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Creating Community: A Quaker, Covental Approach Toward a Parallel Society

Colin B. Saxton

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**CREATING COMMUNITY:
A QUAKER, COVENANTAL APPROACH TOWARD A PARALLEL SOCIETY**

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THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY
COLIN B. SAXTON

APRIL 12, 2004

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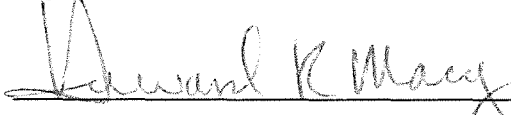
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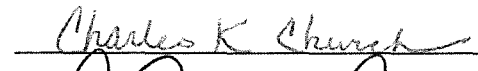
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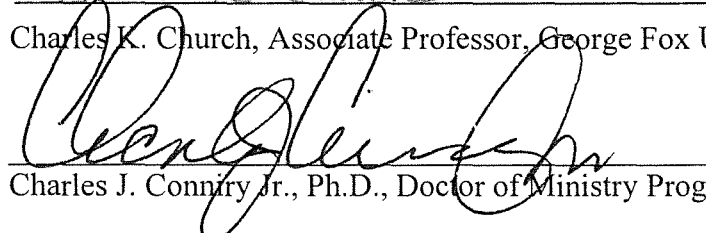
**Title: CREATING COMMUNITY: A QUAKER, COVENANTAL APPROACH
TOWARD A PARALLEL SOCIETY**

**Presented by: Colin B. Saxton
April 12, 2004**

We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation degree.


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Many years ago, when I was still a relatively new Christian, I peppered my pastor with lots of questions about the church and our calling to serve Christ in the world. In a moment of (likely) justifiable exasperation, he said: “One day when you are older, have kids and are carrying a mortgage, you will see why your high ideals won’t work in real life.”

Four kids, a house and twenty-plus years of faith have certainly altered my view of reality but they have not dimmed my belief in the Church. It is, I believe, God’s primary redemptive tool in creation. Because it continues to embody the real Presence of Christ and is committed to continuing his ministry, it is the great hope for the world.

This dissertation is first of all dedicated to the many faithful friends who, in their lives and words, have kept me from losing faith in this hope. Thank you, blessed friends!

In particular, I thank my community of faith—North Valley Friends Church in Newberg, OR. They have been generous and patient with me over the last three years of study and writing. More than that, however, they are a living testimony to some of substantive issues I have presented here. It has been a joy, privilege and honor to share in genuine, covenantal fellowship with them.

Primarily, however, this work is dedicated to my family. To Hanna, Ellie, Amy and Samuel—who truly are gifts sent from above. Thank you for allowing me time and space to work, even when it was not always convenient. Most of all, I thank my sweet wife, Janine. You are the best!

Others deserve my gratitude, as well. Thanks to my parents, Charles and Sally Saxton for the resources to buy a laptop. You aided this project (and my sanity) more than you will ever know. Bless you, Howard Macy, for your support & advising. Finally, a word of “thanks” to those couple of friends who gave me practical wisdom in writing: “Remember, you are painting a wall—not a masterpiece. Just finish the wall. You can make it pretty later.” Good advice, friends, especially since I’ve “hit the wall” right about now, too.

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
CREATING COMMUNITY:
A QUAKER, COVENTANTAL APPROACH TOWARD A PARALLEL SOCIETY

By Colin Saxton

Within many local churches people hunger and thirst for deeper spirituality, authentic fellowship and more active ministry in the world. Sincere disciples long to know and follow Christ and participate in a community of saints who embody the values of God's Kingdom in this world.

Along the way, however, many of these same people often feel unfulfilled and frustrated. Hindered by social pressure and conventional values, these Christians find themselves conforming to the American social patterns and practices they often disdain. Many simply do not experience the necessary communal support to live out the gospel in the face of the prevailing culture.

This phenomenon is exacerbated within the Religious Society of Friends because of the profound shift toward individualism that occurred within their religious heritage. It is further complicated by the rugged individualism that defines American culture and affects the Friends vision of spiritual experience and sense of call.

The subject of this dissertation is to demonstrate creative avenues for authentic, transformational community through the use of a covenantal model in a Quaker fellowship. Sensitive to the peculiarities of Friends' *Faith and Practice*, this model is designed to nurture and sustain the historical and present day alternative way of life of Friends.

Chapter one of the dissertation includes a further examination of the problem by setting it in the context of a local congregation. Critical definitions are included to further

clarify the subject of study. Chapter two identifies key biblical themes and an overarching theology of spiritual community. The third chapter provides a selected overview of communal models within church history that demonstrate a coherent and consistent thread within the long experience of the church. Chapter four examines two significant barriers to spiritual community—present day American culture and paradoxes and tensions within Friends faith. The final applied chapter of the dissertation will serve as a resource for creating a covenantal agreement within a local church. Its aim is to intentionally nurture a communal way of life that embodies the parallel cultural values of Christ's Kingdom.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE LONGING FOR AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Defining the Problem

“So how do we do *it*?” Roger asked as he shoveled another spoonful of vegetarian lasagna onto his plate. His question took Silas off-guard.

“Do what?” Silas asked from his side of the potluck line.

“How do we live this radical, Christian life together? I mean, every week you preach these sermons—holding up wonderful images of the Church continuing the ministry of Christ. You say, ‘we are the ongoing physical presence of Jesus on earth.’ You tell us that we can *know* and *follow* Him in this life. You remind us all the time that we are joined together *in the Presence of Christ* in order to *do His will*. Every time you say something like that my insides ache with longing and my head explodes with joyful possibility.”

Silas poked at a baked potato lying helplessly on the platter in front of him. “We’re not quite there, are we?” he offered somewhat sarcastically.

“You know I love this church,” Roger responded quickly. “I do see Christ at work among us. I do see signs of the Kingdom of God present in our midst. But I also know we are very busy. We are a bunch of middle-class idealists. We want to be faithful. We want to build an authentic Christian community but there are so many barriers to relationship and our good intentions keep getting derailed by the fact we are products of this culture. We need,” Roger said in all seriousness, “some way to build the kind of faith-community

where people are freed to live as we are called by Christ. It is almost like we need a counter-cultural community—or at least an alternative community—that nurtures and supports our experience of Christ and the living out of His teachings. But is there really any way we can do this?”

This was not the first time a “Roger” had quizzed Silas this way. God knows these were the questions that had held him in ministry. They were the ones that drove him to prayer. These were the questions that caused him to lie awake at night and wonder.

Silas had been the pastor at Newton Friends Church for over five years. He loved this community of Quaker people. Though somewhat diverse in background and theological persuasion there was a general sense of unity around their vision of what it meant to be a community of Jesus’ followers. They believed, for instance, that God was calling them both individually and corporately to a life of deep and intimate spiritual communion. Further, they held strongly to the notion of being a spiritual fellowship. Community and establishing an authentic shared life in Christ was work of the highest order. Newton Friends desired to be a community of ministers, as well. Both in their personal and communal life, the people sensed God wanted to use their gifts, callings and concerns to meet the needs of a hurting world. In particular, for Newton Friends, this sense of ministry was closely connected to a Quaker spiritual heritage. Therefore, the concerns of social justice, non-violent peacemaking, simplicity, as well as evangelism and missions, were central to their understanding of discipleship.

Roger and Silas walked over to a table where Sarah and Jean were sitting. They were talking about the church’s youth ministry and how the congregation might encourage the

kids to be actively involved in service to poor. “Sarah,” Silas said, “Roger asked me the question you and I have talked about a 1000 times.”

“Which one?” she laughed.

“How do we *do it*?” he groaned. Around the table, the four friends laughed knowingly and sighed.

“I know, let’s pray about it and make a plan,” Jean suggested. “I mean, we all believe we’re supposed to be intentional about our faith and our community—so let’s figure out what God is asking of us. After all, He has called us into this relationship. He is the One who is asking us to cooperate in His work. Maybe, if we are truly open, we can figure out a new way to experience the kind of community we all desire and God desires for us.”

The wheels in Silas’ head began to spin and churn. Many such “planning sessions” occurred at Newton Friends and at other churches he had served. They met for a time and stirred up a bunch of enthusiasm that even resulted in some positive growth and change. But over time, enthusiasm waned. People moved on to other concerns or moved to a new location. The simple maintenance of the institutional church began to take precedence over the creation and re-creation of a community of people bent on serving Christ.

Silas also knew the idiosyncrasies and complexities of Newton Friends would make this kind of discussion challenging anyway. Full of young, transient adults, this Friends church could be described as well educated, highly idealistic, and quite individualistic. The church tended to be a magnet for people with questions and a tinge of skepticism bordering, at times, on cynicism. Added to this were the inherent complexities and

tensions within the Friends theology and practice of faith. External controls, contractual commitments, programs, and anything even remotely resembling “enforced spirituality” became immediately suspect. What kind of “plan” would have a shot at working in this kind of environment?

“You look skeptical about the idea of a plan,” Sarah aimed at Silas.

“No—not skeptical. It’s just...you know as well as I do that this group of people won’t buy into the idea of a program. Everybody gets uneasy when we talk about ‘7 easy steps to church growth’ or a ‘manual for discipleship.’ I’m all for meeting—especially with you three. And I would like to find a way to draw in others who are interested. But we need to think in different terms than ‘a one-size-fits-all’ methodology or a meaningless contract we might pressure people to sign. Instead, we need to think in terms of how we structure our life together. We need to focus on the covenant life we are called to live in Jesus Christ and then consider what we can do *together* to nurture and sustain us in that kind of life. It means, I guess, that we learn to do more than talk about our covenantal life with God—we must flesh it out and make some decisions about how it will shape our life in community.”

“Exactly,” said Jean. “That’s just the kind of plan that I was thinking! I hate programs even more than you! Let’s think in terms of creating a parallel culture—one in which we learn to know and follow Christ together and find the support we need to live out the values of His Kingdom.”

Roger, Sarah, and Silas looked thoughtfully at Jean, then at one another. “I think,” Roger said, “I’ll need another helping of lasagna first.”

Defining Key Terms

From its earliest days, the Religious Society of Friends has expressed a profound optimism in relation to the spiritual life. Such optimism springs neither from an overdeveloped sense of inherent, human goodness nor the inevitable progress of social ingenuity. Rather, optimism issues mainly from an abiding trust in the absolute grace, power and wisdom of God who is at work in the world “reconciling all things to Himself” (Colossians 1:20).¹

Historically, Friends have been regarded as a more “radical” branch of Christianity. This radicalism is seen in the simplicity of worship, commitment to integrity in all forms, disuse of the outward elements for either communion or baptism, general refusal to participate in the military or other forms of violence, structure of decision making, avoidance of hierarchy and the associated distinctions between clergy and laity. These expressions of radical faith and others like them come out of Friends’ insistence that the only reality that matters in the end is Jesus Christ. Any form, structure or practice that hinders a direct encounter with him is potentially deadening or at least distracting. At its best, the Friends’ radical focus on Christ has allowed them to serve as a faithful witness of Christian faith and a transformational presence in the world. Of course, the previous description is given in an idealized form. Throughout the history of Friends, a deep divide has taken place that has robbed the movement of much of its vitality and radical witness. We do not embody what I have just described.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, copyright 1984 by the International Bible Society. All rights reserved.

Writing as I do from an evangelical Friends' point of view—but quite sympathetic toward much that is common to the other branches of Quakerdom—I also realize that I bring a particular bias to this study. While I have tried to look at Friends theology and practice with a critical, self-aware eye, I still retain certain assumptions about the underlying Christocentricity of Quaker faith that some other Friends might find debatable. I also write from the point of view of a pastor who is committed to the institutional church—despite its many flaws and inherent dilemmas. I am not ready to give up on “organized religion” as some have in the circle of Friends. This underlying commitment to traditional church structures certainly shapes the focus and form of this study. It results in a call for renewal within the existing structure, rather than the abandonment of it. Finally, as I am now firmly entrenched in mid-life, I am more ready to accept that a parallel-culture *can and must* connect to the *real world* where most Christians—and most Quakers—live. It must reach to the person who works and lives and worships in the midst of our complex American culture rather than demand we retreat to the monastery, the commune, or into an entirely counter-cultural lifestyle. While each of the former are valid expressions of faith and may be the call of select individuals, they do not appear to be the paths laid out for most people of faith. Articulating a vision of covenantal life for the bulk of Friends, then, remains an important task—the one at hand.

In the exploration of this topic it is also important to clarify the meaning of a few terms, lest they remain too ambiguous for the reader. These terms are three—found in the title of this dissertation: community, covenant, and parallel culture.

By community, I refer explicitly to the vision of “koinonia” (Greek for *fellowship* or *shared life*) found in the New Testament descriptions of the church. Though community is pictured in a host of other ways in the biblical account, koinonia might be the loveliest image. Far more than a monthly potluck, true koinonia is the working out of Jesus’ call to his followers to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). In doing so, they demonstrate to the rest of the world by their actions that they are, indeed, his disciples (John 13:35).

This kind of community implies sharing on every essential level. It suggests caring for each other in economic, social, physical, emotional and spiritual terms. It necessitates a level of knowing each other, learning to depend on and be accountable to one another. It requires a common purpose, expressed in Christian terms, through a spirit of unity in and fidelity to the life of Christ.

Covenant is the second important theme that needs developing. This idiom of the faith has a particularly rich and full history in the biblical narrative. Throughout this story, God binds humanity to himself and to one another through covenantal initiative in the creation of Adam and Eve, and then in increasingly specified covenants with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David, and Christ.² While the features of these covenants vary and can be differentiated between “conditional” and “unconditional” in nature, what is common to them all is that they originate out of the gracious initiative of God toward humanity.

² Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995), 4.

Early Friends, as it will be explored later, utilized the notion of covenant as a centerpiece for understanding their life in Christ. Much more than a contractual agreement, it was understood that God has established a covenantal initiative that is at work in the world in the life, death and resurrected presence of Jesus Christ. This work may be hidden to many, but it is the binding, driving force behind history as it moves toward the eschatological goal God has purposed. People of faith are the active participants in the covenantal life—which is the real presence of Christ operative in the world. According to Quaker writer Doug Gwyn, we faithfully respond to the covenantal initiative of God in three ways—“first, in our experience of conviction, a sense our alienation from God, our lostness in creation, and our concrete acts of sin; second, in our repentance, a death to what has been, a desolation of the ego-centered world we have construed; and third, in our reconciliation with God, the redirection of our lives into covenant faithfulness to God and to our fellow creatures.”³

What is crucial in the understanding of this term is the relational, participatory nature of it. Covenant, as the early Quakers conceived of it, was not simply a forensic adjustment of status before God or an agreement to abide by a set of moral or pietistic regulations—especially those regulations externally imposed. Neither was it construed as a set of creedal formulations that must be accepted. It was (and is) simply the active encounter with God through the mediating presence of Christ that re-creates individuals, faith communities and ultimately all of creation into the divine image.

³ Ibid., 5, 6.

Contemporary theologian, Walter Brueggemann has this to say about covenant as it is applied to community,

These marks of covenant community... characterize a subversive ecclesiology in deep conflict with our conventions. It is important to see how extensively our usual notions of community are refuted here— notions which are either of *communities of fate* (into which we are locked without choice) or of *convenience* (in which we have no serious or abiding stake). Against both of those, we are to have a *called community*—not a voluntary association, but a people addressed and bound in a concrete and abiding loyalty to God. (his italics).

Finally, we may rearticulate our covenantal hope for the world. So long as this subversive paradigm is kept to God and church, we are safe enough. Its character of surprise and threat becomes clear when the covenant is related to the world beyond the believing community. The covenantal paradigm affirms that the world we serve, and for which we care, is a world yet to be liberated. A theology of covenanting is not worth the effort unless it leads to energy and courage for mission.⁴

Without realizing it, Brueggemann captures the essential notion of Quaker covenant as it applies to their own life as the community of Jesus. As they understood their calling from God, this covenantal life pushed them out into the world as a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven. Undoubtedly, the values of this Kingdom often run counter to the urges and impulses of a world that fails or refuses to acknowledge the reign of Christ. Many times, this conflict of values led to severe persecution, ridicule, and even death for Friends—as it has in every generation of faithful Christians since the day of Jesus himself. But along with these seeming tragedies, their faithful witness to the covenant life of God also led to many conversions, numerous social reforms, and the formation of a movement that remains active to the present.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Covenant as Subversive Paradigm," *Christian Century* 97, no. 36 (November 12 1980): 1097.

The final and connected term to define is a “parallel culture.” Described in greater detail at the end of chapter 2, this phrase suggests something unique about the Christian vocation and the particular interpretation Quakers have given it. While some faith communities have aligned themselves fully or at least provisionally with the socio-political and economic forces that govern their own culture, others have sought to live in denial or separation from these realities. The present day, religious right in America is an easy exemplar of the first group—comfortable and often overtly supportive of our capitalist democracy. Several in this group would go so far as to unite the elements of our national interests and structures under (or alongside?) the heading of basic, Christian faith. For them, our system of government and economy is ideal for remaining “one nation under God.”

The separatist group could be identified with Amish or early Anabaptist groups, who imaged the Kingdom of God in stark contrast with the kingdoms of this world. One realm was the Kingdom of Light—the other, the Kingdom of darkness. Those who were now the children of Light saw the two realms as so different in nature that—in the most extreme cases—there was to be as little interaction as possible in the realm of “darkness.”

Clearly, there are countless other expressions of this tension along the continuum of possibility. For Friends, it is being argued in this paper, the best conception of their historic perspective on this matter is found in the idea of being a “parallel culture.”

A parallel culture exists in relationship to the established culture. It is not simply “counter-cultural” in that it expresses itself in more positive terms than just what it opposes. Instead, it stands for and embodies a primary allegiance to the Kingdom of God,

as best as it is able to discern. This suggests that this community must be continually reflective—considering how it is remaining faithful to the active reign of Christ. It also implies a willingness to connect with the activity of God when it is experienced within the more secular culture. Since the reign of Jesus Christ transcends the limits of the church, it is indeed likely that signs and manifestations of the Kingdom can be found, appreciated and joined with in “the world.” Pragmatically, this awareness and willingness to seek the Kingdom in all of life has allowed Friends to participate in governmental roles (albeit with great tension), join with kindred secular, civil and social causes, and partner with other religious groups working toward common goals.

What matters in the creation of a parallel culture is the willingness to remain faithful to the life, teachings and Spirit of Christ despite the cost. It is a commitment to live in and live out the active reign of God in Christ in the midst of everyday, human existence. Such a life, however, does not happen by accident. Rather, it requires constant nurture, reinforcement and intentionality—not only for the sake of those involved—but also for the sake of those watching and wondering “what in heaven’s name” this group is all about.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF COVENANTAL COMMUNITY

Introduction

In this chapter I will overview the primary biblical scholarship and theological reflection relating to the subject of community and covenantal relationship within the fellowship of God. I will demonstrate that a coherent thread throughout Scripture and theology reveal a distinct call for the creation of a holy people who are to be transformed into the divine image. This spiritual community of human beings is to be gathered into a covenantal life that finds its power and vibrancy in the actual presence of the God.

From the pre-historic beginning of Genesis to the apocalyptic end of Revelation the formation of “the people of God” emerges as a primary motif within the text. While an individual’s experience with God is surely in view in the biblical narrative and personal redemption is an essential aspect of Christian theology and spirituality, there is also an overwhelming emphasis on communal spiritual formation and the corporate encounter with God.

While modern theology has tended toward a more individualistic view of faith, the present, post-modern scene has, in many ways, rediscovered the importance of communal spirituality. The tick-tock of theology’s inevitable pendulum swing has begun to gravitate

toward a more balanced perspective that reflects an understanding of this key concept. The creation of a covenantal fellowship under the reign and rule of God is again beginning to be recognized as an essential element of God's vision for the world.

Monotheism with a Twist

It is unclear among scholars how or how early Israel came to adopt the zealous conviction that its God was the only, true God. Within the biblical narrative there are indications that the earliest Hebrew community may have been more practically monotheistic than theoretically so. That is, functionally, Israel was committed to a life of fidelity with YHWH but did not rule out the possibility that other, lesser gods existed and even minimally controlled other lands and peoples. Over time, however, their understanding of YHWH's nature and character evolved. Before long, in an era dominated by polytheistic religious expression, the early Israelite community stood in stark contrast to the religion of its neighbors because of its radical, monotheistic beliefs.

The classic affirmation of Hebrew faith (the Shema) of Deuteronomy 6:4 insists that "the Lord our God is One." Only YHWH is to be served and worshipped by the small band of people who had been chosen among all the nations. Whether this communal pledge suggests a disbelief in the reality of other gods or simply asserts the primacy of YHWH among the plurality of possible deities at the time it was first introduced is unclear. What is certain, especially as their convictions regarding YHWH's nature solidified, is that Israel from its origin was drawn into a unique relationship demanding total fidelity and allegiant faith to the One God who had selected them among all the peoples of the Earth.

Despite the Hebraic assertion that there is only One God, scripture releases a paradoxical element into the equation. God, while remaining One, in some manner is also revealed in plurality. Even in the early context of the Old Testament, this mystery is unveiled. As far back as the creation account, the Genesis report has God speaking, "Let us make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness" (Genesis 1:26). Though it is almost certain that no Jewish interpreter of this text would have envisioned anything remotely connected to Christian/Trinitarian theology, some scholars suggest it opens the door to or possibly prefigures a later orthodox, Christian understanding of the Godhead.¹

This vision of the Godhead living in divine fellowship, even before the creation of the world, is an increasingly popular and developed theme among contemporary theologians. Writers such as Stanley Grenz and Thomas Oden picture the Father, Son and Holy Spirit living in Triune, eternal community and modeling for humanity the kind of loving fellowship God envisions for humanity to enjoy.

Again, neither the primordial Hebrew community nor later Jewish theology envisions a Triune God. Therefore, it is critical to not read too much back into the Hebrew text. What writers like Grenz and Oden like to point out, however, is how the creation text in Genesis depicts God speaking in first person throughout the account. However, in verse 26 the passage shifts direction and at least hints at the kind plurality seen in Christianity's trinitarian Godhead. "Let *us* make (*na`aseh*) man in *our* image (*besalmenu*), in *our* likeness (*kidmuth enu*)" (Genesis 1:26). Similarly, the Shema passage—often cited to assert the uniquely monotheistic expression of Hebrew faith—

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 27.

uses a variation of the Hebrew *Elohim* for God. This is a plural noun usually linked to singular verbs in the telling of the story of God and God's people. As Oden notes, "However one may seek to explain this unusual use of language, it cannot establish an Old Testament triune teaching, but can point indirectly to some mysterious plurality in the intrasubjectivity of God."²

When Christianity initially emerged as a sect within greater Judaism, it had to defend charges of having rejected monotheism because of its faith claims regarding the divine status of Jesus the Christ and later the Holy Spirit. As uniquely Christian theology developed, so did a full-blown trinitarian formula. The importance of this teaching and the relevance it plays in the discussion of the formation of faith in community has ebbed and flowed throughout the succeeding generations. Because "trinity" is not a word found in Scripture, several prominent theologians like Aquinas, Luther and Schleiermacher found it unhelpful and therefore minimized its place in theology.³ The Religious Society of Friends, the focal community of this dissertation research, has also tended to ignore the relevance of trinitarian theology—and theology generally. Uneasy with formulaic assertions about God, Friends have historically placed more emphasis on the importance of orthopraxy over orthodoxy.

Still, as a Trinitarian understanding has re-surfaced in discussions about ecclesiology and Christian self-perception in the last decades, the subject begins to carry considerable weight. If God, in fact, exists eternally in community, enjoying diversity and self-

² Thomas C. Oden, *Life in the Spirit: Systematic Theology Volume Three* (Peabody: Prince Press, 1998), 193.

³ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 64.

dedicated love within the confines of ontological unity, the door opens to a new understanding and awareness about how the members of a faith community relate to God and to each other.⁴

A Light to the Nations—An Overview of Early Israel in the Old Testament

Even if one denies the relevance of community within the Godhead, it becomes much more difficult to deny the clear, biblical call that focuses on the creation of a “people of God.” From the beginning, the plain account of biblical literature suggests that God relates to humanity in community as much or more than individually.

For instance, in the first creation account in Genesis 1, God creates “man in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). Apparently, only the tandem of the male and female could best reveal the divine image. Later, as the first human community forms, God sees that “it is not good for the man to be alone” and so joins the man and woman in intimate fellowship in order that they might be complete (Genesis 2:18, 23).

The biblical account reveals right away the tenuous nature of human community. Cain kills Abel. Chaos, corruption and violence mark the days of Noah (Genesis 6:11). In the aftermath of the Great Flood, God initiates a covenant with humanity in the hope of restoring fellowship with fallen humanity and creation (Genesis 9:11). Unfortunately, the situation only improves for a short while. Soon, the insurgency at Babel only fuels humanity’s rebellion toward God and the further division among the peoples (Genesis 11:8).

⁴ Ibid., 68.

In chapter 12 of Genesis, however, God begins to adopt a seemingly new strategy. Out of relative obscurity, God calls Abram as founding father for what will become the family of faith.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

In embryonic form the extended family of Abram becomes faithful Israel, the chosen people of God, who are to serve YHWH as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and a light to the rest of humanity. They are to become the people who walk by faith—going whenever and wherever God might lead them. And as will be demonstrated in the further exploration of the biblical text and underlying Christian theology, the people of God are to embody in their common life the *shalom* (peace), *misphat* (justice), *sedaqah* (righteousness) and *hesed* (merciful love) that flows from their dependence upon the Holy God who is all of these in his person.

At this stage of the story, however, God is just beginning to reveal and implement this vision. The divine promise to multiply Abram's offspring holds true. By the end of Genesis, the final patriarch, Joseph, and his clan are being buried, “but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them” (Exodus 1:7). Unfortunately for them, however, the years of suffering, captivity and wandering also begin. Under the crushing hand of Pharaoh's Egypt, Israel learns what it means to live as a powerless minority—aliens and strangers in a harsh environment.

Eventually, God raises up Moses and other leaders for a daring and dramatic escape from Egypt, as the people of God set out to settle in the Land of Promise (Exodus 3:8). Along the way, of course, the Israelites never quite live up to God's invitation to become a faithful, holy people. They stumble, grumble and prove faithless at many critical junctures. Regardless, God continues to invite the people into a covenantal relationship. At Mount Sinai, YHWH offers the solemn reminder that this invitation demands an active, faithful response. "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5, 6). The first giving of the Torah outlines the basic parameters and disciplines of their unique, covenantal relationship with YHWH and the social implications of it among the fellowship of people. It is the beginning of a long history of covenantal initiatives in which God would call for the obedience and fidelity of the people.⁵

These social implications serve to guide the people toward a vision of God's righteousness. They are bound together under the demands of Torah in a way that creates a community of righteous character that lives in dependence upon its God. This vision is reflected in the various annual sacrifices and festivals that help remind the people of how God has acted in their past. It is further evident in the vision of Jubilee. Though it may not have ever been fully implemented as a communal practice, the vision of Jubilee was to create a just social order based on God's character and reign over the community.

⁵ Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 69.

Unfortunately, in the days following their unwillingness to enter the Promised Land at God's direction, the Israelites must learn many painful lessons in the desert. Though these wandering years were likely not God's original intent for the Hebrew people, God uses their experience to teach and train them and gather them into a restored community.⁶

Though some might argue the validity of this perspective, it seems that God's willingness to accommodate the human frailty and faithlessness of the people keeps the door open for a remnant to remain within the larger Hebrew community. Over and over, certain leaders and segments of the society lose hope, courage and focus. In the days of the Judges, the people begin a slow descent away from God's original calling. With Gideon conventional wisdom begins to replace covenantal faith, as the multitude begins to clamor for a human ruler to replace YHWH's active leadership (Judges 9:22). Later, despite the protestations and admonitions of the prophet Samuel, the people finally persuade God to give them their wish—to have a “king to lead us, such as all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5).

It is also during this era that many other issues change within the life of Israel and its relationship with God. In some regard the Torah begins to shift away from an ethical guide to more a rigid rule. *Nomos* (law) rather than *torah* (teaching/guide) begins to characterize the ethical and sacrificial character of the people. This is more than a subtle shift in language, it is reflected in a fundamental re-imagining of relationship between the people and YHWH.⁷ Similarly, in the days of David and his son Solomon, the tabernacle

⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷ Jeremiah Unterman, “Torah,” in *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 1162.

is replaced by a permanent, fixed dwelling place—the Temple—that is meant to house YHWH. While it is subject to debate whether the actual construction of the Temple was God’s will or an accommodation to the people, it is clear that it had radical implications for the community. Now, the un-caged, roving Lion of Judah is localized and tamed. A new era of worship and sacrifice begins by the centralizing, stabilizing presence of one primary worship place. The political implications of joining the house of God near the house of the King are immense. It is also likely that the immense toll of actually constructing the Temple is the impetus for the division of Israel at a later date.⁸

In decline, the nation of Israel moves away from its original calling to be a holy theocracy. By its character and communal life, Israel was intended to demonstrate the reality and primacy of its God over the false gods of other nations. By this time, however, the nation had lost sight of this vision. In ensuing years, exile and judgment accompany the people as they lose their way. Increasingly, YHWH expresses frustration over their idolatry, violence, injustice and disregard of the covenant.

A People Re-membered—Prophetic Renewal of God’s Vision for Community

YHWH’s call to the community is resilient, however. The God of faithful love will not be denied. Like the spurned lover Hosea, God continues to love, to woo, and to court his adulteress bride—even though any other lover would have abandoned a faithless spouse.

At times, as if hanging by a thread, it often appears that the covenantal community is in great danger of being severed in its tie to YHWH. Through

⁸ William Sanford, “1 and 2 Kings,” in *The Bible Commentary*, ed. Donald Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 328.

disobedience, injustice and idolatry, Israel proves to be perpetually faithless. Covenantal love, meant to be shared between God and his people, winds up being exchanged for a kind of slavish ritual that the people hope will appease God and induce his blessing and protection.⁹ Even the Law itself, designed in its original form to create the contours of a community learning to work out the righteousness of God in human relations, becomes perverted. Instead of being a grace-filled guide for life, the Law evolves over time into a rigid rule that soon allows for all kinds of loopholes, distortions, and abuses.

Similarly, God's emphasis on justice and care for the poor and oppressed—evident in the early Torah and vision of Jubilee—is lost in the obsessive commitment to the cultic ritual and sacrificial system that results. At the height of God's displeasure with the people, and as they come under the severe mercy of God's discipline and judgment, the people are told: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. Like Adam, they have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there" (Hosea 6:6-7).

In the midst of God's grieving over the demise of His people, the language of hope and renewal emerges through the words of the prophets. Collectively, they point to a brand new day and covenant—or at least a renewed covenant—in which the people would be re-membered into God's community of promise and righteousness.

These prophetic utterances repeatedly emphasize the communal nature of God's work in the world. They depict, through the various images used by the different prophets, an emerging portrait of a counter-cultural people who are the treasured

⁹ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 64.

possession of God. Their collective calling is to manifest the glory of YHWH to all others and to live in the righteousness of God intended from the creation. Through God's restoring grace and unmatched mercy, a new and lasting covenant will be set in place. At the heart of this covenant is a Messianic figure that will be the instrument for establishing God's redemption among the people.

