Living Stones - Solid Foundations for Christian Community
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Living Bulwark is committed to fostering renewal of the whole Christian people: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We especially want to give witness to the charismatic, ecumenical, evangelistic, and community dimensions of that renewal. Living Bulwark seeks to equip Christians to grow in holiness, to apply Christian teaching to their lives, and to respond with faith and generosity to the working of the Holy Spirit in our day.
Introduction to this Issue

How can Christian Communities weather the challenges and storms ahead?

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” – Psalm 127:1

Living in Christian community is a gift and calling which we cannot take for granted. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, Life Together, speaks of the privilege Christians have to live in visible community with other Christians.

It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end all his disciples deserted him. On the Cross he was utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace to the enemies of God. So the Christian, too, belongs not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the thick of foes. There is his comission, his work. ..So between the death of Christ and the Last Day it is only by a gracious anticipation of the last things that Christians are privileged to live in visible fellowship with other Christians.

In this issue
Dr. Daniel Keating in his article, Called to Be God's Household, Priesthood, and People of God, explains Peter the Apostle's teaching on "being living stones built together 'into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.'"
Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes the spiritual truth that life together in Christian community is only possible through and in Jesus Christ. A selection of quotes from Bonhoeffer's writings highlight his teaching on life together in community.

Bob Tedesco offers an apologetic for lay Christian communities today and their role in the wider church.

Steve Clark's article, Mere Christian Community, offers timeless wisdom that community essentially is a type of relationship rather than a particular structure.

Carlos Mantica explains how the City of God community in Managua, Nicaragua heard the call of the Lord to rebuild their foundations during the chaos and upheaval caused by a major earthquake, political revolution, and collapse of church leadership in the decades following the 1970s. The lessons learned can be very helpful for those who seek to build solid foundations for life together in Christian community.

**A prophetic sign of restoration**

Today there are many hundreds of Christian renewal covenant communities around the world. What is the significance of these intentional lay Christian communities for the wider church today? First, it is a signpost of what God is bringing about through the gift of being baptized in the Holy Spirit. It is a visible public sign of the Lord's work of renewal in bringing people into a revitalized relationship with God, and it is a sign of the unity he desires for all his people. The unity we already have as brothers and sisters in Christ stems from baptism and the gift and working of the Holy Spirit. This gift of life together enables Christians of different traditions to recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and to live together in real shared life. This unifying grace is a hallmark of God's work today.

Second, covenant community is a servant of the renewal. It is meant to be a prophetic sign to the rest of the charismatic renewal, and to the churches, and to the world. It's a message to everybody, but not everybody is called to this particular form of community. People should be able to visit covenant communities and see how the Holy Spirit is renewing his people and restoring to them a fuller shared life together. It is part of the nature of a sign that you cannot be everything. Covenant communities cannot do everything and cannot solve all problems. They are only a part, but, nonetheless an important part of God's work of renewal and restoration.

**The Sword of the Spirit**

We believe that the Lord has called the Sword of the Spirit, an international network of covenant communities, for this age, a time of significant change and upheaval in the world and a time of difficulty and spiritual conflict for many Christians. But it is also a time for great spiritual renewal and evangelism, and for building Christian communities throughout the world to stem the tide of evil and to strengthen God's people.

Sincerely in Christ,

Don Schwager
editor

Don Schwager is a member of The Servants of the Word and author of Daily Scripture Readings and Meditations.
Called to be God's Household, Priesthood, and People

A Commentary on 1 Peter 2:4–10

by Dr. Daniel A. Keating

The following short commentary from the First Letter of Peter, Chapter 2, verses 4-10 is lightly edited with permission of the author, Dr. Daniel Keating, from his book, *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture: 1 Peter, 2 Peter, and Jude*, published by Baker Academic, 2011. While it was written from a Roman Catholic perspective, the material can be beneficial for Christians from other traditions as well.

Dr. Keating explains the aim of his commentary in the introduction to 1 Peter: “The First Letter of Peter is a hidden gem, tucked away among the catholic epistles, just waiting to be discovered. Overshadowed by the longer and weightier letters of Paul, 1 Peter has often been neglected or undervalued. My aim in this commentary is to aid the reader in discovering the riches of this letter, in the hope that he or she may hear its proclamation of the gospel anew and follow the call to suffer joyfully with Christ.” – ed.
1 Peter 2: 4 Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God. 5 and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 For it says in scripture: “Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion, a cornerstone, chosen and precious, and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.” 7 Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” 8 and “A stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall.” They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.

**OT references:** Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 8:14; 28:16  
**NT reference:** Ephesians 2:19–22

**vs.4-5:** In these two verses Paul used the image of a house, or temple, made of stones. Echoing Psalm 34, Peter calls us to **come to him,** to Jesus himself, a **living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God.** This phrase is drawn from two Old Testament texts: Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16 (Peter will quote both texts below in vv. 6–8). Jesus is the “stone” that the Father has given to serve as the foundation of God’s own house. 24 Though rejected by the Jewish leaders of his day, he is raised up and put in place as the foundation of the Church. He is a “living” stone because, though rejected and cut off in death, he has been raised from the dead and now lives.

Strikingly, Peter now applies the imagery of “stones” directly to the Christian people. We are to be **like living stones** who let themselves be **built into a spiritual house.** The image of a “house” predominates here, both as a noun (oikos), but also as embedded in the verb “to be built into” (oikodomeo). This is no ordinary house made of lifeless stones but the true spiritual temple of God that has living members, with Christ himself the cornerstone of the temple (see Ephesians 2:19–22). In the Old Testament the temple in Jerusalem is often simply called the house of God (see sidebar below, “The Temple as God’s House”). It was the dwelling place of God among his people. We the Christian people have now become the dwelling place of God; we are living stones built together “into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

More than this, we are called to serve in this house as a **holy priesthood.** Here the imagery slides from that of the building to those who serve in that building. A priest is one ordained to serve in God’s temple. He offers sacrifices and brings the prayers and needs of the people before the Lord. What then does Peter mean by calling the Church a “holy priesthood” called to **offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ?** He does not develop the practical implications here, but we should note that he is not referring specifically to the ordained priesthood. Rather, it is the entire Christian people by virtue of their baptism into Christ who have entered into the inheritance given to the people of Israel to be a “royal priesthood” (v. 9; Exodus 19:6). We are all called to stand before the Lord as priests, offering our lives as living sacrifices.

We should not overlook the repetition of “spiritual” in verse 5. 25 We have now become a “spiritual house” and a priesthood offering “spiritual sacrifices.” “Spiritual” does not mean immaterial or unreal. Rather, “spiritual” refers to the divine life and activity of the Holy Spirit in and through us. We are now the house where God’s Spirit dwells and we offer our lives as sacrifices in the power of the Spirit.

**vv. 6–8:** To support his point Peter ties together three Old Testament texts that concern a “stone” in God’s
The first (v. 6) is from Isaiah 28:16, where the Lord God reprimands those who put their trust in other gods and promises that he himself will establish among his people a cornerstone, chosen and precious to him, such that whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame. The second (v. 7) is an exact quotation of Psalm 118:22: The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Here, the psalmist rebukes those who reject the “stone” that the Lord himself is establishing as the cornerstone of his own house. The third (v. 8) is a loose adaptation of Isaiah 8:14, in which the prophet chides both houses of Israel for failing to believe the Lord who will become for these faithless ones a stone that will make people stumble, and a rock that will make them fall.

Peter shows that Jesus is the “stone” promised in the Scriptures, rejected by the leaders of Israel who put him to death (see Acts 4:10–11) but raised to life to become the cornerstone of God’s house. The key issue is faith. For those who have faith, the stone established by the Father is “precious,” but to those without faith, this stone becomes a cause of stumbling and falling. What does it mean to stumble in this context? They stumble by disobeying the word, that is, they do not believe and obey the gospel (note the contrast with “obedience to the truth” in 1:22).

What should we make of Peter’s claim that this stumbling over the stone in unbelief was their destiny? Were they personally fated by God to disbelieve and disobey the gospel of Christ? Some have interpreted Peter this way, but this is not the conclusion Peter is drawing here. Rather, he is showing that the Scriptures predicted ahead of time that Jesus, the stone established by the Father, would be a cause of division and that some would not obey his word. The biblical prediction does not rob anyone of free will. Instead, it gives confidence to believers that the ongoing rejection of Jesus by some was foreknown and foretold by God and so falls within his plan and purpose for the salvation of the world.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

The Temple as God’s House

Once his kingdom was secure, David consulted the prophet Nathan about building a house for the Lord God to dwell in, and Nathan gave his blessing (2 Samuel 7:1–16). But the Lord interrupted this plan, telling David through Nathan that he had no need of a house to dwell in. Instead, the Lord turned the tables on David and promised that he would build a house for David, meaning a dynasty of kings. The Lord also promised that David’s “offspring” would build the house of the Lord, and this was fulfilled by David’s son, Solomon. The glorious temple that Solomon built (see 1 Kings 5–8) was the focal point for Israel’s life, worship, and sacrifice. Destroyed by the Babylonian armies in 587 BC, the temple was rebuilt by the returning exiles (see Ezra 3). Enlarged by King Herod the Great (37–4 BC), the temple in Jerusalem stood as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Jesus not only said that he was greater than the temple (Matthew 12:6), but he also claimed that he himself was the temple of the living God (John 2:19–21). He is now the dwelling place of God on earth, and, as living stones built into him, we have now become God’s house where he dwells through the Spirit.
1 Peter 2: 9 But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were “no people” but now you are God’s people; you “had not received mercy” but now you have received mercy.

NT reference: Ephesians 2:11–13

vs.9: We have now come to the climax of this passage. Peter’s main concern is not, in fact, with those who disobey (v. 8) but with the glorious privilege of those who have believed in the “living stone” established by the Father. He announces that believers in Christ have become a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own. The four phrases build upon one another with powerful effect and together communicate the staggering dignity that is ours in Christ. The language is not Peter’s own invention. He has selected and combined phrases from the Greek version of Isa 43:20–21 and Exod 19:6.27 By linking these texts, Peter brings to mind the two great moments of deliverance in Israel’s history: the deliverance from slavery in Egypt (Exod 19) and the deliverance from exile in Babylon (Isa 43). Peter is saying that what Israel was and is called to be has now been fulfilled in the Church through the deliverance Christ has accomplished.

All the terms point to a corporate reality. We have become a “race,” a “nation,” and a “people,” specially chosen by God for his own possession, to be holy as he is holy. And this race, nation, and people is also a royal priesthood. By virtue of our incorporation into Christ, we have attained a truly kingly and priestly status not as separate individuals but as a people, the Church.

Moreover, our royal priesthood obliges us to evangelize: we are to announce the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. The Greek word translated “praises” is literally “virtues” and comes directly from Isa 43:21.28 Though the term “virtues” usually refers to good moral qualities, here it refers to the saving acts of God. As the people of God, we are called to announce God’s great deeds by giving testimony to what he has done for us. The contrast between light and darkness depicts the conversion that ought to accompany baptism: we come out of the darkness of our former way of life into the light of Christ. Here it is helpful to call to mind the mission of the servant of the Lord in Isa 42:6–7. He was called to be a “covenant to the people,” a “light to the nations” (NRSV), and to free from prison those who “live in darkness.” Jesus has done this through the New Covenant, bringing both Jew and Gentile into the full inheritance promised to Israel. This is what we are called to make known in the world—and when we do so, we are giving God praise.

Reflection and application
If all this is true—that each of us has been called to be a member of a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation”—then each of us is also called to participate in the mission of this priesthood and nation to the whole world. We are God’s “own possession” not simply for our own sakes. We are also called to “announce the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Each of us needs to know and experience the freshness of the gospel and to experience wonder at being called into God’s marvelous light. Not many of us are called to preach to large multitudes, but all of us are capable of giving personal testimony to the great deeds that God has worked in our own lives.

Notes

http://www.swordofthespirit.net/bulwark/august2014p2.htm (4 of 5) [21/10/2014 18:10:36]
This is a clear reference to Ps 34:6 (LXX 33:6), which in the Greek text says, “come to him and be radiant.” Jesus applies Ps 118:22 to himself in the Gospels (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17). The Greek word translated “spiritual” here (pneumatikos) is different than the one translated “spiritual” in verse 2 (logikos). The Old Testament “stone” texts singly or in combination are used in a similar way by Jesus himself (Matt 21:42; Mark 12:10–11; Luke 20:17–18), by Paul (Rom 9:32–33; Eph 2:20), and by Peter in Acts (4:11). From Isa 43:20–21 (LXX) with slight alterations come “chosen race” and a “people” for God’s “possession”; from Exod 19:6 (LXX) come the exact phrases “royal priesthood” and “holy nation.” “Virtue” is an unusual translation of the Hebrew “praise,” found only in a few texts in the latter part of Isaiah and once in Habakkuk and Zechariah (Isa 42:8, 12; 43:21; 63:7; Hab 3:3; Zech 6:13).

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

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The Seven Stones

Solid Foundations for Building and Strengthening Christian Community

by Carlos Mantica

The following article is adapted from a series of talks prepared for the City of God community in Managua, Nicaragua, a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. The talks were given by Carlos Mantica, the senior leader of the community. They explain how The City of God community went through a period of re-establishing their life as a Christian community on a more firm foundation. This was done in response to the Lord’s call to them to lay a solid foundation so he could prepare them for times of greater testing and hardship, but also for a time of greater evangelism, mission, and for building Christian communities in other places as well. - ed.

Introduction – A time of social and economic upheavel

It has been our lot to live in a time when everything around us is crumbling. We witnessed how some people whom we thought were built on rock simply collapsed. I remember a friend of mine, who after the 1972 earthquake which devasted Managua, the capitol city of Nicaragua, died of sadness because he had lost serval million in currency. Although he had lost a great part of his fortune, he still had another several million left that would have been enough for him and his children to live as kings for generations to come. There are many others living around us living in anguish and despair even in the midst of their material abundance.

We have watched how some families fell apart – even though they had for several generations been a model of unity. We witnessed divisions around us – parents against children and children against parents, brother against brother. Marriages crumbled – wife against husband, husband against wife – separated by ideologies or causes that were more powerful than their love, more powerful than their children, more powerful than the sacred vows and sanctity of their Christian marriage.

We have seen many social structures crumble – structures that – whether good or bad – made up the world we grew up in. And then we saw the collapse of the revolution that had destroyed the previous structures and thought that its [communist led] regime would last forever.
On the global scene we have witnessed the vanishing of one of the greatest ideological empires of all ages. When the last Soviet cosmonaut entered his spaceship and circled the globe, he returned to earth to find that the Soviet Union was no more. Communism had been repudiated and the names of its leaders could no longer be pronounced.

We have also witnessed the virtual collapse of the world's economic system – the bankruptcy of many Third World countries. For the first time in history, it was the bankruptcy of entire nations.

In the Catholic Church we saw the massive secularization of many priests who abandoned their flocks. And we have seen the abandonment of many lay leaders who were thought to be pillars of the church.

And even in our own personal lives we have seen how things which we have worked hard to build over the years simply crumble down in a single instant.

**Our beginnings in building Christian Community**

When we started our community, *La Cuidad de Dios (The City of God)*, a charismatic lay renewal community in Managua, we wanted to build something solid. And for some time we thought we had built a solid Christian community.

Then one day the Lord gave our community a vision. It was a vision of a wall [a bulwark] which the Lord had called us to build a few years earlier. And the vision of this wall looked impressive.

But then as the vision unfolded, we saw a torrential rain storm that fell heavily upon the wall. After the wind and rain had washed away the plaster and cement that held the wall together – what was left was a pile of barren bricks stacked on top of one another. Then the bricks themselves began to fall apart, until the wall was reduced to a heap of gravel.

Then the Lord explained to us the meaning of the vision. The wall was made of bricks, and bricks are man-made. Then we realized that the wall was supposed to be made of solid stones - not man-made bricks. He wanted the wall to be made of stones which he had made. God wanted to give us solid stones which he had made in place of man-made bricks. The bricks which we had used to build the wall were held together by cement. We understood clearly that the cement which held us together was the quality of our teaching, the joy of our picnics, the beauty of our common worship at community gatherings, the friendship among the brethren, and even the supernatural protection the Lord had given us in times of danger. All of that was really a beautiful work, but it was insufficient to sustain us in more difficult circumstances. And that was exactly what began to happen. When things got really rough, many people left the community or left the country.

We now understood that if our life together as a Christian community was to survive and grow, then all of our members would have to become *living stones* made by God through his Spirit. Instead of being held together by cement, these *living stones* had to be finely chiseled, so that they would fit very well together and stay united. Their union would be the result of the way they were formed by God into the likeness and character of Jesus Christ.

**The Three Pillars**

When we began the reconstruction of our Christian community, we recognized three key pillars that were an essential part of the foundation. These pillars are

- deep convictions [in God's truth and call]
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- firm decisions [to respond and follow God's call]
- and solid relationships [commitment together to follow the Lord as a people].

**First pillar**

We needed to hold to our deepest convictions and to internalize those basic truths that are able to sustain our spiritual life both in good and difficult times. These convictions include the fundamental truth that God loves me personally – even before I became a Christian, and he will continue to love me personally now and in the future – His love is constant and firm despite despite my sins. Another incredible truth is that God the Father has adopted us as his children through his Son, Jesus Christ. We are truly children of the King, even if we often go around in rags. Another incredible truth is that death has no power over us because God promises us everlasting life with him. These and many other truths and promises of God are what sustains us and gives us hope and life. We firmly hold and insist that it must be the Lord Jesus Christ himself who personally calls each one of us and draws us to himself through his overwhelming love and invites us to become part of his people.

