

## Chapter 23

# Five Spirit Stages of Christian Community

As spelled out in the previous chapter, Christianity is a Communal Religion. In this chapter I am going to explore more deeply the “We” dimension of being Christians. A group of people who are meeting regularly as a Christian community can chart their journey as a group in terms of the following five stages or dimensions of being Christian community:

- The Healing Community of Confessing Beginners
- The Wise Community of the Wordless Word
- The Invisible League of Spirit Manifestation
- The Revolutionary Vanguard of Human History
- The Communion of Saints in Absolute Rest

These five categories can be viewed as sequential stages of communal maturity, yet all five apply in some measure to all stages of the communal maturation journey. These five categories describe qualities that are present in each and every authentic Christian community.

### The Healing Community of Confessing Beginners

Christian community begins with the public confession of our actual lives, our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our estrangement, our despairs, our hopes, our depth experiences, any and all aspects of our actual lives. And in this practice, we always remain beginners. In the Spirit journey we never get beyond being beginners, for the Spirit journey is and remains a journey into the unknown. We never know where we are going in comforting detail. We never have lasting certainty that we know precisely what our problems are or what help we need.

Spirit healing always comes to us as a surprise. Being sick in the Spirit sense means not realizing what we are missing in the way of Spirit health. The sickness is usually, if not always, a delusion of goodness that we do not realize is evil. Spirit healing entails waking up to the moldy nature of our virtues and to the deeper disaster of our vices. Spirit healing entails surprises that we could not have anticipated. In any experience of Spirit healing we feel like novices, beginners, or “dumb dumbs” who are ignorant of something crucial for the living of our lives. Healing may be exhilarating, but not in the sense of being rewarded for our fine qualities. This exhilaration is more in the nature of the exhilaration of a child who faces some fresh adventure never taken before.

Community is needed to foster such healing. Christian community has been likened to a hospital for sin-sick souls. We come together each week seeking a fresh measure of health for the week ahead. We may call it “inspiration.” We may call it “moments of Awe.” We may call it “refreshment.” All such words point to the discovery of some estrangement for which we can accept forgiveness and hence feel welcomed back to that common ground of realism from which we have fallen. This experience is the elemental, foundational experience of Christian community. Being a society of healing confession is the process with which each genuine Christian community begins. Without healing confession, it is not Christian community; it is not even a beginning for becoming Christian community. It is something else entirely.

### The Wise Community of the Wordless Word

Healing comes first, and then we can begin to become wise about Spirit matters.

Experiences of healing precede our theological clarity. Someone else's theological clarity may inspire our healing, but thinking through for ourselves what we mean to indicate with our religious terms comes after, not before, our healing. For example, we cannot genuinely speak about "sin" until we experience ourselves as estranged from our own authentic life, trapped in various forms of despair, malice, and bondage. And we cannot genuinely speak about "grace" until we know what it means to: (1) confess our estrangement in personally felt detail, (2) be forgiven (that is, welcomed home to our authentic lives) and (3) choose to accept that welcome.

As a Christian community matures, theological clarity becomes more important. It becomes important in order to assist one another through the tangled weeds of estrangement in all aspects of our lives. It becomes important as a protection against falling into some fresh trap of delusion, estrangement, bondage, despair, or malice.

Theological clarity is a communal achievement. It is the job of all of us in a Christian community to learn to say what needs to be said to one another and to all those among whom we dwell in the times in which we live. Theological clarity is not something worked out centuries ago. Ancient words of wisdom may have been theological clarity for those Christians who lived when that wisdom was forged, but we have to work out our own theological clarity in the times and for the times in which we live.

