

The Church as Community: Subculture or Counterculture?

– Howard A. Snyder–

In offering a clear alternative, a counterculture pushes society to self-examination, self-criticism, and often self-defense

Listen carefully, and you will hear today the muffled cry and sigh for community: Many people, Christians as well as non-believers, long for more intimate and meaningful relationships. Young adults especially seem attuned to the question and quest of community. People want to find a group whose meaning and mission transcend the daily grind, a level of sharing and common life that goes beyond what they have known.

CRISIS OF COMMUNITY IN SOCIETY

Many social indicators point to a breakdown of community today -- in the home, the school, the neighborhood, the church. This goes hand in hand with an advancing technological society that focuses on either the individual or the mass, speeding the disintegration of small groupings. The illusion of total, unrestricted, individual freedom in fact leads to totalitarian mass society in which close-knit intermediate communities of meaning --- the glue of society -- are dissolved. People fail to perceive that the freedom offered is the freedom to do what someone else wants. "Have it your way" really means "Do it our way -- and feel good about it!"

Technological materialism is only part of the problem, however. Other forces are also at work to undermine community, both in society and in the church. But let's play a little game. How would one go about intentionally under-mining community; isolating people from one another and from a shared life?

First, *fragment family life*. Since the family is the primary form of human community, undermining community begins with undermining the family by drawing off its members in different directions and into different worlds.

Next, *move people away from the neighborhoods where they grew up* rather than allow them to live near relatives and friends and among familiar landmarks. Then *separate the places people work from where they live*: divide their lives into as many worlds as possible. And gradually *move people farther and farther*

apart through ever-larger yards, bigger houses, or through walls, fences, and "apartments."

Then, *bring television into the home*. It is perhaps the modern world's most effective communication blocker. *Use the automobile to extend the process further* allowing people to travel separately to stores, schools, and places of employment or entertainment. Add a second or third car to hasten the process.

Finally, *reduce family size*. Where there are one or no children in the home in the circumstances described, real community life expires.

We must not underestimate the role of the visual media, especially television, in this disintegrative process. Passive rather than participatory, these media block communication and push values to the sensate level. They function ever less at the level of ideas and concepts, and more at the emotional and sensual levels. The less viewers think, the more they respond like conditioned animals.

In such a world, the question of the role of the church is crucial. *Undermining community in the church destroys the best hope for community in the world*, the best chance for rebuilding community in society. When the church is a genuine community experiencing real *koinonia*, it is the most potent source of community in the world.

CRISIS OF COMMUNITY IN THE CHURCH

We face a crisis of community in the church today. The Western church finds itself in a world where Christian consensus has broken down. Western society was shaped and largely influenced by Christian values. In the U.S., these values permeated the culture, giving a strong sense of the worth of the individual. Today, however, respect for life is fast disappearing along with other Christian values. Increase in violent and senseless crime, casual acceptance of abortion and mercy killing, and general indifference toward the fate of others are part of the picture. Christian consensus is gone.

Growing up in North America instills a person with neither a Christian worldview nor a Christian set of values. Someone entering the church from such a background begins almost at point zero in Christian life and understanding. The church must therefore increasingly take seriously its true nature as a community and counterculture that reinforces and perpetuates its own values. To do otherwise is simply to accommodate to the culture. This is the crisis the church faces.

The church must be a community with the social strength to incarnate values that are antagonistic at key points to the world around us. But merely accepting such a viewpoint will mean nothing. The church must in fact *be* a community that

experiences and reinforces biblical values. No group with values that differ significantly from society can endure long in that society unless the group is a counter-community. Christians cannot maintain Christian values in society unless they are part of a community that reinforces those values.

I believe this is a crucial point. The relation of Christian community not only to kingdom living but even to doctrinal integrity will increasingly have to be examined. Orthodoxy is no defense. If Christians cease to act like Christians, sooner or later they will stop believing like Christians. So community is a crucial concern.

