

TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE BODY OF CHRIST METAPHOR

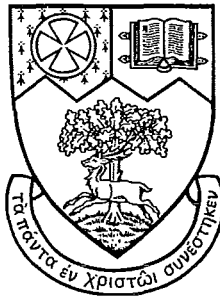
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## ABSTRACT

“Towards a Contextual Theology of Community: An Exploration of the Body of Christ Metaphor”

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This thesis argues that the Body of Christ is an effective metaphor for envisioning healthy Christian community in contemporary North American culture. The Body of Christ metaphor fosters a vision of the alternative community of God that addresses the problem of (unhealthy) displacement and revitalizes the way in which Christians embrace and embody God’s mission. Deeper reflection on the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ assists the church in reflecting on its core identity as the people called by God to share in his mission in the contemporary context. The core identity of the Christian community that this thesis explores includes its nature (‘being’) and function (‘doing’). To conclude, this thesis appraises ‘intentional Christian communities’ as one contextual application of biblical community that lives out the Body of Christ metaphor.

## DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To  
St. James,  
my community

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## Introduction

The challenges of living and practicing faith in a postmodern, individualistic culture have driven institutional churches and independent groups of Christians alike to reexamine biblical models for community that address a fragmented experience of the world. The responses have been diverse. At one end of the spectrum, many churches have adopted a small group model as a way in which to build community among members of the congregation. At the other end, ‘intentional Christian communities’ are becoming increasingly popular among certain groups of Christians seeking to embody biblical community in a holistic manner.<sup>1</sup> Both applications adopt a vision of community that is rooted in certain biblical values and seeks to respond contextually.

This thesis argues that the Body of Christ is an effective metaphor for envisioning healthy Christian community in contemporary North American culture. The Body of Christ metaphor fosters a vision of the alternative community of God that addresses the problem of (unhealthy) displacement and revitalizes the way in which Christians embrace and embody God’s mission. Deeper reflection on the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ assists the church in reflecting on its core identity as the people called by God to share in his mission in the contemporary context. The core identity of the Christian community as the Body of Christ that this thesis explores includes its nature (‘being’) and function (‘doing’). To conclude, this thesis appraises ‘intentional Christian communities’ as one contextual application of biblical community that lives out the Body of Christ metaphor.

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<sup>1</sup> What is meant by ‘intentional Christian community’ will be explained in greater detail in chapter five. Briefly, these communities embody daily faith-based ways of living communally that incorporate elements of economic sharing, social justice, and environmental concern.

In order to orient the reader to the task and approach of this thesis, several introductory comments are made. First, the methodology is set forth, including a description of how certain core concepts and terms are handled. Second, the context for Paul's use of the Body of Christ metaphor in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12 is delineated. Third, a review of the literature is given. Finally, the structure of the thesis is outlined.

### **Methodological Considerations**

Theology exists in and for the church. A theological framework that is sensitive to the postmodern context is necessary in order to help the church extend the message of the gospel in a contextually appropriate manner. This thesis uses a biblical and contextual theology that draws on the methodology suggested by Stanley Grenz and John Franke in *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*.<sup>2</sup> A framework that is scripturally normative, traditionally informed, and culturally embedded is essential to this thesis, which strives to be biblically reflective and culturally engaged. The community of the contemporary church is also missionally-situated to respond to God's calling for its life in the world. Churches often make the mistake of reducing mission to a functional task of the church, when in reality, the church as the people of God is inherently missional.<sup>3</sup> Thus the concept of the Body of Christ as explored in this thesis is grounded in an outpouring of God's triune character as manifested in the missional nature of the community of believers within the contemporary North American context.

Some clarification around the usage of the terms community and Body of Christ is in order. Community can be spoken of in many ways. This thesis uses community when referring to a broad understanding of community as the connections and

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<sup>2</sup> Grenz and Franke, *Foundationalism*, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gelder, *Essence*, 31. The missional nature of the church is clarified in chapter four.



relationships for which people in a postmodern, fragmented context long. This definition of community sometimes encompasses a portion of what this thesis proposes as a vision for Christian community, and sometimes includes aspects of a wider definition of community such as a neighbourhood or online social networking community. When it refers specifically to the larger public community, the words neighbourhood, city, or context are used. This thesis uses Christian community when referring to the specifically Christian community.

The terms Christian community and Body of Christ are used interchangeably throughout the thesis to reflect their flexible natures. The Christian community and the Body of Christ encompasses many meanings. The congregation that meets for worship on Sundays is the Christian community. Likewise the weekly women's prayer group is the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is the physical community of believers gathered; but those who are unable to gather physically are no less a part of the community. The Christian community is one particular local manifestation of Christ's church; it is also Christ's global Body. The Body of Christ consists of those whom Christ has called and in whom he is actively working, individually and collectively, to bring into communion with himself and to transform into a community that will bear witness to his reign in the world. For the purposes of this thesis, discussion of Christian community in all its forms is limited to the North American context.

This thesis approaches the topic of the Body of Christ from the perspective of embodied theology. The metaphor is applied in contextual and flexible ways that reflect Paul's own usage. Following the manner in which Paul addresses the Corinthian church, this thesis aims to use the metaphor to address the concerns and conflicts of the

contemporary situation. Discussion concerning the Body of Christ in the contemporary context balances several core themes. First, the Body of Christ metaphor deals with both contemporary and biblical concerns. Second, the Body of Christ as Christian community embodies God's design for its life together by simultaneously embracing the two dimensions of 'being' and 'doing,' with each aspect constituting the basis for the other. Third, the Body of Christ incorporates individual diversity with communal emphasis. These are core themes and tensions the community must engage if it is to communally address the needs of a postmodern, individualistic culture in ways that are biblically informed. The kind of community that is discussed here centers on one focal point: communion with God through Christ that is enabled by the Spirit. It is as believers and Christian communities enter into full communion with God that they are duly transformed into a Body that can express his mission in the world.

