

Chapter 22

Christian Community as the Body of the Messiah

Christianity is a Communal Religion. All religions are communal in many ways, but Judaism and Christianity are more communal than most. In their ancient origins, these two religions were much more communal than they are commonly practiced today.

Ancient Hebrew culture was based on a montage of communal metaphors: delivery from Egypt, the wandering wilderness tribe, the tribal federation, the divinely “called” nation selected to lead other nations in Spirit realism.

Christianity, likewise, was rooted in communal metaphors: the new Israel, membership in the Kingdom of God, participation in a new humanity (a new Adam), and most striking of all, the living organs or limbs of the Resurrected Body of Christ. The solitary person was affirmed in Christian heritage but not as an isolated person. The solitary person was challenged to choose between: (1) being a slave in the fallen society of Satan or (2) being a freed citizen in the commonwealth of Almighty God.

In their religious practices, the disciples did not go off by themselves and be individual Christians. They formed a close-knit group. They met together; they thought together; they prayed together. The first Christians gave great emphasis to communal life.

The story of Pentecost is an interesting example. In this story the Holy Spirit did not descend upon individuals off alone somewhere,. The Holy Spirit descended on a large group of people speaking different languages. And when the fire of the Spirit burned that day, the result was this: a diverse group of people could hear each other through all the barriers of language and culture. The Pentecost story is the antithesis of the Tower of Babel story. In the Babel story humanity sought a common language with which to build their own kingdom. In the Pentecost story people were moved from the divisive babble of culturally separating languages to the communication of Spirit that is universal to all humans and created by none of them.

Early Christian community understood itself to be the first fruits of a restoration of the entire family of humanity. All humans were potentially members of this communal Body of Christ. Jesus, seen as the Christ, was elaborated as a portrait of a new humanity, which was actually the original humanity restored. Jesus was spoken of as the Second Adam, the Adam who resisted temptation rather than fell into it.

If we do not have a sociological view of being Christian, we are practicing an impoverished sort of Christianity. Today this impoverishment is widespread in both Christian groups and in Western culture generally. We live in an era of individualistic overemphasis. Conservative Christians want to save individual souls for their heavenly reward. And liberal Christians tend to focus on psychological well-being, personal morality, and individual vocation. The sociological intensity of Spirit community and the vision of responsibility for the Spirit healing and structuring of justice for all humankind has been lost in this swamp of individualism. The reverse side of the individualistic coin is collectivistic tyranny. When individuals insist on overemphasizing living alone, those individuals end up living under oppressive conditions. Oppressive leaders come to power when too many individuals have lost their sense of communal responsibility. Strong democracies with responsive leadership comes into being when people are talking together and acting together in most local communities in an aware and responsive manner.

The Body of Christ

Beginning with the apostle Paul, the Christian community was referred to as “the Body of Christ.” The meaning of this phrase, to Paul and his hearers, included a personal appropriation of that story of Jesus’ resurrection and the assertion that Jesus was the Christ – that is, the Messiah who was to change the fundamental conditions of human life. Jesus as Christ was alive in the Christian community. Paul spoke of his gatherings as being “in Christ.” The resurrection was something that happened to a community of people. The resurrection of Jesus was witnessed by a community of people. The resurrection happened to them. They became the resurrected body. The resurrection myths are not about something that happened to a individual person named Jesus. Resurrection happened to that community of people for whom Jesus was viewed as the Christ. The resurrection was not a biological wonder but the birth of a communal body. This understanding has been clouded for us by our individualism, by our hope for the immortality of our individual ego, by our addiction to a miraculous escape from the necessity of our ego death. It is our ego, our individualism, that was crucified. What got raised was our Spirit Being.

This resurrection also undergirds what it means to say that Jesus is the Christ. The union of the words “Jesus” and “Christ” changed the meaning of both “Jesus” and “Christ” for those who first conceived this religious symbolism. “Christ” no longer meant the coming of a divine champion who would throw off the shackles of Rome. “Christ” now meant the coming of a divine champion who would throw off the shackles of demonic addiction of which Rome was merely one passing manifestation. The disciples were indeed rescued from Rome, but in a profoundly inward and secret way that most people could not even see. And the meaning of the word “Jesus” was also changed. The word now meant more than the appearance of an unusual prophet, a mystic teacher, a religious innovator, a social revolutionary. The word “Jesus” united with the word “Christ” now meant more than Jesus, the crucified criminal, the futile attempt to make a difference, the Messianic failure. The word “Jesus” now meant a turning point in human history in which one special person succeeded in leading the human species out of slavery to Satan’s kingdom and into the fresh open air of freedom in the Kingdom of God.

