

GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE: SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND ITS LOCUS IN
COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

American Christians, as a whole, lack a spiritual maturity that infuses the whole of their lives with Christlikeness. Additionally, Americans suffer from an epidemic of loneliness. These two problems are related. We will demonstrate that American Christians lack spiritual maturity, in part, because they have privatized their faith and made spiritual formation an individual endeavor. Furthermore, we will show that spiritual formation is best located and grounded within a community context.

Humans are social creatures. It is becoming ever more widely recognized that social isolation and loneliness are root causes of much psychosocial dysfunction. Humans do not function well if they lack close, beneficial, face-to-face relationships. Yet in the church we approach spiritual formation as an individual endeavor. We often view community as something desirable but inessential to spiritual growth and formation. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is the aim of this work to demonstrate that healthy spiritual formation must be located within Christian community and practiced as a community endeavor.

Chapter One provides a brief narrative illustrating the weakness of pursuing spiritual formation outside of a community context. Chapter Two explores biblical themes related to community, and asserts that to be formed in the image of Christ is to be formed by and in community. Chapter Three surveys two historical movements, Medieval Monasticism and the New Monastic movement, which understood community to be the seedbed of spiritual formation. Chapter Four discusses the wealth of evidence which inarguably demonstrates that loneliness and social isolation are root causes of both psychosocial and spiritual ills. Chapter

Five examines current trends and curricula in spiritual formation. And Chapter Six offers suggestions for nurturing spiritual formation within a community context.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone.”

Genesis 2:18 (ESV)

Loneliness is the first thing which God’s eye named not good.

John Milton, *Tetrachordon*

It is inarguable that American Christians comprise a Church in decay and in retreat. By every substantive measure, the American church is not growing. Indeed, when compared to population growth, the church in America is in net decline. In recent decades the church has failed to positively influence the culture in which it finds itself. Furthermore, American Christians have become harder to distinguish from the general population. We will demonstrate that in many cases when Christian lifestyles and personal and social dysfunctions are compared with those of non-Christians, the degree of difference is negligible.

It is also true that Christians are aware of these realities and are prayerfully seeking to change course, to recapture a defining sense of God’s mission in the world, and to incarnate Christ in their individual lives and worship communities. One hopeful sign has been a resurgence of interest in spiritual disciplines (also called practices) and the process of spiritual formation (discipleship). Many churches now feature classes and provide training to congregants on how to pursue a path of spiritual formation in their lives.

Still, something is missing. Despite the resurgence of interest in spiritual formation in the American church, change has been negligible, slow, and inefficient. Let

us grant, as the church has virtually always done, that a life of discipline in obedience to Christ is an unqualified good. If Christ-changed lives are what is missing in the American church, we must then look to the way we are pursuing spiritual formation in hope of finding the flaw which renders our attempts lacking in measurable success. We assert that one such flaw is that the American church has conceived spiritual formation as an individual endeavor that Christians practice in their solitary “quiet time” with God.

We will argue that if spiritual formation is to be truly fruitful, it must be practiced in community. We will demonstrate from biblical, historical, and sociological evidence that God desires to form Christ not solely in individuals, but in his people as a whole. We will examine and critique contemporary spiritual formation trends. Lastly, we will propose basic guidelines for pursuing spiritual formation within community.

Empty, Overspent, and Alone

Mike works as an associate pastor at a large urban church that claims a membership in excess of two thousand congregants.¹ His responsibilities include overseeing the church’s discipleship ministry and its leadership training program. Mike does well by the most commonly used metrics of church success. His church has an extraordinarily high number involved in small group ministries. Further, the church has recently launched a discipleship ministry that provides weekly Bible studies, and classes on life issues and stages.

Notwithstanding these positive signs, Mike feels troubled. From his regular leadership meetings, pastoral care visits, and counseling sessions, Mike sees a

¹The following vignettes are composites of actual people and stories shared with the author over the past three years. All names of individuals have been changed.

disheartening picture of his congregation forming. Debilitating emotional and relational ills rob many otherwise admirable Christian lives of their effectiveness. Many of his leaders rejoice in Christ publically, but privately they feel empty, overspent, and ill-equipped to face life's challenges. God seems distant to them. More alarming, God seems distant to Mike.

Mike knows, of course, that God is not distant, and so do his congregants. Mike is well aware that every Christian goes through periods of spiritual dryness. He is, however, frustrated and feels utterly alone. He counsels his congregants that these feelings are normal, that they will get through it, that they need to trust God to make himself known and to complete the work he has begun in them. Yet Mike feels as if he is doing nothing more than repeating the same oft-heard platitudes that he tells himself, and with as little result.

Mike and many of his congregants are utterly disciplined in their spiritual practices. They have experienced some degree of individual growth but now feel stalled in their Christian maturation. Their disciplines seem empty. Inexplicably, they feel lonely, isolated, and in retreat. Few hold out any confidence that they will find the life of "righteousness and peace and joy" promised by the Roman epistle (Rom. 14:17).

Each congregant suffers alone. Spiritual practices for this congregation are a private affair. Their gatherings are for celebration, worship, evangelism, and corporate prayer. Because the church makes every attempt to be fully accessible to unchurched people, there is no place within their gatherings for the highly spiritualized language of the inner life in Christ. When these types of conversations do occur, they tend to remain

at surface level. Even friends have no shared experience or shared language to draw upon in order to offer counsel or solace.

The Problem

Mike and his leaders are actually doing better than the average American Christian, although they would not likely be comforted to hear that. Many Christians do not engage in a rigorous discipline of spiritual practices. For them, the Christian life was presented as beginning and ending with an “altar call” or an invitation to salvation. Others view any attempt upon the part of the Christian to engage in his or her own spiritual formation as an affront to salvation by grace. They shun intentional spiritual formation as a form of works righteousness.

Still other Christians have been taught that full participation in the ministry programming of the church will result in spiritual maturity. They attend weekly services, sing and listen to messages, attend midweek Bible studies, and participate in outreach and service works, but do not experience life change. Some discipline themselves to a private devotional time, only to find its initial richness and sense of purpose slowly leeches away. For many of these reasons, Richard Foster writes, “Our world cries out for a theology of spiritual growth that has been proven to work in the midst of the harsh realities of daily life. Sadly, many have simply given up on the possibility of growth in character formation.”²

All recent studies point to the inevitable conclusion that American Christians have been ineffective at forming Christ within their lives and communities. Studies by the

² Richard J. Foster, “Spiritual Formation Agenda: Three Priorities for the Next 30 Years,” *Christianity Today* (January 2009), http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=72902 (accessed June 1, 2009).

Barna Research Group, and more recently by the Willow Creek Association, show that a disturbingly large number of Christians do not have a well-integrated biblical worldview and they feel stalled in their spiritual development. As a result, their lives bear few of the marks one would reasonably expect of authentic, committed followers of Jesus.

George Barna has found in his research that among those Americans who self-identify themselves as “born-again” Christians,³ only one-quarter make moral and ethical choices based upon scripture; twenty percent base their decisions upon whatever they “feel” is right; one-twelfth rely on what their parents taught in terms of values and principles; and ten percent choose whatever course that will minimize conflict.⁴ “In essence,” Barna concludes from this data, “this tells us that three out of four born-again Christians overlook the Bible as their shaping worldview influence.”⁵

While it is true that 25 percent of born-again Christians trust the Bible as their moral guide, Barna argues that we must ask how these same Christians view the nature of moral truth:

Among those who say they rely on biblical standards and principles as their compass for moral decision making, only half believe that all moral truth is absolute. The rest believe that moral decisions must be made on the basis of the individual’s perceptions and the specific situation, or they haven’t really thought about whether truth is relative or absolute. That means the bottom line is that only 14 percent of born-again adults—in other words, about one out of every seven born-again adults—rely on the Bible as their moral compass *and* believe that moral truth is absolute.⁶

³ Barna differentiates between born-again Christians and evangelicals. The two are closely related, however, and a majority of born-again Christians (65%) also meet his definition of “evangelical.”

⁴ George Barna, *Think Like Jesus: Make the Right Decision Every Time* (Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2003), 21.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Barna calls these data “shocking” and concludes that when all data are taken into account, 91 percent of adult born-again Christians and 98 percent of all born-again teenagers do not have a biblical worldview.⁷

It is also worth noting that while the data for born-again Christians regarding worldview formation is not positive, the data for other groups of believers is even worse. That Christians experience and manifest personal and lifestyle dysfunctions at roughly the same rate as the general populace suggests the general failure of Christians to develop a biblically-based moral compass and make their impact known.⁸ Findings like Barna’s remind us that how we think directly effects how we live—life choices that are made without regard to biblical wisdom inevitably yield ruinous results.

Evangelical Christians are not unaware of their lack of spiritual growth. The Willow Creek Association has undertaken a multi-year study of how Christians perceive their spiritual growth and development and how the ministries of the church relate to these.⁹ Over 200 churches and more than 80,000 Christians participated in the study. Participation included large and small churches, both denominational and independent, in all regions of the United States. The study sought to discover (a) whether churches are effective at catalyzing spiritual growth, and (b) how they can become more effective at doing so.

Willow’s study identified four major stages in a Christian’s spiritual development (Exploring Christ, Growing in Christ, Close to Christ, and Christ-Centered) and three major movements from one stage to another. The Willow study also identified beliefs and

⁷ Barna., 23.

⁸ Barna Research Group, Barna Research Group, <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdates> (accessed November 20, 2008); Barna, 23-30.

⁹ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2007), 12-24.

activities that catalyzed movement from one stage to another. In a finding which coheres with Barna's, Willow discovered that an increasing belief in the authority of the Bible stood out as consistently catalyzing growth through all three major movements in the identified spiritual stages.¹⁰

The development of personal spiritual practices was found to be an important and valued part of the spiritual lives of many of the Willow study's respondents. When respondents were viewed in the aggregate, however, it was found that many spiritual practices currently being promoted in churches—practices such as journaling; reading Christian devotional books and materials; and accessing Christian media such as music, radio messages, surfing Christian Web sites, or reading Christian books—did not emerge as significant catalysts of spiritual growth.¹¹

Willow Creek's Reveal study has been criticized by some. For example, some have noted that Willow's use of demographic and statistical data can sometimes be idiosyncratic and does not align with professional standards.¹² Willow's study also assumes that spiritual growth should track consistently over time, and that perceived plateaus or setbacks are signs that spiritual growth is no longer occurring. Tim Conder, author of *The Church in Transition*, disagrees with this reasoning, observing that spiritual growth is rarely linear but instead sporadic and often circuitous.¹³ Finally, Willow

¹⁰ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Follow Me: What's Next for You?* (Barrington, IL: Willow Creek Association, 2008), 34.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Andy Rowell, "Willow Creek Reveal's Second Book Follow Me Tells Us Very Little," Church Leadership Conversations with Andy Rowell, http://www.andyrowell.net/andy_rowell/2008/12/willow-creek-reveals-second-book-follow-me-tells-us-very-little.html (accessed July 1, 2009).

¹³ Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 107-110.

Creek's study presupposes that spiritual formation is largely individualistic, an assumption with which we strongly disagree.

Nonetheless, Willow's findings are consistent with others in this regard: American Christians, generally speaking, do not perceive that they are growing spiritually, or are not maturing as they think they ought to be maturing. Furthermore, the Reveal study illuminates the problem by equating spiritual formation with participation in church activities or the discipline of engaging in basic spiritual practices. To be sure, it may be difficult to envision spiritual formation without spiritual disciplines; however, spiritual formation is the end to which spiritual practices are an effective path. Spiritual formation may be difficult—perhaps even impossible—without spiritual practices, but spiritual practices do not necessarily guarantee healthy spiritual formation.

It is tragic that so many Christians have not found their ultimate sense of purpose and completion in Christ. The tragedy of this reality is compounded when we see how Christians' lack of Christlikeness has undermined the mission of God in the world. Because so many in the American church do not manifest Christ's character and love in their lives, the proclamation of the gospel has been robbed of credibility.

According to recent surveys, Americans outside the church have a jaundiced view of those who proclaim to follow Christ. Only 10 percent of those outside the church view born-again Christians positively.¹⁴ Evangelicals are viewed even more negatively, with only 3 percent of non-Christians viewing them favorably.¹⁵ According to research done for the Barna Group and the Fermi Project by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, non-

¹⁴ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 25.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Christians have a decidedly negative view of Christians. Christians are perceived to be “entrenched-thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire-building, convert-focused people who cannot live peacefully with others... having an us-versus-them mentality.”¹⁶ Dan Kimball, author of *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*, found similar attitudes among the non-Christians with whom he has interacted. Viewing Christians and the American church through their eyes, Kimball was provoked to say, “It isn’t a pretty picture. Based on outside observations of Christians, there’s no way I would want to become one of them.”¹⁷

Christians have an image problem, and it will not be fixed through better media campaigns, marketing initiatives, or increased efforts at social justice and reconciliation. Unless the efforts of Christ-followers are matched with real-life change, the credibility of most American Christians will not improve. Their message of divine love must be matched with clear evidence of Christ-likeness. This is where the topic of spiritual formation becomes critical for the church’s participation in the redemptive work God is doing in the world, the *Missio Dei* as it finds expression within America.¹⁸ Spiritual formation, properly understood, is about renewing the image of Christ within his people.

Spiritual Formation: A Working Definition

Richard Foster, with Dallas Willard, spearheaded a renewed interest in spiritual

formation in the late 1970s. While the topic is commonly discussed today, Foster recalls

¹⁶ Kinnamon and Lyons, 27.

¹⁷ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 32-33.

¹⁸ By *Missio Dei* we refer to God’s working in the world to restore all of creation to right relationship with the Godhead. See Van Sanders, “The Mission of God and the Local Church,” in *Pursuing the Mission of God in Church Planting*, ed. John M. Bailey (Alpharetta: North American Mission Board, 2006), 24; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 55-57.

it rare to find an American Christian, at least in the Protestant wing of the church, who had heard the term when he and Willard began their work.¹⁹ Now, although spiritual formation is commonly discussed and promoted, Foster laments, “Any genuine understanding of Spiritual Formation and its immense importance for the lives of individuals and churches is as remote as ever.”²⁰

That is not to say Christians do not desire to be like Christ. We take it as a given that all Christ-followers consider the forming of Christ in his people an unqualified good (Gal. 2:20). At the same time, many Christians are ill-equipped or untrained in either the understanding or processes by which they may intentionally pursue discipleship to Christ, individually or corporately. Often American churches have not prioritized discipleship or spiritual formation. To large numbers of American Christians, the topic of spiritual formation seems strange, and its specialized language rings foreign to their ears. It is thus important at this juncture to be clear about what spiritual formation is.

The church has at different times and in diverse communities used a variety of terms for the process and manner in which Christ is formed in his followers. The two most common terms in the contemporary church are “spiritual formation” and “discipleship.” We take these to be synonymous in meaning, if not always in practical expression. For the sake of clarity and consistency, we will use “spiritual formation” throughout this work. Nevertheless, we must strive for greater clarity in what we are actually describing when we speak of spiritual formation.

¹⁹ Richard J. Foster, “Spiritual Formation: A Pastoral Letter,” *Heart-to-Heart, a Renovaré Publication*, January 18, 2004, <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=744> (accessed January 18, 2009).

²⁰ Ibid.

Consider how ambiguous the term has become from one faith community or institution to the next. Gerald May defines spiritual formation as “a rather general term referring to all attempts, means, instructions, and disciplines intended towards deepening of faith and furtherance of spiritual growth. It includes educational endeavors as well as the more intimate and in-depth process of spiritual direction.”²¹ Luther Seminary vaguely offers: “Spiritual formation describes a whole host of practices or disciplines that enable us to grow in our relationship with God.”²² George Fox Seminary distinguishes between spiritual formation, which is said to be the “ordinary maturing of one’s relationship with God,”²³ and discipleship, described as the “maturing of one’s faith in the context of the particular beliefs and values of a faith community.”²⁴ While each of these definitions points in the right direction, they are nevertheless insufficient.

Dallas Willard helpfully distinguishes between spiritual formation and distinctly Christian spiritual formation. “Spiritual formation,” Willard writes, “without regard to any specifically religious context or tradition, is the process by which the human spirit or will is given definite form or character.”²⁵ Willard’s point is that each human being has a spirit, which is at all times being formed and shaped, intentionally or unintentionally. “Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts

²¹ Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit: A Psychiatrist Explores Spiritual Direction*, 1st HarperCollins paperback ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 6.

²² Luther Seminary, “Spiritual Formation at Luther Seminary,” Luther Seminary, http://www.luthersem.edu/admissions/community/spiritual_formation.asp (accessed June 2, 2009).

²³ George Fox Seminary, “What Is Spiritual Formation?” George Fox Seminary, <http://www.georgefox.edu/seminary/formation.html> (accessed June 2, 2009).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 19.

have been formed, period.”²⁶ This is true. We will, however, concern ourselves with only Christian spiritual formation.

Christian spiritual formation is an internal process that is guided, driven, and illuminated by God’s Spirit, whereby the human individual’s inner being is transformed and renewed ever more closely in likeness to the inner being of Christ (Phil. 2:13, Gal. 4:19). Human beings were created to reflect the image of their Creator. Christians are to reflect the image of their Savior, Jesus. The end result of spiritual formation ought to be, according to Robert Mulholland, “the fulfillment of the deepest dynamics of our being” by being conformed to the image of Christ.²⁷ Dallas Willard puts it succinctly and cogently: “Spiritual formation in Christ is the process whereby the inmost being of the individual (the heart, will, or spirit) takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.”²⁸

In recent years, spiritual formation’s focus on the inner life has been criticized. It has been observed that many claim to desire and undertake spiritual formation but show little evidence of changed lives. Some have rightly critiqued contemporary spiritual formation as being too focused on the intellectual, or on an emotional response to God experienced within a privatized sphere of an individual’s interior life.

In response to the reality that spiritual formation has, for many, become a compartment of life with no effect upon the whole, Leonard Sweet says that rather than spiritual formation, we should speak in terms of “human formation.” He argues that we must rethink how to approach spiritual formation, and with renewed vigor assert that the desired end of spiritual formation is a people living out their full humanity as God

²⁶ Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, 19.

²⁷ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 33.

²⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 53.

purposed it to be. This contrasts with the reality of the modern church's overemphasis on a propositional, intellectual, and unembodied mode of faith, which has resulted, according to Willard, in "multitudes of professing Christians who well may be ready to die, but obviously are not ready to live, and can hardly get along with themselves, much less with others."²⁹ This is, of course, a radical distortion of the classic view of spiritual formation.

The classic view of spiritual formation understands the spirit to be the core of the human individual. We might as well speak of "heart formation," but the aim is a terminology that recognizes the biblical understanding that the inner life controls outward relationships and actions. In Pauline theology, the distinction is between the inner and outer life of the individual, with heart (*kardia*) and spirit (*pneuma*) often used interchangeably.³⁰ Each human self lives as a unity in diversity, being comprised of both corporeal and incorporeal parts. But the Pauline understanding of the self gives priority to the spiritual nature of the self, out of which the rest of one's life is directed and shaped (Romans 8).³¹

Thus, the spirit is the seat of an individual's identity, which ultimately shapes the intellectual, emotional, relational, and behavioral domains of life. According to this view, to change the spirit is to change how one thinks, feels, behaves, and relates—to others and to the environment. If the patterns of one's life are not reflective of Christ, it is because his or her spirit has not been formed and shaped in Christ's image, notwithstanding one's claim of devotion to spiritual formation.