Christian theology is a strange and paradoxical sort of wisdom, for it uses human words to speak about what we might call "an experience of the Wordless Word." Many contemporary Christians, conservative and liberal, do not understand the wordless nature of the Word of God. Whether we think of memorizing Bible verses or giving 30-minute sermons, "many words" does not equal "the Word of God." When Christian heritage speaks of "The Word of God," this does not mean sentences in the Bible. The Word of God is not human words at all. The Gospel of John states clearly that the Word preexisted humanity. Therefore, the Word preexisted words. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." "All things were made through (this Word), and without (this Word) was not anything made that was made." (John 1:1-3) This is a strange sort of Word! It is a Wordless Word. It is a communication from the Final Reality manifest in all things before, during, and after the advent of words. The author of the Fourth Gospel puts in his own own words this paradoxical assertion. The Johannine writer points to a wordless cosmic communication using the metaphor "Word," "Logos," or "Logic of Final Reality."

And how do we come to hear or know this Word? The author of the Fourth Gospel states clearly that this wordless Word of God walks up to us in some fleshly, breathing, living person speaking from his or her heart and soul to the hearts and souls of we other living breathing persons. Yes, this Word became present in history as Jesus, but in biblical thought the term "Jesus" means something more than an individual person who lived long ago. Jesus is the authentic human, the new humanity that does not fall like Adam fell. Jesus is a new Adam (and a new Eve, by the way) who lives and speaks the Truth heard from the Final Reality that this renewed humanity addresses as "God."

All human words, whether in the Bible or in the mouth of a contemporary Christian witness, are not the Word of God. Such words may point to the Word of God, but the Word is beyond words. The Word of God is a non-conceptual actuality. The God who is really God does not speak in human words; God speaks in direct experiences to the hearts and souls of living people. When we picture God as a Big Person who speaks human words to us, this is metaphorical language. Earlier eras of Christian living were comfortable with metaphorical language. But in our time we either dismiss

metaphorical language altogether because we are aware that metaphors are not literally true, or we make ancient metaphors ridiculous by taking them literally.

For example, the New Testament resurrection stories are ridiculous if taken literally. A dead body getting up and walking about is at most just a curiosity, interesting perhaps to a society organized to explore unusual phenomena. Good Christian theology has not viewed the resurrection as something that superficial. According to the core of Christian tradition, the resurrection has to do with the restoration of humanity to its authentic life. The key to building wise Christian community is viewing the resurrection stories as artistic descriptions of happenings to the disciples of Jesus. And resurrection is still happening to us. The resurrection stories tell us how the disciples of Jesus, who had despaired over the fact that their expectations were crushed by the crucifixion of Jesus, were transformed. The disciples were raised to newness of life. We also can be raised to newness of life. After his death, Jesus lived and walked and ate fish because the disciples who lived and walked and ate fish had become the presence of the same life they had known in Jesus of Nazareth. The first disciples saw themselves as the Body of Christ. They, in their own flesh, were the resurrected body. True Christian community today is a continuation of that resurrected body. Christ is risen indeed – that is, Messianic authenticity is here on Earth in flesh and blood communal life.

The resurrection is a group experience as well as a solitary inward happening. The first disciples saw Jesus in the eyes and speech and actions of one another. We can see Jesus in the eyes and speech and actions of those who comprise our genuine Christian communities. Jesus, the Messianic human, is alive indeed. The first disciples ceased to see his crucifixion as an unmitigated tragedy or a cause for hopeless despair. As Paul put it, “We died with him that we might be raised up with him to newness of life.” The resurrected community sees the death of Jesus as the death of human perversion in our own lives, thus leaving us free to be the authentic beings that we truly are.

Words, especially the words of scientific literalism, cannot tell about the resurrection or any other Spirit happening. We need to praise the first Christians for using fantastic stories and myths to transmit their wisdom to one another and to the awakening and awakenable humanity of their era. Not only “resurrection” but “God,” “Holy Spirit,” “faith,” “sin,” “grace,” “freedom,” “compassion” are words that point to actualities that are beyond words. Nevertheless, the Wise Community of the Wordless Word uses words to talk clearly and meaningfully to one another. This group word-craft is called “theology.” In doing good group theology, we become capable of bearing a witness that awakens humanity in our own time and place. This contemporary Christian witness can have the same effectiveness as the original New Testament witness. The words of the Bible can have power again, but only if we see them as witnessing to the Wordless Word that we also experience and witness to others in our own words.