**Second pillar**

The second pillar was firm decisions made in response to God's call. Firm decisions spring out of deep convictions; but we each need to personally choose, and to decide. I have shared on many occasions how deeply impressed I was many years ago when I went with one of my friends to a rally where a famous Protestant pastor was preaching at the stadium of Managua. The first part of the preaching was uneventful for me personally. We listened to the basic message of salvation which was well known to us. But suddenly, something happened that I had never witnessed before. After his sermon, the preacher said something extraordinary which I had never heard before in my whole life. He said, “And now, those who want to make a decision for Christ, please come forward to the front.”

In my eighteen years of school and religious studies no one had ever invited me to make a decision. I then realized that Catholics [especially those baptized as infants] may be the only people in the world who are able to spend their whole lives listening to doctrines, accumulating truths, without ever being called to make a personal decision for Jesus Christ.

The Gospels describe the multitude who listened to Jesus as “those who believed” in what he said. But James the Apostle rightly reminds us that “even the demons believe – and shudder” (James 2:19). Judas also believed in Christ, but he never really made a decision to follow him no matter what it might cost him. We believe that in every Christian's life there ought to be a point of no return, a place where there is no possible turning back. That is, there must be clear, free, joyous and resolute decision for that truth that has been internalized as a total conviction.

**Third pillar**

Finally, we build our life as Christians on solid relationships. Not on nice, attractive relationships with people who amuse us, who help us, who understand or comfort us, but on solid relationships. In the world, relationships are based on interest or affinity, on mutual liking, on affections that will rarely resist the onslaught of adversity. Would your current relationships stand slander… bankruptcy… illness?

Will you, or your friends, keep your loyalty to Christ and his people when religious leaders are accused of sexual immorality and other kinds of wrongdoing? Let us foster loyalty and faithfulness in our hearts, because the winds that are blowing are able to destroy the strongest relationships.

We have seen these three pillars as important for sustaining our lives as individuals and as members living a common way of life in Christian community. We thought these three pillars were fantastic, and we embraced them fully as good and necessary for our continued growth. But one day the Lord stopped us and said, “That’s not enough.” And he ordered us to stop the construction. The reason was twofold - we lacked solid foundations and we
The Lord wanted us to build upon the rock, and it was then that he gave us what we now refer to as the "Seven Stones." It wasn't just a good idea that someone had as a way to improve things in our community. Rather, it all happened in a quite spectacular way. One day when we had all gathered together as a community for a common time of prayer, one of the community members stood up and began to speak out a prophetic message from the Lord. It wasn't anything he had prepared or thought about before he began to speak. But what he spoke convinced us that God had a message for us which he wanted us to hear through this brother who spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We all understood that something special had taken place that night, and what the Lord had told us became from that day on our fundamental program for growth. It became something we all needed to live out before making our full commitment to the community. These would be the stones on which all of our life together as a community, and all of our behavior as disciples of Christ, were to be built.

Foundations come first
The first thing we heard the Lord say to us was that the foundations need to come before the building. These stones needed to be firmly established one upon the other before the rest was built, and once they were laid in place they ought to be covered forever, just as the foundations of a building, once laid, are never unburied again. When you have a house, and a rainfall or a flood comes, you cannot begin to dig in order to find out whether the foundations are in place, because then the water would sweep them away and the house would fall.

So it is these foundations that I will now be referring to. I warn you, these seven stones are hard. Blessed be God for their hardness, because only hardness makes solidity possible, and it is only on solid foundations that you can build something big and lasting.

1. Jesus is Lord
The first stone, on which the rest of the stones are laid, is that Jesus is the Lord. The title “Lord” is Jesus’ title par excellence. The New Testament gives him this title six hundred times. The Greek word is Kyrios, which expresses, as no other word does, the reality of Jesus Christ as the Lord over all. Kyrios means “absolute master or owner” – the one who has full rights and does what he wants with the things that belong to him. We Christians belong to Jesus Christ, and he can do with us as he pleases.

Kyrios means lord over and against a slave: someone who can exercise absolute control and demand total obedience.
That is why he says, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24). If you serve two, none of them is your real master or lord. Calling him Lord means to reckon ourselves as his own possession - slaves who obey and follow the master.

Kyrios was the title given to the Roman emperor, that is, to the highest authority the world knew of. In the case of Jesus, it is the title of him who says to us, “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Finally, Kyrios is the name that the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, uses to translate the name of Yahweh. Jesus is, therefore, one with the Father, Lord of heaven and earth, of is over all things visible and invisible.

A lived-out truth

All of this has been for us a well-known truth, but not always a lived-out truth. I know for myself that my life is still far from reflecting the full lordship of Jesus Christ in all areas of my life.

But the fact is that, between this absolute reality, independent of our will, that Jesus is the Lord of all that exists, whether we like it or not. The personal reality is that if he is Lord of my life, then my entire life needs to be placed at his service. This is the fundamental way in which we relate to him as our Lord. And this is something I would like to deal with as part of this first stone.

If we are honest, when we review our personal relationship to him we will probably discover that Christ has been for us mainly or only the Savior. That is, he is the Christ who loves me, the Christ who saves me, the Christ who heals me, the Christ who protects me, the Christ who does errands for me.

And this kind of relationship to Jesus the Savior is, ultimately, a relationship in which Christ works for me. Christ is at my service – which is exactly the opposite of Christ as my Lord.

We all know that there are many Christians for whom Christ is only that – their Savior, their good-luck amulet, their helper, their comfort, their private secretary, their family doctor… and the Lord is so good that he allows himself to be used as such.

The devil's temptation

In C. S. Lewis’ book, The Screwtape Letters, there is a tremendous paragraph in which the devil who is training his nephew to become an effective tempter says to him:

We teach them not to notice the different senses of the possessive pronoun – the finely graded differences that run from “my boots” through “my dog,” “my servant,” “my wife,” “my father, “my master,” and “my country,” to “my God.” They can be taught to reduce all these senses to that of “my boots,” the “my” of ownership.

It is the same pronoun, and yet it expresses quite opposite realities. And many of us have fallen into the trap.

I have no doubt that these people love Jesus. They also love their children, and there are even some who love their car. But the truth is that, when we examine their relationship to their Lord, what we find is that Christ is essentially someone they ask for things, someone they use, someone they resort to. He is someone who is there essentially to serve them. Jesus is not their Lord, but only their Savior.

Even though our lives are not entirely at his service, there is something that has changed radically inside ourselves –
the way we relate to him. There is a radical change in our attitudes, and maybe this is what he expects of you right now. For example, I am not in the City of God because I like to, or because I always like it, or because our gatherings are very joyous, or for the love I receive from my brethren, or for the growth I experience, but because Jesus is the Lord.

I do not accept his mission or his ways because I think they are always the most effective. To be honest, I often think things could go better some other way. But I do it because Jesus is the Lord.

I am not willing to fight for his cause because I think that I will live to see the victory, but because Jesus is the Lord.

We try to sow, not because we are sure we will see the fruit, or because people will be thankful or full of wonder, but because Jesus is the Lord.

In my prayer life, I do not come close to him because I think I am worthy, or because I feel good next to him, for in fact I often come to him with impurity; but because Jesus is the Lord. And then I praise him with all my strength, because he is worthy, and the power, the glory and the praise are his now and forevermore.

In fact, there is a radical difference in our way of relating to him, when we do it from the perspective that Jesus is the Lord, than the way we used to relate to him when we only regarded him as the Savior.

**The full Gospel**

But there is also another radical difference, which is the way we now speak his Word. We now preach the full gospel. We no longer go around softening, minimizing or sugar-frosting his message, in order to make it more palatable to people, more digestible to sensitive stomachs. Instead, we proclaim his Word.

We no longer plead with people to accept him. We do not compromise his message with things like, “Look, ma’am, the Lord is going to heal you and will give you a fast-track entrance to heaven. Your husband will become tame, and your children will get out of drugs and idleness. You’re going to feel real great, you’ll get over depression, and everybody will put up with your moods. And if this part of the Gospel is a little heavy for you, we can remove it, or make a better deal. But please, accept Christ!”

Instead of that we proclaim the glory, the power and the love of a King, at whose mere name demons tremble. He is the Lord of history, with all power over kingdoms and empires. He is the creator of heaven and earth, the one who has overcome the world.

It was only from this perspective that I was finally able to understand what fear of God means, which I did not understand before. As many of you probable have, I have often made the Lord sit on the dock, when things did not come out the way I wanted. Many other times I held him accountable because the world was not the way I wished. Many other times I wanted to make deals with him – I would offer him things in exchange for his favors. Or else I would issue an invoice for my good actions, like Job.

And, like Job, one day I felt that he replied to me “out of the whirlwind”:

> Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning
stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy? (Job 38:1-7)

I was nothing but a tiny worm questioning the sun… until one day I met him as my Lord. And that day I discovered something that has been very important to me, which is simply that Jesus does not owe me anything. I might have worked much or little for him; I may be a good person to some extent; I might or might not have done important things – no matter what, Jesus owes me nothing. He is the Lord, he is my Lord. And this Lord says to us:

Will any one of you, who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep, say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and sit down at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and gird yourself and serve me, till I eat and drink; and afterward you shall eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’ (Luke 17:7-10)

The Lord owes me nothing, and being aware of this increases my respect and fear toward my God. I know that my life rests only on his mercy, and that he can dispose at his total right and freedom on any area of my life, because he owes me nothing.

Fully in God's hands
The beautiful part of this is that this does not lead me to anguish, but to peace, because I know I am fully in his hands. I rest fully in his mercy and his love, and I am protected by his omnipotence.

This relationship has totally simplified my life. Now I need no reasons, no arguments, no incentives. In order for me to do something, it is enough to know that he wants me to. I do not need to know, or to figure out, or to decide anything. He has already decided, and he is my Lord. And everything is quite simple this way.

Maybe we need to do some review of our relationship with him if we still practice the type of prayer I call the “vending machine prayer,” because it is like one of those machines where we put a coin on the upper part (in this case it would be a prayer) to see what object we get below. Some of our prayers have in fact a magical intent, because the specific nature of magic consists of wanting to place a supernatural force at our service, through the use of rituals or words that force it to obey us.

I don’t want to embarrass anyone. Up to this date, my life has not been fully subjected to the lordship of Jesus in all its areas. There are still many, many things that need to change. But I do find inside myself a radical change in my relationship to him. I no longer care whether something pleases me, or satisfies me, or fills me with horror. All I am concerned for is his will, which is the only important thing.

This is, then, our first stone, on which the rest of the stones are laid. If the first stone is not well laid in its right place, the others will never be secure.

2. I Am Chosen By Him

On the first stone is laid the second stone, which is not necessarily valid for all Christians, because it is in fact, “I have chosen you,” or “I am chosen by him.”

The Lord was quite clear on this: “Many are called, few are chosen.” He also says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Probably all of us remember that fellow who came to him and said, “Lord, I will follow you wherever
you go.” And the Lord replied to him, in so many words, “Well, and who has called you?”

This has at least two implications: that we have no right to go around recruiting people as if we were drafting people for the army, since not all are called; and that you cannot offer yourself as a volunteer.

There is something here I had never understood. Several years ago, while I was developing a talk similar to this one, the Lord interrupted me several times to give me mentally a scripture passage. I stopped writing and read the text, but would find nothing of interest in it. By the third time I understood clearly. The first paragraph of the passage ended like this: “And from that moment on, many believed in him.” And the next paragraph started like this: “Then the Lord said to his disciples…”

I then understood something that, to a certain extent, changed the lives of many of us: that there is the “company of the believers” to which all men are called to belong, because the Lord wants all men to believe in him and be saved; but there is also the small group of his disciples, those chosen by him.

The mistake of many has been to think that these make up two different categories of Christians – first class and second class Christians. And it is not so. We the disciples are simply people who are at the service of the believers, and even of non-believers, so that they will one day come to know Christ.

This is like a father who has two children. He loves the two of them exactly the same, and makes both of them heirs to his estate. But, just because he wants, he chooses one of them to manage the property, and the son, out love, accepts. He is not any better than his brother. He has simply been chosen by his Father to carry out a work on the benefit of the other brothers and sisters. He is not more or better than them, even though he is supposed to do some things that the others are not supposed to do.

**A particular call and mission**

We believe that the Lord has given our community a particular call and mission. Our motto is "a community of disciples on mission." We have heard the Lord call us together as a voluntary intentional community of disciples. We do not believe that the particular call and way of life that the Lord has given to our community is for everyone. That is why we insist that each individual who wants to join our community must have a firm conviction that God is calling him or her to this community and its mission. A person cannot be a member if he or she does not have this firm conviction.

Several years ago our community received a prophecy in which the Lord told us,

> My children, I love you, and because I love you I want to make all of you into men and women who are able to detach from everything that prevents you from carrying out my great plan to extend my kingdom. Those of you who do not feel able to forsake everything, please move away from this plan, because you are an obstacle that prevents me from making this remnant into my people, a banner and a light for those who would seek me in the difficult times that are coming. If you do not stay here, I will not love you any less. You will continue to be loved by me, I will care for you, I will firmly keep my promises, because I am faithful. But do not become an obstacle for your brothers and sisters.

In a different prophecy, addressed to the wider Charismatic Renewal at an international gathering, the Lord said:

> My beloved people, listen to my word, and only to my word, so you can serve me the way I’m asking you to. In order to persevere in my service, you must be willing to give up everything. My plan cannot
be carried out with a mixture of your desires and my word, with a synthesis between the world’s philosophies and my words. This means that the youth must be willing to waive their right to choose their own lives, and the adults must give over to me the life they have forged over many years. This I demand so that you can listen to my word and serve me. If you are not willing to give up everything, then, as your loving Father, I implore you to withdraw from the people I am gathering. Your brothers and sisters will continue to love you. I will not love you any less. But I am gathering and consolidating a people that is totally committed to my purpose. If you want to stay but find it difficult, your brothers will offer support. If you seek me, I will change your hearts so that you can commit yourselves the way I am asking you to. Those who forsake everything for me will have a more abundant life.

The Lord is choosing and gathering many people around the world to be at his service, especially for evangelism and mission. He says, “O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation…” (Psalm 95:7-10). I am quoting this Psalm because in fact many of us have seen his work, and we will yet see greater works.

This is perhaps the most important stone to cover, once it has been laid into place.

If any one of you has been chosen by him, he will know it beyond doubt, because the Lord speaks clearly to those he marks for himself. What not everyone does is to internalize this call and turn it into a conviction, to bury it deeply in his heart in order not to uncover it anymore.

The Lord had to do wild things in order to persuade me that he had chosen me. I still remember the day when, on the notebook I used for writing the Lord’s guidance to me, I humbly wrote: “Forgive me, Lord, I will never ask again.”

It is important to cover this stone, once we have discerned with conviction and decided with firmness that we have been chosen by the Lord. Because when the storm comes, that is, when troubles arrive, maybe even persecution, if anyone then wonders whether all that is true or not, then the world, the flesh and the devil will say no, and he will flee as many others have.

Not my will, but your will be done
We have always said that, even though the victory of Jesus was won on the Cross, the decisive battle took place at Gethsemane, because it was there that the Lord buried the stone of having been chosen by his Father for redeeming the world. Even against his will, he accepted the cup the Father was inviting him to drink of. “Not my will, but your will be done.”

With the decision come peace and strength. That is why he who had first transpired blood in the struggle for deciding now faces the soldiers with an incredible serenity and majesty. A small miracle for Herod would have been enough to skip the Cross. A little human prudence would have been enough to get around Pilate. But Jesus had already asked for the Father’s will, and when he obtained the answer, he buried it in his heart and covered it forever.

I am not referring to actions of cowardice, as Peter’s, to which we all are subject. I am referring to sincere doubt or confusion. When tribulation comes, things cannot be seen clearly. We must see them beforehand.

Preparation is decisive
In times of war, the time of preparation is decisive. Wars are won before they break out. Someone who has not faced these questions beforehand can be sure that, when bullets start hitting, when they ask themselves whether Jesus is
their Lord and has chosen them, will no doubt come to the certain conclusion that the chosen one is someone else, and that they belong to the holy group of the company of believers.

And, like them, we will cry out (and please, do not hesitate to do so): “Save me, Lord!” – because he has also been and will continue to be only that: your Savior. He may look at you with sadness, as he did to the rich young man, but not with contempt. Scripture says he looked at him with love. He will do the same with you.

We must get used to the fact that we must bury our convictions if we want them to become foundations for our lives. It is not something you can do in just one moment or one day, and we would not advise so. But sooner or later, every Christian has to make a choice, a decision. He will have to decide whether Christ Jesus is his Lord and has chosen him.

3. Yes, I’m Willing

Then comes the third stone, the one only you can lay. This stone is, "Yes, I’m willing." What the Lord expects of us at this point is not essentially to believe God, to believe that the Lord has chosen us, which was the preceding stone, but to respond positively to God.

We said earlier that every step, every decision, needs to be the result of a conviction and of a perfectly free action. I would repeat that now. We do not intend in any way to ask people to make an immediate response to the Lord's call, but to rather reflect deeply before making such a decision.

But it is necessary to support your life with firm decisions, emerging from deep convictions. It is necessary to be firmly anchored so we will not be swept away by the emotions or by “any wind of doctrine”.

Therefore, it is not acceptable to spend your life without making a decision. It is not honest for a Christian to take refuge in indecision for his or her whole life, and thus continue to think on how much he loves God, even though he does not listen to his voice or hear his call.

If someone, with sincerity, says “I’m not willing,” or simply “This is not for me,” we will not love him or her any less as they move on to something else in their life. We will encourage them to not to move away from righteous living or from faith, nor from the church and the sacraments.

In addition to those who are willing and to those who are not willing to follow this particular call, there is the group of those who simply do not know what the Lord wants for them. These we invite to continue seeking to deepen their understanding and conviction for what God wants for them. And this takes us to the next stone.