²⁹ Willard, *The Great Omission*, 53.

³⁰ J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self: Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

Some equate spiritual disciplines with spiritual formation. This formulation is ill-conceived; the concepts are not the same. Spiritual practices—disciplines such as spiritual reading (*Lectio Divina*), prayer, worship, fasting, confession, hospitality, and solitude—are tools that aid in the process of spiritual formation, but they are neither the totality nor end of spiritual formation. Indeed, although it is expected that the transformation and renewal of the inner being will result in a lifestyle reoriented around the heart of God, such is not the immediate aim of spiritual formation. Richard Foster notes, “External actions are never the center of our attention.”³²

In contrast, the aim of spiritual formation is the emptying of self that one may be filled with Christ. Ken Boa asserts, “The disciplines of faith are never ends in themselves but means to the end of knowing, loving, and trusting God.”³³ Simply trying to control our outward actions to reflect a perceived standard of holiness is nothing more than the construction of a lovely façade that all too often obscures the decay within (Matt. 23:27). Through the Holy Spirit’s radical transformation of the soul, however, the entire life is reshaped from the inside out.³⁴

Paul speaks of this in Philippians 2:12-13 when he exhorts his readers to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (NKJV). This is accomplished, according to the Ephesian epistle, by putting off the old self, and being truly renewed in the spirit of our minds (Eph. 4:22-23). Transformation, though initiated and empowered by the Spirit, is

³² Foster, “Spiritual Formation Agenda.”

³³ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image: Biblical and Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

³⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, 20th anniversary ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

challenging work (Phil. 3), which is why a disciplined approach is helpful in strengthening the spirit and training the mind.

Ultimately, lasting and authentic change in thinking, behaving, feeling, and relating can only be achieved by actually changing who the Christian intrinsically is. Jesus teaches this when he states that a bad tree cannot produce good fruit: change the tree, change the fruit (Matt. 12:33). Dallas Willard remarks that one can either love someone who spits in his or her face, or not. At the moment of offense, one cannot will or make oneself love the offender. One is either already that kind of person or not. Willard says, "To obey Jesus' command to love your enemies, you must be a person who actually can love their enemies."³⁵ That is the aim of spiritual formation—to manifest Christ.

Spiritual Formation in Community

Just as one cannot have spiritual formation without spiritual disciplines, so it is that true spiritual formation cannot happen in isolation. Christian spiritual formation can only be fully realized in community. In the balance of this work, we will demonstrate that apart from community, human beings cannot find wholeness and completeness. Community completes us because of how humans are designed by their Creator. To be fully human is to be whole relationally, both as an individual related to God and to fellow humans.

Biblical theology supports this argument. Furthermore, we will show that the biblical claims have been tested and confirmed in two historical movements, Medieval Monasticism and the New Monasticism, which have both been marked by lives

³⁵Alan Hartung, "When You Fail, Again: Realizing the Need for Spiritual Disciplines," *The Ooze: Conversation for the Journey*, October 3, 2002, <http://www.theooze.com/articles/article.cfm?id=350> (accessed July 7, 2009).

consistently formed in the image of Christ. We will then show how modern psychosocial research further supports the necessity of healthy community for human wholeness and health.

CHAPTER TWO

IMAGO DEI & THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.

Maria Von Trapp

In the beginning, God...

Genesis 1:1 (ESV)

"No man," wrote John Donne, "is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main."³⁶ Humankind was created by and in community. To be fully human is to be made whole and complete in our relationship to God and to others. This observation would seem commonplace to the ancient church. Indeed, it would be taken for granted in many cultures today. Americans, however, who are steeped in a highly privatized and individualized culture, jealously guard their rights and personal autonomy. American Christians do the same. However, although American Christians proclaim their devotion to community, they are as isolated as their unchurched neighbors.

What is needed is a corrective, a return to first principles. One such principle is that the divine design and purpose for humanity is inextricably linked to community. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to investigate the place of community within a biblically informed anthropology and ecclesiology. We will discuss the *Imago Dei*, the Old Testament narrative's emphasis on God forming, guiding, and redeeming a people, and the New Testament's clear preference for speaking of Christian life and formation as inextricably linked to the social and relational nature of the Body of Christ. We will demonstrate the biblical teaching that we who are called God's children are at our most

³⁶ John Donne, *John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels: With a Selection of Prayers and Meditations*, ed. Evelyn Mary Spearing Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 243.

human when our relationships to God, ourselves, and others are aligned with biblical principles.

Let's Start at the Very Beginning

In the classic musical *The Sound of Music*, Maria, the lead female character, is hired to be governess of a widower's six children. One day she learns the children have never been taught to sing, let alone harmonize, and she decides to remedy the situation. As Maria begins the lesson, she sings, "Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. When you read you begin with A-B-C, when you sing you begin with Do-Re-Mi." In the time-honored tradition of sound educational practices, Maria starts with the basics. A structure is only as sound as the foundation upon which it is built.

Similarly, when discussing the nature of humankind, we must start at the very beginning, with the creation of humankind in the image of God. Genesis 1:26-27 reads:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Since humans are created in the image of God, and are therefore said to be like him, it can be asserted that, insofar as is possible, humans should reflect the nature of God.

There are, of course, many attributes of the divine character that describe only the

Godhead. Characteristics such as omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience inhere within the Godhead alone. There are other attributes of God's nature, however, which humanity was created to reflect. Chief of these, for our purpose, is the Trinitarian understanding that God is community.

Perichoresis

The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that there is but one God, who eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persons of the Trinity are fully God, and one in nature, essence, and being. These persons are nonetheless distinguishable, not regarding their nature or being, but rather in how they relate to each other and to creation.³⁷

Some early Christian theologians sought to explain the relationships between the three persons of the Godhead in terms of a loving community. They coined the term *perichoresis* to describe the loving community comprised of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Perichoresis as a theological idea appears first in the writings of Gregory of Nazianzen (d.ca.389), followed by Maximus the Confessor (d.ca.662). The idea was further developed in Trinitarian terms by Pseudo-Cyril (ca. 650) and made popular by John of Damascus (d.ca.749).³⁸ Perichoresis comes from the root words *peri* and *choreia*, meaning “round about” and “make room or space for another,” respectively.³⁹ The term connotes the concepts of alternation, rotation, and interpenetration, as well as interchanging with or passing into reciprocally.⁴⁰ Because perichoresis is primarily a dynamic word, it is often seen as denoting a circle dance, or a divine dance.⁴¹

The theological development of perichoretic language to describe God, and by extension the *Imago Dei*, was primarily pursued in the East. The Western church focused

³⁷ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 251.

³⁸ Michael G. T. Lawler, "Perichoresis: New Theological Wine in an Old Theological Wineskin," *Horizons* 22, no. 1 (1995): 50.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁰ Verna Harrison, "Perichoresis in the Greek Fathers," *St. Vladimir's Theological Journal* 35, no. 1 (2006): 54.

⁴¹ Dwight Friesen, "The Divine Dance as the Hermeneutical Key to Ontology and Revelation," (2002), www.dwightfriesen.com/WritingEssays-Dwight-DivineDance.pdf (accessed September 15, 2007).

more on how individual humans existed in the image of God. For the Eastern Church, and those early theologians who worked to develop a perichoretic understanding of the Trinity, the triune God is the “archetype of true human community.”⁴²

The fathers argued that the three persons of the Trinity coinhere, without coalescence, confusion, or contradiction.⁴³ According to their concept of *perichoresis*, there is in God

...no commingling or loss of individual identity.... God the Father makes room for and interweaves with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; God the Son makes room for and interweaves with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit; God the Holy Spirit makes room for and interweaves with God the Son and God the Father. Father, Son, and Spirit are in mutual, interpersonal, and intimate communion.... The three-person God of Christian faith is essentially a God of dynamic communion in life, friendship, love, and peace. In the darkness of the human, therefore, this three-person God grounds and is paradigm for all relationality and communion.⁴⁴

God is love (1 John 4:8b), and the members of the Trinity are without disagreement and are in unity (John 17). The relationship between the members of the Trinity is typified by loving submission and deference to one another (John 17, Phil. 2). Love is the harmonizing theme that grounds the divine dance of *perichoresis*, and it is love that extends an invitation to humanity to be embraced within the divine dance (John 15:9-13, John 17).

Stanley Grenz picks up on the centrality of love within the concept of *perichoresis*, writing that “through all eternity the Father loves the Son, and the Son reciprocates that love.... Through all eternity, there, God is the social Trinity, the

⁴² Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (The Gifford Lectures, 1984-1985), 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 234.

⁴³ John P. Egan, "Toward Trinitarian Perichoresis: Saint Gregory the Theologian, Oration 31.14," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 39, no. 1 (1994): 87.

⁴⁴ Lawler, 52-53.

community of love.”⁴⁵ God is not a theological abstraction or a static reality to be quantified and defined. In C. Baxter Kruger’s words,

God is Father, Son and Spirit, existing in passionate and joyous fellowship. The Trinity is not three highly committed religious types sitting around some room in heaven. The Trinity is a circle of shared life, and the life shared is full, not empty, abounding and rich and beautiful, not lonely and sad and boring....The great dance is all about the abounding life shared by the Father, Son and Spirit.⁴⁶

Image-Bearers

The perichoretic dance of God is one of love, and the outpouring of that love is generative. The world is a manifestation of God’s creative love. The Genesis story recounts the God who is love and is community calling forth the world from darkness. The Spirit broods over the deep, an image of nurture. In the midst of the newly created world, God creates humankind, saying, “Let us create man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). God does not create just man, for “it is not good for man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18), but he also makes a woman. This is important, for it signals that humankind was meant to be in community as God is community, and it is in community that humankind finds its truest potential of being image-bearers (*eikons*) of God. Christopher Wright opines, “God’s creative intention for human life, right from the start and projected into the new creation, includes social relationship.”⁴⁷

Similarly, Jürgen Moltmann argues, “Likeness to God cannot be lived in isolation.

It can be lived only in human community.”⁴⁸ Moltmann continues,

⁴⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 47.

⁴⁶ C. Baxter Kruger, *The Great Dance: The Christian Vision Revisited* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2000), 22.

⁴⁷ Wright, 428.

⁴⁸ Moltmann, 222.

This means that from the very outset human beings are social beings. They are aligned towards human society and are essentially in need of help (Gen. 2:18). They are gregarious beings and only develop their personalities in fellowship with other people. Consequently they can only relate to themselves if, as to the extent in which, other people relate to them. The isolated individual and the solitary subject are deficient modes of being human, because they fall short of the likeness of God.⁴⁹

Although humans were created in whole and unblemished relationship with God and others, that aspect of the divine image became fractured. All sin is ultimately relational. First and foremost, humanity's relationship with God is disrupted.⁵⁰ Secondly, the disruption in humanity's relationship with God "takes on collective dimensions: the whole structure of society inflicts hardships and wrongs upon individuals and minority groups."⁵¹

The Missio Dei

From the fall of humanity in sin and onward, the whole of Scripture becomes the story of God reconciling humanity to himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19). The work of God in the world has been called the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God. God, upon his own initiative, seeks to overcome the enmity between himself and humanity, and consequently the rupture in the human's relationship to the self, and the disruption in humanity's societal connections.⁵² A significant part of God's mission in the world "is to restore healthy social relationships where they are broken through sin."⁵³

⁴⁹ Moltmann, 222-223.

⁵⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998), 918; Grudem, 502-503.

⁵¹ Erickson, 832.

⁵² Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 362-367.

⁵³ Wright, 428.

It has always been the case that God, in his divine wisdom, has chosen to work primarily through a people. In the Old Testament, God's reconciliation is manifest most clearly in the formation of the people of Israel, God's people. Beginning with the lineage of Adam and his son Seth, and continuing with the descendents of Noah and Abraham, Yahweh chooses the people through whom he will form a nation and by whom he will bless the world (Rom. 4-5). God commits himself to his chosen people through a series of covenants. Here again, the covenantal nature of God's grace further highlights his and humanity's relational nature.

O. Palmer Robertson writes, "The result of a covenant commitment is the establishment of a relationship 'in connection with,' 'with,' or 'between' 'people.'...A covenant commits people to one another."⁵⁴ When God cuts a covenant with Abraham, he pledges himself to Abraham and his descendents in faithful and loving relationship (Gen. 17:7). When Moses hesitates to confront Pharaoh, God promises to stand with Moses (Ex. 3:11-12). Later, when God delivers his people under Moses' leadership and draws them to Sinai, he declares himself there as the God who will not be distant but will instead tabernacle in their midst.⁵⁵ "The essence of the covenant is that God is our God and we are his people."⁵⁶

Sinai stands as the supreme event in the Old Testament narrative of God's establishment of a covenant people. Moreover, the covenant of the Law of Moses not only established the relationship between God and his people, but also called God's

⁵⁴ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, Abridged ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 1980), 6.

⁵⁵ Michael D. Williams, *Far as the Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2005), 134-135.

⁵⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (A Theology of Lordship), (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub., 2002), 95.

people to right relationship with those within and outside the covenant people. Israel is to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation that ministers to the pagan nations. Israel is to function among the nations as a priest functions at the tabernacle (Ex. 9:29, 19:5-6; 1 Peter 2:9).⁵⁷

The Cross and Community

For the Christian faith, Jesus' incarnation, ministry, and salvific work on the cross are the culmination and fulfillment of God's reconciliation of his people to himself. This work of salvation and reconciliation is perfectly expressed in Jesus. Upon his death and resurrection, Jesus continues the redemptive mission of God through his body, the church, which is all those who are found in him (Eph. 1). It is through the church that the "manifold wisdom of God" is now made known, according to Paul (Eph. 3:10).

The epistle to the Hebrews links the church to the people of Israel. Early believers are likened to the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, hoping to enter the Promised Land.⁵⁸ It is surprising that the topic of the believers' worship is not discussed more in this epistle, considering its focus on temple imagery. It is all the more noteworthy, therefore, when the author makes special mention and correction of those who have begun to forsake the regular fellowship and community of believers (Heb. 10:25).

The first Petrine epistle pictures Christ-followers as the flock of God. Peter's epistle draws together the shepherd and flock imagery of the Psalms, Prophets, and Gospels, and uses the shepherd/sheep metaphor to teach the social and interdependent

⁵⁷ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 255.

⁵⁸ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 78.

nature of the community of faith (1 Peter 5). As sheep are safest and most content when gathered together, so the people of God are to be in faithful submission to one another and acknowledge their absolute dependence upon the divine shepherd.

The Johanine epistles identify the people of God as those who demonstrate love for one another (1 John 3-4). The people of God are to be in loving community, welcoming fellow believers as friends, even if they have just recently met (3 John 1:5). The emphasis 1 John places on the community of faith as one which coheres in love echoes Jesus' exhortation to his disciples in John's gospel, which says, "By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one to another" (John 13:35).

The Body of Christ

Nowhere is the relational emphasis of the Christian faith more evident, and nowhere are God's children more passionately envisioned as a diverse people made one, than in Paul's writings. Paul implicitly speaks of the people of God as being a spiritual family (as we will discuss below). The dominant, explicit metaphor for Paul's conception of the church, however, is the Body of Christ.

Paul calls the church the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23, 4:12, 15-16, 5:23; Col. 1:18, 24). It is an organic metaphor intended to convey a living, growing, thriving organism made up of constituent parts which all cohere in a single, living entity. All

those who are spiritually reborn in Christ are joined together in love, breaking down negative, exclusionary boundaries of race and gender (Gal. 3:28). Upon God's initiative, the fullness of Christ flows into and through the Body of Christ (Col. 1:19, Eph. 1:23).

No Christian exists apart from the body, but rather each is a valued and gifted part of the body as a whole (1 Cor. 12:12). The health of the Body of Christ is found in the

organic health and working of its constituent parts (1 Cor. 12:26). The body is damaged when those who comprise it are not in harmony, or do not participate according to their gifts (1 Cor. 12:14-26). Indeed, those who might think themselves dispensable because their gifts are not widely acknowledged or acclaimed are, in fact, essential to the ability of the body to function (1 Cor. 12:22).⁵⁹

To be sure, each member of the Body of Christ is an individual, responsible before God for growth, discipline, obedience, and maturation. But Paul notes that spiritual formation and maturity are a community process as well.⁶⁰ Christians are to be equipped for ministry and for the building up of the body, Paul writes, “until we all attain to the unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children” (Eph. 4:12-14).

Paul’s metaphors for the church (temple, building, family, household, body) all share the common characteristic of describing a whole made of many parts, and the exclusion of any one would lessen the whole. Paul views the Christian individual as linked to the community of faith, and resists any impulse to speak of the individual Christian’s life and faith apart from community. To Paul, the unity and health of the community is of paramount importance.

Kith & Kin: Family in the New Testament

The body metaphor is crucial to understanding the New Testament conception of the individual Christian as inseparable from the larger community of believers. The New

⁵⁹ Robert J. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, Rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

Testament also consistently speaks of Christians in terms of kith and kinship. Beginning with Jesus and his disciples, the New Testament situates the inbreaking of God's kingdom within a surrogate kinship group comprised of Jesus and his followers.⁶¹ Joseph Hellerman asserts, "Jesus begins to deconstruct the idea of God's people as a localized *ethnos* that had prevailed since Sinai, in order to reconstruct the social identity of the people of God in terms of surrogate family."⁶²

In Mark 3:20-35, Jesus' family becomes concerned for him and the danger he is exposing himself to because of his ministry. While Jesus is teaching in a home, his family comes looking for him and calls for him to come out. He is told that his family is outside asking for him, and Jesus asks rhetorically, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (Mark 3: 33b). Mark records that in answering his own question, Jesus looks at those surrounding him in the house and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:35).

Textual evidence suggests that the house where Jesus was teaching was his own home.⁶³ If that was the case, then Jesus' words become even more provocative. The crowd both in and outside the home is so large that Mary and Jesus' brothers are barred entry to their own home and denied access to Jesus, a member of their immediate family. They are upset, and concerned about the danger they perceive Jesus to be in. Adding insult to injury, Jesus shows no concern for their plight. Indeed, there is no reading of the

⁶¹ Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 265.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ G.D. Kilpatrick, "Jesus, His Family and His Disciples," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 15, no. 15 (1982): 3-19.

text that softens the impact of what Jesus does at this moment. He rejects his blood kin in favor of his followers.⁶⁴

Jesus shows no concern for how his family will react to his words. Instead, he uses this moment to propound a spiritual reality that will be more fully developed over his ministry and the emergence of the early church: for Jesus, and by extension his followers, the “family” that matters most is the one found in Christ. To the extent one acts contrary to the Kingdom, Jesus establishes that one risks identification in being part of this family.

The call to make one’s relationship with Christ, and by extension his body, primary to other relational spheres will be a grounding theme for Jesus’ call of his disciples. To be a follower of Jesus is to reorient one’s life in service of Christ, even to the point of severing, if necessary, familial and occupational ties. The movement is not anti-family or anti-social per se, but rather “the leaving of familial and occupational ties for the sake of Jesus and the gospel dramatizes powerfully the movement’s sense of new priorities” and what those priorities could cost his followers.⁶⁵ It is not that birth families and blood kin pose a conflicting interest to discipleship which necessitates abandoning them entirely. Jesus’ telling others they must abandon home and family to follow him is part of a demand to reorient their lives around the spiritual family they will find in him.⁶⁶

After Jesus’ death and resurrection, his disciples and others (notably Paul) began to found communities throughout the Greco-Roman world. In the beginning these new Christian communities maintained a distinctly Jewish character and modeled much of

⁶⁴ Kilpatrick, 7.

