

2. A Transformation in Communal Life

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Communal Authenticity and Maturation

You cannot be a Christian by yourself. By yourself you can believe this or not believe that. By yourself you can feel this or not feel that. By yourself you can perform moral behaviors or not perform moral behaviors. By yourself you can experience this or not experience that. But being a Christian is not primarily about beliefs or feelings or morality or private experiences.

And most important of all, being a Christian is not about having a soul or being immortal or going to heaven when you die. Being a Christian is about being the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is a communal reality here on Earth.

I hope the above statements have been blunt enough to dig underneath the pervasive individualism of modern culture. The prevalent understandings of what it means to be a Christian are being limited by our habits of overemphasizing the individual.

Now, of course, each of us is a solitary being as well as a communal being. Profound solitude also exists in the members of the body of Christ. There is no social reality, the body of Christ included, that can be so communally intense that our solitude disappears. But solitude in the body of Christ is also a communal reality. As Christians, we are never just alone. Even when alone, we are members of the entire body of Christ throughout all of time. We take into our solitary inner counsel the voices of all the biblical writers and all the other persons who have embodied for us and brought to us the beneficial breakthrough discovered in the Jesus Christ event. This host of witnesses live in our inner solitude. Through their words, their styles, and their deeds, they continually proclaim to us the SPEECH of love and forgiveness from the INFINITE SILENCE.

Unless this community of witnesses is continually present in our solitude, we are not a member of the body of Christ. ***We cannot be a Christian by ourselves.***

This community of witnesses also accompanies us in our intimacy with other human beings. In our intimacy with others, we are also the body of Christ. It is never just you and me alone. It is always you and me and Christ. When we have become the body of Christ, all intimacy is intimacy illuminated by being the body of Christ.

This community of witnesses also accompanies us in our cultural, political, and economic commonalities with other human beings. In our commonality with others, we are also the body of Christ. We are never just human beings in common life with other human beings. When we have become the body of Christ, all common life is illuminated by being the body of Christ.

In our common religious practices with other members of the body of Christ, we are not just a group of Christian-identified people set apart from the rest of humanity. Rather, we are that part of the entire body of humanity that is recovering being the humanity we were created to be. We are the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ in our rituals and songs and sermons and study and planning and actions. And we are being the body of Christ on behalf of the entire body of human beings who are also, in their essential being, constructed to be the body of Christ.

And if we are the body of Christ, then our being the body of Christ is all pervasive. When we cut our toenails we are cutting the toenails of the body of Christ. When we brush our teeth we are brushing the teeth of the body of Christ. When we join in an emotional, or sensual, or sexual union, we are making love within the body of Christ. And when we die, we are the body of Christ in death just as we have been the body of Christ in life. Death is just one more part of being the life of Christ. And the life of Christ itself does not die; it lives on as the never dying body.

I hope the above poetry has pried us loose a bit more from our pervasive individualism. And I hope that I have given some clues as to what it might mean to begin thinking beyond the box of our individualism and begin to see our singular life and all its living and dying functions as entirely secondary to our communal participation in the body of Christ.

Our actual situation, however, is complexified by the fact that we are also participants in the body of Adam and Eve. We are all “sinners,” if I may use that often misunderstood word. We are all the crucifiers of the body of Christ. We are rebels from our constructed humanity. We are lost in the woods of our obsessions and addictions and delusions. We are isolated in the pride of our own accomplishments. We are mean in the arrogance of our own self-exalting prejudices. These are just a few of the thousands of ways of describing our estrangement from being the body of Christ. Countless ways of being estranged have been invented by the human imagination. We are Adam and Eve facing the temptation to create some new estrangement. We are Adam and Eve having already eaten estrangement. We are Adam and Eve locked out of the garden of our authentic relationship with Infinite Reality and wandering somewhere to the East of our true home.

