

Chapter 4

The Next Exodus of Christian Community

In chapters one and two, I created a brief sketch, using contemporary language and metaphors, of the essential qualities of the Spirit breakthrough that took on historical form in what came to be called “Christian religion.” In chapter three I created another brief sketch, this time of the history of Christian religion in the first century and on how that community came to see itself as a *new exodus*, not simply from Judaism but from all cultural content. In this chapter, I want to apply the exodus metaphor to the whole history of Christianity and to the next stage of Christian religious embodiment.

1. The Continuing Story of Exodus Happenings

Moses led an exodus from civilization. He established a society in the wilderness that heeded the call to worship the Wholeness of Being rather than a human society. This is a powerful symbol for thinking about the future shape of Christian community, for today a new exodus from civilization is required for all of us. In chapter 3 of the first book in this series, I defined what I mean by “civilization” and why humanity must move beyond this now obsolete form of social organization. Eventually, the entire human species must make an exodus from civilization—either that, or face extinction. If this is true, then the vanguard of the human species, the people of God, are those who make this exodus now, and thus lead the rest of humanity in doing so.

If we assume that loving God and neighbor includes taking our place in the vanguard of human history, then a Christian-identified community, in order to be “truly Christian,” would have to take its place among that vanguard of human beings who are leaving civilization and building something better. There may be many ways of being a Christian community, but every authentic manifestation of being Christian Community, in this moment of history, must participate in being an exodus from civilization.

Moses and his band were not the first exodus from civilization. Those who remembered Moses also remembered even more distant ancestors like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham also left civilization. He left the urban area of Ur and went

forth not knowing where he was going. He and his clan, we are told, forged an autonomous social existence in which the worship of the Wholeness of Being was central. So in the biblical memory, the family clan was the earliest sociological form of the exodus people.

Furthermore, the story of Noah indicates that the biblical memory viewed leaving civilization and starting over as a dynamic of life even older than Abraham. Noah built a boat, rode out the great flood, and started human life again.

Even the story of Cain and Abel may reflect this theme. Cain was an agricultural figure. Abel, a herder, may recall our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Cain, like agricultural civilization, kills the hunter-gatherer brother and builds society with the curse of this deed on his forehead. This myth seems to state that civilization’s conquest and control of the Earth and other humans was a primary manifestation of Adam’s fall.

The story of the Tower of Babel also criticizes civilization. In this story, “civilization” builds a tower toward heaven, seeking to make all human beings alike, speaking one language. But the writers of this mythic story pictured God as opposed to this notion. Cosmopolitan uniformity is seen as human arrogance. God prefers diversity.

But, however we interpret these primordial memories and myths, Moses remains a turning point in the biblical memory. He is the leader-extraordinaire of a thoroughgoing exodus from civilization, and he is the establisher of “exodus” as a primary religious symbol. When we read the book of Genesis, we need to realize that all these stories of ancient ancestors were written in the power of the Moses-memory. Exodus was the revelatory event that provided the context for interpreting all these earlier “chapters” of the human story.

And the exodus that Moses led was not the last exodus. Moses kept his band in the desert for his entire lifetime. Some left the band, of course, but Moses stayed in the desert and prepared part of the human race for the long haul. As soon as Moses died, Joshua led the people in a conquest of more fertile ground. This was perhaps a necessary part of the story, but it set up the need for more exodus experiences. The Mosaic band mingled with the other groups that lived in Palestine, including other Hebraic groups that had come earlier. In spite of this mingling, the exodus memory and the exodus style of society was, at least in some measure, retained. A loose federation of tribes became the sociological shape of the People who worshiped the Wholeness of Being.

(There were, of course, other peoples in other parts of the world who “worshipped” the Wholeness of Being in other ways, but we are going to follow the biblical story, this particular story of the struggle to be the vanguard of Being.) This loose federation was inspired and protected and purified from time to time by charismatic figures like Deborah and other timely leaders. Military campaigns were among the key remembered events of this period, because these were occasions in which the people made the hard choices to live exodus-wise rather than other-wise.

The next sociological form for the People of Being began with the anointing of Saul as King and the establishment of a kingdom to replace the federation. The key value that supported having a King was the need for unity and military strength against their enemies. The disvalue was, as some put it, “becoming like the other nations.” In other words, the disvalue was becoming one more civilization, one more hierarchical organization of self-worshipping society like the one Moses left.

Saul, apparently, was leading matters in this negative direction. Saul was a military leader, not a charismatic leader like Moses or Joshua or Deborah or Samuel. David was both a military leader and a charismatic leader, and he and his band of outcast warriors conquered the Saul kingdom from within. David became a different kind of king than Saul, and a different kind of king than most of the kings of Israel and Judah who came after him. David attempted to make his kingship secondary to the worship of the Wholeness of Being. He slipped from time to time into the ancient pattern of blatant aristocratic prerogatives. In the Bathsheba incident, the prophet Nathan tricked David into seeing that taking Bathsheba and arranging for her husband’s death was just like all the other stealing and murdering that David was opposed to. David repented. Most other kings would have simply put Nathan to death. David’s reign was rightly revered as the high point of the “kingship”—a model for being the exodus people.

Many later kings had to be vigorously opposed by the great prophets. These prophets, their writings, and their disciples, comprise a “second exodus” from civilization. The prophets clarified that mere membership in a Davidic, Judaic, or Israeli kingdom did not make one a member of the People of God. What made one the People of God was wholehearted worship of God and the refusal to worship civilization or its wealth or its kingship organization. Prophets like Jeremiah came to see that the true law of God was more profound than any external code; it was a law “written upon the

heart.” So the exodus was now pictured as something far more drastic and Spiritually profound than the outward leaving of Egypt and the outward building of an improved society. The exodus was a profound change of heart, a transformation of the human person that went to the very core of human existence. This had been true for Moses in the beginning, but Jeremiah gave sophisticated clarity to the Mosaic break-through, and he and others like him were seen by the New Testament community as having prepared the way for Jesus.

In the synoptic gospels, (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Jesus, like Moses, is pictured as leading his band of followers out of an existing civilization into a new sort of kingdom. Numerous allusions to the Moses story appear in the synoptic gospels. A new deliverance was seen to be underway. A new covenant with God was being wrought. A new sociological manifestation of the People of God was taking shape. This new exodus was mingled with symbolism about the dawning “kingdom of God.”

Jesus was clear that the kingdom of God, if seen as a manifest social reality, did not now reign upon the Earth. He spoke of the existing reign as the reign of Satan. He did not mean by this that the natural world is evil. He meant that the actual human civilization in which he lived did not operate from loving God and neighbor. We might well claim that no civilization, no human society, will ever perfectly manifest that authentic commonwealth of loving God and neighbor. On the crassly practical level, we need to assume that human estrangement (the reign of Satan) will always play some part in the real world of social practice. Nevertheless, “the kingdom of God,” in the New Testament vision, is not a supernatural place, unrelated to ongoing social life. The kingdom has come and is coming. It happens among us every time a single person is healed and begins to manifest the authentic life that God gives us. And the manifest kingdom of God is not simply an interior or solitary reality. No, it is also a social reality. The followers of Jesus are called to be that new commonwealth in their practical communal life and in all their dealings with all of humanity—indeed, all of nature and all of reality.

Furthermore, this divine commonwealth is given by God. It is real. It is actual. It is not a distant ideal to be realized someday by human effort. It is the truth about human life from which we have fled. So, while this divine commonwealth cannot be said to be built by human hands, it can be given sociological manifestation right now by human hands. Yet human-built sociological manifestations

of the divine commonwealth are, at best, fragmentary approximations of the divine commonwealth in its fullness. Furthermore, all these human-built approximations tend to decay, or be twisted, into new expressions of the kingdom of Satan. So the story of Exodus continues.

By the end of the first century, Christianity had taken on a sociological manifestation distinct from Judaism. The kingdom of God was now being manifest, so they claimed, in the “new humanity” of the Church, the ekklesia. “Ekklesia” means “the called out.” This new humanity had been called out of Hebraic civilization (and of Greco-Roman civilization as well) to be a universal community of Jews and Gentiles (which meant everybody or anybody). This new community was not a civilization, it was a rather loose network held together by charismatic ties and a fairly common set of teachings, literature, and religious practices.

This network of worshipers had no legal standing in the Roman empire, and they were made scapegoats, ridiculed, or persecuted whenever it was useful and convenient for the governing authorities to do so. When in 312 C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine decided that he was a Christian and invited all the Christian bishops to dinner at Nicea, another era in the sociological manifestation of the kingdom of God began.

In the middle centuries of Christianity, the sociological manifestation of the kingdom of God was the heroic effort to dismantle Greco-Roman civilization and build a better civilization, Christendom. This was also an exodus. It was an exodus from the worship of a human empire into the ongoing task of challenging the masses of this empire to worship the Wholeness of Being. It was also an exodus from earlier forms of Christian religion: Christians were no longer an illegal movement but a legal and state-supported social structure for the service of all. This was an exodus, an exodus into the “wilderness” of assuming grueling responsibility for every aspect of general social life. The Christendom they built was not perfect, far from it. But it did manifest elements of the commonwealth of Being. It carried forward the challenge to manifest that divine commonwealth, and it handed that challenge on to us today.

The greatness of the middle ages as a social accomplishment is clouded for us today by our own historical biases and by our memories of how the leaders of Christendom came to worship Christian civilization rather than the Christian God and thus to persecute authentic manifestations of Spirit. This fall into the worship of civilization after having made an exodus from civilization was

another rerun of the old, old story. Falling away from exodus-wise living and then returning to exodus-wise living has been taking place ever since Moses crossed the Red Sea.

In their originating passion, most of the well known Christian religious orders were protest movements against the worship of civilization and they were also some sort of reconstruction of the worship of the Infinite. We could tell the story of each religious order as a mini-exodus from some aspect of an imperfect Christendom.

The Protestant Reformation was an exodus from Christendom. Luther was convinced that Christendom, as he experienced it, had turned in upon itself and had thereby become the anti-Christ, the anti-worship of the Christian God. He enlisted the German kings to assist him in building a new Christendom.

A further exodus took place when evangelical Protestant reformers fought for a practical separation of all the religious communities of Christians from secular political establishments. Basically, they were fighting for room to experiment with manifesting the commonwealth of Being unimpeded by the hierarchies of their civilizations. This also was an exodus from civilization.