⁶⁵ Stephen C. Barton, *Discipleship and Family Ties in Mark and Matthew* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 67.

⁶⁶ Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, “‘Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?’ Family Relations and Family Language in the Gospel of Mark,” *Journal of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2001): 9-10, 16-17.

their structure on the synagogue system.⁶⁷ Paul's mission to the Gentiles hastened an inevitable conflict over issues of the Torah and the divinity of Christ, and quite early in the life of the fledgling church these issues caused a separation from the Temple and the synagogues.⁶⁸ The separation from the Temple (especially after its destruction in 70 AD) and the synagogues was also necessary to transform the Christian church "from a religion shaped in nearly every particular by its early Jewish environment into a religion advancing toward universal significance in the broader reaches of the Mediterranean world, and then beyond."⁶⁹

From the beginning, Christians had met together for fellowship and worship in private homes. As the new faith began to distance itself from the synagogues and Jewish religious hierarchy, homes began to take on a more important role in the growth and spread of the faith. Households became the nucleus for the Christians' community life and worship (Acts 2:46, Rom. 16:5, 1 Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, Philem. 2).⁷⁰ From the birth of the Gentile church through approximately 250 AD, private homes were the primary meeting place of Christians, with modifications being made to smaller homes to allow additional room for church meetings.⁷¹ In fact, it was not until 250 AD that churches began meeting regularly in buildings larger than private homes, and the introduction of basilical architecture was not the norm until Constantine.⁷²

⁶⁷ James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 279-281.

⁶⁸ Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), 45-47.

⁶⁹ Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 27.

⁷⁰ Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine* (The Baker History of the Church), eds. John D. Woodbridge and David F. Wright, *The Baker History of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 115.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 116-117; Arthur G. Patzia, *The Emergence of the Church: Context, Growth, Leadership & Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 194.

⁷² Patzia, 194.

Not surprisingly, however, as much as the early Christians borrowed and adapted the titles of synagogue officers for their own use, it was the language of home and family that would play an especially important role in the shaping of the early church's consciousness. Ivor Davidson writes,

In its own way, the ethos of the house-churches naturally facilitated the characterization of the Christian community as a family network and fostered the emergence of Christian moral codes that projected the household as the context in which discipleship was given true practical expression....The domestic setting of the early churches was an important aspect of their moral as well as organizational character and almost certainly contributed to the spread of the faith.⁷³

The importance of family applied as a metaphor and spiritual reality to the church is a major theme woven throughout the New Testament. Jesus identifies himself as the Son of God, and his followers as his family. Joseph Kellerman argues that while Jesus used a variety of metaphors to describe the relationship between God and his people, the family metaphor was dominant.⁷⁴

Shortly after Jesus' ascension, Peter addresses the infant community of faith as *adelphos*, or brothers (Acts 1:16), a term again applied to the community in Acts 6:3 when the believers needed to be reminded that the needs of all in the community were important. In Acts 15:3 the leaders of the church in Jerusalem call themselves "brothers" of the Gentile Christians, thereby reassuring the Gentile Christians that they, too, were considered members of the family of faith. This kind of loving embrace of all those found in Christ typified the interactions of the Christian community (1 John 5:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:17, 5:19; Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; Heb. 13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2 Pet. 1:7). These verses all describe the love of believers for one another in familial terms, e.g., *adelphos* or

⁷³ Davidson, 117.

⁷⁴ Hellerman, 70.

philadelphia. In fact, so important is a Christian's love for his or her spiritual family that the lack of such love is considered evidence that such a person does not love God (1 John 5:19-21).

Earlier we noted Paul's preference for the metaphor of the body when discussing the people of God. The metaphor of family as descriptive of a spiritual reality is also vital to Paul's conception of the church.⁷⁵ The term *adelphoi* is "far and away Paul's favorite way of referring to the members of the communities to whom he is writing."⁷⁶ Paul does not consistently frame his addresses to the churches in familial terms simply as a matter of affection, but rather to promote the kinds of relationships the terms imply. He wants the readers of his letters to view and treat each other as "equal siblings, who share a sense of affection, mutual responsibility, and solidarity."⁷⁷ Paul consistently challenges his readers to "give their fellow Christians a degree of consideration, respect, and care which is currently lacking but which should follow from their identity as *adelphoi*—hence the reason for the emphatic use of sibling language."⁷⁸

In Ephesians 3:28, Paul constructs a new social reality wherein social distinctions outside the household of faith should no longer be valid within it. Within the family of God there is an equality rooted in shared kinship, and bound by love.⁷⁹ To be sure, there will be roles and functions undertaken by members, but these will be based not on gender, race, or class, but on *charism* as endowed by the Spirit.

⁷⁵ Banks, 56.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

⁷⁷ David G. Horrell, "From *Adelphoi* to *Oikos Theou*: Social Transformation in Pauline Christianity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 2 (2001): 299.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁷⁹ Peter Lampe, "The Language of Equality in Early Christian House Churches: A Constructivist Approach," in *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*, eds. David L. Balch and Carolyn Osiek (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 83.

Here is an area where many modern churches' preoccupation with the issue of women in ministry (especially leadership roles) is out of synch with the early church. While male leadership was more prevalent in the early centuries of Christianity, nonetheless women filled many varied roles, including roles of ministry leadership. Although the literature of the time gives short shrift to women, documentary evidence shows that women enjoyed a great deal of autonomy in the exercise of their skills and intellects, most especially where those were applied to running and managing a household.⁸⁰ Women as ordained ministers were, again, not the norm in the early church, but neither were such women uncommon.⁸¹

Women figured prominently in Jesus' ministry. We see the same when turning to Paul's ministry among the Gentiles. Although he has wrongly been accused of being a misogynist, Paul belies that with his frequent and, to a first-century mind, startling commendation of women ministry leaders. Paul praises Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Phoebe, and Prisca for their leadership within the churches. Additionally, Chloe, Lydia, and Nympha are all identified as leaders within their house-churches.⁸² Paul even names one woman an apostle, and though her gender has been disputed over the years, the documentary, textual, and historical evidence suggests that attempts to argue Junia was not a woman are more rooted in theological bias than in historical reality.⁸³

The latitude in ministry granted by the early church allowed not just women but people from all classes and races to exercise their God-given gifts. This latitude was

⁸⁰ Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, and Janet H. Tulloch, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 154-157.

⁸¹ Kevin Madigan and Carolyn Osiek, eds., *Ordained Women in the Early Church: A Documentary History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

⁸² Mary T. Malone, *Women & Christianity*, 3 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 69-70.

⁸³ Eldon Jay Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

made possible by Paul's making family the dominant metaphor for Christians' interactions with one another. Reidar Aasgaard's work on role ethics in Pauline thought is helpful here.⁸⁴

Aasgaard observes that siblingship was an important social structure of the period and the longest lasting of human relationships due to the vagaries of friendships and the early death of parents.⁸⁵ Adult siblings within the larger family unit were to preserve family traditions, provide a safety net for family members, and be a source of psychosocial support in the family by answering emotional needs and helping family members experience a sense of identity and belonging.⁸⁶

Aasgaard notes that certain expectations were assumed about sibling relationships. They were to be "close and trusting, emotionally intimate and positive. Siblings were to love one another and to show each other tolerance."⁸⁷ Furthermore, siblings were to take care and guard the family's honor, not only within the family but outside it as well. Conflicts, if at all possible, were to be dealt with internally, and great care was to be taken to ensure family harmony lest the family be exposed to shame and ridicule.⁸⁸ Here Paul's concern comes into sharper focus regarding the way Christians are treating one another (in some of his letters), and how their behavior will be interpreted by the surrounding culture.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Reidar Aasgaard, "'Role Ethics' in Paul: The Significance of the Sibling Role for Paul's Ethical Thinking," *New Testament Studies* 48, no. 4 (2002): 513-530.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 518.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 519.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Aasgaard, 519.

⁸⁹ Suzanne Watts Henderson, "'If Anyone Hungers...': An Integrated Reading of 1 Cor 11.17-34," *New Testament Studies* 48, no. 2 (2002): 195-208.

Aasgaard concludes by citing that Paul's concept of siblingship plays a vital role in understanding Christian ethical formation and praxis.⁹⁰ Similarly, in the Johannine community the focus on the familial nature of the community of faith resulted in a "focus on internal love, expressed in concrete acts that work to create the unity that is needed in order for the community to endure.... The community's mission of bearing witness that God is love required that they make this love present in the world, even if only within their own ranks."⁹¹

E Pluribus Unum

As this brief survey of the biblical record demonstrates, the Christian scriptures recognize the relationship of an individual before God but emphasize the community nature of *Imago Dei* and the *Mission Dei*. According to the biblical texts, God has created each human in community and redeems each human in and to community. Out of a disparate and diverse many, God forms a people who relate to one another with familial love and mutual submission.

This family is to be so tightly knit and unified in purpose that it is rightly recognized as a coherent whole, like a healthy body in which all the parts grow in maturity and strength, that the whole might be built up into the image of its creator. It is this family, this Body of Christ, that engages in the mission of God in the world. At God's invitation, strengthened by the Spirit and infused with the fullness that is Christ, the community of faith participates in God's reconciliation of the world to himself.⁹²

⁹⁰ Aasgaard, 528.

⁹¹ David Rensberger, "Conflict and Community in the Johannine Letters," *Interpretation* 60, no. 3 (2006): 288.

⁹² Wright, 22-23.

CHAPTER THREE

SPIRITUAL FORMATION ROOTED IN COMMUNITY

We must create a *scola* for the Lord's service.⁹³

St. Benedict

Love is our true destiny. We do not find the meaning of life by ourselves alone—we find it with another.⁹⁴

Thomas Merton

The life-changing experience of a relationship with God in the person of Jesus, lived out in community with fellow Christ-followers, has always formed the core of Christian spiritual formation. To be sure, Christians have understood their spiritual life in Christ in many different ways throughout their history, making broad conclusions difficult.⁹⁵ Spiritual practices and approaches to spiritual formation have varied widely from one culture to another. Nevertheless, commitment to sharing life with fellow believers has been the foundation of Christian spiritual formation during all periods and cultures of Christian history.

The importance of authentic community to spiritual formation can be clearly seen in three historical Christian movements: the early church, Western Monasticism, and the New Monasticism. In each of these, community is inextricably fused with the movement's conception of spiritual formation. Each one is typified by an absolute commitment to community combined with an intentional focus on spiritual formation.

⁹³ "Scola" denotes not purely a school in the academic sense but rather a combat unit in training. St. Benedict views the monastery as a place of training for spiritual warfare. See C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 2001), 29.

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, Naomi Burton Stone, and Patrick Hart, *Love and Living*, 1st Harvest/HBJ ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 27.

⁹⁵ Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 41.

Put differently, each movement viewed or views spiritual formation as something the community and the individual must actively do rather than expect spiritual formation to simply happen as a byproduct of becoming a Christian.

The Early Church

For the earliest Christians of the New Testament period, spiritual formation integrated all spheres of life in service to Christ.⁹⁶ *Koinonia*, the fellowship of the community of faith, was integral to their life of faith, and they expected their spiritual transformation would result in a new life in Christ that involved the whole of their persons expressed in active service.⁹⁷ The entirety of their spiritual experience centered on the person and work of Jesus.

These Christians understood themselves to be Jesus' disciples. Their understanding of what it meant to be a disciple encompassed more than just knowledge of Jesus' teachings and imitation of the life he lived. The early followers of Jesus understood that "the disciple is someone who is also profoundly united to Jesus as a person and who through that union shares in Jesus' own relationship with God the Father."⁹⁸

Most Christians of the New Testament period had not personally experienced Jesus during his incarnation. Their experience of who he was, and who they were in him, was mediated through the Old Testament Scriptures as illumined by the Spirit, through

⁹⁶ Bonnie Thurston, "The New Testament in Christian Spirituality," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 57.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Philip Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, Blackwell Brief Histories of Religion Series (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 16.

oral witness and the teachings of the apostles, and through their relationships with “other Christs” in the community of fellow believers.⁹⁹

Because of the early divide between Judaism and the burgeoning Jesus movement, the early church eventually removed its meetings from their original synagogue setting. Instead, the new Christ-followers, a swiftly growing number of whom were Gentile converts, began meeting in homes. The household setting of the early church further supported and emphasized the familial nature of the early church.

Because the early church met in homes, the ancient Mediterranean social structure of the household had significant impact on the character of early Christianity.¹⁰⁰ The common life of the early believers—a life of fellowship, shared meals, prayer, shared support of financial and ministry needs, etc.—took place within a network of home environments. Many converts were rejected by their blood-kin because of their new profession of faith, but found in the church a surrogate family.¹⁰¹

Active, regular participation in the communal life and worship of the church was expected of all. New members of the community were not fully accepted unless they had already proven and demonstrated their commitment to the community of faith by completing a rigorous catechetical process.¹⁰² Because the early church structured itself as a typical Mediterranean extended kinship group, individual members understood that personal rights, interests, and autonomy were secondary to the health and functioning of

⁹⁹ Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Patzia, 189.

¹⁰¹ John Reumann, “One Lord, One Faith, One God, but Many House Churches,” in *Common Life in the Early Church*, ed. Julian V. Hills (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 108-117; Burtchaell, 284-288.

¹⁰² Davidson, 272-278, 282.

the family as a whole.¹⁰³ The health and success of each individual member of the family was seen as being dependent upon the health and success of the family group.

Despite the inevitable rise of conflicts and destructive forces from both within and outside the church, the early Christian movements grew at a staggering rate over the first 400 years of existence. It is inarguable that the church's self-identification as a far-flung family rooted in the person of Jesus and flowing from the grand history of the Jewish people was an important stabilizing factor in the movement's early years. The church's emphasis on spiritual kinship and common life provided a strong sense of familial identity in the face of chaotic cultural changes. Their identity and witness as a kinship group into which anyone, regardless of ethnicity or gender, could be adopted also cleared the way for growth as the first missionaries and evangelists crossed all known ethnic and national boundaries in their efforts to advance the Kingdom of God.

The Monastic Period

Kevin Miller, writing for "Out of Ur," the online discussion site for *Leadership Journal*, tells of being contacted by friends working at a major Christian publishing house which was researching trends in spiritual formation. Miller writes,

After a few warm-up questions, they got to the heart of the matter: "What would you recommend for spiritual formation in our time?" "The monastery," I said. There was a long pause. "I'm serious," I said. Another long pause. "You're going to have to unpack that for us," they finally said.¹⁰⁴

Miller's friends can be excused for being skeptical about the relevance of monasticism to contemporary American spiritual formation. Monasticism has long been viewed with

¹⁰³ Hellerman, 214-215.

¹⁰⁴ Kevin Miller, "Spiritual Formation: We've Already Got a Proven Model, but Do We Want It?" *Christianity Today*, July 23, 2006, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/07/spiritual_forma.html (accessed June 12, 2009).

disfavor by American evangelicals. Monasteries are viewed as places of retreat from the world, and monks as those who are so heavenly minded they are of no earthly good. American evangelicals consider the cloistered, ascetic life of the monastery as being void of real-world significance. This jaundiced view, however, is insufficiently nuanced.

Contemporary Christians owe a debt of gratitude to those brothers and sisters of antiquity who pioneered and sustained the monastic movement. The eminent historian Mark A. Noll writes, “The rise of monasticism was, after Christ’s commission to his disciples, the most important—and in many ways the most beneficial institutional event in the history of Christianity.”¹⁰⁵ Surveying the vast tapestry of Christian history in the West, Noll asserts that “between the reign of Constantine and the Protestant Reformation, almost everything in the church that approached the highest, noblest, and truest ideals of the gospel was done either by those who had chosen the monastic way or by those who had been inspired in their Christian life by the monks.”¹⁰⁶

Assuredly, when the first monastics retreated into the deserts of what is now North Africa and the Middle East, the movement was one of dedication to God, asceticism, and separation from the world.¹⁰⁷ Certainly most of the first monks were motivated by a religious fervor to be alone with God. At the same time, without calling into question their devotion, we should also not underestimate the impact made upon the land and culture of the Roman Empire by the invasions suffered from foreign and indigenous peoples (most notably by the Goths) seeking to overthrow Rome’s dominion.

¹⁰⁵ Noll, 84.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Kristina Kruger and Rainer Warland, *Monasteries and Monastic Orders: 2000 Years of Christian Art and Culture* (Königswinter, Germany: H.F. Ullman, 2008), 12.

Suffering from chaos and violence on all sides, is it any wonder many wished to retreat from a dangerous world in search of a spiritual oasis of peace?¹⁰⁸

The invaders, after they pillaged and conquered, tended to settle down and assimilate into the culture. As Phyllis Tickle puts it:

During the long decline of its civil governance, the population of Rome was increasingly composed of illiterate barbarians who had grown weary of raiding the Eternal City and decided instead to take up residency and stay awhile.

Because Christianity was the religion of the Empire, many of these new raiders-turned-citizens adopted it; but they also adapted it as well.¹⁰⁹

By the late fifth century, the remnants of the once mighty Roman Empire were wracked by lawlessness and civil unrest. The inhabitants were largely illiterate. The effects of the Empire's fall were also seen in the church, where both laity and clergy were unlearned. The Christian faith in many areas had devolved into "a kind of animalistic, half-magical form of a bastardized Christianity" that bore little resemblance to the vigor of the early church.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, the church was often the only institution that managed to survive and provide some sense of relatively stable continuity in the midst of the ongoing societal upheaval.¹¹¹

During this period, communities formed by the early monastics became "'survival capsule(s)'" in the turbulent world of a collapsing empire, barbarian invasions, and the eventual emergence of new regional kingdoms in Western Europe."¹¹² From 500-1000 AD, the monastics took on the task of proselytizing and converting the barbarian invaders, then from 1000-1500 AD they attempted to turn a nominally Christian populace

¹⁰⁸ Kruger and Warland, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 25.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Kruger and Warland, 28-29.

¹¹² Sheldrake, *A Brief History of Spirituality*, 40.

into true believers and faithful followers of Christ.¹¹³ They did this by preserving the Christian scriptures, faith, and traditions, and mediated them to every culture in which the monasteries took root. They also preserved in their libraries and through their educational endeavors much of the Greco-Roman classical tradition.

As early as St. Augustine's establishment of a monastery in Thagaste in 388 AD, there had been a strand of monasticism that viewed the monastery as a place of learning and piety in the midst of society rather than at remove from it.¹¹⁴ By the early 700s AD, the idea of a monastery being at the center of society became a central rather than marginal characteristic of monasticism.

Moving into and through the Medieval Period, the monasteries in the West provided both a vital spiritual and societal function. "They found themselves at the center of society instead of on its fringes. From places of austerity, monasteries became places of service to God and the Christian community. The monasteries' new tasks lay primarily in the areas of education and study, relief for the poor, intercessory prayer, land development, and missionary work."¹¹⁵

In Ireland, monks worked mightily to preserve the wisdom and literature of antiquity in their libraries. They also began the development of literature in the vernacular. Both developments proved invaluable to Europe as a whole, as it began to rise out of the Dark Ages.¹¹⁶ Celtic missionaries played an important role in the spread of Christianity and the renewal of education and culture in the West. They were joined by

¹¹³ Stephen Neill and Owen Chadwick, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed., The Pelican History of the Church 6, ed. Owen Chadwick (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 61-139.