In Isaiah, this restoration is promised to occur via "a child [who] is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this"(Isaiah 9:6-7).

Throughout the rest of the Isaiah text, the author teases the reader with further glimpses of the covenantal community God is constructing.

I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD; that is my name. I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you (Isaiah 42:6-9).

And later, "They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted" (Isaiah 62:12). As God's chosen, holy people their style of life in community will reveal the righteous character of their God. It is not religious ritual God requires but the manifestation of God's love shared among one another:

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen to loose the chains of injustice and

untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday (Isaiah 58:6-10).

The ancient prophet, Jeremiah, offers a similar account of God's restoration project. Though the old covenant had been shattered by unfaithfulness and the nation is teetering on the brink of devastation and ultimate exile, Jeremiah promises a renewal of fortune. The relentless love of God offers a new covenant to the people (Jeremiah 31:31). Again, the vision of a restored people, living in a newfound unity with God is prevalent:

Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal my people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security. I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before. I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it (Isaiah 33:6-9).

With amazing uniformity and clarity, the prophetic call rings clear. God is at work in the world bringing about the formation of a righteous people. In this community they will know God directly (Jeremiah 31:34, Isaiah 54:13) and have the Law written on their hearts rather than stone tablets (Isaiah 51:7, Jeremiah 31:31-34). The community will experience the great blessing and abundance of God's provision and peace (Isaiah 66:11, Ezekiel 34:26) and will have their sins and guilt erased (Isaiah 4:4, Ezekiel 36:25). The

intended vision of God, which began in creation and took root in the call of Abram, is announced boldly through the prophets.

The formation of this community, however, is not only directed “vertically” between the people and their God; the vision of covenant is to shape the “horizontal” relationships among the fellowship as well. Again, the prophetic vision remains consistent. Within the community of God, justice will prevail (Isaiah 32:16, Jeremiah 21:12, Hosea 12:6, Amos 5:15). Mercy and care for the oppressed will be a hallmark of the people (Isaiah 1:17, Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:8). Peace will not only be an inner quality of life, it will govern their relations among themselves and with others (Zechariah 9:10, Micah 4:3, Isaiah 2:4, Joel 3:10). Finally, this renewed covenant community is opened to anyone who responds to God’s invitation by identifying themselves with him and his ways (Isaiah 49:22, 2:2, 60:3, Jeremiah 3:3, Micah 4:2)

The people who at one point in Israel’s life were called “not a people” by God (Hosea 1:9) are once again called “you are my people” (Isaiah 51:16). And the great hope of the new covenant is that they are not simply God’s people by name, but this truth will be evident in the way they embody the holiness and righteousness of their God in their relationships with one another. More fundamentally, this “way of being” will flow naturally out of their intimate acquaintance with God, for to know God in one’s experience necessarily leads to the living out of righteousness, mercy and true justice.¹⁰

¹⁰ Leech, *Experiencing God*, 46.

The Messianic Fellowship—New Testament Emphasis on Community

Often, it seems, the distinctions between the Old and New Testaments have been so exaggerated as to make them documents that ought to be viewed in isolation, if not in opposition to one another. Law vs. grace and justice vs. mercy are just a few of the ways that the “old” is sometimes distinguished from the “new.” In a similar manner, especially within the evangelical tradition, the Old and New Testaments are also often seen as distinct in their emphasis upon corporate religion (Israel in the Old Testament) vs. individual religion (a personal relationship with Jesus in the New Testament).

This kind of exaggerated differentiation, however, does not hold up under closer scrutiny of the text itself. While it is clear that the New Testament describes and emphasizes personal salvation and individual encounter with God more than the Hebrew scriptures, the same primary emphasis on the formulation of “God’s people” is still woven all throughout the pages of the later writings.

Looking solely at the text itself, this emphasis appears as early as the advent literature, where Zechariah exalts the work that God is bringing about through the ministry of his own child and the coming Messiah. This hymn of praise details Israel’s long awaited hope for communal redemption and the restoration of its divine covenant with God. Within this relationship, Zechariah prophesies that God will bring:

Salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in

darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace (Luke 1:71-79).

This sense of expectation permeated much of first century Judaism. Living under the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire, faithful Jews held out hope that God would restore Israel's fortunes and return her to prominence among all the nations. They waited for One whom God would send as a deliverer, liberator and bearer of salvation as part of the covenantal promise tracing back to the early Fathers.

In the New Testament, however, this hopeful longing is broadened beyond the confines of Israel. In many respects it is universalized, even to the point that creation itself "groans" and awaits the restoration that God is undertaking in the whole of the cosmos (Romans 8:22, Colossians 1:20). Whatever disorder, brokenness and disharmony has scarred and marred creation, there is a general hope that God is acting to restore, reorder and bring peace.

From the Christian point of view, Jesus the Nazarene is God's peacemaking instrument. Not only does he fulfill the longing of creation, he also sets in motion the redemption and salvation of people. He actualizes and embodies the pleadings found in Zechariah's song—only he expands their meaning and broadens them beyond the confines of ethnic Israel.

In Christ, according to the Gospels and the subsequent New Testament writers, God enters human history clothed in the garment of flesh in order to reveal to people—in a way they can understand in their own terms—the true nature and intent of God (John 1:14). Christ comes offering the forgiveness of sins, the promise of eternal life, and the

indwelling power and love of his Spirit to anyone who, by the gracious initiative of God, unites with Christ in faith.

This individual response to God's love in active, faith-union is also the entrance into a whole new web of relationships. Discipleship, the act and work of following Jesus, is not an individual affair. By the New Testament's accounting, those who receive Christ as Lord and Savior not only become the children of God, and co-heirs in Christ, they also receive a new identity as a brother or sister with others in the faith.

From the outset of his own ministry, Jesus set in motion this new community. Calling his disciples to himself, Jesus began a collection of diverse characters. Though his initial ministry was centered in the Jewish community, Jesus welcomed various Gentiles into his following. These people, who would otherwise be seen as outside the scope of God's love, were even sometimes regaled by Christ as living examples of true faithfulness (Matthew 8:10, Luke 10:30-37, Matthew 26:13).

For instance, women played a key role in Jesus' Messianic community. Viewed more as property than persons in that day and age, Jesus related to them as equal partners and welcomed them into his band of disciples. In his interactions with them he continually raised their level of status and dignity. Central to Jesus' ministry, these women traveled with the larger circle of disciples, may have helped fund some of his ministry and were the first of Jesus' friends to witness his resurrection (Luke 8:3, Matthew 28:5-10). This inclusion of women—as well as children—into his community of friends and faith was foreign to the conventional, religious wisdom and practice of his day.

Even in Jesus' more intimate band of disciples—the apostles—there existed a diversity of personalities and perspectives that challenged their ability to co-exist peaceably. Common enemies—a tax collector and a zealot—were able to find common ground in the willingness to become students of Jesus. Normally, the zealots despised the tax collectors because of their willingness to work for the Roman government and pocket the wealth of their own Jewish kinfolk. Evidence even suggests that the zealots, a more radical, fringe group calling for the overthrow of the Roman government, often made a pledge to kill tax collectors if the opportunity would ever arise.¹¹ Somehow, in Jesus' band of disciples, however, Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector lived harmoniously.

It is being argued in this paper that part of the reason for this lies in Jesus' emphasis on what it means to know and follow God. It is not simply the personal salvation of one's own soul and the care taking of one's individual relationship with God. Instead, following the emphasis of Jesus, the true manifestation of one's relationship with God is best seen in how his people "love one another" (John 13:35).

Over and over, Jesus turned the emphasis on righteousness away from personal piety before God to renewed human relationships shaped and empowered by a vision of who God is and how God is operating within us. Both the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and the Lukan Sermon on the Plain illustrate this point. Several theological traditions would discount the relevance of either teaching. A more fundamentalist approach might

¹¹ Clarence Jordan, Lecture, *Love Your Enemies*, tape cassette (Americus: Koinonia Records, 1961).

suggest that the style of life depicted here is applicable only to another “dispensation.”¹²

Others would suggest the real force of these texts is to reveal how far we fall short of God’s righteousness. Crushed under the weight of our inability to live up to the teachings of Jesus, our only real hope is to rely even more fully on the grace of God.

Beyond being theologically questionable, these perspectives tend to overemphasize an individual approach to salvation and neglect the corporate and cosmic significance of God’s work in the world. God is not only redeeming the lives of fallen, broken individuals. Through Christ, God is also at work creating a new community—a called out people—who by their lives reflect the glory and righteousness of God together.

The significance of the Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit in all of this should not be understated. Because of Christ’s resurrection, the immediate presence of God’s indwelling Spirit is unleashed in the lives of all who believe. Beyond availing individuals to the power and presence of God, the Holy Spirit serves as the unitive influence that binds all Christians in peace (Ephesians 4:3). In this spiritual fellowship, God is forming a transcultural, transgender, transocio-economic reality. No longer do the kinds of divisions exist that have plagued humanity through the ages (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11). Instead, the only reality that matters—the one that shapes and forms the new community’s self-perception and actions—is that “Christ is all and is in all” (Colossians 3:11).

The practical outworking of Christ’s activity among humanity means that the covenant God created between himself and Israel is made available to all of humanity. In

¹² Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 105.

Christ, all people are chosen as God's grace is poured out universally through the loving, redemptive initiative of God that occurs in Christ's life, death, resurrection and continuing presence. Through his incarnation, the "true light which gives light to every person was coming into the world," as God acted "at just the right time" to "reconcile the world to Himself" (John 1, Romans 5:6-13, II Corinthians 5:19).

What is being argued here is not universalism, but the universal availability of grace. God's loving initiative requires a human response—faith—before it is actualized in the life of a person. This is in keeping with the consensual teachings of the early church, though it differs from the later Reformed/Calvinist perspective on limited atonement.¹³ It remains germane to the topic, however, because it highlights the degree to which God's program is moving—the establishment of a diverse human community finding unity and a common life under the reign of the One True God.

The bonding that occurs between those who are "in Christ" is the basis for the creation of a new humanity. As the early Quakers recognized, this reality does not simply create a covenant between the individual members in the fellowship of God. Instead, the actual presence of God *is the covenant* that exists. Lloyd Lee Wilson explains the distinction this way:

In other communities of which we are a part, we choose to be in relationship with the members of the community, or choose to be a part of the community itself, in order to share in the community's identity. In the covenant community, we choose to be in relationship with God, and God gives us to one another and to the community. Our primary bond is to God, which makes the community itself resilient and capable of great healing. The crises and interpersonal failures which could destroy a human community become, in the covenant community,

¹³ Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 205.

opportunities for the love of God to heal and reconciles us to one another, and for the community to witness about God's healing presence in the world.¹⁴

In Christ, therefore, a new community is under construction whose purpose is not simply for its own sake but for the sake of the world. This is the vision of Jesus, who called his followers to "let your light shine before all people, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). This same hope is echoed in the later Pauline and Petrine writings, as those authors expected those whose lives were rooted in Christ would reveal the glory and truth of God to a watching world (Colossians 3:17, I Peter 2:12; 4:11).

The New Testament describes the substance and function of the church in a variety of ways. In each case, the writer uses language that emphasizes the importance of the Church in God's plan for creation/humanity. Similarly, the various depictions provide a unique reflection of the multi-faceted nature of God's people. For instance, a central image of the Church in the New Testament is *the Body of Christ* (Eph. 1:22-23, I Corinthians 12:1-31). The obvious connection to our human anatomy reveals a spiritual body made up of many diverse parts but finding their coordination and direction from the Head, who is Christ. Their goal is to learn to work in symphony (Greek: *sumphoneo*) with the Present Christ who leads them (Matt. 18:19). Most important, the imagery of Body reminds the Church that it is the ongoing, physical manifestation of Jesus in the world. The mutual, outworking of relationships continues to reveal something of the character of God and its work continues his ministry of reconciliation and redemption (John 13:35, II Corinthians 5:18).

¹⁴ Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Burnsville: Celo Valley Books, 1993), 62.

Another key picture of the church is a *nation of God*. The roots of this image trace back to God's earlier call to Israel. Now, however, entrance into the community is not based on ethnicity—it comes solely through faith. It is an international fellowship made up of “every tribe, tongue and nation (Revelation 5:9). This newfound status thus elevates allegiance to the reign of Christ the Lord over any other temporal kingdom or government. In this regard, the spiritual nationhood of God's people becomes a serious threat to every base of human power and authority. God's reign subordinates all human institutions through the power of the cross. For,

That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Ephesians 1:20-23).

Some would argue that the sphere of Christ's reign does not imply any real political threat to human institutions. Instead, they might interpret a passage such as Romans 13, and submission to human governance, as making room for both a spiritual and more worldly realm of authority. This position has a long history in the Church dating back to at least Augustine. Unfortunately, it fails to see a more revolutionary vision of God's new creation imbedded in the text of Scripture.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon offer a more helpful interpretation of the function of Church in the world. In relation to being a holy nation, they remind Christ's followers that they are “a colony of heaven” (Philippians 3:20). “A colony (Greek: *politeuma*) is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where

the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced.”¹⁵

For Hauerwas and Willimon, being part of a holy nation, especially in a post-Christian age, requires a new sensibility regarding the seriousness of the Church’s call—“a joyful call to be adopted by an alien people, to join a counter-cultural phenomenon, a new *polis* called church.”¹⁶ This church (Greek: *ekklesia* is linked both to the word “assembly” and to be “called out” in its origins) is the one who understands that it has been gathered together and called together to live in and serve Christ. “The early Christians found in this term [church] a helpful means for expressing their self-consciousness. They saw themselves as a people called together by the proclamation of the gospel for the purpose of belonging to God through Christ.”¹⁷

The *nation of God* imagery also connects to the descriptions of the Church as “aliens and strangers in the world” (I Peter 2:11), “a chosen people” (Col. 3:12, I Peter 2:9), and “a holy people” (Ephesians 5:3). All of these speak to the distinctive life and nature of the Church. To be holy is not simply a directive to be “set apart for God’s purposes,” it is also a call to “be different.”

As noted earlier, part of the “difference” that is seen in the corporate life of the church is revealed in the way members treat one another. In this covenantal community, the people are enjoined to pattern their lives after the life they have witnessed in the

¹⁵ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 12.

¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 465.

earthly example of Christ and are being empowered to live through the abiding presence of his Spirit (Ephesians 4:21-22, 5:1-2, Galatians 5). Through their common commitment to and experience in Christ, the Church is made into one fellowship (Greek: *koinonia*).

The dynamics of this fellowship run deeper than a simple potluck or social event. From the perspective of scripture, *koinonia* is ultimately a mutually shared, common life. From a strictly spiritual point of view, this is the communion of the saints sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:8, Philippians 3:8-11). It is the gathering of those who partake in the celebration of the Eucharist meal and are joined in the experience of the one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one Lord and one baptism that is found in God “who is over all, through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). *Koinonia* for Peter includes sharing in the “divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). For Paul, this shared life embraces not only holiness (2 Corinthians 6:14), but also participation in Christ’s sufferings and the unity of equity and justice lived out in the worshiping community (1 Corinthians 10-11).¹⁸ It also includes sharing in the “needs of the saints” (Romans 12-13) and “the practical injunction to the Corinthians to contribute money for the impoverished community in Jerusalem” (2 Corinthians 9:13).¹⁹

Of course, the delineation between what is “strictly spiritual” fellowship is not so neat within scripture. The outworking of this reality in and among humanity carries with it the practice of genuine righteousness and authentic love. The descriptions of the early church in Acts 2 and 4 begin to manifest this reality:

¹⁸ Carl F. Starkloff, “The Church as Covenant, Culture, and Communion,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 3 (September 2000): 426.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need (Acts 4:32-35).

Similarly, this sort of righteous fellowship suggests a sharing of burdens, mutual accountability, support and partnership in the tasks of ministry, worship and service in the world. It originates in the life of Jesus and in their ongoing experience of Christ's Spirit continuing to guide and shape their corporate life. The goal, therefore, in the fellowship is not simply the spiritual maturity of individuals, but the working out of love and righteousness in the relationships of those sharing in Christ. David Bosch goes so far as saying, "In Paul's thinking, the 'righteousness of God' (seen later in Romans 3:21-31) is to be interpreted as gift to the *community* (his italics), not to the individual, for the individual believer does not exist in isolation."²⁰

Interestingly, even metaphors for the church that are typically interpreted as more individual in orientation reflect a great deal of corporate emphasis. Through the Protestant renewal of the 16th century, the Church reclaimed its awareness of the "priesthood of all believers." Usually, this aspect of theology centers on the truth that individuals now have the freedom to approach God directly, without the aid of any human mediator. In Christ we have the only necessary mediator of a new covenantal relationship with God (Hebrews 9:15). He has "opened a new and living way" by which we might approach God directly and confidently (Hebrews 10:20-22). This more

²⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 166.

individual emphasis on the priesthood of all believers is counter-balanced by Peter's use of the phrase in his first letter. Instead, he describes the whole collection of God's people as a royal priesthood—noting the plural form of the word used in the text. Here the emphasis seems to be placed on how the church serves a priestly function through its ongoing worship of God. The writer of Hebrews understands and likely defines what Peter means by this corporate emphasis by adding, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:15-16). The priestly function of God's people, then, is their ongoing commitment to worship God in word and deed.

What is hopefully apparent in all of this is that the church is called to live as a "people belonging to God" (I Peter 2:9). They are a "treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5, Ephesians 1:14). The proof of this connection, however, comes not in claiming God's name but in the content and character of the people's lives and in their life together. This is the evidence that they share in the covenantal life that has been established in Christ.

The End in View—*Telos* Reveals God's Goal for Community

Learning to become the community of God's people has a great deal to do with learning to re-orient our lives around God's vision for humanity. At times, as the Israelites often did, it means *looking back* in order to remember God's gracious acts in history and to consider the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs who blazed the early trail.

It is not enough to simply look back, however. In fact, it could be argued that the best way to live in the present comes by looking ahead toward God's ultimate vision. In this way, the Church stays on course by keeping its eyes on True North—or the end goal of God's sovereign intent for creation and humanity.

For Jesus Christ, this end goal is depicted in his vision of the Kingdom of God. Over and over again, he seized upon the Kingdom as his primary teaching theme and worked at describing it in parabolic and provocative terms to help aid the people's understanding of God. (i.e., Luke 15). Repeatedly, he announced the "nearness of God's reign" in order to help the people see and hear what God was doing and would be doing in the world (Mark 1:15).

Most, but certainly not all, theological traditions recognize the inherent tensions within Jesus' use of the Kingdom. Though it is a problematic teaching that has been the source of great controversy throughout the centuries since Christ, nowadays it is generally acceptable to think of the Kingdom teachings as "already but not yet." That is, in proclaiming the advent of God's reign, Jesus is describing what has already come to pass from God's perspective but is still being worked out in the course of human history.

Understanding what this means for discipleship and ecclesiology is just as daunting a task as defining what Jesus meant by his use of Kingdom language. Not surprisingly, various Christian traditions have interpreted and applied these teachings in as many and varied ways as can be imagined. On one end of the spectrum there is the Dispensationalist approach that seeks to postpone the relevance of Kingdom passages to the age when Christ returns to establish a literal, 1000-year reign over the earth. On the other end of the spectrum, a theologian like C.H. Dodd believed that the effective reign of

God had fully come to pass in Christ. His “realized eschatology” helped give rise to several optimistic strains of Christian thought and life. Other approaches, many of which were spawned by Augustinian theology, came to either localize the teachings of the Kingdom in the particular functions of the church or create a kind of dual ethic, in which one could live as a person of faith in one sphere of life but be bound by the realities of humanity’s fallen nature in another.²¹

If, however, humanity can exist uncomfortably in the paradoxical tension of “already but not yet,” it opens the door for rethinking the application of Jesus’ Kingdom teachings. Instead of seeing them as an impossible standard to uphold or an opportunity rejected when they crucified Christ, the Church is better served to see them as the ultimate goal, ethic and vision toward which God’s people are moving.

This sense of ongoing, forward movement is a common theme in Scripture. The Greek verb *teleioo* is found in many places (I Corinthians 2:6, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:15, Colossians 3:14, 4:12). It suggests the “completing, attaining, ending, perfecting, and bringing something to its proper goal.”²² It is a movement, not only by the individual, but also by the community whose life is rooted in God. It is offered both as a goal and expectation for the people of God, even in the midst of difficult and trying circumstances (Philippians 2 and 3).

To the Garden Alone? No!—Why the Church Must Focus on Community

The new community of Jesus’ people seen in scripture is a grand vision that guides

²¹ Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 474-77.

²² Oden, *Life in the Spirit*, 227.

the life and ministry of the Church. Or at least it can—if the Church will embrace it.

For too long, modern Christianity has been overly preoccupied with the individualized view of spirituality. Contemporary writers like Dallas Willard have written at length about how this emphasis—and our loss of transformational power and distinctive witness—has led to the near ruination of the Church.²³ Sadly, the contemporary Church has been guilty of dysfunctional, privatized spirituality that neither serves its own growth or the healing of the world.

Other writers, sensitive to what is happening in the American culture are offering stimulating analyses that suggest hope for the world and renewal for the church. For instance, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon's provocative book *Resident Aliens* serves as a useful starting place. In response to what they describe as a "post-Christian world," in which our illusions of living in a Christian culture have been thankfully banished from existence, the authors hold up the formation of a faithful people as God's social strategy for creation.²⁴ By this, the authors are saying, that the sum total of the Church's life is to be faithful to the story of Jesus. The Church's task is not so much to "change the world" through the political avenues found in society or even through the saving of souls.²⁵ Rather, the work of the Church is the creation of a people who embody the otherworldly character of the God they serve.²⁶

²³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 2.

²⁴ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 46, 47.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

Hauerwas and Willimon offer a serious and challenging description of the church. It is rooted in their theological assumption that Christ issued a similarly serious call to discipleship. For them the Sermon on the Mount is best seen as a description of “who God is.”²⁷ The vision of life Jesus pictures is never implied to make sense to those outside of an experience of God or even to “work” in some sense. Rather, Christians are enjoined to live it out because it happens “to be true,” according to God in Christ. “The church is the only community formed around the truth, which is Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and life. Only on the basis of his story, which reveals to us who we are and what has happened in the world, is true community possible.”²⁸

A similar approach is found in the book *Confident Witness, Changing World*. In this compilation of essays, various authors argue for the creation of a “parallel culture.”²⁹ Differing in degree from a more “counter-cultural” perspective of Hauerwas and Willimon, these writers are interested in emphasizing what the church is *for* over and against what the church stands in opposition *to*. This is an interesting and possibly quite helpful corrective to those who might make all-too-easy delineations between the “church and the world.” While this is not Hauerwas or Willimon's perspective, it can be found in other places.³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 74-77.

²⁸ Ibid., 77.

²⁹ Mary Jo Leddy, “The People of God as a Hermeneutic of the Gospel,” in *Confident Witness, Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 311.

³⁰ Ibid.

As Mary Jo Leddy rightly notes, we “cannot live outside a culture” even if we wanted to.³¹ What we can do, however, is to “create within it zones and spaces, where you can become who you really are.”³² This vision of a faithful people of God, living up to their divine calling even within the harsh and often unfriendly realities of the world, is the story of scripture. It is the reality of those called to be “in the world but not of it” (John 17:14-16).

How to faithfully hold these paradoxical tensions has been a challenge throughout the history of God’s people. For Leddy and others, the ability to live under God’s reign requires a sub-culture that reinforces and nurtures the values of the gospel:

We cannot just criticize it (our country) or just blindly say we are loyal to it. We must first find somewhere, some local church, that we call “a beloved community.” It needs to be somewhere, a specific place where we have come to know the gospel as good news, as the saving and redeeming grace of God. It is from such a beloved community that we can then critique both the culture and the church, and where we can also affirm both of them in a real way.

Small communities, beloved communities and parallel cultures are not necessarily powerless... Power has nothing to do with numbers, it has to do with the quality of relationships, what happens in-between. It is important for us to remember that the power of God arises when we are in-relation to God. This is how power was experienced in the upper room. People gathered, they talked and they prayed. They were there in a sustained interaction. And then there was power between them. It was not a power that any one person possessed. They were possessed by the power of God, because they were in-relation to God as a community. And then they went forth with great power as missionaries.³³

Even these two examples point to the possibility of a constructive communal theology and spirituality that reflect an overarching theme in scripture and address a crying need in our day. There is a hunger for community and for a way of life that is

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 312, 313.

filled with meaning and purpose. Even more, there is a deep thirst in our society for an experiential relationship with God that can be shared authentically with others.

Most important, Christ-centered and Christ-like community is the vision of the New Testament whose roots trace back to the creation account and initial covenantal agreement with Israel. Community is the crucible in which the life of God is formed in his people. In community we are transformed into his likeness and learn a brand new way of living that “no longer conforms to the pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2). In the network of God-directed relationships, the beloved community works out how to share the grace, forgiveness and love of God with one another and to glorify God in the process.

You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:7-15).

Furthermore, in the confines of such an established communal presence operative in the world, individual Christians have a real chance of living up to the high ideals of the gospel and those outside the church are offered a vision of what life in Christ is truly

about. Donald Kraybill summarizes these points in his insightful book, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*:

The people of God are continually tempted to accommodate and assimilate the values of their surrounding cultural environment. It's easy to temper the scandalous nature of the gospel by making it palatable and acceptable to the majority. Before they know it the people of God borrow the ideology, logic and bureaucratic structures from their worldly neighbors. They put a little religious coating on top, but underneath the mentality and procedures are often foreign to the way of Jesus. The structures of the Christian church must always be functional and relevant to their cultural context, but they dare not be determined by the culture. The moment this happens the church is in and of the world...

The necessity of Christian community is obvious beyond the fact that this is God's design for social life. Individuals trying to live the Upside-Down Kingdom agenda alone will soon burn out emotionally. It is not psychologically healthy to be the only oddball around. Embracing a deviant lifestyle requires a community of others who can provide the needed emotional support and affirmation...

The community is [also] essential as a corporate witness to God's love and grace. Without the community context, the upside-down Christian is seen as "just another good guy" or "some nice guy." It's not unusual for a "nice guy" to come along occasionally. It is unusual, however, for people to live intimately as nice guys. The witness of the corporate love and caring is overwhelming in a ruthless dog-eat-dog society. The Christian community is a profound witness to how God wills people to live and do business together. It's a demonstration of a new society of redeemed people.³⁴

³⁴ Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978), 305, 306.

These early, emerging structures, with all of their peculiar emphases, did serve to shape and influence the formation of the post-apostolic churches in various ways. Even so, there remained a common concern of spiritual intimacy, fellowship and the creation of an alternative people in the first several centuries of the church.

In his book, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, Gerd Thiessen suggests that the largely lower class composition of the church was kept out of power, in part because of its social standing.⁸ Even more, they were excluded from various activities and aspects of social engagement as a result of their religious expression.⁹ Because they would not demonstrate their fidelity to the emperor by offering the cultic oaths, they were mistrusted as potential traitors. Similarly, because of their commitment to non-violence they were unable (and generally unwilling) to serve in the Roman militia.

However, alongside any of these more external impediments to becoming fully integrated into the social system of the Pax Romana, Thiessen argues that it was their self-understanding that mattered more. As a people owing their complete allegiance to Christ and the Pax Christi there were certain aspects of Roman culture they would neither support nor serve.

One can easily present the first Christians as peaceful, conventionally “well-adjusted citizens”—indeed they themselves considered it important to fulfill the civil virtues in a model way. The decisive thing was the interpretation the Christians gave to their own dissident behavior. It was loyalty to the “heavenly *polis*,” of which Christians were citizens, and which in the case of conflict had the right to require the life of its citizens in just the same way as the earthly *polis*. On earth (that is, in existing society) Christians were essentially “strangers,”

⁸ Thiessen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, 270.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 281, 282.

(peregrini). The tie with their true home was stronger than any other tie. It was this that made compromises so difficult in cases of conflict.¹⁰

In part, because of their sense of cultural isolation and due to the commands of Christ to love one another as part of this heavenly *polis*, the Church created and maintained an alternative, cultural network. This network, according to Thiessen, was kept in place by constant travels, emphasis on hospitality, system of shared social relief for Christians in need, concern for social equality, along with the common experience of a “personal, charismatic relationship to Jesus Christ.”¹¹ This sense of being a distinct people was further enhanced by their shared ethical ideals in which nonviolence and justice were encouraged. Also, “the exposure of babies and abortion were rejected. Marital fidelity was required, heterosexuality enjoined. In addition, Christians rejected divorce and placed great stress on the control of sexuality.”¹² Together, these kinds of ethical emphases helped to give shape to a common life among the fellowship of believers and coherent witness to the world around them.

As the church moved beyond the apostolic era, it is true that many ecclesial traditions did not, and in later years have not, valued or prioritized community. This is evidenced in both the structural and theological changes that took place. Certain monastic traditions encouraged the solitary life, though a move toward communalism happened fairly soon after the advent of monasticism. Other variations of Christian faith have more eagerly emphasized the primacy of the individual and the personal relationship with God

¹⁰ Ibid., 282.

¹¹ Ibid., 270, 277, 281.

¹² Ibid., 282.

through Jesus Christ. Admittedly, there is a history full of authentic Christian traditions that have evidenced little concern for emphasizing “communal spirituality.”

The purpose of this chapter is not to overview the full-spectrum of ecclesial traditions. Rather, it is to focus on particular groups throughout church history and across theological lines that have emphasized the notion of covenantal community in the theology and actual practice of their congregational life. Examples of community reflecting a call and self-awareness of being an alternative/parallel culture will be particularly highlighted.

The Patristic Era

The pre-Constantinian era of the Christian Church is unique in many fashions. Not only were these first three centuries the formative period for theology and practical spirituality, the specific cultural circumstances profoundly influenced the developing shape of the Church. Arguably, this is seen most clearly with respect to the persecution and social marginalization of the early Christians.

The historical record details a period of on-again/off-again persecution toward the early Christians.¹³ At times this mistreatment was severe, leading to the martyrdom of many. Other times, the persecution was more subtle—experienced as threats of violence, loss of social standing and privilege, or the inability to have public worship on property owned by the Church. As in the apostolic period, the Church was pressed from the outside. Their own unique, ethical standards and the rejection by the prevailing culture continued to foster a spirit of being a peculiar or distinctive people.

¹³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 31-48.

By this time in their history, the Christians were no longer simply a sub-set of Judaism. With the fall of the Jerusalem Temple and the discontinuation of the Temple ceremonies, there was little to tie the groups together. Furthermore, the structural organization and liturgy of the Church was evolving, so as to make it increasingly dissimilar from its Jewish origins.¹⁴ While a great deal of effort was being given to make theological sense of the new movement and to articulate a coherent *apology* for the Christian faith, much of the Church's main witness and growth was due to the common life expressed through the emerging, local congregations.