### **Paul's Use of the Body of Christ**

It is important to base a theology of the Body of Christ on sound biblical exegesis, even if the intent of the argument is more theological than exegetical. Solid exegesis contributes to faithful theological interpretation. It is not just anybody's theology of the Body that serves as the foundation of this thesis, but that which is credited to the apostle Paul. First, it is acknowledged that the concept of Body is employed in several of the letters attributed to Paul. Second, Paul demonstrates vast flexibility in his use of the term Body.<sup>4</sup> The focus here and throughout the thesis will center on Paul's use of the Body as set forth in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12. Here Paul emphasizes on the one hand the Eucharistic Body and blood of Christ (1 Cor 11:23–32) and on the other, the diversity of

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<sup>4</sup> See Bishop, *Some Bodies* and Minear, *Images* for several examples.

ministries and the unity of the Body (1 Cor 12:12–31). Both of these aspects are essential to the content of the thesis. Because the Body analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 is the more frequently used, it is cited here in order to help orient the reader:

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? Now eagerly desire the greater gifts (1 Cor 12:12–31 TNIV).

The Corinthian context serves as a good parallel to the contemporary context. The city itself was ethnically diverse and the church faced struggles including determined individualism, arrogance concerning spirituality and manifestations of the Spirit, as well as accommodation of the gospel to the surrounding culture.<sup>5</sup> Division marked the life of the Corinthian church. On a societal level, competition accompanied increasing

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<sup>5</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 19.

prosperity.<sup>6</sup> Such competition infiltrated the church on multiple levels, resulting in at least two crucial issues. Not only did Christians prefer one leader over another in terms of their good rhetoric and oratory skills, but rivalry also ensued between members in connection with spiritual gifts. Instead of honouring each member alike, the Corinthians had been acting in accordance with cultural competitive norms.<sup>7</sup> Social division also marred the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Instead of sharing a common meal, wealthier Christians were privatizing their own meals while others went hungry.<sup>8</sup>

In writing his letter to the Corinthians, Paul addresses these two issues, first by reinstating the inclusive practice of the Lord's Supper as it was handed down from Christ himself (1 Cor 11:23–26): “By their abuse of one another they were negating the very point of that death—to create a new people for his name, in which the old distinctions based on human fallenness no longer obtain.”<sup>9</sup> Second, he addresses the gifts exercised within the Corinthian community. His argument here is polemical. His intention is not to present an exhaustive list of gifts, but to rebuke the community for their improper elevation and abuse of the gift of tongues. The purpose of gifts is for the edification of the church, a concern which lies at the heart of his letter.<sup>10</sup> The Christian community expressed through his metaphor of the Body of Christ is intended to be marked by an inclusive regard for the diversity embodied in the community so that the Body and all its members might be built up in love. Paul's challenge continues to be relevant to the Christian community today.

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<sup>6</sup> DeSilva, *Introduction*, 556–57.

<sup>7</sup> DeSilva, *Introduction*, 565.

<sup>8</sup> Theissen, *Social Setting*, 96.

<sup>9</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 557.

<sup>10</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 572.

## Literature Review

The concept of the Body is one of the foundational pieces of Pauline theology. Although he uses the term in a variety of ways, the focus of this thesis is on the Eucharistic Body and the church as the Body of Christ as they inform the life of the Christian community. A literature review that outlines several of the major scholarly contributions provides a helpful background to the argument of this thesis. Below is a topical summary of the following broad areas: biblical studies on the church as the Body of Christ, biblical studies concerning the Eucharist, biblically-informed theologies of community, and the interrelationship between Christian community and context.

### *Biblical Studies on the Church as the Body of Christ*

The Body of Christ is an important metaphor for the church in the New Testament. *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (1941) by Lionel Thornton remains the seminal work on Christ's Body that addresses the theological foundations of the church as they appear in the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> John Robinson (1966) underscores this relevance of the Body in Pauline theology for the church in an era of emergence from individualism:

It is from the body of sin and death that we are delivered; it is through the body of Christ on the Cross that we are saved; it is into His body the Church that we are incorporated; it is by His body in the Eucharist that this Community is sustained; it is in our body that its new life has to be manifested; it is to a resurrection of this body to the likeness of His glorious body that we are destined.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thornton, *Common Life*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Robinson, *The Body*, 9. Robinson writes from the basic conviction that the age of individualism is no longer economically viable and is thus coming to an end. Just the opposite is true today. Individualism has reached unprecedented heights and continues to influence the context into which an understanding of the church as the Body of Christ is merited.

Paul Minear (1960), addressing a variety of New Testament images for the church, highlights the flexibility of Paul's thought on the Body. Eduard Schweizer contributes both a preliminary methodological study of the history of the Greek word for Body (1964) that describes early Christian thought on the term, as well as a detailed biblical treatment of  $\sigma\kappa\mu\alpha$  (1965). A. J. M. Wedderburn (1971) focuses on an interpretation of the Body of Christ on the basis of Paul's earlier letters, particularly 1 Corinthians.