4. The Cross

Let us now see what the Lord promises to those who respond, “I am willing,” to those who have the certainty that the Lord has chosen them to be his disciples and are willing to follow him. There is only one thing that is guaranteed in writing – the cross. “If anyone would be my disciple, let him take up his cross and follow me.”

It is true that the Lord promised his apostles that whoever left his father and his mother for his sake would receive a hundredfold here on earth, and glory in heaven; and he added that they should rejoice because their names were written on the book of life.
That is true. But it is also true that we have one thing guaranteed in writing, which is the cross. We would be very happy to be able to tell you something different. We would like to sugar-frost the gospel for you to swallow it with pleasure. We would like to promise you a lot of different things, as many others do, while leaving the cross outside the picture. And there is nothing wrong in promising things, because the Lord also made unbelievable promises. But the fact is that he also promised the cross. If any man would be his disciple, let him take up his cross.

Of course there are other ways to soften the gospel, such as saying that your cross is to bear with your mother-in-law, or put up with your wife’s nagging. But in fact that’s just the commandment of love, which commands you to love them as God does, who puts up with you.

The cross is quite a different thing. And those who were listening to Christ understood it clearly. For every Jew of Jesus’ time, the cross only meant one thing – death.

**Dying to self**

Being a disciple involves dying to your own self. For some this can be physical, actual death through martyrdom; but for all it will always mean dying to ourselves. It means you will never be the same again. Like Paul, it means to die so that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” It means that you will no longer be able to do anything except what he desires. No being is more defenseless, more useless than a dead person.

This means depending on him and receiving everything from him. It means to be carried around like a corpse in its coffin. Jesus tells this clearly to Peter:

> “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:18-19)

The cross means being tied and nailed to Christ unto death. It means to share the same fate of Jesus:

> A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you... But all this they will do to you on my account... (John 15:20-21)

It means being exhibited and humiliated as he was; being lifted up as the scorn of the crowd. This goes from the small humiliation of being ridiculed for his sake, crucifying our human areas, to the open mockery of the old buddy who mocks at you because you have ceased to be a buffoon, or the millionaire friend who, with his laughter and his money, keeps telling you, “Come down from that cross, don’t be a fool.”

However, the quintessence of the cross is not suffering itself. The quintessence of the cross lies in doing the will of the Father. The cross was nothing but the concrete will of the Father for his Son. Jesus’ merit did not consist of suffering, but of being willing to give up life itself in obedience to the Father.

The Lord was so polite with me that he wanted to make this quite clear to me from the very beginning. That memorable evening in the town of Diriaamba, Nicaragua, when we were baptized in the Spirit, the Lord decided that, when hands were laid on me, my arms would begin to levitate. I knew well it was not I who was lifting them up. It was a gentle force that raised them, and at a given moment that same force threw my arms back with violence, until I was left in a very uncomfortable position – that of a crucified man.
Since I am so daring, I told the Lord: “If what you mean is that the cross awaits me, I accept it.” Then the Lord taught me a lesson which I am sharing with you today: I felt a force that impelled me to kneel down. It was so strong that I was forced to bow my knees. But I resisted for social reasons. I did not dare to fall on my knees out of respect for my brothers. I was pushed down for a second time, and once again I refused.

At that point the prayer was over, and then I realized what had happened. The cross the Lord was offering me was to do his will, and I had failed just a few seconds after I had said that I was willing to die for his sake. I was terribly ashamed and full of sorrow. Thank God, a while later, when the mass [Catholic liturgy] was celebrated, the text of the first reading was that paragraph of St. Paul’s where it says, “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Since then, I have known that it is only through his own power that I will be able to carry his cross and do his will.

At this time I would like to be able to share with you a lot of terrible sufferings for Christ’s sake. But actually, what we have received from him is nothing but joy. In fact, even in the difficult things he has asked, and which were really hard for our “old man,” became easier and more joyous to the extent that we would die to ourselves so that he would live. That’s what all things are like when they are done out of love. And it is because of that, not for masochism, that, thirty years later, we continue and will continue to do whatever he desires, full of joy and peace.

One thing is true, and it is that this stone can only be placed in its position if the three preceding ones are already well buried. If Jesus is the Lord and I have been chosen by him, and if I have accepted and said Yes to his will, then I can see no problem. And this takes us to the fifth stone.

5. The Mission

The fifth stone is connected to the question: “For what purpose?” What has the Lord called me for, what has he chosen me for?

In the world, this is the first thing we ask when someone calls us. “First tell me what for, and then I’ll tell you if I accept.” The Lord, however, has a very serious defect, a very disgusting one, and it is that he always says, “First say yes, and then I’ll tell you what for.” From the very beginning, he wants to make very clear that he is the Lord – he is the one who makes the decisions and gives orders.

This is because, ultimately, if he calls you to be his disciple, he is calling you to do whatever he wishes. “Matthew, come.” And Matthew, immediately, “rose and followed him.” There are no questions. No questions.

“Teacher, where do you live?,” John asked. “Come and see,” replied the Lord. You shouldn’t go around asking silly questions. This is his style. But one thing is certain, and it is that the Lord does not just call us because he wishes, which is nice in itself, but he calls us with a purpose, because he has a mission for us to carry out.

The Lord has not chosen us simply in order for us to be “nice people” or for us to go to heaven some day, or to do the good things the world suggests us. He has called us rather to carry out some area of his own mission, and that is why this mission is almost always one aspect or one area of the universal mission of the Church, which, ultimately, is nothing less than the expansion of the Kingdom of God here on earth.

Throughout history, the Lord has raised in his Church movements, associations or simply groups of people to whom he has entrusted a particular mission. To each of them he gives a concrete aim, and with it certain charisms and a spirituality, or a mystique that makes it different from the rest, and which we must respect, as all of them come from
God and have enriched the Church in extraordinary ways. Many others have helped to revitalize or renew the Church itself.

That is why it is so important for us to be able to discern God’s purpose for us, as individuals and as a group of people. We will never carry out his will unless we know it or are faithful to it. Even more terrible is for us to want to use the things of God for our own glory or benefit, or to further our own causes. This would mean to use God as our instrument, when he has called us in order for us to be his instruments. We thus come across many Christians with no vocation, which is absurd, or with organizations that work only to engross themselves, which is ridiculous.

Our association of Christian communities has a particular mission to carry out. The Lord has called us from among the nations in order to be a people for him, completely consecrated to his service, and in many ways different from all others, that would become a bulwark for his Church and for the world, a sign standing in the midst of the nations.

Our community has found its raison d’être in the mission it is supposed to carry out. We exist in order to carry out that mission, and we know it. This means that if we do not struggle to carry it out, it would only be reasonable to dissolve the community instead of wasting our time, no matter how beautiful its life may seem to us. And if I say this, it is because I think this is true for all things in the Church and for the Church itself. We exist for a purpose, and if we do not strive to carry it out, then we have no reason to exist.

But this also means something even more important, namely, that if the Lord chose us for something, what we are carrying out is his work, not ours, and that is why he is the one who is most invested in it. He is the most committed one. It is he who has to invest everything to make it a reality.

This then leads us to the following stone.

6. His Covenant

I believe that if someone has a sense of mission, but lacks a sense of covenant, he will be an easy prey to discouragement or despair.

The Lord has made a covenant with his people. The bottom line of this covenant is, “If you are entirely mine, I will be all for you, and you will receive all things from me.” That is what I call a transaction between nothingness and the infinite, between man’s powerlessness and God’s omnipotence.

In its core, this is nothing but the continuation of his first covenant:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

In the chapters that follow in Deuteronomy, the Lord spells out for his people all that they can expect from him in exchange for this full obedience. And what they can expect is absolutely everything, as our Lord reminds us in the Sermon on the Mount, when he recalls the lilies of the field and the birds of the air which God clothes and feeds.

And this is the first commandment of God’s law. Contrary to the Jewish people, we are so stupid that we settle for just an awareness of the commandment, while forgetting that through that commandment God was establishing a covenant with his people.
In Scripture, God compares us to three kinds of people, apparently opposed to each other: a son, a soldier, and a slave. These persons have nothing in common, but one thing: that the son need not worry how to buy the books for school, or the slave what he will eat this evening, or the soldier how he will buy his weapon. The three of them receive everything from their father, their master, their chief... and these three things is what our God and Lord is for us. And in exchange for that, they only owe one thing – obedience.

From early on, the Lord wanted to instill very deeply on us this sense of covenant. He judged this so important that he often would not grant us anything unless we appealed to his covenant with us. Together with that, he never waited to respond when, with a view to his mission, we claimed his total support and divine intervention for us to move forward. We could spend several hours witnessing to his faithfulness to the covenant.

When the war came, he told us quite clearly that we ought to trust in his covenant to such an extent, that we could forget completely about our personal safety so we could be free to go and serve others. The physical, psychological and spiritual protection we then received was just incredible.

This is another stone we need to bury deeply and cover with ground. If, when the time comes for us to act in his mission, we do not have beforehand the total certainty that the Lord of faithfulness will be with us, we will hesitate and will then be rendered ineffective.

7. His Power

It is from his covenant that we derive the last stone: his power.

This stone is laid on top of the others and is a consequence of them. It emerges from the lordship of Christ, to whom all power has been given in heaven and on earth. This power has been promised to his disciples: “[You] will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will [you] do” (John 14:12). “I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Matthew 28:20). This power is necessary in order to carry his cross, to carry out his mission, which is so far above our strength. And it is a consequence of his covenant, in which the very omnipotence of the Omnipotent God is committed with his people.

Let me repeat – our mission is far beyond our strength, and without God’s power we have no chance to accomplish it. The Lord has already said it, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Here it would be fit to clarify what power I am referring to. The first thing that must be clear is that we are not referring to a power that is of us, but in us, and able to act through us. Of course, I am referring to the power of his Spirit in us, which is the very dynamis of God.

We need this power, and the Lord has sent it to us, for several different things:

1. First of all, we need it in order to live according to his law. If the only thing Christ came to do was to bring a better law than the preceding one, then we are at a worse place now than before. Because, if we could not fulfill the former law – which, by the way, nobody has abolished – much less will we be able to live according to his Beatitudes.

But, thank God, the Lord did not come for that purpose, but in order to write his law in our hearts, according to his New Covenant, and to give us the power for us to fulfill it through the Spirit of God that has been poured out on our hearts.
2. We need his power in order to be like him, to think, to feel, to want and to love like the only-begotten Son of God. And this is the work and the fruit of the Spirit who, from one degree of glory to another, shapes us according to Christ in order to give us his own character.

3. It is also the power of prayer, which is the way to involve God’s omnipotence in the lives of men and even in the destiny of the peoples and in the events of history. It is to verify that God did not make the world as one would manufacture a clock and wind it, and then let it run until the end of the story. Christ is, instead, the Lord of history, and the leaf of a tree will not move or a hair from our head will not fall without his consent.

4. It is also his power or authority over the devil. It is an authority the Lord gave his disciples, because he came to undo the work of Satan. We are to carry on his work, and we have seen our authority confirmed a thousand times in delivering people from the devil’s claws.

5. It is an openness to all the gifts of the Spirit, the gifts that the Lord is now pouring out on his people, in an unprecedented outpouring in the history of his Church: power to heal the sick, word of knowledge, tongues, prophecy, wisdom, discernment, miracles, etc. These are gifts the Lord is giving because he knows we will need them, because the Lord does not send anything without a reason, and because spiritual weapons are needed for a war that we know is spiritual, since our warfare is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers in high places.

6. And finally, power includes our openness to “do the same works as he did, and even greater,” according to his promise – the openness, say, to raise the dead, while we learn to move mountains.

We do not make these things into absolutes, we just use them. In our community we do not talk much about charisms. We just exercise them, and week after week there are testimonies of the signs and wonders that the Lord does in us or through us. These are the signs of the Kingdom, the visible proof that the Kingdom of God is in our midst, because the King is also within us and among us.

We do not make charisms into absolutes, but we have a total openness to his power. We even say that, to receive God’s power, you should not just show the Lord a thimble (because then that’s all the Lord is going to fill with his power), but a large gourd that he will fill with his power. We would even like to come to him with the tank trucks used for carrying gasoline, to get a real big amount of power from him.

Now there’s something I want you to meditate on. A thimble, a gourd or a tank truck are all equally full. At every step we feel equally full of God. It is not, therefore, for our own well-being or benefit. But there is no doubt that, with a tank truck, the Lord can give more to the other people than with a thimble, no matter how full of his power it is. Let us not minimize the work of God. Let us allow him to act, simply being open to let him do whatever he wishes with us and, through us, with all people.

In the 25 years that have elapsed since being baptized in the Spirit, we have been witnesses, and often actors, of the many signs that go together with the ministry of preaching. The deaf hear, the blind see, the dead come back to life, and the poor hear the good news. This was the sign Jesus gave to John the Baptist that the Kingdom of God had come. And it is also the sign we give today to all Christians when we preach the Good News to them.

I can’t think of even one sign of power that we have not witnessed in Nicaragua. Surely the Lord must be foreseeing something quite great and terrible, if he deems it so important to pour out so much power in the midst of a people
that, despite the signs, continues to be hard-headed and slow-hearted.

Brothers and sisters, these are the seven stones on which the Lord wanted to build our life. I had told you they were hard, but that something great and solid could be built on top of them. Our three pillars continue to be based on them: deep convictions, firm decisions, solid relationships.

The only thing left to put in place is a vital element, that which engineers call “seismic beam,” which serves to tie the foundations and the pillars together. And this beam is the life of union with God through prayer.

In fact, in prayer the lordship of Christ becomes experiential, as we allow him to take the reins of our lives. His call becomes audible. The decision to follow him becomes joyous. The mission and call are gradually revealed to us, and we are then guided and led by him. The covenant is confirmed with facts, and we are gradually filled with his power as we are, once and again, filled with his Spirit.

It is a pity that this is just a talk. For us it was, and continues to be, our major program for life and growth. Many will think that this is too demanding on God’s part. For us it was something he gave us as a great gift. That is why we are aware that we have been built on a rock.

If our lives, our families, or our community threaten to crumble down at some point, then let us listen again to the voice of the Lord, who continues to repeat: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

Praise the Lord!

See related articles by Chale Mantica > What is the Kingdom of God?

This article is adapted from the book, *From Egghood to Birdhood (hatch or rot as a Christian)*, (c) copyright 2001 Carlos Mantica. Used with permission.

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Community Through and In Jesus Christ

quotes from the writings of Dieterich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

The following selection of quotes from *Life Together* are taken from Bonhoeffer's 1938 reflections on the character of Christian community, based on the shared life together in community that he and his seminarians at the Finkenwalde seminary experienced before it was closed down by the Nazis.

**We belong to one another through and in Jesus Christ**
Christian community means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. There is no Christian community that is more than this, and none that is less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily community of many years, Christian community is solely this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

What does that mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others for the sake of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity.

First, Christians are persons who no longer seek their salvation, their deliverance, their justification in themselves, but in Jesus Christ alone…

The death and life of Christians are not situated in a self-contained isolation. Rather, Christians encounter both death and life only in the Word that comes to them from the outside, in God's Word to them…

**We live entirely by the truth of God's Word**
Christians live entirely by the truth of God's Word in Jesus Christ. If they are asked “where is your salvation, your blessedness, your righteousness?," they can never point to themselves. Instead, they point to the
Living Bulwark

Word of God in Jesus Christ that grants them salvation, blessedness, and righteousness. They watch for this Word wherever they can. Because they daily hunger and thirst for righteousness, they long for the redeeming Word again and again.11

We need other Christians who speak God's Word to us

…When people are deeply affected by the Word, they tell it to other people. God has willed that we should seek and find God’s living Word in the testimony of other Christians, in the mouths of human beings. Therefore, Christians need other Christians who speak God’s Word to them. They need them again and again when they become uncertain and disheartened because, living by their own resources, they cannot help themselves without cheating themselves out of the truth.

They need other Christians as bearers and proclaimers of the divine word of salvation. They need them solely for the sake of Jesus Christ. The Christ in their own hearts is weaker than the Christ in the word of other Christians. Their own hearts are uncertain; those of their brothers and sisters are sure. At the same time, this also clarifies that the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God allows Christians to come together and grants them community.

Excel in love more and more

“Now concerning love of the brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another…. But we urge you, beloved, to do so more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:9f.).

It is God’s own undertaking to teach such love. All that human beings can add is to remember this divine instruction and the exhortation to excel in it more and more. When God had mercy on us, when God revealed Jesus Christ to us as our brother, when God won our hearts by God’s own love, our instruction in Christian love began at the same time.

When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with one another. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too were made ready to forgive each other. What God did to us, we then owed to others.

The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our love for one another, the less we were living by God’s mercy and love. Thus God taught us to encounter one another as God has encountered us in Christ. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15:7).

The dreamer's image of a perfect community

…On innumerable occasions a whole Christian community has been shattered because it has lived on the basis of a wishful image… A great disillusionment with others, with Christians in general, and, if we are fortunate, with ourselves, is bound to overwhelm us as surely as God desires to lead us to an understanding of genuine Christian community. By sheer grace God will not permit us to live in a dream world even for a few weeks and to abandon ourselves to those blissful experiences and exalted moods that sweep over us like a wave of rapture. For God is not a God of emotionalism, but the God of truth.

…Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.

Thank God for the gift of common life with other Christians

…Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, not as those who make demands, but as those who thankfully receive.

We thank God for what God has done for us. We thank God for giving us other Christians who live by God’s call, forgiveness, and promise. We do not complain about what God does not give us; rather we are thankful for what God does give us daily...

**Community is an outright gift for which we have no claim**
Like the Christian’s sanctification, Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim. Only God knows the real condition of either our community or our sanctification. What may appear weak and insignificant to us may be great and glorious to God. Just as Christians should not be constantly feeling the pulse of their spiritual life, so too the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be continually taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more assuredly and consistently will community increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.