We who are members of currently existing Christian religious bodies, find ourselves in institutions that are thoroughly accommodated to the present forms of industrial civilization. Our earlier fight on behalf of the freedom of the solitary individual has degenerated into an individualism that fits neatly into a society that atomizes persons, destroys community and responsibility, and leaves each of us more or less on our own as a solitary job hunter and consumer who takes little thought and has little time for the issues of destiny faced by the overall society and the planet. In this manner, Christians have again joined the worship of civilization.

So as we approach the end of a second millennium of the Christian struggle to temporally manifest the Kingdom of God, we stand at the doorway of another, quite new, quite astonishing exodus. This time we are called to lead the entire human race in abolishing civilization from the entire planet and in building something better. By “something better,” exodus Christians could only mean something more in keeping with the Kingdom of God—that commonwealth in which love for the Infinite Neighbor and every finite neighbor prevails.

Seeing this “exodus quality” within the long story of the Hebraic and Christian “people of God” can assist us greatly in articulating how we can go

forward without abandoning the true essence of our past. The new exodus which I want to describe for the practical, religious community of Christians does not mean an abandonment of the Christian past, it means an application of the true wisdom of that past to a new historical situation. This new historical situation is provoking us to new clarity about the wisdom of Christian traditions, wisdom which we, as religious bodies, have been carrying with us but have seldom profoundly understood.

At the same time, this next exodus of Christian community will be a thoroughgoing experience of sociological discontinuity with the sociological manifestations of Christian religion that have carried us to this present moment. I want to insist that our familiar denominational congregations have almost completed their job in human history. We have arrived at an historical juncture where new sociological manifestations for Christian community must again be built. Furthermore, we cannot go back to the state-church pattern, or to the second century pattern, or to the New Testament pattern, or to the nation of Israel pattern, or to a Moses-revering tribal federation, or to a family clan like that of Abraham. All these sociological manifestations of our past struggles to be the people of God are over, finished, done, complete. Each of these obsolete manifestations may teach us things which are relevant for our future, but we must decide anew what past lessons are relevant and then innovate that fresh sociological shape for Christian community which is appropriate to our thoroughgoingly new situation.

I find it very helpful to summarize the history of Christianity as four major eras and then to describe these eras using the symbols "Exodus" and "Civilization" as a means of summarizing how Christians, in each of these four eras, viewed their mission to love God and neighbor. (See the chart at the top of page 45)

The task that now faces Christians has not been done before. We do not need to disparage the three earlier tasks. They were great and heroic tasks, and we can learn from them. But they do not tell us, entirely, how to do our task, or even what our task precisely is.

There are many Bible-revering Christians who insist that 21st century Christians need to model their mission and their communal life after that of the New Testament community. While we certainly do need the interior clarity and devotion possessed by those first witnesses to the Christian breakthrough, our task is different. We live in a different time. We face a different "action of God" to which we must respond.

Some Roman Catholic Christians seem to be asking 21st century Christians to model their mission and communal life after the practices of the middle ages. While we need an inclusive or "catholic" perspective on humanity and on planet Earth, our task is not to build a better Christian civilization, but to lead all people in an exodus from all types of civilization.

Finally, there are many modern Christians--Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox--who are asking 21st century Christians to continue focusing on the spiritual maturity of individual persons and to trust those inspired individuals to repair industrial civilization in whatever manner they think it needs repair. While the next manifest practice of Christianity must, indeed, continue to honor and mature the individual lives of Christian-identified people, we must widen our scope. We must be a new experiment in human community on behalf of the whole of the human community.

So, I see us building a Christian-identified community, not as an escape from the general community and its issues, but as a base from which we can also participate in vanguard groups of people who are wider than Christian-identified. I envision Spirit-filled Christians working alongside other Spirit-filled persons and cooperating effectively in leading the massive social transformation demanded of us in the coming centuries.

I have called this massive social transformation "an exodus from civilization." But this name is not what is important. It is the actual content of our social living that is important. I have used the symbol "the end of civilization" to depict the radical nature of this shift and also to honor tribal people who have never identified themselves with the word "civilization" and need not now be asked to do so. I respect very much an author like Albert Schweitzer who saw deeply into our social crisis and who used the term "civilization" in a positive manner to describe our wholesome future. But the future "civilization" which Schweitzer described is, in most respects, the same "post-civilization" to which I am pointing. I feel that the term "post-civilization" helps us clarify aspects of the future not captured in Schweitzer's vision of an ethical civilization. Civilization, as I am using the term, is a social form that can never again be considered ethical.

I have explored the symbol "exodus" because this symbol, like few others, unites the Spirit depths of Christian tradition with the struggle to give sociological manifestation to those Spirit depths. The exodus I am picturing for Christian-identified people is a profound Spirit journey, not simply into the mystical depths of our interior

The Missional Focus of the Four Eras of Christian History

Ancient	Middle	Modern	Next
Building a Network of Exodus Communities within Civilization	Building an Exodus Civilization	Building many Organizations for Exodus Individuals within every Civilization	Building a Vanguard Force Leading a General Exodus from Civilization

being, but in our actual walk, talk, work, and play, a change in our total styling of space and time around us, a change in our total aim and purpose as an enfleshed community on this planet.

So what does this 21st century enfleshed community need to look like? What qualities will it have? How is it different from the Christian communities we have known and read about in the past? These questions re-ask the central question of this chapter.

2. The Future Sociological Shape of Christian Community Life

What will Christian community be like on the other side of its next exodus? Since being Christian community means being part of the vanguard of the human species, those qualities which we see as appropriate for all human society sometime in the next century need to be manifest within Christian community *now*. (a) The end of civilization means abolishing hierarchy within the human society at large, so we must abolish hierarchy within the Christian community now. (b) The end of civilization means abolishing patriarchy within the human society at large and so we must abolish patriarchy within the Christian community now. (c) The end of civilization means abolishing ethnic we-egoism within the human society at large, so we must abolish ethnic we-egoism within the Christian community now. (d) The end of civilization means abolishing gross economic inequity within the human society at large, so we must abolish gross economic inequity within the Christian community now. (e) And last in this list, but certainly not least, the end of civilization means abolishing within human society all our trends toward ecological devastation. This means ending the human conquest and control of nature, our fear and hatred of nature, and our alienation from our own natural bodies. These changes, like the first four, need to take place within the Christian community **NOW**--immediately, without delay--as well as within the entirety of human society somewhat later on.

I want to describe some of the shocking implications of these five vast transformations for the next sociological shape of Christian community.

a. Abolishing Hierarchy in Christian Community

Abolishing hierarchy within the Christian community means the complete abandonment of anything like Popes, Cardinals, and Bishops. The whole notion of clerical ordination has to be rethought. Of course, there has to be leadership. Also, there has to be some sort of coordinating and ordering of the common life at local, regional, continental, and planetary scopes¹ of interrelatedness. But how will all this look in a completely post-hierarchical world? The Christian community cannot claim to be part of the vanguard of humanity and still bring up the rear on abolishing hierarchy.

So let us, first of all, stretch our imaginations toward envisioning a Spirit based, organic leadership within each local community of Christians. And then let us imagine what it would look like for these local communities to relate to one another through some sort of horizontal polity at regional, continental, and planet-wide scopes.

In any local group of exodus Christians, there will be some who are more mature in this calling, more clear about what it means, more practiced in actually living the implications of their deliverance and avoiding the temptations to fall back into one or more of the many estrangements that still yawn on every side. Yet these more mature persons will know themselves to be vulnerable and fragmentary just like everyone else. Leadership is a relative thing. Indeed, every person in a group may be able to provide leadership in some arena. So to give our most "mature ones" anything close to unquestioned authority is a lie. Hierarchy of any sort is spiritually dangerous to all involved. The history of Christian religion certainly attests to the corruptions possible within the hierarchical mode of

¹ I use the word "scopes" instead of "levels" because "levels" assumes the hierarchical imagery.

ordering. Perhaps we can excuse the use of hierarchy by those past generations who, realistically, had no other way to organize, but that excuse no longer applies. We now possess better organizational models, well tested and long practiced.

Though hierarchical leadership must go, organizing some sort of leadership will be needed. Leaderless community is a sentimental and demotivating fiction. Mature and gifted people show up in every group and do lead and do need to be expected to lead. We would be amiss if we did not acknowledge mature persons and their gifts and expect them to lead in the strengthening of Christian community and in the most effective accomplishment of its work. Leadership just is. But instead of hierarchical leadership, we need to imagine some sort of **organic leadership** that grows up out of the Christian group and continually surprises the group with its functional potential.

We must also envision some sort of democratic polity. A creative form of **consensus-building democracy** can be the political process whereby an organic leadership is acknowledged and appointed to its roles. The sort of adversarial democracy currently practiced in most democratic national governing assemblies is not the correct image. We need, I believe, to follow the lead of the Quakers and mature our understanding of consensus processing. This will work splendidly, if we develop good consensus facilitators who can enable a group of passionate, Spirit-filled folk to move quickly through tough issues to a common mind. Within such a democratic body, the common mind can, without sentimentality, select this one or that one as the leader for this or that function. It may be that some sort of well-organized "ordination" of leadership can be reconstructed in this fashion. But the ordination of leadership by the laying on of hierarchical hands must be terminated now and forever. If the consensus process makes mistakes in the ordination of leadership, the consensus process can correct them. Serious mistakes were certainly made within the hierarchical systems of the past, and correcting those mistakes was never very easy. Furthermore, in a fully democratic environment, minority views are never prevented from giving their leadership. The holder of a minority view retains the leadership of being a full member of the consensus-forming process. A spiritually powerful person can lead magnificently without ever playing any of the appointed roles, paid positions, or whatever other functional roles a group deems useful.

Organic leadership will, I believe, feel quite natural and easy to do when we become familiar with it. The difficulty of working with foolishly

appointed, unspiritual bishops, priests, clergy, and "leading laity" has certainly not been minimal. The hierarchical model has been expedient for an age whose time is past. Attempting to continue it, in any form whatsoever, is opting to condone the manipulation, subterfuge, and downright meanness that currently characterizes most church governments. Both hierarchical obedience and adversarial democracy can be safely placed on the scrap heap as organizational models we no longer need.