Besides these more biblically exegetical treatments, much has been stated regarding the character of the church as informed by the metaphor of the Body of Christ. Of Avery Dulles' (1978) six major models, the church as mystical communion emphasizes the interpersonal nature of the church that is brought out through the imagery of the Body of Christ.<sup>13</sup> Brett Webb-Mitchell (2003) insightfully applies the Body of Christ to a description of the church as a school of Christian discipleship. Drawing on the theological vision of Paul especially in the book of *Romans*, he understands that "the purpose of educating all Christians is that they take their rightful, God-given place in Christ's body."<sup>14</sup> Yung Suk Kim (2008) construes the church through an interpretation of the Pauline Body of Christ as "a metaphor for those associated with the crucified one" that "allows for identifying that body with many broken human bodies and communities through history and culture."<sup>15</sup> Kim provides a bridge between solid biblical exegesis and faithful application to a theology of Christian community. Finally, a very recent and interesting article by SueAnn Johnson (2009) seeks meaning in the Body of Christ from a

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<sup>13</sup> Dulles, *Models*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures*, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Kim, *Christ's Body*, 3.

feminist perspective as “a distinctly Christian symbol that empowers the contemporary community of Christian believers with a radical new identity.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Biblical Studies on the Eucharist*

The subject of the Eucharist has enjoyed significant scholarly attention across all domains of Christian study. Joachim Jeremias' *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (1964) provides an exegetical foundation of 1 Corinthians 11 that forms the basis for much of later scholarship on the Eucharist. The Eucharistic meal at the time of the New Testament was recognized to be the heart of a Christian worship that encompassed all of life.<sup>17</sup> The Lord's Supper functioned and continues to function to sustain the identity of the group as one which values fellowship, equality, reconciliation and unity, servanthood, group awareness, and expectation of the return of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Through the practice of the Lord's Supper, Jesus transmits his identity,<sup>19</sup> Christian unity is promoted,<sup>20</sup> and the love of Jesus is made visible.<sup>21</sup>

Several of the works mentioned establish well the connection between the Body of Christ and its application to the Christian community or the church<sup>22</sup>; some bring out more so than others the communal emphasis of the Eucharist.<sup>23</sup> However, most of these works are concerned with the historical interpretation of the Body of Christ and the practice of the Eucharist. Only Webb-Mitchell, and to a lesser extent Robinson, Dulles,

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, “Meaningful Symbol,” 210.

<sup>17</sup> Moule, *Worship* and Bishop, *Some Bodies*.

<sup>18</sup> Witherington, “Making a Meal,” 82–83.

<sup>19</sup> Bishop, *Some Bodies*.

<sup>20</sup> Davies, *Bread of Life* and Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*.

<sup>21</sup> Moloney, *Body Broken*.

<sup>22</sup> Thornton, *Common Life*, Minear, *Images*, Schweizer, *Church as Body*, Robinson, *Body*, Dulles, *Models*, Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures* and Kim, *Christ's Body*.

<sup>23</sup> Minear, *Images*, Moule, *Worship*, Schweizer, “σ□μα”, Witherington, “Making a Meal,” and Bishop *Some Bodies*.

and Ben Witherington, provide a particularly contextual expression of the Body of Christ as a metaphor; of these, Webb-Mitchell is the most contemporary.

*Biblically-informed Theologies of Community*

Distinguishing between exegetical writings on the Body of Christ and theological writings on Christian community is in some cases an ambiguous task; nonetheless, to do so helps to clearly summarize the literature. The contributions listed below relate to the general category of a theology of community. Marva Dawn's exegesis of Romans 12 (1992) and Philip Esler's *New Testament Theology* (2005) appropriate particular biblical passages to the challenges of contemporary Christian life, experience, and identity.<sup>24</sup>

Gerhard Lohfink and Paul Hanson take a much broader biblical view. Lohfink's *Jesus and Community* (1982) present a clear and systematic presentation of biblical community from the conception of Israel through the time of Christ to the early New Testament and apostolic churches. Hanson (1986) surveys the growth of community from the time of Genesis to the New Testament era, highlighting encounter with God as the founding Hebrew principle.

More generally, Norman Kraus (1993) traces the biblical formation of community from the perspective of the person-community relationship and explicates the Spirit's role in transforming Christ-followers into a community of witness. Developing the biblical notion of persons in community as a reflection of the Trinity are Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf (1998), and John Zizioulas (2002). Grenz's systematic theology (1994) is thoroughly communally-oriented. Of the church he says:

The church is to be the fellowship of individuals who are bound together by the love present among them through the power of God's Spirit which is exemplified

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<sup>24</sup> Esler, *New Testament*, 2. Esler explores 1 Corinthians 10–14 as a model of persons in communion.



by humble service to each other and the world. Indeed, as we exist in love, we reflect what God is like.”<sup>25</sup>

Likewise, the central premise of Craig Van Gelder’s *The Essence of the Church* (2000) is that the church is and should be a community of people governed by Scripture and taught by the Spirit. Van Gelder expands his distinctly missionally-oriented and Spirit-led ecclesiology in *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (2007). Here he focuses more particularly on the ministry and organizational life of the church.