This life is described by various writers of the period. The *Didache*, or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, offers an early example of this literature. Though not written by any of Jesus' actual apostles, it offers a window into the priorities in the communal life of Christians during the middle of the second century. Above all it is a call to the "way of life" prescribed by Jesus.¹⁵ Throughout, disciples are instructed to give generously, avoid all forms of dishonesty and injustice and are given repeated admonitions regarding brotherly love as an aspect of Christian discipleship and witness.¹⁶ This early call to a distinctive lifestyle included active care for one another.

Another early example of a guide for practical, Christian community is found in the text of *Hippolytus*. Penned by an unknown author in what was likely the third century, this small treatise recounts important aspects of the early Church's worship priorities and many features of discipleship in community. Of particular interest is the process of

¹⁴ W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 37.

¹⁵ W. A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

initiation detailed for “newcomers to the faith.”¹⁷ Each person must undergo a rigorous round of questioning pertaining to personal morality and vocation. With far more interest shown in the catechumen’s manner of life than his or her theology, this pattern of examination reveals a strict expectation that entrance into the community of faith is accompanied by a transformed way of life that resonates with the values of Christian teaching. Some might suggest that this form of examination was an unfortunate lapse toward legalism not intended by the Gospel. Regardless, it does reflect the conviction that conversion to Christ precipitates a new morality and participation in a new, transformed community of believers.

It is also true that at the point of baptism the catechumens were required to affirm a basic creed. Orthodoxy has been an important component of the faith-life—especially as it leads toward orthopraxy (right living) and unity in the Body.

Many other writers of this era reflect the same general description of the Church.

From the anonymous *Letter to Diognetus*, Christians are described this way:

The difference between Christians and the rest of men is neither in country, nor in language...they dwell in their own fatherlands, but as temporary inhabitants. They take part in all things as citizens, while enduring the hardships of foreigners. Every foreign place is their fatherland, and every fatherland is to them a foreign place. Like all others, they marry and beget children; but they do not expose their offspring. Their board they set for all, but not their bed. Their lot is cast in the flesh; but they do not live for the flesh. They pass their time on earth but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and in their private lives they surpass the laws. They love all men; and by all they are persecuted... They are put to death, and they gain life. They are poor but make many rich; they are destitute, but have an abundance of everything... They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted, and they pay homage. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; and when they are punished they rejoice as if brought to life. They are made war upon as foreigners by the Jews, and they are persecuted by the Greeks;

¹⁷ Geoffrey J. Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* (Bracmote, Nottingham UK: Grove Books Limited, 1987).

and yet, those who hate them are at a loss to state the cause of their hostility... To put it briefly, what the soul is in the body, that the Christians are in the world.¹⁸

Aristedes of Athens echoes the same theme in his *Apology* when he says about Christians:

They have the commandments of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself impressed upon their hearts, and they observe them, awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come... They hasten to do good to their enemies. They are gentle and reasonable... They despise not the widow, nor do they distress the orphan. Whoever has, distributes liberally to him that has not. Should they see a stranger, they take him under roof, and rejoice over him as over a blood brother. For not after the flesh do they call themselves brethren, but after the spirit. For the sake of Christ they are ready to lay down their lives.¹⁹

Even Justin Martyr, known more for his philosophic defense of Christianity than his practical descriptions of the faith, writes in his *First Apology*:

We who formerly delighted in fornication now cleave only to chastity. We who exercised the magic arts now consecrate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God. We who valued above all else the acquisition of wealth and property now direct all that we have to a common fund, which is shared with every needy person. We who hated and killed one another, and who, because of differing customs, would not share a fireside with those of another race, now, after the appearance of Christ, live together with them. We pray for our enemies, and try to persuade those who unjustly hate us that, if they live according to the excellent precepts of Christ, they will have a good hope of receiving the same reward as ourselves, from the God who governs all.²⁰

Similar descriptions of life in the early church are also given in other post-apostolic writings, such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *Against Heresies* by St. Irenaeus, and *Stomateis or Miscellanies* by St. Clement of Alexandria. Each, in their own way, depicts a community of diverse people who find a new kind of unity and way of living in Jesus

¹⁸ Ibid., 40, 41.

¹⁹ Ibid., 49.

²⁰ Ibid., 52.

Christ. Similarly, these writings begin to spell out how the early church put into practice the love of God that had been revealed to them. Usually this included the care of the poor, support in times of distress, prayer and mutual edification. This counter-cultural concern for each other led another early theologian, Tertullian to comment, “But it is mainly the practice of such a love which leads some to put a brand upon us. ‘See’, they say, ‘how they love one another,’ for they themselves hate each other. ‘And how ready they are to die for one another,’ they themselves being more inclined to kill each other.”²¹

These examples of early Christian communal concern are not meant to imply that there were no divisions, struggles or more individual leanings in this era. Rather, they are offered to demonstrate something of the self-understanding of these Christians—that they were called to embody the life and spirit of Christ in their shared ethics and in the shape of their communal existence. Throughout the literature of this era, this remains a primary mode of faith expression, at least until the time of Constantine.

Monasticism and Roman Catholic Communities

Whether one regards the “Constantinian shift” as either the near ruination of the Church or the sequence of events that led to the Church’s stability and expansion, it is evident that many things did change after the emperor’s “conversion” and subsequent legitimization of Christianity.²² With the signing of the Edict of Milan and later changes in the official Roman stance toward Christian faith under Theodosius I and II, the

²¹ Ibid., 116.

²² Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1*, 136.

Church's relationship with the world was significantly altered.²³ Not only was the threat of persecution ended by imperial decree, new-found opportunities to become landowners, serve in public office and even serve in the military were now open to Christians. With an increasingly wedded relationship to Roman political power, over time Christianity became the civil religion of this society.

This enculturation of the Church led to dramatic alterations in its life of worship, ethics, and theology. Furthermore, the power structure that governed the Church took even more pronounced steps toward a patriarchy that was in many ways subservient to Roman rule. Beyond these more global alterations in the Church's life, the effects of the Constantinian shift were beginning to be felt personally by the people of faith, according to historian Alan Kreider.²⁴ More and more, the theology of the Church portrayed God as an increasingly transcendent being—distant from the life and concerns of humanity. No longer did members of the Church see themselves as part of an organic whole. In increasing measure, the people of the Church viewed themselves and their local congregations as “clusters of individuals.” As a new faith and practice emerged across the face of the Church, it was increasingly individualized, more ethically wed to the social conventions of the day and seen as integral to the preservation of Roman society rather than distinct from it.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 124, 125.

²⁴ Alan Kreider, Lecture notes, "Schematized Constantinianism," in Early Church History class (Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite Seminary, January 22-23, 1991).

²⁵ Ibid.

In the face of these vast changes, many Christians reacted negatively. With persecution and martyrdom no longer a threat—and no longer a means of proving the authenticity of one’s faith—the rise of the monastic movement began. Since some found the security, safety and new honor being afforded to Christians in society more of a hindrance than a help to life with God, “many found an answer in the monastic life: to flee from society, to leave everything behind, to dominate the body and its passions, which give way to temptation. Thus, at the very time when churches in large cities were flooded by thousands demanding baptism, there was a veritable exodus of other thousands who sought beatitude in solitude.”²⁶

Contrary to the communal emphasis of earlier days, the first wave of desert fathers and mothers were generally “anchorite”—or solitary monks.²⁷ This relatively singular existence was aimed toward learning utter dependence upon God and mastering the ascetical practices that would lead one toward personal union with Christ. The classic example of this manner of living is found in *The Life of Antony*, whose story is told by Athanasius. In the desert of Egypt, Antony serves as the model for this new kind of spiritual life.²⁸

Despite their desire for solitude, however, Antony and other desert saints were often engaged by seekers, requesting to be mentored and guided in the desert way.²⁹ Before too long, communal forms of monasticism sprang up, initially through the leadership of

²⁶ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1*, 137.

²⁷ Ibid., 138.

²⁸ Bradley P. Holt, *Thirsty for God: A Brief History of Christian Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 39.

²⁹ Ibid.

people like Pachomius, Basil of Caesarea and Benedict of Nursia.³⁰ This new variation of monasticism, called cenobitic (from two Greek words meaning “communal life”) continued to emphasize “solitude.”³¹ Now, however, instead of a solitude that was bent on being away from other people—cenobitic monasticism was primarily focused on enabling the community of faith to “be away from the world.”³²

Generally speaking, the various monastic communities quickly established some sort of “order” or “rule” for their common living. Many of these centered around a shared discipline of worship, service and mutual submission. One of the earliest known examples of communal discipline originated under the leadership of Pachomius, around A.D. 300. Dissatisfied in his seven year experience as an anchorite, Pachomius repeatedly asked God to instruct him in a better way of service. Finally responding to a “vision from an angel,” the monk constructed an enclosure that would house a community of monks focused on learning prayer, contemplation and service to one another.³³

Pachomius and his brothers created a rigorous discipline that included vows of poverty and obedience, labor with their hands, and a strict regimen of devotion and mutual service. Out of their produce, the community also shared with the poor and sojourners who happened along their path. Interestingly, before anyone was allowed to join either of the many men’s or women’s communities, the interested parties were forced to spend several nights waiting outside the gates—begging entrance. This was done in

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

³¹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1*, 144.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

order to demonstrate “their firmness of resolve, their humility and willingness to obey.”³⁴ Many of those awaiting admission turned out to be non-Christians, suggesting that the pagan populace saw life in the monastic community worth pursuing, even though it was foreign to them.³⁵

St. Basil offered another form of communal monasticism. Originating in Asia Minor, the *Rule of Saint Basil* spread rapidly in this area and has remained the model for monasticism in the Orthodox Church to the present day.³⁶ Unlike the Pachomian tradition, Basil was less interested in fleeing the world. His communities were purposely centered in places where the monks could serve the world. Toward this end, schools for children and hospitals were established and staffed by the monks. They understood the communal, religious life in a new way, elevating the monastic ideal from personal to social service.³⁷ In accord with other monastic communities, a covenantal agreement was established to order their shared life and keep them focused on their particular calling.

A later example comes through the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Like Pachomius and Basil, Benedict established an ordered way of life that was intended to direct the members of the community toward a deeper life with God. For Benedict, one of his established communities would serve as “a school for the Lord’s service” governed by a discipline that was not intended to be “harsh” or “burdensome” but “may prompt us to a little

³⁴ Ibid., 146.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Frend, *The Early Church*, 194.

³⁷ Ibid., 195.

strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love.”³⁸ Though in certain instances quite strict, the *Rule* is intended to foster a high degree of spiritual growth and obedience. His *Rule* became a pattern for many similar communal movements and for individuals seeking a more intimate life with God and greater obedience and service in the world.³⁹

Similar kinds of monastic communities were replicated in many places. Though these communities are often interpreted as means by which individuals drew closer to God and learned the way of obedience, others interpret the whole movement as “an effort after social righteousness.”⁴⁰ Author Kenneth Leech contends:

There is no greater lesson that modern Christian disciples can learn from monasticism than this: our life and death are with our neighbor. There can be no private way to God, and only those who have learned the way of community can safely move towards that of solitude. The monastic life sought to offer in a concentrated form the life of the Christian Church, itself seen as a foretaste of the life of the Kingdom of God. Throughout the writings of the early Fathers, there is a repeated insistence that community and the life of sharing is the life of God and of the new age, while individualism represents a regression to the unredeemed order. It was this common life which early monasticism sought to express.⁴¹

Paradoxically, the monastic movement is also often seen as a legalism—rules to follow over against the grace offered in Christ. In fact, however, the discipline is meant to serve as a grace, by establishing the necessary parameters to live in the freedom and fullness of God’s will. Again, Leech concludes:

The monastic movement is a witness to Christian freedom, to a refusal to be bound by current conventions and trends. There is an element of utopia about the monastic life: a dissatisfaction with social life as it is, a refusal to accept that this

³⁸ Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 18-19.

³⁹ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 138-40.

⁴⁰ Leech, *Experiencing God*, 142.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

is all that can be, and an assertion that freedom in Christ is not limited to the individual in isolation. In theory, monastic life has held to the concept of the community as a “counter-culture”, a liberated zone.⁴²

It is easy for some to idealize the monastic life from a distance. Those who embraced it, however, understood that the hardship and difficulty of living in community is often the avenue for understanding their own need for further grace. John Cassian, another monastic leader, identified the goal of life as love.⁴³ The pursuit of such love must be lived out in the context of real, and often difficult human relationships, which expose our own human weakness, selfishness and need to change.⁴⁴ Without such community, Christians may lack a very necessary avenue for grace that enables important growth in godliness.

Clearly, the majority of Christians in the Middle Ages were not involved in monastic communities. Other sincere Christian people lived out their faith in the context of more traditional life callings and vocations. Unfortunately, the poor, uneducated and “common” people do not write books about their experiences and so posterity is left mostly with the accounts of the more wealthy and educated.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly, a great deal of spiritual community also occurred in the many parishes that dotted the globe. What the monastic communities represent, however, is the Church’s resilient effort to retain a counter or parallel cultural presence in the world and base for radical spirituality. It was seen as an attractive and inspiring way of faithful living. At points along the way, the lure

⁴² Ibid., 147.

⁴³ Robin Maas and Gabriel O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 63.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁵ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 1*, 359.

of monastic life among women was so pervasive that the male leaders of those orders began limiting the number of women who could be admitted.⁴⁶

These limitations led to innovations like the “beguinages”—homes where women gathered to live in small groups outside the governance of the established church. Similarly, men like Gerhard Grote and his “Brothers (and Sisters) of the Common Life” developed a form of piety and communal devotion for people largely remaining in “normal society.”⁴⁷ For Grote, the path toward holiness and community did not have to originate in life-long vows and isolation from society. Rather, it could occur just as sufficiently through an ongoing, voluntary commitment to make “resolutions to God,” while remaining squarely rooted in society.⁴⁸ Interestingly, Grote’s work led to renewal in both the religious and lay communities of his day and was known for uniquely combining both the interior and socially active elements of spiritual formation.⁴⁹

These Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were committed to being “modern devouts” in the context of local parishes. Most remained as lay people in more traditional vocations. Their goal, however, was to live together in “humility, love and in pursuit of the virtues,” a “somewhat bland or generic description of what should apply to all Christians,” Grote argued.⁵⁰ Practically, their life was a disciplined devotion, shared in accountable community with the end goal of loving one another and the world.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 358.

⁴⁸ Maas and O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions*, 115.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁰ Geert Grote, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John Van Engen, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 15.

Communities like the one founded by Grote, along with the Franciscans and Waldensians, attempted to live out a more radical vision of discipleship in community during this time period. Unfortunately, as the dawn of the Protestant Reformation began to appear on the horizon, there was growing abuse, apathy and dead ritualism in the Roman Catholic Church. Morally, theologically and structurally, the Church was in disarray.⁵¹ Coupled with the demise of the feudal system and the overall discontent of the masses, the time was ripe for an overhaul in and out of the Church.

Community in the Protestant and Radical Reformation Era

The Protestant Reformation and later “Radical Reformation” led to thoroughgoing alterations in the face and shape of the Church. While this movement and the changing political and philosophic ideals governing humanity led to a greater spirit of “individualism,” the Church still retained a sense of priority about communal spirituality.

Martin Luther, often criticized for fostering a more radically individualized approach to God, actually emphasized the importance of the Christian faith being lived and nurtured in the “mother church.”⁵² In fact as he was contemplating his own steps toward reform, Luther envisioned a “truly evangelical order” of those “who want to be Christians in earnest.”⁵³ In describing this group, Luther suggested this evangelical order:

Should sign their names and meet alone in a house where to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and do other Christian works. According to this

⁵¹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 6-8.

⁵² Ibid., 33.

⁵³ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1968), 3.

order, those who do not lead the Christian life could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ—Matthew 18:15-17. Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example—II Corinthians 9. Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing. Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament and center everything on the Word, prayer and love.⁵⁴

Later, Luther gave up this dream as impractical and sought another path within the established, state-supported structure of society. What it may reveal, however, is more about how he truly envisioned the Church at its authentic best.

Despite his support for civil authority and his contentious relationship with Anabaptist reformers, John Calvin held the work and witness of the Church in high regard. Though he denied the kind of spiritual perfectionism sometimes touted by monastic leaders and the competing Anabaptist movement, this reformer believed

That everyone of us must maintain brotherly concord with all the children of God, give due authority to the Church, and, in short, conduct ourselves as sheep of the flock... The saints are united in the fellowship of Christ. For if they are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings to each other. Then it is of the highest importance for us to know what benefit thence redounds to us... In this way our salvation rests on a foundation so firm and sure, that though the whole fabric of the world were to give way, it could not be destroyed.⁵⁵

During this era of reform, however, there were other groups and individuals who insisted upon a more thoroughgoing renewal. They were not content to simply "reform" certain practices or correct various abuses in the Church. They were interested in recapturing the basic principles and emphases found in the New Testament period. Rather

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, "Institutes of the Christian Religion: Book Fourth of the Holy Catholic Church," 1581, trans. Henry Beveridge, in *The Master Christian Library Version 5*, 4th ed. (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1997), 1158.

than beginning in one central place, this more “radical reformation” was touched off in many different locations in Europe and under the auspices of very different leaders. Some of these groups flourished and were able to sustain momentum. Others wilted under the intense persecution from both their Protestant and Catholic contemporaries. A few other groups, including the followers of Thomas Munster, imploded due to their own misguided zeal.

This collection of groups is often identified as the “Free Church” or “Believer’s Church” tradition. It includes the Anabaptist movements of the Swiss Brethren, Mennonites, and Hutterites. Through their writings and personal interaction with others, their influence is felt in the rise of the later Baptist churches and English Reformation groups like the Quakers.

Though the individual groupings of Anabaptist churches varied somewhat, they did share many emphases. At one gathering in 1527, representatives from different areas agreed to meet to discuss disputed issues and to establish parameters that might quench excesses that could disrupt their efforts at renewal. The outgrowth of this gathering resulted in the Schleitheim Confession that documents seven points of agreement. They include:

1. Baptism—Given to all who learned repentance and amendment to life...and to all who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.
2. Ban—A form of discipline to help bring erring/fallen members back into obedience and fellowship.
3. Lord’s Supper—Only those who have been baptized into the Body of Christ shall participate.
4. Separation—A clear distinction and separation from involvement in the evils of the world.
5. Pastors—Various duties were outlined which placed a high premium on encouraging faith, obedience and commitment.

6. Sword—The use of the sword by world magistrates is outside the perfection of Christ and therefore not for members of His Body to use.
7. Oaths—Following Christ's command, his disciples are not to swear oaths.⁵⁶

Beyond these general principles, the Anabaptist reformers emphasized complete obedience to the teachings of Jesus, primarily those found in the Sermon on the Mount. This collection of Jesus' teachings was considered the central ethic for the community of Christ, as it struggled to shine its light in a dark world. Even with this united understanding, the Anabaptist groups varied in the application of these teachings. Some, like the Swiss Brethren, allowed for individuals to hold on to private property, always being ready to share with those in need. Others, like the Hutterites, adopted the kind of communalism seen in Acts 2 and 4 as normative for their faith.⁵⁷ In either case these groups were held together by a strong emphasis on the ethical aspects of faith, a clear communal discipline, a foundational commitment to an intimate life of Christian fellowship, and a sense of being uniquely called to be the people of God in the world.

About one hundred years later in England, another radical reformation occurs, in part influenced by the developments that took place in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. During this era of English political and religious upheaval, numerous splinter groups arose in opposition to the state-sponsored church. Many were seeking religious liberty, deeper holiness and faithfulness, and often, a more radical identification as the faithful people of God. Among these groups was the Religious Society of Friends. Because this

⁵⁶ Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church*, 73, 74.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

the center of reality.”⁶⁰ Though it will be explored more thoroughly in the subsequent chapter, this transition into the “modern” world also helped set the stage for a deeply bred individualism.

Clearly, these philosophical undercurrents worked to alter the face of congregational life as it was lived among the masses. Still, well established and newer communal movements continued to develop and thrive—sometimes in “response to the dogmatism of the theologians and the rationalism of the philosophers.”⁶¹

One form of reaction to the Enlightenment was the kind of pietistic spirituality reflected in the lives of such figures as Philip Spener, the Moravians, and John Wesley. Spener, a Lutheran reformer, was an early crusader for small bands of committed Christians gathering for the purpose of cultivating holiness. These *collegia pietatis*, Spener felt, were the leaven by which the whole lump of Christianity would be transformed into a more authentic representation of what God intended for the church.⁶² Focusing more on the Christian life than Christian thought, he advocated for a greater freedom for and participation by the laity in the ministry of the church.

Though often criticized by his peers for his optimism and mystical spirituality, Spener’s prolific writings helped to create an atmosphere of greater and deeper communal spirituality within his tradition. In his *Pia Desideria*, Spener attacked the corruption and moral laxity found in both the ranks of clergy and laity. He began his

⁶⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 2.

⁶¹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2*, 205.

⁶² Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964), 19.

section on reform by stating, “We can have no doubt that God promised his church here on earth a better state than this.”⁶³ He admonished his readers to consider the example of the Early Church, which was “in such a blessed state that as a rule Christians could be identified by their godly life, which distinguished them from other people.”⁶⁴ Spener hoped the same might be said of the church in his day.

By way of prescription, Spener suggested a greater personal acquaintance with scripture among the people. He called for regular group gatherings—less formal than the Sunday worship—in which honest and direct questions, discussions and mutual ministry could occur. Furthermore, in *Pia Desideria*, he offered comments about a truly expanded ministry by developing Luther’s insight surrounding the “priesthood of all believers” (I Peter 2:9). In this way, Spener hoped that members of the laity would join with the established clergy to carry out some of the pastoral and oversight duties needed in the congregation. He concluded with a strong emphasis on applied faith—that is, connecting the teachings of scripture to the actual happenings of life. He saw this as particularly important in regard to the care of neighbor, the quality of love within the congregation and ministry to the needy.⁶⁵

Spener and other German pietists left a deep impression on later reformers, such as Nicholas Zinzendorf, a founder in the Moravian movement. Spener served as the sponsor at Zinzendorf’s baptism and a mentor in the spiritual life. Imbued with the same sort of pietistic impulses and commitment to personal and corporate holiness as their forbears,

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 81, 82.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 95-97.

the Moravians also burned with a passionate zeal for missionary outreach.⁶⁶ Traveling around the world, the Moravians established several communities that lived in often-awkward tension with the more established Lutheran parent church from which they were born. Ultimately, the group would dwindle in numbers but left a life-changing and lasting impression upon another reformer, John Wesley.⁶⁷

Wesley's life as an Anglican-turned-Methodist minister is well chronicled. Raised in a devout Anglican home, Wesley was educated at Oxford and received training to become a promising and accomplished priest. While at Oxford he showed early signs of commitment to personal growth and corporate spirituality through the innovation of his "Holy Clubs" that he began with his younger brother Charles. Though ridiculed by classmates for their "methodist" approach to spirituality, Wesley was not discouraged in his pursuit of personal salvation and purity.⁶⁸

It was not until his travel to America, however, that Wesley's life was truly transformed. Under the influence of Moravian missionaries and teachers, he was forced to confront the poverty of his own soul and whether or not he had experienced in himself the life changing power of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ Still later, in 1738, the young priest had his famous "Aldersgate experience" in which his "heart was strangely warmed."⁷⁰ In that experience, he found release from his perpetual quest for certainty about his own

⁶⁶ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2*, 209.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church*, 134.

⁶⁹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2*, 210.

⁷⁰ Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church*, 136.

salvation. Thereafter, he was at liberty to focus on ministry, revival preaching and encouraging faithful discipleship in the lives of others.

While Wesley's life was largely consumed with preaching and writing, he found time to create a clear "method" for developing communal spirituality. Through a complex coordination of bands, classes, societies and conferences, Wesley helped establish an organizational structure designed to nurture discipleship, fellowship and provide an avenue for church discipline. Through these largely lay-led groupings, erring members could be corrected, built-in accountability was created, an opportunity for deepened relationships provided, and a regimented approach for spiritual growth provided. It was a system of mutual involvement by people of varying backgrounds that were committed to greater holiness and faithfulness in ministry.⁷¹ Furthermore, instead of emphasizing a kind of human striving after God that more typified the Wesleyan "method" at Oxford, he now focused on the transforming power of God that makes individuals holy.⁷²

Though the structure of Methodism with its pietistic and revivalistic emphases might have developed an exclusively inward, spiritual orientation, it did not. Wesley was deeply concerned about social holiness as well.⁷³ Not only did he anticipate the total transformation of individuals, his vision of spirituality included the transformation of social structures, values and practices, as well.

⁷¹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2*, 213.

⁷² Paul R. Spickard and Kevin M. Cragg, *God's Peoples: A Social History of Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 247.

⁷³ Maas and O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions*, 311.

At the heart of Wesley's process for transformation was participation in a rigorous accountability group—called bands—that demanded high level commitment and where mutual trust was expected.⁷⁴ These weekly gatherings became the cornerstone for individual growth through the creation of a safe place for soul searching and confession.⁷⁵ Their aim was to help members avoid sin, learn to do all the good possible, and attend the “ordinances of God”—prayer, fasting, communion, Bible study, works of mercy, worship, etc.⁷⁶ In these groups, Wesley devised a set of queries that were to be answered at every meeting:

1. What known sins have you committed since our last meeting?
2. What temptations have you met with?
3. How were you delivered?
4. What have you thought, said, or done, of which you doubt whether it be sin or not?
5. Have you nothing you desire to keep secret?⁷⁷

Less rigorous in orientation was Wesley's “class meeting.” These meetings were designed to help “Christians exhort, comfort and edify one another, to meet frequently for prayer, instruction, mutual confession, and support.”⁷⁸ Enormously popular and successful within early Methodism, these groups also created a conduit for people to get better acquainted, meet each other's physical needs and continue to fan the flames of spiritual passion. With an emphasis on “applied spirituality,” they also helped attendees learn how the teachings of faith could apply to the circumstances of their daily lives.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 313.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 315.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 314.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 315.

These organizational forms served as Wesley's catechetical approach to Christian discipleship. He recognized an inherent danger for legalism and formality in the structure but suspected that good leadership and enough variation could keep the gatherings from becoming monotonous and spiritually lifeless.⁷⁹ In the end, however, these tendencies mixed with other social factors to cause a slow demise of the structure. Only in more recent years has there been a renewal movement to recapture in some form the basic structure of accountability. David Lowes Watson's *Covenant Discipleship* is an example of this, which establishes a process for creating more flexible covenant discipleship groups.⁸⁰

Interestingly, contemporary writer Robin Maas interprets the early Wesleyan emphasis on communal spirituality as less about spiritual growth and more about preserving the distinctive culture that is the church:

It is never easy to be faithful to the demands of discipleship, and that is why Wesley emphasized so heavily the importance of regular, mutual, structured support for individuals struggling to be faithful to Christ in a culturally hostile environment. Such groups were not simply an "aid" to the enhancement of spiritual growth—in fact, they were not about "growth" at all. They were necessary channels of grace and served not to enhance but to preserve—to make sure that what was gained in conversion was not destroyed in a workaday world still infested with sin and evil.⁸¹

Again, this fits with the vision of a parallel society—a distinctive, Christian culture called to embody the vision of holiness, righteousness, and truth that is from God. Wesley, as he

⁷⁹ David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation Through Mutual Accountability* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 49.

⁸⁰ Watson, *Covenant Discipleship*.

⁸¹ Maas and O'Donnell, *Spiritual Traditions*, 320.

operated in the 1700s, understood this vision and worked to develop a structure that could sustain it.

Continued Experiments in Community in the West

Beyond the Methodism of Wesley and varied Roman Catholic forms of monastic community, other brands of Christianity developed in the late 1700's under an increasing cloud of individualism, growing pluralism and doubt regarding the reasonability and usefulness of institutional Christianity. Though people remained largely "religious" in their orientation and the phenomena of revivalism was adding to the growth of the church, the landscape on which the church was sitting continued to shift.

In the emerging colonies of the "New World," many branches of Christianity were being established. This virgin frontier offered them a "fresh start, a 'holy experiment,' an 'errand into the wilderness' to set up a society that would live and worship and love one another the way God intended."⁸² At least in the New England area, various Puritan groups held regional power and influence in local governing authority. These Puritan assemblies combined a strong communal concern for one another with a covenantal understanding of their relationship with God.

In regard to their sense of community, "a truly Christian society, in Puritan thinking, consisted of individuals voluntarily submitting their own individual concerns for the good of the whole. This applied to the church as well as society."⁸³ Practically, this manifested itself in a strong sense of personal calling to particular vocations for the sake of a good

⁸² Allen Carden, "The Communal Ideal in Puritan New England, 1630-1700," *Fides Et Historia* 17, no. 1 (Fall-Winter 1984): 25.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 27.

social order and out of a sense of duty to God. It also meant a willingness to accept one's station in life—be it rich or poor, powerful or powerless. It was a communal system that bred an inherent inequity, but was seen as a part of God's will and a way for people to live in mutual submission to one another by being faithful to their station in life.⁸⁴

Beyond a concern for community, the Puritans also held to a firm belief in their being a covenantal people. According to Francis Bremer, most of the English Puritans came to the New World in the hope of establishing a model society, reflected not only in its political and economic sphere, but in its ecclesial institutions, as well.⁸⁵ In fact, so strong was this underlying covenantal basis that it assumed both the Church and State would work together to “establish a righteous commonwealth in New England that would be a model for true Christians everywhere.”⁸⁶ In the Puritan worldview, every person under the jurisdiction of his or her society was seen as part of “a national covenant with God.”⁸⁷ John Winthrop, then Governor of Massachusetts said it this way:

The Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his owne people and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes, soe that wee shall see much more of his wisdome, power, goodness and truthe than formerly wee have bueene acquainted with,... for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in the worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁵ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 86.

⁸⁶ Carden, “The Communal Ideal in Puritan New England,” 26.

⁸⁷ Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment*, 89.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 89, 90.

Not alone in this sentiment, Winthrop's vision becomes the seedbed for an ongoing form of civil religion that will attempt to combine the teachings of Christianity with the socio-political and economic strategies of democratic capitalism. Intensely committed to God's call to holy living, the Puritans believed that part of the function of government was "to see that all people observed true religion and behaved in a godly manner."⁸⁹

But according to Carden, the idea of covenant applying to both church and society was equally "ingenious and insidious."⁹⁰ In the end it created a strong, shared identity and commitment to cooperate, out of obedience to God. On the other hand, it assumed that each person was a willing participant in the "religious commonwealth." In fact, not everyone in the colonies cared "to seek after the ways of God with all their hearts," nor were they interested in "subordinating their interests for the good of their communities."⁹¹ As was demonstrated throughout church history, the internal, voluntary submission to God's rule in the church and the external, imposed rule of law for secular society do not always fit hand in glove.

For other Christian groups in this era, this combination of spirituality and governmental control was untenable. Some groups, like the Mennonites and Amish, continued in a largely separatist fashion by establishing small, rather isolated communities (although the Mennonite church became increasingly engaged in "political protest and social activism" over time). A similar group, the Hutterites, came to the U.S. and settled first in South Dakota as an intact community in the mid-1800s. More radically

⁸⁹ Spickard and Cragg, *God's Peoples*, 227.