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN COMMUNITY

The New Testament pictures the church as the community gathered around Jesus. Matthew 18:20 is perhaps the most compact definition of the church in Scripture: "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." One person is not enough. Church is a community of people gathered around Jesus, committed to him, worshipping him, and ready to serve his kingdom in the world. People gathered around Jesus is the irreducible minimum of the church. Then arise questions of preaching, sacraments, liturgy, ordination, doctrine, church government, and the many other things that separate Christians into denominational families.

The church was born in first-century Jewish society. Born in a culture with a strong sense of community and an ethos of peoplehood, it drew some of its strength from these roots. Jews in Jesus' day knew they were a covenant people; they existed as a nation because God had acted in history. The new reality believers discovered in Jesus Christ was built on this foundation of community and peoplehood.

Though the church outgrew its Jewish character, it brought over understandings, concepts, practices, and even structures from the Jewish community, which became basic to the Christian church. For example, the church initially built its worship on the synagogue model; churches were at first largely Christian synagogues.

From the beginning, however, the church was more than simply a Jewish sect because it was the community of Jesus' disciples. Jesus was the incarnate Son of God announcing a new order and kingdom. The impressive thing about Jesus' three years with his disciples is the embryonic community that he *himself formed*. Tracing the word *disciple* through the Gospel of Luke reveals a community of several concentric circles of disciples, beginning with the Twelve.

The church of the Acts and the Epistles was based on the community Jesus had formed. After Pentecost the disciples simply repeated what Jesus had done with them. The first several chapters in Acts show the pattern. Jesus had provided for the many converts of Pentecost by preparing a community of people -- not a

disconnected corps of experts. How different it was from today's missionary and evangelistic methods!

Put yourself in the picture. Your small church suddenly gains 3,000 converts, and a few days later, several thousand more. And you don't even have a board, an organizational manual, a budget, a doctrinal statement, committees or buildings. Can you survive?

From our perspective, the church at Pentecost was hopelessly handicapped. But Jesus worked at a more fundamental level. He gathered a community of believers, working intensively with them so that they would understand who he was and why he had come. They could handle problems as they came, guided by the Holy Spirit and following Jesus' teaching and example.

Here is a vital lesson about church life and structure. At Pentecost the disciples clearly got a taste of new wine. But Jesus provided also the basis for new wineskins, created from patterns, customs, and understandings derived from centuries of God's acts in history. He drew on millennia of God's work in forming his new community - and then baptized the group with his Spirit.

As Jesus had met with the first disciples in small groups, and as they had met together outdoors and in homes, so did the first Christians. The life of the early church was nourished in homes. First, it was built through normal family life. Second, it was fed through koinonia groups, cells of people who met together for prayer, worship, and the Eucharist, and who passed on Jesus' teaching by word of mouth.

The church's experience of community was complemented by its sense of being a distinct people. The Epistles reveal a strong countercultural consciousness, which developed and deepened as the church spread across the empire. As it expanded, it learned that God's plan was not just for the Jews, but for all peoples, nations, and classes. It began to develop a people consciousness.

This consciousness dawned gradually. The Holy Spirit was poured out equally on Jew and Gentile (Acts 10:44--47; 11:15-18; 19:5-6). Christians began to think of themselves as a third race: neither Jew nor Gentile, but something new transcending both. Christians were "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," but "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28; note also 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 2:14; Col. 3:11). This was not merely spiritual renewal; it was social revolution.

The modern tragedy is that this consciousness has all but evaporated from the church, especially in North America. A sad symptom of the loss of true community is the way Christians easily accept massive gaps between rich and poor in the church as normal, or at least as not a pressing Christian concern. The early Christians took

steps so that "there were no needy persons among them" (Acts 4:34), but few Christians today are so moved.

In North America, most of the Christian church is a subculture rather than a counterculture. When the church fails to oppose the dominant culture at those points where the culture pays allegiance to alien gods, it functions as a subculture, not as a counterculture.

THE CHURCH AS COUNTERCULTURAL COMMUNITY

But should the church be a countercultural? Some say no, wanting to preserve its vital, transforming link to society. But understood biblically, the model of the church as countercultural community is both dynamic and missiologically faithful.