As members of the body of Christ we have come home, but we also remain members of the body of Adam and Eve. The communal life of Christianity must be understood not only as a communion of saints who share in the life of the body of Christ but also as a hospital for these same persons who also share in the sicknesses of the body of Adam and Eve. It is not accurate for any of us to claim that we have arrived at the full stature of Christ. It is not accurate for any of us to claim that we are not capable of falling away from whatever elements of the life of Christ we have enjoyed. The moment of choice between Christ and Adam/Eve is always now. As the apostle Paul put it, we press forward not looking behind, but choosing to heed the call to move toward the fullness of Christ that stands before us. This tension is inescapable, but it becomes bearable to us when we fully realize our forgiveness and when we cease to be preoccupied over the maturity or immaturity of a soul we do not even possess and begin to care instead about the maturation of the whole body of Christ of which we are one limited but significant part.

Consensus-built Alliances of Covenanted Circles

So what does the next expression of this down-to-Earth body of Christ look like in actual everyday practice? What does the next edition of Christianity look like as a set of finite, cultural, political, and economic processes? The image of small, four-to-twenty-person groups has been

making great headway in the minds of sensitive Christians for several decades. Some very large congregations attempt to organize small groups. The liberation theology movement in Latin America has put great emphasis on small groups they call “base communities.” Both liberal and conservative Christians have experimented with “house churches” or “home churches” meeting in living rooms.

My vision of the future follows this trend toward small groups, but sees the members of these small groups as thoroughly grounded in the theological revolution described above and as practicing innovative covenanting with one another to be the body of Christ in particular regions of the planet.

I also see these groups as parts of larger alliances of other such groups. The polity of these alliances is not top-down controlling structures, but service-rendering fabrics designed and sustained through consensus-building processes that begin in each of the small groups involved.

Ordinary and Spirit-empowered Servants

Ordinary or lay leadership is already a trend underway in base communities and home churches. Key to the effectiveness of such leadership is the quality of Spirit-empowered servanthood. The future of Christian communal life, as I envision it, will entail rethinking the selection of leadership. Shifting from “ordination” to “ordinary” may be too cute a way of saying this, but this is the basic idea. I envision some kind of organic leadership arising out of the consensus processes of local groups. Top-down laying-on of hands by the established lineage holders will, as I see it, fade into the past. A democratically operated alliance of groups may play a role in leadership selection and training, but in no way does this come as an imposition upon or a control of local groups.

Also, the economics of current Christian clergy practices must be thoroughly discarded. The possibility of following the lead of the Spirit into the always controversial actualities of true Spirit living is currently being blocked by the need to raise salaries and build buildings. These economic needs also force current congregations to build larger and larger memberships. In order to do this, controversial matters are inevitably avoided.

It will be a tremendous relief to many Christian-identified people when they clearly embrace the truth that being a small intensely dedicated group is more effective as a Christian witness than having large numbers.

Sharing Prophetic Breakthroughs

The pattern of community life I am describing will also end the need to market religious products. This new community has nothing for sale, no doctrines people have to have, no rituals that are essential, no consolations we have to persuade people they need, and no don't-rock-the-boat patterns that have to be complied with. These small groups will be free, “free at last” to share prophetic breakthroughs with one another and with the world at large.

By “prophetic breakthroughs” I mean clear awarenesses about the delusions of the humanity among whom these groups dwell. The motto of the prophet might be taken from the words of Isaiah when he was called to be a prophet, “I am a liar and I dwell among liars.” The prophet has only one task--to tell the truth to liars, and to carry out that task for as long as it takes. This task is never popular in the first instance. Telling the truth can sometimes be a relief to everyone, as illustrated in the story of the honest child who pointed out that the Emperor was

wearing no clothes. Frequently, however, liars are severely defended against hearing the truth, however redemptive that truth might be.

The prophet can be civil and courteous and clever and strategic and thus communicate truth in a manner that makes hearing it and accepting it most likely. But the prophet never knows whether truth will be accepted or not--nor how long it will take for this to happen. It is often a thankless job to tell the truth.

Nevertheless, it remains the main purpose of Christian community to liberate people with the truth. And let us not underestimate the radicality of truth-telling. Only when the Christians living in our modern culture are rid of the burdens of salaries, buildings, and the need for popularity will they be free to tell the truth--to actually *live* instead of merely *revere* the saying that "the truth will set you free."