¹¹⁴ Christopher Nugent Lawrence Brooke, *The Age of the Cloister: The Story of Monastic Life in the Middle Ages* (Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2003), 36.

¹¹⁵ Kruger and Warland, 30.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: The Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 193-196.

many other monastic missionaries on the continent.¹¹⁷ Civil order and culture were restored throughout Western Europe, in no small part due to the work of these missionaries.¹¹⁸

Monastic Spirituality

The focus of monastic spirituality was prayer and meditation on scripture done within community, and the end result was a heightened love of God and love of neighbor expressed in a life of service.¹¹⁹ Monastic spirituality emphasized growth within community and service to those in need.¹²⁰ “Medieval spirituality was generally public rather than private, and tied to a wider range of issues than the desire for “personal growth,” a modern Western concept that would not have made much sense to a Medieval Christian.”¹²¹ Through monastics’ scribal efforts, the Christian faith and scriptures were preserved when they might otherwise have been lost, and through their lives and witness, those who could not read the scriptures for themselves were presented with “living sermons” in the persons of the monks who ministered to them.¹²²

At the risk of being overly reductionist, it can be argued that classic monastic spirituality is dominated by the contributions of two men, Benedict of Nursia (480-547) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153). Benedict, founder of the Benedictine movement,

¹¹⁷ Noll, 97-103.

¹¹⁸ Christopher Dawson, *The Making of Europe: An Introduction to the History of European Unity*, The Works of Christopher Dawson (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 188-191.

¹¹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism, The Presence of God 2* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

¹²⁰ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 348.

¹²¹ Ulrike Wiethaus, "Christian Spirituality in the Medieval West (600-1450)," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 108.

¹²² Ibid.

established a “rule” of life and the praxis of faith.¹²³ Monks living under Benedict’s Rule spent their day in communal prayer and worship, private meditation and scripture reading, and in manual labor—the order and nature of which were set out in the Rule of Benedict. Obedience and discipline in following the regimented order of life demanded by the Rule was an absolute. To be a Benedictine monk was to live unwaveringly by the Rule of Benedict.

Unlike some earlier monastic orders that stressed the need for monks to keep themselves separated from each other, Benedict made communal life a necessary foundation of all a monk did.¹²⁴ The monastery was to be a place where a community of brethren purified themselves in obedience to God. Unlike other traditions that had made a sharp division between the life of faith and a life of labor, Benedict asserted that all of life is to be expressed as worship to God.

Benedictine monasteries of the early medieval period usually kept themselves separated from the surrounding culture. Although hospitality to strangers was valued and required, the Benedictine monastery existed for the most part as an oasis of piety in the midst of an arid, pagan world.¹²⁵ This would change in subsequent years, however, as monasteries began to be centers of commerce, healing, and education.

In the intervening years between the death of Benedict and Bernard’s founding of a new monastic community at Clairvaux in 1115, monasticism in some monasteries had become diluted and corrupted. By becoming more involved in the world outside the monastery, some of these communities became warped by their interactions with the

¹²³ To what degree Benedict was the author of his Rule, or perhaps more a copyist and redactor of earlier works, is a matter of some scholarly disagreement.

¹²⁴ Brooke, 49.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

secular world. Unsurprisingly, as a result many monks had become lax in following the Rule of Benedict, and were enamored with wealth, privilege, and power. Bernard sought to bring a corrective.

Bernard worked to restore the purity of devotional life found in early monasticism without ceding in any way its place of positive influence within society.¹²⁶ Just as importantly, Bernard sought to re-envision faith as not just discipline in spiritual practices but as a living, loving relationship with Christ.¹²⁷ The Christian's relationship with Jesus was not ultimately proven or founded in theology, Bernard argued, but was to be proven through the experience of life in Christ.¹²⁸ Whereas it could be said that Benedict's spirituality was dominated by the otherness of God, his spirituality was typified by a joyous embrace of the intimate immediacy of God.

Where all strands of Western monasticism converge is on the profound conviction that spiritual formation, the forming of the totality of life in the image of Christ, is both intentional and communal. The monastic movement did not believe that being formed in the image of Christ happened naturally, or as a consequence of a laissez-faire approach to faith. Rather, true life change which results in the image of Christ being reflected in the totality of one's life is only the result of an intentional, disciplined focus on those practices which deny the self in favor of allowing the Spirit of God to work his will.

Furthermore, although currents within monasticism have always celebrated a life of solitude, monasticism's core has been predominantly communal in nature. One valued spiritual practice of classic monasticism, among many, is solitude. The classic monastic

¹²⁶ Lawrence, 173-175.

¹²⁷ Ivan J. Kauffman, *"Follow Me": A History of Christian Intentionality*, New Monastic Library (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 53-54.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

thinkers have asserted that a life in Christ is at its core a life in community. The monastic community of believers shares its meals, its prayers, and its labor. They live together, study together, and seek to be formed in Christ's image together.

Finally, as we have seen, medieval monastic communities were not completely isolated from the world. Except for a relatively brief period in the history of the monastic movement, monastics have valued engagement with the world in which they live. At the height of monasticism's influence in the West, the work of the monastery was a potent force for societal and spiritual good. The chief power of the monastery's influence was not located in a solitary monk living an isolated life of mystic piety, but in the monastery striving to be an outpost of the Kingdom of God, a community of people living out in unity their best understanding of what it meant to be faithful to Jesus.

The New Monasticism

For most in contemporary society, monasteries are quaint relics of an ancient era. Few have ever seen, let alone visited, a monastery. What little most people know of monasteries owes more to Hollywood and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* than it does to either medieval or modern reality. And yet monasticism still has much to teach and offer the ever-more pagan, chaotic, and lonely American soul.

Mark Noll argues, as we have noted, that the rise of monasticism was a major positive turning point in Christian history. Others believe that the modern church is on the cusp of a return to some form of neo-monasticism that may well prove as important and beneficial to the church and the world as the original movement. Phyllis Tickle suggests we may be witnessing and participating in a "great emergence" which will see a major shift in how we experience and understand the church—and she avers that

Christians are seeing in the Emerging Church movement the shape of things to come.¹²⁹

The experienced missiologist Ralph D. Winter has suggested the church may be at the start of a new renaissance during which the community of faith will see unprecedented growth.¹³⁰

Brian McLaren, arguing that the church has become ineffective and must undergo radical change, states, “The hard work of rebuilding community and family is essential.”¹³¹ Reggie McNeal claims that the church needs to change its scorecard, and instead of keeping score of the number of people involved, attending, or participating in church programs, we should be tracking the relationships people are cultivating.¹³²

Joan Chittister, a nun and member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, also perceives a spiritual restiveness among contemporary American Christians. She notes in particular an increasing interest in the monastic life. “The fact is,” she writes, “that people young and old, married and unmarried, flock to our monasteries even now, even yet.”¹³³ They come to learn, to partner in outreach and service to the poor, to pray, and to capture a sense of the monastery’s simple but rich sense of the Spirit.

A growing movement amongst younger American evangelicals is reacting against what it perceives to be a consumerist, imperial, colonial, apathetic church that has been

¹²⁹ Tickle, 26.

¹³⁰ Ralph D. Winter, “The Kingdom Strikes Back: Ten Epochs of Redemptive History,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1981).

¹³¹ Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 264.

¹³² Reggie McNeal, *Missional Renaissance: Changing the Scorecard for the Church*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 112.

¹³³ Joan Chittister, “Old Vision for a New Age,” in *A Monastic Vision for the 21st Century: Where Do We Go from Here?* ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterian Publications, 2006), 91.

co-opted by modern American culture. Related to but different from the Emerging Church movement, they call themselves the New Monasticism, and sometimes the “New Friars.”¹³⁴ One webzine notes that this grassroots movement, which is growing largely unnoticed by the mainstream institutional church, is one “whose book sales tower over their secular progressive counterparts in Amazon rankings; whose sermon podcasts reach thousands of listeners each week; and whose messages, in one form or another, reach millions of churchgoers.”¹³⁵ The New Monasticism has quickly expressed itself as a global movement of Christians who seek to re-envision the church, not as a collection of buildings, programs, and hierarchies, but as a people whom God is seeking to form to assist him in his mission within the world.¹³⁶

Like their predecessors in classic monasticism, New Monastics view community as essential to the biblical design for the church.¹³⁷ They understand full participation in the community of faith to be a biblical essential and a necessary counter to culture’s exaltation of consumerism. By rooting people in covenant relationship with God and one another in a particular body over an extended period of time, they seek to tack against the prevailing winds of contemporary culture, forces which divide and isolate rather than unify. One group of New Monastic authors observes, “Authentic community takes time. Like anything of value, it comes at a cost. Our culture of immediate reward and

¹³⁴ Scott Bessenecker, *The New Friars: The Emerging Movement Serving the World's Poor* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006).

¹³⁵ Zack Exley, “Preaching Revolution,” *In These Times* (March 14, 2007).
http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/3061/preaching_revolution/ (accessed July 2, 2009).

¹³⁶ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *New Monasticism: What It Has to Say to Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-73.

gratification resists this truth in the interests of consumerism.”¹³⁸ By rooting themselves in community and committing themselves to a single group of fellow Christ-followers, “we make promises and keep them; we enter into a vow of stability.”¹³⁹

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, echoing Benedict of Nursia, prescribes New Monasticism as the cure for what ails the modern church: “Christians in twenty-first century America are in desperate need of new spaces where the experience of a personal relationship with Jesus is not privatized but rather made public and active in the life of a community. What we most need are schools for conversion.”¹⁴⁰ Ideally, members of New Monastic communities cohere in a covenant of agape love typified by “faithfulness, steadfast love, self-sacrifice, patience, long-suffering ... loyalty, and promise.”¹⁴¹

New Monastics generally agree on the “12 Marks” which distinguish New Monastic communities from other communities of believers. The twelve marks of a New Monastic community are:

1. Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
2. Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
3. Hospitality to the stranger.
4. Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
5. Humble submission to Christ’s body, the church.
6. Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.

¹³⁸ Jon Stock, Tim Otto, and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 111.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “Conversion,” in *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*, eds. Jon Stock and Tim Otto (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 28.

¹⁴¹ Jon Stock, “Vows,” in *Inhabiting the Church: Biblical Wisdom for a New Monasticism*, eds. Jon Stock and Tim Otto (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 26.

7. Nurturing common life among members of intentional community.
8. Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
9. Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
10. Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
11. Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
12. Commitment to a disciplined contemplative life.¹⁴²

Some of the marks of New Monasticism are unlikely to be accepted by many contemporary Christians. For example, New Monastics' commitment to relocate "to the abandoned places of Empire" will not appeal to most suburban Christians, many of whom not only have no desire to move to downtrodden urban environs, but also find cities to be antithetical to a reflective, peaceful life. Nevertheless, other parts of their monastic rule are to be commended to all Christians. For example, the nurturing of a common life can only enhance a sense of solidarity and community. Furthermore, their ideals regarding submission, reconciliation, hospitality, and intentional formation are values all communities of believers would do well to adopt in one form or another.

New Monastics' view relocation to blighted urban neighborhoods as akin to the earliest monks retreating to desert areas in Egypt and the Middle East.¹⁴³ Some New Monastics view suburbia as an environment which has wholly sold itself into slavery to "imperial pressures and pleasures and rewards of conformity to the way of all empires:

¹⁴² The Rutba House, *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), xii-xiii.

¹⁴³ Sr. Margaret M. McKenna, "Mark I: Relocation to Abandoned Places of Empire," in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, ed. The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 14-19.

pride, power, and reduction of all values to the ‘bottom line.’”¹⁴⁴ Some might argue with these conclusions, however, pointing out that God loves those who live in the suburbs as much as those in the city. Furthermore, if the suburbs are so deadly to the spirit, is it not all the more important to establish beachheads of Christian faithfulness there?

Some New Monastics pursue a lifestyle of communal living that is not desired nor particularly well-suited or practical to many Christians. Furthermore, many leading New Monastics (e.g., Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Scott Bessenecker) fall to the extreme progressive end of the political spectrum, a fact which may hinder the acceptance of their message among those who lean more to the conservative side. At the same time, their emphasis on a shared life of service in and to Christ is a welcome change from our highly individualized, consumer-driven lives and church systems.

Certainly their emphasis on a shared rule of life and their adherence to a uniform code of spiritual essentials more closely align with Paul’s vision of the church than do many, if not most, of our contemporary churches driven by felt needs and marketing strategies.¹⁴⁵ The New Monastics’ dedication to a shared life allows them to know each other fully, and to remain united rather than torn apart when threatened by the realities of living in a world inhospitable to the traditional church but hungry for relationships typified by authentic and faithful love.¹⁴⁶

The church as instituted by Jesus and elucidated by Paul is to be characterized by “teamwork, partnership, trust, respect, and intimacy...the intimacy and devotion that

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴⁵ Paul R. Dekar, *Community of the Transfiguration: The Journey of a New Monastic Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 118-131; The Rutba House, xii-xiii.

¹⁴⁶ The Rutba House, 100.

develop between a group of people when faced with a common task or ordeal.”¹⁴⁷ It is an organic network of relationships unified by a common love, mission, and faith. The church is and has always been first and foremost a people, not a place or collection of ministry programs.

Additionally, the church as inaugurated by Christ and enlivened by his Spirit is a uniquely needed presence in the world, most especially in an era where people find themselves increasingly isolated and alone in the midst of many. As noted earlier, contemporary American society is characterized by its lack of cohesive families and communities. This lack has wrought an epidemic of societal, medical, and emotional ills. Our churches, too, have been robbed of their power and effectiveness by these same ills, an epidemic we will discuss in chapter four.

Signs indicate that the church is moving back toward health. Recent decades have seen a new emphasis on small group ministries, a renewed interest in Christian spiritual formation, and the emergence of the New Monastic movement. All these positive indicators show the church is awakening to the twin realities that Christianity is nothing without the witness of a changed life (James 2:17), and that relationships, not buildings and programs, are central to our identity and mission as the Body of Christ.

These are hopeful signs. It remains to be seen whether interest in monasticism resurges and whether the appeal of its new hybridized forms proves effective.

Monasticism’s foundational emphasis on establishing communities intentionally focused on forming and serving Christ in the totality of life reflects a value the contemporary church would do well to adopt as its own.

¹⁴⁷ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 169.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL & SOCIAL IMPACT OF COMMUNITY

How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Psalm 133:1 (TNIV)

We have asserted that community is essential to Christian spiritual formation.

This claim is consistent, as we have demonstrated, with the biblical text and sound theology. Humankind has been created in the image of the Triune God, from whose nature true community arises. To be in the image of God, to be the *Imago Dei*, is in no small part to be in loving community with God and others.

Given the fractured, individualistic nature of contemporary American society, it is essential that Christians keep this truth at the forefront of their minds and ministries: humans were created by God in loving community with God's self, to be in loving community with him, with each other, and with creation. Holding to this fundamental truth of human identity is of paramount importance. As Emil Brunner writes, "The most powerful of all spiritual forces is man's view of himself, the way he understands his nature and his destiny, indeed it is the one force which determines all the others which influence human life."¹⁴⁸ In contrast, when humans believe themselves to be purely autonomous individuals, able adequately to be image-bearers of God solely as individuals, they serve only to perpetuate the brokenness introduced to creation at the Fall.

¹⁴⁸Emil Brunner, "The Christian Understanding of Man," in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, ed. T. E. Jessop (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1938), 146.

Ian McFarland notes, “Because the image of God takes specifically human shape as a life with and for other human beings, its contours are fully resolved only in the destiny of humankind as a whole.”¹⁴⁹ When relational connectedness breaks down in society, when humans draw away from being image-bearers of God, the results are ruinous. “Societies that replace the biblical ideal with a focus on individual fulfillment,” Leroy Howe explains, “risk eventual disaster.”¹⁵⁰ Howe continues, “Human beings are created for community, and nothing accomplished by way of individual fulfillment and aggrandizement can fully compensate us for the misery suffered when the structures supportive of genuine community are compromised.”¹⁵¹

Broken people make broken communities. Of course, God’s mission in the world is concerned with redeeming and restoring broken people and broken communities to right relationship with himself and with each other. It follows that if Christians are committed to advancing God’s mission, they must also be committed to a ministry of relational healing and wholeness.

The potential beneficial impact of Christians forming communities typified by love, nurture, and care of others rather than self is enormous. We previously observed that the early church and the monastic period were both typified by Christian communities that were extraordinary transformative forces within their cultural milieus.

During the earliest centuries of the church and during the height of the classic monastic period, Christians were a force of great good, showing charity and care for others and for

¹⁴⁹ Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 30.

¹⁵⁰ Leroy T. Howe, *The Image of God: A Theology for Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 38-39.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

each other. Their effectiveness was largely due to the consistency with which the gospel was made flesh within their communities.

It is worth asking at this juncture whether or not modern social and psychological sciences also support our contention that healthy community is not only beneficial but also vital to the well-being of both human individuals and society as a whole. If our contention is correct that community is hardwired into humanity by its Creator, and that the lack of community consequently impedes individuals from being fully formed in the image of Christ, we should see corroborating evidence within the sciences most closely attending to the human condition.

In fact, evidence from sociological and psychological studies does support our contention. Community is, as the evidence demonstrates, essential to the healthy functioning of both individuals and societies as a whole. Without strong, beneficial relationships, individuals do not function well. Unhealthy people form unhealthy societies (although some would reverse that equation). It follows as a matter of human nature that the lack of strong, biblically healthy relationships will impede the ability of Christians to develop communities which manifest Christ and advance his mission.

Contemporary American Society and the Decline of Community

For most of history, the majority of human cultures have been collectivist rather than individualistic, by which we mean that most societies have prioritized the group, tribe, or community over the individual. In contrast, America's highly individualistic culture "is a relatively new player on the historical stage."¹⁵² While it is true that there are

¹⁵² Philip Cushman, *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Addison-Wesley Pub., 1995), 357.

many benefits to America giving high value to personal rights and the protection of the individual from predation by the state, it is nevertheless the view of some sociologists that we have gone too far along the road of individualism and have paid an enormous price for our radical personal autonomy.¹⁵³

Contemporary America is a fractured, fractious nation, and its churches show no lesser levels of dysfunction than does the society around them. Evangelical churches struggle to be effective messengers for Christ, but taken as a whole, they become less so with every year.¹⁵⁴ Epidemic numbers of Americans are anxious and depressed. The cause for the malaise creeping through American society and churches is increasingly being linked to a common pathogen. Far too many Americans are lonely, disconnected, and bereft of meaningful relationships.

There are a number of reasons for Americans' lack of meaningful relationships. For one, they are an increasingly mobile society, with the number of Americans moving from one state to another reaching record levels.¹⁵⁵ More than 43 million Americans move each year, a breathtaking number.¹⁵⁶ According to a study done by Mayflower Transit, one of the nation's leading moving companies, more than half of Mayflower's

¹⁵³ See Robert Neelly Bellah, *The Good Society*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991), 19-51; Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 319-335; see also Peter Morrall, *Sociology and Health: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵⁴ David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

¹⁵⁵ Haya El Nasser and Paul Overberg, "Millions More Americans Move to New States," *USA Today*, November 30, 2007, http://usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-11-29-Mobility_N.htm (accessed December 5, 2007).