Continuing with a vision for Christian community informed by the greater biblical witness are Stanley Hauerwas, John Westerhoff III, Charles Gerkin, and John Zizioulas. Hauerwas (1981) emphasizes the storied-character of true community. What forms community, is not “power, or security, or equality, or even dignity, but a sense of worth gained from participation and contribution to a common adventure.”<sup>26</sup> Westerhoff III (1985) envisions the kind of church where Christians truly live out faith in community. His vision connects the Christian’s need to the heart of community, which is worship, and a common life in which Christians are nurtured and find identity in a ‘faith family.’ For Gerkin (1991), the Christian community, centered on the biblical narrative, defines a normative vision of human life and living:

The Christian community, through the centuries, has sustained its identity through the appropriation and reappropriation of the images, themes, and metaphors of that biblical narrative. For Christians it contains a normative vision of what life is and should be.<sup>27</sup>

For Zizioulas, the church is a way of being in communion with people and with God.<sup>28</sup> In addition to these more biblically-focused ways of speaking of community, Henri Nouwen

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<sup>25</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, 489.

<sup>26</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Gerkin, *Pastoral Practice*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 15.

and Jean Vanier have made several contributions that are more reflective in nature. In *Reaching Out* (1975) Nouwen seeks to capture the tensions inherent in community, between loneliness and solitude, hostility and hospitality, and illusion and prayer. *Lifesigns* (1986) explores the communal imagery of the vine and the branches. Jean Vanier (1988) offers ‘starting points’ for reflection on the nature of community. Community calls a person both to displacement and to belonging and to wholeness in the Body of Christ (1996).

### *Christian Community and Context*

Finally, resources that address a contemporary Christian engagement with culture are considered. Although significant contributions to the topic do exist, it is noted that little specifically addresses the relationship of the *community* to culture. The majority of the literature takes the perspective either of the individual or of the entire institutional church. H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951) remains the highly influential treatment of Christianity and culture. Craig Carter (2006) critiques Niebuhr’s admittedly outdated perspective from a post-Christendom viewpoint. How the church might embody the gospel in a post-Christendom culture is addressed through several essays in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (1996). Part of what defines the current context is a sense of fragmentation.<sup>29</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh (2008) offer a thoughtful and well-researched account of the contemporary situation, and argue for the need for an integrative and communal response.

Responses that focus more on the concrete implications of the church as a community of people rather than as an abstract concept, are as follows: Rodney Clapp

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<sup>29</sup> See Berry, *Sex, Berry, Way of Ignorance, Casey, Into Place, Relph, Place and Placelessness*, and Smith, *Who’s Afraid* for examples that define the contemporary situation.

(1996) argues that Christians must reclaim their heritage as a peculiar people in order to live and work faithfully in a society that is individualistic, technologically-based, and consumer-oriented through reclaiming its heritage as a worshipping community. Albert Hsu (2006) makes some practical suggestions for developing community in the suburban context. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay (2008) describe personal and tangible experiences of the kingdom of God through a variety of communal and contextually relevant examples. A theology of community is always contextual. Clapp (1996), Hsu (2006), Halter and Smay (2008), and to a lesser extent Bouma-Prediger and Walsh (2008) reflect concrete attempts to ground the experience of community within a particular cultural context. Each engages thoughtfully with the surrounding context and presents a theology of community that lives out the mandate of the Gospel to be a *communal* sign to the nations. Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides an excellent case study on the nature of Christian community that is biblically and theologically grounded and engages with culture. *Sanctorum Communio* (1927), his doctoral dissertation, forms the theological foundations upon which he builds his later and better known works. *Life Together* (1996) is a reflection on the practice of daily Christian living for individual persons belonging to community. His interpretation of community is always Christological.

Most of the well-established writings on Christian community mentioned thus far are grounded solidly in the biblical tradition. However, no theology of community, with the exception of Dawn (1992) and Webb-Mitchell (2003), focuses on the relationship between a particular biblical metaphor and a contemporary expression of community. In addition, the literature which relates the Body of Christ to the Christian community neglects to contemporize that context. Therefore a contextual theology of community is

needed that describes not the relationship of church and culture or Christianity and culture, but the Christian *community* and culture. How does a biblically-informed vision for Christian community address twenty-first century North American culture? It is the contention of this thesis that an exploration of the metaphor of the Body of Christ can be fruitful for helping to bring a relevant biblical metaphor, the Christian community, and contemporary culture together in dialogue.

### **Outline of the Thesis**

In order to assist Christians in the church to reflect on their life together as a people called to be a missional and incarnational presence in the contemporary North American context, this thesis describes how the Body of Christ metaphor opens up a fresh contextual expression of community. Chapter one makes the case that the Body of Christ is a contextual metaphor. The contemporary context experiences cultural and relational fragmentation and physical displacement from people and from land. Chapter one argues that a Christian concept of community can mediate the cultural dilemma of displacement.

Chapter two argues that the presence of Christ is constitutive for the community of faith. The presence of God among the Israelite community foreshadows God's future presence 'in Christ.' The Spirit now remains the triune God's mode of manifestation of his presence in the gathered community, even as the community abides in Christ. Worship is the fitting response to the divine indwelling and is the heart of Christian community. The practice of the Eucharist, in particular, constitutes the heart of the faith community. The Eucharist is both essence and practice; it is a central event whereby believers-in-community experience communion with God and with one another.

Chapter three flows from the central emphasis in chapter two on the Spirit's indwelling presence and unifying activity in communion. It shows that the Body of Christ as community responds to, and intentionally participates in, the divine initiative. The response of the Body is marked by its humanity and the interaction of individual persons. The faith community functions most effectively as a Body when each member is performing his/her *God-given* function (1 Cor 12:12–30) for the sake of the unity of the faith and the building up of God's kingdom (Eph 4:1–16).