In addition to "organic leadership," "**servant leadership**" is another master image that can become very important for clarifying the nature of a post-hierarchical community. By "servant leadership" I mean leadership that is "for others" rather than "for status or position." Status and position are dynamics in life, but status and position do not need to become central values in the selection of leadership. No one needs status or position. One only needs self-affirmation. If one cannot affirm oneself without status or position, status or position will not help. When service is the context, status and position become opportunities to serve.

When we are practicing organic, servant leadership, we can expect every member of the local Christian community to see himself or herself as a leader, or at least as a leader in preparation--someone who can be asked to lead both life within the Christian community and life in the world at large. Yet this "everyone-is-a-leader" image does not eliminate the need for specific roles of leadership. Selected leadership is needed to make many things happen effectively: the training, the nurture, the life-together, and the external, socially transforming work of the Christian community. Some members must be given the preparation time to become competent leaders in theological clarity, in training methodology, in sociological clarity, in psychological clarity, in artistic creation, and so on. Every group needs at least one person who can lead consensus processing. Yet such specific skills do not exhaust the meaning of leadership. We need Spirit-leadership, a leadership that is more subtle than anything we can define as a skill. The life of any group will always need mature Spirit persons who can be counted upon to provide wisdom or healing or stability at the crucial moments of living.

Spirit leaders arise within the community, but the actual source of such leadership is the grace of the Wholeness of Being and the freedom of the persons involved. A Spirit leader is not someone arbitrarily selected by a community. A Spirit leader is "called," and then has to discover for himself or herself this leadership calling, decide to lead, and give particular form to that leadership. Those who follow such leadership are also doing a

Spirit action. An authentic follower **chooses** to be led, not relinquishing his or her responsibility to someone else, but responsibly choosing to follow leadership as a means of enabling his or her own responsibility and emerging leadership.

So, rather than leaderless, I envision the authentic, post-hierarchical Christian community as a community in which very strong leadership functions. I see powerful mentors functioning with dedicated disciples following them. And I see some of those disciples becoming powerful mentors themselves.

Nevertheless, I do not recommend ordaining anyone, permanently, to a mentoring role. Permanent, formal ordination of leadership runs the risk of creating roles of status and position that are not filled by Spirit people but by those who feel some need for status and position. Perhaps something wilder than formal ordination needs to take place.

Most other species of animals create their positions of leadership by butting heads or showing teeth or wrestling with each other. Within a human Spirit community, the wildness of leadership formation probably means something more than tests of elemental physical power. But perhaps there does operate in the real life of a Spirit community some sort of jostling and testing of Spirit strengths. Organic leadership, I believe, can arise and grow and be joyously followed by all who recognize it--taking joy in being able to recognize it, taking joy in being able to follow it, and taking joy in the opportunity to lead wherever and whenever the call to lead presents itself.

Creating the sociological shape of leadership is central and crucial to the future shape of Christian community, but it is only one of many issues. To start with, there are other polity issues, such as: how do we relate local Christian groups with other local Christian groups across regions, across continents, across the entire planet? Do we need a regional gathering of all local groups on a quarterly basis? Such times of fellowship, sharing, training, and celebration among various local groups does seem appropriate. Do we need representatives of these regional groupings to meet and reflect on the continental and planetary scope of the Christian tasks of love? Certainly that seems wise as well. Do we need rather permanent centers and offices for training and publishing? Probably so. All these functions, however, can be created and governed in a non-hierarchical manner. And the foundational political power within these future Christian religious associations can be retained by local Christian communities. All other bodies can derive their authority to serve and their financial support

from these local groupings. This empowerment of the local is crucial in a truly non-hierarchical polity.

But the empowerment of the local need not mean that no political power would exist in the regional, continental, or planetary components of a non-hierarchical Christian polity. These organs of larger scope, though authorized by the local communities, would also function in creative ways that strongly impact local groups and even serve to define what it means to be a local group in each particular Christian network of groups. In other words, I am suggesting that an appropriate balance between local, regional, continental, and planetary make up the proper quality of an operative horizontal polity.

Without going into more detail on how all this might be worked out, I want to end this section by simply saying that love can find a way. No matter how different this next social organization of Christian community life needs to be, we must, in order to properly love God and neighbor, make an exodus from the inherited patterns and create the ways to live abundantly in the wilderness of a post-hierarchical polity.

b. Abolishing Patriarchy in Christian Community

Male prerogatives in the life of the Christian community must also be abolished and abolished entirely. This must be done, not because Christian religious institutions need to please their women in order to pay their bills. It must be done because abolishing patriarchy is part of what it means to end civilization--and to love God and neighbor in this moment of history.

The love which Jesus commended for God and neighbor clearly included women. Jesus included women (along with all sorts of outcasts) powerfully in his movement, but he was not called in his time to thoroughly abolish patriarchy. We are. Jesus followed the patriarchal pattern of using male names for the Final Reality. Jesus may have chosen 12 males to symbolize his New Israel, though some scholars root that decision in the earliest Church. At any rate, the earliest Christian communities felt no violation of Jesus' teachings when they resolved their worship etiquettes and leadership assignments in compliance with first century patriarchal culture. But we need not conclude from these accommodations that either Jesus or the earliest Christians implied an ontological demeaning of women. Later, some males in Christian leadership questioned whether or not women had "souls," but Jesus, and the earliest preachers of the good news of Jesus Christ, clearly supported the view that women have as much spiritual potential as men.

Today, the practical accommodations with patriarchy made by the early church are inappropriate. As we propose to give fresh religious form to the Christian Spirit, we must not make any compromises with patriarchy. We are demeaning women if we use only male names for the Infinite Neighbor or if we select all male leadership for the Christian community. The symbol "Father," since it is so embedded in Christian liturgical life, seems quite essential to many Christians, but it is not. First of all, it is only a symbol, not the literal truth about some Supernatural Being. The meaning of the Father-symbol to Jesus and the early church was, after all, only this: that the Wholeness of Being was like a powerful, caring parent and could therefore be trusted. The maleness aspect of this symbolism was never its essential meaning. Jesus and the early Church were simply using the normal cultural customs of family life as symbolic material for the Infinite relationship. But the cultural custom of the patriarchal family is now passing away. And we must finish abolishing it. In our liturgical life, this will mean exploring the symbol "Mother" alongside "Father" or using "Parent." Clearly the Almighty Wholeness of Being is neither male nor female in some literal sense. On the other side of abolishing both patriarchy and literalism, we might meaningfully explore the question of how both male and female traits could provide useful metaphors for expressing our actual experiences of that Final Otherness of Being.

Another aspect of patriarchy is the homophobia in our culture and in our Christian-identified communities. Homophobia might be defined as an irrational fear and hatred of those who sexually desire persons of the same sex. This oppression of homosexual persons is an aspect of the same oppression that insists that men rule women. Battered women are often called lesbians by their batterers. Men have been called sissies both for being gay and for not oppressing women. Patriarchy is actually the empowerment of heterosexual maleness. So for Christian community to move beyond patriarchy also means for it to move beyond homophobia and into a much broader view of the "Christian family" and its various possibilities.

Patriarchy, like hierarchy, may at times have functioned merely as a mode of organization within which many people were loving persons to the best of their abilities. But patriarchy has also been and still is a meanness, an egoism, a network of illusory prerogatives that destroys the authenticity of men and women alike. "Obeying maleness," in divine or human form, cannot be asked of any Christian

woman or man in the third millennium of Christian community.

I cannot, in a brief section, explore all the subtle sub-points involved in abolishing patriarchy: creating a genuine partnership style between men and women; creating genuine friendships between men and men, women and women, and women and men; raising children with a more wholesome emotional and sexual conditioning; conceiving workable family covenants of several varieties; and much more. Nor do I intend to imply by my brevity that these many tasks are unimportant, already done, or simple to do. The task of rediscovering our genuine feminine and masculine gifts and honoring both of them fully is a journey which will unearth vast and complex estrangements and involve us in deep healing processes which will stretch many, many decades into the future.

c. Abolishing Ethnic We-egoism in Christian Community

The fact that racism and ethnic we-egoisms still divide many, if not most, present expressions of Christian community testifies to the deep nature of this sort of estrangement. As I have said elsewhere, monocultural uniformity is endemic to civilization as a social form. Ending civilization includes ending all racism and other ethnic we-egoism. This means giving up our ideals of uniformity and viewing diversity as the normal condition of human life.

Perhaps the most crucial form of we-egoism to consider in this section is the bigotry which "Christians" have manifested toward "non-Christian" groups. The term "non-Christian," to a bigoted Christian group, can even mean "Catholic" or "Protestant" or "Quaker" or some other brand of Christian religion which is not "our" brand.

To fully demolish such we-egoism, we have to insist that there is no such thing as "**The**" Christian religion. There are many Christian religions and none of them are fully "Christian" in the Spirit-meaning of that term. This is true for the same reason that there is no such thing as a Christian economics or a Christian politics. Christians do economics but no economics can be considered the final or "Christian" brand. Also, Christians do politics, but no politics can be considered the final or "Christian" brand. Similarly, Christians do religion, but no religion can be considered the final or "Christian" brand.

If the word "Christian" is used to mean "the ultimate depths of human authenticity" then the word "Christian" cannot be used to modify some

particular practice of prayers, liturgies, theologies, myths, rituals, icons, ethics, or community organization. Perhaps we need a new term. I like "Christian-identified" as our term which means "practicing a religion which uses symbols related to the New Testament and to Jesus Christ." The point I want to clarify is this: all religion, including religion which uses the Christian vocabulary and traditions, is a finite thing, a passing thing, a limited thing, an imperfect thing, a thing which leaves out good stuff that other religions may include. "Christian" cannot mean "the ultimate depths of human authenticity" and still modify a particular religion.

On the other hand, if we insist that the only meaning of the term "Christian" is a finite religious heritage, then we rob the term "Christian" of its symbolic power within the Christian-identified community. For Christian-identified persons, "Christian" also means "the ultimate depths of human authenticity." Christian-identified persons can be unbigoted in retaining this meaning only if they are clear that there are people who are not "Christian-identified" who are "Christian" in the sense of manifesting the qualities of human authenticity.

