

Peoplehood: A New Model For Church Life

- Peter S. Williamson -

Part 1: Losing Ground

Why are church members having a harder and harder time living a faithful Christian life?

I can remember, growing up, hearing Bible stories at home and at church and thinking to myself, "Gee, I wish I could have lived back when Christianity was really interesting, when all the exciting stuff was going on." But I have come to see that I live in an age when Christianity is very interesting and when a lot of "exciting stuff" is going on.

The 20th century has become the greatest age of missionary harvest in history. We have seen a tremendous outpouring of the Holy Spirit among Christians of many different backgrounds. Lay men and women have gotten increasingly active in carrying out the Lord's work. And ours is an age of martyrs that outshines every earlier time -- a century when more Christians have borne witness with their lives than any in the past.

But alongside all the "exciting stuff" is a trend that threatens to undo the progress. In historically Christian North America and Western Europe, Christians to a great extent are not staying faithful to God's teaching about how human beings are to live.

We all know the shocking and depressing figures that show that Christians are right in the social mainstream when it comes to cheating and pilferage, sexual sin, and chasing the dream of hedonistic fulfillment. Sociologists' findings only confirm what we see around us. A study conducted for the Christian Advertising Forum concluded that the 53 percent of Americans who say they have made a commitment to Christ at some time in their lives do not show values and life style distinguishable from the population as a whole.

Even those of us who belong to the more theologically conservative sectors of the churches know a lot of Christians who drift away or stay at the fringes of church life

and never really change their way of living. One fellowship of Christians that I know in Detroit, a group dedicated to radical discipleship, has seen its leadership riddled with a series of divorces in the last couple of years.

Particularly serious is the failure to pass on Christianity to the next generation. My casual observation is that even in the best church situations only about a third of the children grow up following the Lord with the same degree of commitment as their parents. Another third continue going to church, but their lives revolve around other things. A third drop out entirely. Even as recently as 30 years ago Christians were doing better at guiding their children into an adult affirmation of faith in Christ.

AN UNFAVORABLE CLIMATE

Why are so many Christians not succeeding at living God's way of life? Why are Christian families no longer reliable transmitters of Christian faith and morality to the young? Why are Christians constantly losing ground in the attempt to live out the Christian way of life?

Humans are social beings. Our lives are naturally influenced by the people around us. The Christian way of life, like any other, flourishes where it has social support. Our problems today, I believe, are rooted in the fact that the social environment that influences us is no longer very Christian. In many ways, in fact, it is anti-Christian. The complex problem of maintaining a Christian way of life in a non-Christian environment can be illustrated with a little story: A friend of mine had an office attached to the back of his house. It was bare and uninviting, so his wife and children decided that they would give him an aquarium at Christmas to brighten things up.

After a couple of days my friend noticed that all the fish were floating on their side. This was puzzling. The fish had been fine in the pet store and were fine when he brought them home. There was nothing wrong with the aquarium. What could be the problem?

He decided to try again. He bought some more fish, healthy like the first, and put them in. After a few days they died too.

It finally occurred to my friend that his office, though attached to the house, was not as well heated. When he took the temperature, he found that on cold nights it sometimes went down to as low as 40 degrees

So there was nothing wrong with the aquarium or the fish. What was wrong was the environment in which the aquarium was located. The fish could not survive the cold.

Church life today is like the aquarium in my friend's office. We have every reason to think it should sustain Christians and their children in their life in the Lord, as it has in the past. But the environment in which the church is situated has changed. Major changes in society have produced a climate unfavorable to Christian living even for members of otherwise good churches.

WHERE HAS IT COME FROM

It is helpful to understand how our present situation has come about. Three changes in particular have been crucial in producing today's de-Christianized environment.

One is very familiar and so needs little comment here. It is the secularization of thought and public life that has followed from the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinking has seen God as distant or nonexistent. Man has seemed capable of solving all his own problems by the use of his reason. The possibility of knowable, objective revelation from God is rejected. Religious faith is seen as conflicting with real, scientific knowledge. In fact, religion is seen as a divisive, emotional force that is best kept out of public life. Since the 18th century this outlook has come to pervade government, business, education, and media.