**Not an ideal but a reality created by God in Christ**
Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is in Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.

[Excerpt from *Life Together*, originally published in German by Christian Kaiser Verlag, Munich 1939. English translation by Donald Bloesch © Augsburg Fortress 1996.]

Dieterich Bonhoeffer was born in Breslau, Germany, one of seven children. He grew up in Berlin, where his father worked as a prominent professor of psychiatry and neurology. His mother was one of the few women of her generation to obtain a university degree. At the age of 14 he decided he would become a Lutheran pastor and theologian. He was the first of the German theologians to speak out clearly against the persecution of the Jews. He was 39 years old when he was taken out of his prison cell and hanged as a Nazi traitor on April 9, 1945. As he left his cell he said to his companion, "This is the end – but for me, the beginning of life."

photo of Bonhoeffer in the courtyard of Tegel prison, summer 1944
source: Christian Kaiser Verlag
An Apologetic for Christian Community

By Bob Tedesco

Introduction

The following essay in three parts presents a focused apologetic for Christian community today.

1. A Scriptural perspective on Christian community
2. A Protestant perspective
3. A Catholic perspective

The approaches are different. Taken together they represent and appeal to different kinds of authority that might be helpful to different readers.

Part 1. A Scriptural Apologetic for Christian Community

Overview of Part 1: Scripture has much to say about Christian community. This section includes a set of Scripture passages that can help people better understand, present, and defend the modern re-emergence of lay Christian communities. Also worth mentioning is the fact that some Scripture passages speak directly to the issue while others imply or suggest community as an expression of church. I would suggest that much of the New Testament seems to be addressing people (churches) whose way of life seems far different from the modern experience of church for most Christians.

One Question
At the core of much of this work is this question: “What level of relationship should members of a church expect and pursue?” There are also corresponding questions such as:
1. What does the Lord expect the church to look like?
2. How did we get to the modern approach?
3. How can we recover what has been lost?
4. How do families adjust to fit into a community-oriented church?
5. What elements of the sodality are to be experienced at the level of the modality, the local church?”

The questions can be too numerous and overwhelming, but our hope here is to explore the area from a scriptural perspective, and dig into the issue of how deeply should we form Christian relationships.

My mother used to tell me, “Blood is thicker than water.” Occasionally, I would respond something like, “We are bound together by the blood of Christ which far surpasses any human family!” My mother never did join our Christian community, but she lived long enough to receive elder care far beyond anything that the family could (or would) do for her. While her mind was still working, she came to understand and expressed her appreciation for the community.

(Note: I do appreciate the role of immediate family in caring for aging or dying members; I appreciate the special bond of the immediate family as well.)

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**Scriptures**

**Familial**

“If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” John 14:23

(Note: The Father and Jesus make their home with those who keep the word of Jesus. It starts here: the Father makes his home with us; his people are therefore his family and in family together.)

“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Matthew 12:50

“Do not rebuke an older man but exhort him as you would a father; treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity.” 1 Timothy 5:1-2

(Note: “brothers,” “brethren,” and “sisters” are used 311 times in the New Testament referring to the Body of Christ).

**Beyond Family**

“For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” Matthew 5:46
Community

The high degree of common life of the church at Jerusalem does not seem to be replicated in other New Testament churches, but it is worth noticing it as a “reaching for heaven”. The classic descriptions of the first church are in Acts 2 and 4.

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Acts 2:42-47

“Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.” Acts 2:32-35

Trans-local Sharing

“...but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it was written, “He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack.” 2 Corinthians 8:14-15

Unity

“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me.” John 17:20-23

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel...” Philippians 1:27

Connected in Relationship

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and up builds itself in love.” Ephesians 4:15-16
Committed, Loving Relationships

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34-35

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.” John 15:12-14

“This I command you, to love one another.” John 15:17

A People

“When one of you has a grievance against a brother, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, matters pertaining to this life! If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no man among you wise enough to decide between members of the brotherhood, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers?” 1 Corinthians 6:1-6

(Notes: 1. If two men had a fender bender in the parking lot of a church, would they expect the pastor to resolve their present conflict? Any conflict? 2. Most communities do not exercise this kind of responsibility. 3. Something unusual is implied: that the body of Christ can have the wisdom and authority to resolve significant conflicts between members.)

“And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.’” Matthew 22:37-40

(Note: When this was given, the word “neighbor” would not have included everyone in the sense of the whole world of gentiles and pagans; it would have referred to another Jew, one of God’s people.)

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”. 1 Peter 2:9

Love in “Real Time”

“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” 1 John 3:14-18
“We love, because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.” 1 John 4:19-21

Be Ready

“Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone. Colossians 4:6

These and many other Scripture passages indicate that life in the Lord’s family is meant to be far more substantial than is the experience of most.

Part 2. A Protestant Apologetic for Community

At the 2006 North American Sword of the Spirit Summer Conference, we presented three workshops intending to lay out apologetic approaches and resources for Protestants, Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. We drew from scripture, articles, papal encyclicals, and speeches and papers of respected church leaders. Here we will draw on resources by Paul C. Dinolfo, Ralph D. Winter, R. Pierce Beaver, Carl W. Wilson, and Sacred Scripture.

Difficulties Due to Range

The wide variations among Protestants present a challenge to creating an apologetic that would be helpful and accepted across the spectrum.

The primary categories of Protestants are 1:
1) Mainline (or historic) vs. Evangelical
2) Liturgical vs. Non-liturgical
3) Presbyterian vs. Congregational

The church affiliations of Christians in the USA are 1:
1) Catholics 24.5%
2) Baptists 16.3%
3) Methodist/Wesleyan 6.8%
4) Lutheran 4.6%
5) Presbyterian 2.7%
6) Pentecostal/Charismatic 2.6%
7) Episcopal 1.7%

The percentage of Americans who attend church during a given week are 1:
1) Catholics 6.2%
2) Evangelicals 9.2%
3) Mainline 3.2%

Therefore our first contribution to an apologetic would be to again say, “Things are not working so well; maybe this
would be a good time for someone or some set of people to try something else or something additional.” Secondly, it would be a good time to expect that the Holy Spirit would be at work addressing our needs, our concerns, our weaknesses, and our lack.

**Scripture and History**

Another approach would be to step back to take a broad look at the New Testament church and compare that to what has happened through the ages. It can easily be seen in the New Testament that the broad-based church had stable local churches and missionary groups that evangelized; explored new prospective locations; founded new churches; and served, refreshed, and renewed existing churches. That broad-based pattern has continued throughout Christian history in both Catholic and Protestant streams of Christianity.

**Warp and Woof**

The church is often compared to a tapestry, which is first of all a cloth. Ralph D. Winter and R. Pierce Beaver describe the “warp and woof” of Christianity with the warp being the stationary threads while the woof are the moving threads on the spindle. Both are needed: the stationary (local church) and the moving (renewal movements, communities, mission bands); both are needed for church maintenance and church growth.

**Sociology Intersects Ecclesiology**

In Ralph D Winters, “The Two Structures of God’s Redemptive Mission”, he describes the stationary part (local church body) as the “modality.” The moving or missionary part of the New Testament church he describes as a “sodality.” A modality is the normal expression of a grouping, its commonly understood pattern. A sodality is a somewhat specialized grouping or association. It is voluntary, and might have a narrower mission or responsibility. Today’s renewal movements and new communities are presented as sodalities and not as modalities or replacements for the local church.

Methodism

Wesley saw his movement as a sodality and did not intend to form a new church. He felt forced out of the Anglican Church and Methodism followed (a modality). This history points to the need for getting these distinctions clear: 1) sodalities, when welcomed and embraced, can bring evangelism, service, and refreshment to the local church; 2) when misunderstood or rejected, sodalities can result in division and separation, or, at the very least, disappointment and marginalization of gifted brothers and sisters.

**Further Distinctions of Warp and Woof**

As already mentioned, modalities are the stationary aspect of church. They handle the wearing task of everyday life; they care for the children; there is a sort of “structural” fellowship; and there is no distinction of age or gender. Sodalities are moving, responsive, nimble. They often have two purposes: 1) internal church renewal, and 2) outreach or mission. They may be limited by age, gender or marital status. They thrive on zeal and enthusiasm and are often more engaging of the young. They are “not your father’s Oldsmobile” (to use a marketing phrase). A “second decision” or additional commitment is required (beyond modality membership).

**A Historic Sketch**

In overview we can see these structures present throughout Christian history, and there is some advantage to looking for their different expressions. It seems likely that the Holy Spirit has initiated, inspired, and influenced these different structures to meet the needs and challenges of the peoples and various periods of history.

**New Testament Church**

As the first Christians were Jews, their modality was the temple and all that was familiar to them. They met together
in the temple, and had meals together in their homes (see Acts 2:46). Peter and John (after Pentecost) prayed in the temple (see Acts 3:1).

In the shadow of Pentecost, new things began to happen: miracles (Acts 3:7), meals together, proclaiming God’s message with boldness (Acts 4:31), and sharing possessions (Acts 4:32). These were quickly followed by persecution (Acts 5:18) and martyrdom (Acts 7:58). This remarkable mix of spiritual events and inter-modal pressure and rejection was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the sodality that would develop. The new Christians were scattered far and wide (Acts 8:4).

We then see the selection of Saul by the Lord himself (Acts 9:15). For his protection Saul was sent to Tarsus via Caesarea, and he later returned (Acts 12:25) with Barnabas and John Mark. In Acts 13:2, we see the Pauline mission sodality being prophetically initiated and empowered by the Holy Spirit as he says, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul, to do the work to which I have called them.” They traveled to Cyprus (Salamis), Perga, Antioch, and Iconium, preaching and teaching in synagogues along the way. “In each church they appointed elders and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.” (Acts 14:23 Today’s English Version)

By this time, the pattern, the work, and the effects of this missionary sodality are well established: it is in service to the local bodies that they are being established in each locale.

**From Then Until Now**

Both structures have continued to develop and adapt with the modality being more stable than the sodality, which has had many forms. Even after the Reformation, the modality for some Protestants had a diocesan structure. In his “Structures” paper, Winter points out that “the greatest error of the Reformation” was to reject the sodalities of their age: the religious orders. By the nineteenth century, however, Protestants were actively engaged in missions.

All through the founding, settling, and evangelism of North America, we have seen the sodalities repeating the New Testament pattern: setting up local churches, establishing them, and then reaching out to new population centers. It is this last step (reaching out) that is so crucial to the ongoing growth, vitality and purpose of the modalities.

It could be said that our modalities (parishes, congregations) would be much healthier if they saw themselves as “beachheads” from which further ground should be taken. It is the settled-in, coasting mentality that is so lethal to our faith. Our faith must be allowed to grow beyond its boarders or something starts to die. It cannot just be enjoyed; it must be employed, or deployed to use a military term.

**Today**

In these times, we have multiple examples of sodalities impacting the Protestant world and local congregations: The Billy Graham organization, Alpha (Campus Crusade), Athletes in Action, Promise Keepers, InterVarsity Fellowship, the Charismatic Renewal, and the new communities (many of which are covenant communities). The new communities (and their networks) are probably more comparable to the sodalities that existed after the early church and up to the Reformation. They exist, not as in competition with, but as a support to the local congregations. They offer some hope and some promise in extending our borders, spreading the gospel, and deepening our commitment to the Christian way of life. They are a part of us. They are a gift from God.

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**Part 3. A Catholic Apologetic for Community**
Two Broad Structures of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church can be seen as divided into two types of membership—two expressions of life. The lay or diocesan structure is by far the largest and includes families and singles in local parishes under a bishop. The religious order side of things includes priests, brothers and sisters. The parallel to a bishop would be an Abbot, and an Abbess or Mother Superior would oversee the women’s orders.

Religious orders have certain similarities to the new communities: they take vows, we have covenants; they have novitiates, we have formation and discipleship; they have certain accountability and spiritual direction and we have pastoral care; they tend to have a very high degree of common life and we strive for a high degree of common life with families and singles maintaining a high degree of personal responsibility. (Note: several networks of communities have brotherhoods which are even more similar to religious orders). The similarities mentioned are notable but they do have distinct differences, especially with the degree of shared life.

The Witness of Canonizations

The largest number of canonized saints, (perhaps 10 or 20 to 1), come from the smallest structure (much smaller religious order side). So the Catholic measure of success would seem to say that vows (commitment), formation, accountability and common life have produced a high degree of recognizable holiness. Similarly, there is something about the community/formation model that works better for lay people, as a complement to parish life by orders of magnitude.

We could stop here! The witness of history for Catholics has overwhelming evidence for the community/formation model.

Quotes from Modern Documents and Presentations

We will draw quotes from two sources: “The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements”2 (shown as TL in the footnotes and “On Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: the Response of the Holy Spirit to Today’s Challenge of Evangelization”1 (shown as “M” in the footnotes).

“TL” is a paper by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI), and”M” is by Archbishop (now Cardinal) Stanislaw Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity (the largest part of the Catholic Church mentioned earlier. These two apply mainly to Catholic movements and new communities, but they have certain implications for ecumenical communities, especially for the Catholics involved in such movements and communities. The quotes have some phrases in italics or with underlining. These do not appear in the original text, but have been added to link them to the topic. Italicized text and added “**” are inserted to highlight or give emphasis to a point. They do not appear in the original text.

We’ll consider these papers in regard to some topics common to the new communities; some quotes apply to more than one area and may be repeated. I have not added much commentary since I believe that the quotes have more power if not obscured by extra reflection on my part. While most of the quotes are encouraging to communities and movements, it is worth mentioning that almost all of these kinds of addresses by church officials have some statements of caution and concern that enthusiasm and energy do not become divisive. Local church authority and membership are worthy of respect through the process of renewal.

Encounter with Christ and Baptism in the Spirit

- “Only when the person is struck and opened up by Christ ...can true community grow.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “The Spirit cannot be correctly understood without Christ, but it is equally impossible to understand Christ
Living Bulwark

without the Holy Spirit.”  

- “Thus, social service is always connected in one form or another with evangelization. All of this presupposes the source is usually the flame of the initial charism – a deep encounter with Christ. The formation and up-building of community does not exclude the personal element, but calls for it. Only when the person is struck and opened up by Christ in his inmost depth can the other also be inwardly touched, can there be reconciliation in the Holy Spirit, can true community grow.”  
- “…there is always a personal encounter with Christ.”  
- “‘Come and see’...There is always a ‘before’ and ‘after’ in the lives of those who belong to ecclesial movements and communities. For some, the conversion of heart is often a gradual process which takes time. For others, the conversion is an unexpected and all-encompassing ‘lightning bolt’ experience.”  
- “How many members of movements and new communities can repeat the words of convert Andre’ Fossard: ‘God exists, and I have experienced Him’.”

Discipleship/Formation

- “It is their task to bring the message of Christ ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8 RSV) and to make disciples of all men” (Mt. 28:19).
- “Above all, communion must not be conceived as if the avoidance of conflict were the highest pastoral value. Faith is always a sword, too, and it can demand precisely conflict for the sake of truth and love.” (cf. Mt.10:34)
- “Here the Pope notes two fundamental priorities of evangelization, of ‘making disciples’ of Jesus Christ today: a ‘solid and deep formation’ and a ‘strong testimony’. These two areas in which the new ecclesial movements and new communities are producing stupendous fruits for the life of the Church. These groups have become true ‘laboratories of faith’ and authentic schools of Christian life, holiness, and mission for thousands of Christians in every part of the world.”
- “The first and greatest priority is, therefore, Christian formation.”
- “The Christian family is no longer capable of passing on the faith to the next generation, and neither is the parish, even though it continues to be the indispensable structure for the Church’s pastoral mission in any given place.”
- “And what is the motivation behind the pedagogical strength? The ‘secret’, so to speak, is found in the charisms which have produced them and which constitute their very soul. It is the charism which produces the ‘spiritual affinity between individuals’ animating a community and movement.”
- “The charism is also the source of the extraordinary educating power of the movements and new communities. Here I refer to a formation whose departure point is a deep conversion of heart. It is no accident that these new ecclesial realities include converts, people who ‘come from afar’.”
- “…a distinct, specific pedagogical approach which is typically Christ-centered...It develops within Christian communities.”
- “…these new movements and communities are true schools for the formation of Christian ‘adults’. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger wrote some years ago, they are ‘forceful ways of living the faith that stimulate individuals, giving them joy and vitality; their faith really means something for the world.”
- “Movements know how to awaken a desire to ‘make disciples’ of Jesus Christ, a desire that often moves individuals, married couples, and even entire families to leave everything in order to embrace the mission...new communities are responding to one of the most urgent needs of the Church today, which is the catechesis of adults...”
- “…it is truly surprising to witness the missionary vision which the Holy Spirit has raised up today by means
of these new charisms. The movements and new communities have become true missionary ‘schools’ for so many lay…”1 Cardinal Rylko

Authority

- “...God continually stirs up prophetic men (they can be lay persons or religious, but also bishops and priests) who proclaim to it the right word that is not pronounced with sufficient force in the normal course of the ‘institution.’”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “…his move...supplements the fatherhood of bishops and priests by the power of a wholly pneumatic life.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “…movements generally come from a charismatic leader and they take shape in concrete communities that live the whole gospel anew from the origin and recognize the Church without hesitation as the ground of their life, without which they could not exist.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “Above all, communion must not be conceived as if the avoidance of conflict were the highest pastoral value. Faith is always a sword, too, and it can demand precisely conflict for the sake of truth and love.” (cf. Mt.10:34)2 Pope Benedict XVI