This linguistic snarl is further complicated by the fact that many conflicts between religious groups are meaningful conflicts. Critical issues do come up between one religious group and another simply because one group opposes the bad religion it sees in the other. If we take our experiences of religious truth seriously, we must maintain that there is such a thing as good religion and bad religion (just as there is such a thing as good economics and bad economics). Good religion, as I have suggested, is religion which gives meaningful expression to our actual Spirit lives. But no religion, however good it may be, expresses everything about our human relationships with the Infinite. How could it, since the Infinite mystery, and our relationship to it, is inexhaustible? Also, no religion has succeeded in avoiding perversions--changing its gifts into ungifts. Even movements which clearly began as "good religion" have become "bad religion" in many periods or aspects of their existence. But herein lies the complication: a good religion is a religion that maintains humility about its incompleteness, while, at the same time, boldly opposes bad religion.

Religious bigotry abandons this essential humility and thereby becomes bad religion. Religious bigotry is a form of ethnic we-egoism. Religious bigotry is an attitude that makes my religious identifications and practices the absolute standard by which every religious identification

and practice is to be judged. Jesus' saying, "Judge not lest you be judged!" applies exactly to religious bigotry.

Further, Christianity has fallen into bigotry by improperly conducting its redemptive commission. Having good news to tell "all the nations of the Earth" has been confused with having all the answers to being a religious person. We need to carefully define "evangelism" to mean "sharing a crucial breakthrough about living human life," rather than "recruiting people to be part of our religious in-group." If someone, after hearing the "good news" of their forgiveness, wants to remain a Buddhist, we need not consider ourselves a failure. And if someone, after hearing the universal good news of their forgiveness, wants to join our particular group, we must inform him or her that our group is only one more finite religious group, that joining us is joining one particular struggle to be part of the vanguard response to the Infinite Neighbor, that we are certainly not the whole of that response and certainly not free from all omissions and errors in our responding.

Such humility about our Christian religious practices and organizations would be a large change from the typical attitudes dominant in existing Christian churches. This view would not only ask Christian-identified persons to give up the security of membership in a final religion, it would also lay the groundwork for criticizing current practices of religious marketing. We live in a time in which the various forms of "Christian" religion are being hawked like snake oil or used cars by super-salespersons. Can we imagine such super-salespersons watering down their pitch to plain honesty? Surely that would mean being able to say something like this: "We have our gifts and here is what we believe they are, but if you want the absolute truth beyond all further question, you will be disappointed in our group." A super-salesperson cannot be this honest. So, it seems to me, we have to totally renounce marketing the Christian religion.

Can you imagine how different Christian community life would be if we gave up manipulating people into joining our group? Suppose we simply created ways of doing the tasks of love and carried them out. Would not those who are being called by God to be the people of God notice and be drawn to wherever this was going on? A Christianity that has to be marketed, is probably not good Christianity. In the worst case scenario, Christianity is being watered down into something that will sell and thus pay for a building or someone's salary.

d. Abolishing Gross Economic Inequity in Christian Community

Probably, no part of the task of rebuilding Christian community will be more controversial than dealing honestly with the economic demons that rule our era. We cannot be vanguard humanity, leading the way toward an economically equitable world, unless we renounce the economic inequity we bring into the Christian community itself. Imagine the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor sitting in the same circle of an authentic Christian community. How can this relationship be genuine without some profoundly altered behaviors on the part of both the rich person and the poor person?

Let us stretch our minds to imagine a Christian community within which there exists a practical sociological response to economic inequity. I see the rich person who enters such a Christian community being asked to renounce the game of climbing the ladder of more and more and more and to begin seeing his or her self-worth as having nothing whatsoever to do with a position on the ladder of wealth. In terms of economic consumption or what we ladder-climbers have called our "standard of living," I see the rich person in a sincere Christian community deciding what is **enough** consumption, and then living "frugally" within that "enough." All the wealth that remains in the power of that rich person after this "enough decision" can then be devoted to the service of rebuilding Christian community and of ending civilization and beginning something better.

Our ethical challenges are too complex to allow a currently wealthy person to consider himself or herself righteous for simply giving away some or all of his or her wealth to the poor. Rather, all a wealthy person's time and wealth are included in the calling to being the People of God--that is, to be wholly dedicated to loving God and neighbor. This means using any accumulated capital in a manner that is responsible toward the entire destiny of life on this planet. We who are this new Christian community, do not need to prescribe how this dedication of wealth is to be specifically enacted; we can leave this to the creative imagination of each wealthy "saint." But an authentic Christian community must challenge the wealthy Christian to a thorough "Spirit-detachment" from all wealth and wealth status.

And what about the poor person; what attitude must he or she take to sit with integrity in Christian community? The poor person must renounce being poor. The poor person must hold that he or she is entitled, by virtue of existence alone, to the

financial means to eat and be healthy and have adequate support for full cultural enrichment. And this poor Christian claims these entitlements whether or not he or she has contributed something thought valuable by a human society. Yet the Christian "saint" who is poor, will, as I picture it, contribute in every way feasible, not only to his or her own survival and basic needs but to the timely revolutionary tasks of ending civilization and building something better. This could mean public protests of specific personal injustices. It might mean hard work caring for self and family to whatever extent possible. It might mean giving a shocking portion of his or her time and meager money to specific tasks of Christian love. Such a poor saint can sit with pride in the same circle with a rich saint precisely because this pride, in spite of poverty, is a form of Spirit-detachment from the trap of needing to have wealth or status to have self respect.

So I see the healthy Christian community challenging all its members to embrace a Spiritual poverty--poverty as detachment from all wealth for rich and poor alike. But this challenge does not mean that everyone in the good Christian community I am envisioning must have the same amount of wealth. Although the rich Christian may in appropriate ways relieve some of the burdens of the poor, each situation creates its own imperatives. Alms for the poor can still be part of what loving includes. But alms cannot be the whole answer for relations between rich and poor, for we must avoid the old and deadly pattern of establishing patronizing rich people in relationships with poor "rice Christians" who are in Christian community only for the rice. In order for Christian community to have integrity, we must begin with people as they are and then ask our poor people and our rich people to have the integrity of using their whole lives to disestablish inequity in the whole world, along with all the other aspects of ending civilization and beginning something better. Rich and poor can be one in repentance and in creative work, even though they are not equal in monetary power.

Furthermore, complete equality in economic power is not a proper or realizable goal for the world at large. Certain differences in personal wealth can be considered equitable. For example, we might recommend differences in wealth that are clearly related to the actual social contributions being made by the rewarded individuals. But no such rationale can be considered equitable which allows the extreme gap we now allow between rich and poor in our current industrial societies. Billionaires need to become a thing of the past. There needs to be a strict upper limit on the

economic power permitted to any single individual. Similarly, starvation, homelessness, and other grueling circumstances need to be renounced as an enduring necessity. Any baby we choose to birth into the human family can simply be given, for his or her whole life, a substantial minimum support, simply because he or she exists. This was partially accomplished in ancient times through the giving of alms, but we must create something more organized (and more honorable than begging) for each individual who is, for whatever reason, being excluded from the contribution-reward system of our complex and changing societies. If our social systems were to firmly establish some minimum support for every person, then each person could, with equity, be rewarded with more than the minimum by making contributions that the society found valuable.

But “total economic equality” is a rational ideal which must not be super-imposed upon the normal diversity of human life. Total equality is unrealistic and unworkable, and our current, ruthless, dog-eat-dog competition is even more unrealistic and unworkable. The flexible practice of equity I am suggesting is itself a formidable project to actually accomplish, so to require of ourselves the establishment of total equality, either in the general society or in the Christian community, will not only fail, but will have the further consequence of creating deeper frustrations and bitterness.

Even the flexible equity suggested above will prove to be one of the biggest challenges in creating the next exodus of Christian community. Modifying the extremes of wealth and poverty will create social conditions clearly discontinuous with the general practice dominant in the world today. I believe that only those social goals that are realistic for the general society are realistic within Christian community. Therefore, our imperative is to practice **now** within our Christian communities the patterns of equity that we recommend and hold ourselves responsible to build in the world at large.

e. Abolishing in Christian Community the Conquest and Control of Nature.

Gradually, most people are becoming at least superficially aware of the most obvious ecological insanities--polluting our own nest, our food, our water, our air; killing off our companion species; ruining our own heath; and consigning our descendants to disease and starvation. Few, however, have a clear understanding of the planet-wide crises in over-population, in food production, energy and resource shortages, and in widening distribution inequities. Still fewer are aware that the momentum for all these crises is being sustained

by a runaway economic system over which there is no effective political control. These vast systemic maladies demand cooperative responses which conflict with our popular life style, a life style of individualism that permits us to forget all public matters except those that have to do with assuring “me and mine” the safety and opportunity to climb some economic success ladder to more and more and more desire satisfactions, security, and status.

Still deeper down in the strata of social and personal existence, is a pervading fear which civilized people have of the natural world. Civilization shelters us from the natural world. Especially in cities, we live most of our lives in enclosed, air conditioned, paved-over environments. The plants and animals in our living space are either domesticated or are being fought as weeds and pests. Though we may focus energy on our health and even on the sculpturing of our bodies, we do not experience, often enough, the wildness of our natural bodies or experience our bodily identification with the other wild creatures of nature. Though we may focus energy on the emotional quality of our intimate relationships, we shelter ourselves from those “uncivilized” emotions that accompany the grim tragedies and glorious beauties of the natural world.

So the practice of ecological sanity means all four of these things: (1) becoming continually more aware of the extent of our planet-wide crises, (2) working to transform the entire social practice of humanity toward an ecologically sustainable form, (3) changing considerably our own personal lifestyles, and (4) shifting the quality of our own fundamental relationships with natural wildness. I will comment further on each of these:

(1) Within the next Christian community, we should expect to see urgent and continuing study of our ecological maladies, plus thoughtful envisioning of viable planet-wide ecological strategies. We will interpret these maladies as “the judgment of God” upon our civilizations and on our own egos and we will interpret our visions of viable strategy as visions of “resurrection” for our own personal egos and for the human species at large.

(2) We should expect to see the external mission of the next exodus Christian community to be thoroughly ecological in its content and tone. Our participation in our local community, county, or region, will include learning to know and love the natural life processes that characterize our home locales. We will learn to identify the boundaries of our home region in biological and ecosystem terms. Our entire sense of ourselves in geographical space will shift from being members of states or nations

to being members of our surrounding watersheds, grasslands, forests, bioregions, biomes, and natural continents.