⁹⁰ Carden, "The Communal Ideal in Puritan New England," 32.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

communal than either the Mennonites or Amish, they disavowed the private possession of property. Believing that God “created all things for common use” and that through private possession “man brought disorder into the world by his grasping and greedy spirit,” community became the overachieving theme of their shared life.⁹² According to their tradition, each individual’s purpose is to add to the common life through their “honest manual labor” and by their “submissiveness to the will of God that is explicitly manifested in the believing community. Self-surrender and not self-development is the divine order.”⁹³

In distinction to the more Puritan vision of church and state, the Hutterian perspective required complete separation. In their theology, there are two spheres of operation at work in the universe—the Kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world. As part of the believing community truly devoted to the Kingdom of Christ, they are to witness to “the world” through their faithfulness to God’s “divine order.”⁹⁴ Through the creation of established colonies (Bruderhofs), the community became an “ark of safety” in which “individuals overcome the selfish desire of his carnal tendencies and are confident of eternal life after death.”⁹⁵

Education plays a dominant role in the discipleship of the young in this way of life. There is a clear, established process for bringing children up to know Christ and to understand the Hutterite worldview and practice. Especially in more recent years, this has

⁹² John Hostetler and Getrude Enders Huntington, *The Hutterites of North America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 12, 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

included a great deal of service and witness opportunities for children and young adults, as these communities have become increasingly interested in issues like the death penalty, war, secular school violence and poverty. This practice of interaction with more secular issues is particularly true of the tangentially connected Bruderhof communities founded by Eberhard Arnold during the rise of Hitler in Germany. More than the longstanding Hutterites, this group has been interested in witnessing to the presence of the Kingdom, not by participating in the secular, political process, but by serving as an active sign or movement that reveals the truth of God's Reign over creation. Foundational to this witness, however, remains the visible demonstration of God's love enacted in community. Along these lines, Arnold writes:

We believe that by living in total community we set an example and that this is the best service we can do for society today in its fragmented state. We want all those who sigh and groan under the wrongs in today's world to see that full community lived in love is possible.⁹⁶

During the rise of the American Republic, the social dimensions of the society lent themselves to a greater spirit of community within local congregations. The more rural, agriculturally based economy required a greater interdependence. Similarly, the restrictions on mobility and greater, extended family connections kept many people from moving about the country. There were fewer obstacles to the formation of lasting relationships.

Again, it is recognized that the typical church in this time period evidenced certain aspects of communal spirituality. Needs within the congregation were tended. Education and discipleship occurred via both formal and informal means. The surrounding

⁹⁶ Eberhard Arnold, *God's Revolution: Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1997), 118.

townsfolk witnessed the values of a particular worshiping community. Over time, as innovations like the Sunday School movement (first an evangelistic strategy) came into being, new avenues for bringing people together for the purpose of shaping their common life developed. Many of these groups became increasingly involved in the social ills of their era. In the 1800s, slaveholding became a primary concern that several church groups addressed. Later concerns included women's suffrage, the temperance movement, poverty, foreign missions, and evangelism. Each of these, at least in part, was an active demonstration of Christian witness and service to the world.

The argument in this paper is not that "community" is either non-existent or trivial in certain branches of the faith. Instead, it is being asserted that there is a particular vision of community that arises out of scripture and the spiritual heritage of the church that is distinct in its calling and witness. In particular, it is the emphasis upon the creation of a "parallel society" that is key. The community of Jesus Christ exists to embody the presence and active reign of God in the world and to demonstrate the contours of authentic love for one another. Further, it springs from the guiding sensibility that God is at work in the creation of such a people who embody the values of Jesus' life and teachings.

It is also true, even in scripture, that at certain times the socio-political climate is either more or less conducive to the values and vitality of the church (cf. Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:2). The witness of the church, though not dictated by the culture, is certainly influenced by it. For example, at the turn of the 20th century, the optimism associated with the "Social Gospel" was not only deeply influenced by underlying philosophies of social Darwinism, socialism and liberal theology, that optimism was born out of rapid

technological advances, urbanization and American political security. While several complex social issues faced the Church, many Christians of this era maintained an equally high degree of confidence that God was working through their social development to bring in an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity for all people. Walter Rauschenbusch reflected the spirit of that day as well as anyone when he wrote in 1907:

Perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary stage of growth, and now the flower and fruit are almost here. If at this juncture we can recall sufficient religious faith and moral strength to snap the bonds of evil and turn the present, unparalleled economic and intellectual resource of humanity to the harmonious development of a true social life, the generation yet unborn will mark this as the great day of the Lord for which the ages waited, and count us blessed for sharing in the apostolate that proclaimed it.⁹⁷

Two World Wars and the continued moral evil expressed by humanity scorched the optimism of the Social Gospel. Unfortunately, despite the many worthwhile reform movements that began in that era, it was based, in part, on a misguided notion that Christianity fits easily within the construct of the secular, political system. Similarly, it is possible to critique the adherents of the Social Gospel for the somewhat easy association they made between gospel ethics and the conventional wisdom and morality of American society. It is at this point that the mark of the particular kind of community that is being considered in this project becomes most clear. While not necessarily separate from society—that is, seeking entire isolation from the social system—it retains a certain distinction from it. The community of Christ remains “separate” in its peculiar vision of holiness, radical allegiance to God alone, and the priority it gives to living out the values

⁹⁷ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 422.

of Christ over against contemporary social values. It is a parallel culture, not defined by geography, racial lineage, or place of birth. It is, rather, a cross-cultural, multi-lingual, interracial gathering of people who are joined in covenantal fidelity with Christ, who is Lord over all creation.

Again referencing the rise of Hitler's Third Reich, this kind of witnessing community was visible in the German "Confessing Church." In counter-distinction with the state-sponsored "German Evangelical Church" (those Protestants who were supporting Hitler's regime), the members of the Confessing Church coalesced in their opposition to the Nazi movement and did so in the name of the gospel. Gathering in Barmen, Germany in 1934, delegates from several traditions developed and signed what would become known as "The Barmen Declaration." It reads:

Jesus Christ, as he is testified to us in the Holy Scripture is the one Word of God, whom we are to hear, whom we are to trust and obey in life and in death. We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and must recognize yet other happenings and powers, images and truths as divine revelation along this one Word of God, as a source of her preaching. We repudiate the false teaching that the state can and should expand beyond its special responsibility to become the single and total order of human life and also thereby fulfill the commission of the church. We repudiate the false teaching that the church can and should expand beyond its special responsibility to take on the characteristics, functions and dignities of the state and thereby become itself an organ of the state. We repudiate the false teaching that the church, in human self-esteem, can put the word and work of the Lord in the service of some wishes, purposes, and plans or other, chosen according to desire.⁹⁸

The cost of signing the Barmen Declaration was huge for many of those involved. For some, like Karl Barth, it meant fleeing his homeland. For others, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, opposition to Nazi political propaganda and the German Evangelical

⁹⁸ Spickard and Cragg, *God's Peoples*, 373.

Church's distortion of the gospel eventually cost them their lives. Prior to his death, however, Bonhoeffer was responsible for beginning an underground seminary that stressed the importance of discipleship in community. In his book, *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer outlined several aspects of healthy, spiritual relationships. Far more than some utopian ideal, it described the difficult fleshing out of human relationships governed by the gospel and Jesus Christ. "Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."⁹⁹

The work of this community required ongoing forgiveness, truth speaking, mutual ministry and a deep devotion to God in Jesus Christ. It was a community—not in the sense of isolated individuals volunteering to spend time and energy together. Instead, it was a group of people who recognized that their lives had been bound up in God's own life. And now, in that reality, they were charged to live out the uniqueness of the gospel as the absolute priority of their common life within their cultural context.

In later 20th century America, communities with a similar vision emerged, though the cultural climate was notably different from Nazi-dominated Germany. Regardless, certain movements such as the Koinonia Fellowship fostered by Clarence Jordan, the Sojourner's Community in Washington D.C. and the Church of the Savior (also in Washington D.C.) arose out of a sense of need for communal support in order to faithfully serve Christ and effectively witness to a world in need of transformation.

The example of the Church of the Savior is highlighted not simply because of its strong commitment to intentional community, but because of its structure. Begun in 1946 under the leadership of Gordon and Mary Crosby, the Church of the Savior is a

⁹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1954), 30.

contemporary example of an intentional effort to create a parallel, witnessing culture within the larger context of a broken world. Combining a “School of Christian Living” with active group ministries that are a part of small, mission cells, the Church of the Savior requires a minimum pledge to become a member in their community. It reads:

“We covenant together with Christ and one another to:

1. Meet God daily in a set time of prayer.
2. Let God confront us daily through the Scriptures.
3. Grow in love for each other and all people, remembering the command, ‘Love one another as I have loved you.’
4. Worship weekly—normally with our church.
5. Be a vital contributing member of one of the groups.
6. Give proportionately, beginning at the tithe of our incomes.
7. Confess and ask the help of our community should we fail in these expressions of devotion.”¹⁰⁰

This communal structure is in many ways akin to the Rule of Benedict. That is, its intent is to release rather than restrict the members of the community by establishing a basic order and rhythm to their life. As Elizabeth O’Connor describes it, this “discipline is a response to the waiting love of God. It helps keep us open to the love of God. It helps keep our feet upon the pilgrim way.”¹⁰¹ Interestingly, this community has established a “graduated” level of commitment. This reflects the understanding that not all people are at the same place at the same time. A degree of flexibility is required—both on the front end as people are beginning in community and on the tail end as individuals move forward in deeper, more obedient faith.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth O’Connor, *Call to Commitment: An Attempt to Embody the Essence of the Church* (Washington, DC: Servant Leadership Press, 1994), 34.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 35.

As part of their life in community, members proceed through a catechetical selection of classes. Their School of Christian Living offers courses over both the Old and New Testaments, Christian Growth, Christian Doctrine, Christian Ethics and Stewardship. Participation in a mission group allows for the exploration and development of both gifts and calling. These ministries range from various forms of evangelistic outreach to activity around different social concerns. An effort is made to gather people around a common sense of calling, not only to heighten support and effectiveness, but because they “need one another to work together.”¹⁰³

In an effort to keep their covenantal life vibrant and in order to avoid legalism, the Church of the Savior has developed a “principle of recommitment.” According to O’Connor, “each year, under God, we will review our commitment to this expression of the Church. If we find at any time this doesn’t have meaning for us or we are automatically performing a ritual, we will not recommit.”¹⁰⁴

Contemporary Trends

This desire for more intimate relationships, cooperative ministry, mutual support, and collective identity continues to show up in a variety of ways in the present. Clearly, the small group and cell group movements of the last century grew in response to this felt need. Around the world, vast networks of house churches are springing up—sometimes in response to the disillusionment brought about by participation in the larger, institutional forms of Christianity.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 37.

Nowadays, authors such as Wolfgang Simson contend that the next great reformation within Christianity will be a return to the house church model. Arguing that the typical institutional structure of most churches is counter-productive to either evangelism or discipleship in the post-modern era, Simson calls for a “reformation of [church] structures.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he asserts that churches with fewer than 20 people have a higher degree of flexibility, opportunity for genuine fellowship and ministry, and are a much more cost-effective pattern for accomplishing God’s work. In the end, he would also describe them as more faithful to God’s original, intended pattern.¹⁰⁶

Whether or not Simson’s convictions are true or relevant to every culture, the house church movement does provide a compelling critique against the kind of individualistic, passive un-involvement that characterizes some churches. In the confines of a small committed group, it is significantly more difficult to remain invisible. For the house church to exist, everyone must be involved by necessity. Like the Wesleyan cell structure of an earlier time, house churches potentially combine a wide variety of people and empower its members for leadership by giving them significant responsibility with one another.¹⁰⁷

Other writers, choosing to remain in the confines of the more traditional/established church, also call for a renewed focus on communal spirituality that reflects a covenantal commitment to love and serve God faithfully in the world. For instance, Dallas Willard’s

¹⁰⁵ Wolfgang Simson, *Houses That Change the World: The Return of the House Churches* (Waynesboro: OM Publishing, 2001), 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

books have struck a responsive chord in the lives of many people over the last decade. In his *Divine Conspiracy* he argues for a much more intentional process of spiritual development accomplished in, what he refers to as, “a community of prayerful love.”¹⁰⁸ Together, Willard contends, we learn to become “students of Jesus” as we adopt the pattern of Jesus’ life through scripture and as we learn to attend to Him through the practice of spiritual disciplines. Focusing on the application of faith in this world, as opposed to simply gaining entrance into heaven, Willard highlights the Christian’s fidelity to the Kingdom of God as the centerpiece for discipleship.

Jesus came among us to show and teach the life for which we were made. He came very gently, opened access to the governance of God with him, and set afoot a conspiracy of freedom in truth among human beings. Having overcome death he remains among us. By relying on his word and presence we are enabled to reintegrate the little realm that makes up our life into the infinite rule of God. And that is the eternal kind of life. Caught up in his active rule, our deeds become an element in God’s eternal history. They are what God and we do together, making us part of his life and him a part of ours.¹⁰⁹

Establishing this kind perspective, according to Willard, happens through a radical identification with Jesus Christ and via the intentional reorientation of one’s whole life.¹¹⁰ It is a strategic set of disciplined choices under the direction, grace and power of God at work in us, to be progressively transformed into the image of Christ—both individually and corporately. In this way, the church will “fulfill his call to be an *ecclesia*, his called out ones: a touch point between heaven and earth, where the healing of the Cross and the

¹⁰⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 215.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁰ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 253.

Resurrection can save the lost and grow the saved into the fullness of human beings in Christ.”¹¹¹

Covenant Community as a Historical Thread—One that Must Continue

It has been demonstrated that a clear and consistent thread runs throughout the history of the church. Especially within the ongoing renewal movements that have sprouted in the seedbed of Christianity, a focus on community and radical fidelity to God’s mission is evident.

While this theme has been expressed in a variety of ways and has, in some sense, been influenced by the cultural circumstances of each era, there remain resonate themes throughout. Included in this list would be deep spirituality, tension within the culture, a strong sense of mission, an intentional program for spiritual formation, mutual service performed in the context of loving, accountable fellowship, and a focus on the Kingdom of God. Even in the most conducive of political and social environs, these spiritual themes are useful and foundational aspects of Christian spirituality.

Many contemporary writers suggest that this focus is needed as much in our time as ever before in human history. As mentioned in chapter 2, Hauerwas and Willimon describe the present age as post-Christian. Whereas we once “could convince ourselves that, with an adopted and domesticated gospel, we could fit American values into a loosely Christian framework, and we could thereby be culturally significant”—those days are gone.¹¹² Instead, at a time of greater pluralism and with the myth of the U.S. as a

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹¹² Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know That Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 17.

“Christian nation” no longer believable, “we have an opportunity to discover what has and always is the case—that the church, as those called out by God, embodies a social alternative that the world cannot on its own terms know.”¹¹³

Douglas John Hall suggests a similar notion—that the American church is living in a time of *diaspora*. But instead of responding with fear or “resigned passivity... it is to be seen as a fresh opportunity to rethink the faith theologically in order for the church to be in mission to its culture.”¹¹⁴ No longer, he asserts, can we live under the “pretense of a universal Christendom,” instead the church must undergo a radical “metamorphosis” in order to “authenticate its message and mission.”¹¹⁵ For Hall, part of this process of change means letting go of our “triumphalism” and adopting a minority status that will require a renewed, prophetic witness.¹¹⁶ Like Hauerwas and Willimon, Hall sees this as a great opportunity awaiting the church to redefine the meaning of Christianity for a world that may not have experienced it in a vital way.

The time for rediscovery and/or re-emergence of a distinctive community of faith is also ripe for the post-modern climate we find ourselves in—at least according to Stanley Grenz.

The postmodern worldview operates with a community-based understanding of the truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth is dependent on the community in which we participate. Further, and far

¹¹³ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁴ Douglas John Hall, “Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora,” in *Confident Witness, Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 66.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 67-69.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 74.

more radically, the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our perceptions of truth to its essence: there is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate.¹¹⁷

This rejection of the idea of absolute, objective truth does not mean, however, that postmoderns are not looking for guiding principles or stories that offer meaning, purpose, beauty and authenticity. “Although they have divested themselves of any metanarrative, postmoderns are still left with local narratives.”¹¹⁸ In the search for a local “story” to adopt and to attach to, the church has a unique opportunity to introduce skeptics to God, via the divine life they demonstrate with each other and through the set of values and priorities they own as followers of Jesus.

Grenz, in discussing the contours of postmodernity, describes this emerging culture as also being “post-individualistic.”¹¹⁹

One of the hallmarks of modernity is the elevation of the individual. The modern world is an individualistic world, a realm of the autonomous human person endowed with inherent rights... While maintaining an individual focus in our presentation of the gospel, we must shake ourselves loose from the radical individualism that has come to characterize the modern mind-set. We must affirm with postmodern thinkers that knowledge—including knowledge of God—is not merely objective, not simply discovered by the neutral, knowing self.

Here we can learn from contemporary communitarian scholars who have joined the postmodern assault on the modern epistemological fortress. They reject the modern paradigm with its focus on the self-reflective, self-determining, autonomous subject who stands outside any tradition or community. In its place the new communitarians offer a constructive alternative: the individual-within-community.

Communitarians point out the unavoidable role of the community or social network in the life of the human person. For example, they affirm that the community is essential in the process of knowing. Individuals come to knowledge only by way of a cognitive framework mediated by the community in which they

¹¹⁷ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 8.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

participate. Similarly, the community of participation is crucial to identity formation. A sense of personal identity develops through the telling of a personal narrative, which is always embedded in the story of the communities in which we participate. The community mediates to its members a transcendent story that includes traditions of virtue, common good and ultimate meaning.¹²⁰

This insight is significant to the formation of our faith communities. At a time when Christianity is not the “assumed religion” of our culture, it becomes not only an opportunity but also a necessity that the Church reconsider our narrative and the way we pass it on to our members and communicate it to a watching world.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 168.

CHAPTER FOUR

BARRIERS TO COMMUNITY

Introduction

Despite the biblical and historical expressions that emphasize covenantal community, it is a commonly held opinion that American Christianity, at least in the present, suffers from a profound spirit of individualism. Seemingly, a breakdown of communal structures has coupled with a tendency toward a more solitary spirituality and human individuality to create this phenomenon. Clearly it would be inappropriate and inaccurate to assert that every problem in the church (or secular culture) is or ought to be linked to individualism. Other factors, such as the rise of dual-income families, divorce, changes due to industrialization and technology, increased mobility and transience, are but a few of a host of changes in society that have also impinged upon the shape and function of faith communities. Similarly, some of the radical changes in theology over the last several hundred years have impacted the self-perception and practice of the church. From a liberalism that de-emphasizes the authority of scripture to a fundamentalist dispensationalism that undercuts the vision of Kingdom ethics, these changes have been influential. At the same time, the cultural evolution toward a more individualistic worldview is a very significant contributing factor to the breakdown of communal spirituality.

While this trend is reflected within most American Christian traditions in the present culture, it is felt acutely within the Religious Society of Friends. Across the divergent theological spectrum of this group, the issues of rampant individualism and loss of community are prevalent and pressing concerns.

In this chapter, it will be demonstrated that at least two significant barriers face the Religious Society of Friends. These must be addressed if Friends are to recapture the flavor of a distinctive community of faith, as envisioned in this presentation. Again, it is not being argued that these are the only negative forces affecting Friends. No simplistic reduction of complex social, philosophic and theological issues is being offered here. All that is being presented is a more in-depth look at two primary concerns that appear to be of particular importance to the Society of Friends.

The first barrier stems from some of the inherent tensions and theological paradoxes within the group and their response to significant theological shifts over the past 350 years. The other barrier results from the Society's immersion in a broader culture of individualism, especially in the last century. Both will be explored in some detail in order to identify the source of the problem presented in this dissertation and to identify elements that must be addressed and overcome in the final chapter of this work.

Barrier One—Tensions and Paradoxes in Quaker Faith and Practice

Early Quakerism as a Covenantal Community

The roots of Quaker struggles with individualism might be traceable to the experience of George Fox himself. Growing up as he did in a religious matrix that combined either cultural Christianity or a restless Puritanism in search of assurances of salvation, he began a serious quest to experience *for himself* the mystery that is God.

Turning to the religious leaders of his day, Fox sought answers to his searching questions and satisfaction for his spiritual longing. Through a series of encounters with various parish priests and other religious leaders, Fox found himself in even greater despair. Instead of finding clues that might lead him in the right direction, he found only empty words and deadening religious forms offering nothing of substance.

It was upon his disavowal of others as a means for discovering God that Fox comes to a realization within himself:

But as I had forsaken the priests, so I left the separate preachers also, and those esteemed the most experienced people; for I saw there was none among them all that could speak to my condition. When all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could I tell what to do, then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition;" and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition, namely that I might give Him all the glory. For all are concluded under sin, and shut up in unbelief, as I had been; that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus when God doth work, who shall hinder it: and this I knew experimentally.¹

For Fox it became crystal clear that it was only through the unmediated, personal experience of Christ that one could be truly converted. Anything less was mere religious formality or a second-hand account of faith that would be insufficient to truly transform one's life in the manner God intended.

Unlike the more dominant, Calvinistic strains of Christianity at the time, early Friends believed in universal covenant of light initiated by God. The Puritan vision of covenant was symbolized by the more conventional phraseology of "grace" which allowed room for either an antinomian or legalizing tendency among the Puritan

¹ George Fox, *The Journal of George Fox* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1963), 82.

populace.² Friends, on the other hand, applied the symbol of “light” in order to reflect their absolute dependence upon the person of Christ at work in them, rather than a transactional view of “imputed righteousness” avowed by the Puritans.

More pointedly, they believed that this grace of God was available to all people rather than being reserved for those whom God had predestined for salvation. Christ, they insisted, had “come to teach his people himself” and was available to each and every person as “the true light that gives light to *everyone*”—Jesus Christ who came into the world (John 1:9). They even radicalized this message beyond the scope of other like-minded people by insisting that the presence of God was available and active, even among those people who did not know the name of Jesus Christ.

While this did not imply the universal salvation of all people (universal *availability* versus universal *inevitability*), it did place a great emphasis and responsibility for each person to attend to the Present Teacher, Jesus Christ.³ At the same time, they were thoroughly convinced that this same grace that allowed individuals to know Christ would also enable them to follow Him—even in perfect obedience.

In recognizing this truth *for himself*, Fox also came to see that it was the truth *for all people*. Early on in the movement, he and other leaders reckoned that God had established a “covenant of light” with all of creation, not through a system of ritual piety or creedal purity, but by his living presence among people. This idea of covenant played a central role in Friends’ early self-understanding as a people and helped them connect

² John Punshon, *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 2001), 167, 168.

³ Dean Freiday, *Speaking as a Friend: Essays Interpreting Our Christian Faith* (Newberg, OR: Barclay Press, 1995), 9.

their own experience to the work God had accomplished in their spiritual ancestors in both the Old and New Testaments. In this light, Francis Howgill writes,

Arise, shine forth, thou everlasting covenant of light and peace, by which and in which all our fathers believed, and so obtained a good report, and were redeemed out of captivity to serve the Lord forever with one heart and mind and worshipped in one spirit, in which faith they laid hold upon the perfect righteousness of Christ manifest in them.⁴

This is a foundational aspect of the Quaker covenantal vision. They experienced themselves as a gathered people, joined in a divine-human relationship initiated by God.⁵ More explicitly, it is not so much that there is a covenant between God and the community. Rather, the community is joined in a relationship of abiding trust and fidelity with God through Jesus Christ, *who is the covenant reality*. In practical terms, this meant the early Friends conceived of their life in God as cooperative participation in the divine life of Christ, acting as His Body on earth, rather than attempting to live up to certain moral standards or achieve particular clarity about dogmatic issues. Just as important, they believed that this life could and must be expressed in the present rather than waiting, as many of their contemporaries were, for a future date when Christ would return to an outward rulership over creation.⁶

Edward Burrough, another early Friend, began to describe some of the implications of this covenant for Friends, “The Covenant of God is Unity betwixt God and man, and a

⁴ Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1973), 168.

⁵ Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Burnsville: Celo Valley Books, 1993), 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

binding each to the other, to serve each other, the one bound to obey, submit, and worship; the other to bless, and keep, and lead, and preserve.”⁷

Over time, this understanding of living in the light and grace of God began to take particular form in what the Friends called *Gospel Order*, as an “outgrowth of that [covenantal] relationship with Christ.”⁸ Though often described in the present day as simply a model for church discipline, the initial vision of Gospel Order was far more comprehensive. In its original form, it alludes to the complete, redeeming activity of God in the world that is at work reconciling “to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1:20).

For the early Friends, this vision of Gospel Order had personal, communal and social implications. By living in tune with the spirit of Christ, it would mean a renewal in personal holiness, love and right-relatedness within the fellowship of believers, and even the peace and justice of God manifest in the social order. Again, they were captured by the idea that God was powerfully at work renewing the world through Jesus Christ and by their faith in God, they were being called to participate in the process. Doug Gwyn, a contemporary Friend who has written extensively on this subject concludes,

Their [the early Friends] historic significance lies in their gathering into a witnessing community, a covenantal sign to the world. They understood their worship and their way of life as forming a coherent sign “answering that of God in every one,” calling men and women universally to repent of their faithless ways and come to the “covenant of life, light, and peace.” This new gathering was to enact the Kingdom of God on earth, a new social order.⁹

⁷ Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995), 109.

⁸ Sandra L. Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1991), 7.

⁹ Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified*, 20.

While these Quakers were immensely optimistic about God's covenantal purposes and their own participation in the order of the gospel, they did not believe it would come easily. In fact, like their Puritan contemporaries, Friends believed in the strong power of sin and the hold it could have on people's lives. In the end, however, they trusted even more fully in the power of God to overcome sin—both personal and social—through a fiery process of “convincement.” This “profoundly transformative experience of God” moved an individual from a “state of lostness, emptiness and abandonment” to an “overwhelming sense of Presence.”¹⁰ Within that “presence,” the newly convinced Friend acquired not only an ability to walk in harmony with God but to see the world through a new set of eyes. In many ways, this process of convincement reflected the Pauline message where one is admonished: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2).

It is important to note that reaching a place of such conviction and obedience came through a terrible struggle. With remarkable consistency, the journals of early Friends recount the inward agony of spiritual transformation. Richard Hubberthorne, an early convert, describes his experience by saying, “the Lord hath been mightily exercised upon me, and his terrors hath been sharp within me... All that which was my life and that which had fed and nourished it must all now perish together... Yet in the midst of his terrible judgments there was a mercy hid which I saw not, which was the cause why I was not consumed.”¹¹

¹⁰ Punshon, *Reasons for Hope*, 66.

¹¹ Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 158.

Thomas Camm wrote of a similar experience in the life of his father John Camm, one of Fox's earliest converts in Westmoreland.

He was made willing to take up the cross and become a fool for Christ's sake (1 Corinthians 4:10), forsaking the world, and all the glory, delights, pleasures, wisdoms and riches of it, of which he had enjoyed a share equal, if not above, many of his degree; for naturally he was a wise man in worldly matters, having at that time great concerns and dealings therein; and the world seemed to smile upon him, and the riches and glory of it had exceedingly increased, and was then likely to increase more; yet notwithstanding all this, the Lord so prevailed by his power and spirit in his heart, that he was made willing to part withal, and counted it a blessed exchange to be made an heir in Christ of that durable riches laid up in heaven that his soul had travailed for, so that it was no hard thing for him to forsake all for Christ's sake, and become a despised follower of him through many tribulations.¹²

These periods of struggle—in order to break through to a place of peace and centeredness—were often described as lasting weeks or months.¹³ Usually in the midst of long stretches of solitude and silence, the individual was brought under the searing Light of God. Under that holy gaze they were made aware of all the habits and patterns that arose out of their own self-will, pride or lack of discernment. Many journals describe unrelenting tears, sleeplessness, as well as physical quaking. Akin to the experience found in other streams of Christian spirituality, these intense spiritual experiences were clearly purging those who could and would endure them. The ravages of this inner warfare shattered barriers to intimacy and obedience. Similarly, there was a clarifying of vision and a renewed understanding of what it would entail to follow the Risen Christ.

Quite often, Friends described this purifying process as “the Lamb's War.” James Nayler, in his written tract titled by that name, describes the process this way,

The Lamb's War you must know before you can witness his kingdom,

¹² Leo Damrosch, *The Sorrows of the Quaker Jesus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 32.

¹³ Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1988), 33.

and how you have been called into his war, and whether you have been faithful and chosen there or no. He that preaches the kingdom of Christ in words, without victory, is the thief that goes before Christ. So take heed that your own words do not condemn you, but mind your calling and how you have answered, and whether you have been faithful to that which you have been called, the war. Christ has a war with his enemies, to which he calls his subjects to serve him against all the powers of darkness of this world, and all things of this old world, the ways and fashions of it will he overturn, and all things will he make new... The Lamb wars against, in whomsoever he appears, and calls them to join with him herein in heart and mind, and with all their whole might. And for that end he lights his candle in their hearts, that they may find out every secret evil that the man of sin has treasured, even to every thought and intent of the heart, to cast out the enemy with all his stuff, and to subject the creature wholly to himself that he may form a new man, a new heart, new thoughts, and a new obedience, in a new way, in all things to reign, and there is his kingdom.¹⁴

Unlike some later modifications of Wesleyan sanctification, however, the Quaker experience of spiritual transformation was more of a beginning than an end. Through the severe inner revolution that had occurred and was occurring, individuals were opened to a place of complete devotion. Now, in many ways, they were open to a life of abiding in the Presence of Christ, freed from many of the obstructions and distractions that had bound them. Suddenly, many Friends asserted, God was guiding and leading them in new ways. No longer was faith a matter of holding to mere doctrines or attaching to abstract principles. Now Christ was speaking to them in direct, concrete ways—calling them to particular activities. Having had their worldview transformed and made open to the inner promptings of Christ, these Friends ventured out into their world intent on discerning and minding Christ in every circumstance. Even having passed through the harrowing travail of the Lamb's War, still Friends were counseled by Fox and others to wait upon God, in order to remain in the life and power that had begun a good work in them.¹⁵

¹⁴ Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 114.

¹⁵ T. Canby Jones, *The Power of the Lord is Over All: The Pastoral Letters of George Fox* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1989), 47, 48.

Individually, this meant many changes in terms of personal convictions. Old attachments to worldly possessions passed away since they viewed themselves as instruments in God's glorious work in the world. Vain pastimes and personal luxuries were put away in favor of a life devoted to ministry and spiritual pursuit. Beyond their own personal changes, this sharpened sense of Christ's Present leadership created a new understanding of how they were meant to live communally and socially. Now, it appeared to them, God was calling them to take very specific stands against inequities in social arrangements. No longer could they bow and scrape or doff their hats to those who imagined themselves superior to others. Neither could they swear oaths or participate in the military or activities that would lead to oppression. Increasingly, participation in the Lamb's War meant speaking directly to the political powers, both to remind them that the Quaker allegiance was with Christ's Kingdom and to call oppressors to repentance.

George Fox the younger (no relation to the movement's founder) expressed it this way:

This I declare in the truth and presence of the Lord...that it is not for the name that may be put upon a government, that we either stand for or against: but it is a righteous government which we stand for and earnestly desire after, both in things appertaining to God and man.¹⁶

This same George Fox goes on to say that members of the Friends movement would gladly support or happily stand against any government—depending on whether it was in alignment with the Truth that was being revealed to them through the inner working of God.