Some biblical scholars have tended to dismiss the Christ interpretation of Jesus and seek instead for an uninterpreted historical Jesus as the starting point for their theological system. The value of this work is that it makes probable that there actually was a historical figure called “Jesus” who actually did have qualities that make plausible all the fuss that has been made about him. But what we know about the historical Jesus is probable knowledge, scientific knowledge, knowledge that still has to be interpreted for its human meaning. Some of these biblical scholars do not seem to notice that, like the New Testament community, they also have to interpret Jesus. Perhaps they identify more with the interpretation of Jesus that appeared in the Gospel of Thomas. Perhaps they do not notice that the “Gospel” of Thomas is an interpretation of Jesus that is quite different from the interpretation that is contained in the “Gospels” selected for the New Testament. The author of the Thomas writing did not call his work a “gospel.” The term “gospel” or “good news” is a New Testament symbol for the Christ interpretation of Jesus. In spite of significant differences, the four Gospels of the New Testament agree that Jesus is to be viewed as the Messiah and that resurrection and cross are fundamental metaphors for interpreting this Messianic significance.

It is true that Jesus did not start Christianity. A select group of his followers did. The Christian interpretation of Jesus was done by those who saw themselves as his

resurrected body. They felt empowered to interpret what Jesus said and did and to expand on what Jesus said and did because they were Jesus in his resurrected continuation. They saw Jesus in one another. While they failed, so they said, to realize this high calling fully, they saw themselves in a covenant to grow up into the full stature of Christ. However fragmentary was their realization of this completeness, they nevertheless viewed themselves to be "in Christ." They were his body. They had died with him in his crucifixion, and they saw themselves as raised up with him into the Spirit life that he pioneered.

The Kingdom of God

Almost all scientific/historical biblical scholars recognize that the probable preaching of the historical Jesus frequently contained the phrase "the Kingdom of God." But a number of those scholars assume meanings for this phrase that may not accurately reflect what Jesus was pointing to. "The Kingdom of God" could be translated "the Empire of God." Part of its meaning was its opposition to "the empire of Rome." In the Empire of God we experience a wholly different mode of social operation than in the empire of Rome. Here is a saying that the Jesus Seminar scholars color gray, meaning only a small percentage of them view these words as the actual words of the historical Jesus. But I view the meaning of these words as consistent with other sayings that most scholars consider to be the actual words of Jesus.

You know that the so-called rulers of the heathen world lord it over everyone, and their great leaders have absolute power. But it must not be so among you. No, whoever among you wants to be great must become the servant of you all, and if he wants to be first among you, he must be the slave of all persons.

(Jesus, according to Mark 10:41-44)

Many things are surprising about this passage. First of all, the disciples are being understood as members, indeed leaders, in some alternative sociological operation quite different from the heathen world. Secondly, this new "empire" is not organized topdown. The leaders are on the bottom. They are the slaves of the led. This means a new style of governing and a very different style of communal life than is commonly practiced in the civilizations of this world. And third, this Kingdom is not something in an after death beyond; it is something here on Earth. One of the phrases in the "Lord's prayer" says, "Thy Kingdom come on Earth as it is in heaven." Perhaps we can relate better to the power of this phrase if we reword it slightly: "May the mode of Spirit community essential to the cosmos be manifest here on Earth as it already is eternally present in the essence of all Reality."

H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *The Kingdom of God in America* suggests that this metaphor went through three stages in the history of American Christian theology. In the first of these stages Christian theology emphasized that God is king. Early Calvinist and Lutheran theology emphasized the sovereignty of God. That is, they clarified that the word "God" pointed to an absolute all-powerful OTHER-THAN-HUMAN objectivity that was being encountered by humans in every natural event and in every historical event in human history. Many contemporary Christian interpreters have taken offense with this use of the word "God." They have said that an all-powerful God cannot be deemed benevolent, that we have to choose between a God who is all-powerful and a God who is good. But Luther and Calvin as well as Augustine, Paul, Isaiah, Amos, and also Jesus use the word God to point to that which is all-powerful and which they also view as good. This joining of Final Power with Final Goodness entails giving up the ordinary human views of "good." It entails seeing that all human views of good and evil are relative and basically self serving.