(3) Such geographical sensibility should be a foundational principle for our changed personal life style. By “life-style” I mean the entire design of our personal lives in time and space. An ecologically sane life-style will create space for such things as a viable home for the birds, the wild animals, the natural grasses and trees. It will strive to conserve energy and avoid pollution. It will buy and build and throw away in a thoughtful fashion. It will eat--perhaps grow and/or gather--healthy organic food. It will do all these things and more and do them in a non-moralistic and non-perfectionistic manner. Perfection will not be possible in our currently insane societies. Yet we can create a life-style, however imperfect, which does many new things as an expression of love for the entire natural realm and for the human community as a natural species among all the others. Our life-style can bear witness to our understanding that the Wholeness of Being, which we worship, shines through every aspect of nature, rendering nature sacred as part of the overall Awesomeness of Being.

(4) The last sentence of the previous paragraph introduces this fourth aspect of ecological sanity, a profound shift in our fundamental relationships with natural reality. In the next exodus of Christian community, the sacredness of nature must become a heart-felt part of our entire religious perspective. God, the Almighty, can be known and celebrated as we confront every natural being. God, the Holy Spirit, includes our Awe of and love for this incredibly huge cosmos, the Earth, all the plants, animals, fungi, microbes, molecules, atoms, and energies that comprise our lives. And our understanding of God, the Healing Event, will include seeing our own flesh, our own natural bodies, as the place and the only place where Awe fills us, the only place from which we encounter Awesome Otherness. Furthermore, the Healing Event includes the ongoing healing of our relationships with sex, birth, death, emotion, sensuality, delight, horror, and all other aspects of our natural lives.

Clearly, the journey toward ecological sanity is a lifetime journey. It will be an ongoing process of growth in the lives of any group of people who clearly understand themselves as part of the vanguard of the human species. If being “Christian” means being part of this vanguard, then ecological sanity must become a primary aspect of our next exodus in Christian community.

3 . The Future Religious Practices of Christian Community Life

When we think of actually functioning as a Christian community, we usually think first of a body of people gathering for worship and study. We may also claim that a Christian community is a mission of love toward the entire world, but we may not view the doing of that mission as part of our “going to church.” I want to suggest an expansion of our inherited definition of “going to church.”

I want to suggest that “going to church” in the next millennium will mean two things: (1) gathering with Christian-identified people who understand that being truly “Christian,” means functioning as part of the vanguard part of humanity, and (2) gathering with vanguard groups whose membership is wider than Christian-identified persons, but who are doing the tasks of love which Christians are called to perform. In other words, our Christian responsibility is to organize and/or join both types of groups. In the first type of group, a **worshiping body**, we will be operating as a sectarian religious group, using the Christian language, treasuring Christian heritage, building and rebuilding our common religious memory and practices. In the second type of group, **secular task-groups**, we will participate with a wide diversity of people who gather to accomplish some needed actions. We have already seen action groups arise on an ecumenical and inter-faith basis. And we have seen concerned Christians join virtually every progressive organization. These are signs of a trend toward taking more seriously this thoroughly secular component of “going to church.” By “secular” I do not mean that Spirit living is not present in these groups, I mean that these groups are not sectarianly “religious” or “Christian.”

For the future, I envision the formation of increasingly effective secular bodies which clearly love God and neighbor, and yet which are comprised of human beings from every and any conceivable religious or secular identification. And when we who are Christian-identified persons attend these wider-than-Christian vanguard groups, we will envision our attendance as part of our “going to church”. When we are working alongside this diversity of people to awaken the sleeping, to protect some ecological treasure, to recycle our garbage, to elect a progressive county commissioner, to build a new business, to organize a buying cooperative, and so on, we will consider these activities as part of our “church work.”

In these secular groupings we normally do not use our church language, though we might do so on

those rare occasions when theological discussion seems appropriate. We simply take our place as human beings among other human beings in the vanguard work of the present moment of history. Calling this work “going to church” is for our own benefit as Christians. It reminds us that doing this loving work is a crucially important aspect of being a Christian.

The other “half” of our “going to church” is gathering with Christians who are making the exodus from civilization described above. This exodus is also an exodus from the inherited religious forms which I am calling “the denominational congregation.” These “exodus Christians” may not understand every issue exactly the same, but they will need to have a common mind about becoming a definite departure from the forms of church life that have brought us to this crossroads in Christian community building.

And this exodus is an actual departure, not some sort of angry pout. Persons who are making this exodus will talk differently and act differently about the whole subject of “going to church.” Though exodus Christians may also attend denominational congregations, “going to church” will no longer mean attending a denominational congregation. In the vision I am painting, a full exodus must be made. Our religious identification will shift from being a member of a denominational congregation toward a new sociological manifestation of “going to church.” This new sociological manifestation may be, at first, only one small circle of exodus Christians. Later, it will surely become a region-wide association of such circles. And these regional associations or cooperatives will have continent-wide and planet-wide ties with other such groups. Large or small, exodus Christianity must not be misunderstood as one more piece of our already diverse modern church life. We will not be creating another Christian denomination. Nor can this work be understood as simply reforming some congregation or denomination to which we now belong. The shape of Christian community for the 21st century is not a reform or a renewal of the present mode of “going to Church.” It is a replacement of the denominational congregation with a new invention--an extensively discontinuous sociological form.²

Within the life of our inherited denominations of Christianity, we have already seen some initial movement in the directions I am indicating. Base

² For a thorough critique of the denominational congregation as a viable institution for the future, see my essay called “A Brief History of Going to Church” published in *To Be or Not to Be a Christian*, in 1994 by Realistic Living Press; Rt. 3, Box 104-A5; Bonham, TX 75418.

communities were organized as part of the liberation theology movement among the Roman Catholic people of the nations of Central and Southern America. These local-people-based, socially-energized communities are living signs of the emergence of this new form of going to Church. But when fully emerged, the exodus worshiping bodies I am envisioning will not be Roman Catholic or Protestant or Orthodox. They will be “base communities” of an entirely new planetary, post-denominational, Christian organism.

We have also seen among North American Protestants the emergence of home-churches or house-churches. Many of these groups have been critical of the denominational congregation as a social form, often seeing themselves as a return to the New Testament form of church life. But the exodus Christian worshiping bodies I am envisioning will not be a return to New Testament practice, but a distinctly new sociological form. Loving God and neighbor in these times requires something more far-reaching than repairing the existing institutions or reverting to older ones. We are redefining completely what it means to “go to church.”

This redefinition, as I indicated above, includes both of these group practices: (1) being a sectarian Christian-identified worshiping body and (2) being a non-sectarian social transformation force. I want to turn now to this question: What do we do when we meet as a sectarian Christian-identified worshiping body? In new ways we will practice all the ordinary activities of any religious gathering: worship, nurture, study, planning the outgoing tasks we want to do together, and preparing each other for our singular missions in the wide-world.

And I repeat, when we do our tasks in the wide-world we do not do them in the name of some publicly known Christian body. We do them as noncompetitive colleagues with vanguard humans of whatever religious background or secular philosophy. We take our places in the trenches of ending civilization and building something better alongside people who may not know we are Christians and may not care. These action colleagues do not need to know that we see ourselves as “going to church” in these trenches. They do not need to know that we view them as “going to church” with us. We do not need to tell them that anywhere people are truly doing Spirit love, the community of Jesus Christ is present. They may not need to know that, but we do. We need to know, because by “we” I mean the Christian-identified people who are making this exodus and redefining what “going to church” means.

When we gather back within our exodus Christian worshiping body, we are among people who do know, according to our own definitions, that being out in those trenches is “going to church.” So now we can talk together about our church work out in those trenches. And we can talk about how better to prepare ourselves to be the People of God alongside those others who are the People of God but who do not call themselves that nor need to do so. If we choose to share with them our understanding of “church work” and “being a Christian,” we can. If they wish to join us in being worshiping Christians, they can. But it is not attending a Christian worship group that makes them or us the People of God; it is doing Spirit love with the whole of our lives. Within this context of active love, we can include attending a Christian worshiping group as part of our overall loving of God and neighbor. And it is a crucial part!

Attending a Christian-identified worshiping body is crucial because this is where we are sustaining our dedication to being faith, freedom, and love in all aspects of our lives. We are also working, for the long haul, on the task of keeping in history a lively, functioning expression of good Christian religion. We are thereby loving the generations to come by providing for them a Christianity that can be useful to them.

Denominational congregations will not be useful much longer. For many of us, they have already become more debilitating than inspiring. Creating something new simply means creating something for ourselves that works. We can then invite others to join us. We do not need to see ourselves as competing with any denominational congregation. Some local congregations, or parts thereof, may join us in our secular works of love. Even in their inward ministries, some congregations may be providing values we also affirm: ethical wisdom, a sense of Awe, some community that counters and overcomes strict individualism. They may be preserving and presenting fragments of good Christian religion. So, if they are, they are our allies not our competitors. But, we who have made the exodus from denominational congregations have done so because we are seeking a more Spirit-energized form of worship and religious community nurture. In this regard, we are also not competing with existing denominational congregations, for they are not doing what we are doing. And they cannot be asked to do, or expected to do, what we are doing. If they are going to pay their bills, they have to do something that earns a living in the culture we now have. So, with very few exceptions, no denominational congregation will wholeheartedly join the exodus Christian groups in the task of leading the exodus from civilization and in building

a drastically new sort of Christian religion as well as secular culture, polity and economy. But in this regard, denominational congregations will be no more our enemies than all the other obsolete institutions of civilization. And the primary enemy is not obsolete institutions, but the evil spirit within our population which cannot see the obsolescence of these institutions and does not feel the call to leave obsolescence and to replace obsolescence with something better.

Our exodus Christian worshiping groups will not, in the beginning, earn a living for anyone. They will not pay for a building. They will, however, create the next practices of Christianity. Those who come to practice those practices will grow in numbers, and sometime in the next century, they will be numerous enough to pay salaries to full-time workers, rent offices, finance training centers, whatever they see as needful to do in order to love God and neighbor in their times.