Friends during this era were not vying for political power. Rather, they perceived themselves as part of an overarching cultural revolution that was happening, not through their own ingenuity or imagination, but by God's power at work in them and guiding

¹⁶ Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 401.

them collectively. God, they believed, ruled and reigned over all. Their mission was simply to declare this Truth and to call everyone to learn the way of submission. Douglas Gwyn describes the unique relationship the Quakers posed to the ruling party of this day:

The forces that easily defeated and discouraged radicals in the 1640's were now being overcome by the power and unity of the Seed, a hidden power, enigmatic to the world. "The days of virtue, love and peace are come and coming... the Lamb is warring with the kings of the earth." Apocalyptic proclamations such as these were grounded in the Quaker sense that Christ was gathering an army of saints to perform spiritual holy war along the lines portrayed in Revelation: "He is risen and come in his saints, who is Lord and King, who will reign over all the world, and bear the government upon his shoulders." In such statements we can easily see the Quakers' threatening ambiguity in the eyes of civil authority. Their collective embodiment of Christ returned, as true king and judge, confronted the prevailing political power. Yet their relation to government was to bear it. Their posture toward the state was subordinate *and* subversive: they remained under civil authority and answerable to it, yet with a power to lift and move the state to a different "place," to shift the ground of political authority from below.¹⁷

Often, this commitment to grass roots transformation and willingness to be subject to—but not necessarily obedient to—the power of the State led to great conflict and persecution for Friends. Their willingness to stand on the margins or outside of institutions—while still addressing them and calling them to faithfulness—issued from their uncompromising, primary commitment to their fellowship in the love of God.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, this sense of being called into a God-ordained revolution quickly brought the Friends into a toe-to-toe confrontation with the established Church as well. Specifically, the Quakers were troubled by the institutionalism and ritualism that appeared to dominate the ecclesial structure. In radical response, the prophets of the Lamb's War challenged the hierarchical status of the clergy, with their state-supported salaries. In the minds of most early Friends, the Church and State were more than strange

¹⁷ Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified*, 134, 135.

¹⁸ Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality: Volume II* (Washington Grove: Openings Press, 1999), 226.

bedfellows; in fact they embodied Revelation's Beast of Babylon, warring against Christ and his True Bride, the Church. Quaker speakers and writers also denounced the ritualism of institutional religion, in part because they felt it unnecessary, but also because it inappropriately kept the locus of authority in the hands of a few humans, rather than the living Christ. The masses had become enslaved by a religious system that doled out grace and kept its constituency in check. The Lamb, they concluded, faced a major adversary in the Church, and so the Quakers expended much of their energy working in that arena.

In their appeal to the Present Leadership of Christ and their disavowal of scripture as the ultimate spiritual authority, Friends trusted the Spirit to provide ongoing revelation in their pursuit of God's cosmic redemption. Along the way, new openings came. Before long they would begin to address issues of slavery, war, cruelty to prisoners and religious dissenters. As the industrial revolution progressed, issues of fair pricing, marketing and extravagance began to surface. The direct and immediate leading of God, they believed, was guiding them to take new and specific action in the strategic advance of the Lamb's War. As will be noted later, the elevation of personal experience over scripture also becomes a point of tension in their understanding of personal versus corporate discernment and matters of authority.

The work of Friends was not limited to their words. It was an embodied message. Discerning ways in which a dark world was out of kilter with the Kingdom of Light, the emerging, communal practices of the Quakers began to serve as "testimonies" to the Truth found in Christ. In this way, the Lamb's War gained ground through the establishment of a visible, alternative reality. So convinced of what God was doing in the people called Quakers, Fox said,

And therefore the Lord requires more from Friends than all other people, because he has given more to them. So, all people do expect more from Friends than all other people, in answering that of God in them all in Truth, Righteousness, Holiness and Godliness; for you are lights of the world and the salt of the earth to season it.¹⁹

Whether or not Friends had somehow received a “higher calling” from God than other Christians is uncertain. They did, however, clearly sense that the Truth of their witness would be evidenced in the quality and character of their lives and life together. Within their own community, their vision of Gospel Order meant the working out of support and accountability, in particular in times of severe persecution. Generally, poverty plagued England in this era. With so many Friends jailed or killed by persecutors, their conditions were even more unfavorable. What Friends devised was a system to help alleviate particular instances of poverty within their own Meetings. It also spawned an interest in dealing with the root causes of poverty.²⁰

In practice, each Monthly Meeting established a fund and process for discerning need. Those who were in poor health, aged, widowed or orphaned were cared for out of the community’s fund.²¹ Those in poverty because of sloth or laziness were admonished by Friends as part of their communal discipline. Those who were suffering because of a loss of trade due to imprisonment were often cared for by the larger constituency of Friends’ Meetings. Often, groups from the broader region would link up to pay a person’s expenses. “Meetings free of the burden of prison relief gave generously to others in

¹⁹ Jones, *The Power of the Lord is Over All*, 369.

²⁰ Arnold Lloyd, *Quaker Social History: 1669-1738* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1950), 32.

²¹ Ibid.

distress.”²² Again, there was a high degree of connectional accountability and shared sense of responsibility to one another in the covenantal fellowship.

Additionally, the early texts suggest that their communal witness to the Truth would be visible in at least two other, key ways. First of all, the Victory of the Lamb would be manifest in a spirit of unity. Rather than relying on the written testimony of the Bible or the dictates of some human authority, Friends expected the Living Spirit to lead them together. Inevitably, conflicts and various opinions would arise, but through the unifying power present in those who had overcome in the Lamb’s War, it was expected they would come to eventual unity in all matters. For example, in a pastoral letter addressing an issue of disagreement, George Fox writes, “And you with your earthly spirit... and form have given occasion to the world to say, that the people of God called Quakers are divided. But the people of God called Quakers are one and not divided in the Power of God and in his Truth.”²³ This unity was in some measure a by-product of the Lamb’s War that had been scouring individual lives. Transformed and brought together in community, this holy war could extend within the group, as the clarifying Light of Christ began to develop a common vision, deep solidarity and sense of corporate discernment of God’s will.²⁴

The other way in which the Lamb’s War was manifest in the community came through their suffering for Truth’s sake. Convinced that God was leading them to embody

²² Ibid., 38.

²³ Jones, *The Power of the Lord is Over All*, 169.

²⁴ Douglas Gwyn, *The Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 1984), 74, 75.

the ethics of non-violent love, Friends refused to strike back in the face of severe oppression and persecution. To his comrades in England, Fox wrote:

Dear Friends: Those that live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution. God is righteous, God is pure, holy and just. God is clean. He that is godly and holy suffers by the ungodly, unrighteous, unclean, unjust and filthy. And so, the just suffers by the unjust. He that is born of the flesh persecutes him that is born of the Spirit.²⁵

In many ways, Fox and others welcomed this persecution as a sign of their own faithfulness. In addition, they trusted that their suffering would somehow reveal the world's false peace and comfort in a darkness they would otherwise not perceive. "They must know that peace taken away before they are redeemed out of the earth."²⁶ By their living witness, the Quakers hoped others would be enlightened to their own sin, repent and turn toward the source of true peace. Many and various journals remark on the suffering they endured for this witness. And while Quaker leaders worked vigorously to stop the imprisonments, beatings and deaths, there remained a quiet confidence that even these were a part of God's redemptive activity.

As previously stated, the Lamb's War was waged in the broadest possible scope and was meant to extend to every sphere of human existence as a part of Friends' covenantal relationship with Christ. As one writer notes, "When early Friends spoke of Christ's saving grace and the need to respond to it, they meant not only that individuals should be reborn, but that Christian community should be reborn to perform a revolutionary function in history, through day-to-day immediate corporate faithfulness to its divine

²⁵ Jones, *The Power of the Lord is Over All*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 294.

Leader.”²⁷ The Lamb’s War, indeed, was a personal, communal and social vision of transformation, carried out through a direct encounter with the Living God.

Points of Tension within the Covenant

From the beginning of this chapter, it was noted that the seeds of tension between the individual and corporate dimensions of faith were inherent in George Fox’s initial encounter with Christ. The purpose of this section is not to eradicate that tension or seek to ease the struggle between living individually before God and participating with others as a member of Christ’s Body. This is but one of many paradoxes found in Scripture and the history of the church that remind us God is ultimately Mystery. What remains important in the present is to continue to wrestle with these tensions, for when we are no longer willing to cope with the paradoxes and tensions that are inherent in faith we run the risk of succumbing to heresy.

Central to the Friends’ understanding of relationship with God is the profound realization that God is operative in each and every person. Christ calls each of us into fellowship with God directly, rather than through the mediation of a priest or through the vehicle of a hierarchical, religious system. This understanding is coupled with a profound sense of liberty to act as one feels led. In early days of the movement (and in unprogrammed meetings today) worship services took place without prepared forms in order to allow for God to move individuals directly and immediately. When the Spirit prompted a person to speak a message—either male or female—they did so. God’s directive was the only permission one needed. Similarly, Friends did away with clerical, positional authority, instead creating a network of equals under the headship of Christ.

²⁷ R. W. Tucker, "Revolutionary Faithfulness," *Quaker Religious Thought* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1967): 24.

Since outward religious rituals—baptism and communion—were eliminated as unnecessary, people did not need to rely on others to serve as dispensers of grace. It was already available to all through direct, personal encounter with Christ.

Unrestrained by an equally strong communal emphasis on spirituality, this understanding of faith can lead easily to a kind of radical egalitarianism that loses a sense of cohesion and corporate identity. In its worst form, radical egalitarianism means nothing more than an individual's right to assert his or her own way. Understood more positively in the confines of healthy community, radical egalitarianism refers more to a shared equality under the headship of Christ. It includes mutual submission and respect. There must be that strong spiritual and communal element, however, underlying the community if the egalitarian spirit is to pull individuals together rather apart. At least among the earliest Friends, this understanding was noted. Historian Justo Gonzalez, in describing the advent of the Quaker movement, suggests "Fox was aware of the danger that his emphasis on the freedom of the Spirit would lead to excessive individualism...[and] avoided this danger by underscoring the importance of community and love."²⁸

In the early days, this communal emphasis surfaced in many ways. Their form of worship—set up to be dependent solely upon the promptings of God—was expressed as a "gathering event." In this regard, the focus on Quaker, corporate worship was not envisioned as a place for individual communion with Christ, as much as it was the forum in which God gathered the members of his Body to teach, guide and direct them together.

Similarly, meetings for business were seen as ways in which the people of God would learn to discern the leading of Christ collectively. Rather than relying on majority

²⁸ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. 2* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 200.

rule to make decisions, Quakers engaged in a form of spirit-led discernment. Individuals were encouraged to speak *as they felt led*. Ultimately, however, matters of discernment were determined through a corporate process of submitting to the Divine Will. When practiced faithfully, this consensual form of decision-making results in a spirit of unity, without demanding complete uniformity.

It is also true that the earliest Quaker community was mightily influenced by the charismatic authority of its first leaders. George Fox, James Nayler, Francis Howgill, Margaret Fell, Richard Hubberthorne, William Penn and others were able to exert a strong, stabilizing effect on the oftentimes scattered and unruly community. In the case of Nayler, however, that same charisma and penchant for individual dependence upon God led to his downfall.²⁹ True authority, however, was understood to remain solely in the Person of Christ, operative both within the individual and community. Beyond scripture, tradition or any human conventions, the experience of God remained the ultimate source of truth and leading.

As was expressed earlier, the Friends understood themselves to be a “peculiar people,” “the Children of Light” living in covenant fellowship with God. Unlike their Anabaptist predecessors, Friends believed they were called, not to distance themselves from the world, but to live distinctly in it. At points along the way, they developed the notion of creating a “hedge”—an intentional, protective barrier around between themselves and the world.³⁰ It included practices and rules against marrying out of Meeting, plain dress and speech, the process of disownment and guarded education in

²⁹ John Punshon, *Portrait in Grey: A Short History of the Quakers* (London: Quaker Home Service, 1984), 74-77.

³⁰ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 227.

Friends schools.³¹ Again, the point of the hedge was to help insure and preserve a distinctive way while Friends engaged the world with boldness and even a spirit of optimism.

As the Society emerged, and especially later as it organized more concretely, points of tension developed that led to later division and a lack of clarity about the nature and shape of Quakerism. These tension points can be generally categorized under the headings of *personal autonomy versus organizational authority, inward versus external authority, and individual versus corporate salvation*.

Personal Autonomy Versus Organizational Authority

Questions and concerns regarding personal leading and corporate control came to light most clearly during the days when George Fox was imprisoned. On one occasion another leading Friend, John Perrot, stirred up controversy, and in doing so raised very serious questions about matters of authority within the Society. His “hat controversy” led to division and resulted in tenuous steps to clamp down on some of the unrestrained individualism within the group.³² Later, when increased organization (and institutionalization) developed out of need for stability, coherence, and long-term preservation, a more radical group led by John Story and John Wilkinson opposed this trend toward any hierarchical leadership or control.³³ At issue was largely the question of communal authority and individual leading. At that time the move toward some increased corporate authority and accountability carried the day.

³¹ Punshon, *Reasons for Hope*, 375.

³² Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (Dublin, IN: Print Press, 1979), 126-29.

³³ *Ibid.*, 140-45.

At the heart of this issue lay the primary, fundamental Quaker assertion that the Light of Christ, experienced inwardly, is the true source of authority. It is true that Quakers counter-balanced this idea by recognizing that the ability to best discern the Light happens in the context of community. Similarly, individual and corporate leadings were to be measured against the testimony of the Holy Spirit in scripture.³⁴ But central to the early Quaker movement was the absolute certainty and reliability of the personal, experiential leading of Christ. This was a message they declared with boldness and worked to live out with dogged determination. But, as John Punshon observes, “this was both their strength and weakness.”³⁵

This conviction concerning the authority of direct, spiritual experience was a strength in that it led to great vitality, experimentation and dependence upon Christ to lead and guide in all circumstances. When practiced in community, this vision of authority created opportunity for unity and corporate direction, in worship, business meeting, and smaller gatherings like meetings for clearness.

As time passed on, however, Friends began to be influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the quietism of the second generation of leaders. Along the way, the Society became increasingly individualized and inward in its orientation. Some of the vitality and sense of pressing into the world as an evangelical, transformational community died off with the founders. Organizationally, the more charismatically fluid movement was concretizing in established forms. Tensions continued to emerge over issues of authority and how to work out a shared sense of identity and spirituality.

³⁴ Punshon, *Portrait in Grey*, 72.

³⁵ Ibid.

Roberts and Barbour express the tension well as they describe the passing of one generation of Friends on to the next:

Being led by the Spirit, they did not feel obliged to define for themselves the precise, scriptural forms that church organization (or for that matter, the godly state) should take. Even Fox's strong suggestions were pragmatic and experimental responses to urgent needs in time of persecution. The struggle to reconcile the Spirit's freedom with the unity, uniformity and consensus by which Friends could stand together against the world produced a crisis: it led to the first major splits in Quakerism as well as to some of its best thinking about leadership. While Friends kept the spirit of an army on the march as "a movement not a sect," they needed to guide each other's inner growth and to watch over each other's outward morality. When the hope of world conquest and the sense of the Spirit's onward sweep began to fade after three decades of persecution, the mechanisms of mutual ethical discipline remained. Quaker group life had become quite sectarian. A new age and a new, more patient form of inwardness had begun, but with less patience for individual variation.³⁶

Later, the issue of individual autonomy and corporate authority become even more complex. As the Society split into evangelical and liberal camps, both groups struggled with the issue in various ways.

Rufus Jones (1863-1948) one of the prominent interpreters and spokespersons for "liberal Quakerism," reflects the trouble and tension surrounding the issue of individual autonomy and corporate authority.³⁷ As he interpreted the work of Fox in founding the Society, Jones recognized conflicting principles at work.

It is the mark of the wisdom and sanity of George Fox that, mystic and idealistic as he was, he faced the facts of life, he learnt from experience, he came to see that disembodied spiritual movements cannot succeed and do a permanent work in the world; and, when the hour came for it, he took the leadership in organizing the Society of Friends for its abiding, expanding mission. This was obviously a delicate and difficult undertaking. It was in some degree a surrender of the original ideal, perhaps we had better say of the primitive dream.³⁸

³⁶ Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 32.

³⁷ Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified*, 22.

³⁸ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1919), xxviii.

For Jones, the resulting organizational structure that resulted from the Story/Wilkinson and Perrot episodes was not a complete rejection of inward, personal obedience to the Light of Christ but an accommodation meant to insure the successful future of the movement.

On the other hand, it is quite clear in reading Jones that any formalizing tendencies were at least unfortunate—if not a severe blow to the way of faith that was intended to spring entirely out of a personal response to the inward Light. Summarizing the original vision of the Church by Fox, Jones writes, “they assumed that religion as a living, inward experience would take care of itself in the world. It would need no external supports nor contrivances. Christ... would guide, protect, create, construct His own church, if only men would let Him work unhindered.”³⁹

Historian William Braithwaite, a kindred spirit to Jones, described the move toward corporate authority in a similar fashion. “The unification of the members of the Quaker groups into a common witness and way of life had been achieved at first through a fellowship and leadership and worship in the Life. But as years passed, a great tradition began to impose itself, and with the growth of organization, the acceptance on the authority of the church of rules of conduct became in many cases a substitute for living principles of truth in the heart.”⁴⁰

In Jones’ ideal world, Quaker spirituality and witness would spring naturally from individuals sharing in the same experience of the Spirit of God. In opposition to what he called “organization” which attempted to mandate and enforce unity, Jones desired a

³⁹ Ibid., xxvi.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 498.

spiritual fellowship founded on “personal contagion.”⁴¹ Using Jesus as his example he writes, “Instead of founding an institution or organizing an official society, or forming a system, or creating external machinery, he counted almost wholly upon the spontaneous and dynamic influence of life upon life, of personality upon personality. He would produce a new world, a new social order, through the contagious and transmissive character of personal goodness. He practically ignored, or positively rejected, the method of restraint, and trusted absolutely to the conquering power of loyalty and consecration.”⁴²

There is something quite compelling in Jones’ vision. However, questions arise over what to do when contagion lags or when such disparate expressions and experiences of God spring up to create disunity instead of fellowship. Both of these problems have been the experience of many Friends within the liberal branches of Quakerism.

While less evident at times, this issue of personal autonomy versus corporate authority remains an issue among the evangelical wing, as well. Often around the social testimonies of Friends great disparity can be seen. Again, it remains a serious question—What, if anything can or should be done to encourage a great spirit of unity?

Given the individualistic nature of Friends generally, more recent practice seems to avoid the corporate use of authority. Among evangelicals, a more unified theology may be presented from the pulpit and in their literature, but often Friends express great divergence in their faith and practice. Among liberals, even greater diversity is expressed, as well as a greater reluctance to address an individual’s personal experience of God. In

⁴¹ Rufus Jones, *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time: An Anthology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 78-79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 79.

the end, both groups tend to leave people to themselves to live out and interpret their life of faith.

While it is true that Friends uphold the direct communion of the individual soul to God, there is a counterbalancing reality acknowledged by Lloyd Wilson. He writes, “the basic understanding of Friends, gained through painful experience, has been that God is present with the faith community, not with individuals; that it is in the faith community that the divine will is truly known, divine blessings are shared, and Friends are able to build one another up in the faith. A solitary Quaker is an oxymoron.”⁴³

Inward Versus External Authority

A similar point of tension plagues Friends around the subject of external authority—those sources of authority beyond experience. For many Friends, questions arise as to the place of scripture, tradition, even the stated *Faith and Practice* of a particular Yearly Meeting. What authority, if any, do these hold over the individual conscience of a person or local fellowship in helping to shape corporate life?

Many of the same historical circumstances connect to this discussion. From the beginning, Quakers have flatly rejected the relevance of a creedal formula, believing that correct dogma is insufficient for salvation. What matters is a direct experience of Christ.⁴⁴ At the same time, early Friends did share a sense of being called into this covenant of Light. They imagined and articulated a description of Gospel Order, and along with it, some of the practical implications of a shared, covenantal life.⁴⁵

⁴³ Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, 20.

⁴⁴ Fox, *The Journal of George Fox*, 82.

⁴⁵ Cronk, *Gospel Order*, 7.

Therefore, while wanting to avoid external norms and descriptions of the spiritual experience, Friends recognized the spiritual life can be described in ways that serve to guide people toward the truth. Their reluctance around creeds and “forms” had more to do with wanting to not supplant their genuine, intimate knowledge *of Christ*, with a far inferior knowledge *about Christ*. In the end, the ability to live in creative tension around this issue depended on whether the community of people was actually gathered in the Life and Power of Christ. Sandra Cronk writes,

Early Friends stressed that God’s new order was not present simply because people did all the “right” things in an outward sense; rather, God’s new order, gospel order, was present when people lived out of the fullness of their living relationship with Christ. Truth is not found in professing correct beliefs and correct actions while actually living outside the life and power of Christ. Only this life and power makes a church-community part of the true church. Only when the sap of the vine flows through the branches are they living branches.⁴⁶

According to Cronk, though Friends “did not define gospel order in terms of a legalistic framework, this order was not only an inward feeling. Gospel order entailed an ordered way of living that had concrete expressions in virtually all areas of life.”⁴⁷ So while there was a rejection of outward creeds, Friends did allow room for a mutually shared, intentional program to help shape their individual and corporate lives.

By the early 1700s, Friends began to write copies of a corporate “Faith and Practice” which gave expression to their commonly held understanding of God and the practice of the spiritual life. Though not technically creedal in the sense that it remained fluid and one did not have to sign a declaration of belief, the *Faith and Practice* was (and is) used to describe the contours and parameters of the community’s experience of God. In its best

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

form, the document frees the community to know and serve God in understanding and obedience rather than become a restrictive influence.

In the early days, and among most evangelical Friends in the present, Bible reading was a common practice. Later, however, as splits began to develop in the late 1880s and early 1900s, the Bible began to be viewed as either unnecessary or unreliable for matters of faith. In reaction to the so-called, liberal movement among the Society, more evangelical Friends began to assert the primacy of the written word over the inward experience of the Christ. In some regard, this reaction may have led to some of the further rejection of scripture among liberals, in a kind of unfortunate, polemic reaction against the evangelical wing.

In regard to the external, corporate structure of the church, Quakers developed an early process of church discipline. It was termed *disownment*. In its best form, the eldering process of disownment was used as a redemptive measure in the life of an erring member and as a way to keep the distinctive standards of the community intact. Sandra Cronk writes, “The disownment was understood not as the intention to cut one off from relationship with the community. The disowned one could still attend meeting for worship; social discourse was not interrupted. Disownment was the recognition that a fundamental covenantal commitment was already severed.”⁴⁸ Examples of behavior leading to disownment by the Meeting included, “loose and unprofitable company...frequently drinking strong liquors to excess...disregarding duty to parents...disrupting the unity of Friends...and neglect of Meetings for Divine

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

Worship.”⁴⁹ As it might be easily imagined, disownment was at times a controversial—and abused—process.

Documents such as Faith and Practice and scripture and other corporate guides like the queries worked alongside the church structure to create communal support and guidance for the membership. But over time, many Friends began to reject these external authorities or allowed them to fall into disuse for fear they would “infringe upon individual freedom.”⁵⁰ This fear of infringement resulted in a loss of benefit these external sources of “authority” might have offered the community as it struggled to retain a sense of cohesion and harmony.

As Cronk wisely relates, none of these external standards hold any redemptive power if the people in the community are living outside the Life of Christ. Therein lies the tension. How might the appropriate use of these “authorities” create an environment for vital faith? Or is the tendency toward imposing external authority so pervasive that it is likely to diminish or destroy the possibility of genuinely experiencing God?

According to one Friends historian,

The crusade against worldliness should have devoted itself, not to the multiplication of rules of outward conduct, but to the fostering of this inward discipline by vital methods. Living ministry and leadership, the maintenance of warm and open-hearted fellowship, and a generous method of education were all needed, and could they have been secured and would they have kept the tradition of the fathers and the authority of the elders from narrowing the outlook and service of the Church. A Quaker way of life would have been assured by the power of first-hand conviction renewed in each generation and continually drawing into the Society others of all ranks who were reached by the Quaker

⁴⁹ Sydney V. James, *A People Among Peoples: Quaker Benevolence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 36, 37.

⁵⁰ Cronk, *Gospel Order*, 21.

message—a way of life growing out of the rich inheritance of the past but not limited by it.⁵¹

Braithwaite assumes in this passage that the only thing really needed is encouragement for individuals to look inward to Christ. Having turned inward, he assumes each person will naturally come into the Life and Power that will lead him or her to unity with God and each other. Instead of outwardly enforcing or even directly encouraging unity in beliefs and practice, the inward Presence is able to accomplish this work much more adequately.

The experience of Friends over the last few hundred years, however, has demonstrated this is not necessarily so. At the same time, many Friends have come to lament the disunity in the ranks. Even so, many Friends stand firm in their resolve not to approach anything that resembles an authority beyond the individual. Rufus Jones reflects this resolute spirit in his day,

Every person who thinks that it is the spiritual mission of the church to become the most refreshing and healing stream of life which flows through the modern world must hope for the recovery of the unity of it. But that unity, we may be sure, cannot be restored in any superficial way, certainly not in any artificially constructed way of patching up a *scheme* of unity. It can come only through deepening processes of life and growth. A superficial unity brought about the formulation of a common creed and order would mark no great advance in spiritual and creative power. What is needed most is a rediscovery of the message and mission of Christianity, the Galilean way of life, the depth and power of Christ's life, and the significance of life and sacrifice for the world today.⁵²

What constitutes a “patchwork scheme to promote unity” undoubtedly is subject to debate. What remains certain is Friends’ general discomfort with any source of authority beyond one’s own, direct experience of God. Many refuse to be “boxed in” by a general

⁵¹ Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism*, 522, 523.

⁵² Jones, *Rufus Jones Speaks to Our Time*, 186.

label that brands anyone's spirituality. Tolerance and respect for others' divergent beliefs are mingled with a fear and discomfort about speaking in any way that might be seen as "authoritative" and tries to capture the essential dimensions of Quaker thought and life. In the end, it creates a difficult environment to attempt to speak coherently or truthfully about who Friends are and what they believe. What remains are mostly tentative expressions of one's own personal experience.

Describing the state of affairs among his circle of Quakers, Wilson suggests,

The corporate reluctance of many unprogrammed meetings to allow anyone to speak authoritatively about what Friends believe (where there are two Friends, there are three opinions) completes the conundrum. We agree wholeheartedly that what we've found among silent Friends is the most precious of jewels, yet are unwilling or unable to share the source of our good fortune with others. Friends are unable to speak clearly about the covenant nature of their community because they are not in complete unity about that covenant."⁵³

Beyond the loss to ourselves, Wilson goes on to conclude that "when we lack, as a faith community, a shared vision of what is essential to our corporate faith experience, we are unable to teach newcomers what it means to be Quaker. Without a shared vision of who we are as a faith people, we are unable to invite others to join us."⁵⁴

Individual Versus Corporate Salvation

A final point of tension, at least among the evangelical ranks of Friends, is the larger Evangelical Christian overemphasis on "personal salvation."

It has been argued throughout this work that salvation is in its fullest sense a cosmic restoration that God has and is working through Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:20). While it is true and essential that individuals receive the grace and forgiveness of God through

⁵³ Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, 66.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 68.

their own faith and repentance, this is not the sum total of salvation, as Evangelicals often like to make it.

Early Friends had a helpful sense of being saved as individuals *into and as part of* a community of faith. Conversion and process of conviction resulted in a person being grafted into the True Vine, along with the many other branches (John 15:1). Together, this company of disciples was called to embody the divine life in the context of the world. This focus led to both an internal orientation of worship toward God and an external orientation of service toward humanity.

Later, however, in the revivalist era of the 1800s, Friends were mightily influenced—for good and ill—by this movement and the resulting changes it brought with it. On the positive side, it meant a fresh concern for evangelism among Friends, at a time when this was waning. Similarly it brought new people, new vitality, and a broad range of innovations to their ecclesial and worship forms.

More negatively, many Friends fell into a larger trend that would continue among the greater constituency of evangelical Christians. This was a move toward a privatized faith and individual emphasis upon salvation. Losing much of the communal, social and cosmic implications of Jesus' Good News, the evangelical emphasis diminished the scope of the Gospel to little more than an individual's eternal destiny. Given this loss, a tension area for Friends is how to recapture a sense of communal or corporate spirituality and redemption, while still maintaining appropriate concern for the experience and salvation of individual believers.

Nowadays, many writers lament this individualized emphasis claimed by evangelical Christians. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard rejects a view of salvation

that focuses only on the forgiveness of sin and admittance into heaven.⁵⁵ This sort of “fire insurance” neglects the social dimension of redemption, the call to communal participation, as well as a vision of the transformed life here in the world as new creations.

Similarly, Robert Mulholland in his thoughtful treatise titled, *Invitation to a Journey*, warns that without a strong communal component to the faith life, it too easy to lose proper perspective. “Corporate spirituality is essential, because privatization always fashions a spirituality that in some way allows us to maintain control of God. Without brothers and sisters to call us to accountability, we will work powerfully to maintain that control.”⁵⁶

Also, in a very fine essay, Mark Baker critiques the present, individualized spirituality found in many evangelical circles.

North American evangelicals tend to read the Bible through an individualistic and spiritualized lens. Built into this lens is the idea that future-individual-salvation of the soul is the center of Christianity. The lens causes many evangelicals to interpret all else in relation to this center.⁵⁷

For Baker this skewed perspective means the loss of corporate or justice-oriented aspects of the gospel and a further misapprehension about the primary theme of the kingdom of God.⁵⁸ He goes on to say that individualistic Christianity is “actually a subversion of Christianity. It hinders us from experiencing the abundant life of authentic community

⁵⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 48.

⁵⁶ M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 149.

⁵⁷ Mark D. Baker, *Religious No More: Building Communities of Grace and Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 57.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

that God intends for us.”⁵⁹ Instead of defining salvation in the almost exclusively private, inward and mystical experience that is common, he suggests a changed conception that includes a “self-identity as persons-in-covenant community.”⁶⁰

This helpful corrective would mitigate against some of the trends within evangelicalism that have also crept into evangelical Quakerism. For instance, this would include the reaction of fundamentalism and evangelicalism against social action—for fear of being connected to liberal theology.⁶¹ This unfortunate reversal of an earlier emphasis has left a huge and damaging impact on Friends’ spirituality and witness within the evangelical tradition.

Baker summarizes four characteristics that have come to define evangelicals because of their increasingly individualistic approach to salvation. They accurately reflect a great many evangelical Friends, as well.

First, for them the important spiritual unit was the individual. Whereas Christians had previously seen the church as God’s primary agent of activity in human history, it now had become a voluntary association functioning to gain new converts and to aid the individual Christian in spiritual growth. Second, they understood salvation solely in spiritual terms. Third, their ethical focus was on individual morality. Fourth, their strategy for changing society was to evangelize individuals. Changed individuals would lead to a changed society.⁶²

Again, his critique fits much of the present, evangelical wing of Friends. Baker’s argument is not that these concerns need to be rejected. Rather, he is simply calling for a more biblical and historical sense of balance with the communal and social aspects of the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 66.