As applied to the church, the term *counterculture* is both a positive and a negative concept. Perhaps the negative side is more obvious: As a counterculture the church takes its stand against surrounding culture. The Christian community must be in some sense "other than" the world around it, maintaining fundamental points of antithesis.

But counterculture is also positive, offering a genuine alternative to the dominant culture. In fundamental ways, the counterculture claims to be better than the world's culture. In offering a clearly delineated, visible alternative, the counterculture pushes society to self-examination, self-criticism, and often self-defense. In this way the counterculture has a significant social impact good or bad. Conversely, the counterculture is influenced by its contact with the larger culture and often defines itself in reaction to the prevailing view. If "straight" culture wears suits, ties, and carefully manicured hair, for instance, the counterculture may sport jeans, beads, and beards. Of course, with time the countercultural trends may be popularized and exploited by the dominant culture.

In what sense should the church be a counterculture? Five portions of Scripture help to provide the biblical image of the church.

John 15:18-19: *In the World, Not of It.* "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world" (NIV: compare also John 17:14-16).

We see that Jesus' disciples must maintain a critical tension: *in* the world but not *of* it. Christians are neither to withdraw from the world nor to become one with it. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), but he made it plain that it is *in* the world (Luke 17:21). Jesus plants us in a place of tension. We are to maintain that tension against the strong pull to a more comfortable position either

out of the world or totally of the world. This tension of incarnation requires the church to be in some sense a counterculture.

Romans 12:2: Conformed to Christ, Not the World. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." With this we may compare Romans 8:29.---For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." The church is to avoid conformity to the world by being conformed to Jesus Christ through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus as "the firstborn among many brothers" suggests that the church is a brotherhood, a family, a community.

Luke 12:29-32: The Flock of the Kingdom. "Do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." What a contrast of weakness and strength --- a flock and a kingdom! You are a little flock, Jesus says, but in your very weakness and dependence on me you will inherit the kingdom of God (compare II Cor. 12:9).

Having traded the values of the present world for the truth of the kingdom, the church is a counterculture. It pledges its allegiance to a sovereign different from that of the citizens of this world kingdom.

This adds two more elements: the church's distinctness from the world is not merely a difference, it is warfare, a battle raging between the kingdom of God and the powers of the Enemy. In this warfare the church must be faithful to its King and Lord, to the new covenant. It has pledged itself to live by the values of the kingdom of God and to renounce the values of the world's culture.

John 17:18: Sent into the World. In his prayer Jesus says, "As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world." In other words, the church is to be engaged aggressively with the world in winning the allegiance of increasing numbers of people to Jesus as Lord and King. We are called to make disciples of the kingdom, not just of the church.

Revelation 21.23-27. Contributing to Culture. The holy city is described: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

As a Christian counterculture, the church can legitimately be engaged in cultural works that add beauty and harmony to the world. This also is kingdom work. It includes all good work in the world that holds potential for glorifying God.

THE KINGDOM COMMUNITY

The danger of a countercultural model is that it may lead inward away from engagement with the world. The antidote is a deep consciousness that the church exists for the kingdom. The model of countercultural community is essentially negative, despite its positive possibilities. But it is an important perspective. The church can be free for the kingdom only if it is sufficiently detached and distinct from the world's culture to maintain obedience for the kingdom.

Often the church's notion of community is shockingly shallow. It fails to see how radical it is to build a community for the kingdom. It misses the deeply social, economic, and political dimensions of New Testament *koinonia*.

Individual Christians are seldom persecuted. Christian communities that dare to follow an alternative, Christian sociopolitical life together constitute a political challenge to the status quo and are always in danger of persecution or extermination.

The church for the kingdom is inevitably political, social, and economic. Political, because it deals with ultimate meaning and allegiance and aims to change the present order. Social, because it forms people into close-knit, intense social groups organized around questions of values and life meaning, not just around secondary tasks. Economic, because it involves the stewardship of money and resources and some level of mutual economic sharing and liability. If the church poses no threat to the Enemy in these areas, its allegiance to Jesus Christ must be seriously questioned.

Jesus also makes the point that where your security is, there your heart is. The question is basic loyalties. Do we find our fundamental meaning and security in the kingdom community or in material and economic resources? It is a choice between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world.