Chapter four ties together the 'being' and 'doing' dimensions of the Body of Christ as they relate to the expression of God's mission in the contemporary context. It contrasts the displacement described in chapter one with the true displacement that comes as a result of fulfilling God's mission and intention for community. Thus the Body of Christ is simultaneously implaced and displaced. Several practices that both constitute and characterize the community contribute to the fulfillment of God's mission in the contemporary context.

Chapter five presents one contextual Christian response to the experience of fragmentation and displacement that marks the contemporary context, that of 'intentional Christian communities.' It integrates the arguments of the previous chapters and evaluates this response in light of the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ. It concludes that 'intentional Christian communities' represent one theologically faithful and holistic response to the prevailing cultural dilemma.

Bonhoeffer's words provide a fitting conclusion to this introduction. He summarizes much of the subject of this thesis and emphasizes again the importance of Christ's presence in relation to community:

The relation of Christ to the church is twofold. Christ is the foundation, the cornerstone, the pioneer, the master builder. But Christ is also at all times a real presence for the church, for it is Christ's body, and the people are members of this body (1 Cor 12:2; Rom 12:4; Eph 1:23, 4:15; Col 1:18), or members of Christ himself (1 Cor 6:15; Rom 6:13 and 19). This means that the church is at once already completed and still in the process of growing. The actualization is accomplished by the spirit of Christ and by the Holy Spirit. What the former is for the church as a whole, the latter is for the individual. The Holy Spirit brings Christ to individuals (Rom 8:14; Eph 2:22) and establishes community among them (2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1).<sup>30</sup>

The Body of Christ metaphor emphasizes the centrality of Christ's presence. In response to the divine actualization, the community responds in particular ways that reflect its God-given potential. As it embraces communion in the Spirit, the community is transformed into a Body that can express God's mission to the world. This thesis explores the Body of Christ metaphor as it relates to a contextual expression of Christian community. A description of the contemporary context, which is the subject of the first chapter, facilitates the argument of this thesis: that the Body of Christ as a metaphor offers fresh perspective on the embracing of healthy Christian community in North American culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 139.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Displacement and Considerations for a Christian Response**

This chapter outlines the problem of displacement that leads to fragmentation and alienation and argues that an experience of Christian community that is physically and contextually rooted can mediate the cultural trend toward (unhealthy) displacement. To this end, an understanding of displacement is essential. This chapter aims, first, to set forth an appreciation of this trend in relation to the broader cultural milieu, and second, it offers several considerations, or points of engagement, for a contextual Christian response, which subsequent chapters develop in terms of the Body of Christ.

It is the contention of this thesis that understanding the nature and function of the Christian community in terms of the Body of Christ enables the community to address the contemporary experiences of displacement and fragmentation. The Body of Christ presents an image of the community of God that responds to these particular experiences with a vision for community that fulfills and surpasses that for which people are seeking.

#### **The Condition of Displacement**

Understanding cultural texts and trends is important if Christians are to live the Gospel authentically and in a manner that is contextually credible. According to Kevin Vanhoozer, a cultural “text” is “any human work that, precisely because it is something done purposefully and not by reflex, bears meaning and calls for interpretation.”<sup>31</sup> Like texts, cultural trends also communicate and orient the cultural reader toward particular visions of the world; they reproduce particular sets of beliefs, values, ideas, fashions, and

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<sup>31</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 248.

practices and by so doing, gain the power to shape the human spirit.<sup>32</sup> The condition of displacement is a cultural trend. Vanhoozer suggests a multidimensional approach to interpreting cultural trends that includes what he calls the world “of,” the world “behind,” and the world “in front of” the trend. The world “of” refers to the particular way of being and participating in the life embodied and displayed by the trend.<sup>33</sup> The world “behind” indicates the background context and life view of the forces or people at work to create the trend.<sup>34</sup> The world “in front of” relates to the kind of person one becomes when one accepts the invitation to indwell a certain world of meaning.<sup>35</sup> This section examines each of these three worlds of displacement in turn.

### *The World “Of” Displacement*

What way of life is embodied in the cultural trend of displacement? Today’s society is marked by a deep sense of rootlessness. Now more than ever, North Americans face an overwhelming multiplicity of choices in every aspect of life, including place of residence, relationships, vocation, and lifestyle. These choices may change several times over the course of a lifetime. In addition, these choices are no longer limited to the immediate locale in which one finds one’s place of residence. Commuting to work, purchasing globally-imported goods, or nurturing relationships through online social networks have become ordinary activities for many middle-class citizens of Canada and the United States. This semi-nomadic consumer lifestyle feeds a profound experience of displacement and at the same time, displacement fuels the consumer lifestyle, both from

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<sup>32</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 28–31. Vanhoozer’s discussion here focuses predominantly on the nature of cultural texts; however, his comments can be equally applied to trends.

<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 52.



the people within one's community, as well as from the physical environment of that community. Rootlessness, or displacement, signifies a two-fold physical disconnectedness—from other people and from place.