⁶² Ibid., 67.

gospel. Such a return to balance among Friends would also mean a return to their own historical roots and initial calling as a Society.

As will be demonstrated in the next section, these points of tension within the Faith and Practice of Friends dovetail with a pervasive cultural trend toward individualism. Brought together, these barriers have resulted in a fundamental reshaping of Friends in America.

Barrier Two—Shaped by a Culture of Individualism

Along with the theological and ecclesial complexities that are a part of the make-up of Friends, American Quakers are also profoundly influenced by the marked individualism of the broader culture. In an idealized sense, any faith tradition has the clarity of vision and internal resources to remain true to its calling. It is able to withstand the conforming pressures and shaping ideologies that may tend to distort its apprehension and application of the divine life (Romans 12:1-2). This is part of the argument for why covenantal community is so necessary, if, in fact, the people of faith are interested in creating a parallel culture within their context in the world.

Unfortunately, it is being argued in this case, the Society of Friends has not done well in its battle with modern individualism. Across the whole theological spectrum of Friends, the Society has certainly lost much of its distinctive calling. Nowadays when a person makes inquiry into the nature of Quaker faith, long explanations ensue to delineate the vast differences and distinctions between groups claiming the same name and heritage. More locally, particular meetings and churches often feel tension points around how much they share a common faith and how well they are connected to each other as individuals.

Again, this is part of a larger social trend that has helped foster this spirit within the Friends community of faith. It would be both inappropriate and inaccurate, however, to picture the American culture as entirely individualistic. Throughout U.S. history, the people of this nation have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to help each other in times of need, as witnessed in recent memory with the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Reaching out to people beyond our own borders, “this country has constantly served as a haven for refugees from tribal warfare, ethnic hatreds, and centuries-long social exclusivities.”⁶³ All across the land, people are actively involved in others’ lives in meaningful and significant ways.

Still, in nearly every arena of life, people lament the “loss of community.” Anecdotally, many individuals report feeling *isolated, disconnected, without roots or deep friendship*. A great number of people desire closer, more meaningful connection with others but find these relationships difficult to create or maintain. In many ways, American society has become a culture of disconnected individuals—and it has left a deep impression on both the wider social structure and the peculiar, Christian culture within it.

Individualism Distinct from Individuality

Within this discussion it is important to distinguish between *individualism* and *individuality*. The notion of individuality is the positive aspect of our being a unique creation—the gracious handiwork of God. Julie Gorman, writing on relationships in the

⁶³ Carl F. Starkloff, “The Church as Covenant, Culture, and Communion,” *Theological Studies* 61, no. 3 (September 2000): 411.

church, defines individuality this way:

Individuality (being a unique person) . . . is self-awareness and personhood that are found in taking personal responsibility within a sense of existing in community. In other words, others are impacted by what I do, and I am responsible for that impact. Individuality values the uniqueness of God's created person but always with the thought in mind of what this one contributes to and draws from the corporate body. The image-bearer is always individual-in-community.⁶⁴

This is an important distinction, for the goal of creating a parallel culture does not include the loss of personal uniqueness or responsibility for one's own life with God. Rather, within the network of diverse individuals manifesting the wide spectrum of gifts, talents and perspectives, there can remain a sense of shared unity—over against uniformity. Similarly, remaining faithful to our individuality-in-community, the group is consistently mindful of being responsible *for themselves as individuals*, while remaining responsible *to one another as members of the same community*.

It is at this point where individuality and individualism part company. In its most extreme version, individualism rejects or at least minimizes the sense of responsibility to each other in the group. The term *individualism* was coined by the French writer Alexis de Tocqueville, who came to the U.S. in 1831. Impressed by the burgeoning industrialization of the country, de Tocqueville noted an intense, independent spirit among the people. He termed this spirit *individualism*. Tocqueville described this

... as a calm and considered feeling that deposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his tastes, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself. . . . Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Julie A. Gorman, *Community That is Christian: A Handbook for Small Groups* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 36, 37.

⁶⁵ David G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 162.

More recently, in his critique of North American Christianity, Mark Baker delineates three aspects of individualism. One is that “individualism is the view of reality in which the individual is the most basic entity and the defining principle of all existence. It is an atomistic conception of reality in which a collective has no existence apart from its constituent parts...the social whole is a composite of separate individuals.”⁶⁶ Second, he goes on to conclude that “individualism as a value system makes the individual central and asserts the individual’s primacy over the group. Therefore an individual culture values freedom, privacy and autonomy.”⁶⁷ Finally, more contemporary forms of individualism “stress personal morality over social ethics, individual transformation as the key to social change, laissez-faire economics, and a politics of extolling the freedom of the individual and a limited state.”⁶⁸ All of these, Baker argues, have negatively affected our understanding of Christian faith and distorted the relationships within community.

The Roots of Individualism

It can be argued that the seedbed of individualism was tilled in the period known as the Enlightenment or “Age of Reason.” Clearly, Bacon, Descartes and Newton were instrumental in the Renaissance shift that elevated humankind to the center of reality.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Baker, *Religious No More*, 58.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 58, 59.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 2, 3.

However it was during the later Enlightenment that a more radical transition ensued: the “establishment of the individual ego as the self-determining center of the world.”⁷⁰

According to theologian Stanley Grenz, the Enlightenment period

...brought an enhanced status to humans and an elevated estimation of human capabilities. It replaced God with humanity on center stage in history. Medieval and Reformation theology viewed people as important largely insofar as they fit into the story of God’s activity in history. Enlightenment thinkers tended to reverse the equation and gauge the importance of God according to his value for the human story.⁷¹

Along with this elevation of the human ego, two other significant paradigm shifts occurred in the Enlightenment. One reflected a heightened confidence in humanity’s ability to discern knowledge, both scientific and moral. Hence the name “the Age of Reason,” for it is during this time that Enlightenment thinkers began to appeal to human reason over external forms of revelation as the ultimate source of truth.⁷²

This principle of “autonomy” meant that people were increasingly inclined to rely on their own internal search for the universally accessible principles of natural law as their guide toward truth and order. At the same time, this inward quest led to the rejection of the earlier, external (and more communally shared) authority found in the Bible, the teaching office of the Church, and Christian dogma.⁷³

The second shift that developed during this time period actually carried further an earlier trend. In many quarters, since the days of Constantine, theology was increasingly removing God as an active participant in the affairs of humanity. The transcendent nature of God was overwhelming the immanent nature of the God in the paradoxical tug-of-war

⁷⁰ Ibid., 60.

⁷¹ Ibid., 61.

⁷² Ibid., 62.

⁷³ Ibid., 69.

of how humans apprehend the divine character. The age of Enlightenment added another twist to this ongoing movement by redefining God as an increasingly distant being. Creating and ordering the cosmos by the dictates of pure reason, God was now able to stand back and watch it run like clockwork. This theological move, it can be argued, not only distanced God from humanity, but also necessitated a spirit of greater human self-reliance.

Primarily in Immanuel Kant, the individual human person becomes the center of epistemology. Through his views on reason, knowing and morality, the individual is deemed the locus and interpreter of truth.⁷⁴ Stanley Grenz insightfully summarizes the Kantian effect on the emerging spirit of individualism:

Kant's philosophy provided the intellectual foundation for another dimension of modernity as well—the shift to radical individualism...Like his fore-bearers, Kant was confident that through observation, experiment and careful reflection, human beings could discover the truth of the world. That being the case, he believed that the burden of discovering truth is ultimately a private matter, that the knowing process is fundamentally a relationship between the autonomous knowing self and the world waiting to be known through the creative power of the active mind. In the same way, Kant viewed morality as a relationship between the autonomous active agent and the universal law, which the self can know through practical reason. He accorded little significance to any role played by human communities, whether in the form of providing social customs, traditional values, or moral education. Kant's world consists simply of the individual and the universal. His philosophy set forth the self coming to know—and to harness—the universal.⁷⁵

In Kant the spirit of individualism began to take root and flower with a great deal of support from other sociological forces. “The self-centeredness that grew out of certain dimensions of later Enlightenment thinking, reaching its nadir in the radical liberalism of laissez-faire economics, theories of the absolute private property, and the ‘survival of the

⁷⁴ Paul Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Norte Dame: University of Norte Dame Press, 1989), xiv.

⁷⁵ Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 80.

fittest' that developed even before the work of Darwin."⁷⁶ It was a great time of social and philosophic re-orientation that was made even more complex because of the interplay of radical changes in industry, morality, government structures and family make-up. Over the next several centuries the sense of individualism develops even further, especially on American soil where the industrial revolution and quest to conquer the frontier wed with philosophic tendencies to further elevate the independent, autonomous self.

American Individualism

In his book, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah chronicles the major players and expressions of individualism over this era. For instance, in the life of Benjamin Franklin, he sees the archetypal account of the self-made individual—the rags to riches story getting ahead on his own initiative.⁷⁷ Just as important, Franklin ingrained this ideal into the self-consciousness of our national philosophy through his widely read *Poor Richard's Almanac*.⁷⁸ Because of his writings, many have become true believers in the notion “God helps those who help themselves.” Similarly, Rodney Clapp considers the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson as emblematic of the emerging American spirit of autonomy. In Emerson, he sees an individual asserting his *right* to non-conforming, personal apprehension of truth, self-reliance and separation from the external, ancient traditions that had shaped groups.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Starkloff, “The Church as Covenant,” 415.

⁷⁷ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1985), 32, 33.

⁷⁸ Gorman, *Community That is Christian*, 73.

⁷⁹ Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 35, 36.

It is true that the movement toward individualism was not simply a philosophic shift. It was also an attempt to be set free from the shackles of oppression. According to Bellah, “Modern individualism emerged out of the struggle against monarchical and aristocratic authority that seemed arbitrary and oppressive to citizens prepared to assert the right to govern themselves.”⁸⁰ Coupled with the social and geographical mobility that was increasingly common in this culture, these changes led to loosening ties to traditional community.⁸¹ Urbanization and rising affluence also enabled a significant portion of the American populous to become more independent and self-reliant.⁸²

What developed over time, however, was a culture that pushed the assertion of rights, liberty and freedom too far toward individualism rather than individuals-in-community. Harold Bloom describes the outcome of this shift by saying, “In modern political regimes, where rights preceded duties, freedom definitely has primacy over community, family and even nature.”⁸³

Manifestations in Contemporary Culture

Social critics like Bellah and Bloom argue that the American culture has become too radically individualized for its own good.⁸⁴ Others, like Julie Gorman, describe the current social landscape in polemic (and quite possibly overstated terms) when she says:

As Americans we pride ourselves on our ability to take care of ourselves. The Declaration of Independence is more than a political document. It is a personal

⁸⁰ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 142.

⁸¹ Myers, *American Paradox*, 173.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸³ Harold Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1987), 113.

⁸⁴ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 144.

manifesto. From our youth we have been taught such axioms as, “Don’t depend on anyone else,” “If you don’t look out for yourself, nobody will,” “Stand on your own two feet.” We have embraced freedom as the highest virtue. We prize the freedom to move in and out of relationships as our own individualized choices determine... If the relationship does not fulfill us—whether friendship, group, church, marriage, or other—we can opt out.⁸⁵

Furthermore, she notes how “rights language is our native tongue.”⁸⁶ Whereas the concept of “personal rights as we know it did not even have a means of expression in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, or Old English before the Middle Ages, or Japanese before the mid-nineteenth century,” she concludes we are dominated by this concern.⁸⁷ She argues that nowadays the primary grid for moral decision making is neither absolute truth nor virtue—but rather our insistence upon protecting and preserving our individual freedom to choose and right to personal expression.⁸⁸

Such generalizations express something of what is true in American society—although it is hardly the whole picture. The three aforementioned writers (Bellah, Bloom and Gorman) all agree that the typical American still finds this bent toward individualism paradoxical and full of tension. Like Tocqueville, they recognize the positive side of the individualistic, American spirit—it supports democracy by stimulating initiative, creativity and the equal rights of all individuals.⁸⁹ Unfortunately, when taken to its

⁸⁵ Gorman, *Community That is Christian*, 112.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Myers, *American Paradox*, 162.

extreme, it can also foster an environment where a person “thinks of all things in terms of himself and to prefer himself to all.”⁹⁰

Contemporary writer David G. Myers provides a provocative, engaging, and helpful analysis of American culture in his book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*.⁹¹ In it he looks at the social tensions within the larger culture, evaluating what society says it wants with how it acts. He also offers reams of sociological data as a way of interpreting how the activities of people in our culture are actually affecting the quality of life we share. Myers also uses the text to spur on the Church to live up to its calling as a unique people called to follow Jesus Christ.

Myers, in surveying the cultural scene, clearly identifies individualism as a very real threat to public and personal welfare.

The celebration and defense of personal liberty lies at the heart of the old American dream. It drives our free market economy and underlies our respect for the rights of all. In democratic countries that guarantee what Americans consider basic freedoms, people live more happily than in those that don't. Migration patterns testify to this reality. Yet for today's radical individualism, we pay a price: a social recession imperils children, corrodes civility and diminishes happiness. When individualism is taken to an extreme, individuals become its ironic casualties.⁹¹

Myers is not arguing for an end to individual concerns or even the complete reversal of our American individualism. “Extreme collectivism,” he asserts, is no panacea for it can engender “intolerance.”⁹² Unlike several collectivist nations, the United States is not torn apart by ethnic warfare.⁹³ Neither do people generally have to live in fear of rigid

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 7, 8.

⁹² Ibid., 177.

⁹³ Ibid.

social controls or governmental punishment for voicing opposition.⁹⁴ But Myers also rightly notes that just as extreme collectivism comes with costs, so does “extreme individualism.”⁹⁵

The social manifestations of these costs, according to Myers, can be seen in a variety of ways. For instance, in something as seemingly innocuous as our culturally conditioned need to feel good about ourselves, there appears to be a downside. In order to boost children’s sense of acceptance “just as they are” through positive affirmation, Myers describes a counterbalancing side effect.⁹⁶ Interestingly, teenage males who are sexually active at an “inappropriately young age,” “gang leaders, extreme ethno-centrists and terrorists” all tend to have “higher than average self-esteem.”⁹⁷ Similar studies also tend to reveal a tendency toward violence and aggressive behavior by those with high self-esteem when they are criticized or challenged.⁹⁸ At least for Myers, this need for reinforced self-esteem often springs out of our heightened desire for individualism.

Myers also demonstrates through cross-cultural surveys how the American sense of selfhood contrasts sharply with the image of a more collectivist culture like Japan.⁹⁹ Over and over again, the comparisons reveal a far greater spirit of social solidarity and interdependence among people within the Japanese culture than our own. Furthermore, in contrast to a collectivist nation like Singapore, individualistic America demonstrates

⁹⁴ Ibid., 178.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 168.

significantly higher levels of “loneliness, homicide, thefts, eating disorders, and stress related diseases such as heart attacks.”¹⁰⁰

In his assessment of American society, Myers argues that the profound tendency toward individualism among most people leads to paradoxical outcomes. Though “individualistic countries often have a relatively high number of ‘very happy’ people (perhaps 3 in 10)—suicide and murder rates are also very high.”¹⁰¹ As the author notes, “when individualists pursue their own ends and things go well, it can be rewarding... When things go badly, there is less social support.”¹⁰²

He also describes a serious weakening of social connectedness due to the pace, advancing technology and myopic perspective of many residents. “Eye to eye interactions are waning, thanks partly to drive-through food pickups, ATM machines and email.”¹⁰³ Television, he concludes, is another ingredient in the recipe of individualism. Television “exposes them to differing and more individualistic norms... When television comes into remote communities, individualism goes up. Television not only provides a model for individualism, it isolates people.”¹⁰⁴ This is especially true today, he suggests, since 74% of homes now have multiple sets—further splitting families into different, isolated sections of the home.¹⁰⁵ Even within traditional families, many individuals choose isolated activities and entertainment in order to feed their own individual desires.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 178.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Myers suggests other trends reveal something significant about how our tendency toward individualism results in weakened relationships and brings costs to society. For instance from 1973 to 1994, U.S. citizens report a decreased involvement in each of the following activities (shown in percentages).¹⁰⁶

*Served as officer of a club or organization	-42%
*Work for a political party	-42%
*Served on a committee for a local organization	-39%
*Attended a public meeting or town or school affairs	-35%
*Attended a political rally	-34%
*Made a speech	-24%
*Wrote a congressman or senator	-23%
*Signed a petition	-22%
*Held or ran for political office	-16%
*Wrote a letter to the paper	-14%

Add to this his statistics on the decreased level of “communal socializing” from 1975 to 1997, and it appears that people truly are significantly less connected.¹⁰⁷

*Entertaining friends and acquaintances at home	-40%
*Attending “club” meetings	-60%
*Attending dinner parties	-50%
*Families eating dinner together	-16%

Myers argues that these traditionally relational activities are increasingly replaced by more solitary activities like television viewing, video renting, Web surfing, and home computer use. He suggests these activities reflect an “individualism [that] is a centrifugal organizational force, leading people away from commitment and community and toward privatization.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 179.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 288, 289.

The bottom line suggests this increased isolation and diminished social connection also results in greater mistrust, less participation in political activities like voting, the corrosion of family commitments, leading to spiraling numbers of divorce and serial out-of-wedlock relations.¹⁰⁹ It also is exacting a huge personal toll on individuals—seen in the high numbers of depression cases reported.¹¹⁰ Without social support and shared interests, many people find the life they have chosen *for themselves* unfulfilling and isolating.

The Hunger for Community

According to David Popenoe, “The push for self-fulfillment, when carried to the extreme, leads not to personal freedom and happiness but to social breakdown and individual anguish.”¹¹¹ Fortunately, in the face of that sort of extreme, social psychologist Myers sees hopeful signs that we are moving back toward a more balanced perspective in our culture. He argues that as humans, we have a fundamental need and desire to belong:

We Americans are the preeminent individualists. For this we enjoy many benefits, but at what communarians believe is an increasing cost to the social environment. We humans like to feel unique and in control of our lives, but we also are social creatures having a basic need to belong. As individuals, we therefore need to balance our needs for independence and attachment, personal control and community, individuality and social identity, freedom and order. As a society, we struggle to discover balance on that fine line between anarchy and repression.¹¹²

Just as Myers asserted later, Bellah recognized the paradoxical nature of our

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 180-84.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 182.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 52.

¹¹² Ibid., 194.

individualistic culture in his extensive study. His findings revealed

all the classic polarities of American individualism still operating: the deep desire for autonomy and self-reliance combined with an equally deep conviction that life has no meaning unless shared with others in the context of community; a commitment to the equal right to dignity of every individual combined with an effort to justify inequality of reward, which, when extreme, may deprive people of dignity; an insistence that life requires practical effectiveness and “realism” combined with the feeling that compromise is ethically fatal. The inner tension of American individualism adds up to a classic case of ambivalence. We strongly assert the value of our self-reliance and autonomy. We deeply feel the emptiness of a life without sustaining social commitments. Yet we are hesitant to articulate our sense that we need one another as much as we need to stand alone, for fear that if we did we would lose our independence all together. The tensions of our lives would be even greater if we did not, in fact, engage in practices that constantly limit the effects of an isolating individualism, even though we cannot articulate those practices nearly as well as we can the quest for autonomy.¹¹³

Bellah and others like him seem to be suggesting a reformulation of our society if we are to survive. What shape that must take is a serious question for the general American citizenship. It is an even more serious question for the Church if it is to experience a renewal in its communal life and witness in the world.

Overcoming Tensions, Eliminating Barriers

As noted at the outset, both tensions and barriers confront and often confound attempts to create and establish meaningful, transformational community. Whether those tensions exist within the paradoxical theology of Quaker faith or around our ambivalence between living in isolation or in community, the tensions will not simply go away on their own. Neither will the imposing barriers that stand in the way—be they theological, technological or social. Rodney Clapp envisions the present culture as “mass-techno-liberal capitalism,” a conglomeration of significant, pervasive barriers all seemingly poised to keep the members of our culture un-focused, isolated, self-interested and

¹¹³ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 150-51.

largely powerless.¹¹⁴ The barriers and obstacles—whether internal to Friends or external to our environment—are huge.

For there to be a substantive change in the kind of communal relationships that are shared within the Religious Society of Friends, they will only be addressed through intentional, discerning action. It will require a new way of creating and expressing our covenantal life. Gorman phrases a few helpful questions that have application to American Quakers in the present culture: “Can we redeem our precious individuality by transforming it into a radically relational form? Can Christians who have been bombarded with cultural mores extolling American individualism be recreated to value the sanctity of the individual within an over-arching sphere of community?”¹¹⁵

The answer, argued in this project, is “yes.” But it only occurs through the purposeful creation of a parallel culture—an accountable community fashioned in the image of God. Sociologically, Bellah refers to these types of fellowships as “communities of memory.”¹¹⁶

Communities... have a history—in an important sense they are constituted by their past—and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a “community of memory,” one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community.¹¹⁷

In order to create this type of community, however, it will require that Friends consider the shape of their present communities. At this moment, of course, communities

¹¹⁴ Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 189, 190.

¹¹⁵ Gorman, *Community That is Christian*, 14.

¹¹⁶ Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 153.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

do exist—even if they are populated by people who tend to be highly individualistic. What that entails, then, is a reclaiming of relationship as central to spiritual formation and faithfulness. Furthermore, it means an alteration in how the community perceives itself and its role in the world as a redeeming agent in God’s activity. It will even require reconsidering the shape of communal expectations and the kinds of disciplines, practices, and structures that will nurture a common and faithful spirituality.

This sort of reformulation means rejecting “community where the individual takes precedence over the group.”¹¹⁸ Critiquing what is common to most churches today, Baker writes, “The group has become for us a collection of individuals created *by* individuals *for* their own advantage. Rather than seeing the church as a community that offers an alternative culture, its function is often seen as only offering care for individual souls.”¹¹⁹

The argument in this project is that this trend must not continue and will only be overturned by the practice of faith-in-community. An alternative way of life is possible when and if the members of a community agree together to intentionally shape their common life in and around their common experience of Christ. Spiritually, this is the vision outlined in scripture for those who are joined in the unity of Spirit and bound together in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). As Myers notes, there is also a sociological phenomena known as “group amplification,” in which a group of like-minded individuals join together to strengthen one another.¹²⁰ In that setting, not only is the shared story reinforced and retold, a pattern of shared behavior and values is inculcated—potentially,

¹¹⁸ Baker, *Religious No More*, 62.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Myers, *American Paradox*, 287.

one that is even able to withstand the prevailing cultural values that run contrary to the group's self-identity and calling.

In a less than triumphant, but immensely realistic tone, Rodney Clapp summarizes the church's calling:

Church as a way of life is incremental obedience, passion subdued but sustained over years. It is discipleship for the long haul, over a road that is inevitably bumpy and includes detours, switchbacks and delays. It is the persistent if not perfect unlearning of the world system's established separation of the practical and theoretical, the profane and the sacred, the political and the spiritual, the theological and sociological.

Church is a way of life lived not with the expectation that Christians can, through managerial arts or sudden heroism, make the world right. It is instead a way of life lived in confidence that God has, in the kingdom of Christ, begun to set the world right—and that someday Christ will bring his kingdom to its fulfillment. Only then will wars cease, will the lion lie down with the lamb, will death itself die, will children frolic at the mouth of the viper's den. In the meantime, Christians are about surviving and alleviating the worst effects of a world bent on self-destruction, about reminding the world of its true nature as fallen and redeemed creature, about demonstrating to some real degree that there is or can be communal solidarity on God's good earth.¹²¹

How to accomplish this in practice and with respect to the unique, and often paradoxical complexity found within the Religious Society of Friends remains the challenge and becomes the focus of the next chapter.

¹²¹ Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 199, 200.

CHAPTER FIVE

A COVENENTAL MODEL FOR QUAKER COMMUNITY

Introduction

The dilemma that Friends face is really no different than the one faced by every Christian tradition: How does a community of faith live in and live out the transforming power of the Gospel?

It has been demonstrated in this dissertation that through the biblical narrative and throughout the Christian age, God has been calling and creating the church to live as a parallel culture—as light in a dark world. Especially in its origins, the Religious Society of Friends accepted that challenge with zeal and a profound awareness that as the Children of Light they had been drawn into a Covenant of Light through Jesus Christ.

In the radical focus upon the inward availability and sole authority of Christ, however, tension points arose. Questions and controversies about the practical implications of such a faith developed, especially in the context of community. As organizational structures were put into place, they brought about awareness that Friends must walk an often paradoxical and tension-filled line between radical, subjective individualism and hierarchical, external authority. Since neither of those polarities fit their understanding or experience of the Divine Life, however, another way must be available.

In America, in particular, Friends face the added burden of dwelling in an excessively individualist culture. Individualism is the air we breathe, and it has affected the spirituality and witness of the Quakers across the theological spectrum. This independent spirit creates one more barrier to the already difficult task of shaping a communal structure, at least one that refuses to simply succumb to the impulses of an isolated, individualist faith perspective. At the same time, the unique Friends' perspective honors individuality and each person's ability to know and obey Christ's leading. Therefore, it becomes a challenge to avoid over-compensation against the spirit of individualism, that a legalistic or externally imposed spirituality supplants a vital and active life of dependence upon the leading of Christ.

The perspective offered in this study is to introduce a mutually agreed upon, covenantal arrangement established within a local Friends' church or meeting. Rooted in the historic experience of Friends and moored to their (generally speaking) commonly held understanding of being called into a Covenant of Light, this model attempts to flesh out some basic parameters to guide and guard the shape of life in a local setting. Through the use of various agreed upon practices and structures, this covenant aims to give enough coherent order to the shared life in community so as to encourage its intimate knowledge and faithful obedience to Jesus Christ.

The covenantal model that follows requires several disclaimers. First, this is not an attempt to spell out a path for justification before God. In the spirit of the Protestant tradition, I affirm that salvation is by grace alone. A person's only response to the overwhelming divine initiative is faith: a trusting acceptance of God's profound love and a willingness to walk in obedience with the God who calls us his own. Therefore, this is

no “plan for salvation,” only a faith-filled response to being already loved and called into the family of God.

Second, neither is it assumed that this model can serve as a “one-size-fits-all” formula or program for any community. Though specifically crafted for at least the evangelical segment of Friends, it is recognized that there is still a significant amount of diversity in that subset. At its best, the model ought to be seen as a starting place. View it as an attempt to organize some of the building blocks of community in such a way that it will free and release people to know God better, love one another more faithfully, and minister in the world more boldly.

From my own experience, Friends (and other groups) vary for many reasons. Geography, size, theological persuasion, and congregational history all play a role in a community’s self-perception. So, too, does the unique make up of its individuals and the expressed calling by God for that collection of people. All of these ought to be taken into account in any discernment process about how to apply a covenantal agreement within a group.

Third, this model is neither comprehensive nor necessarily intended to be applied in total. Certain groups might be led to agree about communal practices that are not mentioned here. The life of faith, in my experience, is an adventure, an experiment in the laboratory of life. Were a community to agree together to listen for the leading of Christ and work together around the issue of communal covenant and discipline, it is certain God would suggest some ideas more wildly creative, comforting and disturbing than anything found here. This, it is clear, is not the last word on covenant. That belongs to Christ.

It is also not assumed that each of these suggestions needs to be put into practice for the covenantal model to have benefit. The practice of any disciplines can be mixed and matched. There are seasons in an individual's life where a particular spiritual practice—i.e. fasting, journaling, solitude—may be wonderfully freeing and redemptive. At other times that same discipline may not. Similarly, there are unique spiritual personalities—differences in the way we experience and attend to God—that are best fostered through different avenues. Certain disciplines may usher us into the presence of God. Others may leave us cold. As this is true for individuals, there is also a sense that it may well be true for communities.

This is not to suggest that a communal discipline is a willy-nilly affair, easily discarded if a group becomes bored or restless. Unfortunately, our lack of perseverance in our disciplines is often a primary reason why we find them devoid of meaning. What is being suggested instead is the principle of discernment and attendance upon Christ. In considering a shared communal covenant it is important to assess how it fits with the particular needs of the group at a particular time in its life. This is preliminary work that needs to be accomplished within the context of each unique congregation before it determines the precise shape of its covenantal agreement.

Finally, the disclaimer needs to be made that this is a dangerous undertaking. Many abuses lie just below the surface of any “rule of discipline” or covenant, even when it is undertaken for all the right reasons. William Braithwaite, in critiquing some of the organizational changes implemented by Friends said, “herein...lay the danger of this strong emphasis on rules of discipline. The teaching of Jesus was a profound criticism of this legalism. With him the inward disposition, the filial relation to the Father, was the

essential thing, and, as it was maintained, would express itself in right conduct.”¹ More recently, Richard Foster addresses a similar concern in his book *Celebration of Discipline*,

By themselves Spiritual Disciplines can do nothing; they can only get us to the place where something can be done. They are God’s means of grace... They are intended for our good. They are meant to bring the abundance of God into our lives. It is possible, however, to turn them into another set of soul-killing laws. Law-bound Disciplines breathe death... When the disciplines degenerate into law, they are used to manipulate and control people. We take explicit commands and use them to imprison others... If we are to progress in the spiritual walk so that the Disciplines are a blessing and not a curse, we must come to the place where we lay down the everlasting burden of needing to manage others. That need more than any single thing will lead us to turn the Spiritual Disciplines into laws.²

Clearly, there is a danger present in any model based on spiritual discipline—especially a communal one. It can also be argued, however, that there is just as real a danger in doing nothing. Quite possibly our refusal and/or fear of discipline and order is potentially just as faithless and death-dealing as is our tendency toward legalism. Is it possible, then, to create a model that refuses to impose uniformity but is courageous enough to articulate shared principles and practices in the hope of nurturing a friendly, supportive, and accountable environment where they can be faithfully lived?

If a communal covenant has any hope of being life-giving instead of death-dealing, it must issue from the community’s shared concern for faithfulness. This means that the shape of the covenant will come, not from hierarchical imposition, but through the community agreeing together under the leadership of the Spirit to order itself in a way that makes gospel living possible. In this way, it becomes an intentional act of submission

¹ William C. Braithwaite, *The Second Period of Quakerism* (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd., 1919), 521.

² Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978), 6-8.

to Christ and one another done in response to the love of God and a calling to *be the ongoing visible expression of Christ* in the world.

For Friends, at least historically, this understanding has been shaped by the knowledge that we are *already in covenant* with God through Jesus Christ. Because we are joined with him through faith, we are participants in the divine life that is continually seeking to express itself through us in the context of human history. Whatever practical, shared arrangements are made within the ordered life of the human community ought to simply be an expression of that greater, divine reality already operating within. Furthermore, for such a covenant to be applicable, it must be able to touch the lives of ordinary people—those committed to Christ who exercise their faith and ministry in the workaday world of the marketplace, neighborhood, and home. These were the venues where the original Covenant of Light was lived and had its most transforming effect.³ It is where we must engage in the present, as well.

Underlying Assumptions

Patricia Loring writes, “The quality of our life as a spiritual community depends upon the degree to which we are inwardly reaching, stretching toward, and re-orienting our personal and corporate being toward a deeper sense of unity in God.”⁴ This, in brief summary, is the goal of the covenantal model.