To say that what the all powerful God does is good is to say that what is actually happening is trustworthy. God is King and what this King does is good. From my perspective the probability is high that when Jesus used the word "God" in the phrase "the Kingdom of God" he was indicating this all powerfulness which he trusted as good. Current attempts to interpret the historical Jesus as a secular, post-theistic humanist are simply preposterous.

H. Richard Niebuhr's second stage of the interpretation of the Kingdom of God in American Christian theology emphasized the transformation of the solitary soul. That is, it emphasized making the good, sovereign God our (my, your) personal King. The kingdom comes in our own soul when we begin to trust God as the King of our lives. Here Niebuhr is talking about the emphasis of the Great Awakenings initiated by John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and others.

Niebuhr's third stage of American Christian theology's interpretation of the Kingdom of God emphasized building the Kingdom of God here on Earth. Here Niebuhr has in mind theological work commonly called "the Social Gospel." Niebuhr says there is no contradiction to meanings one and two for us to also view the Kingdom of God as an enactment here on Earth. Our Earthly living is different, a fresh manifestations of fresh social functioning, when we are living from the perspective that God is King of the cosmos and that this God is our King – that is, this all-powerful Final Reality is trustworthy, good, the core loyalty of the good life.

Niebuhr is indicating that all three of these understandings of the Kingdom of God are valid and are implied in the sayings of Jesus. We do not have a complete understanding of Jesus' teachings until we embrace all three of these dimensions of meaning of the Kingdom of God: (1) that God is King, (2) that the Kingdom comes in our lives when we trust this King, and (3) that this Kingdom can be visible here on Earth as manifestations of real community among these transformed humans.

For many decades the Social Gospel made considerable headway among liberal Christians, but this sociological emphasis, this building of the Kingdom of God here on earth become separated from the Spirit transformation emphasis and from the beginning point of trust in Final All-powerful Reality. Many social-action Christians reduced the Kingdom of God to mean "the society of my ideals." Added to this reduction of meaning was a neglect of communal nurture, of a life of worshiping together, of the healing forces of sharing and studying together, and of the slow preparation of masses of people to be the Spirit-effective persons needed for any of the huge social transformations that are called for. Many socially active Christians tend to go off by themselves and find some project to do that satisfies their own individualistic need to be useful. They have lost contact both with the wholeness of humanity and with the nurturing communion of Christian life together. Their sociology has lost its Spirit roots. Instead of being the Awed Ones living in Awe before the Awesome, they simply glorify themselves as those who do good by their own standards. Their sociology is not based on the insight that every human being is a ramp from here to Eternity with angels moving up and down. Their sociology is reduced to dealing with only those elements of reality that are continually passing away.

Though our thinking about the sociological coming of the Kingdom of God has been perverted, the social manifestation aspect of the Kingdom of God is an important part of the whole picture. True followers of the Christian breakthrough are the Body of Christ; they are the Kingdom of God coming to Earth; they are the perpetual manifestation of authentic community and a planet-wide social practice based on the Jesus Christ breakthrough into the historical process.

Our basic theology needs to reflect this deep sociological emphasis. What we mean by "Jesus Christ" needs to reflect this sociological emphasis. Jesus Christ needs to be seen as a community of human beings not merely one person. Jesus was a singular person. You and I are singular persons. But "Jesus Christ" is a new humanity, a restored humanity, a new Adam and Eve, an Adam and Eve who remain ignorant of good and evil, who do not eat this forbidden fruit, who allow the Primal Mysterious Reality walking in their garden to be their Good and their God. As we take up our membership in this true humanity, this authentic humanity, we are in Jesus Christ. We are Jesus Christ. We can identify with this figure in all the New Testament stories about him, however fictional they may be, however preposterous they may at first seem. And being Jesus Christ, we can create and recreate his words and his deeds for our time in history.