At its core, displacement is a crisis of social identity. Its opposite, *implacement*, refers to belonging to a particular group of people, as well as to a particular physical space. Both are necessary to healthy human flourishing and the development of culture. However, the semi-nomadic western way of life, dependent on imported goods and services, encourages fragmentary ways of living that do not require grounding in only one cultural story. The North American consumer is free to choose his/her goods, relationships, spirituality, vocation(s), etc., from a seemingly endless array of global options. Not only is the consumer free to pick and choose elements from among a plethora of options, he/she is not required to root those choices in any one particular context. One may effectually live one's work life, home life, and recreational life in three different geographical locations. Wendell Berry writes that individuals “choose to conform not to local ways and conditions but to a rootless and placeless monoculture of commercial expectations and products.”<sup>36</sup> The consumer experience of repeatedly picking and choosing one's lifestyle from among options can lead to fragmentation.<sup>37</sup>

Place is an important factor in developing healthy connections within a particular context. Edward Relph writes, “The relationship between community and place is indeed a very powerful one in which each reinforces the identity of the other, and in which the landscape is very much an expression of communally held beliefs and values and of

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<sup>36</sup> Berry, *Sex*, 151. Although the proliferation of choices suggests plurality, the underlying Market could be the unifying factor, suggesting what Berry calls a “monoculture.”

<sup>37</sup> Juliet Schor provides a well-researched example of the effects of the consumer lifestyle on children. Based on a sophisticated statistical model, she concludes that, “involvement in consumer culture leads to problems.” See Schor, *Born to Buy*, 143.

interpersonal involvements.”<sup>38</sup> An awareness of one’s place has everything to do with one’s identity. Edward Casey notes that one’s truest identity is intimately connected to land, “for the sense of self, personal or collective, grows out of and reflects the places from which we come and where we have been.”<sup>39</sup> Conversely, the loss of one’s identity in relation to place results in “disorientation, memory loss, homelessness, depression, and various modes of estrangement from self and other.”<sup>40</sup> Brian Walsh and Steven Bouma-Prediger write about the displacement and implacement of the socio-economically homeless, the well-housed homeless, and the postmodern nomad:

In one way or another, all of the people we have described thus far are displaced: they are excluded from some place and have no remaining connection to it. Such displacement, in its various forms, is at the heart of homelessness. On the other hand, to be “placed” is to have a sense of connection, loyalty, affection, and identity within a particular context—a location, a house, a community, a nation.<sup>41</sup>

Attachment to a place and to people is an important element for healthy cultural development and the cultivating of human identity. That western society suffers from insufficient attention to both of these elements are significant reasons for the experience of displacement of its people.

The twenty-first century North American context exhibits simultaneously a strange disregard for implacement and a desperate longing for it. The paradox is well reflected in the advent of interactive social networking websites that connect people through shared life experiences. Social networking sites thrive on the basis of physical disconnectedness while paradoxically proposing an experience of genuine connection. In addition to social networking sites, Albert Hsu notes that the search for community finds

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<sup>38</sup> Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> Casey, *Into Place*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Casey, *Into Place*, 38.

<sup>41</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 45.

its solution “more and more in the imagined and virtual communities of consumer demographics.”<sup>42</sup> It is no longer necessary to establish face-to-face connections with others in order to belong. The twenty-first century individual, then, has found a way to maintain high levels of personal privacy and independence, while at the same time seeking relational fulfillment. However, this dialectic does not dissolve feelings of loneliness and isolation. Henri Nouwen notes the irony:

Children, adolescents, adults and old people are in growing degree exposed to the contagious disease of loneliness in a world in which a competitive individualism tries to reconcile itself with a culture that speaks about togetherness, unity and community as the ideals to strive for.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, twenty-first century North American culture presents something of an absurdity: a displaced view of human existence operating under the myth of human autonomy, and a simultaneous longing for genuine implacement. How did it come to be this way?

### *The World “Behind” Displacement*

This section explores the forces and trends at work behind the trend of displacement. One condition that contributes to feelings of displacement and fragmentation is loneliness. Despite unprecedented access to people and relationships, North Americans suffer from loneliness more than ever. Henri Nouwen writes, “Loneliness is one of the most universal human experiences, but our contemporary Western society has heightened the awareness of our loneliness to an unusual degree.”<sup>44</sup> This should not be surprising. In a time of perceived economic self-sufficiency and double-car garages with automatic door-openers, one perceives no real need to commune with one’s neighbour. Displacement also arises from the neglect with which individuals

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<sup>42</sup>Hsu, *Suburban Christian*, 124.

<sup>43</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 24.

treat their physical surroundings. Most middle-class North American citizens are only vaguely aware of the damage their habitation has caused to the local ecosystem.<sup>45</sup>

Individuals do not envision themselves as part of a creational geography that includes plant and animal life. Part of the reason for this may be the lack of dependence that first-world nations have on the fruits of their own land for sustenance.

Behind the experiences of loneliness and displacement from land lies the belief in the autonomy and priority of the individual. According to Norman Kraus, it is the “unquestioned assumption” of North American culture that “the individual takes precedence over the group.”<sup>46</sup> This reality is due in part to the fact that most individuals in the North American context no longer derive their identities from families or extended family connections. John Zizioulas writes, “Respect for man’s [sic] ‘personal identity’ is perhaps the most important ideal of our time.”<sup>47</sup> Personal identity is understood on the basis of what is unique about the individual. Rodney Clapp reiterates the point:

The “real me” is not my membership in the worldwide church, my shared kin with Clapps around the country, nor my connection—with three million other people—to the geography and culture of Chicago. The “real me” is my unique, individual, core self. The in-dividual self values itself most for what is supposedly utterly different and unconnected about it.<sup>48</sup>

The individual self, according to Clapp, is a modern mystification—an absurd and illogical idea.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, it is a superficially attractive idea. Individual supremacy as a cultural self-concept has given North Americans the justification for competition and individual achievement, and these in turn generate success and prosperity.

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<sup>45</sup> For example, suburban shopping districts that have replaced farmlands and wooded areas have both destroyed the environment and replaced places for authentic interaction with places for economic consumption. See Purvis, “Mallification.”