It is not being argued that this is a static or once-and-for-all step. Our apprehension of God is too limited and the circumstances in which we live are too unsettled to ever reach a place of finality in our discipleship. Living in community requires ongoing

³ Douglas Gwyn, *The Covenant Crucified: Quakers and the Rise of Capitalism* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill Publications, 1995), 106.

⁴ Patricia Loring, *Listening Spirituality: Volume II* (Washington Grove: Openings Press, 1999), 30.

reflection, discernment and intentionality. For this reason what is being presented as a covenantal model is best reviewed annually. In this way, the meeting or church has both the opportunity and responsibility to reconsider and further clarify its sense of mutual covenant. Circumstances may change. Greater clarity may emerge regarding what it means to be in relationship with Jesus Christ and one another. The individual and corporate needs of the people may have changed sufficiently so that a reformulization of the covenant might be in order.

It needs to be noted that the covenant described here is a voluntary enterprise. Meetings and churches develop and apply it as they see fit. At the same time, the notion of a shared covenant within a community raises the question of “to whom does it apply?” Is it for those in active membership? Could it be a process distinct from membership, possibly an annual covenant that each person agrees or declines to participate in each year? And what about newcomers and seekers? How do they fit (or not) within the parameters and agreements shared by the larger community?

These are fairly essential questions that need to be worked out prior to implementing any sort of program. My own bias is to create a covenant that is clearly communicated and articulated within the fellowship. It covers everyone, in a sense, because it is the expressed and lived faith of the community. Too often, in too many Friends churches and meetings, there has been a reluctance to clearly articulate what it means to be a Quaker follower of Jesus Christ. This tendency has been exacerbated in recent years by the thought that spiritual seekers are not interested in denominational approaches to Christianity. Furthermore, though it seems to be on the way out, it was often commonly assumed that seekers would be threatened or put off by a church calling for high levels of

commitment. If, however, the community views itself as a parallel culture, it has a responsibility—not only to its membership but also to those who visit—to serve as an honest host, by clearly defining itself, its sense of calling and mission.

It is also true, however, that it takes a voluntary, mutual act of submission to live in Quaker community. It should not be imposed upon those who are not willing, ready or interested. Therefore, it makes sense that the covenantal life moves from an implicit understanding about who the community is and how it functions to an explicit commitment at the point of membership in the fellowship. Non-members are encouraged to live in harmony with the rest of the members of the meeting/church for as long as they wish to remain attached to the group. They are encouraged to sojourn, to seek and in some cases heal from other unhelpful or abusive church communities. Opportunities for worship, fellowship, service and ministry are open and available to those interested. And along the way, these people are encouraged to formalize their connection to the church or meeting by entering the covenant community through active membership.

This is a difficult point in the process. What must be avoided is either a dual-ethic (a higher morality/discipleship for members) or a first-class ranking (special status for those in membership). The hope is not to draw a line between those who are in and those who are out of the covenant. Instead, it is to respect the mutuality and seriousness of the decision to be a covenantal member and to create an intentional, determinative process by which people come to share in communal life. Furthermore, this approach assumes that calling people to a point of intentionally identifying themselves with a particular community has its own drawing power and reward. For those seeking a spiritual home, the opportunity for membership signifies they have found that place.

Developing a Covenant Model

What follows are some specific suggestions for creating a covenant aimed at fostering a gospel community, one that seeks to live as a parallel culture in the world. I include further discussion to clarify connected issues and offer appendices for practical use at the end of document. Also included is a sample covenant adapted for the pseudo-church, Newton Friends, in the first chapter. This section also concludes with a brief, final word.

Articulating and Building a Sense of Shared Identity

A shared life in community begins with self-understanding. Knowing who we *are called to be* is a necessary prerequisite to knowing *what we are called to do*. Unfortunately, in many circles, the church gives inordinate attention to the latter without adequately considering the former. Because Friends have been resolutely non-creedal during their history, the closest approximation to a stated sense of shared life has traditionally been the *Faith and Practice* of each Yearly Meeting. Better than a dogmatic list of ideas about God, the *Faith and Practice*, in its best form, describes the collective experience of God in history and how that experience orders common life in the present. Encouraging individuals and involving groups in the exploration of Friends *Faith and Practice* is a good way to begin developing a common language and vision. It also serves as a useful way of explaining why the polity of the church or meeting is structured as it is.

In more recent history, churches, meetings and similar organizations have further delineated their self-identity and calling through a list of shared values (Friends have historically called these testimonies—to be described in greater detail in a later section),

vision and mission statements. The process of working through to unity around these issues can be energizing, clarifying and helpful in gaining a sense of unity and direction. Excellent resources exist for walking through the process of determining these overarching, communal themes. Robert Quinn's *Deep Change* provides wonderful considerations for doing more than superficial, organizational change. Similarly, John Kotter's *Leading Change* outlines a helpful process for insuring that sufficient care is given to all of the elements of organizational direction and transformation. Finally, a host of Christian and secular resources are available for learning to walk through the process of creating mission and vision statements for an organization. Carried out in a healthy and thorough way, the process of clarifying the organization's values, vision and mission can help keep it directed and united. A sample document, titled "Testimonies, Vision and Mission of Newton Friends" is included as Appendix A.

The argument for engaging this kind of process is to clarify the community's sense of identity and calling in Christ. In our history, Friends have had a unique perspective on the faith life. No one—not the members of the community or the world that surrounds—is served by an unstated, unknown, or insufficiently understood identity.

Reclaiming Membership as a Meaningful, Two-Way Covenantal Reality

Official membership among many Friends' groups is in decline. Some of this may be due to the spirit of the age. Postmoderns, it is often suggested, are not typically joiners. Conventional wisdom says this group does not value official connections to organizations or groups. It is also true that a significant portion of people simply do not find official membership either meaningful or particularly helpful in a real way. They fail to see the significance of it, especially among a denomination that otherwise forgoes symbolism. If

official membership is really only symbolic of our true membership in the Body of Christ, why have it?

Historically, the earliest Friends did not have official membership. If one was involved in the group and faithful to the Truth, they were understood to be “in” the covenant. Even during this time, Friends still had an informal structure that “recorded” ministers, disciplined people and provided support for those in need. Later, however, as persecution and imprisonment became an increasing concern, the leadership among Friends did construct an official membership as a way to know who should receive aid and how to avoid abuses in their system of support.

Increasingly, membership began to take on further implications. It offered a way of expressing covenantal commitment, encouraging mutual accountability and support, as well as providing a natural avenue for discussing Friends’ faith and encouraging evangelism and discipleship. In more recent times, membership determined who might serve in various capacities in the church or meeting. Elders or members of the Ministry and Oversight Committee, for instance, must generally be members of a local group. Furthermore, official membership has provided protection against litigation in cases of church discipline.

Among evangelical Friends, official membership is often downplayed. In some circles it is seen as a barrier to church growth because discussions about membership are the forum where “those embarrassing distinctives”—peacemaking, women in ministry, our view of the ordinances—arise. Convinced these are hindrances to outreach, too many Friends churches hide these away until inquisitive individuals can no longer avoid them.

The resulting effect, along with undermining the distinctive character of Quaker faith, is the way it downplays membership as a vital avenue for discipleship.

Among unprogrammed Friends, Loring writes,

In this era of rampant individualism, there are many people who feel either that there is no need for formal membership or that membership involves too much sacrifice of personal autonomy or identity. Some people reject membership with self-satisfaction in the fact they are “free spirits”... This stance shows no sense that the ground of Quaker community is God-given gathering together.⁵

She also goes on to describe how, too often, people who do come to the membership process often find it a “rubber stamp approval” rather than a real process of discerning how and if this step ought to be taken.⁶ Many people, it seems, see participation in a Quaker community as a serious commitment to a particular way of life. When the meeting fails to understand it in this light, it creates confusion and disappointment.

If possible, membership must be re-cast as an expression of the covenantal reality that is already operative among the people who are being gathered together in Jesus Christ. In its best sense, membership is a vehicle for inclusion rather than exclusion. It is a two-way point of gathering—in which the individual embraces the community as her own and the community embraces the individual as its own. There is a sense that the two somehow fit together and are joined together in a common life. As Howard Brinton writes, “the test of membership is compatibility with the meeting community. Members...join because they desire to fit into the pattern of behavior peculiar to the meeting and find themselves able to do so... Anyone who can become so integrated with

⁵ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

a meeting that he helps the whole and the whole helps him is qualified to become a member.”⁷

A suggested part of covenantal community, then, is making membership an intentional, discernment process that clarifies the nature of the community for the prospective member, helps both parties come to clarity about the “fit” of the relationship, and is clear and upfront about the two-way responsibilities between the meeting/church and the individual. An example of such a membership process is found in Appendix B.

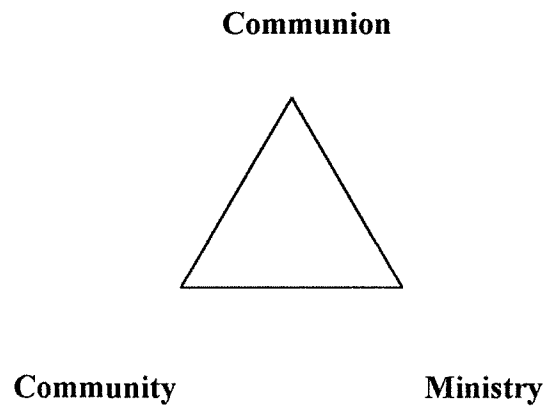
Defining the Elements of the Communal Covenant

It cannot be emphasized enough that the goal of a mutually-discerned, jointly-owned covenantal agreement is faithfulness to God. It is about creating an environment where a gathering of disciples is freed to love, know and follow Jesus Christ with abandon.

It has already been stated that one of the great cautions is the concern for legalism and the imposition of spiritual “laws” upon others. Another very real dilemma is how to make a covenant accessible for *regular people*—for men, women, and children who live ordinary lives in the world—as opposed to a monastic community tucked away on a mountain top or in a desert region. How to do all of this and not make it unnecessarily onerous is a stiff challenge, indeed.

In my estimation the spiritual life can be encapsulated (imperfectly, to be sure) in three general movements or categories. They are not exclusive of one another but rather reinforce the need for each other in daily practice of our lives. I would describe these movements as **communion, community and ministry**.

⁷ Howard H. Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years* (Wallingford, PN: Pendle Hill Publications, 1997), 127.



Communion reflects our personal and corporate experience of intimacy with Christ. It occurs through the disciplined practice of personal piety and in the context of gathered worship. Communion, used in this context, is the ongoing life of knowing, abiding in and obeying the Living Christ. Furthermore, at least in the understanding of Friends, it is ultimately a way of living in which we walk in faith-union with Christ each and every moment of our lives.

Such intimacy with God drives us into relationship with others—for the love we experience with God is always shared with others. Specifically, if we are to take Jesus at his word, this love is to be expressed among the members of his Body as the most visible and reliable sign that we are, indeed, his disciples (John 13:35). Therefore, the local fellowship becomes the training ground and laboratory for practicing the love of God. This is the forum in which most deeply experience true **community**. Of course, life in spiritual community is beyond our human capability. Left to our own, limited resources we are not capable of loving one another as Christ has loved us. This reality, when recognized, only serves to increase our dependence upon Christ and drives us immediately back into deeper communion with him.

In the same manner, the love of God and the kindling nature of fellowship send us out into a world that is full of need. This is the primary ground for **ministry**, although a great deal of service also occurs in the fellowship of believers. We are compelled by the love of God to bear witness to the grace and truth we have found in Christ and to declare word of his reconciliation to a lost and broken world. We are to be instruments of peace and justice, healing and hope. By the content and character of our lives, we are meant to reflect something of the glory and wonder of our God. Since our fellowship gathering serves as a base of operation, it becomes an eventual place of hospitality and welcome to those who respond to the Good News. These sorties into the world demand a great deal of those in ministry and so once more they return, by necessity, to the warm fellowship of the brothers and sisters and into communion with the God who loves and calls them to serve.

Again, this triad of communion, community and ministry reflects in simple form the complex nature of our life with Christ and the goal of fellowship. Our faithfulness in each of these areas goes a long way toward creating the kind of parallel culture that reflects and makes real the presence of Christ operative in the world.

With this understanding in mind, the primary elements of this communal covenant will reflect these concerns in order to insure that a community is attending to each in appropriate measure. A sample covenant, designed for “Newton Friends”, follows on the next page.

A Sample Covenant: Newton Friends Community Covenant

The following set of covenant commitments is aimed at helping to form us into the people God desires. These commitments are not the goal of our life in God but are simply meant to move us individually and collectively toward unity in Christ. This covenant is not intended to exclude or make any false distinctions in “levels of spirituality.” Instead, it is our hope that this will serve as a vehicle for inclusion. Through it we hope to encourage everyone toward deep spiritual *communion*, authentic Christian *community*, and joyful, God-directed *ministry* in the world (See “Testimonies, Vision and Mission of Newton Friends”—appendix A). As members of Newton Friends Church, we agree together to the following:

Communion

*To the regular practice of spiritual discipline(s) that will enhance our growth, understanding and experience of Christ. Such disciplines include prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, etc. Each member is encouraged to determine his or her own “rule of faith” (regular spiritual practices) and to share that personal plan with accountability partners and others in the Meeting. Support is available from the pastoral team and elders for those desiring assistance in this area (see Query 1).

*To make corporate worship a priority in our weekly schedules by gathering as often as is possible. Furthermore we agree to prayerfully prepare ourselves ahead of time for worship and to be open to the Presence of Christ as we gather. If led by the Holy Spirit to minister in open worship, we will do so faithfully (See Query 2).

*To give careful attention to listening to God’s Spirit and one another in the community in matters of church business. Members agree to participate in the

organizational and decision-making life of our Body as regularly as possible and in a way that reflects disciplined, spiritual sensitivity and a respect for others (See Query 5 and 6).

*To carefully cultivate a prayerful, inward attentiveness to God in our normal, daily activities so that, as much as it depends upon us, we will walk in the Light we are given (See Query 3, 4, 12, 14, 17, 18, 20).

Community

*To participate in a regular accountable, spiritual relationship. Small groups and spiritual friendships are designed to help facilitate this kind of shared life in community. The focus of these groups will be on spiritual formation, developing mutually supportive friendships and fostering a concern for ministry. Ideally, participants would meet close to weekly, however, this may not be possible in every circumstance. The pastoral team will help to arrange groups and provide support as needed (See Query 2, 3, 6).

*To care for each other's physical, spiritual, emotional and social needs, as one is able and when needs arise. We commit to "bear one another's burdens," as commanded in the scripture (Galatians 6:2). (See Query 7).

*To agree to participate in a biblical/Spirit-led process of conflict resolution should relationship problems occur, business or financial issues develop between members of the meeting, or conflicts arise over matters in the church. This process is under the care of the elders and is governed by policies approved by the Church.

*To agree to a "Meeting for Clearness" with the pastors and elders should one feel either called away or potentially released from their commitment to this Body.

Just as entrance into the community (membership) happens through a process of corporate discernment, we believe departure should as well. This process allows us a way to come to unity on the matter and to join in the blessing of a new adventure or calling. This process is also established to insure that relationships are maintained in peace, mutual support, and good order.

Ministry

*To participate in a discernment process that attempts to identify one's gifts, sense of calling or particular concerns for ministry when one covenants in membership or as might be desired again at a later date. (See Appendix C—"Newton Friends Gifts, Calling and Concern Discernment Worksheet" for a brief outline).

*To being involved in a recognized ministry either in the Newton Friends community or out in our surrounding world. This ministry may include one's primary vocational work or a volunteer service opportunity. As a community of ministers, we feel that we should each know and encourage one another in the use of our gifts and faithful pursuit of our calling (See Query 3).

*To commit to an annual meeting with a member of the pastoral team or elders to report on your ministry over the past year and to consider plans/goals/changes for the next. This will also be a time to consider if there are ways the congregation can better support and release people in their particular ministries, encourage a greater spirit of community and offer support in the process of spiritual growth (See Appendix D—"Communion, Community and Ministry Queries" for a list of questions to be used with each member).

*To contribute financially to the work and witness of Newton Friends. Each of us is encouraged to give regular, prayerful consideration to the stewardship of all resources (wealth, possession, time, energy, etc.) and learn to use them as God leads—both in relationship to Newton Friends and beyond. As part of this community, every member is encouraged to give generously a regular portion of his or her income to our common work and witness (See Query 4 and 7).

The Meeting's Covenant to its individual members:

This covenantal agreement is a reciprocal exchange. As a participant in this effort to encourage deep spiritual *communion*, authentic Christian *community*, and joyful, God-directed *ministry* in the world, the community of Newton Friends covenants to the following:

*To provide a spiritually nurturing community and home base for ministry.

Toward this end, groups will be arranged for community and spiritual growth and a Kendal Fund will be established to help facilitate ministry as much and as often as we are able (See Appendix E—“Kendal Fund” for a brief description of this idea).

*To help provide for the spiritual, physical, social and emotional needs of you and your family. Toward this end, an emergency fund is established and administered by the pastoral team, under the care of the elders. Money is provided, as a gift, to individuals and families in need, under the terms of our emergency fund policy. Gifts may be repaid if one so chooses but this is not a requirement to receive assistance. Requests for aid should be communicated to a member of the pastoral team.

*To provide you with opportunities for growth, leadership within the meeting, and ministry.

*To encourage your accountability to Christ and this community of faith.

*To listen to your concerns and sense of leading for our Body.

*To gather the community annually to read, reflect and respond to a set of queries. These thought-provoking questions are intended to help shape our life as a Quaker fellowship and guide our sense of ministry in the world. Together, we will consider them and discuss how/if they are calling us toward anything new or different in our life together (See Appendix F—"The Queries"). We will do this in a special, called meeting once a year in which the queries will be read and considered in an atmosphere of worship. Responses to the queries will be recorded and published (in our newsletter) to help us further reflect on what God may be saying through this process.

It is recognized that matters of health, life transition, unexpected crises and many other issues will affect our ability to live in covenant community. Grace and compassion, not rigidity and legalism, will be the lens through which we consider this mutual agreement. Our desire in covenant is to free us for life and service in the Kingdom of God, not to weigh us down with unnecessary burdens.

Each summer we will task the elders with the job of reviewing our covenant within the community of Newton Friends. They will consider how it continues to serve its stated purpose. They will bring an annual report of their deliberations to a designated Monthly Meeting. Any adjustments and revisions will be considered and implemented as discerned by the Body.

Explanatory Comments

The above, explicit agreement requires several comments. First, it should be noted that a great deal of individual latitude and flexibility is granted. Individuals are encouraged to develop their own “rule of faith” rather than imposing a common rule on all the members. As opposed to some communities—the Church of Savior in Washington D.C., for example—a minimum level of giving is not required. This measure of individual discernment and variability is in keeping with the manner of Friends and reflects a larger goal of encouraging unity in faithfulness, instead of uniformity.

Secondly, the use of the selected queries is another intentional Friends practice that arose out of a desire to attend to the active, present and direct leadership of Christ. Instead of reciting doctrines or standards of behavior that members were bound to accept, Friends devised a system of reading queries in a spirit of reflective worship. Through those times of individual and corporate self-examination, the questions were posed to help the meeting consider the state of its own behavior. It also created sufficient space for God to speak into the hearts of those who were listening.

According to Howard Brinton, “The Queries were a kind of group confessional by which every individual and every Meeting was able at regular intervals of a year or less to check actual conduct against an ideal standard of behavior.”⁸ Interestingly, the written responses of each Monthly Meeting were passed on to Quarterly Meeting and then on to Yearly Meeting as a way of creating a broader circle of support, accountability, and nurture toward a shared practice.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁹ Ibid.

Third, it is true that a covenant of this sort requires a high level of participation in order to work well. It could be similarly argued that much of Friends practice—i.e., form of decision-making, unprogrammed worship, vision of ministry—hinges on an actively engaged, thoroughly committed group of participants. Though this may strike an outsider as too idealistic to work, this vision of a congregational life in which each member shares in the ownership, direction and discernment of leading is at the heart of Friends' polity. This covenantal agreement attempts to reflect this understanding.

Fourth, the covenant calls for participation in some smaller circle of fellowship. Whether the church or meeting numbers 25 or 2500, there must be some method for developing small group relationships. Numerous examples and programs abound for this type of arrangement and they can vary in focus and form.

Among evangelical Friends, small group Bible studies are quite popular. In some circles, accountability groups offer prayer support and a forum for discussing questions and struggles in the life of faith. Richard Foster's *Renovare*' ministry provides useful resources for learning and nurturing spiritual disciplines and in practicing a vision of holistic Christianity. Among more liberal Friends, the use of "Friendly 8's" offer a gathering space for members of the meeting to get to know each other, focus on the pursuit of God, and practice mutual support and ministry.¹⁰

Each of these examples is simply an intentional effort to shape a small group encounter in which "church" is able to happen. For most people, Sunday/First Day is a helpful time to gather for worship. What does not happen there, however, are the more foundational elements of *koinonia*, as expressed in the New Testament. Only as people

¹⁰ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 244.

gather in more intimate venues is there opportunity for real mutual sharing: appropriate vulnerability, correction, accountability, questioning, aid and comfort, and prayer.

Making it an “expectation” as an aspect of participation in the larger community is just a way of encouraging the church to do what it already ought to be doing.

Fifth, a great emphasis is placed on ministry in this covenantal agreement. Friends understood from their origins that every believer was a priest and minister for Jesus Christ. As Elton Trueblood often remarked, “the early Christian ideal [was] the complete abolition of the laity—with all Christians as recruits in a common cause.”¹¹

It is my experience that most Friends desire to be involved in ministry. It is not enough to attend religious services or practice spiritual disciplines. Part of the lure of Quakerism is its longstanding insistence that God sends men, women, even children, out into the world in active service. Sometimes this ministry is easily identifiable: pastor, evangelist, missionary, relief worker, peacemaker, or community organizer. Other times, it is less obvious but equally valuable—to God, to the health and stability of the meeting/church and to the well being of the world.

The covenantal emphasis on participation in ministry is, in some sense, a way of recapturing and reinforcing that core value of shared ministry. Whether it comes through a better process of discerning gifts or naming people’s callings, or explicitly recognizing people’s “ordinary” work and service in the marketplace, it is important that ministry be highlighted among Friends.

The “Kendal Fund” named after an early Friends fund by the same name is offered as a way of investing in this vision of a community of ministers. Originally, the Kendal

¹¹ Elton Trueblood, *Signs of Hope in a Century of Despair* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), 77.

Fund was set up to support traveling ministers and their families.¹² It was a way for the community to “release” people for ministry. In the present, especially in the pastoral system, Friends regularly free these ministers—either completely or through a bi-vocational arrangement—to do the work of pastoral ministry. Evangelical Friends, at least, have often done less well at continuing to release other, non-pastoral ministers for service.

Such service might include short-term mission trips, Christian Peacemaker Team assignments, or participation in a relief program or work camp. A fund like this might also be used, however, on a more local level to fund a specific program or ministry or to release a person or small group for a short duration. Such supported efforts might include outreach programs, ministries to migrant workers or children, or to engage in a traveling ministry among Friends on weekends. The options are many but would be focused around what God might be calling individuals in the meeting to do to meet specific needs or to address specific issues. What is critical, however, is a faith community with enough vision to designate funds to cultivate and support a return to this type of ministry.

Finally, this agreement attempts to take the notion of covenant seriously. If it is assumed that *we are already in a covenant with one another by virtue of our relationship with Christ* rather than *agreeing to be in covenant between ourselves*, this changes the way we approach our relationships in community. Making the distinction clearer Lloyd Wilson suggests:

The presence of a covenant relationship exerts a profound influence over the way we deal with disappointment and pain in our relationships within the community. The individual whose commitment to the community is based on a sense that

¹² Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1973), 474.

these community members are somehow special human beings, who have the right concerns and values and live the right lives, will find great difficulty when members of the community fail to live up to these standards and expectations. Being human, we all fail repeatedly to live up to our own standards and expectations, and are bound to disappoint other people on occasion. If one's commitment to a community is a human commitment to the individuals in it, because they are the right people in some way, the community will be shattered when the individuals fail to live up to their ideals.

In contrast, the individual whose commitment is based on an acceptance of a covenant relationship with God has a different reaction to those inevitable pains and disappointments. The covenant relationship says we are given in relationship to each other precisely in order to help one another through these painful times, into a fuller relationship with God and one another. What is a centrifugal force in one case is a bonding experience among a covenant people... It is precisely the imperfect, human nature of the people in a covenant community that gives it the opportunity to witness to the redeeming love of Christ, through the redeeming love we have for one another in Christ.¹³

This important distinction cannot be emphasized enough. In this form of covenantal fellowship, it serves as the backbone of the community and the interpretive grid in which agreements around entering and exiting the community, caring for emotional and physical needs and conflict resolution are made and kept. Furthermore, it reminds and keeps the community focused on its primary calling to exist as the Body of Christ.

Any of us who have been involved in the church, however, know it is hard work to be in relationship. Even in the most superficial fellowships, imperfect people hurt, disappoint and offend one another. This may even be more likely to occur in a fellowship (of equally imperfect individuals) that intentionally presses people together and calls them to trust and rely on each other.

But in an era of church hopping, minimal commitment levels and consumer mentality, this kind of covenantal understanding needs to regain a foothold in the common life of the church. Early Friends understood and experienced this kind of

¹³ Lloyd Lee Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order* (Burnsville: Celo Valley Books, 1993), 69.

fellowship to a high degree. It came out in their willingness to care for each other, correct each other, and even disown one another when it appeared necessary. Creating a covenant that asks people to resolve their conflicts peaceably and to not leave the meeting without a process of discernment is a small step toward the earlier ideal.

The Use of Testimonies to Create a Hedge of Identity and Witness

Beyond the explicit agreements that might be shared within the member of the church or meeting, there are also other practices that are in keeping with the faith of Friends that deserve consideration. As it has been previously stated, Quakers have a tradition of creating a “hedge” around themselves, primarily to retain their distinctive way of life. The hedge consisted of a number of testimonies “that overtly distinguished Quakers from other people.”¹⁴ The testimonies included plain speech, plain dress, simple living and rigorous truth telling.¹⁵

It is also true, however, that these hedge practices and testimonies were developed and maintained in order to “protect those inside [the faith community] from the temptations of the wider world, on the assumption that those temptations are too strong to resist day after day for a lifetime.”¹⁶

In its best sense, the testimonies of early Quakers helped to create a demarcation, a clear boundary or hedge to help members avoid activities and choices that would not lead to either their own renewal or the development of the faithful, spiritual community. At its worst, this hedge became a legalism—in retrospect, misguided rules that drained life and

¹⁴ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 227.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Wilson, *Essays on the Quaker Vision of Gospel Order*, 24.

vitality from the community. For example, Friends excluded certain forms of music, literature and art, because they were seen as vain and empty pastimes.

The principle of creating intentional boundaries, however, is not without merit despite earlier abuses and misguided attempts. Unfortunately, it is a very unpopular concept today, if it is even considered at all. In the twentieth century, Loring concludes, “Quakers have all but abandoned the ‘hedge’ of plainness that outwardly distinguished them from the world.”¹⁷ In most ways, Friends have blended rather easily into the broader culture. Coupled with our individualistic spirit and uneasiness with outward forms, “we are reluctant to establish and uphold corporate standards of living lest they infringe on individual freedom.”¹⁸

The suggestion in this project is not to return to “theeing one another,” or adopting a uniform dress code, or insisting the Friends only marry Friends, or even that we determine that members ought to “affirm” rather than “swear” in courts of law. Instead, I would simply raise the question of whether or not it might be appropriate to consider adopting certain expectations among our membership—*because they reflect our understanding and commitment to God’s will.*

These hedge practices and testimonies might not need to be written into the explicit membership agreement, as in the example provided earlier. Where these might better show up is in the regular practice and expectations that guide and guard much of any community’s behavior. For instance, most evangelical churches would expect members not to engage in adulterous relationships. Undoubtedly, this topic would even be openly

¹⁷ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 227.

¹⁸ Sandra L. Cronk, *Gospel Order: A Quaker Understanding of Faithful Church Community* (Wallingford: Pendle Hill, 1991), 21.

addressed as a matter of preaching and as an ethical standard for Christian behavior. This moral expectation might not be stated explicitly in any sort of church literature or in a membership agreement. But, it might be argued that it is a biblical/Christian standard of behavior that would be addressed by the church if a member chose to engage in this type of activity.

Within the broader stream of Christianity, Friends have carried certain concerns that are peculiar to them—testimonies, they are called that distinguish them, in some sense, from other branches of Christian faith. In most literature, there is general agreement that the main social testimonies can be grouped under four headings—harmony, community, equality and simplicity.¹⁹ It was out of a concern for these specific testimonies that several of the hedge practices and behaviors found their origin as Quakers sought to witness the truth of God's reign over creation. They were also part of the Quaker ethos that helped to set them apart as a distinguishable people—even in the larger Christian context.

In his book, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs*, Wilmer Cooper explores the nature and breadth of Friends testimonies more fully. "Friends testimonies are an outward expression of inward spiritual leadings and discernments of truth and the will of God. They constitute the moral and ethical fruit of the inward life of the Spirit."²⁰ Dividing Quaker testimonies into two spheres—religious and social—Cooper suggests

¹⁹ Brinton, *Friends for 300 Years*, 119.

²⁰ Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith: An Historical Study of Quaker Beliefs* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1990), 191.

there are “some...in our history that have been normative in Friends faith and practice.”²¹

By “normative” I mean that these testimonies can be objectively discerned and articulated because they have been so widely held and practiced for more than three hundred years that they have become a way of life for Friends and are often spoken of as “Friends principles.” Of course the concept of normative Quakerism suggests an ethical note—namely, the sense of “ought” about believing and practicing these Quaker testimonies. But normative also suggests some latitude for those whose inward leadings of the Spirit do not bring them to the same place at the same time, for while normative expresses a sense of “oughtness,” it is also open to God’s continuing revelation through new and fresh leadings of the Holy Spirit.²²

As noted, Cooper distinguishes between “religious” and “social” categories. His eight normative, Quaker testimonies are summarized in the following fashion:

Religious Testimonies

1. *Direct and immediate access to the Living God*—Since the Presence of God is within people, we can know the Truth and discern the will of God both individually and corporately. This means we can be led beyond the limitations of majority rule to unity in matters of conscience. Similarly, the Presence of God will reveal any darkness that is within us and turn us toward Light.
2. *Empowerment to do the will of God*—Not only are we enabled to know God and God’s will we are empowered by that same Presence to carry it out faithfully, even to perfection. The spiritual life is a life of transformation if it is authentic.
3. *Gathered in community*—As members of Christ’s Body we have responsibilities to one another and are mutually accountable to each under the Leadership of Christ.
4. *Sacramental view of life*—Not only is this reflected in the Friends disuse of the outward, spiritual elements, it issues in a more positive way by suggesting that all of life is potentially holy and can serve as a means of God’s grace.