A second change is less widely recognized. This is the breakdown of natural forms of human community due to the advance of modern technological society.

Before the industrial revolution of the 18th century most people in Europe and America lived in a network of stable relationships with those they dwelt, worked and worshipped with. There were no big factories or big businesses, or large governmental, educational, or medical institutions. People normally worked in the context of a family household of some sort.

Most people lived in villages or small towns. Even in the few cities, people were linked in neighborhoods and guilds. Extended family relationships played a significant part in people's lives.

This small-scale, close-knit world gave people less privacy and fewer options than our own. But it provided a lot of support for Christian ideals, beliefs, moral teaching. There were positive reinforcements for right behavior, and negative pressures against departing from the norms. If someone began to get out of line with the values of the community, he would hear about it from relatives, neighbors, and others.

There were disadvantages to this arrangement. Many people would not personally appropriate a relationship with God. Many were carried along without their faith

being tested in ways that might have strengthened it. But the support and protection of the culture was nevertheless a great advantage.

DISSOLVING RELATIONSHIPS

Modern life, as we know, has changed all this. One social historian describes modernization as a social solvent. It dissolves the patterns of relationships that held people together.

Protestant missionary and theologian Howard Snyder has highlighted some aspects of the process. If we ask ourselves what would undermine community, what would isolate people from one another and from a shared life, modernization is an exact answer to the question:

"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."

Obviously, personal relationships have lost out in the modern restructuring of society. Most neighborhoods, for example, have become insignificant as social units. To most ears it sounds odd even to suggest that people should have more than casual acquaintance with their neighbors.

Schooling puts children in environments apart from their parents. Rather than growing up at home and being trained by their parents or uncles or aunts, children now are away the better part of the day and are taught by other adults, who may or may not share their parents' way of life.

Extreme mobility constantly disrupts personal relationships. Most people have immediate family members they rarely see because they live in distant parts of the country. Many people end up not having any close relatives nearby. Because of such changes, individuals lack support and accountability in leading a Christian life.

We can go even further and say that the breakdown of natural community undermines not only Christian faithfulness but basic human life:

- Not only do many Christian marriages end in divorce, but the very idea of marriage as a defined institution disappears.

People drift in and out of sexual relationships of every sort. Clear ideas of husband and wife roles vanish. Children are no longer seen as an essential part of marriage.

- Not only do many children leave the church as they grow up, but many young people suffer psychological and emotional problems, which show up in alcohol and drug abuse, crime, and suicide.
- Not only do many Christians fall into fornication, but homosexuality and pornography become widely accepted in society.

MORAL FRAMEWORK ABANDONED

A third big change - related to the first two - which has revolutionized society is the open rejection of Judeo-Christian morality. This cultural upheaval was a long time coming. Since the 1960s it has established itself as the reigning cultural position.

Previously, Christian moral principles implicitly undergirded law and custom in the United States. Respect for honesty, authority, social responsibility, sexual morality, and family and religion were publicly promoted. Society was not officially Christian, but Christianity provided society's de facto moral framework. The Ten Commandments were taught in public schools. Laws prohibited behavior inconsistent with Christian moral teaching.

In most social circles it was unacceptable to flout Christian morality. An interesting instance of this was the 1934 American movie industry guidelines. Among the movie producers' self-imposed strictures were these:

One: The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld.

Pictures shall not imply that low forms of sex relationships are the accepted or common thing.

Two: Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embracing, suggestive postures and gestures are not to be shown.

- Three:** Pointed profanity (this includes the words 'God, Lord, Jesus, Christ,' unless used reverently, and 'hell, S.O.B., damn, gawd') or other profane and vulgar expressions, however used, is forbidden.
- Four:** "Ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains."

The movie-makers upheld these guidelines to some degree until about 1960. Today such a list of don'ts would be considered ridiculous.

TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

The secularization of public life, the breakup of natural community, and the open establishment of an amoral consensus have produced a social environment inimical to Christian living. It is no wonder that Christians in this environment are not doing very well at living out their way of life and handing it on to their children.

The de-Christianized environment has given rise to a characteristic problem of Christianity in our society: many people retain the name of Christian, and even worship and speak sincerely of their Christian faith, but their lives are shaped more deeply by non-Christian influences than by the gospel.

This is a historic turning point in the life of the church. It calls for a fundamentally different way of living as the Christian people and relating to the society around us. My friend's aquarium required an adaptation—a heating element and a thermostat—in order to fulfill its purpose in a cold environment. The church today must make an analogous adaptation to sustain Christian life in the environment in which it finds itself.

The transition we are in now is a time of great spiritual conflict, because evil spiritual forces are at work behind the de-Christianization of Western societies. Certainly the Holy Spirit is also at work around the world. But forces antithetical to Christ have gained the upper hand in the West. Without resorting to overt persecution, they are suffocating Christian life.

God has been pouring out the Holy Spirit in powerful ways to equip us in this conflict. Only in the power of the Spirit can we stand in this time of trial. Only as the people of God are sealed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit can we resist the pressures and allurements of the powerful de-Christianized culture which has emerged (see Rev. 7:3).

With less and less middle ground all the time between what serves God's purposes and what serves his enemy, it is a time for clear choices. We need to be clearly "in the Lord" and "in the kingdom of God," building up that which serves his cause. It is a time to make radical decisions in order to secure Christian life in an age of crisis.

Part 2: The Call To Peoplehood

The solution has been with us all along

In an understanding of God's purposes, Christians of every age can find solutions to the problems they face. Today's de-Christianized society challenges us to take a fresh look at God's plan of salvation. The letter to Titus provides a helpful summary: "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (2:11-14).

The purpose of God's grace goes beyond forgiveness. We do not commonly speak in terms of God's grace coming to "train" us, but that is exactly what Scripture says. God's grace has come to train us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions and to say yes to self-controlled, upright, and godly living. God's grace has appeared so that we can *lead a way of life* reflecting God's character and become like him. Faith that does not issue in holy living misses the purpose for which God's grace has appeared in Christ.

A second, closely related purpose for the coming of Christ, Paul tells us in the Titus passage, is so that we *will be a people for God himself*, eager to live his way of life.

Paul's reference to "a people that are his very own" is an allusion to Exodus 19:5. There God explained that he was about to bind the Israelites to himself in covenant. They would become *his* people, his nation.

God has not planned to have a vast collection of individuals independently trying to do what is right. He intends to "purify for himself a *people*," joined together in covenant with him and one another, a real nation, living his way of life together.

A PEOPLE BOUND TOGETHER

The expression "people of God" is not merely a collective term for all the Christians in the world. In the Scriptures "people" means a group of human beings who share a common identity and way of life and recognize mutual obligations to one another.

The Jews knew themselves to be a distinct people among the other nations. Through the covenant given at Sinai they related to God not in an individualistic way, but as a nation. Their relationship with one another as covenant brothers involved special responsibilities. For example, Deuteronomy gave these instructions:

"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 expect 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" (Deut. 15:1-3, 7-8; 23:19-20; see also Prov. 3:28; 14:21).

The Israelites' faithfulness to their concrete obligations to one another as members of God's people was crucial for their well-being. Their failures brought God's rebukes through the prophets and were a major reason why God expelled them from the land he had given them:

- Israelite tribes failed to treat their brother tribes justly

(Hosea 5:8-12; Isa.9:18-19)

- The rich oppressed their poorer covenant brethren

(Amos 2:6-7; 4: 1; 5: 11; 8:4-8; Isa. 1:23; 10: 1-2; Jer. 22:15-17; Micah 2:1-5; 3:1-4; Ezek. 22:1-12, 29; 1 Kings 21; see also Ezek. 18)

- The wealthy failed to aid their needy brethren

(Amos 5:12)

- The nobles of Jerusalem enslaved their brethren against the terms of the covenant

(Jer. 34)

THE CHRISTIAN PEOPLE

The new covenant in Christ is supposed to create a people for God with as much mutual commitment as the people formed by the old covenant. The transition to the new covenant did not "spiritualize away" the here-and-now meaning of peoplehood. The New Testament references to the Christian "people" and "nation" describe a body of men and women who accepted a common way of life and recognized a bond with one another that was just as real as under the old covenant.