¹⁵⁶ Mayflower Transit, "Americans on the Go: More Than Half of People Moving in 2006 Have Done So More Than Once in the Last Five Years," Mayflower Transit, <http://www.1888pressrelease.com/american-on-the-go-more-than-half-of-people-moving-in-2006-pr-mfy148r71.html> (accessed December 5, 2007).

customers who had moved in 2006 had moved at least one additional time in the previous five years.¹⁵⁷

These are not new trends. The numbers over the past few decades have been remarkably stable. As a percentage of total population, roughly 16-20 percent of Americans move every year.¹⁵⁸ Think of that for a moment: in any given year, one out of five Americans is new to his or her neighborhood. If churchgoers, they are new to their churches. The most common reason for moving is a change in job or a job transfer.¹⁵⁹ The impact of this mobility on an individual's relational network is nothing short of staggering. Every year, 20 percent of Americans are faced with not only the prospect of settling in at a new job, neighborhood, school, or church, but also forming new friends, new neighbors, new co-workers, and new co-worshippers—only to have a significant number of those new relationships fractured when those people themselves move within the next five years. Americans have effectively become a nation of strangers living hospitably with strangers.

"Individualism," David G. Myers writes, "is as American as baseball, hot dogs, and the fourth of July."¹⁶⁰ This is not a new feature of American life. Americans have long been known as a fiercely independent people, as Alex de Tocqueville observed in the early 1800s.¹⁶¹ Scholars who study social change in America note that Americans'

level of engagement with one another has long been somewhat cyclical, but the past few

¹⁵⁷ Mayflower Transit.

¹⁵⁸ James Jasper, "Restless Nation: Starting over in America," The University of Chicago Press, <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/394786.html> (accessed December 5, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ About.com, "What Moves Americans to Move?" under "U.S. Government Info," <http://usgovinfo.about.com/library/weekly/aa060401a.htm> (accessed December 5, 2007).

¹⁶⁰ David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 161.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

decades have nonetheless been marked by a precipitous decline in voluntary social affiliations.¹⁶²

The ongoing entrenchment of radical individualism within American society has had a “corrosive” effect upon the American family.¹⁶³ Families are no longer the support structures and reservoirs of relational support they once were. Consider this:

Over the past 30 years, the traditional American family has undergone dramatic structural changes, as evidenced by double-digit increases in the rates of divorce, remarriage, cohabitation, and single-parent families. As of 1991, married couples with children represented only 37 percent of all families and 26 percent of all households in the United States. Demographers estimate that more than half of today’s children will spend some time growing up in a single-parent family. In sum, most young Americans are likely to spend part of their childhood in a disrupted-family structure.¹⁶⁴

As a result of this family disruption, young adults reared in these families are generally much more materialistic and exhibit much higher levels of compulsive consumption than those raised in intact families.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, even after taking into account the socio-economic disparities and other factors between intact families and disrupted families, the study found that children of disrupted families were at risk of a host of developmental problems.¹⁶⁶ In contrast, according to studies done on the positive benefits derived from being in healthy community with others, “even in the poorest neighborhoods,” researchers found “positive personal connections were associated not just with lower

¹⁶² Putnam, 25.

¹⁶³ Myers, 182.

¹⁶⁴ Aric Rindfleisch, James E. Burroughs, and Frank Denton, "Family Structure, Materialism, and Compulsive Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 23, no. 4 (1997): 312.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

crime rates but also less drug use among young people, fewer unwanted teen pregnancies, and a rise in children's academic performance."¹⁶⁷

America is a media nation, captivated by electronic entertainment and the phenomenal advantages offered by the World Wide Web. Yet Americans' attachment to electronic media has had a deleterious effect upon our relational connectedness. Will Miller, a psychotherapist and campus minister at Purdue University, along with his colleague Glenn Sparks, head of the communications department at Purdue, have surveyed studies in the areas of mobility and media and their impact on society, and have found that we are a nation of depressed, media-obsessed people. According to their research, in the years since World War II, the rate of major depression as a clinical disorder has doubled. If the rise continues at current rates, depression will soon become the second most disabling disorder, second only to heart disease, within the next two decades.¹⁶⁸

Miller and Sparks further observe that these numbers only refer to those who have been diagnosed clinically. They write, "Therapists will readily testify that many of their patients who fail to meet the criteria for clinical depression are nonetheless suffering from milder forms of the problem."¹⁶⁹

Miller and Sparks also found in their study that we are substituting media for people:

- Almost 60% of children watch at least two hours of TV each day.
- Roughly one-quarter of America's dinners are eaten while watching TV.

¹⁶⁷ Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 291.

¹⁶⁸ Will Miller and Glenn Grayson Sparks, *Refrigerator Rights: Creating Connections and Restoring Relationships* (New York: Perigee Book, 2002), 70.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

- Four of every five adults in the United States reported that watching TV with their children is a “family activity.”
- Increasingly, Americans are forming parasocial relationships (relationships highly charged with emotion and giving a feeling of intimate connection) with fictional TV characters.
- The United States leads the world in Internet users. It has 165 million Internet users (at time of authors’ writing), adding an additional 10 million per month. Japan comes in a distant second with 50 million users online.¹⁷⁰

The Internet is a marvel and provides much value to Americans’ lives.

Nonetheless, online relationships, however well they mimic face-to-face relationships, cannot and do not suffice as a relational support network.¹⁷¹ Researchers have found that online communication technologies can assist in the ongoing maintenance and continuation of close relationships already forged during periods of physical proximity.¹⁷² For those without relational support structures, namely those who need to develop positive, meaningful relationships, most Internet communication technologies actually exacerbate feelings of loneliness, a lack of a sense of well-being, and poor social involvement.¹⁷³ Although individuals making high use of the Internet and social

¹⁷⁰ Miller and Sparks, 133-134, 148.

¹⁷¹ It is sometimes said that the rise in Internet usage proves that Americans are becoming more social since they are spending more time on the Internet, often participating in social networking sites instead of passively watching television. In fact, Americans are increasing their time watching television while concurrently spending more time on the Internet than ever before. See James Hibberd, “Nielsen: TV Use at All-Time High,” THR.com, November 24, 2008, <http://www.thrfeed.com/2008/11/nielsen-tv-use.html> (accessed July 7, 2009).

¹⁷² Robert Kraut et al., “Internet Paradox Revisted,” *Journal of Social Issues* 58, no. 1 (2002).

¹⁷³ Kraut et al.; Erik Wästlund, Torsten Norlander, and Trevor Archer, “Internet Blues Revisted: Replication and Extension of an Internet Paradox Study,” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 4, no. 3 (2001): 385-391.

networking technologies feel connected to others, they also feel a great deal of “emptiness and restlessness due to the lack of intimate relationships.”¹⁷⁴

These negative feelings are probably experienced because, at least in part, the kinds of meaningful relationships that bring enhanced well-being and social involvement occur almost exclusively where the interaction is constant, local, and typified by trust and reciprocity.¹⁷⁵ Both reciprocity and trust require time and proximity. According to researchers, it is in day-to-day relational interactions, where actions and visual physical indicators can be compared and assessed against spoken declarations, that reciprocity and trust are developed, which in turn form the basis of relational intimacy. “Healthy relationships demand a higher level of mutuality, responsibility, commitment, and accountability” than can ever be provided by purely online interactions.¹⁷⁶ It is simply the case that “strong relationships developed online are comparatively rare,” and “online relationships are weaker on average than those formed and maintained offline.”¹⁷⁷

Although Americans are increasingly aware of the problem of isolation and loneliness, they nevertheless allow themselves to grow ever more isolated from one another. Americans are surrounded by opportunities to join others in community but consistently fail to engage. The distractions of work, lengthening commutes, suburban sprawl, electronic media, and largely individualized forms of entertainment are all factors in their isolation.¹⁷⁸ Some companies, such as Starbucks, have attempted to recreate the

¹⁷⁴ Eric J. Moody, "Internet Use and Its Relationship to Loneliness," *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 4, no. 3 (2001): 394.

¹⁷⁵ Jeffrey A. Simpson, "Psychological Foundations of Trust," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 5 (2007); Linda D. Moum, David R. Schaefer, and Jessica L. Collett, "The Value of Reciprocity," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (June 2007).

¹⁷⁶ Miller and Sparks, 150.

¹⁷⁷ Kraut et al., 69.

¹⁷⁸ Putnam, 277-284.

social ambiance and potential of the village square, the village pub, the corner diner—those places where one could expect the random meet-and-greet of friends.

Notwithstanding their efforts, most Americans do not have a “third-place” wherein they find community and relational satisfaction, but are instead increasingly “bored, isolated, and preoccupied with material things.”¹⁷⁹

A sharply increasing number of people find that their spouse is the only person in whom they can confide, raising the question that if people are deprived of their spouse through illness or other happenstance, or are otherwise unable to rely on their spouses for emotional support, to whom will they turn?¹⁸⁰ In 1985, 75 percent of people surveyed said they had at least one friend in whom they could confide, but by 2004 that number had dropped to only 50 percent.¹⁸¹ Relational isolation has become a staggering health problem. Dr. James House writes that medical studies have found “the magnitude of risk associated with social isolation is comparable with that of cigarette smoking and other major biomedical and psychosocial risk factors.”¹⁸²

The Lonely Leading the Lonely

The American church is ailing along with the rest of society, and the lack of authentic community that plagues its members may well be one of the causes. As noted earlier, research done by George Barna and the Willow Creek Association documents the severe problems endemic to the American church. David T. Olson, director of the

¹⁷⁹ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 1999), 5.

¹⁸⁰ Shankar Vedantam, "Social Isolation Growing in U.S., Study Says," *The Washington Post*, June 23, 2006.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² James S. House, "Social Isolation Kills, but How and Why?" *Psychosomatic Medicine* 63, no. 3 (2001): 273-274.

American Church Research Project, believes from his investigations that the American church's problems are far worse than even Barna imagined, and unequivocally declared that the church is in the midst of a dire crisis.¹⁸³

Individualism and societal isolation is as much a problem for ministry leaders as it is for those they lead. Indeed, it has been noted that pastoral loneliness is a terrible paradox: how can one spend so much time in the company and service of others and yet feel so alone?¹⁸⁴ Ministry leaders are no more immune from the societal ills of the culture in which they live than is the general public they serve. If congregants struggle to make authentic community central to their lives and spiritual formation, it is in no small part because their leaders struggle to do so as well.

It might seem counterintuitive to claim that ministry leaders in America are not invested in community. Pastors are almost always seen as highly relational people with excellent people skills. Successful pastors have the skill sets and personal charisma requisite to attract, provide value to, and mobilize significant numbers of people. Most pastors in America are convinced of the need for small group ministries, recognizing the relational opportunities they afford congregants. By and large, pastors like people. How then may it be argued that pastors are not, on the whole, fully committed to community as a necessity of spiritual growth and formation? The evidence that many pastors are not fully committed to this goal is found in how they live their lives and structure their ministry environments, demonstrated in a number of studies on pastoral burnout.

¹⁸³Olson, 33-45.

¹⁸⁴Ruth Haley Barton, "When the Buck Stops Here: Dealing with the Loneliness of Leadership" (lecture, National Pastors Convention, San Diego, CA, February 10, 2009).

The phrase “pastoral burnout” summarizes a host of factors resulting in a ministry professional either leaving or contemplating leaving full-time vocational ministry in favor of other work. One United Methodist study found that ten years after ordination, 41 percent of ministers in that denomination had left full-time ministry. After twenty years, only 42 percent remained.¹⁸⁵ A 1998 study of fifteen denominations found that by ages 45-50, 33 percent of ordained ministers had left full-time ministry.¹⁸⁶ For many of these, burnout was a contributing factor. In virtually all instances, pastors left full-time ministry as a result of unresolved or irresolvable institutional or interpersonal problems. “The greatest interpersonal problems were feelings of loneliness, isolation, and inadequate boundaries between ministry and family life.”¹⁸⁷ These are all contributing factors to burnout.

Feelings of loneliness and isolation are epidemic among ministry professionals. One study found that loneliness or isolation was a contributing factor to 76 percent of ministers leaving the profession, while 55 percent of pastors who stayed in full-time ministry also complained of severe feelings of loneliness and isolation.¹⁸⁸ Of pastors who stay in ministry, surveys have found that as many as 45 percent have experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence.¹⁸⁹ A study of five major denominations found that almost 51 percent of pastors in those denominations identified loneliness and isolation as being significant to their choice to

¹⁸⁵ Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Pastors in Transition: Why Clergy Leave Local Church Ministry*, Pulpit & Pew (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 28.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 117.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Todd Wilson, Brad Hoffmann, and CareGivers Forum, *Preventing Ministry Failure: A Shepherdcare Guide for Pastors, Ministers and Other Caregivers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 31.

end their vocation in ministry.¹⁹⁰ One obvious reason for pastors' loneliness and isolation is that fully 70 percent of them do not have someone in their lives they consider a close friend.¹⁹¹

This statistic regarding friendship is not surprising. As one writer notes, "Set apart by their ordination, they've been schooled to believe they can't have friendships with their parishioners."¹⁹² Additionally, many pastors do not stay at one church long enough to build truly lasting friendships. The average pastor leaves a church in five years or less, a fact made all the sadder when one considers that a pastor typically has the greatest ministry impact at a church during the fifth through fourteenth years of his or her pastorate.¹⁹³

Stanley Grenz observes that many pastors try to locate their sense of self-identity in their work. "It doesn't take long," he reveals, "before we find ourselves working, even overworking, ourselves in a never-ending quest to produce an ever-increasing output and thereby to attain an ever-elusive standard of success or to earn an ever-fleeting sense of esteem."¹⁹⁴ We misunderstand work, he concludes, "when we look to our work to provide what God never intended it to."¹⁹⁵

Pastors find it a challenge to find fulfillment in their work. Congregational expectations are high, and success (lives changed in service to Christ) is so rarely

¹⁹⁰ Hoge and Wenger, 237.

¹⁹¹ Wilson, Hoffmann, and CareGivers Forum, 31.

¹⁹² Bob Wells, "It's Okay to Go There: The Place of Friendship in Ministry," *Pulpit & Pew: Research on Pastoral Leadership* (2003), <http://www.pulpitandpew.duke.edu/friendship.htm> (accessed March 25, 2009).

¹⁹³ H. B. London and Neil B. Wiseman, *Pastors at Greater Risk*, Rev. ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2003), 34.

¹⁹⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, "Burnout: The Cause and Cure for a Christian Malady," *Currents in Theology & Mission* 26, no. 6 (1999): 427.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

quantifiable.¹⁹⁶ How does one quantify life change when it is more often than not incremental and sporadic? How does one do a cost benefit analysis on hours spent in prayer, study, or simple pastoral care? By what measure do we track the rise or fall of spiritual health on a week-by-week basis?

Congregants can be distressingly critical of how pastors spend their time. Needy individuals or constituencies are often convinced that the pastor spends time and care on others that would have been more appropriately lavished on them. It sometimes seems as if every congregational member has declared him or herself an expert on all aspects of ministry, and is ready, willing, and able to share his or her expertise with the pastor by phone, text, e-mail, and all other forms of communication. Pastors come to feel misused by their congregations and begin to draw away in hurt. Lacking a close network of friends outside their congregations to which they can turn to for support, they become lonely and withdrawn. This kind of loneliness can metastasize into doubt and toxic self-hatred. "No wonder," Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write, "pastors often seem so lonely; self-hate creates a person who cannot make friends worth having."¹⁹⁷

It might be thought that better time management or the accelerated development of skill sets necessary for modern ministry would alleviate the problem of pastoral burnout. Approaching the problem from that perspective, however, misses the complexity of issues underlying burnout. Burnout often occurs not because pastors manage their time ineffectively, or because they lack the skill sets necessary to be competent at their jobs,

¹⁹⁶ Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, "The Limits of Care: Burnout as an Ecclesial Issue," *Word & World* X, no. 3 (1990): 251.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

but because they lack whole and healthy support systems of close-knit relationships among their families and friends.¹⁹⁸

Many pastors are either predisposed to or fall into a kind of narcissism that is fed by congregants' unhealthy view of the pastor as a unique conduit to God.¹⁹⁹ A pastor's narcissism or unhealthy need for affirmation can place his or her relationship with work at odds with family and friends. "The pastor who is admired as a hero at work may be seen as something considerably less at home, setting up a negative feedback loop."²⁰⁰ Congregants mirror the image the pastor wishes to see. In contrast, friends and family confront the pastor with reality. Because many pastors fear to be seen in the fullness of their flawed humanity, they distance themselves from close friends and family who do not validate their grandiose view of self.

For those pastors who struggle with narcissistic tendencies, the commitment to personal relationships and reshaping their churches into fully relational communities entails an additional challenge. The type of leaders needed to form and maintain organic communities are not those who draw significant attention to self. Leaders devoted to community will find themselves having to re-envision the role of "leader" from "special/gifted person-in-charge," who is the focus of the community's attention and devotion, to being the "social architect," who creates deep and meaningful experiences for others in which they can exhort, encourage, and motivate one another.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ David C. Olsen and William N. Grosch, "Clergy Burnout: A Self Psychology and Systems Perspective," *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 45, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 297-304.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 300-301.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008), 86.

It has also been found that there is a much lower incidence of burnout among pastors who invest time and energy in their spiritual formation. Pastors who perceive that they are highly connected to God experience burnout at much lower rates than those who allow the demands of their job to crowd out spiritual disciplines.²⁰² In contrast, “the less one feels oneself in intimate relationship with the Divine, the greater the likelihood of burnout.”²⁰³

Leading under any circumstance is difficult. Leading a church is often an especially challenging and draining experience. If a pastor wishes to avoid burnout, he or she must actively attend to his or her spiritual life and vitality. “It is imperative,” MaryKate Morse advises, “that we eat regularly from Christ’s table. We need to spend time in our spiritual closets to clear our heads of the constant buzz of life. We should not lead or attempt to influence others without preparing ourselves.”²⁰⁴ As we have seen, the support and nurture of the community of faith is an important part of this preparation. Ministry leadership is often draining. Healthy integration and full participation in community life, however, is restorative.

Many pastors, regrettably, do not attend to their spiritual health. They prioritize their time so that it is filled with the constant “work” of ministry, and rarely invest systematic time for personal devotion or spiritual disciplines, in community or alone.²⁰⁵

Kevin Harney, a pastor and pastoral leadership consultant asserts, “Too often they lack an

²⁰² Jonathan Golden et al., “Spirituality and Burnout: An Incremental Validity Study,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 115-125.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁰⁴ MaryKate Morse, *Making Room for Leadership: Power, Space and Influence* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 158.

²⁰⁵ Ruth Haley Barton, “Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership,” (lecture, National Pastors Convention, San Diego, CA, February 10, 2009); Kevin Harney, “Leadership from the Inside Out: How a Leader Guards and Grows His Soul,” (lecture, National Pastors Convention, San Diego, CA, February 11, 2009).

examined inner life shaped by the Holy Spirit. This vacancy leads to actions and decisions that compromise pastors' ministries, damage their relationships, and undermine their integrity."²⁰⁶

Community and the *Missio Dei*

American-style capitalism has produced a wondrous array of benefits. As with any good thing, however, capitalism has given rise to dysfunction as well. One of these ills, consumerism (also referred to as materialism), is directly related to loneliness. Tim Kasser, Associate Professor of Psychology at Knox College, writes that current research shows that

...materialistic values are associated with making more antisocial and self-centered decisions involving getting ahead rather than cooperating. As a result, others in the community are treated as objects to be manipulated and used. Materialistic values also conflict with concern for making the world a better place, and the desire to contribute to equality, justice, and other aspects of civil society.²⁰⁷

Christians agree that the church is called to serve others. The church, which is the Body of Christ, should be characterized by love, mutual submission, and preferring the needs of others to the desires of self (Luke 6:27-35, John 13:34-35, Rom. 12:9-10, Phil. 2:3).