Social Testimonies

5. *Peace (or Harmony)*—This is a whole life commitment to the vision of peace and justice found in scripture. It includes the refusal to engage in forms of violence and warfare and the active effort to work toward reconciliation, forgiveness and healing in all spheres of human relationships.
6. *Simplicity*—One’s style and manner of living should be based on need, with a concern for the well-being of others and the preservation and right sharing of natural and human resources. Concern for simplicity is ultimately rooted in our willingness to be singularly focused on the concerns of the Kingdom,

²¹ Ibid., 156.

²² Ibid., 156, 157.

rather than becoming distracted with other concerns in the stewardship of our time, talents, resources, and energies.

7. *Equality*—We hold all persons to be potentially of equal worth before God and therefore all should be treated with love and concern regardless of race, gender, creed, social standing or other human classification.
8. *Integrity*—This is a call, not only to speaking the truth in all situations but also to be honest and authentic in all dealings with others. Similarly, it reminds us that there must be consistency between the religious convictions we profess and the life we possess.²³

For Friends to be faithful to their heritage, calling and ongoing experience of God, these testimonies must be re-introduced as crucial elements to the group's distinctive witness to the world. Certainly other sincere Christians might disagree with these particular testimonies and both the assumptions underlying them and the practical life-choices that would result. This is both understood and acceptable. The point, in this presentation, is simply how Friends might be faithful to their unique relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The inherent danger of Friends testimonies is similar to the one in this whole covenantal approach. Removed from a living, ongoing encounter with Christ these testimonies can become a wooden standard lacking any real meaning or a harsh rule used to punish those who do not live up to it. During the most restrictive and narrow days in Friends history, the testimonies were often used to determine who fell short and ought to be out of the Quaker fold.²⁴ In their best form, however, the testimonies were simply the functional outgrowth of Friends' inward experience. Through the use of written documents that include advices and queries, Friends were encouraged to use the testimonies as life-guiding principles for individuals and local communities.

²³ Ibid., 157, 158.

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

In the present day, because of this individual spirit and seeming unwillingness to be a distinctive people, the testimonies have fallen out of use. The resulting loss is described in part by Patricia Loring:

In either giving up or clinging to the “hedge” as a quaint bit of Quaker antiquarianism, we have lost many of the inner meanings and outward witness of which it was a sign. We have also lost the support and reinforcement that the implicit affirmations of the hedge gave us. This has happened at a time when we’ve also become even more dispersed within an increasingly mobile, alienated, and pervasive outer culture.²⁵

It has also meant that the witness of Quakers to the world—once well-known as a people committed to peace, justice, social reform, simplicity—has been weakened and confounded.

A practical reaffirmation of the testimonies—through their renewed use in teaching, membership classes, literature, queries and use in designing long-range planning and programming strategies—would serve the covenantal nature of Friends community. This would be true, first of all in the practical sense of covenant, as they are articulated and lived out in shared fellowship. They would help to create useful parameters for a vision of spirituality, community and service. Secondly, and more importantly, they would re-establish a vital connection to the early Friends’ vision of the Covenant of Light and Gospel Order. As mentioned previously, these Friends believed that the Living Christ was calling and empowering them to live in the vision of God’s redeemed creation. These testimonies, it was believed, helped to spell out some of the practical, human responses to a world that was being restored by God.

John Punshon describes the practice of these types of virtues and ethical principles

²⁵ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 232.

as “emblematic of the new covenant.”²⁶ He goes on to say “they provide a guide to the corruptions of popular culture, the biases of the information media, the excesses of politics, the dangers of wealth, and what Pope John-Paul III called ‘the culture of death.’ They call us to a very different style of life by virtue of which it is possible to live modestly in a world of vanity, generously in an inquisitive society, honestly in the company of those who are concerned more with image than virtue, and peaceably in a nation and a world characterized by systematic violence.”²⁷

In some ways, these “expectations” are also important for newcomers to the faith. Because so many people in Friends churches are transplants rather than birthright members, the understanding of what constitutes “the Quaker Life” can be muddled or unclear. Without a group committed to hosting the community by continuing to clarify its vision and shared practices, these can be lost completely. If newcomers are to become “convinced of the Truth” they need to have it articulated clearly and modeled adequately.

The Matter of Disownment and Restoration

The question of what to do in extreme cases of disunity or failure to live up to the ideals articulated by Friends leads to a brief discussion of disownment. It has been described already that Friends used “disownment” as a means of discipleship and retaining their distinctive, communal quality. Sandra Cronk describes the early Friends’ understanding of this process:

A forced change of behavior in the offender is no change at all. Yet the church was clear that it did expect to see amendment of behavior. If this change was not forthcoming after a suitable time, working through all the avenues of caring

²⁶ John Punshon, *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* (Richmond: Friends United Press, 2001), 250.

²⁷ Ibid.

outlined in Matthew 18, the Meeting felt it had no choice but to recognize that the relationship of love and trust with the recalcitrant person was non-existent. Lack of repentance was a sign that the offending part was not part of, and did not wish to be part of, the covenantal relationship that characterized the Meeting's commitment. In such situations the Meeting disowned the party involved. The disownment was understood not as the intention to cut one off from relationship with the community. The disowned one could still attend meeting for worship; social discourse was not interrupted. Disownment was the recognition that a fundamental covenantal commitment was already severed.

The possibility of disownment among Friends prevented the accountability process, with its strong emphasis on forgiveness, from being a matter of cheap grace (i.e., offering the offender forgiveness with no call to righteousness). At the same time, it is always clear that disownment is not the end of all hope of reconciliation... When there is repentance and change of behavior, the Meeting is happy to welcome the person back into the community, allowing no shadow or inward reservation to undermine the person's full participation in the life of the church.²⁸

Patricia Loring adds, "Disownment was the acknowledgement that one could not both live into the counter-cultural demands of Quaker life and witness and conform to the life of the surrounding culture."²⁹ In fact, the process of disownment was not so much seen as something *done to the other person* as much as a choice they made *for themselves* to step out of the covenantal life in community. It was not an act of "excommunication," as in the Roman Catholic tradition that included cutting a person off from the rite of the sacrament. Rather, it was more closely seen as a witness to the world that the community was trying to honor the Truth of God—and to keep it pure—by naming the behaviors of its membership that were outside the bounds of righteousness. It is also true that the act of disownment, at its best, was also a way of encouraging a return to the Truth by the erring member.

²⁸ Cronk, *Gospel Order*, 30, 31.

²⁹ Loring, *Listening Spirituality*, 231.

The ongoing process of pastoral care/spiritual oversight, eldering, and discipline leading to disownment is best carried out in loving, committed relationship. It is to be done in sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit and only in the hope of eventual restoration for the individual. According to Hugh Barbour and Arthur Roberts, persons might be formally disowned by the meeting, but even then they “were not handed over to Satan spiritually.”³⁰ The ultimate hope was repentance leading to complete reconciliation within the community of Christ.

Nowadays, in many Christian fellowships, fallen members simply leave shamed by their behavior. Other times, the church family ignores the person or (sometimes worse) the behavior, choosing to pretend as if nothing significant is taking place. Especially when another member of the meeting or church has been victimized by the offender’s behavior, this passive acceptance of unrighteousness can leave the fellowship wounded and deeply scarred for many years. Other times, this kind of behavior results in ruptured or awkward relationships until such a time as either the offender, or more likely the victim, chooses to leave.

For many the term “disownment” casts a pall that is far too negative. It might be that contemporary Friends could be well served to rephrase the process as one of “restoration” since the goal is the same. For a distinctive, parallel community to exist both harmoniously and faithfully, the very serious issue of reconciliation/disownment must be humbly and thoroughly addressed. An example of a “Restoration Process” is found in Appendix G.

³⁰ Barbour and Roberts, *Early Quaker Writings*, 42.

Undoubtedly, it would be “easier” in the short-term to avoid such severe love. In the long run, however, the Church and Truth are better served by being pro-active, and when necessary appropriately re-active, in times of spiritual crisis, relational problems, and sin. Having the courage to discipline, restore and if necessary disown members, is a weighty responsibility for any community interested in living up to the calling of Christ.

Getting From Here to There

Moving toward a covenantal community may require a good deal of organizational restructuring, community re-prioritization and discernment surrounding the way staff and leadership time is allocated. Undoubtedly, how much will be determined by the present circumstances within the congregation and their readiness for such a transition.

In this regard, it would be impossible to articulate a precise strategy for implementation or to offer exact job descriptions or proposed budget adjustments that might become necessary for such a makeover in congregational life. Variables such as congregational size, the number of staff and gift mix of elders will be initial, determinative factors in assessing a plan for strategic change.

A model for thorough and successful transformation within organizations is delineated in John Kotter’s book, *Leading Change*. Though geared toward secular businesses, his insights are easily transferable to the workings of a local church. This model is offered, in part, because of its processional nature. Change is never easy, especially in the church where we often rest comfortably in the status quo. Kotter argues that there are significant forces that keep us from changing and huge obstacles that stand in the way of transformation. Coupled with our impatience and typically unwillingness to

do sufficient work at each critical juncture in the process, the transformation we desire often gets stalled.

As a fellowship considers its present circumstances and begins to consider a strategic plan for moving toward a covenant based community, Kotter's "Eight Stage Process for Creating Major Change" raises excellent suggestions and a clear, guiding formula:

- I. Establishing a sense of urgency
 - a. Examine the market and competitive realities
 - b. Identify and discuss crises, potential crises, or major opportunities
- II. Create a guiding coalition
 - a. Put together a group with enough power to lead the change
 - b. Get the group to work together like a team
- III. Develop a vision and a strategy
 - a. Create a vision to help direct the change effort
 - b. Develop strategies for achieving that vision
- IV. Communicate the change vision
 - a. Use every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategy
 - b. Have the guiding coalition role model the behavior expected of employees
- V. Empower broad based action
 - a. Get rid of obstacles
 - b. Change systems or structures that undermine the change vision
 - c. Encourage risk taking and non-traditional ideas, activities, and actions
- VI. Generate short term wins
 - a. Plan for visible improvements in performance, or wins
 - b. Create those wins
 - c. Visibly recognize and reward people who make the wins possible
- VII. Consolidate gains and produce more change
 - a. Use increased credibility to change all systems, structures, and policies that don't fit together or don't fit the transformation vision
 - b. Hire, promote, and develop people who can implement the change vision
 - c. Reinvigorate the process with new projects, themes, and change agents
- VIII. Anchor new approaches in the culture
 - a. Create better performance through customer and productivity oriented behavior, more and better leadership, and more effective management
 - b. Articulate the connections between new behaviors and organizational success
 - c. Develop means to ensure leadership development and succession³¹

³¹ John Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 21.

It is clear that Kotter's approach needs to be "Christianized" and made sensitive to the language and spiritual underpinnings of the church. His secular model for a rationally based strategic plan would be greatly enhanced for a faith community by recasting the process along the lines of a Quaker process of worship and discernment. Even so, the main thrust of his strategy is on target. A clear understanding of why the community could and should move this direction needs to be developed in relation to obedience and faithfulness as God's people. The contagion of urgency must lift the community out of its present state. A group of impassioned leaders must superintend the process and develop the necessary cohesion to discern God's vision for the community and the strategic plans to make it work. Through the preaching, teaching, and structures of business and discipleship, the vision must be thoroughly taught if it is to be caught by others. Again, how this is best accomplished will very much depend on the makeup of the congregation.

As Kotter notes, "the first four steps in the transformation process help to defrost a hardened status quo. If change were easy, you wouldn't need all that effort."³² Sufficient time and energy must be given to these initial stages for there to be a real prospect for change. These steps in the sequence will provide the foundation for steps five through seven where new practices are actually implemented. The last step in Kotter's process is intended to "ground the changes in the corporate culture and helps make them stick."³³ Using Kotter's stage-based plan for change provides a sufficient skeletal framework to think through the various issues, concerns and implications of this kind of congregational

³² Ibid., 22.

³³ Ibid.

model—sermon topics, budget alterations, program offerings, staff and elder job descriptions, and so on.

A Final Word

John Punshon argues at the end of his book *Reasons for Hope: The Faith and Future of the Friends Church* that there is a “powerful and accessible niche... waiting to be found in the historic character and practices that make Friends distinctive.”³⁴ His basic point is that if only Friends—in this case, evangelical Friends—would be faithful to who God has called them to be, God would use them in creative and mighty ways.

Punshon’s hope captures both the point and similar hope of this project—that in the creation of a faithful, distinguishable community of Quaker believers, God will continue the work of reconciling all of creation to himself. As Children of the Light, called into a Covenant of Light, Friends have been given a unique message and distinctive way of life that is to be shared boldly, creatively and passionately with the world through word and deed.

Unfortunately, in the present, evangelical Friends have lost much of their distinctive flavor. While clinging to their Christ-centered roots and the proclamation of the gospel as a means for personal salvation, they have often disavowed or diminished many of the other testimonies and distinctives that made their message unique and transformational. Concerns for peacemaking, justice, equality, and simplicity are often seen as adjunct to “the real gospel” rather than central to it. They have divvied up the gospel—taking those pieces that fit most naturally with the revivalist, Bible-centered influences of the

³⁴ Punshon, *Reasons for Hope*, 358.

Gurneyite tradition. Other pieces were left to “those other Quakers,” often in an effort to distance them from the more liberal tradition.

Along with the losing a vision of the whole gospel, evangelical Friends have been largely swept up in the prevailing culture. The same might also be said for nearly all Friends, but this treatise is aimed most pointedly at the evangelical tradition. We have lost our distinctive quality, the “peculiarity” that made us something much more than quaint. In the best days of our heritage, the peculiar and distinctive manner of Quaker life and witness made us a relatively small, but very powerful, transformational force to contend with.

Critics might argue that Friends theology and tradition have been abandoned in the formulation of this covenantal approach. The reliance upon a written covenant, the willingness to use communal authority over individual leading, and the concretizing and formulization of a strategic approach might strike some as a dangerous move away from a sole dependence upon the leadership of Christ.

I am and have been fully aware of this danger throughout the research and writing of this project. As I have noted, I have labored through some of the various paradoxes and tensions within Quaker thought and practice. One of the reasons I am a Friend is because of my abiding respect for a tradition that has had the integrity, and often the corresponding guts, to both name and try to live within those tensions. Typically, Friends have not tried to ignore or gloss over the difficulty of being faithful in a world full of complexity. I find that willingness wonderfully refreshing, even in the most frustrating moments of living in it.

What I have tried to accomplish in this presentation, in response to this complexity, is a practical application to an underlying spiritual reality: Friends are a covenant community, called to a distinctive way of life that embodies the Presence of Jesus Christ.

The dilemma, as it has been repeatedly stated, is how to avoid the inevitable draw toward legalism and hierarchical harshness and control. Additionally, as Elton Trueblood reminds, it is necessary to “avoid the trivial, the merely negative, and the merely traditional items of discipline,” in order to focus on the genuinely life-giving aspects of the gospel.³⁵ This kind of ongoing sensitivity is absolutely required and cannot be minimized as we learn to define and articulate what it really means to live as followers of Christ.

Whether a community adopts the strategy presented is really not the goal of this endeavor. I see this particular model as simply a starting place—a discussion starter—that might encourage Friends churches and meetings to reflect—intentionally and diligently—upon their common life. Similarly, in a spirit of mutual submission to the Present Leadership of Christ, Friends might consider how to re-order their common life in such a way that it allows them to know God more intimately, love one another more deeply and minister in the world more faithfully—after the manner of Friends.

Were this to occur, the Religious Society of Friends might once again be a parallel culture—“blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2:15, 16).

³⁵ Trueblood, 116.

Testimonies, Vision and Mission of Newton Friends

OUR TESTIMONIES:

We have direct and immediate access to the Living God.
We are empowered to do the will of God.
We are gathered in community.
We have a sacramental view of life.
We are called to peace.
We are called to simplicity.
We are called to equality.
We are called to integrity.

OUR VISION:

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to lives of radical commitment in which we learn to abide in the character of his Spirit and reflect the values found in his teachings. We are to be transformed into his likeness in all that we are and do.

As a community of disciples, we further recognize our call to live out the values of God's Kingdom here and now, as a redemptive fellowship in the world. We are bound together in a Covenant of Light because of our common unity in Jesus Christ. As an expression of that Covenantal relationship, we are called to minister to others, witness to God's truth, and live out Jesus' love to all people. In word and deed we are charged with bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to our world. Rooted in the spiritual tradition of Friends, we are working to live in the same Life and Power that gave rise to our denomination and witness to our historic understanding of God's Truth in ways that speak to our present world.

In particular, we seek to establish a community of Quaker ministers released for service in the world. Through our various gifts, callings and concerns we will make visible the love and truth of Christ in every sphere of influence. Through our personal lives, love for one another and ministry to a hurting world, we will embody the Spirit of Jesus that is operating in us.

OUR MISSION:

Newton Friends Church seeks to be a community of Quaker ministers who follow Jesus Christ faithfully, love each other deeply and continue his ministry in the world.

Newton Friends Membership Process

- I. Interested persons will attend the regularly scheduled “Membership Class” held over several weeks during the Sunday school hour. The class will include a brief history of Christianity, the history of Friends, discussion of Faith and Practice and the testimonies of Friends. An overview of our community’s covenantal agreement will be made and time provided for questions and answers about the ministry and mission of Newton Friends.
- II. Prospective members meet with the elders and pastoral team to prayerful discern the request for membership. At that gathering, individuals will be asked to:
 - a. Share their spiritual journey.
 - b. To speak to their faith and commitment to Jesus Christ.
 - c. To speak openly and honestly about any concerns they have regarding Friends’ Faith and Practice.
 - d. To speak to any questions, concerns or reservations they have about our shared covenant.
 - e. To relate ways the Meeting can better facilitate their spiritual growth, meet specific needs or pray for them.
 - f. To discuss their sense of clarity about entering into the membership covenant.
- III. The elders and pastoral team will discern whether to bring the person’s name to Monthly Meeting for approval. If this group does not feel clear to do so, the interested person will be invited back for further discussion, clarification, and explanation. Friends will continue to labor over this decision until there is clarity either way. Should a person not be recommended for membership they will certainly be welcome to continue to remain in the care and fellowship of the church, unless it is agreed that finding a more suitable church home would be best. Newton Friends will assist in that search if the person desires. A reapplication for membership, at a later date, may certainly be made as circumstances change.
- IV. If recommended by the elders, the person’s name will be brought to Monthly Meeting for approval. If accepted, the person will be welcomed into membership on an upcoming Sunday morning where the community will gather around them for prayer and the laying on of hands. At that time, the new members will publicly affirm their willingness to live within the covenantal agreement that guides and guards the life of Newton Friends.
- V. The elders and pastoral team will regularly follow up with support and encouragement.

Newton Friends Gifts, Calling and Concern Discernment Worksheet

Each member agrees to participate in a discernment process that attempts to identify one's gifts, sense of calling or particular concerns for ministry. As a community of ministers, we desire to faithfully serve Christ in every way and in each setting he might be calling us.

This discernment process helps us make a start on sensing God's leading for us by clarifying our God-given spiritual gifts, unique calling or particular concerns. **Gifts** offer us the spiritual tools to do ministry. Our sense of **calling** often serves to give us a direction for ministry. A **concern** may often be a very specific issue or activity we are being asked to address in our lives in the present.

After spending some time with a member of our pastoral team, you are encouraged to spend some time with this worksheet alone in prayerful reflection. Later, your accountability group may be able to help you further clarify your sense of leading. What comes of this process is intended to help you find a life-giving, effective and fulfilling ministry in the coming year.

Spiritual Gifts

GIFT	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Not usually</i>	DESCRIPTION
Administration	_____	_____	_____	Ability to organize people and resources to get things done.
Apostleship	_____	_____	_____	Ability and spiritual authority to minister to/lead a number of churches/communities of faith.
Discernment	_____	_____	_____	Ability to see the spiritual dynamics behind/under things.
Evangelism	_____	_____	_____	Ability to lead people to the Good News of God.
Exhortation	_____	_____	_____	Ability to come alongside people, to be truly "with" them so that they are helped, touched by God's love
Faith	_____	_____	_____	Ability to see God at work in all situations.
Giving	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to pour out resources for God's purposes.
Healing	_____	_____	_____	Ability to cure and restore body, mind, emotions, spirit.

Helps	_____	_____	_____	Ability and delight in assisting leadership.
Hospitality of God.	_____	_____	_____	Ability to create warm, welcoming space/place that is filled with the love
Intercession	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to serve through prayer.
Interpretation	_____	_____	_____	Ability to translate/understand languages you do not know.
Knowledge	_____	_____	_____	Ability to know information—often that one hasn't been told or known through the study or memorization of scripture.
Leadership	_____	_____	_____	Ability to see and motivate people to see the way forward.
Mercy	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to alleviate suffering—physical, emotional, economic.
Miracles	_____	_____	_____	Ability to cooperate with the power of God to intervene in specific circumstances.
Missionary	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to reach out cross-culturally.
Pastoring	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to care for a group of people over time.
Prophecy	_____	_____	_____	Ability to sense and communicate the heart of God.
Service	_____	_____	_____	Ability and desire to meet the practical needs of people.
Teaching	_____	_____	_____	Ability to help people learn, grow, become competent.
Tongues	_____	_____	_____	Ability to express the Holy Spirit through a language never learned.
Wisdom	_____	_____	_____	Ability to understand the application of truth.

Note the primary cluster of gifts:

Activities that utilize both gifts and talents?

Complimentary gifts I need in my life or ministry to be successful? ³⁶

Note additional talents and abilities:

³⁶ Much of this section on spiritual gifts originates with Jan Wood, a gifted Quaker minister who spoke on this subject at the North Valley Friends Church retreat in 1999 at Twin Rocks Friends Camp in Rockaway, OR.

Calling

Frederick Buechner suggests that “the place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

1. Prayerfully reflect on what you *need to most do* in your life. In doing so, pay attention to the work, activity, ministry that brings you the greatest joy, satisfaction, peace.
2. Prayerfully consider—from your perspective and in your life situation—what does your world *need to most have done*. In doing so, consider the causes, issues, people, circumstances that most stir your heart to action, prayer, response.
3. Prayerfully consider how the answers to these two questions begin to intersect and direct the flow and focus of your life.

Concern

Howard Brinton describes a concern as “a strong sense that some action should be taken to meet a certain situation.”

1. Are there specific concerns in your family, our community, and our town or beyond that God may be calling you to address?
2. If so, how might you test this potential leading? (i.e. sharing it with your accountability group, the Newton Friends pastoral team or elders).
3. If this concern grows—consider a Meeting for Clearness, especially if you are feeling directed to take specific action.
4. Are there Friends who might join you in addressing this concern?
5. Are there ways Newton Friends might support you/release you to act on this concern?

Communion, Community and Ministry Queries

1. How would you describe your relationship with God? What are some ways in which you learned to know and obey God more faithfully in the past year? What were the things that hindered you?
2. Are there ways the Meeting can better support your spiritual growth?
3. How would you describe your relationship with others in the Meeting?
4. Do you have concerns or questions about the community that you would like to share? Are there new ways you are feeling led to be involved?
4. How are you currently involved in ministry? In what ways did you see God use you in this or other arenas?
5. Are there new ways God might be calling you to serve? In what ways might the Meeting support you in this?

Kendal Fund

The Kendal Fund at Newton Friends Church is established to release members of our community to faithfully serve God in ministry. Since we are all ministers of the gospel, we trust and expect that any of us could be called to ministry—one that might best be supported by the other members of the community.

Fund maintenance:

This fund was established by the generous support of our membership. Each year we will commit to adding to this fund through our general church budget. Additional, designated gifts may be made by members at any time to increase the available amount. We will also hold (at least) one fundraiser a year for the purpose of growing the account.

Fund use:

1. If a person or group desires to receive support for ministry from the Kendal Fund, an inquiry should be directed to a member of the elders to determine availability of funds.
2. A meeting will be scheduled with the Elders to discuss the plan, length and scope of the potential ministry.
 - a. The interested individual(s) are asked to provide a written document outlining a plan for ministry, anticipated costs, and a description of how they have come to carry this concern. It is requested that this would be given to the Elders prior to the meeting so that the document can be reviewed ahead of time.
 - b. Any number of ministry ideas might be granted funding. Generally speaking, the Elders will be looking at certain criteria—does the ministry seem capable of being carried out, does it fit within the scope of our community's testimonies and concerns, does it seem to be directed by Christ, are their sufficient human resources to support the person(s).
 - c. Funds can also be used to cover a variety of expenses—from the cost of materials, to paying for travel and lodging, to maintaining living expenses while away from normal employment. The lack of availability of funding may mean other sources of support will need to be found in certain instances.
3. If the Elders recommend moving forward with the request a task force of committed Friends will be assigned to help oversee planning, preparation and necessary support, as well as serve as a communication link between those in ministry and the church.
4. Before funds are released, the proposal will be brought to a Monthly Meeting for approval. If approved, a "minute" will be written by the Meeting on behalf

of those involved, recording our support for them and their ministry efforts for the duration of their released or supported service.

5. Upon completion of the ministry, those involved will be asked to share with the community what was accomplished.

THE QUERIES

The Queries are thoughtful questions that remind people of the spiritual and moral values Friends seek to uphold. They help individuals and the church to consider the true source of spiritual strength, to nurture loving relationships, and to maintain a strong Christian witness to society. Reading the Queries is a tradition of Friends.

Personal Faith

Query 1

Do we live in vital relationship with God, trusting in Jesus Christ as our saving Lord and obeying the leadings of the Holy Spirit? Is Christ's presence evident in our life?

Query 2

Do we cultivate spiritual growth through prayer and Bible reading and through attendance at meetings for worship and study?

Query 3

Does our inward faith turn outward? Do you pray for our friends and associates and for those engaged in spreading the Gospel? Have we examined our beliefs and prepared ourselves to share them, with sensitivity and humility, as the Holy Spirit leads?

Query 4

Do we acknowledge God's ownership of all that is under our care? Do we give of our time and abilities in service to church and community and gratefully use our possessions as a trust to honor God?

The Individual and the Church

Query 5

Are meetings for worship and business duly held, and are we regular in attending them? Do you come ready to commune with God and to fellowship with believers, willing to participate in contemplation or in spoken ministry?

Query 6

As followers of Christ do we love and respect each other? Do patience and consideration govern our interactions; and when differences arise, do we resolve them promptly in a spirit of forgiveness and understanding? Are we careful with the reputation of others?

Query 7

Do we give generous financial support to the work of Friends? Do you contribute regularly to the ministry of our church and to the wider outreach of the Yearly Meeting? Are we aware of those likely to require material aid, and do we give freely to those in need?

Marriage, Children, Home

Query 8

Do we conduct ourselves in a manner that supports and preserves the sanctity and permanence of marriage? Do we who are married yield to each other in decisions and build up each other as individuals?

Query 9

Do we who have children under our care educate them for upright and useful lives? Do we nurture them toward Christian faith and commitment, giving them the Scriptures for their guide? Are we watching over our young people with loving concern and providing a place for each one in the life of the church?

Query 10

Are we teaching our children the ways of Friends? Do we encourage them to participate in Friends programs and to attend Friends schools?

Query 11

Do we use our free, family time in ways that refresh the spirit and benefit mind and body, that encourage creativity and friendliness? Are our homes pleasant and peaceful places?

Manner of Living

Query 12

Is our life marked by simplicity? Are we free from the burden of unnecessary possessions? Do we avoid waste? Do we refuse to let the prevailing culture and media dictate our needs and values?

Query 13

Are we careful to live within our incomes? Do we avoid involving ourselves in business beyond our ability to manage or in highly speculative ventures? Are we willing to accept a lower economic standard rather than compromise Christian values?

Query 14

Are we honest and just in our dealings? Are we true to our promises, prompt in paying our debts, and responsible in handling money or property entrusted to us?

Query 16

Do we discipline our minds and bodies to serve as instruments of the Lord? Do we avoid pornography? Do we abstain from harmful, addictive, and unnecessary drugs? Do we refrain from gambling and taking part in lotteries?

Concerns for Society

Query 17

Do we exercise our civic responsibilities and support acceptable legislation? Do we pray for those in authority? Are we careful to avoid defrauding the public treasury? In or out of court do we affirm instead of taking oaths?

Query 18

Do we speak out for justice and morality, and against oppression, exploitation, and public wrong? Do we recognize the equality of persons regardless of race, gender, or economic status?

Query 19

As Christian stewards, do we treat the earth with respect and with a sense of God's splendor in creation, guarding it against abuse by greed, misapplied technology, or our own carelessness?

Query 20

Do we observe and teach the Friends testimony against military training and service, making clear that war is incompatible with the spirit and teachings of the Gospel? Do we find appropriate ways to work for peace? ³⁷

³⁷ These Queries are adaptations of the Northwest Yearly Meeting queries from their copy of *Faith and Practice*, 2003.

Newton Friends Restoration Process

In cases where members are engaged in behavior that is so grievous that it is harmful to themselves, others, the community or the Truth we possess, the Church will begin a process aimed at restoring the Truth.

Causes for Action and Efforts at Restoration. If there are erring members in the church, the elders are to initiate discipline and to do so with love and prayer. Actions that constitute sufficient cause include failure to live a consistent moral life, conduct unbecoming a Friend, habitual and unreasonable neglect of meetings for worship, denial or repudiation of Christian beliefs as set forth in *Faith and Practice*. Initially, individual members of the elders and/or pastoral team should meet with the person and labor in love in an effort to resolve the problem or encourage their repentance. Care should be taken to distinguish between the deed and the doer. If these efforts at individual counsel do not prove fruitful, the person will be asked to meet with the entire Elders' committee for further counsel.

Formal Complaints and Further Efforts at Restoration. When the local elders have exercised proper pastoral care without avail, they lodge with the Monthly Meeting a formal minute in writing against the erring member, setting forth the charges and their efforts at restoration. It must be evident that the elders have exercised loving care, shown the accused person the nature of the default, and sought to bring about repentance and restored communion with Christ and the church. At this point, the matter becomes a communal matter of prayer and concern.

Action of Disownment. If the exercise of care and forbearance proves unavailing and the offender maintains the same pattern of conduct the church executes a minute of disownment, recognizing that the person is no longer choosing to participate in the common, spiritual life of the community. At this time, the clerk furnishes the offender a copy of the minute, at which time it is recorded at the next Monthly Meeting for Business. At that time the person's name is taken off the membership role. **This is an action of last resort and even then, the individual is to be instructed that they may be welcomed back into membership at such time as they make a public confession of their behavior and are interested in being restored to the life and fellowship of the community.** Disownment means that the individual is no longer a member and thereby loses the right to a voice in church business. Disowned persons are not shunned or excluded from public worship—unless their behavior poses a threat or continued harm to some or all members of the community. Disownment is not a statement about their ultimate relationship with God, only their current willingness to abide the Truth as the community has discerned it.

Filing an Appeal. A member in the process of disownment who is dissatisfied with the decision of the church may file an appeal with the church at its next business session. In

this case, the clerk of the Meeting will name a task force of independent members to review the discipline process. If they find that the Elders acted harshly, impulsively or unwisely in the their dealings with the erring member—a mediation process will be implemented to reconsider the issue and work through any damage done between relationships.

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