BUILDING COMMUNITY TODAY

The church has redemptive significance only when it is an empirical fact, a social and historical reality. The community model is helpful only if it serves to build authentic community in the church. Building genuine Christian community means applying basic biblical principles of church life, and it involves the following aspects.

Commitment and Covenant. Christian community starts at the point of commitment and covenant. Whether this commitment is formal or informal is secondary. The point is, Christian community cannot exist without commitment to Jesus as Lord and to one another. It must be specific and explicit, involving our time, energy, and resources.

Shared Life. The church exists in time and space and so must come together in time and space. Real community means shared time, shared meals, shared priorities, and some level of economic sharing. Specific patterns may vary, but New Testament *koinonia* does not exist without this shared life.

The Dimension of Transcendence. The church transcends mere human community when the horizontal, human dimension is married to the vertical dimension through Jesus Christ. This dimension of transcendence constitutes the church and builds it into a true community of the Spirit. It causes the Christian community to look not just inward or outward, but also upward to God and ahead to the promised kingdom.

The first priority of the church is always worship. If community itself, or the church's witness in the world, takes the place of worship, the dimension of transcendence may be lost, and the church may forfeit both its unique character and its power.

SERVICE IN COMMUNITY BUILDING

Servanthood is an essential mark of authentic Christian community and should characterize the church's internal life and its life in the world. Although society's macro-structures must be changed or replaced before universal justice can reign, much of the battle for justice today is taking place at the level of the microstructures of family, church, and neighborhood, which are the building blocks of a just society. If the church fails to make its contribution at these foundational levels, it will have little significant impact at broader levels.

If the church is seen primarily as an institution, its ministry will be largely institutional and program oriented. But if it is viewed as a community, its ministry will be person oriented, focusing on building structures of human interaction - family, church, and neighborhood - structures that are being undermined today.

1. Family Building. The church builds families first by recognizing that the church is the family of God and the family is the church of God. Family was the original form of human community: both in Scripture and in history it preceded the church.

Mother, father, and two kids, virtually divorced from grandparents, cousins, and other kin, is not the biblical ideal. With so many isolated families and people living singly, the church should rediscover the extended family, providing for every

believer literally to find a home. It must explore extended family models, so that each home truly is a church and the church truly is a family.

2. Neighborhood Building. Beyond family life, a key ministry for the church is building vital, healthy neighborhoods. This is true especially in the city where the church has often failed to invest in, or has abandoned neighborhoods that most needed a Christian presence. Neighborhoods decline when the institutions sustaining their social and economic lifeblood pull out. When a bank refuses to grant mortgages or loans in a particular area, it is called "redlining." The church practices redlining when it abandons or bypasses needy communities. In so doing it fails to live up to its mission as a builder of community.

What happens in a neighborhood when the church strives to build community? Let us imagine:

- Couples on the brink of divorce discover that God's love can put their homes back together again.
- Fearful neighbors get acquainted and begin to work on community problems. As Christians help bring people together, fear is reduced and understanding grows.
- Poor families find that someone cares as Christians reach out in love, giving material aid when needed and working to improve housing conditions and employment opportunities.
- Aimless children find that God has a plan for them, and, as the church opens its doors to them, find a loving, caring family where they are welcome.
- Elderly folks find new security and new opportunities for service.

The church can literally transform neighborhoods, and the larger society, for Christ. Liberating the church means freeing Christians to be a community of believers that serves as an agent of the kingdom of God. As the church becomes a community in the New Testament sense, it is able to *create* community and to enhance existing community.

When the kingdom comes, it will come through genuine community in Christ through the power of the Spirit. Where the church today is truly the community of God's people living for God's glory and mission, there the kingdom is already visibly present as sign, promise, and first fruit.

*Howard A. Snyder is pastoral coordinator of the Irving Park Free Methodist Church, Chicago. and teaches in the Wesleyan Urban Coalition, connected with Olive Branch Ministries in Chicago. His article is adapted from *Liberating the Church*, copyright 1983 by Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship of the U.S.A. and used by permission of InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois.*