Of course, the new people of God are not a nation in the sense of belonging to only one ethnic group. Membership is open to men and women of every country and race. But those who believe and are baptized join a real nation, a social group with its own way of life (see Matt. 21:43; 28:19- 20; 1 Peter 2:9).

The nationhood of the Jews was a prefigurement of the nationhood of the Christian people (see Gal. 6:16; 1 Cor. 10:6). The early Christians took up the basic aspects of peoplehood under the old covenant and lived them out according to the teaching of Christ:

- They incorporated and adapted old covenant patterns of prayer and festival

(Acts 2:46; Rev. 1: 10; 1 Cor. 16:2; Acts 20:16; 1 Cor. 16:8).

- They developed their own community government, with elders who watched over the life of the people with authority, cared for them, taught them

(Acts 6:1-4; 15:6; 1 Cor. 5:12; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12-15; Heb. 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-5).

- They followed their own way of life, based both on the Old Testament interpreted in light of Christ's revelation and on "the law of Christ"

(Gal. 5:13-14; 6:2).

- They came to each other's aid in times of need. Collection for the "relief of the brethren who lived in Judea" is mentioned in several New Testament texts...

(Acts 11:27-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-27; 2 Cor. 8-9; Gal. 2: 10).

Aid was specifically "for the poor among the saints"; it was "alms and offerings to my nation."

- They had courts for resolving disputes among themselves in order to avoid taking their cases before unbelievers.

(1 Cor. 6:1-6)

PILGRIMS AND EXILES

It is because the Christians lived as a distinct people that the New Testament uses words of citizenship to describe the effects of becoming Christian: "You are no longer strangers and sojourners but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19). When individuals became Christians they underwent not only a spiritual change but a social change as well. They joined a people (see Eph. 2 and 1 Peter 1-2).

The Christians' life as a people was modeled on the Jewish communities of the Diaspora. Jews were sprinkled all over the Mediterranean and Near East. They lived in communities together, centered on the synagogue, with their own customs and courts, educational and charitable institutions. They carried on their way of life in accord with the Mosaic law to the extent that the Roman government allowed them.

Like the Jews of the Diaspora, the Christians recognized that their bond of peoplehood with one another required a spiritual separation from the surrounding pagan societies. The Christians knew that they belonged to a different country. Their homeland was in heaven and they were leading a life of pilgrims or exiles together until they arrived there (1 Peter 2:11). While they were fully involved in the work of this life, their fundamental identity was with the people of God, whose homeland is not in this world. Loyal subjects of the empire, their primary citizenship was in heaven (see 1 Peter 1:3-2:12).

OUR CHALLENGE TODAY

God's purpose, then, is to purify men and women for himself in Christ so that they can live a holy life and be a people for him in this world. During the centuries of Christendom, Christians attempted to fulfill these purposes by shaping societies that

fostered Christian living and that expressed the reality of Christian peoplehood. To different degrees, Western societies were inspired by Christian principles and supported Christian living.

The problem we face today is that Western societies are much further from being Christian social environments, even though some aspects of law and culture still bear signs of the Christian heritage.

So far, however, we Christians have not grasped the necessity of building Christian social environments within the larger society in order to foster Christian living and express our peoplehood. We have not yet found ways of living as a people, a distinct community, a spiritual family. Our relationship to the larger society is obsolete, but we have not yet faced up to the fact adequately and found an alternative. To fail to do so will mean a constant accommodation to the de-Christianized culture.

In a sense we need to do more than the early church. In the New Testament times- and throughout the history of the church- Christians have been able to transform existing patterns of natural community and use them to support Christians in a new way of life. But today the forms of natural, human community have broken down. More than in the past the pastoral task involves building up natural human relationships within the church.