Regrettably, it can be persuasively argued that rather than providing a counterculture of love to the world, the church has instead become just as materialistic as the world it is supposed to serve.

Ronald Sider argues that "evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the

²⁰⁶ Kevin Harney, *Leadership from the Inside Out: Examining the Inner Life of a Healthy Church Leader*, The Leadership Network Innovation Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 13.

²⁰⁷ Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 90.

world in general.”²⁰⁸ Sider is correct, but American Christians’ lifestyles are merely reflections of the cultural mindset they have adopted. Skye Jethani, a pastor and an editor at *Leadership Journal*, argues in his book *The Divine Commodity* that the defining worldview of modern America is not postmodernism but consumerism, and that consumerism is becoming the dominant worldview of many Christians as well.

American companies have had astounding success with advertising programs, luring American buyers with promises that purchased products will give lives meaning, purpose, and a promise of community. Consider the ongoing success of Apple’s latest campaign that asks people if they would rather be a Mac or a PC. Observing this type of activity, Jethani comments, “Successful companies finally discovered what philosopher Jean Baudrillard had known for decades: ‘Consumption is a system of meaning. . . . We define our identity and construct meaning for our lives through the brands we consume.’”²⁰⁹ This raises the question, if Christians are as consumerist in their outlook as non-Christians, is it Christ or the world that shapes and defines the meaning of Christians’ lives?

Scientists working in the field of neuroscience might quibble with Jethani’s construction. There is considerable evidence that countless generations of mothers who warned their children about peer pressure were actually correct: who we spend our time with is highly determinative of our sense of meaning, completeness, contentment, and

²⁰⁸ Ronald J. Sider, “The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience,” *Christianity Today*, January 1, 2005, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/bc/2005/janfeb/3.8.html> (accessed August 31, 2009).

²⁰⁹ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering a Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 50.

well-being.²¹⁰ So perhaps we consume because we are surrounded by others who consume. In the final analysis, the fact remains that consumerism is a predictable corollary of metastasized individualism.

A consumerist mindset becomes especially horrific within the church. Consumerism sees value not as something intrinsic to another, but rather in what personal benefit is derived from another. A church given over to consumerism will value goals over people. Leaders with a consumerist mindset will put mission values and programs ahead of people, and willingly sacrifice a few individuals if growth goals can be met as a result. Consumerist worshippers will value experience over meaning, and passive entertainment over challenge and the discipline of submission to others.

Churches that are consumerist in their approach to ministry will love the people they hope God will bring to them far more than they will love the people already there. Most terrible of all, a Christian who has assimilated consumerism as a worldview, however unwittingly, will value God only for what benefits he provides, not for God himself.

Restorative Communities

In the final analysis, the harsh reality is that Americans comprise a lonely and isolated society which has given itself over to gross consumerism. Americans' obsession with personal autonomy and media consumption feeds their consumerist tendencies. Because Americans are isolated, they try to remedy their need through consumption, which only increases their loneliness. They surround themselves by others who are also

²¹⁰ Christian De Quincey, *Radical Knowing: Understanding Consciousness through Relationship*, Radical Consciousness Trilogy (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 2005); John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, 1st. ed. (New York: Norton, 2008).

highly consumerist in their lifestyles. This creates strong, underlying social forces that work to reinforce people's negative, self-destructive behaviors. Within the church specifically, loneliness, dysfunction, and consumerism mitigate against spiritual growth and impede the church's witness.

The answer to this problem is the same answer God has provided for all of society's ills throughout history. God desires to form restorative communities of grace that will partner with him in his work. God seeks to restore humanity to himself. He chooses to do so through and with people, namely Christians, who are the Body of Christ. He invites them to join him in his work.

Many of contemporary America's personal and societal ills are caused by isolation and loneliness, which are, quite simply, the absence of networks of healthy, meaningful, authentic relationships. The good news is that there is an antidote to the problem psychology and sociology have diagnosed, and an answer to many of America's personal, spiritual, and societal problems: the restoration of community to the center of American life.

If those who argue we consume because we lack meaningful relationships are correct, then the antidote is to create communities that offer a network of meaningful relationships. If society suffers because the individuals comprising society are alone and depressed, then the answer is to invite people into communities where they can be loved and given opportunity to love. If people are devalued by consumerism, the best correction is to welcome them into relationships where they will be valued for themselves. In short, the answer to all these ills is the church as God designed it. But in order for the church to

truly be the church, it will have to recapture a vision of, and recommit itself to, authentic community.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNITY & CONNECTIVITY

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:15-16 (ESV)

The relentless motion of cyberspace produces an online diaspora, where people experiencing the lightness of digital being gather. Some spend hours online, trying to reach anyone who will care about them, however superficially.

Quentin J. Schultze²¹¹

On this much Christian theology and contemporary psychology agree: humans need community to function well. What, though, do we mean by “community?” “Community” is one of those ubiquitous words that carry a freight of meaning which differs from one individual to another. Community may at its most prosaic be defined as a group of individuals joined by shared location, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, profession, or interests. Politicians regularly vie for the endorsements of the gay community, the black community, or the Christian community. City planners and officials attempt to address the shared needs of blighted communities, areas fallen into disrepair, neighborhoods ridden by crime, or businesses rendered unattractive by the development of new retail centers nearby. In all these cases, individuals who might be very different from one another in all other regards are nevertheless recognized by having certain characteristics in common.

²¹¹ Quentin J. Schultze, *Habits of the High-Tech Heart: Living Virtuously in the Information Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 191.

Community at its most basic is a collection of mutually beneficial relationships that provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and bonds of commonality.²¹² Authentic community is characterized by a high degree of connectivity. Members of an authentic community are connected to one another through complex networks of relationships.²¹³ By virtue of these relational webs, community members remain in touch with the general health, welfare, and needs of the community no matter how diverse the individual members might be outside of that which they have in common.

Christian Community

The Christian understanding of community flows from Christians' self-identification with God in the person of Jesus. As noted earlier, humankind was created in the image of a relational God—an understanding rooted in the Trinity—to be in relationship with their Creator. When that relationship was fractured by humanity's rebellion against God, God set in motion a process of reconciling humanity to himself.

In the Old Testament, God formed a people through a series of pivotal covenants. A covenant is, at its core, a relational concept that forms a contractual bond between two parties.²¹⁴ Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of the people of God in the Old Testament was that they were a society bound by covenants that called them to moral righteousness and ethical justice expressed toward one another and to those outside the

²¹² Gerard Delanty, *Community*, 2nd ed., Key Ideas (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8.

²¹³ Putnam, 274-275.

²¹⁴ Gordon Johnston, "Old Testament Community and Spiritual Formation," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 76.

community.²¹⁵ Salvation and sanctification in the Old Testament are addressed primarily as community acts rather than acts concerning the individual.²¹⁶

Moral and ethical concerns have always been important to the community that is the people of God. According to Proverbs 13:20, the type of community in which we invest ourselves shapes us into either wise or foolish people. Proverbs 27:17 says that community with others improves us. Ecclesiastes teaches in ancient terms the very modern observation about synergy that people working well in concert with one another derive far greater economic benefit from their labors than any one of them would accrue working alone (Eccl. 4:9-12).

As we observed earlier, the New Testament's emphasis on community is unequivocal. "The gospel," Darrell Bock writes, "is about a renewed, unending, enabled relationship with God, which liberates us to live well with others."²¹⁷ In Christ, all people are invited into a divine fellowship that eradicates ethnic, class, and gender distinctions that had previously separated people from community with one another. This new fellowship sought to form a unique whole from many individuals (Eph. 2:11-18).

Spiritual disciplines are a part of the formation of Christian community. Nevertheless, disciplines and practices used in the process of Christian formation are not, according to Bock, primarily a means of improving the self. Rather, they are meant to ever more fully align the self in right relationship with God, and in doing so, remind the individual of his or her vital place within the will of God and within the community of

²¹⁵ Johnston, 76.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 77-78.

²¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock, "New Testament Community and Spiritual Formation," in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 108.

faith.²¹⁸ Though sanctification of the individual is desired by God (1 Thess. 4:1-8), the primary goal of sanctification is not the health of the individual. The primary goal of spiritual formation is the well-being of the faith community as a whole (Gal. 5:13-15) so that it might further the Kingdom of God.

Essential Characteristics of Christian Community

Communities of all kinds share many characteristics. Authentic Christian community is more like non-Christian community than unlike it; nevertheless, Christian community differs in some ways. Peter Block, in his book *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, discusses three helpful characteristics of community that are especially consistent with the biblical understanding of Christian community. These qualities are Wholeness, Aliveness, and Unfolding.²¹⁹ Block evokes these organizing concepts as a way of suggesting how authentic communities cohere in spite of the myriad conflicting ideologies and priorities of the communities' individual members. Although Block applies these characteristics to his discussion of the nature of community in general, they are also fully consistent with the Christian perspective.

Utilizing and adapting several concepts from Block's work, we suggest there are four core aspects of Christian community. Authentic Christian community is characterized by:

1. Wholeness: A Christian community is an organic whole drawn together and given unity by the person and salvific work of Jesus, the second person of the Godhead. The community is organized and governed by a principle of love that is reflective

²¹⁸ Bock, 109.

²¹⁹ Block, 18-20.

of God's love for the world. No matter how seemingly diverse its constituent parts, the Christian community is drawn together in a whole within the connective power of the Holy Spirit (1 John 4:8, Eph. 2:5-13, John 14:26, Acts 2).

2. Aliveness: The community that finds wholeness in Christ also finds life in Christ (Rom. 6:11, Eph. 2:1-5). A truly Christian community is full of life, purpose, meaning, and hope. It is never just an institution. Nor can the shape and forward momentum of the community be absolutely programmed or constrained any more than the life of a human person. The expressed life of Christian community flows from Christ, who is both the source and ultimate director (Eph. 4:15-16, Eph. 5:23b).

3. Unfolding: Healthy Christian community is always dynamic, never static. A Christian community that is not growing in love, expressed both inward toward the community itself and outward in mission, is one that has fallen into relational sickness (Eph. 4:16, Matt. 28:19, Acts 2:42-47).

4. Physical presence: Christian community is an embodied community. Assuredly, Christians and the communities they form are joined one to another in the Spirit, if not in actual presence. All Christian communities are part of both the visible and invisible church, that is to say, the church in both its temporal and eternal

states. Notwithstanding the unity Christians experience in spirit, physical presence is fundamental to Christian community.

At the risk of lapsing into tautology, it must be declared that no community may authentically claim to be Christian unless it explicitly locates its identity and purpose in

the person and work of Jesus Christ. The ambition to achieve desired goals or succeed at certain initiatives can seduce communities into adopting methods that are perceived to work, without considering whether those methods or the desired goals themselves are consistent with the person of Christ. Secular communities have been degraded by prioritizing results over people, by valuing personal or collective gain without counting the relational cost.²²⁰ Christian communities should take note that expedience is no substitute for sound Christology.

The interactions of an authentically Christian community are typified by love. Some communities are united only by a shared self-interest among their members. A community may be drawn together by the overwhelming homogeneity of its members. In contrast, Christian community is to be typified by love, in the midst of diversity and in spite of adversity (John. 15:12-13; Matt. 19:19, 22:39; 1 John 2:9-11; Phil. 2:3-4; Col. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:18). No more succinct statement of the fundamental relationship of love to Christian community exists than Jesus' words recorded in John's gospel: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Healthy Christian community manifests wholeness. Wholeness refers to a lack of fragmentation or disintegration. A whole may be comprised of many parts. For example, Paul describes the community of faith as a body (1 Cor. 12). A body is comprised of many organs, each with its own internal structure, consistency, and purpose. All the organs, however, are integral to the functioning of the whole. Indeed, no single organ

²²⁰ Bellah, 52-81.

exists for its own benefit but only for the benefit of the whole, without which it cannot survive.

In the context of the church, no member is more important than another. To the contrary, those that might be thought lesser according to conventional wisdom are actually among the most important (1 Cor. 12:22). Although a person with a well-honed gift for teaching or communication may garner more attention than one who is skilled in the art of hospitality, neither is more important than the other. A gifted communicator may initially draw more people to visit a church, but it is the hospitable person who creates a sense of welcome belonging that encourages visitors to return regularly.

Authentic Christian community is also characterized by aliveness. Block describes the quality of aliveness in this way: “The life of any one center depends on the life of other centers. This life or intensity is not inherent in the center by itself, but is a function of the whole configuration in which the center occurs.”²²¹ A community that values aliveness is not threatened by diversity but instead will celebrate it. Even single-celled organisms have internal structures that are surprisingly complex. Living creatures, however small they might be, are made up of irreducible complexities wherein the removal of a single, inconspicuous structure can deprive the whole of life.

Of course, institutions, like so many things in nature, may be made up of many parts and yet be essentially dead. Like an ancient creature embedded in geological strata, a church can fossilize. In doing so, it becomes something less than true community. In contrast, a healthy community with the quality of aliveness grows, develops, thrives, and

²²¹ Block, 19.

reproduces. The range of generative characteristics that flow from the aliveness of a community is the characteristic Block names “unfolding.”²²²

Christian communities exist for more than their own health and benefit. A Christian community should be notable for the way it nurtures members while at the same time embraces those outside the community (Heb. 13:2, 1 Peter 4:9, Titus 1:8, Luke 14:13, Isa. 58:7). The unfolding of life in the Christian community encompasses both spiritual formation and mission. An authentic Christian community reaches out and welcomes others into the community (Matt. 28:19, Mark 13:10, Titus 2:11). Christian community is never to retreat or retrench, but is instead a community unfolding, advancing, and always on a pilgrimage of transformation. The community seeks to transform itself ever more fully into the image of Christ and thereby advance the mission of God in the world.

Physical presence is an essential component of authentic Christian community. The primary means of interaction in healthy Christian community is face-to-face relationships. The importance of the body to the full expression of God’s purpose for humanity and the mission of God in the world pervades both the Old and New Testament scriptures.

God created humanity as embodied creatures and declared that his creation was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). In fact, the only thing in the creation story that God declares not good is man’s aloneness before the creation of woman (Gen. 2:18). The crowning expression of God’s self-disclosure to humanity is found in the incarnation, when God

²²² Block, 19.

takes on bodily form. Christianity recognizes that there is profound value in bodily presence.

The Old Testament views human beings wholistically, showing little interest in distinguishing between the body and the soul. "In the Old Testament," R. Eduard Schweizer writes, "What is man can only be understood in a wholistic way....Man does not possess a soul and a body, rather he is both soul and flesh, full of life and potential activity, while at the same time threatened by illness, transitoriness, and death."²²³ In fact, there is no word for "body" in the Old Testament "except when designating a corpse or a slave."²²⁴

The Old Testament is similarly disinterested in the human being as an autonomous agent. Community, especially that comprised of the people of God, is always at the forefront of the Old Testament's treatment of the human being. The focus is always on the individual's location within the unfolding plan of God for humanity.²²⁵ "The idea of an individual developing to a more and more perfect specimen of human being," Schweizer continues, "is foreign to the OT."²²⁶

The New Testament, in contrast to the Old Testament, frequently discusses the corporeal body. New Testament authors wrote in a Greco-Roman tradition that utilized multiple concepts for different aspects of the human person. For example, they spoke of the body (*soma*), the flesh (*sarx*), the soul (*psyche*), and the spirit (*pneuma*). Unlike the Greek Stoics and Epicureans, however, biblical writers did not make hard divisions between these concepts. In the New Testament scriptures, both *sarx* and *soma* are used

²²³ R. Eduard Schweizer, "Body," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 768.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 769.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 768.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

when referring to the tangible body. But *psyche* and *pneuma* often refer to the entirety of the human life. There can be no absolute, clear division between the corporeal and incorporeal in the New Testament, for all terms used in reference to the human individual have some degree of overlap.²²⁷ Knox Chamblin explains, “*Soma* denotes the whole person in his corporeality, in his concrete relationships within the world; it is because he is body that man can experience the world and relate to others....*Psyche* may likewise denote one’s whole life or, by metonymy the whole person....The life denoted by *psyche* is a bodily existence.”²²⁸

Because all Christians find their identity in Christ and are enlivened by the Spirit of God, they are in some sense present to each other spiritually, if not temporally. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 5:3-4 that though he is not present with the Corinthian believers in the flesh, he is nonetheless present with them in the Spirit. Yet spiritual presence is incomplete. Paul often remarks on his and other Christians’ longing for one another when they are physically apart (Phil. 1:8, 2:26; 2 Cor. 9:14; 1 Thess. 2:17, 3:17; 2 Tim. 1:4). Despite the fact that Christians may know and experience fellowship with other believers in the Spirit, it is nonetheless Paul’s view that knowing another person both factually and experientially is found only when the whole of the person, including physical presence, is involved (Rom. 12, Eph. 4).²²⁹

Community and Connectivity

Henry Cloud states, “God created us with a hunger for relationship – for relationship with him and with our fellow people. At our very core we are relational

²²⁷ Chamblin, 43-48.

²²⁸ Ibid., 45-46.

²²⁹ Ibid., 49.

beings....The soul cannot prosper without being connected to others.”²³⁰ And yet, it is extremely difficult to experience true community without a high degree of relational connectivity. Christians wishing to develop and nurture community must seek ways to foster “front-porch” places and opportunities where friends and acquaintances may regularly meet and share in one another’s lives. “Front-porches,” are like third-places, they are places separate from home or work that “provide space where social and personal connections can develop in healthy ways.”²³¹

With the contemporary prevalence of social networking technologies—technologies which encompass Twitter, MySpace, and Facebook, as well as more traditional instant messaging applications—some argue that physical presence is no longer a necessity for authentic Christian community. They contend that online social networks provide community which is every bit as real and authentic as physically present communities. Granted, online social networks do provide a high degree of connectivity. People who regularly participate in online social networks may actually be in more frequent contact with other network members than those whose community of friends meet primarily face-to-face. Social networking technologies render many benefits, but online groups that lack any regular dimension of physical presence offer connectivity, not Christian community.

Opining approvingly about the growing ubiquity of social networking technologies, Lorne Dawson of the University of Waterloo, Canada, states, “Community is associated too much with a romanticized notion of life in the small towns and villages

²³⁰ Henry Cloud and Lisa Guest, *Changes That Heal Workbook: How to Understand Your Past to Ensure a Healthier Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 54.

²³¹ Joseph R. Myers, *The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2003), 129-130.

of the past.”²³² “Some measure of communal life,” Dawson writes, “clearly has emerged at some times in cyberspace.”²³³

Christian author Cathleen Falsani agrees with Dawson that true community may be found online. Having become disenchanted with her local churches, Falsani found a sense of spiritual connection and fulfillment with Christian friends on Facebook, one of the most successful contemporary social-networking Internet services. Commenting on her group of Facebook friends, Falsani says that on Facebook she has found “real, authentic, deeply connected, deeply faithful community.”²³⁴ For Falsani, her threaded discussions on Facebook have become church.²³⁵

Andrew Careaga, author of *eMinistry: Connecting with the Net Generation*, suggests that “virtual” community online and “real” community offline are both valid forms of community for many younger Americans whom he designates the “Net Generation” or “N-Geners.”²³⁶ Careaga observes that those who seek community on the Internet obviously aren’t finding it in the “real” world.²³⁷ He notes that many N-Geners consider online friendships as real as face-to-face relationships and that “for a growing number of Christians, cybercommunities are as real as flesh-and-blood fellowship.”²³⁸ To those who might suggest that online friendships lack the full richness and depth of real,

²³² Lorne L. Dawson, “Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community,” in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, ed. Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan (New York: Routledge, 2004), 76.

