

Mere Christian Community

– Steve Clark –

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

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 Pet. 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" (Col. 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" (Matt. 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.

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 (Matt. 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 member 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" (Deut. 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 Lev. 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* 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 Cor. 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".

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 Cor. 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 Cor. 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 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.

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