What if we were to take up the challenge to build church life more fitted for our present situation? What elements would go into strengthening Christian living and building Christian peoplehood?

Part 3: Elements of Peoplehood

Six steps to a stronger common life

If living as a people is the way for Christians to grow in being faithful to Christian teaching, what is the road to living more as a people? What existing elements of church life need to be strengthened? What missing elements would have to be supplied? Looking at the example of the church in the New Testament, and speaking from the experience of The Sword of the Spirit, my own inter-confessional

community, I would identify the following elements as particularly important in our present cultural situation.

BEING TOGETHER

The first element is a rich life together, in which people find their primary relationships and identity. Consider the first Christians in Jerusalem: "All who believed were together and had all things in common. 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" (Acts 2:44, 46-47).

Notice the word "together." These first Christians spent time together. Their relationships with one another were their most important relationships.

This is how it must be for us. Our churches and fellowships must become our most important social environment. The relationship we have as Christians, rather than as fellow employees or fellow court-club patrons, must become primary. As the Roman Catholic bishop of Providence, Rhode Island, Louis Gelineau, has remarked, "The Lord does not want us to live in the world and go to church, but to live in the church and go to the world."

This means having many opportunities for being together besides worship and activities in the church building. For example:

- **Outreach.**

We can see that everyone is involved in some role with other members of the church or fellowship.

- **Small groups.**

In my own community, for example, every person belongs to a small men's or women's group. The person holds himself accountable to this handful of people. They know him and he knows them. He knows that, of the many people in our community, these are ones he has a special responsibility to care for.

- **Mutual service.**

We can encourage the church's members to help one another in practical ways. In my community when women have babies, other women provide meals for their families for a week or two afterwards. When somebody moves or paints his house, other members join in the work.

- **Recreation.**

Some of the leaders in my community have passes at a local racquet club so they can play together. Some other community members vacation at a particular group of cottages together.

- **Schools.**

We have opened one for children in our community in the middle grades.

- **Neighborhood clusters.**

Many members of my community have purchased or built homes in certain neighborhoods, so they and their children can spend time together more easily.

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Many who see the desirability of developing a Christian social environment in the church are looking for something relatively painless to build. In one magazine article, for instance, a writer asked, "Is it possible to form a parish into a community? Is it possible to create an atmosphere in which people feel 'at home'?"

He spoke about developing an environment that is "warm and inviting," where people have "a sense of belonging," a "feeling of community." Producing it, he suggested, would require little more than carefully wording church bulletin announcements and facing chairs in a circle rather than toward the speaker.

But we need more than. a "feeling" of peoplehood. And in order to build the real thing, we need a second element – commitment and stability.

A family-type relationship in the church cannot exist when people treat the local church body like a convenience store. Church cannot be a place where people swing by to pick up a little fellowship and inspiration, where people go only to get their needs met - and never go if it is inconvenient. Family is where we are responsible for one another. If the church is to be our spiritual family, we must make some commitments to one another and have some kind of agreement to stick around.

Calling people to commitment goes against the grain of American individualism. A recent study of Roman Catholic parishes conducted by a unit at the University of Notre Dame found that parishioners' expectations for what the church should provide for them were often summed up in "community-oriented" terms. But parishioners' expectations for themselves tended to be self-centered. They were generally concerned with how God could help them with their individual problems and shortcomings, and what rewards they could expect from God. The researchers

concluded that the "very self-centered and individualistic values of the culture" deeply affect the way Catholics relate to church life.

Some evangelical, charismatic, and Pentecostal churches experience a higher level of commitment than many Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations. Even so, members' approach to church life is individualistic and therefore unstable. People shift from church to church in a search for better preaching or fellowship or youth ministry, or because they are moving for jobs.

The extreme transience that characterizes American society works against building church life with substance and stability. Church members assume that career opportunities and the desire to own a bigger house are self-evident reasons for relocating. They do not even ask themselves whether God might want them to stay put in order to continue to take part in some particular local expression of the body of Christ. We cannot eliminate transience from modern life. But we will be unable to build real peoplehood unless Christians adjust the values by which they make decisions about when and whether to move.