²³³ Ibid., 80.

²³⁴ Cathleen Falsani, “The Thread: When Church Happens Online,” *Q* (2008), <http://www.qideas.org/essays/the-thread-when-church-happens-online.aspx> (accessed July 12, 2009).

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Andrew Careaga, *Eministry: Connecting with the Net Generation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 130-135.

²³⁷ Careaga’s consistent use of quotation marks around “real” and “virtual” when distinguishing between the Internet experiences or realities and offline experiences or realities suggests a certain ambivalence about whether or not “real” communities and experiences are any more real than their “virtual” counterparts.

²³⁸ Careaga, 131-132.

authentic friendships based on physical presence and shared physical experiences, others ask who exactly gets to determine what is real and authentic and what is not?²³⁹

Heidi Campbell, Assistant Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University, has made the confluence of religion and the Internet a focus of her research and writing. She believes it is possible to build authentic community in online networks. According to Campbell, because cyberspace is immaterial space, networks of individuals seeking spiritual sustenance are able to reconnect with and find new appreciation for immaterial, spiritual realities.²⁴⁰ On the Web, those just beginning to explore the Christian faith, as well as those who were once part of local communities of faith but who because of hurt or wrong have left those fellowships, can explore the spiritual dimensions of their life with others in an environment which seems safer and often more tolerant than traditional faith communities. It should also be noted that online social networks may be appealing because they can be left as easily as joined, with but a single click of the mouse.

Social networking technologies undoubtedly provide opportunities for beneficial, interpersonal connections. As noted earlier, individuals with strong face-to-face relationships find that social networking technologies allow them to stay in touch with friends and family who no longer live locally. These people report that having the ability to maintain relationships over considerable distances enhances the quality of their

²³⁹ Heidi Campbell and Patricia Calderon, "The Question of Christian Community Online: The Case of the 'Artist World Network,'" *Studies in World Christianity* 13, no. 3 (2007): 264.

²⁴⁰ Heidi Campbell, *Exploring Religious Community Online: We Are One in the Network*, Digital Formations, vol. 24 (New York: P. Lang, 2005), 55.

lives.²⁴¹ Online social networks such as MySpace or Facebook become a type of third place²⁴² where friends can connect and interact throughout the week.

At the same time, it is worth asking whether virtual social networks offer true community or if what they are really providing is high relational connectivity. Technology's ability to enhance relational connection in the midst of the extraordinary busyness of contemporary Americans' lives should not be lightly dismissed. It is inarguable that a high degree of connectivity between individuals can only serve to enhance community formation. Nevertheless, while connectivity is a necessary component of community, it is not synonymous with community. Furthermore, while technology is generally neutral (being neither inherently good nor evil), it always has both intended and unintended impact. And while Christian communities should welcome the beneficial potential of social networking technologies, they should also be mindful of the real limitations of the technologies.

For example, e-mail has allowed near instantaneous transmission of text and multimedia communications. Where one party might once have had to wait days or even weeks for a letter or parcel to arrive, that same communication can now be made in nanoseconds. This has been an extraordinary benefit to both personal and business communications.

At the same time, it has been widely observed that the quickness of e-mail encourages precipitous and ill-considered communications. Writing or typing a letter, placing it in an envelope, and taking it to the post office (or waiting for the mail carrier to

²⁴¹ Kraut et al., 49-74.

²⁴² People generally develop relationships in three places: home (family), work (colleagues), and a third place (where friends gather). Historically speaking, pubs, sports leagues, fraternal organizations, clubs, churches, and more recently coffee shops, were important third places in which people found a sense of community.

pick it up) all take time. The time it takes to write a letter gives irritated or angry people a chance to cool their tempers and give second thought to whether they wish to send their missive at all. E-mail, given that it can be typed, sent, and received in a matter of minutes or seconds, allows for no such consideration.

The easy availability of inexpensive mobile phones and cellular service has also enhanced the ability of businesses, families, and friends to stay in close connection with those who are important to them. People can connect with each other easily and frequently by voice mail or instant text messaging. This allows many more personal connections a day than would otherwise be possible. At the same time, because they are able to connect by phone, people often feel less need to connect face-to-face. Their relationships lack a component of physical connection. Furthermore, because texting on a mobile phone is somewhat clumsy, messages tend to be condensed into a kind of shorthand. Conversations by text are, by necessity, short and lacking in substance.

Similarly, social networking technologies and online relational networks are amazingly helpful in maintaining relational connection with others, especially with those who live at a distance, when regular face-to-face connection is impossible. New Facebook users find not only do they communicate more regularly with current, local friends, but they are also quickly reconnected with friends they haven't spoken with in years.

Christians who have become disaffected with their local churches find welcoming networks of likeminded believers online, where constraints of distance and time are inconsequential. Online, they may find innumerable nuances and permutations of Christian relational interplay. Whatever one's theological tradition, ethnic background,

political persuasion, or generational perspective, there is a virtual community of similar affinity that interested Christians may join. Furthermore, joining such networks can awaken them to stories and perspectives within the Body of Christ that they might otherwise have never encountered within their local faith communities.

Of course, human beings do not readily seek out diversity. We are instead far more likely to group together based on affinity. Quentin J. Schultze, a nationally known expert on communications, notes, “We can talk about cyberspace as a global village, as if it unifies the world into a community, but our actual uses of cyber-technology suggest that we select our online affiliations to maximize our own narrow interests, not to reach out beyond those interests.”²⁴³ On the Internet, Christians are just as likely to seek out only those with similar affinities as they are within their local environments. Furthermore, given the ephemeral nature of Web-based social networks, when conflict arises, as it inevitably must where two or more people are gathered together, severing the relationship is far easier on the Net than it is in face-to-face communities.

Brenda Brasher is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at King’s College, University of Aberdeen, and a frequent religious consultant to the media. She offers several critiques of the potential negative impact of making online environments the center of one’s religious experience. Among other concerns, she argues that the Internet is a “cool medium that rewards pithy phrases,” and that “cyberspace makes unwieldy the extended reflection on the transcendent that religion requires.”²⁴⁴ Furthermore, she states, “An oversaturated information place, cyberspace adapts best to specialized niche

²⁴³ Schultze, 172.

²⁴⁴ Brenda E. Brasher, *Give Me That Online Religion* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 43.

knowledge distinctly at odds with the integrated wisdom that religion promotes.”²⁴⁵

Lastly, Brasher avers cyberspace is “a fantasy universe” that may enliven the imagination but essentially delivers a disembodied experience that can distract and seduce users from important interaction with their immediate surroundings and relationships.²⁴⁶

John P. Jewell, director of instructional technology and distance learning at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, generally takes a positive view of the benefits communication and social networking technologies have to offer Christians and churches. On the other hand, he argues that virtual communities are often communities without accountability or recognized canons of truth.²⁴⁷ He claims each member of the virtual community is accountable only to him or herself, and each individual determines what “truth” he or she will accept.

Online communities are hesitant to attempt to impose any sort of doctrinal canon on their participants. Indeed, to do so would be pointless since members come and go at will, and often only affiliate with those communities wherein they find comfortable agreement. Ironically, while advocates of virtual community criticize real-world communities for their homogeneity, online communities are often just as homogeneous. It is much harder to avoid differences between people when one is interacting face-to-face as opposed to interacting online.

Jewell is most concerned with the lack of real presence on the Internet. He locates the importance of physical presence to community within the Incarnation.²⁴⁸ Through the Incarnation, God made himself bodily present to humanity as an act of supreme love.

²⁴⁵ Brasher, 43.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 42.

²⁴⁷ John P. Jewell, *Wired for Ministry: How the Internet, Visual Media, and Other New Technologies Can Serve Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 60.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 61.

Christ, argues Jewell, means for his body to make themselves physically present in love and service to one another, like he did. This is an argument that appears in virtually (no pun intended) every critique of online communities. Physical presence is essential to a biblical understanding of what it means to be human. Therefore, the argument may be made that physical presence is also essential to authentic human community.

Shane Hipps is especially wary of the potentially negative impact of technology upon authentic community formation. Hipps believes that “the experience of virtual community can feel just as real as physical community, but the social, spiritual, and emotional realities do not provide the same kind of connections.”²⁴⁹ In Hipps’ evaluation, because virtual community mimics many of the feelings of real community, it “inoculates people against the desire to be with other people.”²⁵⁰ Because people feel that they are in regular contact with their online friends, they are less likely to meet with friends in face-to-face interactions. “These virtual relationships,” Hipps concludes, “have a strange effect. They provide just enough of a connection to paralyze our best efforts at unmediated community.”²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Shane Hipps, "Our Nomadic Existence: How Electronic Culture Shapes Community," *Q* (2008), <http://www.qideas.org/essays/our-nomadic-existence-how-electronic-culture-shapes-community.aspx> (accessed July 14, 2009).

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

A strange dynamic occurs among many N-Geners who regularly utilize social network sites like Facebook. N-Geners on these sites are often extraordinarily transparent about private pain, betrayal, perceived slight, or other relational disappointments they may be experiencing at a given time. They lay bare private thoughts on public Web pages for all on their friends list (often numbering in the hundreds) to read, but would never do the same in a physical gathering of those same people. Indeed, we have found in our own ministry setting that some of the most vocal and assertive people on Facebook are in person among the most introverted and socially awkward in our community of faith. Shane Hipps, a Mennonite pastor and former advertising executive who has made the subject of technology and faith a matter of in-depth study, calls this phenomenon “intimate anonymity.” He explains, “We have the illusion of being intimate with people while remaining totally anonymous if we desire—this is the draw and danger of so-called virtual community. There is no need to offer real vulnerability.”²⁵²

Face-to-Face with Hands (Virtually) Extended

Online or “virtual” Christian communities can manifest wholeness, and to a certain degree may be characterized by aliveness and unfolding. If these communities are rooted in the person and work of Jesus, they are consequently united and made whole in him. By virtue of the individual members being “in Christ,” though they may be far from one another physically, they are brought near to one another in spirit (Eph. 2:13, Col. 2:5). Grounded in Christ, they are made one in him (1 Cor. 12:13).

Virtual Christian communities can also be characterized by aliveness and unfolding. Most people who decide to dabble in an online social network soon find

²⁵²Hipps.

themselves wholly immersed. Although Facebook began as a network for college-aged young adults, in 2008 its 35- to 54-year-old demographic grew faster than any other, doubling roughly every two months.^{253, 254} Facebook has well over 150 million monthly active users, leading one source to observe, "If Facebook were a country, it would now be the 8th most populous in the world."²⁵⁵ People, millions of them, find online social networks to be full of life. Meeting online with their friends, either synchronously or asynchronously, individuals can share humor and pain, hopes and failures. In other words, they may invite others to participate in the substance of their lives while also accepting the invitation of others to do the same.

In our own ministry context, we have made constructive use of social-networking technologies. We utilize Facebook as a kind of third place where community members connect with one another multiple times a week. Connections are made through both asynchronous message threads and instant text messages. Members use cell phones to text and call one another throughout the week. By use of these media, community members laugh, cry, pray, and learn together with far greater frequency than would occur if they only met face-to-face. These are valuable connections which enhance the meetings where community members are physically present with one another.

²⁵³ Peter Corbett, "2009 Facebook Demographics and Statistics Report: 276% Growth in 35-54 Year Old Users," iStrategyLabs, <http://www.istrategylabs.com/2009-facebook-demographics-and-statistics-report-276-growth-in-35-54-year-old-users/> (accessed July 29, 2009).

²⁵⁴ Recent reports show that younger users may be leaving social network sites in favor of other online pursuits, such as online role-playing and real time gaming. Time will tell, but it may be that the main appeal of online social networks to younger users was their novelty rather than a sense of true community. See Maija Palmer, "Social Network Sites Lose 'Cool' Image," Financial Times, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f46382bc-821f-11de-9c5e-00144feabdc0.html> (accessed July 29, 2009).

²⁵⁵ Inside Facebook: Tracking Facebook and the Facebook Platform for Developers and Marketers "Facebook Growth Continuing, Surpasses 150 Million Monthly Active Users," <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/01/07/facebook-growth-continuing-surpasses-150-million-monthly-active-users/> (accessed July 29, 2009).

At the same time, none would forsake physical meetings in favor of a purely online community experience. In the area of aliveness, and even more poignantly in the area of unfolding, the lack of physical presence is sorely felt. The flattened interactions of online relationships cannot compare to the potential richness of face-to-face fellowship. Friends in online communities can share stories and pictures of mission trips, but face-to-face communities of friends can do missions together. Online friends can text each other about what God is doing in their lives, but face-to-face friends can do the same over a shared meal that becomes, in that moment, a Eucharistic celebration. Online brothers and sisters in Christ may empathize with one another but do not truly share in each other's lives, except at a distance. The unfolding of their lives is experienced vicariously instead of in true harmony. Encouragement, aid, and comfort are extended by friends online but usually only as words and emotions. The blessing of these should not be minimized, but they do not compare with the concrete embodiment of love found in a close friend who is physically present. As Quentin Schultze succinctly puts it, "If we have a choice, each of us would rather receive a hug than an e-card."²⁵⁶

Social network technologies offer high relational connectivity. Like the hundreds of millions of nerves in the human body, online social networks link the far-flung members of the Body of Christ together in a world-spanning web of communication.

Many ministries have discovered the benefit of using these technologies to reinvigorate a daily sense of belonging and participation to their communities of faith. Where once people lamented that they only saw their brothers and sisters in Christ one or two days a

²⁵⁶ Schultze, 170.

week, now they can meet and chat every day in the Web-equivalent of the local diner or coffee shop.

These online networks can serve the needs of authentic Christian communities, but lacking physical presence, they cannot take their place. Healthy, authentic Christian community finds people present to one another in body, mind, and spirit. Christianity is not a faith only of the spirit. Rather, it is an embodied faith. So, too, is Christian community. Christian community is not only the joining of hearts and minds but also of hands. Christian community in its fullest expression emerges in a people who have found newness of life in Christ, joining together for shared meals, shared worship, and shared service. The quintessence of Christian community is two hands extended, one in welcome and the other in service to a world desperately in need of the real presence of Christ, who manifests himself in the sacrificial lives of his people.

CHAPTER SIX

PRACTICING SPIRITUAL FORMATION IN COMMUNITY

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On
the willows there we hung our harps.

Psalm 137:1-2

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy
Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as
we are one.

John 17:11

The prophet Ezekiel was among the 8000 Jewish people taken into exile by
Babylonian armies following Babylon's invasion and destruction of the Jerusalem temple
in 587 BC. Ezekiel lived with his wife (Ezek. 24:15-27) among a community of fellow
exiles in Babylon, next to an irrigation canal called Chebar (Ezek. 1:1) in southern
Mesopotamia.²⁵⁷ He was a relatively young man at the time of the exile, probably about
thirty years old.

Most modern Americans can scarcely imagine the personal and cultural agony
experienced by Ezekiel and his contemporaries. They had lived through the destruction of
their nation and witnessed the demolition of the temple, the heart-home of their worship.

And though the Babylonians were relatively benign in their treatment of the Jewish

exiles, Ezekiel and the other exiles were nevertheless strangers, subject to sanctioned
persecution and prejudice.²⁵⁸ Even so, in the midst of a life that would have reduced most

²⁵⁷ Tremper Longman and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed.
(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 315-316.

²⁵⁸ Lawrence Boadt, "Ezekiel, Book Of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel
Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 711-722.

to unrelenting despair, Ezekiel hears the word of the Lord and begins to speak hope into the lives of his people.

Chapter thirty-seven of the book of Ezekiel records Ezekiel's prophesy that God would eventually restore the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and make of them again a single nation, unified in his name (Ezek. 37:15-27). Ezekiel, proclaiming the words God had given him, assures the Jewish exiles that "I (God) will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore....My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Ezek. 37:26-27)."

American Christians today might take hope from these words as well. The contemporary American church often feels that it is a people in exile. American culture so often seems to be at war with the church. It has become increasingly clear that those outside the church view Christians with distaste and disdain. The church in America is fractured, with Christians and churches fighting amongst each other, further devaluing any influence and credibility their witness might have had in the communities they seek to serve.

The American church needs a healing return to unity of love, and a sense of mission arising out of Christians' shared identity in Christ. It is not enough to individually proclaim the gospel; it must be lived. If the church is to truly serve as the Body of Christ physically extended in the world, it must do so as a unified force, clear about who it is as a people and the work to which God has called it. In order to

accomplish this, Christians not only need to be formed individually in the image of Christ, but also formed as a community that seeks to incarnate Christ in the world.

Spiritual Formation Resources

In recent decades American Christians have expressed renewed interest in spiritual formation as a means of realigning their lives around Christ. In response to this rising interest, major Christian publishing houses have partnered with authors, pastors, and parachurch ministries to produce spiritual formation curricula and resources at an increasing rate. These resources are generally well written and produced. Many are affordable to even the smallest of groups and churches, and worth serious review by those who wish to lead congregants in a process of intentional spiritual formation. Most of these curricula and resources are helpful; yet many are geared toward the individual believer's growth, with little emphasis on spiritual formation in community.

Books

For those who find text resources helpful, many books assisting readers to be formed in the image of Christ are currently available. For example, InterVarsity Press publishes a series designated "SoulCare Resources," intended to "be simple, but not simplistic, guide(s) to maintaining or recovering the life and health of your soul." The Soul Care series currently has four titles, all authored by Mindy Caliguire, who was formerly on staff at Willow Creek Community Church and currently serves as founder

and president of a parachurch organization called Soul Care. Her Soul Care titles include *Soul Searching*, *Discovering Soul Care*, *Simplicity*, and *Spiritual Friendship*.²⁵⁹

Willow Creek and Zondervan have partnered to produce their own series of books to be used as guides in the spiritual formation process. Their series is called Pursuing Spiritual Transformation, and its chief editor and contributor is John Ortberg.²⁶⁰ Willow and Zondervan's series has six titles currently available: *Fully Devoted: Living Each Day in Jesus' Name*; *Giving: Unlocking the Heart of Good Stewardship*; *Grace: An Invitation to a Way of Life*; *Groups: The Life-Giving Power of Community*; *Growth: Training vs. Trying*; and *Gifts: The Joy of Serving God*.

Numerous other books, both classic and contemporary, offer beneficial reads for those who care about spiritual formation and desire to be more closely formed in the image of Christ. Authors Robert Mulholland, Dallas Willard, Jerry Bridges, Eugene Peterson, and Richard Foster, to name a few, have long been well received by evangelicals and are to be commended for their work. Other writers such as Ruth Haley Barton, Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Scot McKnight are relatively newer to publishing in the narrow field of spiritual formation, yet are wise and seasoned guides. They are doing excellent work in addressing evangelical audiences who want to grow and

²⁵⁹ Mindy Caliguire, *Discovering Soul Care*, SoulCare Resources (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2007); Mindy Caliguire, *Spiritual Friendship*, SoulCare Resources (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2007); Mindy Caliguire, *Simplicity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2008); Mindy Caliguire, *Soul Searching* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Connect, 2008).