But long before any sort of financial solvency has been established, these emerging exodus Christian worshiping groups will be sharing their new practices with others. Each group of exodus Christians will surely be arranging speeches, conducting courses, offering workshops, and arranging other occasions at which these religious matters are thoroughly clarified and discussed. Such organized sharing of the good news of the Christian breakthrough and its next exodus in religious community will be an important part of this new venture in Christian living.

These organized efforts toward sharing exodus Christianity must not be reduced to mere membership drives for our new groups. Members for these new groups will probably arise from these courses, workshops, and other sharing occasions, but these new programs on Christian religion need to be conducted in the style of outgoing service to the Spirit needs of all people. If, through these programs, any person sees any aspect of their estrangement, hears the good news of their forgiveness (that is, their welcome home to reality), and chooses to accept such acceptance for their lives and thus to begin to love God and neighbor more deeply, then our purpose in conducting these programs has been accomplished, whether or not that person joins our group. And we must also remain clear that this person has experienced the Healing Event of Jesus Christ, even if they do not wish to use that language for it or join any group which does. If they do wish to use Christian language and to join a worshiping group who uses that language, then we who are the exodus Christian worshiping groups will be there using that language, knowing what we mean by it, and living

its meaning to the fullest extent of our Spirit maturity. Our group life will be a follow-up and a follow-through of our teaching of the Christian religion. As others experience their need for such religious practice and sense their calling to join in the task of creating this next exodus of good Christian religion, our worshiping bodies will be there for them to join.

4. More than Friends, Less than Angels

So what does one of these exodus Christian worshiping bodies look like? How does it function? In my vision, these groups will be small groups, not only at the beginning, but even after the number of exodus Christians has become great. Worshiping bodies of large numbers of people do not need to meet on a weekly basis. Christendom is over; we will no longer be dealing with religion for the masses. So we no longer need to hold weekly or daily “masses,” but weekly “smalls.” Perhaps a number of these local “smalls” will meet together quarterly in regional gatherings of larger size. Certain kinds of training, consensus building, and planning might be appropriate for these larger regional gatherings. But I am assuming that the “smalls” will be the “base communities” for this new Christian-identified religious practice.

How large are these small groups? Where two or three are gathered in this self-understanding, Jesus Christ is there in their midst. But perhaps five is better and twelve still better. Perhaps twenty is too many. Perhaps between twenty and thirty, we divide like amoebas into more small groups.

Why does the number of members in the base community needs to be so small? I am assuming that the kind of nurture that needs to go on is one in which small-group dynamics are beneficial. I am assuming that each person will be taking full responsibility for making this group work, and will attend its meetings every week, if at all possible. I am assuming that time for full participation by each member is a key value. I am assuming considerable membership continuity over months, and perhaps years--a continuity that makes it possible for people to know one another well enough to discern the specific Spirit needs in the life of each person and to meet those needs with well-conceived Spirit wisdom.

More than Friends

It will be important, however, for these groups to overcome a flaw or limitation that is present in small group life as commonly conceived and practiced today. Small group life, in its most

popular form, is basically a group of friends who have gotten together for much less Awesome purposes than I am imagining for these Christian worshiping groups.

A Christian community is something more than a group of friends. Its members do not have to be friends. Its members do not have to like one another. From time to time, its members may be enemies, or feel like enemies. The love which is basic to the operation of Christian community is more profound than friendship, or than emotional connection, or than like-minded fellowship. A great deal of small group life is directed toward some purpose of psychological healing. We have support groups for women, for men, for people with certain addictions or certain destructive life styles. Christian community is not a support group. It has no psychological purposes. If psychological healing takes place in Christian community, that would, of course, be welcome. If physical healing takes place in Christian community, that would be welcome as well. But the purpose of Christian community is Spirit healing. The purpose of Christian community is the increase among human beings of the love of God and neighbor. This difference in purpose makes an enormous difference in the way small group life is conducted.

First of all, each member in a Christian community considers the other members to be, actually or potentially, the body of Christ. Becoming more fully the body of Christ and manifesting that aliveness in the world at large is the focus that makes sense of everything that is done in a Christian community. So, at a meeting of an exodus Christian worshiping body, before we simply say “Hello” to one another and settle into being friends, we need to say something else: “We are a **communion of saints**.” That is, we are persons who have been restored to our authenticity and are still being restored to our authenticity, and have no other purpose at this meeting than to be more fully restored to our authenticity. Authenticity, let us recall, means living in Awe, where Awe includes trust, freedom, and compassion. If we are indeed living in Awe, we are the body of Christ, a body which feeds others. Why? Because in some measure we are already manifesting our authenticity and we already know how the human Spirit is healed.

This Awe, this authenticity we are talking about is something very simple and yet Infinitely profound. I am authentic when and only when I am willing to be the self I am--a self who is both finite and yet related to the Infinite, a self who is willing to trust the Infinite and thus love the Infinite and

every being that issues forth from the Infinite. This trust and this love is undergirded by my essential freedom to trust and love and to figure out for myself what trust and love mean in each and every situation of my life. Freedom, trust, and love are the Holy Spirit, the Awe placed within me by the Awesome Otherness who is my God, my object of worship. To worship this Otherness and to be filled with this Spirit is to be “in Christ.”

Clearly, going over and over and over and over again what these summary statements mean in our actual lives is one of the activities that needs to be done at each and every meeting of the Christian worshipping community.

Perhaps the activities of the worshipping community can be broken down into these three categories: (1) confession, (2) celebration, and (3) dedication.

(1) By “**confession**,” I mean owning up to the fact that all my living has not been conducted “in Christ.” Part of the job of the Christian community is to assist each member to see more precisely what needs to be confessed. This job may be done very quietly and indirectly. Or it may come out in some rather unpeaceful encounters with each other. However it may happen, there is in the wisdom and life style of a Christian community a very profound Spirit severity that a group of “only friends” will often attempt to avoid.

(2) By “**celebration**,” I mean rehearsing the good news that all of us are welcomed home to reality in spite of our many trips into the far country of unreality. This celebration of welcome can take the form of praise or adoration for that Final Reality, that Healing Event, that Whole Spirit, which has brought us to this place of having something to celebrate. We might celebrate in song and in listening to the Scripture with “ohs” and “ahs” rather than with quiet incomprehension. We might celebrate by listening to people tell it like it is in their own lives as those lives struggle to be lives of faith, love, and freedom. We might enrich our celebration with psalms, creeds, drums, flutes, clashing cymbals, or whatever works for us. We might make feeding each other the symbols of the body and blood of Christ a central part of our celebration. If we do, we need to think our way out of all the magical perversions of the past and see the eating of these elements as simply taking into ourselves the plain truth that other Spirit persons have laid down their lives for us in order that we might have the Spirit experience of realizing that our deepest fulfillment is in laying down our lives for still others.

(3) By “**dedication**,” I mean exercising our freedom in choosing to be free, loving, trusting in the time just ahead, and in all the situations into which we are choosing to go. Dedication might take the form of prayers: prayers for our own wellbeing; prayers for the wellbeing of specific others; prayers for the wellbeing of whole societies, ecosystems, and planets. Prayers, seen as dedication, do not mean turning our responsibility over to some Supreme Being. Prayer articulates where we intend to assume responsibility and indeed insists with our freedom that the Infinite Neighbor do what we say. Prayer is a discussion with God in which we insist on co-creating the future that God will give. Because “God” means the Infinite and we are finite, we have to end our authentic prayers with “thy will be done.” The “will of the Infinite” is a metaphor for the fact that our destiny is, in the final analysis, beyond our control. But we, with our dedication and our freedom, can lay our lives on the front lines of history and thereby, perhaps, change “God’s mind” about what shall be done. For example, it appears, at the present time, that the Infinite Neighbor will “punish” the human species for our refusals to limit our ecologically devastating practices. We can pray to change “God’s mind” on this. That is, we can put our bodies on the front lines of history to awaken people and invent with people some alternative ways of behaving before it is too late. This is the way life works. Prayer, as serious dedication, can change “God’s mind.”

I hope the readers of this book are clear at this point that I do not mean something literal by “God’s will” or “God’s mind.” There is no literal Super Being out there in a Super Realm who literally has a will or a mind. Rather, the Infinite All Powerfulness we encounter in real down-to-Earth history is the only Super Being there is. To paraphrase Mohammed, “There are no super beings but the Infinite.” The Infinite is that which is doing what is being done and will do what will be done. Prayer is our ability to participate in shaping the outcome of those doings that the Infinite will do.

So Christians gather together, not as friends only, but as saints who confess their sins, celebrate their welcome to authenticity, and dedicate themselves to changing “God’s mind” on the specific futures they care about.

Less than Angels

We may be saints, but we are not angels. “Angel” is a metaphor for “a messenger from God who tells only the truth.” An angel is a fully Awed being, a complete manifestation of the Awesome. Angels are fiction. We may, at times, be angelic

messengers of the truth, but we are also sinners who rebel against the truth and, therefore, speak falsehood to others. When Christians, in the early centuries, began to think soberly and fully about their community life, they saw that “saints” could not mean “angelic at all times.” They even talked about Christian community as a place where the spiritually sick go to get well. Christian community is, therefore, a hospital or spa for sin-sick persons. We come to Christian community to be healed as well as to be a healing agent for others. So do we view ourselves primarily as a community of saints or as a community of sinners? The answer is, “Both.”

“Saints who confess their sins” might seem to be a contradiction, but only because the common view of “saints” means something idealistic. “Saints,” we often think, means perfect persons who harbor little or no sin in their lives. Such “saints” do not exist in actual human living. Even Jesus of Nazareth need not be viewed as a saint of this sort. The term “Jesus Christ” stands for perfect Human Authenticity, but this term is not the same term as “Jesus of Nazareth.” When the creeds said that Jesus Christ was like us in every way except without sin, they were not speaking of Jesus of Nazareth, the actual historical person. Jesus of Nazareth was indeed “in Christ.” Jesus was the Christ. He confronted the lives of his followers as a living embodiment of the “Christ life.” Further, as a healing impact Jesus also occasioned a dawning of the “Christ life” in those followers. But even Jesus, as an historical human being, may have been at some point or another or in some way or another, “in Adam” as well as “in Christ.” He did after all come to the Jordan to be baptized by John for the remission of sins. Jesus, whoever he may have been or whatever struggles he may have had to go through to become what he became, was only remembered by those who remembered him as being “in Christ,” that is, as being without sin. So the sin of the historical Jesus, whatever it may have been, has been forgotten forever. So perhaps we too can be “in Christ” to such a degree that our sin is forgotten forever. Perhaps this is what forgiveness really means: that the Final Reckoning of all history has forgotten our sin forever.