EXPRESSIONS OF COMMITMENT

Because of the need for commitment and stability, today it is not enough for evangelism to help a person make a decision for Christ and then give him some follow-up. To be complete, evangelism must lead individuals to commitment to a particular local expression of the body of Christ.

This is closer to the way things were done in the New Testament period. Baptism then was the expression of commitment to the community of believers. Being baptized into Christ meant being joined to the body of Christ in a concrete, visible way.

As we call people to greater commitment, we will find it helpful to provide means by which people can visibly express their commitment to God's people. This makes it clear to them and others that they are taking a serious step, one that is not lightly changed.

My own community began about 20 years ago as a charismatic renewal prayer group. After a couple of years we began to feel that God wished to make a covenant with us as a group and wished us to make an agreement that we would stand with one another and follow him together.

New members now enter that covenant after a process of preparation and teaching. At first they make what we call an "underway" commitment. By this they agree to be present when the community comes together for various activities, to share in service and give financial support, and to accept the order and leadership of the

community. After living this way for a few years and seeing if it is what the Lord has for them, people then make a "public commitment." They publicly declare their intention to go on living as committed members of the community. The two defined stages of commitment mean that people do not just come in and go out, but understand themselves as stable members.

PERSONAL PASTORAL CARE

A third element concerns leadership. Peoplehood requires *personal accountability in pastoral relationships*.

It is good to have friends who can ask us what is going on in our life and how we are following the Lord. But it also helps to have someone older in the Lord to whom we can hold ourselves accountable.

This is not a new idea. Indeed, it comes from the New Testament. Paul speaks about those who are "over you in the Lord" to admonish and encourage (1 Thess. 5:12-14). The letter to the Hebrews says to "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account" (13:17). Peter writes that "you that are younger [should be] subject to the elders" (1 Peter 5:5).

I am glad that I have such people in my life. I respond to them differently when they ask me questions about my life. I respect their spiritual authority and defer to their wisdom. In The Sword of the Spirit, we seek to apply what the New Testament says about pastoral care. This fills a void in our highly individualized culture; it provides protection and support that is otherwise lacking.

Of course, spiritual authority should not be exercised in a controlling or coercive way. In our community pastoral leaders exercise an authority of counsel, rather than requiring obedience, in major decisions. To avoid dangers of self-aggrandizing leadership, we teach about the nature of the pastoral relationship and work hard at choosing and training leaders well and structuring leadership relationships wisely.

THE NEED TO KNOW HOW

A fourth element is an emphasis on practical Christian teaching.

In the early church, Christians were given two kinds of instruction. There was the announcement (in Greek, *kerygma*) of the gospel, the explanation of what God has done for us in Christ. And there was teaching (*didache*) [Greek for "*teaching*" or "*instruction*"] about behavior, character, and relationships.

In the epistle to the Ephesians, for example, the first three chapters speak about God's hidden plan and about what he is doing now with the human race in Christ. The final three chapters teach about living a life worthy of Christ's call. They give us *didache*-practical teaching about how we should treat and speak to one another, how husbands, wives, and children should relate to one another, and so on.

Today we often assume that people already know how to live as Christians. Our strategy is to give them the gospel, supposing that if only they get connected to Christ, they will be motivated to do what is right. Or we focus on calling people to be faithful to worship and sacraments, assuming that if they are in contact with Christ in these ways they will have the spiritual resources to do what is right.

When society was more Christianized, these strategies were more realistic, because we could count on people knowing more or less how to do things right. But today many people simply do not know how to lead a Christian life.

Hearing the gospel message, receiving the sacraments, and being encouraged to be good do not make up for the lack of Christian training and examples that many of them have experienced. Coming from broken family situations, growing up in a corrupt youth culture, and working in de-Christianized social environments, many Christians have no idea how to lead a Christian life and relate to one another as members of a people. They do not have a Christian understanding of how to work out problems in personal relationships. They do not know how to give and receive correction. They do not know how to find a spouse in a godly way. They simply do not know.