Being able to do theology in this paradoxical fashion is a second step in being genuine Christian community. And this is an essential dynamic of Christian community that never grows old or becomes unneeded.

### **The Invisible League of Spirit Manifestation**

As the journey of maturity proceeds, a Christian community can become aware that Christianity is only a religion, a finite sociological practice alongside the many other religions that humanity has invented. I have taken the word “Invisible” from that part of Christian heritage that has distinguished the visible sociological Church from the Invisible Spirit Church. And I have taken the word “League” from the wonderful little

book by Herman Hesse, *The Journey to the East*. This wildly imaginative and poetic book provides us with a keen sense of the wondrous quality of being on a journey into the endless depths of Mystery and finding there our membership in an Invisible League of authentic community.

We commonly use the word “Church” to mean a group that practices a Christian religion. But the Christian heritage speaks of “Church” in a deeper way – as a sociological dynamic in the entire history of humanity. People of all religions, and even people who lack a formal religious practice, can be seen to be members of this Invisible League of Spirit manifestation. And it is this Invisible League that is the true Church. The visible sociological expressions of Christian religion are, at their best, merely pointers toward this Invisible actuality. This Invisible League, the Spirit Church, is the true fleshly presence of the Body of Christ in human history. This mysterious Body existed before, as well as after, the life and death of Jesus. Jesus himself speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as among the living. Moses and the prophets also are seen by Jesus and by his disciples as members of their community. For Christians, the life of Jesus was a revealing moment in history showing us this Spirit body, this Kingdom, this commonwealth of God, this League of Spirit manifestation. But this League that Jesus showed us is something far greater than a visible sociological body in which people explicitly speak of Jesus.

This League is “Invisible” because the extent of its boundaries cannot be known to human beings. Organizations and doctrines do not circumscribe it. Some of the people who call Jesus “Lord, Lord” may not be members of this Spirit League. And others who never heard of Jesus may be members of this League. Being a member of this League means manifesting the Spirit of restored humanity – of the profound authenticity from which we have all fallen. Jesus is reported to have said to his disciples when they were worried about the healing work being done by people who were not of their group, “If they are not against us, they are for us.”

Such an awareness about the deep nature of Christian community means a complete end to every fragment of Christian bigotry. No longer can a Christian evangelist claim that there is no salvation (Spirit healing) outside of some Christian religious group or outside some particular confession about Jesus. No longer can a Pope or some other primary leader make the claim that his or her religious organization plays the essential role in salvation (Spirit healing). Salvation, understood as the healing of our escape from Spirit living, is a universal process. The boundary of those who have received this healing is unknown – that is, this boundary is invisible to all members of humanity.

For those of us who are a Christianity-practicing community, this vision of the Invisible League is an essential step toward realizing who we are as Christians. As we become the true Church, we become clear that the essential nature of the true Church is a dynamic of the cosmos far more profound than our specific sociological group. This means that as true Christians we experience a detachment from our own religious practices and a detachment from Christianity as a whole. Indeed, discovering the Invisible-League quality of the true Church means realizing that being a Christian community goes much deeper than the practice of any Christian religion. Christianity, like every other religion, is only a means to the realization of membership in the Invisible League of Spirit .

What does all this mean for our practice of Christian community in our local place? It means not taking too seriously our Christian theology, Christian symbols, Christian ethics, or Christian organizations. At the same time, we take with ultimate seriousness the universal Realities to which these Christian symbols point. We also take seriously

our challenge to create Christian practices that bear witness to these universal Realities. This is a paradox: we can have confidence in that to which good Christian religion points and yet have the humility to understand that we are only true Christians when we can transcend our Christianity. This detachment allows us to see ourselves as compatriots, not competitors, with all members of the Invisible League of Spirit whatever religion they may practice.