Nevertheless, realism insists that when we come into the Christian community, we confess our sin, we acknowledge our estrangement to whatever degree we are conscious of it. This humiliation is the road to healing and there is no other. The road to authenticity passes through the dark woods of despair over our inauthenticity. And this we must never forget. This severity protects the Christian community from being a sentimental fellowship

who whitewash reality and thus ignore the actual Spirit dimension in human living.

It was this realism, I believe, that led the maturing Christian movement to define the purpose of the visible Christian community in sacramental terms. The visible Church is not a bit of perfection on Earth; it is a place where you go to perform sacramental activity that heals your life.

a. Sacramental Society and the Purpose of the Visible Church

Throughout the Middle Ages, the visible Church was discussed as a sacramental society. The architecture, the art, the rituals, the icons, the Bible, the sermons, the creeds, and even the leadership hierarchy of the institution--popes, cardinals, bishops, priests, monks, nuns--were all considered to be sacraments which provided a means of grace to those who came into contact with them. Grace itself was pictured as a spiritual substance that moved through the physical substance of these visible components of the visible church.

The Protestant Reformation criticized this understanding of grace. For Luther, Calvin, and others, grace was not a spiritual substance that flowed through the visible church. Grace was seen, instead, as a personal relationship with God, a relationship that did not require mediation by the visible church. Further, this personal relationship was seen as the foundation for reforming the practices of the visible church. The visible church was still expected to be a means of grace toward the persons of faith, but it was the personal response of faith that made this relationship complete. No sermon, no sacrament, no ritual, no piece of art or architecture, no authorized leader, no scripture was automatically a healing medium or event. Only faith enables any of these specific physical presences to become a means of grace.

So, according to the Protestant breakthrough, if the visible church was to be a means of grace, it had to move from faith to appropriate practices and from these appropriate practices back to faith. Faith alone was the beginning and the end of religious practice. Protestantism had invented a strict principle of perpetual religious reform: the visible church had to perform practices that did indeed inspire Awe--trust, freedom, love--in those who participated in the visible church. No apostolic laying on of hands, not even a fanatic loyalty to the Bible, can assure us that the visible church is fulfilling its destiny. The founding scriptures, the heritage, the existing organizations of Christian life, all were judged effective or

ineffective by one and only one reality: faith--that is, trust as a personal relationship to God in the present life of human persons.

Even though, following Luther, Protestants reduced the sacraments to two, Baptism and The Lord's Supper, they did not deny that all seven sacraments of the old church had inspired Awe. In some form they still practiced the life passage rites of Baptism, Confirmation, Marriage, Ordination, and Extreme Unction. In some form Protestants also performed the repeating sacraments of Penance and the Mass. The Mass, Eucharist, Lord's Supper, or Communion, insofar as this ritual was a celebration of God's forgiveness of any and all estrangement, remained central in Protestant liturgical practice. And even Penance, the abuses of which were so severely criticized by Luther, remained a part of Protestant practice. Penance, reunderstood to be a confession of the seriousness of our estrangement, was retained as a useful religious invention.

Similarly, loyalty to the Protestant principle of reform did not deny that the active leadership of the visible church often were a means of grace--were a medium through which Awe was inspired. Even music, art, architecture, and the life stories of "the saints" might be means of grace. The Protestant principle of reform does deny, however, that the visible Church can be an adequate source of Awe simply because of its historical rootage and record. Rather, the perversion or obsolescence of any particular practice of any Christian religion disqualifies it as a reliable means of grace.

Unfortunately, this essential Protestant perspective on faith, grace, and the means of grace is not well understood, even by Protestants. Faith has been misunderstood as belief in doctrines rather than as a personal relationship of trust toward that Awesome Almightyness which provides us all our specific challenges. Grace is seldom clarified as a personally relevant, healing event initiated, not by human beings, but by that Awesome Actor who confronts us in the everyday events of our lives. Most misunderstood of all is how faith itself is not a human achievement but a gift of grace, a result of the ongoing healing action by that Almighty Awesomeness. Human beings actively perform their own faith, but they do not create the faith they perform. Faith is Awe given by the Awesome. Faith is God's Spirit filling the finite human spirit. Humans are given their faith (that is, their trust of the Awesome) and then sustained in this trust by the Almighty Awesomeness which they trust. In contrast, "belief in doctrine" is a human achievement, not a gift of God.

It may seem at first, that envisioning grace as a personal relationship with God leaves no room for the means of grace--for the mediation of grace by the visible Church. Yet Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox bodies have all claimed, in their various ways, that the visible presence and ministries of their religious practices are functionally important for the spiritual healing and maturation of their constituencies. So what is the role of the visible Church in bringing faith to human beings and in the ongoing lives of these faith-full (that is, trust-filled) persons?

All good religion has the practical function of enabling the maturation of spirit living. Good religion focuses the consciousness of humans on the Awesome, on the Awe, and on the qualities of the Awed Person. Good religion elaborates in thought, communal life, and ethical action this Awed consciousness. By "the visible Church" we mean a social formation of religious practice. If that religious practice is a good religious practice, then those involved are being matured in their Spirit lives. So if we can describe how a Christian religious practice can be a means of grace (a source of healing and maturation of the human spirit), then we will have the practical wisdom we need to form a sociological manifestation of the visible Church that is indeed a means of grace. And we shall also sharpen our critique of existing Christian bodies, for any "Christian" religious practice which is not being a means of grace to human beings is not fulfilling the purpose of the visible Church, namely to manifest the invisible Church, to manifest Jesus Christ, who is both the Authentic Human and The Healing Event. The purpose of the visible Christian community is to manifest the Spirit health of freedom, trust, and love, and thus to open each "church member" (as well as each neighborhood of human society) to that Spirit healing which releases those saintly qualities.

b. Matching the Means of Grace to the Happening of Grace

In order to discuss the actual reconstruction of the visible church as a sacramental society providing means of grace, we must examine again the fundamental meaning of grace as clarified by Paul, Luther, and, most recently, Paul Tillich and others. Grace is a healing happening in personal life that includes these three things:³

- (1) The dawn of awareness, in the self being healed, of some of its own particular estrangement and how this estrangement is a state of despair,

³ For further elaboration of the essence of grace see paragraph 12 of Paul Tillich's sermon "You are Accepted" published in his book of sermons called *Shaking the Foundations*.

- (2) The dawning (during that very moment of despairing awareness) of the full acceptance (forgiveness or welcome home) by the Wholeness of Being of the actual and currently despairing self, and
- (3) the acceptance by the person in despair of this final acceptance.

So a religious practice can be a means of grace only if it is a means by which one or all three of these aspects of the event of grace actually happen to individual persons. If a sermon or a ritual or a prayer results in the dawn of awareness of some specific estrangement, it is a means of grace. If a Scripture reading or a piece of art or one sentence of speech from another person results in a dawning of one's acceptance by the Wholeness of Being, it is a means of grace. If the style of someone's living, or a story, or a ritual effectively models accepting this cosmic acceptance, then it is a means of grace to the person who embodies this modeling with his or her own active faith.

No one can do faith for another person. No institution can force faith upon another person. But the community of faith can invent practices which communicate the nature of faith and make the possibility of faith specific for persons who encounter these practices. If this is taking place, then these practices are means of grace. That is, the Awesome is using these means to establish personal relationships of healing with actual persons.

c. Sometimes Grace Happens, and Sometimes it Doesn't.

The means of grace, performed by the visible church, do not control or force the action of the Awesome. We might liken a specific means of grace to a yell from a hill top. Grace is the echo of the Awesome, not the yell. And sometimes the Awesome echoes, and sometimes the Awesome does not. We humans do not control Awe and the Awesome. Awe happens or it does not happen.

Or we might liken grace to the rising of the sun. A guitar player who went at dawn to sing the sun up was questioned about the efficacy of his singing in accomplishing this cosmic event. He winked and replied that anyone who wanted to make the sun rise had to sing at the right time. This is also true about doing means of grace. If we wish to effect the cosmic event of spirit healing, we must perform our means of grace at the right time and in the right manner. Yet unlike the physical sun rise, we do not know whether or when the sun of grace will actually arise. We play our songs, we sing our words, we do our dance. And then grace, the Healing Event, chooses how or whether to happen.

Awed persons tend to be means of grace, because they discern how to create occasions that are Awe-producing for others. But this is not automatic. Jesus, in his own home town, was not able to produce any Awe. The conditions of estrangement in people, the choices people make, or even their customary paltry view of things may resist the Awe and the Awesome to such an extent that even a supremely Awed One is powerless to inspire Awe.

Similarly, the Bible does not automatically inspire Awe. The Bible, like all powerful religious traditions, might be likened to a crater left in the ground where a bomb has exploded some time in the past. The crater is not the Awe: Awe is the explosion that made the crater. Viewing this crater may provide an occasion in the life of the viewing person in which the explosion repeats itself--in which the crater once again becomes a site of Awe.

d. The Style of Sacramental Community Life

The style of living which is practiced in a Christian religious community is one of the factors which make a community what I am calling "sacramental." I want to explore this sacramental life style in terms of three stylistic qualities which are consistent with the happening of grace: **Convicting Severity, Objective Absolution, and Beckoning Respect.**

The chart at the top of page 60 can help us hold in our minds how these three stylistic qualities are each associated with one of the three dynamics of grace:

(1) Convicting Severity

There is a tendency to view our sin, our horrible estrangement, in a trifling manner. We often see our estrangement as merely an awareness of need for some intellectual learning or psychological growth rather than as the tragic loss of our true humanity. In order to visualize what it means to take our estrangement seriously, let us imagine Adolf Hitler, late in his life, undergoing a genuine healing of his spirit. The first aspect of that healing would have had to be a devastating awareness, "My God, I have killed 6 million Jews." He would have had to take in the sober truth that this systematic extermination of fellow human beings was awful beyond awful beyond awful. Before World War II, many more people had the last name Hitler than do today. So awful was the image that Adolf gave this name, that people simply changed their names. A dawning of this awfulness would have had to be the first stage in Adolf's healing.