Consequently we should be giving those who join us a lot of practical teaching – *didache* – about the Christian way of life.

A COURSE OF INSTRUCTION

In some ways our situation is similar to that of the early church. The church's first experience involved converting Jews, who were already instructed in the ways of righteous living. While they needed instruction in Christ, their main need was for the life-giving relationship with God in Christ that would empower them to live a holy life from the heart.

But when the church began to convert gentiles, it found itself dealing with people whose ideas of right and wrong were often mistaken and who needed basic instruction in how to live a godly life. For these inquirers into Christianity-called *catechumens*-the church developed a one- to two-year program of teaching, called the *catechumenate*. This teaching drew on the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and instructed pagans in how to conduct business, family, and other aspects of life according to God's mind.

We need to do something similar today. In a sense we need to establish a modern *catechumenate*.

My own community has developed a set of courses given to all those entering our community life together. We give single people instruction in a Christian approach to sexuality and courtship. We teach parents about marriage and raising children. We teach everyone about personal relationships, about repairing wrongdoing, about what love is, about proper Christian speech, about handling emotions, making decisions, and receiving guidance from the Lord.

DIFFERENT PATTERNS OF LIFE

Fifth, we need to develop a spiritual separation between the church and the world. The early Christian teachers held before God's people the choice of two ways: God's way and the way of the world (for example, the second-century work entitled *The Didache, or the Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*). We need to do the same. We need to help people distinguish the one from the other and show them how to make a separation between the way of life we have as Christians and the way of life of the society around us. We have to be willing to be different.

Making a spiritual separation involves living by different values. For example, we do not necessarily resemble the people around us in how we decide where we live, how we use our money, how we discipline our children.

Spiritual separation also means setting some boundaries around our life together. For example, in *The Sword of the Spirit* we help people recognize the non-Christian biases of mass media news and entertainment. We encourage people to limit the media's access to their time and attention. We point out the illogic of spending more time listening to the car radio, watching television, and reading secular newspapers and magazines than praying, studying the Bible, or doing other spiritual reading. We specifically recommend that people limit television viewing to no more than four hours each week.

We also look for ways to develop customs and festivals that celebrate and strengthen our distinct identity as God's people. The Lord's Day each week and the Christmas and Easter seasons each year are times when we set aside regular work and meetings, in order to recall the basis of our life together in Christ. We find it helpful to develop some recreational activities of our own, rather than simply being passive recipients of de-Christianized, mass-produced entertainment.

THE FAMILY A PRIORITY

A final key element: *an emphasis on family life.* We all know that the family is under attack. Nowhere are the effects of the de-Christianized social environment clearer than in the break-up of marriages and the widespread problems of youth. The youth culture is picking off many of our young people, drawing them away from their parents and far from Christ. PASTORAL RENEWAL has devoted considerable attention to this area over the last year. I will limit myself here to simply pointing out that we need to make the protection of family a high priority in church life.

In my own community we express this priority through the school, the patterns of prayer and celebration, and the teaching about family life for new members which I have mentioned. In addition we have a youth program and link high schoolers to big brothers and sisters who are community members. Pastoral leaders take a special concern for the family life of those in their care, and all parents attend a monthly "family forum" for prayer, teaching, and testimony about topics such as discipline, dealing with the secular youth culture, and husband-wife communication.

GOD WILL LEAD US

To do all this is not easy. Changing our model of church life takes courage, leadership and hard work. But God's grace is available to us for following a way of life that is holy and pleasing to him and for building a life together as a people for his own possession.

The place to begin living more as the people of God is in our turning to him in worship and repentance, submission and trust. The Maker of the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains will lead the way. "He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of his hand" (Psalm 95:7). O that today we would listen to his voice!



– (Sidebar Article) –

**The Early Christians:
They Lived as a People**

The Christians of the first centuries saw themselves as a distinct people in the world. They showed their peoplehood by caring for one another as brothers and sisters in the new covenant, by making a separation between their own way of life and that of the people around them.