²⁶⁰ John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, and Judson Poling, *Giving: Unlocking the Heart of Good Stewardship*, Pursuing Spiritual Transformation Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, and Judson Poling, *Grace: An Invitation to a Way of Life*, Pursuing Spiritual Transformation Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, and Judson Poling, *Groups: The Life-Giving Power of Community*, Pursuing Spiritual Transformation Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000); John Ortberg, Laurie Pederson, and Judson Poling, *Growth: Training vs. Trying*, Pursuing Spiritual Transformation Bible Study Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

mature in Christ, and truly experience whole-life change but need guidance in taking their first steps.

Most of the books cited, however, are geared primarily toward the individual reader and fall short in the area of nurturing formation that occurs in community. While they provide a fine introduction to spiritual formation, they are not as helpful when it comes to integrating the formation with others in the community of faith—a primary. Many of these resources guide the reader through a process of self-examination, and encourage practices aimed at reinforcing life change. However, they are heavily weighted toward private times of devotion and reflection, with far too little advice for how to grow in concert with others.

For example, each book in the Soul Care series is designed primarily as an individual resource. Divided into four “experiences,” these in turn are comprised of five parts. The first four parts provide daily readings that include reflection questions and suggestions of spiritual practices to enhance the specific area of growth that the reading addresses. The fifth part of each experience is a guide for group discussion about the participants’ reflections upon the readings of the week.

The group part of each week’s experience is limited to a series of discussion questions and a suggestion that the group end their meeting with a closing prayer. Group discussion is, of course, an important part of community building. As the group participants discuss their learning and growth over the preceding week, they build intimacy, trust, and fellowship. These outcomes are good, but they only touch on authentic community. The group discussion initiated by these guides is typically one-

dimensional, promoting feedback of what participants thought or felt while reading throughout the week, without moving on to group reflection, prayer, or action.

Considering the three general domains of life—affective, behavioral, and intellectual (feeling, acting, thinking)—a resource aimed at making community the locus of spiritual formation should attempt to impact all three, not just individually but in community as well. Christian spiritual formation is meant to encompass the whole of life, privately and relationally, in all its domains. The Soul Care series does nurture individual growth in all three domains. Individuals are guided to examine and grow more Christlike in the way they think, feel, and act. In contrast, the series' group work focuses primarily on the intellectual domain by asking participants to answer closed-end questions about their thoughts and experiences during the week. The community component of the series is severely lacking.

The Pursuing Spiritual Transformation series is organized similarly to the Soul Care series. Designed for small groups or individual use, these books guide participants through seven weeks of both individual work and group sessions. These sessions provide participants with a devotional reading, scriptures to study, and guidance for reflecting on how to personally apply the scriptures studied. The content of the books is sound, introducing participants to spiritual practices and disciplines meant to encourage spiritual formation. Group sessions, as in the Soul Care series, give participants the opportunity to share with the rest of the group their individual reflections and experiences from the prior week's study.

On the positive side of the evaluation, the Pursuing Spiritual Transformation series consistently and explicitly takes a holistic, whole-life approach to spiritual

formation. The series identifies ten core values for spiritual formation, including the convictions that spiritual formation

1. ...is essential, not optional, for Christ-followers.
2. ...involves those practices, experiences, and relationships that help me live intimately with Christ and walk as if he were in my place.
3. ...is not individualistic, but takes place in community and finds expression in serving others.
4. ...is ultimately gauged by an increased capacity to love God and people.

Superficial or external checklists cannot measure it.²⁶¹

These are laudable values. They place spiritual formation at the center of life instead of allowing it to be compartmentalized as but one area of life among many. The focus on practices, experiences, and relationships signals that the authors understand spiritual formation as a process that involves one's intellect, affect, and behavior. The authors write, "It all counts. Life counts. Every moment of life—at least potentially—is an opportunity to be guided by God into his way of living."²⁶² Taken in their entirety, the series' ten core values emphasize the relational nature of spiritual formation, with love of God and others as the measure by which true spiritual growth is gauged.

On the other side of the equation, however, the Pursuing Spiritual Transformation series shares the same weakness as the Soul Care series, in that weekly devotional readings strongly assert the need to intentionally practice spiritual disciplines in relational ways. The reflection questions, however, are all directed at examining and changing an

²⁶¹ Ortberg, Pederson, and Poling, *Growth: Training vs. Trying*, 9.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 17.

individual's thoughts and feelings. The positive change of an individual's thoughts and feelings is desired, but the exercises would be more effective if they incorporated a community focus as well.

As with the Soul Care guides, group sessions are devoted almost entirely to questioning how participants feel or think. In other words, the series places a high value on community but does not give adequate guidance in how to do spiritual formation in community. The study guides do not, regrettably, engage the group beyond primarily an intellectual encounter. And although leader's notes for the sessions give question prompts and other basic directions, they do not provide guidance for activities that build spiritual practices into the group time.

Video Curricula

Renovaré is a parachurch organization headquartered in Englewood, Colorado, that seeks "to resource, fuel, model, and advocate more intentional living and spiritual formation among Christians and those wanting a deeper connection with God."²⁶³ This organization aims to accomplish its mission through regional and international events, conferences, local training, and a variety of resources produced by Renovaré's members and affiliates. In partnership with LifeSprings Resources, Renovaré has produced three video curricula utilizing writings by Dallas Willard and Richard Foster, both of whom are the primary teachers in the videos. The curricula consist of essentially video-driven book studies with guided group discussions and are named after books by Willard and Foster which are core to the curricula's lessons: *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual*

²⁶³ Renovaré: Becoming Like Jesus, "What Is Renovaré?" Renovaré USA, <http://www.renovare.us/WHOWEARE/WhatIsRenovaré/tabid/2475/Default.aspx> (accessed August 1, 2009).

Growth; Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith; and *Renovation of the Heart*.

Celebration of Discipline studies the classic disciplines of a spiritual life. *Streams of Living Water* examines five historical Christian traditions and the lessons they offer to one seeking to live “a balanced and well-rounded” Christian life.²⁶⁴ *Renovation of the Heart* seeks to help people focus on the transformation of, in Willard’s conception, the six parts of the human being. According to Willard, these include thoughts, emotions, will, behavior, social relationships, and the soul.²⁶⁵

The primary benefit of these curricula is the source material. Three books by Willard and Foster form the foundation of these studies and are Christian formation classics. These books provide a solid discussion of the soul, Christian spiritual formation, and spiritual practices that have been helpful to Christians in diverse time periods and cultures. Virtually all Christians would benefit from reading and applying the wisdom from these studies to a program of intentional spiritual formation. However, the video presentation of the material comes across as flat and static.

Either Willard or Foster delivers the video lessons, sometimes alone and other times sitting at a café table with others. Many of the lessons are taught to a small audience sitting in the video’s production studio. This format tends to distance viewers from the material and encourage a sense of passivity as participants may feel they are merely listening in on a group of people being taught by Willard and Foster.

²⁶⁴ Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (Franklin Springs, GA: LifeSprings Resources).

²⁶⁵ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Franklin Springs, GA: LifeSprings Resources).

Like other materials we have surveyed, the printed guides participants use throughout these studies do not lend themselves to community spiritual formation, as the guides are weighted toward content delivery rather than active group participation. Certainly this is to be expected of studies that are first and foremost digest versions of substantive, information-laden books. The video sessions may be helpful for laying an intellectual foundation for spiritual formation and may also provide beginners with guidance in developing spiritual disciplines. Notwithstanding these benefits, in its current design, this curriculum may not be very helpful for doing spiritual formation in community.

Doing Life Together offers a far better curriculum in terms of encouraging spiritual formation that is purposefully located within community.²⁶⁶ Zondervan partnered with Saddleback Church to produce this comprehensive small group curriculum. It is arguably the best video curriculum currently available for encouraging spiritual formation within a community context.

Five 6-week sessions make up the series, which corresponds to Saddleback's formulation of the five purposes of the church: Connecting (fellowship), Growing (discipleship), Developing (Ministry), Sharing (Evangelism), and Surrendering (worship) lives for Christ. Written guides are completed individually along with participation in a weekly group meeting centered around multimedia material provided on session DVDs. A local leader provides additional structure and guidance as needed.

The DVDs are expertly produced. Onscreen teachers, leaders, and speakers, as well as the music, graphics, and motion video all display the highest of professional

²⁶⁶ Brett Eastman et al., *Doing Life Together*, DVD-ROM (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

standards. Directions are clear, and the DVDs make it easy for even the most inexperienced small group leader to feel confident in leading the lessons. Unlike the Soul Care and Pursuing Spiritual Transformation series, *Doing Life Together* guides place the greatest emphasis on the group participants' time together. The studies do not provide long lists of response questions for individuals to complete throughout the week. Instead, participants read a provided list of scriptures each week and receive helpful direction for making spiritual practices a part of their daily lives. These practices are introduced and explained during the course of the weekly group sessions.

Doing Life Together systematically teaches participants how to read and meditate on scripture, journal, spend time in reflective prayer, fast, practice solitude, and discipline themselves in other helpful spiritual practices. Just as importantly, participants are strongly encouraged to pair up with a spiritual partner. These partners will provide essential challenge, aid, and support throughout the entirety of the series. Furthermore, even though each part of the series focuses on one of Saddleback's five purposes, practices that also support and encourage growth in the other four purposes are provided as well. In this way, the whole series coheres and integrates Saddleback's five purposes for the church.

Admittedly, video-driven curriculum has certain drawbacks. A style of presentation or speaking which seems engaging and natural in person may appear fake or over the top on video. Some participants may find that video curricula lack the naturally engaging relational dynamic of meetings in a purely live format. Indeed, the speakers on the *Doing Life Together* videos do, in all candor, sometimes seem as if they just stepped out of an infomercial.

In spite of these concerns, the *Doing Life Together* curriculum has many potential benefits. Although each group of sessions in the series focuses on one of Saddleback's five purposes of the church, the integration of the other four purposes within that group of sessions serves to keep the community of faith in view. Group participants are reminded that no one purpose takes precedence over another. Connecting (fellowship), Growing (discipleship), Developing (Ministry), Sharing (Evangelism), and Surrendering (worship), are all essential to the health and maturity of the Body of Christ.

Additionally, the session work and weekly practices are intentionally designed so that doing spiritual practices with others is given as much priority as the work one does individually. The studies encourage a natural rhythm of life in which personal spiritual practices expand outward and are supported and reinforced by one's social interactions. Furthermore, the studies do not simply ask participants to think, reflect, and respond to questions in workbooks. Participants actively engage with others and the world around them through various exercises. Adding a kinetic component—requiring participants to not just think and feel but to also “do”—is an important strength of this series.

Web-based Spiritual Formation

One of the newest developments in the area of Christian spiritual formation is the scheduled launch in 2010 of a Web-based spiritual formation resource named *Monvee* (<http://www.monvee.com/?flash=1>). According to the developers of Monvee, “One-size-fits-all discipleship programs are killing the church,” a problem they aim to solve by “handcrafting” individualized spiritual formation programs for those who utilize the

Monvee service.²⁶⁷ According to its promotional materials, Monvee hopes to do for spiritual formation what eHarmony did for dating.

Participants who enroll in the Monvee program are led through a Web-based evaluation process. Using diagnostic questions and a series of graphic interfaces, the program purports to discover how individuals learn best, how they grow, and how they most effectively connect with God. After the evaluation process is completed, Monvee provides users with a personal spiritual formation “roadmap” that gives guidance in four areas: “My Time,” “My Mind,” “My Relationships,” and “My Experiences.” The “My Time” part of the personal roadmap gives the individual a spiritual practice to work on that is deemed to be ideally suited to the individual at this point in his or her development. “My Mind” provides a selection of resources to be utilized for learning. These resources may consist of any kind of media, including books and audio or video resources, depending on the individual’s preferred mode of learning as determined by Monvee’s evaluation process.

The creators of Monvee recognize there is an essential link between spiritual formation and community. Monvee is designed for whole congregations to use together. While the “My Time” and “My Mind” components focus solely on the individual, “My Relationships” and “My Experiences” focus on the individual’s spiritual formation with others. Monvee is currently in its beta testing phase, and the “My Relationships” and “My Experiences” areas of the service are not yet functional. When the service is fully operational, however, “My Relationships” will give suggestions on how individuals may integrate their spiritual growth within the existing ministries of the local church. “My

²⁶⁷ John Ortberg, “Hand-Crafted,” Monvee, <http://blog.monvee.com/?p=207> (accessed July 27, 2009).

Experiences” will direct participants to ministry outreach endeavors that their church is already doing within the local community. Theoretically, all advice given will be uniquely designed by the proprietary Monvee process to ideally suit an individual’s current needs, personality, learning style, and track of spiritual growth.

Some churches may wish to pursue spiritual formation entirely within their own community and not turn over the bulk of the work of direction and coordination to Monvee. At the same time, given the busyness of contemporary Americans’ daily lives, churches may be frustrated by their inability to gather congregants together for spiritual formation as often as they would like. Churches such as these, which desire to promote spiritual formation in their local bodies and wish to also leverage the connective potential of social networking technologies have a number of options:

- **The City** (www.onthecity.org), a social networking site developed by Mars Hill Church in Seattle and bought by Zondervan in 2008, can be used by churches to provide members with a virtual third place where they can meet, share stories, pray together, and receive updates on activities of the local church.
- **Ning** (www.ning.com) and **GroupSite** (www.groupsite.com) are free social networking platforms that can be upgraded with a variety of paid add-ons that allow individuals and groups to create niche social networks with far more interactive capabilities than a standard Web site or blog platform.
- **Unifyer** (www.unifyer.com) and **MemberHub** (www.memberhub.com) are networking and communication sites designed specifically with ministries, universities, and non-profit organizations in mind.

Each of these sites might be used meaningfully to promote spiritual formation. Although face-to-face interactions should be core to community-based spiritual formation, the higher the level of connectivity between community members the better the needs of the community will be served. Social networking technologies, when leveraged wisely, can provide a much higher level of relational connectivity than can often be realized in groups meeting only face-to-face. Because community members can log on to the network at any time, community interactions are not limited to only those times when all members are physically present at the same time and place.

Clarity and Focus

Churches and ministry leaders desiring to see lives transformed more fully in the image of Christ must have unwavering clarity of purpose and focus on a compelling strategy to achieve their goals. Authors Thom Rainer and Eric Geiger argue that the only way to accomplish this is to simplify. Churches, they assert, need to eradicate the clutter of a multiplicity of programs that do not serve the core purpose of the church, which is to be the Body of Christ. “A simple church,” they write, “is a congregation designed around a straight-forward and strategic process that moves people through the stages of spiritual growth.”²⁶⁸ All church programs and ministries should be aligned around the chosen process. Programs that do not meet the core purpose of the church should be eliminated.²⁶⁹

Authentic Christian community will be vital to the success of any discipleship program. Churches and ministry leaders should have clarity and laser-like focus on this

²⁶⁸ Thom S. Rainer and Eric Geiger, *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 2006), 60.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 74-78.

point as well. Every ministry program should be evaluated as to its internal process for nurturing life change that occurs in community. Ministry leaders would benefit from asking, is our community typified by wholeness and aliveness in Christ? Are our ministries marked by evidence of the unfolding of life in Christ? Does our community manifest love for one another, while at the same time reach ever outward to welcome others?

No ministry of the church should make community a secondary concern. Instead, every ministry should be designed in such a way that members pray together, study together, learn together, and serve together—in other words, do life together. All church ministries ought to draw people into community life, and all community life should be celebrated and made a part of the ministry of the church.

Churches that do not make Christian spiritual formation the core purpose of their ministry risk obsolescing into irrelevance. How could they expect to do otherwise? As James Wilhoit observes, “Spiritual formation is *the* task of the church. Period. It represents neither an interesting, optional pursuit by the church, nor an insignificant category in the job description of the body of Christ. Spiritual formation is at the heart of its whole purpose of existence.”²⁷⁰ A church that has not first and foremost devoted itself to making disciples has lost sight of its primary mandate (Matt. 28:18-20).

The contemporary world changes so quickly that churches must, of course, be nimble. Ministry methods can and should change. Programs should constantly be evaluated to ensure they are theologically sound and that they actually serve the purpose for which they were intended. It is the nature of life and ministry for the mechanisms of

²⁷⁰ Jim Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered: Growing in Christ through Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 15.

life and ministry to skew out of healthy alignment. It is therefore all the more important that ministry leaders constantly monitor whether community is at the center of what the church does, or if it has been allowed to drift to the periphery.

That They May Be One

A recent episode of ABC's hit television drama *Grey's Anatomy* centers around the treatment of a young man who had some years previously lost both lips and his entire nose during a terrible car accident. Some of the young surgeons in the show callously refer to the young man as "Blowhole" when not in his presence. The patient has come to their hospital to receive a face transplant, a groundbreaking and highly experimental surgery. The patient, "Dave," is committed to the surgery, despite its risks of infection and tissue rejection, because he tires of being, in his words, "a point-and-stare freak."

Dave is asked if his family will be there to support him before and after the surgery. He responds that he has no family, but some of his online friends will be coming to see him after the surgery. When three of these friends arrive early, however, Dave turns from them in anguished embarrassment over his disfigurement and shouts for them to get out. He drives them from his hospital room. "You're strangers! I've never met you! I don't know you! You know nothing about me," he cries while turning away from them so that they will not see his ruined visage.

Hours later, Dave's surgeons prevail upon him to call his friends back to the hospital. The surgeons explain that rules prevent them from going forward with the transplant if he does not have a support system to care for him post-operatively. When his friends return, Dave tearfully explains, "I didn't want you to see me like this. I wanted you to see me whole. If the surgery doesn't work, I'll be even uglier than I am now."

In a heartbreakingly beautiful moment, one of his visitors, an older African-American woman, takes his hand, looks him in the eye, and says “Please don’t call my friend ugly. You are beautiful. You are a survivor. It’s written all over your face.” And then she kisses him on the cheek.

In that moment, Dave truly enters into community. Before, he was a faceless entity who could communicate with these others via the Internet, but did not truly know them or allow them to know him. He used distance as a wall to protect that part of himself he thought would be unacceptable to them. That wall, however, stood in the way of his healing. Only when he saw his supporters face-to-face, and was ministered to by a loving kiss, did he fully enter into friendship with them. In that moment, community was born, and the most important part of his healing, the healing of his heart, began.

As we have demonstrated, authentic Christian community is essential to Christian spiritual formation. From creation, humans were designed in the image of God, making loving community an essential component of what it means to be truly human. The weight of psychological and sociological data suggests that healthy community is essential to personal and societal health.

Though we may have partially forgotten or neglected the importance of community in recent years, Christians have always known that community is God’s primary chosen means of advancing his redemptive work. Humankind rebelled against God. And yet, God so loved his creation he would not allow humanity to languish in death. He called out of sinful humanity a people he would call his own, and entered into a covenant of love and grace with them. In them he would make manifest his love, a love that would save the world. Through them he would work to restore creation.

In what is often referred to as Jesus' high priestly prayer, he said, "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:11). Faced with imminent death, Jesus' heartfelt plea was that his people would once again experience the community of love in which they had originally been created. Christians cannot fully experience that love apart from authentic Christian community. To achieve wholeness in Christ otherwise flies in the face of everything we know about God's design of humanity. It really is that simple. Humans were created in the image of a relational God. To be formed into the image of Christ is to be formed in community.

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