The Style of Sacramental Community Life

The Grace Happening

(1) The dawn of **awareness**, in the self being healed, of some of its own particular **estrangement** and how this estrangement is a state of despair.

(2) The **dawning** (during that very moment of despairing awareness) of the full **acceptance** (or welcome home) by the Wholeness of Being of the actual and currently despairing self.

(3) The **acceptance** by the person in despair of this final **acceptance**.

The Sacramental Life Style

(1) **Convicting Severity**: Insisting upon a sober and serious view of our actual estrangements and of the Awesome Realism from which we are estranged.

(2) **Absolving Objectivity**: Witnessing to the Eternally enduring fact that the Wholeness of Being simply does welcome home to Reality each and every estranged person.

(3) **Beckoning Respect**: Calling the inherent freedom within each person to respond in realistic trust without any help or emotional manipulation.

This example might seem to imply that Adolf's estrangement was of an order of severity far greater than our own, but this is not true. Estrangement is destructive of self and others. If someone has been a teacher of teenagers in the public schools for 20 years without realizing that respect is the fundamental spiritual need of teenagers, what would that person's healing be like? It would begin, "My God, I have killed 6 million teenagers." It does not matter that it was only 600--that only the self esteem of those teenagers was killed and not their bodies. (Perhaps a few did commit suicide or kill one another.) Whatever the consequences, the estrangement of dealing with teenagers without giving them the respect they require is a deadly, destructive thing.

Only recently in my own life, am I learning how important it is to listen to the women in my life, to allow them to express their emotional feelings no matter how exaggerated these expressions may seem to me. Rather than assuming that I must do something about these intense feelings or explain to these women why I cannot do something helpful about their situation, I am coming to understand that women need, first of all, my intense accepting attention. I can say "Oh," "Uh-huh." "I see how you feel," "Tell me more." Such responses respect and nourish the feminine reality I am facing. Now this dawning in my life is something more than a new skill. It is a fundamental departure from a well ingrained habit that has been functioning in my

life for many decades. "My God, I have disrespected the feelings of 6 million women." This is what it means for me to take my estrangement from women seriously.

One more story: I had a friend visit with me who had had a cancer operation which was apparently successful. My friend had been informed that a different life style of diet and exercise was needed to prevent a recurrence of this health catastrophe. But this friend was not maintaining those life style changes and had become quite overweight and run down. Further, this friend was viewing these lapses as excusable and tolerable. I might have said quite honestly and truthfully, "My God, you are committing suicide," but at that time I did not. I did not want to hurt my friend's feelings. I was not sure about this or that detail. On and on my excuses went. Yet when my friend left, I knew I had failed to be a means of grace. The awareness which my friend most needed was this: "My God, I am committing suicide; I am killing 6 million possibilities in my life and in the lives of those for whom I am living." This was the convicting severity needed by my friend, and such convicting severity indicates the sort of life style I needed to have been, at that moment, to be a means of grace to my friend.

No matter how minor our estrangements may seem to us, the actual truth is that each and every estrangement is destructive and any postponement of its renunciation is never appropriate. The excuse

of “not being ready” for such a “big change” is an illusion that comes with every estrangement. “Not being ready for change” is precisely the first estrangement that needs to be admitted immediately. Old patterns may take time to finish dying out in our lives, but a full admission of estrangement can always take place immediately. The admission of sin, not its complete correction, is the first step toward healing. But this admission, to be a first step, needs to be an admission of the full seriousness of our estrangement.

One of the earliest religious orders of Christianity made its entire emphasis the repeating of this one phrase, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” If we were to translate that language into contemporary metaphors, they were saying, “Oh Healing Happening of all history, heal me now, a person lost in estrangement from my authentic life.” The emotional tone of that ancient prayer captures the severity I am attempting to express. “Oh my God, have mercy on me, for I see how awful my wickedness is.” “Oh my God, I have killed six million Jews.”

Living a style of convicting severity assists others in having an awareness of the awfulness of their estrangement, and thus taking the first step toward healing. The style of convicting severity does not mean being morose or gloomy. Convicting severity is something clean and cleansing. The style of convicting severity is an affirmation of the Awe of living as well as an illumination of our awful estrangement. Exposing estrangement is, at root, a happy thing, for estrangement means some horrible reduction of the glorious Awe of living.

Living the style of convicting severity might bring an immediate enrichment to your relationship with someone. Yet such a result is never assured. The style of convicting severity will often make people very angry. We need to soberly notice the fact that Jesus was crucified for his convicting severity. So this may be the reason we are reluctant to embody this style. We intuit that such a style is dangerous to pursue in this deeply estranged world. But such a retreat from danger is itself an estrangement. Jesus was applying convicting severity to our lives when he asked us to accept this saying, “Blessed are you when you suffer insults and persecution and every kind of slander (because of your convicting severity), for you have wealth in the Commonwealth of Being” (A slight paraphrase of Matthew 5:11-12).

Even a casual reading of Luke’s gospel illustrates how convicting severity pervades the life style of Jesus as Luke pictures him. How did we ever derive from the New Testament a picture of

Jesus as meek and mild? I suppose estrangement can twist anything.

(2) Objective Absolution

To those who acknowledge their estrangements, Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament, has only one thing to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” The story of the prodigal son who is welcomed home in spite of all his debauchery is a central image of what, according to Jesus, the Wholeness of Being is like. The elder brother expects preferential treatment for his years of good behavior, but this attitude misses the entire point: the point is that a beloved son who was lost has now returned home.

The absolution extended by the Wholeness of Being can be spelled out in these four formulae: (1) your whole life is received, (2) your whole past is approved, (3) your whole future is open, and (4) the whole circumstances of your outward life are good. Not one of these statements makes any sense from a strictly moral point of view. How could Hitler’s whole past be approved? How could mine? Of course, I would live my life differently if I could live it over. The point is that my present life is what it is because: (1) it has this particular past, (2) it has these particular potentials for the future, (3) it has these particular outward factors, and (4) it has these particular inward factors. I have no other life. My present life, including all its estrangements, is objectively absolved. These four formulae of absolution contain no silly sentiment, no indulgent permissiveness, no curtailment of moral seriousness. These phrases simply state a truth which each of us might view as written on the cosmic canopy in flaming galaxies: ***My life, just as it is, with nothing changed, is welcomed home to Reality by the very Reality from which I have been and still am estranged.***

As a life style, objective absolution, means: alerting other persons, however despairing they may be, to these absolving actualities. Estrangements and the despairs which estrangements feel are fragile Reality. And what is Reality? This is Reality: our true life--our life in Awe before the Awesome--is abundantly livable. No humanly invented crutches or reductions are necessary. The sainthood of freedom, trust, and love are waiting for us as our real lives. Open arms are extended to us in spite of all our conscious rebellion and unconscious foolishness. We are accepted in our actuality by that Awesome Otherness which constituted us as a relationship of Awe with this constituting Awesomeness. If, in our poetic picturing, we imagine that Infinite Being is seeing us, then we can say that Infinite Being looks past our

estrangement and sees only a precious son or daughter who--now being in Awe--has returned home. When we have come home, then we too will embody the style of objective absolutism: we will side with the Infinite Neighbor in taking this forgiving view of every person.

Acknowledging our sin comes before forgiveness, but repenting of our sin comes after forgiveness. By "repenting" I mean turning our back on the sin, abolishing it in our own personalities, and then leading the entire human species in doing away with this estranging practice. Repenting of sin and being in Awe are one and the same thing. When we are in Awe we are also aware of our estrangement from that Awe. If we accept being in Awe, we are repenting of our estrangement. If we are not repenting, we are not in Awe. So only those who are in touch with the need to repent are also in touch with having been forgiven.

But whether we are fully aware of our forgiveness or not, forgiveness remains an objective actuality--like the cosmic canopy itself. We are forgiven PERIOD. And living the style of objective absolutism means affirming the forgiveness of all persons, however estranged they may be, however ignorant they may be of their estrangements, however destructive their estrangements may be to other persons.

When the gospel writers pictured Jesus hanging on the cross saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," they were picturing objective absolutism. Jesus, in this story, is not saying that his generation was excused because they did not know that they were crucifying Authenticity. Rather "not knowing" was their crime: "not knowing" was their estrangement. He joins with the Awesome Wholeness of Being in forgiving this inexcusable "crime" of spiritual ignorance.

(3) Beckoning Respect

Finally, if we intend to be a means of grace to others, our life style must include beckoning respect. I have already illustrated the style of beckoning respect with the story of Jesus and Peter walking on the water. When Peter says to Jesus, "Tell me to come walk on the water," Jesus says "Come on then!" That is beckoning respect.

The style of beckoning respect respects the freedom of others. It does not assume responsibility for other people's decisions. Assuming responsibility for another person's freedom is the one responsibility that must never be taken. True responsibility for another human being means

beckoning that person to assume responsibility for his or her own decisions. The decision to be in Awe can only be made by that person who is going to be a person who is in Awe. Faith, freedom, and love are all states of Awe, and thus choices to be in Awe. And the Awesome is awesome without any help from you or me. Awe bubbles up in another human being without any help from you or me. If you or I find ourselves being the Awed One, we can tell of our Awe, we can live that Awe to the hilt. But if some other person sees us walking in courageous Awe on the Awesome waters of life and asks for help in this regard, all we can do is say, "Come on then." And after we say that simple phrase, all we can do is wait on the freedom of that other person to choose to join us in the life of Awe, or not.

If believing religious doctrines were more important than the Awe they were invented to express, then we might be able to argue or manipulate someone into abundant life. But since this is not true, we must simply wait on each person's God-given freedom to engage in living the life of Awe or to refuse to do so. The stylistic quality of beckoning respect is essential if we wish to be a valid and effective means of grace to another person.

* * * * *

So if you, the person who is reading this book, are inclined to answer the call to be a living embodiment of the next exodus of Christian community, you must, I insist, be clear that this call means creating a community which disciplines itself toward being an ongoing means of grace through embodying these three life styles: convicting severity, objective absolutism, and beckoning respect.

If after considering all of these demanding necessities, you are still inclined to answer the call to be the next exodus in Christian community, I have only this to say, "Come on then!"