Community

- “Only when the person is struck and opened by Christ...can true community grow.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “The same Gribomont sees the monastic community that Basil founded as a ‘small group for the vitalization of the whole’ and does not hesitate ‘to call (Basil) the patron...of the new communities without vows.’”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “Augustine, for example, designed his whole rule ultimately on the basis of Acts 4:32: ‘they were one heart and soul.’”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “…movements generally come from a charismatic leader and they take shape in concrete communities that live the whole gospel anew from the origin and recognize the Church without hesitation as the ground of their life, without which they could not exist.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “Therefore, there is an urgent need for a strong testimony and a Christian formation. What great need there is of living Christian communities! This is where the ecclesial movements and new communities appear. They are the answer which has been raised up by the power of the Holy Spirit to this dramatic challenge at the end of the millennium. You are this providential answer.”1 Pope John Paul II
- “And what is the motivation behind the pedagogical strength? The ‘secret’, so to speak, is found in the charisms which have produced them and which constitute their very soul. It is the charism which produces the ‘spiritual affinity between individuals’ animating a community and movement.”1 Pope John Paul II

Encouragements

- ** “When these movements...are welcomed by bishops and priests...they represent a true gift of God... I therefore recommend that they be spread and that they be used to give fresh energy...”2 Pope John Paul II
- “In situations of scarcity, the Church must create stopgap structures.... In general the Church must keep the number of self-created administrative structures as small as possible. It must not over institutionalize itself, but must always remain open to the Lord’s unforeseen, unplanned calls.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “…the Church is also criss-crossed by successive waves of new movements, which re-invigorate...also serve the spiritual vitality and truth of the local churches.”2 Pope Benedict XVI
Living Bulwark

* “Two of the constitutive elements of the reality of ‘movements’ clearly emerge from all this:
  - a) The papacy did not create the movements, but it did become the principal reference-point in the structure of the Church, their ecclesial support... The Bishop of Rome... his office... has... an apostolic character.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
  - ** “... from the second century on, when the universal ministries were coming to an end, the papal claim to exercise this aspect of apostolic mission begins to be heard more clearly. It is no chance, then, that the movements, which go beyond the scope and structure of the local church, always go hand in hand with the papacy.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“...There must also always, be in the Church, ministries and missions that are not tied to the local church alone, but serve universal mission and the spreading of the gospel. The pope has to rely on these ministries, they on him, and the collaboration between the two kinds of ministries completes the symphony for the Church’s life.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“...I must say quite clearly here that the apostolic movements appear in ever new forms throughout history necessarily, because they are the Holy Spirit’s answer to the changing situations in which the Church lives.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“It is all the more true that movements cannot be organized and planned by authority. They must be given, and they are given. ...we must learn, using the gift of discernment, to accept what is right while overcoming what is unhelpful. One looking back at the history of the Church will be able to observe with gratitude that it has managed, time and again, in spite of all difficulties, to make room for the great new awakenings.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“...they are a gift to, and in, the whole of the Church, and must submit themselves to the demands of this totality in order to be true to their own essence. But the local churches, too, even the bishops, must be reminded to avoid making an ideal of uniformity in pastoral organization and planning.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“Primacy and episcopacy, the local ecclesial system and movements need each other.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

“Thanks to the ecclesiology and the theology of the laity developed by the Council, many groups referred to today as ‘ecclesial movements’ or ‘new communities’ have appeared alongside the traditional associations.” 1 Pope John Paul II

** “One of the Spirit’s gifts to our time is truly the flourishing of the ecclesial movements which, from the beginning of my pontificate, I have seen and continue to see as a reason for the hope for the Church and for society”. The Pope was deeply convinced that these ecclesial movements were a manifestation of a “new missionary advent”, of a great “Christian springtime...” 1 Pope John Paul II

“Movements know how to awaken a desire to ‘make disciples’ of Jesus Christ, a desire that often moves individuals, married couples, and even entire families to leave everything in order to embrace the mission... new communities are responding to one of the most urgent needs of the Church today, which is the catechesis of adults...” 1 Cardinal Rylko

“As we have seen, the ecclesial movements and communities are truly a ‘providential gift’ of God to the Church, a gift that should be received with a living sense of gratitude and responsibility...” 1 Cardinal Rylko

“...the Holy Father insisted that Pastors, bishops and parish priests ought to welcome these groups ‘cordially,’ recognizing and respecting their particular charisms...” 1 Cardinal Rylko

“One notes that something new is beginning: Here Christianity appears as a new reality, and is perceived as a way to live - to be able to live - in today’s world by people who have often come from afar. Today there are ‘isolated’ Christians at the margins of our strange understanding of modernity who are willing to try new ways of living. While they may not get much attention from public opinion, their way undoubtedly points to the way of the future.” 1 Pope Benedict XVI

** “According to the then Cardinal Ratzinger, the ecclesial movements and new communities provide something new which makes them a type of prophecy for the future.” 1 Cardinal Rylko

“The Church must value these realities while guiding them with pastoral wisdom, so that the Churches and the movements are not separate realities, but rather both constitute the living structure of the Church.” 1 Pope John Paul II
**Evangelism**

- “It is their task to bring the message of Christ ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8 RSV)…and to make disciples of all men” (Mt. 28:19) 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “…Francis of Assisi and Dominic…wanted simply …to renew the Church with the Gospel. And the very fact of being evangelists made it necessary to go beyond the borders of Christendom, to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “Apostolic life calls for apostolic activity: pride of place is given, again in different ways, to the proclamation of the gospel as a missionary element.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “The greatest challenge facing the Church… evangelization.” 1 Cardinal Rylko
- “As we have seen, the ecclesial movements and communities are truly a ‘providential gift’ of God to the Church, a gift that should be received with a living sense of gratitude and responsibility...” 1 Cardinal Rylko
- “We must reflect seriously on how we might carry out a true evangelization today...People don’t know God, they don’t know Christ...paganism is present.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- “The ecclesial movements and new communities contain a precious evangelizing potential urgently needed by the Church today. Yet their richness has not yet been fully recognized or valued.” 1 Cardinal Rylko
- “The movements and new communities respond to a second urgent need of great...importance, which is the need for ‘strong testimony.’ All Christian formation ought to have a missionary element...Missionary outreach helps baptized persons to discover the fullness of their own vocation; it helps them overcome the temptation of egoistic selfishness and the subtle danger of seeing the movement or community as a refuge or a way to flee the problems of the world in an environment of warm friendship.” 1 Cardinal Rylko
- “…is the indisputable ability to awaken the apostolic enthusiasm and missionary courage of the laity. They know how to draw out the spiritual potential of the laity by helping them smash the barriers of timidity...” 1 Cardinal Rylko

**Other Comments**

- “…our question: How do we characterize the relationship between the permanent pattern of Church order and ever new charismatic eruptions?” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- ** “Basil, like today’s movements, was obliged to accept the fact that the movement to follow Christ radically cannot be completely merged with the local Church.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI
- ** “Christ lives, and He sends from the Father the Holy Spirit - that is the joyful and life-giving experience that is ours precisely in the encounter with the ecclesial movements.” 2 Pope Benedict XVI

These two papers reveal the high level of enthusiasm and expectations that the movements and new communities have generated in high places in the Catholic Church. Three popes and quite a number of cardinals and bishops have spoken of the hope that these new works of the Spirit have generated. They have seen the chance for error, yet they have also seen the chance for new life, new responses of faith in the modern world.

**Conclusions**

First, we saw that the historical Catholic process of recognizing holiness has leaned heavily toward those who have lived their lives in more community-like environments.

Second, we saw that the very existence of the new communities and some of their important elements are approved and appreciated at the highest leadership levels.
Finally, many Catholics have as their own experience that of having been greatly trained, formed, and blest by some of those living within a religious order. Modern life, however, is not contributing many to the religious orders which are now, and have been for quite some time, in a state of declining membership.

It should not come as a major surprise, then, that the Holy Spirit is raising up lay communities, and that many Catholics have a predisposition to understand and respond to that initiative.

Notes

1. There are denominational differences about the “born again” experience versus the salvation reality which some say takes place at baptism, others at accepting Christ. There are sacramental and experiential differences and emphases.
2. The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements (resource TL), Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 1998; p. 1, para. 1
3. On Ecclesial Movements and New Communities (resource M), Cardinal Rylko, Zenit Weekly News Analysis, April 1, 2006; section 3, para. 6
4. Ibid, section 1, para. 1
5. Ibid, section 3, para. 7

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Mere Christian Community

by Steve Clark

New Testament view of community
People have a variety of notions of Christian community. Some people picture Christian community as 20 or 30 people living together in a large house or on a farm. Other people consider Christian community to be a group of Christians who pool their finances, putting their checkbooks and bank accounts into a common pot. Others think of community as a monastic community or religious order.

But to be a Christian community, a group of people do not have to live in one building or handle all their money in a centralized way. These are possible forms of Christian community. They may be good for some Christians and inappropriate for others. Fundamentally, Christian community means a way that Christians can relate to one another. The Scriptures regard a community relationship of love, commitment, and interdependence among Christians as normative, not optional.

I would like to examine three terms in the New Testament which communicate some of the scriptural vision of Christians’ relationships with each other. These are terms used to describe Christians: the word brother; the word koinonia, usually translated “fellowship”; and the phrase the body of Christ.

Brothers and sisters
The most common term for Christians in the New Testament is brothers. We might translate this “brothers and sisters in the Lord”. Brothers was the term Christians used to refer to each other.

The love Christians are to have for each other flows from this relationship and bears its special mark. “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22). “Let brotherly love continue,” we read in Hebrews 13:1. A particular Greek word, philadelphia, is used in such places to mean “brotherly love”.

Scripture is talking about a special kind of love that exists among us because we are brothers and sisters in the Lord. But in our own culture and language we have lost much of the underlying scriptural concept of brothers and sisters. On the one hand, the words brother and sister refer to children of the same parents. On the other hand, the words are used to refer to some vague kinship among all men, as in the slogan “the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God.” Not all brothers

Scripture, of course, uses brother and sister to refer to children of the same parents. However, Scripture never uses the term brother to refer to all mankind. It consistently uses brother precisely to describe situations in which there is
a definite relationship among a group of people. In the New Testament, this relationship is the brotherhood of Christians; we are brothers and sisters because we are joined to one another in Christ. Non-Christians are “outsiders”. For example, Paul writes, “Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time” (Colossians 4:5).

Scripture teaches that we should love and serve all men. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:44-45). We are to love our enemies because God loves them and because God wants Christians to be like him. But we are not told to love them because they are our brothers.

**Essentially, community is a type of relationship, rather than a particular structure**

**In the early church**
The early Christians understood that their faith gave them a distinctive identity which they shared with all other Christians. They saw their relationship as Christians as a relationship among members of a family; they were “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8) – the same spiritual blood flowed in them.

Everything was affected by the early Christians' unity in Christ. Oneness with brothers and sisters in the Lord was more important than relationships with fellow countrymen, with members of the same social class, with political allies, even with members of the same family. This was the meaning of the rebuke which Jesus spoke when informed that his blood relatives had come to visit him (Matthew 12:48-50).

**The Jewish background**
The early Christians recognized one another as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Before them, the Jews also had understood themselves as brothers. Among the Jews, brother meant not only “blood brother”, it also meant the relationship all Jews had with one another because they were members of the Jewish people.

Jewish law spelled out the responsibilities of this relationship in some detail. Deuteronomy instructs the Jews:

> At the end of every seven years...every creditor shall release what he has lent to...his brother, because the Lord’s release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it; but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release.

> You shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.

> You shall not lend upon interest to your brother... To a foreigner you may lend upon interest, but to your brother you shall not lend upon interest; that the Lord your God may bless you in all that you undertake (Deuteronmy 15:1-3; 15:7-8; 23:19-20).

The Jews of the old covenant understood that their relationship with each other was different from their relationship with all men. Their relationship as brothers and sisters was a relationship of full commitment. To be members of the
same people meant that each person was responsible for the welfare of all others (See also Leviticus 19:18).

The relationship was the same for the early Christians, and it should be the same among Christians today. But today, few of us experience a definite relationship with many other Christians. We may be close to a few Christians, but most are complete strangers to us, even those who attend and support the same church.

**Today, limited commitments**

While the early Christians made a total commitment to each other, our commitments are increasingly fragmented and limited. When another Christian gets into trouble or incurs a need, we expect him to seek help from friends, family or from a social welfare agency.

Recently, I asked myself a simple question. “What would I have done if I had gotten into financial difficulty a few years ago, before the community I belong to began to understand what it means to be brothers and sisters? If I had a medical bill of several thousand dollars that I absolutely had to pay, and I had no money in the bank, whom would I have turned to?” I could never have asked other members of the parish for the money; probably they would have told me of a bank where I might get a loan, or of a welfare office where I could get public assistance. As for the men I was working with to spread the gospel, we simply did not have that kind of commitment to each other. The person I would have gone to with my need was my blood brother. Our relationship meant that I could go to him for every need in my life. I could not think of a single Christian I could have turned to for help.

Some Christians know other Christians who would help them in trouble like that. But probably these are close friends who simply happen to be Christians. But our love for other Christians should not be limited to those whom we like and can get to know personally. Brotherhood in Jesus Christ, not friendship or personal intimacy, was the basis of the brotherly love spoken of in the New Testament. The early Christian communities – and such are the communities the church needs today – encompassed all Christians in a particular area. Brotherly care means a total commitment to those who share our rebirth in Jesus Christ, even to people whom we may not know at all.

**A family relationship**

Most Christians today make limited commitments to other Christians. They can be counted on for a number of carefully specified activities. The remaining parts of their lives are private. Our commitments as Christians are usually no different from our other commitments such as our jobs.

For many of us, the only exception to limited commitments is our family. A father makes a full commitment to his wife and children. He is responsible for the things the family does together and the things its members do alone – for his children while they are at school, for his wife while she works outside the home.

The Christian community is meant to be like a properly functioning family. The commitment of all of its members is full, encompassing all aspects of each person's life. Brothers and sisters place no limits on their responsibility for each other. We can live out this commitment because Jesus has changed us. As Christians, we can say, “You are my brother,” because the power that unites us is stronger and more important than anything else. The same Holy Spirit has poured the same love into our hearts.

**Sharing in Christian community**

The New Testament often uses a second term to describe the body of Christians, *koinonia*. The common English translation is “fellowship”. “Fellowship” is not a very helpful translation because it has the connotation of a loose collection of friends. *Koinonia* means holding things in common; an exact translation would be “community”. The Christians had a community; they were a group of people who shared.
The first thing they shared was the Holy Spirit. Paul refers to the “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” or the “community of the Holy Spirit” (2 Corinthians 13:14). The Spirit was the basis of the Christians’ common life.

But the early Christians shared much more. They had their whole lives in common. Perhaps the best definition of Christian community is found in the Acts of the Apostles: “Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common... There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need” (Acts 4:32,34-35).

Having everything in common meant that no one thought anything he possessed was his own. Everything was at the disposal of the community for the common good. Christian community, koinonia, means that our whole lives are in common. Our possessions, our lives, belong first to the Lord and then to our brothers and sisters in the lord, the body of Christ. In Christian community, what’s mine is yours. We do not keep parts of our lives for ourselves, unavailable to our brothers' claim on them.

**The place to begin**

The place to begin sharing, of course, is in our spiritual lives. Ironically, sometimes Christians are more likely to make great financial sacrifice to help each other than they are to talk about their prayer life, their experience of God, or their love for the Lord. Our spiritual lives are the most important things we have in common. Our life with God is the reason we share a life together in community. At the beginning it is hard for many people to open up their inner lives like this, but in the community I'm a part of we've learned that such sharing is essential for spiritual growth; it is also the basis for other aspects of our common life.

**An end to hiding**

Having our lives in common also means sharing other personal aspects of our lives. In our culture, if we sin, if we are plagued by sexual temptations, if we are anxious or depressed, we keep these problems to ourselves. Victories over difficulties are similarly private. We might share our personal lives with our spouse or a very close friend. But most of us grow up with the firm conviction, perhaps arising from bitter experience, that our personal lives are strictly private.

However, as brothers and sisters in Christian community, nothing in our lives is entirely our own. My life belongs to my brother. I cannot construct elaborate strategies to keep him from finding out what I am really like. In fact, opening up our lives to our brothers and sisters in the Lord is usually necessary to begin overcoming our problems and experiencing the freedom that the Lord wants us to have.

Most people who belong to Christian communities where personal sharing is encouraged find quickly that they can be more free about their personal lives than they ever imagined. Personal sharing must be done with discretion and in the appropriate circumstances. But it should be done, for it is part of sharing our lives in Christian community.

**Our money, our time**

Quite often, the real test of our commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christian community lies in our willingness to give up time and money. Time and money are not among the things we can keep while we give them away. We can talk about our spiritual life, and still hang onto it. If we share about a victory over a personal problem, the victory is still ours. However, if our money goes to our brother's purpose, we cannot spend it on our own purpose. If we give up our time to our brothers and sisters, we cannot use it for ourselves.
When we read in Scripture about taking up the cross and laying down our lives, we can ask ourselves, if these words have affected the way we make decisions about time and money. This is where we have to love as Jesus did, who gave up his life for love of men.

Scripture makes an explicit connection between the Gospel and our use of material goods. “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if any one has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:16-18).

Our love for each other does not consist of words – even honest, holy, spiritual words. It is something that gets expressed in material terms. It is practical, concrete, and sometimes painful.

This does not mean that we can produce Christian community by giving away all our money to needy Christians. A relationship with one another as brothers and sisters must come first. When that is established, then there should be koinonia, community, among those brothers and sisters. Many Christian groups have found themselves in serious difficulties because they have started by developing community in material terms.