## **The Revolutionary Vanguard of Human History**

The Invisible League just described is also the Revolutionary Vanguard within human history. When we ask how human society can change for the better, we discover something I am calling “the Revolutionary Vanguard.” On the one hand human history is the story of the ever-recurring fall into depravity, the fall into a loss of our essential humanity. But human history is also the story of healing and restoration. Human beings, acting from their Spirit restoration, are those who make progressive history on behalf of the whole human species. The Invisible League manifesting as the Revolutionary Vanguard is the foundation for healing, restorative action.

Whenever significant change for the better is taking place, we find a Revolutionary Vanguard at the core of this happening. Human cultures and their economic and political systems have a conservative bent, an intense momentum in accord with their habitual patterns. These inherited patterns may hold positive values, but they are also a straightjacket for aliveness and a bondage that is typically difficult to break. Those who start human societies in fresh directions are those who are detached from the old patterns. They are those who are able to rest in a home of consciousness that is beyond the current cultural canopy. This is the position in human living from which fresh creativity for greater justice and a more workable society can take place. Those who do this basic creativity are the Revolutionary Vanguard. And being this creativity is one of the core qualities of being the true Church. Being the fullness of Christian community includes being part of this basic dynamic within human history that I am calling “the Revolutionary Vanguard.”

This Vanguard is manifest in signal individuals who envision fresh visions and accomplish new things, but it is also manifest in the millions of ordinary people who resonate with those fresh visions and do most of the accomplishing. Martin Luther King, Jr. is an example. He was a signal individual, but the Revolutionary Vanguard that healed the United States of much of its racial sickness was much larger than Dr. King. The civil rights movement led by King and others also illustrates how the Revolutionary Vanguard starts small, but can become a mass movement with historic effects. The Revolutionary Vanguard is people working together to make far reaching social shifts.

The Revolutionary Vanguard is a group, a big “We.” The “We” quality is a challenge to the individualistic overemphasis in modern society. Christianity is a communal religion witnessing to communal forms of living. The Revolutionary Vanguard is also a communal actuality. Its boundaries are unknown, but its consequences within the flow of human history are visible for all to see.

When we consider the journey of our own Christian community toward being the Revolutionary Vanguard, we find ourselves challenged to give up the image of doing our own thing, finding some project we happen to like, or finding some other way of avoiding the complexities of the broad sweep of history. The Revolutionary Vanguard is concerned for the whole of history; it is a flesh and blood community of people who are repenting of the sins of the whole society and who know that nothing historic is

accomplished alone. Within this broad “We” context, each of us chooses our own particular roles and makes our own particular contributions, but this solitary choosing does not deny the “We” context.

This Vanguard “We” may not be as large and powerful as the social “We” being changed, but the Vanguard is a “We” that is dedicated to becoming large enough to shift the entire course of history. And this Vanguard includes a wide variety of people, most of whom do not engage in a Christian religious practice. Nevertheless, this Vanguard is the Church from the Christian point of view.

Each of us who shares in being the Revolutionary Vanguard is challenged to be obedient to the tasks of this particular Vanguard in our particular hour of history. We choose our own specific roles and tasks, and yet we also sense that our part in the fray is being chosen for us by the times in which we live. And our action is shaped by the evolving consciousness of the time-specific Revolutionary Vanguard of which we are members. The Vanguard as a whole is freely choosing its way amid the ambiguities of history, yet the overall agenda is being set for us by the times in which we live. We the Vanguard are choosing freely, and yet we are also being obedient to challenges set for us by the God of history.

The experience of being this Vanguard is a paradox; it includes both great certainty and great vulnerability or ethical risk. The Vanguard has certainty about the Spirit context from which thinking and action flows, but in the actual drama of history all responses are ambiguous. Our critique of the old social fabrics is risky because those fabrics are a mixture of good gifts and deep corruption. Since we are part of this old corruption, our actions are best characterized as repentance. Our proposals for new social fabrics to replace the old are untested creations; they are risky ventures fraught with uncertainties. We have to choose and we may choose wrongly. We may see later that our choices were wrong. We may have to repent of our own choices and choose again. Being the Vanguard is a free venture into an unknown future. Such ethical risk requires the deep courage to be our essential freedom.