<sup>46</sup> Kraus, *Community of the Spirit*, 31.

<sup>47</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 91.

<sup>49</sup> Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 90–91.

The basic concept of the human person as autonomous and self-reliant fuels an ethos of individual success and prosperity, which contributes to a consumer-oriented culture. Self-sufficiency and independence fuel the North American economy. The measure for success and prosperity, on an individual and economic level, consists largely in what one is able to buy or achieve with one's wealth. Juliet Schor states:

The United States is the most consumer-oriented society in the world. People work longer hours than in any other industrialized country. Savings rates are lower. Consumer credit has exploded, and roughly a million and a half households declare bankruptcy every year.<sup>50</sup>

The identity of the human person (and the growth of the market) depends on the continuous acquirement of goods and services. It is predicated on the premise that “bigger is always better and growth is always good.”<sup>51</sup> This kind of thinking began in a modern era marked by the optimistic progress of humanity and which understands progress in terms of access to and consumption of an ever proliferating menu of new products and technologies. Although the optimism has faded, production of objects for consumption has not. A shift has occurred in postmodernism: Mass production of identical objects has given way to the proliferation of many different objects to meet the changing demands of a fragmented “taste culture.”<sup>52</sup>

However, Schor's research points to the failures of an individual and consumer-oriented lifestyle. Bigger is *not* always better. The pursuit of “bigger and better” can contribute to bankruptcy and problems among children.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, working longer hours can contribute to decreased opportunities for genuine connection, loneliness, and displacement from one's own community.

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<sup>50</sup> Schor, *Born to Buy*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 182.

<sup>52</sup> Grenz, *Primer*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> See Schor, *Born to Buy*.

*The World “In Front of” Displacement*

Vanhoozer asks, “What kinds of persons do we become when we accept culture’s invitation to indwell a certain world of meaning?”<sup>54</sup> To accept culture’s conception of the human person as an autonomous consumer is, on the surface, to witness to a way of being human that promises economic self-sufficiency and great freedom of choice. Happiness is based on what one can achieve for oneself. Underneath the surface, however, the centrality of the individual is a myth that fails to satisfy the deepest longings for genuine connection with others. In its fullest sense, it invites inhabitants to embrace a world of meaning that is lonely. To indwell a world of meaning in which individuals relentlessly pursue “bigger and better” also has profound implications for one’s place of being. Place is essential to human identity, and yet, people are too busy to take note of their surroundings and the ecological degradation their habitation is causing.

Neglect of physical context not only contributes to personal displacement, but also has ecological consequences. Thoughtless and self-centered consumption has local and global ramifications. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian Walsh write, “The belief that we humans are at the center of the universe contributes both to the degradation of our home planet and to our own sense of homelessness on earth.”<sup>55</sup> Humanity’s rapid and thoughtless ownership of the earth is costing humans the physical place on which their survival depends. Wendell Berry calls the damaging effects of individualism tragic:

The tragic version of rugged individualism is in the presumptive “right” of individuals to do as they please, as if there were no God, no legitimate government, no community, no neighbors, and no posterity. This is most frequently understood as the right to do whatever one pleases with one’s property. One’s property, according to this formulation, is one’s own absolutely. Rugged

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<sup>54</sup> Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology*, 52.

<sup>55</sup> Bouma-Prediger et al., *Beyond Homelessness*, 182.

individualism of this kind has cost us dearly in lost topsoil, in destroyed forests, in the increasing toxicity of the world, and in annihilated species.<sup>56</sup>

If individuals continue to pillage and consume the earth's resources, and to submit to a metaphor of the good life that encourages self-absorption and consumption at all costs, the outcome will be a heightened experience of displacement and fragmentation and a progressive destruction of place.

Displacement witnesses to a way of being human that is fragmented, rootless, and self-centered. Yet displaced persons are also, to a somewhat superficial degree, keenly aware of their dilemma. There is recognition that what promises to be the good life fails to fulfill fundamental human needs of connection and community. Douglas Hall notes the quest for meaningful community that has arisen because of the failure of individualism to provide a satisfactory answer to the meaning of human existence.<sup>57</sup> From the experience of displacement there emerges a desire for a better way of life, one that provides the antidote to loneliness. This way of life ought also to be more authentically rooted in the physical community.

Like the culture at large, the church is deeply affected by the issues of consumerism, self-absorption, and the damaging effects of individualism. Individualism potentially reduces the idea of Christian community to a mere collection of individuals worshipping side-by-side. James K. A. Smith summarizes the matter of modern Christian individualism well:

Within the matrix of a modern Christianity, the base 'ingredient' is the individual; the church, then, is simply a collection of individuals. . . . With this model in place, what matters is Christianity as a system of truth or ideas, not the church as a living community embodying its head. Modern Christianity tends to think of the church either as a place where individuals come to find answers to their questions

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<sup>56</sup> Berry, *Way of Ignorance*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Hall, "Theologic," 208.

or as one more stop where individuals can try to satisfy their consumerist desires. As such, Christianity becomes intellectualized rather than incarnate, commodified rather than the site of genuine community.<sup>58</sup>

Individualism disconnects worshippers from place. Just as people travel to shop at a distant mall, so they commute to the Big-Box church. Furthermore, most churches, like society at large, pay less than adequate attention to the ecological damage their practices engender. Unattended, these aspects that have penetrated the church can lead to further damage including greater loneliness, alienation from one another, and displacement and destruction of place. A more comprehensive biblical conception of community has the potential to address these complex experiences of displacement and fragmentation.