The body of Christ
The phrase “the body of Christ” is found in the letters of Paul. In Ephesians, one of his later letters, he uses the term to refer to the universal church. However, in his earlier letters he applies the term to a local Christian assembly. He tells the Christians in Corinth that they should function as a body because they are the body of Christ. "Just as the [human] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

The members of the Christian body have different gifts, but they are to function in unity. “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues... Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (1 Corinthians 12:27-30)

Being the body of Christ means much more than running orderly worship services or establishing proper procedures to make decisions and resolves disputes. It is a daily, living relationship that embraces our whole lives. We are members of the same body all the time. The relationship goes beyond the things we do in common. On the job, alone in a secular environment, we are still parts of the body of Christ. Together, we are Jesus in the world today because we are members of his body. Through us, his body, he proclaims the good news of salvation; he heals, feeds, teaches, and confronts men with the truth about God.

Interdependence
An important implication for the church and for all of us as individuals is that we must begin to give up our hard-won independence and become interdependent; we must become people who depend on each other. This does not mean becoming weak or less capable of doing things. We become interdependent in order to become stronger – to do even greater things than Jesus did.

Interdependence sounds nice. However, it is much easier to acknowledge our interdependence than it is to act as though our very lives hinge on others. We experience this as difficult largely because in our culture, growing to maturity means cutting the ties that bind us to others. We learn to make our own decisions and chart our own course. Acting as a member of an interdependent body involves unlearning the habits of a lifetime.
Only the body is whole
God’s plan for our maturity is not individualistic. The only complete Christian is the body of Christ. Jesus is the only individual who is complete in himself. Today he is present in the world in the body of believers. Only the body can be whole. Anyone who wants to be a complete Christian must realize that he is part of a body, dependent on others, and must begin to act accordingly.

The interdependence and total commitment of Christians to one another is not possible without authority and submission. To be unified, a Christian body must have recognized headship. To function as a body, Christians must make themselves subordinate to one another. When we put our lives and resources in common, we need to establish some person or group to take responsibility for the common life to see that it functions in good order. When Christians love one another and are one in the Lord, authority takes on the character of service. It changes from something fearful into a personal relationship we can trust.

Sometimes Christians use the term Christian community vaguely to refer to any group in which everyone is a Christian. In reality, Christian community is Christians who have a brotherly commitment to one another, who share their lives, and who live interdependently as members of a body. People working for church renewal who want to know what Christian community is and how to build it should begin by studying the depth of the relationship among Christians that the Scriptures envision.
Journey to Covenant Community

"from Brussels ...to Brussels with family and community in between"

by Jean-Francois Collet

Dr. Jean-Francois Collet is a Belgian scientist who does biochemistry research at the Catholic University of Louvain in Brussels, Belgium. In 2004 he received the prestigious BAEF Alumni Award for excellence in scientific research. He and his wife, Claire and their three children live in Brussels.

A happy meeting at Tiberiade
My wife Claire grew up in a French village close to the German border. I grew up in Brussels, Belgium. Our common path started in April ’94 during an Easter celebration at the Belgian Community of Tiberiade. After our wedding in 1997 at the end of the summer, Claire moved to Brussels.

Claire and I grew up as Christians. We both had a personal prayer life; we were involved in Franciscan renewal groups and in several other church-related movements. With Tiberiade, I had the wonderful opportunity to go on an ecumenical pilgrimage from Assisi in Italy to Sarov in Russia. We were joined by Orthodox brothers and sisters and, on our way from Italy to Russia, we prayed together for the unity of the church.

Yearning for Christian community
After we got married, Claire and I got involved with youth groups in Brussels, being responsible for the pastoral care of about 150 young boys and girls. At the same time, a desire for community started to grow in our hearts. Paradoxically this desire was both vague and clear. We did not know what we were longing for, but we knew it was something different from the communities we knew in Belgium. We prayed for it, asking the Lord to show us what he wanted.
In 2000, I got my PhD in biochemistry and shortly after that we decided to look for a place for a postdoctoral job. At a meeting in Leeds, I met an outstanding scientist from La Jolla, California who invited me to join his lab in sunny home state California. Although it was very tempting to take this job opportunity, we were not at peace with it and we continued to pray for discernment.

In May 2000 I heard of a good lab in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. So I sent an email to the group leader; he called me back less than an hour later and it immediately became clear to Claire and I that this was the place where we were supposed to go. At that time we did not even know where Michigan was, and we had no idea that there was a Christian community such as the Word of Life. [See related article on Word of Life.] We got word of it a week before we left Brussels. Someone gave us the email address of Bruce Yocum. I sent Bruce an email to ask him a few questions about the community in Ann Arbor. Bruce replied that he was not in Michigan anymore and suggested we contact Ed Conlin. We did not know it, but the Lord was discretely tying a spiritual knot that would impact our life far more that we could have expected.

**Word of Life community in Ann Arbor**
The day after we landed in Michigan, Ed came over to our new place. We could not believe our ears when we heard that Ed had spent several years in Brussels and was fluent in Flemish and in French, the two languages spoken in Belgium. On our first Sunday in Ann Arbor, Ed took us to the Word of Life afternoon community meeting. Although we had to adapt to the way they prayed, we quickly sensed that this community was the answer to our prayers. This was what we were longing for! A few months later, we got baptized in the Holy Spirit. I have to say that it did not change our life overnight. However, it progressively made us enter into a new and deeper relationship with Christ. We stayed in Ann Arbor more than 3 years; our time in the community has been a real blessing for Claire and me, and also for our 3 children. It really renewed us and, importantly, gave us a vision. We now knew that community life was possible!

**Jerusalem Community in Brussels**
Strengthened with this vision, we decided to move back to Belgium where we joined the Jerusalem community, a multilingual and multicultural community which is part of the same network of international communities as Word of Life in Ann Arbor. When we first went to Jerusalem, the community was recovering from difficult times they had experienced in the 1990s. However, we were deeply moved by the faithfulness and commitment of the community members we met. It quickly became obvious to us that the Lord was at work in the community, bringing new life to it. After seven years in Jerusalem, we feel blessed to belong to this community and to humbly take part in its life and mission. We are convinced that Ann Arbor was for us the best way to go from Brussels to… Brussels!
Karen (right) with friends at an Antioch summer barbeque event

A home and fruitful place for service

by Karen Mascarenhas

**Antioch** is part of an international network of about 70 communities called the Sword of the Spirit. I come from one such community in Mumbai, India. Four years ago I left Mumbai to pursue higher education in London. Coming to the UK was a completely different experience for me. Coming from a culture of warm and friendly people it was difficult to get used to a lonely life in London where people are more reserved. Added to this was the not-so-pleasant weather. I remember wondering how I would cope for the next year. God obviously had plans for me, and a week into my course I met some women from Antioch's university outreach (**Koinonia**) and went along to their weekly meeting. One of the first things that struck me was the welcoming nature of these students which was such a refreshing change from what I had seen so far in London.

My first experience with Antioch was at the community anniversary weekend. I didn't really know what to expect and wondered if they were anything like the community I was part of in India. To my surprise I found they were so much like my community back home, with people being warm and loving. That weekend really made me realize I was so blessed to be part of the Sword of the Spirit and to have found community in London.

Since then God has brought me a long way. Initially I never thought I would have much time to invest with Koinonia or Antioch because of my intense course, and the fact that I lived in northeast London. However, as I went along to some Koinonia meetings and during my personal prayer times, I began to realize that there was more to life than just...
Living Bulwark  

focusing on my degree. That changed the way I managed my time, and I began to see that the minute I had God as my top priority (including being with people whose hearts were set on him - Koinonia, community, etc.), my assignments, exams, dissertations all fell into place. What was even more amazing was how well I was able to do in them. Through it all, I slowly learnt how God wanted me to trust in him totally, which is something I have always struggled with. This was something I was to learn more of in the months after I received my degree.

I felt God calling me to serve him in Koinonia after my degree and thought I would be able to do it while I looked for a job. However as the months drew on it was more and more difficult to find a job and I had trouble with a visa as well. I ended up spending a lot more time serving with Koinonia than I had planned. This involved connecting with Christian students at university, and I found God really blessing me in this work reaching out to students. I was happy serving God in this way but constantly questioned and doubted if this was where God wanted me to be especially since I had no visa and hadn't found a job yet.

Although it was really difficult, I felt a sense that God wanted me to "have faith” in him for my present circumstances, and I had a number of scripture verses assuring me that he was caring for me. However, being the kind of person who always liked things done my way and who hated uncertainty, I found this very difficult to handle. As I look back I've seen that even though I was going through a difficult time in another country away from family, I wasn't alone. It was so reassuring to know that I had the support and prayers of the community here in London. I am thankful for God's provision in ways like that.

I know that God’s provision and love for his people never ends. Exactly when I desperately needed answers about how I was going to be able to carry on in London, I received my visa a full two weeks before it was actually due. God's provision didn't stop there, and just after Christmas when I returned to London really low on funds to survive, I was offered a job with Koinonia. In addition I also have an opportunity to work in a laboratory a few hours a week and get UK-based lab experience.

Shortly before these things fell into place, I had turned to this scripture verse from Isaiah 30 during my prayer time, explaining how God is waiting to be gracious to me:

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him. For a people shall dwell in Zion, in Jerusalem; you shall weep no more. He will surely be gracious to you at the sound of your cry. As soon as he hears it, he answers you. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isaiah 30:18-21)

I've realized through this experience that what God really wanted me to do was serve him fully and leave the rest up to him. I feel so blessed and happy. It has not been an easy thing to learn, but I've realized it's God's plan for my life that's important and not my own, because he knows best. It's about fitting myself in his plan.
I've been a member of Antioch Community for over 23 years now, having first come into contact with community through one of its outreaches based at the University of London, where I was studying.

I can think of many reasons why I decided to join Antioch, not least the blessing of being able to find “a place to stand” with men and women who were, and are, constant in faith, hope, and love, having a vision to be a bulwark and a place of refuge, and a desire to make Jesus known in this generation. But, I always come back to one thing, something that makes Antioch, though numerically a small community, a significant, unique, and prophetic expression of God's love for his people, and that's our ecumenical call – a call to live out Christian unity with integrity.

I was born in 1968, in Ballymena, Northern Ireland – the year the modern-day “troubles,” as they are euphemistically called, began. I was brought up in a strong Catholic family, in a small farming community. All the other villages around us were all Catholic, and also quite strongly believed that Northern Ireland should become part of the Republic of Ireland, not the United Kingdom. To say that I had a parochial upbringing would be true in its fullest sense. Anti-Protestant feeling was very strong in our local community. The sense of mistrust, suspicion, and hostility was not helped by the segregation of the Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland. In my case, I was 17 years old when I met my first Protestant. In many ways this was a watershed, the guy was perfectly normal (we went on to be close friends when we went to college in London) so my worldview, such as it was at the age of 17, was challenged for the first time.
A year later, when I left home to study in London, the Lord started to stretch my perspective even further. I became involved in University Christian Outreach (UCO), a student Christian group at the University of London (now called Koinonia), mainly through the persistence and faithfulness of a few men. Even back in 1986 the university environment was a hostile place for Christians. This group was unique among the student Christian societies in providing a place for Protestants and Catholics to serve and worship together, a place where I quickly felt spiritually at home. Later on I discovered that UCO was an outreach of the West London Community (now called Antioch), a group of Christians of all denominations, including families and single people, as well as a lay brotherhood of celibate men who were seeking to live out the call to Christian unity in their day-to-day lives. The theologians call this grassroots evangelism – it's a precious thing, which comes from the recognition that as fellow members of the Body of Christ we have a relationship with and an obligation to each other. In 1988, I made a public commitment to join the West London Community. That night was significant for me and for the community too – at the time the senior leader of the community was a Protestant from Northern Ireland, and I was the first Northern Irish Catholic to join. On the same evening a Singhaelese from Sri Lanka joined, crossing another divide, and taking his place worshipping side by side with several Sri Lankan Tamils, who at that time formed a significant contingent of the West London Community.

Regarding reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (2:14-16) wrote:

> For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

In Antioch we attempt to live out our life together because of what we've got in common – what we have received from the same person – the Lord Jesus. At the same time we try to understand our differences, showing charity and humility in our dealings with one another, and supporting each other in being faithful members of our own churches and traditions. This is not cheap and not always easy, but as Psalm 133 says, when we dwell in unity, God commands a blessing, and this is my experience of 23 years living in this ecumenical, charismatic, covenant Christian community called Antioch.

[Arthur and his wife Rebecca live in London, UK with their two children.]
Living in an Imperfect Christian Community

by Tom Caballes

And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. If you have love for one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples.

- Johns 13:34-35

A Perfect Christian Community

We all have different ideas of what a dream house, an ideal car, or the best job looks like. But how would you depict a perfect Christian community? My description would include:

- All community members are faithful to daily prayer and Scripture.
- All community members have heard all our courses and are applying them in their lives. All of them are growing in Christian character.
- All the leaders have been adequately trained and have the vision, skill, time and energy to follow God’s call; and all the members understand and support their leaders.
- There is perfect unity within the community – among the leaders, members, and the youth. There are no cliques or factions within the community.
- All relationships are doing well – there are no relationship difficulties, strains, grudges or misunderstandings. People patch up broken relationships quickly.
- There is no slander and gossip – every word that is heard is healthy, up-building and encouraging.
- All members are involved in some form of service and are building up the community and wider church
in one way or another.

- The community is doing well financially, with all members being very generous with their giving.
- The community youth are catching the vision of the community, and are well on the way to becoming full adult members in the future. All the community youth are choosing to follow God and a vast majority of them stay in community. Their most significant relationships are in the community.
- Community youth work is flourishing, with abundant resources available in all fronts.
- Everyone is trying to evangelise in the school, university, neighbourhood and at the workplace. There is a good response to evangelism work. Because of this, the community membership is flourishing.
- All the members’ needs are taken care of.
- All members of the community live out their call faithfully to the end.

Would I like to live in such a perfect community? Most probably, but I do not think I am qualified to do so. I will bring that community in disrepute because of my unfaithfulness, faults and sins. The reality is - no such community exists – at least here on earth. We are all sinners, and being part of a Christian community does not make us automatically a saint. We are all in the process of being redeemed and growing in Christian maturity. That is why our community is not perfect – because all of us are not perfect. That transformation to Christ-likeness will only end after we breathe our last breath here on earth.

**A School of Love**

One thing that I learned when I was young in community is that it is like a school of love. In school, we sign up to learn things. God the Father is the principal of the school you are enrolled in. We have the one and same teacher – Jesus Christ. He is the one teaching us news skills - how to love, serve, relate and forgive one another. We also have the same tutor or coach – the Holy Spirit – to give us power to change and be transformed. We have one book all the time we are learning – the Scripture, the Word of God. The Bible is our textbook, our guide, and our map in daily living.

**Some features of our School of Love include:**

- We enrolled in the school so we can learn Kingdom values, relationships and character; we are here primarily to learn to love and serve one another. We are here to learn to be Christ-like in all things. And we are here also to unlearn the old ways of living and relating to one another before we enrolled in the school.
- We have schoolmates in the community who might have enrolled earlier or later than us – they are ones we primarily apply what we learn from the school.
- Our schoolmates are as imperfect as we are. We sin against each other and we hurt one another. We need to learn to forgive them and ask forgiveness from them as the need arises. In spite of their imperfections, we are called to love and serve them to the end – and that means we will bury one another and take care of each other’s families as we get older and die. Our relationships are eternal and are thicker than blood because we are all bought by the same price – the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- We do not earn any degree after some time – our learning in the school of love is meant to be a lifetime enrolment, unless the Lord calls us somewhere else. Our graduation is in heaven, where Jesus would welcome us and say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant!”

**Embracing an Imperfect Christian Community**

Our community is the body of Christ here on earth. It can be a great witness for non-believers to see people of different race, age, location and religion to be caring, loving and serving one another. If we do not live our lives well, our community can be a great scandal to people outside looking in. How can our community grow in holiness and zeal for God and become mature? Its members need to grow in holiness and zeal for God and
Living Bulwark

become mature. We all need to set our focus on God, who called us to live this particular way of life, and not on the faults, weaknesses and sins of our brothers and sisters. If we do, then it will only be a matter of time before we give up. God is the source of all grace, and we need to fix our eyes on God in order to live our call in our imperfect community.

I believe that it is God, by His great love and mercy to us, who formed our Christian community. It is by His grace that we can love, serve and live the way of life He has called us into. He is the one who sustains us and makes us grow to become mature men and women of God. Yes, we may need to talk with our leaders on improving how our community functions and also work on some of our relationships to restore them, but let us embrace our imperfect community, made up of imperfect brothers and sisters. Let us be faithful to our call to the end. Heaven is our true home, but God has gifted us a temporary home here on earth – our sick, deficient and imperfect Christian community.

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Tom and his wife Mhel and their two daughters live in Wellington, New Zealand.
Conversion, Covenant, and Immortal Diamonds!

by Tom Mangan

The Gospel is never negotiable. It cannot be adjusted to fit special needs. It is what it is. It applies today in the same way it applied 2000 years ago. It will apply in the same way years from now. It is an absolute. Everyone, everywhere, and in every age will face the same question: where do you stand with the Christ?

When Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God, he said: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). I believe that if we want to be faithful disciples of Christ, then we need to embrace both conversion and covenant on an ongoing basis. We need the balance of both. Conversion is the growth element and covenant is the context in which growth occurs.

Now conversion to the Good News demands a continuous response. In other words, grow or die! If we are to remain faithful to this eternal Gospel we must be dedicated to growth. I have come to understand that the process of conversion is in the present continuous tense. Even the Christ grew as he lived on the earth. Look at the end of chapters 1 and 2 of Luke: “And the child grew and became strong in spirit…” “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.”

New Testament examples:

Let me give you a few examples from the New Testament. First, let’s look at Mary, the mother of Jesus. She moves from discipler of Jesus to disciple of Jesus. Look at the absolute beauty of Mary’s inspired song recorded in Luke 1:46-55, which is rich in truth, tradition and humility. It’s a true canticle – a song of praise, recounting the deeds of God, recorded in Scripture. It’s a great teaching that I’m sure, as a mother, she passed on to her son. It’s filled with great ideals. (Long before she conceived Jesus, the Word of God who became flesh in her womb, she allowed the
Word to take root in her heart.) But, as a disciple she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Later, in the Gospels we see Mary change with her life’s experiences: (1) when Jesus was “lost” in the Temple, (2) at the wedding feast of Cana when the wine ran out and (3) at the Cross where she is silent.