When tackling historic issues we can find great comfort in realizing that we are not entirely alone. The choices we are personally making are part of a wider consensus building that is taking place across a wide spectrum of Vanguard persons. The wisdom of this larger body is many times greater than the sum of its parts. The free venture of each of us makes a contribution to the ongoing consensus building being conducted throughout the entire Vanguard. And while we contribute to that consensus through our own creativity, we also experience an emerging group wisdom to which we are called to be obedient. That group wisdom may call us to perform actions that we did not design and may not feel prepared to do. We may experience ourselves, in large measure, as foot soldiers who carry out master strategies that are being built by the most sensitive, innovative, compassionate people of our era. These strategies are being freely created by the Vanguard, yet these strategies can seem to arrive at our door as specific callings to be obedient to the Vanguard of our times. Obedience to the Vanguard is consistent with obedience to God. Obedient to that Final Reality that confronts us in and through our historic challenges is consistent with obedience to and among the people who are meeting those challenges.

The Bible can teach us much about the qualities of being this Revolutionary Vanguard. The Vanguard are those who, like Abraham, leave old cultural homes and head for some promised land to which they have never been. Similarly, we are those who leave the well-established hierarchical slave camps of our various Egypts and

wander in the wilderness of freedom waiting to discern what our promised land might be. We are those who conquer a place for our vision in actual history. We are sometimes the prophets of doom and sometimes prophets of unbelievable hope. We are like those who leave fishing nets and tax offices and follow some nomadic Jesus into awakening the lost villages of our era. We are those whose righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes of tradition and moral teachers of past-oriented holiness. We the Vanguard are those who find ourselves among the subversive forces within some decaying and tyrannical Roman Empire. We are those who build within the ruins of social collapse some small monastic islands and then whole continents of alternative living. As the Christian part of the Vanguard, we are those who engage in a thoroughgoing critique of the old and stodgy forms of Christian practice and join in the perpetual Reformation of Christian practice. Such qualities, appropriately crafted for each era of living, are part of the abiding nature of being Christian community. The Revolutionary Vanguard is both what it means to be Christian community and a calling that transcends Christian community and includes a much larger constituency.

### **The Communion of Saints in Absolute Rest**

Absolute Rest is also a quality of the fully realized Christian community. This “Rest” exists alongside, or perhaps inside, our also being the ones who climb mountains of care as the servant forces of Revolutionary change in our era of history. We do not “burn out” in our revolutionary action because at a deeper level we are at Rest. We are protected from the anxiety of failure or the anxiety of completing our favorite tasks because at a deeper level we are at Rest in a manner that no historical success or failure can disturb. This Rest is our sense of being at home and having a type of home that is unthreatened by any historical development. In a fully realized Christian community, we are at home with the Absolute.

And by “Absolute” we mean the Absolute Void, the Absolute No-Thing-Ness from which all things come and to which all things return. And by “Absolute” we also mean the Absolute Fullness, the Every-Thing-Ness in which all things cohere. As fully realized Christian community we are at home with everything, with all comings and all goings. We are at home with the Void out of which comings occur and into which goings return.

Christians have called this Rest “the Communion of Saints” because it is a group experience. We look into one another's eyes and we see this Rest. We Rest in communion with a community of humans who are at Rest. These humans are saints because they are at Rest, for this Rest means being the Spirit beings we are. It is Rest in being the sons and daughters of the Absolute. This Rest is Eternal Life, here and now. It is Eternal Life because the Absolute Void/ Absolute Fullness is Eternal. This Absolute God (symbolized in both impersonal and personal metaphors) does not change, the biblical God is not part of the world of change. This God is Eternal. And as we Rest in this Eternality, we are Eternal. We Rest in Eternal Life. It is Rest because we have arrived. There is no more seeking to arrive. There is nowhere else to go. This is the final destination. All historical destinations are passing things yielding to still other historical destinations. In social history we never arrive at a final destination. But as the Communion of Saints we have arrived. We are home. There is no other home to go to, and there is no possible threat to this home. This home is Eternal. This home is Rest.

