting and promulgating its “**correct**” **dogma**. It operates as a push toward the **mental indoctrination, emotional control, and prescribed religious practices** of each solitary person. It tends to neglect intimate community and to replace it with an oppressive educational process in which ordained leaders train the youth and laity in the “**correct**” catechism.

Spirit-Up Ecclesiology emphasizes intimate group life in which **personal meeting** on the Spirit level is the primary means of grace for the Spirit maturation of the solitary person. **Consensus processing** rather than clerical rule characterizes the decision-making in these intimate groups. Instead of turned-in religious defensiveness, **inclusive compassion** for one another and for the neighborhood, region, continent, and planet characterizes the group’s orientation.

Toward the singular persons who comprise these intimate groups, the aim is to enable each person to **think** for herself or himself, to **share** one’s actual experience honestly and emotionally, and to **create** one’s own religious practices and assume responsibility for the appropriate disciplines of one’s own solitary care.

Toward religious commonality, the intimate group sees itself as the generator of the cultural traditions of the larger network. Useful ritual practices and theological clarifications flow from the life of the intimate groups that comprise the network. Locally arising innovations become a common culture through **consensus processing**. The polity of this network of groups is **local to global** rather than pope to peasant. The economic life of this network **enables** the inner functioning and outward mission of the whole network. It does not establish positions of power which then control the thinking, creativity, and individual journeys of the members of the intimate groups.

This question arises: how can commonality become somewhat stable in such a wild, freedom-loving, local-to-global organization? How can a locally empowered organization avoid disintegrating into an endless variety of religious expressions, many of which have lost touch with Christian heritage altogether?

A more basic question also arises. What is commonality anyhow and why is it necessary or useful? I will turn first to that question.

Commonality is a necessary part of every human community. The language we speak is part of our commonality. The taken-for-granted structures of time – months, days, hours, minutes – are part of our commonality. Our group processes are part of our commonality. In Christian community, theological agreements and customary ritual practices are part of our commonality.

There are three basic human processes that comprise commonality: cultural processes, political processes, and economic processes. Economic processes have to do with the basic survival and physical enablement of the human group. Political processes have to do with how the group makes decisions and carries them out. Cultural processes are all the rest.

In a religious organization cultural processes are the most important, because religion is a cultural dynamic within the larger society. In a network of groups practicing a fresh expression of Christianity, theological commonality is an important aspect of the cultural commonality of that network. Theological commonality includes some sort of commitment to the Christian Bible and to Christian heritage through the centuries. Theological commonality includes some sort of agreement on how that heritage is to be interpreted for the times in which we live. The translation of the inherited religious expressions from the transcendence metaphors in which they were written into the transparency metaphors of contemporary awareness is an example of an agreement on heritage interpretation. Without such an agreement on heritage interpretation and without an agreement to be committed to Christian heritage in the first place, our efforts to create a new form of Christian commonality will disintegrate into chaos.

The need for theological commonality illustrates how a certain amount of commonality is fundamental to the well-being of a Spirit-up mode of Christian community. So how can we have the needed theological commonality without slipping back into the top-down indoctrination mode of religious organization? How can we keep our theological thinking open-ended and creative without disintegrating into chaos?

The answers to such questions are anything but obvious or easy. But here is a clue: Spirit is the essence of human existence, and that essence is the same for every person. If all our decisions are referred to Spirit experience for their authorization – for resolving their truth or falseness – then we can proceed with a common obedience to the universal qualities of Spirit and can also affirm our Spirit freedom to be creative. Spirit is a creative wellspring from which valid, Spirit-expressive commonality is constantly arising. Understanding this clearly is understanding how commonality can have both stability and open-endedness.

So how does Spirit provide us with our authorization in our building of community commonality? Spirit flows from solitary individuals. There is no such thing as Spirit unless solitary persons are assumed to be the place where Spirit enters the processes of human life. Intimate community, in which the appearance of Spirit is valued above all else, is the testing ground for the formation of common forms. Whatever common forms work for an actual intimate Spirit community are the commonality that is needed. Freedom, operating through a consensus process, can be trusted to evolve the forms that are needed.

Spirit freedom/creativity/obedience functions most effectively in an intimate group of about 12 people. When willing to persist for years in a disciplined fashion, a group develops a commonality that is constantly changing and hopefully improving in relation to Spirit authenticity. If a dozen such groups were to meet quarterly for a whole weekend, these 144 people would enrich one another. Such groups of 144 would still be within the bounds of knowing one another in an intimate fashion. Intimacy would still function, and the result would be the building of commonality with even greater stability.

A 144-member commonality provides a stability within which the intimate relations in all 12 groups of 12 can function more effectively and with greater scope. The larger group does not oppress the smaller ones, because the smaller groups remain the creative source for the commonality of the larger group. This same consensus building process can be designed for relations among thousands of 144 member gatherings.

How do we assure that this smaller-to-larger movement does not become an oppressive larger-to-smaller type of organization? We do this by establishing as part of our commonality the understanding that truth originates in the experience of the singular person and is nurtured toward fulfillment in an intimate circle of weekly meetings. The group of 144 is a gestalt of that local intimate life rather than a prescription to be followed by local chapters. The same principle applies to still larger groupings.

It is possible, of course, that some groups of 12 might go astray from obedience to Spirit just as some individuals in a group of 12 might go astray. And just as an individual who is no longer committed to this sort of Christian practice might drop out of a group of 12, so also an entire group might drop out of the quarterly association of 144. A significant amount of coming and going will characterize this sort of religious organization. We need not worry about that. Sometimes leaving is a creative thing; at other times leaving is running away from authentic living. And no human being is ever clear about the extent to which leaving means one or the other. Each group of 12 and the gatherings of the 144 must simply keep making consensus decisions from the ground of Spirit. Who joins and who leaves is not our first order of concern. Our first concern needs to be whether we are obedient to Spirit – that is, whether we are obedient to freedom, creativity, compassion, trust, and to the continuity of such states of Spirit as they are expressed in commonly held theological vision, group practices, and compassionate modes of service.

Building commonality is a movement toward stability, but this movement does not have to become rigid and oppressive. Commonality building can be an open process that is continually enriched from the wellsprings of intimate Spirit practice. And intimate Spirit practice is constantly being enriched from the wellsprings of each singular individual who makes up that disciplined intimate group.

Only when we are actively engaged in this sort of organization will we experience its full validity. As we walk this path, we will discover the additional clarity and courage we need for this walk. And as we continue this walk we will learn how to say more clearly what we are doing and how it is deepening our Spirit maturity and enabling our compassion on behalf of the planet we are called to serve.