Peter, the chief Apostle, is another example. He moves from impetuousness to a humble submission to the will of the Lord. In Matthew 16:22-23, he rebukes Jesus. He attempts to speak for the Lord; he betrays Jesus. Then, at the turning point in his career, Peter falls to his knees and is completely overcome (Luke 5:8)!

Yes, he turns from disciple to disciple. At the end of John we see prophetically a far different person than the outspoken fisherman of the earlier chapters. We see a man who will ultimately offer up his life for the Kingdom. The path of coming to faith is different from that of coming to the mere knowledge of God. Just look at the maturity of Peter as expressed in 1 Peter 1:3-9. If maturity equals the producing of spiritual fruit, then Peter had a bushel full!


Later, in his aggressiveness as a disciple, he would confront Peter to his face over the issue of Judaizing Christians. But, toward the end of his life we see a humble disciple who, from prison, encourages the Christian communities with godly profundity and wisdom – a sure sign of a mature man of God. You can see a great example of this in his letters to the Colossians and to the Philippians.

1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory... 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

– Colossians 3:1-4, 16-17

The people of Israel in the Old Testament may have been Jews, but they weren’t necessarily religious. In other words, they may have bought into “the way of life,” but not the Messiah or his prophets. It is possible for us to do the opposite. That is, to accept Christ and reject “the way of life” he has so generously given us. Growth occurs in context. If tomatoes need a hothouse, we, too, need a field in which to flower. We need covenant; we need community!

**God is a covenant maker**

If you look through the Bible you can see many instances in which God made a covenant with people: (1) Adam & Eve, (2) Noah, (3) Abraham, (4) Israel, (5) the Levites, (6) Phineas, (7) David and (8) of course, there is the New Covenant that he made with all of us. Christ is the mediator of that covenant and the Holy Spirit is the administrator of it. The sheer number of times in which God made covenant should give us a hint of how God works with a people. A covenant helps us to keep our promises, to manifest our love, to agree on certain things, to remember, to pass important things on to the next generation, to walk in God’s abundant blessings, to remain rightly related to the Lord, to instill in each of us a healthy godly fear. A covenant can also help us to understand the everlasting nature of God’s covenant, to be more God-like, to love with a deeper commitment, to obtain the mercy of God, to learn how to worship, to tug God’s heart, to set apart certain things for the Lord, to be free and to be better brothers and sisters to one another.
We are a covenant people and we keep covenant in all sorts of ways: not neglecting to meet together, keeping holy the Lord’s Day, worshiping, tithing, praying, serving, doing works of mercy, etc. We meet in covenant gatherings to do the Lord’s business together. This is our time. We need each other more than we could ever imagine. The glaring example of righteous lives is in our midst. We need the challenge to outdo one another in zeal. If you shoot low, I will only shoot lower, but if you reach for the stars, then I’ll reach for them with you as well.

Small groups provide a pastoring, caring environment to spur or aid growth. Where else can we find acceptance, worth and compassion, but with the brothers and sisters? What if, like Solomon, you prayed for wisdom and knowledge and God sent you to your men’s or women’s group to receive it?

What if we walked into our small groups looked around and said this: “These folks here are a means of grace for me today!” Growth isn’t optional. It is absolutely imperative for us if we are to reach our goal of being changed into the image and likeness of God (2 Corinthians 3:18). Let’s face it, sanctification (Romans 6:19), transformation (Romans 12:2) and growth (1 Peter 2:2) should be present continuous actions for us. We are called to offer our bodies in slavery to righteousness to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. If we want to mature in our salvation, then we need the on-going help and support of one another. The Scriptures give ample reasons for this:

9 Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. 10 For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up. 12 And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

- Ecclesiastes 4:9-10,12

**A launch pad to maturity**

The Christian community should be a launch pad to maturity. A launch pad is a platform with a supporting structure from which a rocket can take off and head for it is destination. As a people, we find this supporting structure in our brothers and sisters who will pick us up when we’re down and help us go further than we could on our own (Sirach 37:12). We need to encourage, counsel, and pray for one another. Spiritual progress can only happen with the aid of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our goal and destiny is nothing less than immortality, union, and glory with God.

Gerard Manly Hopkins (1844-1899) penned in verse this great mystery of our faith when our mortal nature will be changed in an instant at the last trumpet sound when the Lord Jesus returns in glory:

“In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is,  
Since he was what I am, and  
This jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch,  
matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.”

[from the poem, *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire*]
Tom Mangan is the senior coordinator of the People of God Community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA.
What Is the Sword of the Spirit?

Some Questions and Answers

By Jerry Munk

What is the Sword of the Spirit?

Simply put, the Sword of the Spirit is an association of self-governing communities that have agreed to do some things the same way and to do some things together. The Sword of the Spirit is governed by an international assembly, composed of the senior leader of each member community. In addition, the Sword of the Spirit is divided into a number of regions: the North American Region, the Ibero-Americana Region (Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula); the European Region, the Asian Region, and the South Pacific Region. Each region is governed by a regional council, on which sit the senior leaders of member communities in that region.

Why the name, Sword of the Spirit?

“Sword of the Spirit” is a term one finds in the Bible. The term is a reference to the Bible itself (Ephesians 6:17) and, more generally, “sword” is sometimes used in Scripture to refer to an instrument wielded by God for his purposes. When leaders of the communities met to pray for direction, they were led to take this name as a statement of the call God had given to us. Therefore, the Sword of the Spirit is a name signifying our role as a missionary body of Christian
disciples, witnessing to and proclaiming the word of God in this age of **spiritual** warfare – a people who can be used by the Lord to accomplish His purposes.

**What is the purpose of the Sword of the Spirit?**
The Sword of the Spirit stands and works for a number of goals:

1. To help people commit their lives fully to Jesus Christ and become mature Christians.
2. To help people experience the presence and power of the Holy Spirit so they may live and serve in a spiritually effective way.
3. To foster love and worship of God and a life that is lived for His glory.
4. To form loving, personal relationships that support an ongoing Christian life.
5. To develop a way of life where the Gospel can be lived fully.
6. To do the work of evangelization—to help other people come to know Jesus Christ.
7. To proclaim and defend the Gospel.
8. To foster Christian unity through collaboration and cooperation among Christians from different traditions.

In addition, the Sword of the Spirit understands that it is called to be a bulwark. The dictionary defines a bulwark as a solid, wall-like structure built for protection and support. By building an international community of communities linked together in a common way of life and engaging a common mission, the Sword of the Spirit is a bulwark: a structure that provides protection, support, and defense in the face of modern challenges to the Christian way of life. By being part of a bulwark, members can better respond to those challenges in unified and life-giving ways.

**Is the Sword of the Spirit a church?**
Sword of the Spirit communities are not churches. Members of Sword of the Spirit communities belong to many different Christian churches. They remain active in their local parish or congregation. They live a common life in community that is complementary to and supportive of church membership. Some Sword of the Spirit communities are ecumenical: members attend churches from different Christian communions. Some Sword of the Spirit communities represent a single church communion. There are a number of Catholic communities in the Sword of the Spirit.
Is it necessary for all Christians to live in community?
The New Testament describes the Christian life in ways that are clearly corporate and communal. Christians are called to relate to one another as “brothers and sisters.” They are to be knit together as “members of one body.” They are “members of the household and family of God.” In this sense, all Christians are called to live in community. Relatively few Christians will live in a Sword of the Spirit community. By its existence, however, The Sword of the Spirit hopes to be a witness to the communal dimension of the Christian faith, a dimension that is weak or missing in the lives of many believers. We hope that our life together encourages individuals and groups of Christians to examine the New Testament call to a corporate life and take tangible steps to grow in it.

Why form community alongside, but still separate from, church life?
Christian communities are formed with those people who hear the Lord’s call and are willing to embrace it freely. In some circumstances those who hear this call and respond to it are scattered among several Christian traditions. In other circumstances those who hear this call and respond to it are from a single church communion and believe that the Lord would have them build community with people from that communion. We have come together in communities because God can act in specific communities to accomplish things that can then be made available to the wider church. Members of Sword of the Spirit communities love the churches of which they are members. Many serve their local congregation and work for renewal within it. Members see their involvement in The Sword of the Spirit as complementary to and part of their commitment to their church – and to the larger body of Christ.

Why is the Sword of the Spirit ecumenical?
The word “ecumenical” is a Greek word meaning the whole of creation or the whole family. It is a word that implies all of the Christian people, regardless of the church communion to which they belong. We believe the Lord has called The Sword of the Spirit to be a special witness to ecumenical cooperation. Division and bad relating among Christians has been common for most of the last 2000 years. The issues that divide us are important, but so is the
fact that we are brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Members of The Sword of the Spirit, even members of single-communion communities, work to give witness to the unity that we already share in Jesus Christ. We actively follow the guidelines given by our respective churches for how we can and should cooperate as brothers and sisters in Christ – while we wait and pray for greater Christian unity. We seek to live our Christian life in a way that will further the unity of God’s people, seeking to find a convergent way of expressing our Christian life in harmony with our church identity. It is encouraging that many leaders of our respective churches have been involved in an ongoing ecumenical dialogue, and have made progress towards greater unity and understanding.

**Sword of the Spirit communities are “lay communities.” What does that mean?**

Christians use the term “laity” to distinguish church members from the ordained clergy: priests, ministers, those in monastic life, and, in some traditions, missionaries. Ordained clergy do participate actively in some of our communities, but the focus of our communities is on living a day-to-day Christian way of life, a way of life that is helpful and supportive regardless of one’s vocation: male or female, married or single, lay or clerical. All Christians, not just clergy, are called to live fully for Jesus Christ and His kingdom.

**The Sword of the Spirit is “charismatic.” What does that mean?**

You may notice some different things about our prayer meetings and gatherings: people raise their hands, pray out loud, pray in a language that you (and they) do not understand, and every so often someone will read a Bible passage or say something he or she believes comes from the Lord. All of these things have been part of Christian worship since the Church was established, but they had, for the most part, fallen into disuse. In recent decades, the Charismatic Renewal has changed this for millions of Christians. Through this renewal, people have come to a more personal and tangible experience of the person, the power, the guiding, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. (For a partial list of the gifts of the Holy Spirit see 1 Corinthians 12:7-9.)

This experience is similar to what happened to the early Christian believers, as we read in Acts 2:1-13: All the believers were gathered in one place...they were all filled...
with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. The Apostle Peter explained what was happening by quoting an Old Testament prophet: “This is what I will do, says the Lord. I will pour out my Spirit on everyone. Your sons and your daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams. On My servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit and they will proclaim my message” (Acts 2:17-18).

[This article is excerpted from, The Sword of the Spirit: Communities of Disciples on Mission, by Jerry Munk. Used with permission. The booklet can be purchased from Tabor House.]

When people first encounter the Sword of the Spirit, they often have a number of questions. This booklet provides a good overview of the New Testament call for all Christians to live in a new society and one response to that call, the Sword of the Spirit. Especially helpful for guests and newcomers.
I grew up and went to university during the peace movement in America during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was fueled to a large degree by the Vietnam war. Many young people simplified and sentimentalized the notion of peace. The Beatles, for instance, made a lot of money on a song whose main message was “all we are saying is give peace a chance.” Shortly afterward they broke up, the result of some irreconcilable differences.

The peace movement was strongest on university campuses. Many students were socially conscious and idealistic, determined to change the world they lived in. Lambasting the greed and tyranny which characterized the “capitalist system,” thousands of strident, naïve student protesters vowed to shape a brave new world.

I remember joining the volunteer staff of a student newspaper on campus in my effort to change society. I was enthralled to be in the company of young, bright, selfless idealists working unitedly against the ills of the world.

Within a short time, however, I was unnerved by what I saw in these selfless idealists. Jealousy and backbiting were common among various editors. Many of the staff seemed to have fragile and inflated egos. Arguments flared quite easily, gossip was common, selfishness rampant. My bubble began to contort – then it burst. The very problems we were seeking to solve worldwide flourished in our midst! How empty all the words and
editorials about greed and injustice seemed to me, as I considered the vivid testimony of our own lives.

Soured and sobered by this experience, I was motivated to look to elsewhere for the answers to these very basic human problems. Even my untrained eye could see that the validity of one’s message is best judged by the witness of one’s life. Talk is cheap by action costly.

Just as the obvious selfishness of many of my idealistic colleagues quenched my zeal for the peace movement, the actions of some Christians arrested my attention.

I was impressed by the thoughtfulness and concern that was regularly demonstrated by members of a local Christian group. One young man whom I had just met invited me over to his apartment for a fine meal and gracious hospitality. Another Christian acquaintance volunteered to type a paper for me during a time when I was particularly busy. These actions, plus many more, were instrumental in a spiritual change that began to take place in my life. I am certain many have been drawn into a new or fuller Christian life, largely by the loving actions of other Christians toward them. Conversely, many have not been won, because they have yet to personally experience real Christian love.

This principle of love is broadly recognized as an important tool of persuasion. To a significant degree, the membership growth in various sects and cults can be attributed to the warmth and love initially extended to outsiders. Even the most secular activities and causes can attract people to them by the demonstration of love and concern. Though this kind of love is often shallow and fleeting, it can attract enough to fulfill its purpose. A highly touted college athlete once told me, “Boy, that coach was so nice and friendly when he recruited me – smiling attentive, gracious. What a change after I was signed and at practice! He turned real mean and nasty – quick!”

Genuine Christian love differs from the world’s version, in at least two ways. First it is directly rooted in the only true source of love for the world – the love of Christ. “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). We are now able to love others effectively because we have received the momentous, empowering, eternal love of God Almighty. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

Second, Christian love rightly directs its recipients towards man’s greatest good. The apostle Paul showed through his actions and his words the genuine love that compelled him to serve both believers and non-believers. This love was directed toward the highest, most noble aspirations. To the church in Philippi he wrote:

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:8-11)

Paul wanted their love to abound not simply because it would win more converts, good as that goal might be, but so they could be pure and blameless, filled with the fruits of righteousness. The ultimate purpose of love is for “the glory and praise of God.”
Love is cited frequently in the New Testament as the highest virtue. We are told that it is greater than all gifts, knowledge, and ability. We are charged to make it our aim in all relationships – with Christian and non-Christians alike. It is the basis for Christian unity – a sign to a lost world that they may believe. Jesus thus prays for his disciples, “that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you have sent me” (John 17:23).

Showing love to others is not an evangelistic ploy or strategy. The love that Christians have even for their enemies is a stamp of their sonship:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

In this passage the Lord exhorts us to extend our love to those who don’t love us, who are ungrateful and selfish. Even sinners love those who love them. There is no inherent virtue in returning good for good. Every day we come across many unlovable, ungrateful, and unfriendly individuals that we are commanded to love and forgive.

The story is told of a missionary who served a colony of people with leprosy. His aim was to bring the gospel to the least loved and most universally shunned people in the world. One patient met him every day with extreme hostility – yelling obscenely and flinging garbage at him. Despite this ongoing contempt, the missionary visited the man every day, until one afternoon, eighteen years later, he accepted Christ. Surely, the love of Christ extends to the most abject and resistant human being. Love can win them to his kingdom by its power and durability.
Most of us find it much easier to love Christians than others, though even Christians are not always easy to love. How instinctively we can react to the pettiness, selfishness, immorality, and disinterest of many of our contemporaries. How frequently those around us seem to take advantage, to offend or ignore us. In fact, more and more people in our society are behaving in decidedly unchristian ways. Such behavior can tax us well beyond our limits. Fortunately, we can rely on the power of God to love others, regardless of how unloving they might act. Our decision to love and serve difficult people must remain firm. God’s grace makes loving action possible. Jesus’ own example is one of unfailing love. Richard Wurmbrand graphically recounts the torture he underwent in the communist prison camps of Rumania. But he repeatedly cites the power of Christ’s love alive in the most desperate and challenging circumstances:

We know about the love of Christ toward the communists by our own love toward them.

I have seen Christians in communist prisons with 50 pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterward without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold, and praying with fervor for the communists. This is humanly inexplicable! It is the love of Christ, which was shed into our hearts.

Another account emphasizes the converting power of Christian love toward those who seem impossible to love,

A Christian was sentenced to death. Before being executed, he was allowed to see his wife. His last words to his wife were, “You must know that I die loving those who kill me. They don’t know what they do and my last request of you is to love them, too. Don’t have bitterness in your heart because they kill your beloved one. We will meet in heaven.” These words impressed the officer of the secret police who attended the discussion between the two. Afterward he told me the story in prison, where he had been put for becoming a Christian.

By witnessing the heroic love of numerous Christians for their tormenters, Wurmbrand concludes:

God will not judge us according to how much we endured, but how much we could love. I am a witness for the Christians in communist prisons that they could love. They could love God and men.

We can receive inspiration from these extraordinary accounts as we seek to love and do good to more ordinary sinners in more ordinary daily circumstances. For most of us, determined love will probably take more modest forms:

- continuing to be courteous to an inconsiderate neighbor
- forbearing our employer’s sarcasm and particularly demonstrating appropriate respect
- doing a favor for a critical, ungrateful in-law
- regularly visiting an invalid aunt who endlessly details her sufferings
- giving a small gift to a stingy co-worker
- volunteering to cut the lawn of our unfriendly, vacationing neighbor

I was once praying with great fervor for the conversion of a friend, when the Holy Spirit interrupted me with this practical directive: “Go wash his car. You can pray at the same time.”
We can find many occasions to love others – without expecting a return. Giving a helping hand, buying a lunch, offering a car ride, loaning a tool, baking a dessert – there are innumerable opportunities to give and do good. These kinds of actions warm and win the hearts of others.