Peace, Tranquility, Stillness, Silence, these are words used by Christians and by other traditions to describe this Rest. And when Christians Rest they Rest along with the “saints” from other-than-Christian religions. It is clear that generations of Hindus and

Buddhists have known this Rest. Perhaps every religious community that has lasted for hundreds of years has lasted because its members, or some of its members, knew this Rest.

Finally, this Rest is not an escape from the ongoing work of the Revolutionary Vanguard. History moves on and our participation in history does not end when we Rest in Eternal Life. Rather, we bring this Eternal Life of abiding Rest into the continuing everyday anxieties of history. We overcome those anxieties and move on to other anxieties because we do not seek our rest within those historical processes or in our victories or defeats. We have our Rest in the Eternal Now of fellowship with all the saints of every generation. We share in their blessings of security in their Eternal place where no rust can corrode nor moth destroy. We Rest as we move and act and live and serve in all the particulars of our historical era. This Rest is even our power to move more courageously and more persistently and more flexibly than those who live in history without this Rest.

In our practice of a Christian life together, we find that our coming together each week is a way to access this Rest. We return from our work to the place of Spirit Rest. We reinspire our participation in Eternal Rest that we may be Rested in our work during the next week. The Sabbath tradition is a rhythm well tested through many centuries. Every seven days we need Rest, Rest in the Eternal. The Sabbath tradition arose as an expression of this Spirit insight. The Sabbath is a gift to humanity not a moral rule for being more righteous. We come together to Rest and to celebrate Rest in the Eternal Now of all of living. We set aside time for Eternal Rest, so that we can have Eternal Rest in all our time. We set aside time for communion with our fellow saints, so that this Communion of Saints can be with us guiding us in all that we think and do in the entire round of our lives.

Rest for our deepest being is a quality of true Christian community. We have only to open ourselves to it and participate in it. This Rest is a solitary experience, and yet it is also a group experience. We are not alone in such Rest. We Rest with all the saints in every age – past, present, and future. We Rest together and we remember that we would not have come to this Rest without the ministries of our companions in Rest. Our security in being a person who Rests is also enabled by the ongoing communion of those who also Rest. We need this communion. And this communion needs us. And yet it is also true that this communion is not sustained by any of us who Rest there. It is sustained by the Almighty/Awesome, Impersonal/Personal, No-Thing-Ness/Every-Thing-Ness that is Eternal and is the bestower of Eternal Rest.

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Perhaps this brief description of the journey into the depths of Christian community can assist us to notice more fully the Spirit journey of the Christian groups to which we belong.

Also, I want to suggest that the reflections in this chapter can assist us to further flesh out our master view of the Christian Trinity. On the next page is a master triangle breaking down the Triune experience of God into twenty-seven inseparable, interdependent subparts. The upper left triangle breaks down our experience of the Awesome. It contains the angels of encounter described in chapter two. The lower triangle breaks down our Awe-responses to the Awesome. These are the angels described in Part Two – the angels of Trust, Love, and Freedom that move up the ramp of our soul from here to Eternity. They are the Holy Spirit. Thirdly, the upper right triangle breaks down our experience of being the Awed Ones, the Body of Christ, the



socially manifesting Kingdom of God, the “We” dimension of being Christian. This upper right triangle points to that third of the experience of God that the best of triune Christian theology calls “Jesus Christ.”

Finally, I want to remind us once again that there are many who experience “Jesus Christ” who have never heard of Jesus or the “Jesus Christ” theology. The Awed Ones are a universal community that can appear in any culture at any time, and they have done so often.