The early Christian writers describe how the first Christians fulfilled their commitment to care of each other. Aristedes, a Greek Christian of the second century, gives us this picture:

"They love one another and do not overlook the widow and deliver the orphan from him who treats him harshly. He who has supplies the needs of him who has not, without grudging. If they see a stranger they bring him under their roof and rejoice over him as a real brother, because they call themselves brothers not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. And whenever one of their poor passes from the world, each one of them according to his ability gives heed to him and carefully sees to his burial. And if they hear that one of their number is imprisoned or afflicted on account of the name of their Messiah, all of them anxiously minister to his needs, and if possible redeem him and set him free. And if there is among them any that is poor and needy, and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days to supply the needy with what they need" (Apology, 15:7).

At the end of the second century, the African Christian Tertullian adds these details:

"On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation, but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able, for there is no compulsion, all is voluntary. These gifts are . . . taken ... to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such too as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in the prisons for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's church, they become the nurslings of their confession" (Apology, 39).

A modern historian, Igini Giordani, offers these descriptions:

"Assistance was given to all who could be reached, but it was given first of all to companions in faith and in a spirit of brotherhood. 'Although the good which is done to strangers is greater,' wrote Tertullian, 'it does not come before that which is due to one's neighbors.' . . .

"Because the Christians loved one another as brothers and called one another by that name-so that it could be said that they 'love one another almost before they know one another'-this love, translated into works of charity, created a real and effective solidarity between the rich and the poor. . . .

"The virtue of hospitality was practiced on a vast scale, since every Christian traveling for business, necessity, or relaxation immediately sought out the Christian community wherever he arrived; and in it he did not feel a stranger" (The Social Message of the Early Church Fathers).

The Christians' sense of being a distinct people, living their own holy way of life in the midst of nations, was a frequent theme of the early Christian teachers. At the end of the second century Clement of Alexandria boldly stated the contrast between the ways of life of Christians and other peoples in this way:

"Let the Athenian follow the laws of Solon, and the Argive those of Phoroneus, and the Spartan those of Lycurgus; but if you enroll yourself as one of God's people, heaven is your country, God your lawgiver. And what are the laws? 'Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not seduce boys; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not bear false witness; thou shalt love the Lord thy God.' And the complements of these are those laws of reason and words of sanctity which are inscribed on men's hearts: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself; to him who strikes thee on the cheek, present also the other; thou shalt not lust, for by lust alone thou hast committed adultery.'" (Exhortation to the Greeks, 10).

The Christians of the first centuries recognized that if they were to obey the commandments they needed to follow different customs from those of people around them who did not acknowledge God or his law. Giordani describes some of the conclusions the early Christians drew regarding the kind of spiritual separation to be made between themselves and the surrounding society:

"The gospel teaching demanded that Christians stay away from all those places and exhibitions of one sort or another in which monotheism, or Christ as God, or his moral law might be offended.

"Therefore they stayed away from religious festivals, they did not go to the temples, adorn their houses with garlands on the festival days, light torches, or wear wreaths upon their heads, etc. They continued to frequent the baths, the basilicas, and the forums in the daily round of business, but they did so with a feeling of revulsion, and they kept away from those places too as much as possible because of the records of idolatry, the exhibitions of corruptions, and the fraudulent transactions they were bound to run into when they entered them. The baths, for example, had in a great number of cases become real brothels and the attendants acted, even legally, as procurers."

The Christians' refusal to exchange their own way of life for that of the non-Christians they lived among was recognized as a key issue between Christianity and pagan society.

Giordani tells of one instance in which "Seven men and five women of Scillium were condemned to death by the proconsul of Asia because they refused to 'return to Roman customs.' The sentence of death read: 'Since Speratus, Nartallus, Cittinus,

Donata, Vestia, and Secunda have confessed that they live in the manner of the Christians and since, when a reprieve was offered them if they would begin again to live after the manner of the Romans, they have persevered in their obstinacy, we condemn them to be put to the sword."

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