One Christian family I know makes it a practice to welcome newcomers into their neighborhood. They not only introduce themselves, but offer practical assistance as well. The husband and his sons try to pitch in with some of the heavy work; the wife makes a meal or two. This kind of help prepares the soil of their hearts for later spiritual influence.

If we are eager to win people for Christ, we should likewise be eager to love and serve them. In these acts of generosity, Christ is speaking to them: “I love you. You are important to me. I care about your needs.”

We should be led by the Holy Spirit and his wisdom in serving others. It would be imprudent, for instance, to so aggressively serve outsiders that we neglect some of our basic responsibilities. We cannot meet every need or serve every person we meet. A Christian is not just an indiscriminating do-gooder, but one who thoughtfully seeks to advance the kingdom of God through his works of charity.

On the other hand, we should not do good simply for the sake of evangelizing others. “OK, now I shoveled your sidewalks, come to my Bible study!” Our temptation can be to serve expecting a harvest, thus reducing our inclination to serve others unless there is the possibility of evangelistic fruit. We should determinedly love, do good, and lend, and not just for the sake of evangelizing.

When saying that our “reward will be great,” Jesus is giving us great incentive for loving all men. “Give and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38). The single reward stated by Jesus is that we will become more and more like God our Father. We shall see God. One day we will be united with him forever.

I have heard countless individuals attest to how their lives had been changed through Christian charity and mercy. Those who experience Christian love and service are hearing a message much like the glory of God described in the heavens:
The heavens are telling the glory of God; 
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. 
Day to day pours forth speech, 
and night to night declares knowledge. 
There is no speech, nor are there words; 
their voice is not heard; 
Yet their voice goes out through all the earth, 
and their words to the end of the world. 
(Psalm 19:1-4)

If we are to be effective ambassadors of Christ, we must affirm our message with action, seasoning the world with salt and brightening it with light.

[This article is adapted from the book, Person to Person: How to be effective in evangelism, © 1984 by Jim Berlucchi, and published by Servants Books, Ann Arbor.]

Person to Person: How to Be Effective in Evangelism 
by Jim Berlucchi

> Part 1: True “No Limit” Message
> Part 2: Everyday Evangelism
> Part 3: Be Open - Be Natural
> Part 4: Building Bridges
> Part 5: Authentic Evangelism
> Part 6: Portrait of the Christian Ambassador
> Part 7: Prayer Makes a Difference

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Betrayal

by Sam Williamson

Last week I woke up to an intensely vivid dream. In comparison, past dreams seemed like a hazy video on a scratchy black and white TV, while this dream felt like an IMAX theater with heart-throbbing surround sound and mountain-shaking sub-woofers.

I dreamt of a long-past betrayal, and I felt raw fury, pain, and shame wash over me. Again.

Have you ever been betrayed? Few men and women I meet are unscathed. Sooner or later—and most likely sooner—we will all experience a betrayal.

I don’t mean a stab in the back; I mean a face-to-face, kiss-on-the-cheek treachery that leaves us reeling, bleeding, and bewildered; all this from the former ally who afterward smilingly asks, “What’s the big deal?,” suggesting, “Let’s grab a cup of coffee for old time’s sake.”

The depth of our former friendship increases the magnitude of our pain. The friend whose betrayal most brutalizes us is the comrade whose care most comforted us. As David once sang,

For it is not an enemy who taunts me—I could bear that; it is not an adversary who deals twistedly with me—even that I could bear. But it is you, my comrade, my companion, my close friend. We used to enjoy sweet intimacy. (Psalm 55:12-14)
It may have been a wealthy parent who willed you one penny, a callous gym teacher who called you a coward in front of other kids, or the partner who embezzled your retirement funds. Probably the worst is an adulterous spouse.

How do we handle the pain, fury, and shame of a personal betrayal?

**Let the meditations of my heart...**

Let the meditations of my heart...

After the dream, I lay wide-awake, outraged all over again, and wondering, “How could he have done this? How could I have been so stupid? If only his family knew of his heartlessness.”

Let’s just say, it was not visions of sugarplums that danced in my head.

All my anger, pain, and shame coalesced into one short declaration, “I’d never do that.” I’d never treat a friend that way; I’d never be so underhanded; and I’d never be so heartless.

Almost instantly I felt God say, “Oh yes you would, and you’re doing it right now.”

**Spiritual plagiarism**

I felt God say that my self-praising mantra, “I’d never do that,” was stealing from God. If my claim had any truth (and that’s open to debate), any good in me was itself just a gift from God. I was taking credit for his work. It was plagiarism—exactly as if a friend wrote a great book, and I stole it, published it, and put my name down as its author.

We are spiritual plagiarizers. We see friends divorce their childhood sweetheart, scream at their kids, or buy luxury cars they can’t afford … and we praise ourselves with, “I’d never do that.” (Or we read a writer who admits his self-praising mantra, and we say, “I’d never think that.”)

It’s spiritual plagiarism. If we had their parents, their upbringing, or if we were born with their temperament, we would do the exact same thing. We might even do something worse.

I was betraying God. I knew my mantra was damaging, and I knew I should forgive, but I felt God lead me to rest—to pause for a moment—in the sense that I was a traitor.

**And then**

As I floundered in the feelings of being betrayed, I remembered the parable of the unmerciful servant. It’s the story of a man who is forgiven about ten billion dollars. He, in turn, finds and beats up another man who owes him the paltry sum (relatively) of fifteen thousand dollars.

I wondered how anyone could be so heartless. How could he justify such harshness after receiving such a great release? There is only one answer. Somehow, something inside the unmerciful man said he deserved that forgiveness. He must have told himself, “I’m a good guy. The king made a wise choice. I’m worth it.”
He couldn’t admit the depth of his own betrayal. And God said that man was me.

**It’s not about forgiveness as much as forgiven-ness**

I had tried to heal my heart with self-praise. Now, if I tried to forgive him on my own, I would have appealed to that same flesh with another self-praise, “I’m the kind of man who forgives.”

Our world has manipulated us. It tells us that the power we need most is self-esteem. But the power of God is the cross; the way up is down. We can only forgive with the power of being forgiven; and the more we need to forgive, the more we need to know our own forgiven-ness.

Before “just forgiving” my betrayer, I felt God call me to understand his forgiveness of me. And to know the heights of his forgiveness, I had to begin with the depths of my betrayal of him.

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart ... be humble**

God uses all kinds of metaphors for our relationship with him (potter, king, vine, and friend); but his most intimate metaphor is when he calls us his spouse. And almost every time he calls us his spouse, he also calls us his adulterous spouse (see Hosea 1-3 and Jeremiah 2).

It’s hard to think of our actions as adulterous—sure we harbor a grudge for a week, or we think ill thoughts of that weird woman at work—but adultery? Have I really been that bad?

So I began to meditate on how bad I am. (Yeah, yeah, I know I’ve been given a new heart and a white cloak, but I can’t rest on my deserving them—that would be spiritual plagiarism.)

Thinking of my own badness was bizarre. I listed bad behaviors (and thoughts) from the past few months (the rest will take a lifetime). I just meditated on them, and then I admitted them.

As I said, it was bizarre. At first, all my self-esteem just evaporated, disappearing in a whimper. And then God’s love—shown through his enormous forgiveness—astonished me. I wasn’t just being forgiven for losing my temper; I was being loved by the one I betrayed. I wasn’t forgiven of a few thousand dollars, I was forgiven for tens of billions—maybe trillions—of dollars.

I began to sense a God-esteem take the place of my self-esteem. And I began—slowly at first, but it picked up steam—I began to want to forgive that person who betrayed me. Compared to my betrayal of God, it was nothing.

And I would probably have done the exact same thing.

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Sam Williamson grew up in Detroit, Michigan, USA. He is the son of a Presbyterian pastor and grandson of missionaries to China. He moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1975. He worked in London England from 1979 to 1982, helping to establish Antioch, a member community of the Sword of the Spirit. After about twenty-five years as an executive at a software company in Ann Arbor he sensed God call him to something new. He left the software company in 2008 and now speaks at men’s retreats, churches, and campus outreaches. His is married to Carla Williamson and they have four grown children and a grandson. He has a blog site, www.beliefsoftheheart.com, and can be reached at Sam@BeliefsoftheHeart.com.
How Do We Forgive Betrayals?

by Sam Williamson

I ended the previous story of betrayal with the faint beginnings of a desire to forgive. But our wanting to forgive doesn’t mean we’ve granted forgiveness any more than wanting a beach vacation gives us tickets to Tahiti. It’s a start, an important start, but only a start.

Our desire to forgive is undermined by our memories, recollections of the betrayal that relentlessly resurface with stunning clarity. With the vividness of slow-motion video, I recall a half-erased whiteboard, the buzz of a fly, and the shadows on the wall.

A friend of mine remembers the jingle of an ice-cream truck and the smell of lilacs through the screen porch.
We want to forgive, but images flood our mind, and something in our soul recoils. We try to forgive and forget, but those memories scratch their way out of the holes we buried them in.

We want justice; somehow, in some form or fashion, we want payment. Like David, our heart cries, “Let death take [them] by surprise; let them go down to hell while still living” (Ps. 55:15).

Or as Freud said, “One must forgive one’s enemies: but preferably after they’ve been hanged.”

It twists our soul

Last week, I heard a talk radio host interview a therapist. The therapist claimed that “un-forgiveness is a major contributor to heart disease,” and that “bitterness can kill us.” The wrong done to us begins to take root in us. The evil inflicted on us begins to flow out of us.
Mirslov Volf wrote, “Forgiveness flounders because I exclude my enemy from the community of humans and I exclude myself from the community of sinners.” We begin to dehumanize our betrayer, and in turn we are dehumanized. Agony and anger twists our souls.

On hearing the consequences of non-forgiveness, the radio host responded, “I don’t want a stroke, so I’d better start forgiving. I’ll just let it go.”

But it’s not so simple. No magic wand will wave away the stain. To claim, “I’ll just let it go,” is like getting over stage-fright by saying, “I’ll stop being self-conscious.” It makes matters worse.

And it completely misunderstands the essence of forgiveness.

**Because someone does have to pay**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (the World War II martyr who died resisting Hitler) said:

If you’ve ever really forgiven somebody, forgiven some real wrong, all forgiveness is suffering. If you say “I forgave and I didn’t suffer,” it wasn’t that serious a wrong. But if you have ever really been wronged, and if you have forgiven it, then you have suffered. Because all forgiveness is a form of suffering.

When we’ve been deeply wronged—not just an accidental slipup but a treacherous betrayal—we know there is a debt, a deep-seated sense of injustice. We can’t shrug it off as if nothing happened, we can’t simply dismiss those memories in a momentary fancy of forgiveness.

When we remember the injury, we must choose between two paths. We can make the perpetrator pay (by finding little ways to make them suffer, poking pins in their memory, disparaging them to our friends, or snubbing them in our heart); or we can forgive.

If we make the perpetrator pay, evil wins. The road to hell is not paved with good intentions, and not even with our betrayal of others. The road to hell is paved with our non-forgiveness.

**So what does it mean to forgive?**

Everyone thinks forgiving is a wonderful idea. Until they have something real to forgive. Because forgiveness means suffering. If we don’t make the perpetrator pay (and somebody has to pay), it means we pay.

Forgiveness means we pay our betrayer’s debt.

It’s normal life. If I borrow your car and wreck it, then either I cough up cash for the repair, or—if I don’t have any money—then you do. The damage doesn’t disappear magically. Somebody pays. (Or you drive a wrecked car, which is just another form of you suffering for my mistake.)

How do we pay? When we’re tempted to dwell on their cruelty, we stop (it costs not to punish them in our thoughts). And when we have a chance to tell others of their betrayal, we shut up (we suffer when
they enjoy a good reputation). And we pray for their welfare, not punishment.

Of all Christian disciplines, this is the hardest. First we suffer the horrible wrong done to us, and then we pay for their wrongdoing. It’s double baked death. Compared to forgiveness, chastity, charity, and contentment seem like sipping lemonade on a summer’s evening.

 Forgiveness also brings us closest to Christ. It is suffering, thorns, nails, and a cross.

**Forgive me for repeating myself**

To settle a debt requires capital. We need a full bank account (either financial, emotional, or spiritual reserves) to write that check. We need deposits in our account before we can pay out. But our reserves were depleted by the wrong done to us. What are we to do?

Our ability to forgive is wholly dependent on our being forgiven. When it seems impossible to forgive, our only hope is to understand our debt to God, and to grasp our own forgiven-ness.

Jesus said of the prostitute who washed his feet, “She loves much because she’s been forgiven much, and whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” With the deposits of our own forgiven-ness, we pay our debtor’s debt. And little by little, we find we have forgiven.

Over time (not magically in a moment) something miraculous happens. We begin to really hope for them, to really wish them the best; we even begin to love them.

The evil done to us has been executed.

**P.S.** Don’t think that because I can write this that I can also do it well. But I’m getting better.

**P.P.S.** Forgiveness does not mean disconnection with reality. Our betrayers may still act like jerks toward us or toward others. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we should go back and work in that ministry or become best pals with that former friend. But it does mean their debt has been paid, that we have shredded our case files, and that we desire their welfare.

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One of the themes of my Scotland painting series is ‘Bands of Light’. Here’s the story of how I use a process to create visual symbolic references in my paintings.

While I was taking the ferry out of Oban, West Coast of Scotland, the sun broke through the clouds and laid a bright band of light across the sea. It was as though a luminescent cable was dropped into place, and electrified that horizontal slice of the sea’s surface. I’ve seen this a million times before. For anyone living by the sea, it’s a familiar sight.
But in that moment this image struck me as significant. Of all the views from the ferry, this band of light on the water caught my attention. I was in pursuit of answering the question 'what visual symbols capture essence of the Scottish landscape?'

These bands of light are distinctive in Scotland’s seascape, capturing in an image the variable change of weather, the intensity of the sun as it breaks through the clouds, the scale of the expansive sea, the interaction of the heavens and the earth.

I noticed this, and carefully observed the nature of that bright line: how the white line was bounded by a bright coloured line along the edge, and the effect of the glow on the immediate colour around that band of light.

Later that day I visited the Abbey on Iona. As I walked through this ancient and beautifully alive centre of worship and Christian community, I listened to the audio tour guide. The presentation included a recording of monks singing plainchant. Deep resonance of a cappella singing, prayers lifted in music.

For a few moments that cathedral space was filled with spiritual expression, heaven and earth co-mingled. In the early days the monks gathered for prayer 8 times a day. As though 8 times a day a shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds of day and laid a band of luminescent light across the Iona landscape.

Each morning over the previous few days at my residence in Oban I had joined the community for prayer. We prayed again each evening after dinner. Twice a day a band of light was laid across the pattern of life and work.
After visiting the Abbey I set up my painting materials in its coast side shadow to paint the view looking towards the Scottish mainland. I noticed the bands of light and of colour that now emerged in that landscape view. These bands now had meaning for me, touching on essence and resonating with the living history of Iona’s story. I accentuated them to highlight their significance as a symbolic reference in my painting.

The image ‘Iona’s View’ is the sketch I painted that afternoon. The bands of light and colour laid across the scene are symbolic references to those ‘God moments’ when heaven and earth co-mingle, perhaps in a time of prayer or a moment of revelation through the course of the day. The bands of colour are pure colour and somewhat translucent. Prayer brings a moment of purity, of transcendence. These moments occur in a pattern of prayer, or an unexpected moment of revelation. They anchor the messy reality of daily life in heaven’s light.

To see more of Jamie Treadwell's works visit www.jamietreadwell.com

Jamie Treadwell is a life coach, and a noted artist who works in pastels, watercolors and acrylics. He is a member of The Servants of the Word, an ecumenical lay missionary brotherhood of men living single for the Lord, and mission leader in the Sword of the Spirit. He is currently based in London, UK. Visit his art website to see more of his work.]
The life I live is not my own

By Ellie Giles

A few years ago during my second year of university, I experienced a particularly challenging and joyful time in my relationship with the Lord because of a consistent, clear call he gave me to live a life of martyrdom. Over the course of several months, this call from the Lord was given to me repeatedly through different words, Scripture passages, and other people. God was not asking me to travel to the most dangerous place in the world to preach the gospel to cannibals; rather, he was asking me to live a life of complete surrender no matter the circumstances, no matter the cost. He was asking me to sacrifice everything I had – my time, my studies, my money, my relationships, my family, my strengths, my weaknesses – in order to seek him alone, and he was showing me that the call to martyrdom is not just for grown-ups. I was given this call even as a student.

While I felt very challenged by this radical call God had placed on my life, I also felt overwhelmed by two things: first, the peace I had in forsaking other things, even good things, so as to claim Christ as my one prize; and second, the joy I had in saying “yes!” to a life of complete surrender. This call is one I know I will be striving after during my whole life, and although I fall down daily, God continues to pick me up and brush me off, reminding me not so much of my weakness but of his strength.

In response to this call, I wrote the song *You Are Mine*, and had the opportunity to record it with some friends for the *Detroit Summer Outreach Music CD Overwhelmed*. Recording the song was a huge blessing to me, and I hope that it
can inspire others, as it continues to inspire me, to live a life of single-hearted devotion to the Lord.

You Are Mine

The life I live is not my own,
For what I have I give to you.
For you, O Lord, I claim as my prize.

Holy, worthy, beautiful are you.
You are mine, and I am yours.
And though I cannot see you, I believe.
You are mine.

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
Holy, worthy,
You are mine.

Ellie Giles is a Mission Leader for the University Christian Outreach Chapter at Grand Valley State University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. This autumn she will begin work as a middle school teacher at The Potter’s House School in Grand Rapids.