### **Considerations for a Contextual Christian Response**

Although contemporary North American culture leads to displacement that fosters fragmentation and alienation, Christianity envisions a more holistic and integrated life. This section of the chapter outlines recommendations for the community orientation of Christianity that fosters values of connectivity between people and their environment. The concern below is to identify ways in which the Christian community can respond to the cultural condition of displacement. Subsequent chapters show more fully the implications of a theology of the Body of Christ for how the Christian community embodies its life together. Recovering a biblical emphasis on community has the potential to provide traction in a context that is marked by physical and relational fragmentation. There is no one way to address the problems facing our time. However, there are several considerations that might be helpful in pointing the direction to a variety of contextual and thoughtful responses based on a theology of the Body of Christ.

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<sup>58</sup> Smith, *Postmodernism*, 29.



First, Christians ought to recognize the interconnectedness of all life and respond accordingly. They can do this by allowing the biblical story, rather than cultural myths of individualism and consumerism, to shape the meaning of their lives and their choices. Choices, whether for groceries, vocation, or lifestyle ought to be thoughtfully considered in light of a biblical emphasis on creation and the appropriate use of one's gifts and resources. In an era of globalization, the choices that citizens of first world countries make have massive global implications. Christians can choose to grow food locally, support local businesses, or buy fair trade products. These are life choices that demonstrate respect for creation and the world's people, both locally and globally. As another example, Christians might choose to live within walking distance of the workplace, both in order to reduce carbon footprints, and to build relationships with the people in the neighbourhood.

Second, Christians ought to recover interdependency among members of their neighbourhood and Christian community. Albert Hsu makes multiple simple suggestions for increasing communication among members of suburban neighbourhoods, such as hosting more gatherings, sharing resources with one's neighbours, or parking on the street in order to facilitate opportunities to speak with one's neighbours.<sup>59</sup> Members of Christian communities might explore ways of communally participating in the rhythms of community through sharing friends, food, and life.<sup>60</sup>

Third, Christians have the opportunity to model a way of life that counters unsatisfactory cultural norms and offers a holistic approach to living in the twenty-first century. By so doing, Christians fulfill their God-given calling to be a light among the

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<sup>59</sup> Hsu, *Suburban Christian*, 134–36. It should be noted that these suggestions are not necessarily limited to one's Christian community as such.

<sup>60</sup> Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*, 157.

nations.<sup>61</sup> Each community must consider how best they might embody that calling in context. One example is that of ‘intentional Christian communities.’<sup>62</sup> These communities foster daily life together in physical ways that are counter-cultural. It is possible that such unusual living arrangements would engage neighbours in a way that small groups or other church programs would not. However, it is equally possible that this intentional model draws unnecessary boundaries between those “in” and those “outside” of community. Jesus prayed that his disciples and those who would come after be “in” but not “of” the world (John 17:15). Being “in” but not “of” in the manner of Jesus implies that Christians must distinguish themselves from and at the same time engage the world incarnationally.

Fourth, embodying the mission of God to be a witness among the nations sometimes requires denying the comforts and respectability of life that is formed by the motifs of individualism and consumerism. It requires instead embracing a lifestyle that may in some cases give rise to displacement. This type of displacement, in contrast to the fragmentation experienced by contemporary culture, is a true displacement. It has biblical roots beginning in the story of the community of Abraham who is called by God to leave his country, people, and father’s household (Gen 12:1). Following the way of Christ entails a balancing of the dichotomy between true and false displacement. Christians are called to embody a community grounded in Christ and the biblical story in a context that lacks rootedness in one cultural story. At the same time, the Christian community is called to do so in ways that may feel unfamiliar, unnatural, and even costly.

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<sup>61</sup> This idea will be explored in greater detail in chapter four.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Intentional Christian communities’ will be explored in greater detail in chapter five.

In conclusion, Christian community that demonstrates respect for creation, promotes interdependency among members, models God's mission, and embodies true displacement has the opportunity to provide traction in a context marked by fragmentation and displacement. Yet many approaches are appropriate; many ways exist by which the Christian community might engage the surrounding culture. Building community in a context marked by physical and relational fragmentation will require creativity, imagination, and the formational work of the Holy Spirit.

### **Summary**

This chapter has explored the condition of displacement in twenty-first century North American culture by means of Kevin Vanhoozer's categories of the world "of," "behind," and "in front of" the text. The world "of" displacement is marked by a deep sense of rootlessness or lifestyle fragmentation. That fragmentation is defined by displacement from other people and from place. The world "of" displacement is the result of belief in individual autonomy and is linked with a consumer-oriented society. Continuing to indwell this world of self-absorption promises to contribute to increasing loneliness and fragmentation. Neglect of physical place contributes to environmental degradation. Displacement is detrimental to healthy communal flourishing. This chapter argued that an experience of Christian community that is physically and contextually rooted can offset the cultural trend toward displacement.

Understanding the condition of displacement and the points of engagement for a contextual Christian response helps to determine the context into which a vision for Christian community as described by the Body of Christ metaphor can be cast. The Body of Christ metaphor assists the Christian community in reflecting on its core identity and

enables it to respond authentically to a situation marked by individualism and fragmentation. In the next chapter the focus turns to determining *how* the Body of Christ metaphor functions to shape an understanding of Christian community. The Christian community exists as the Body of Christ first in its 'being' dimension. Only in Christ and through the Spirit is the Body built up for its life in the world. From Christ's presence in the communion of the believers ('being'), flows the life and practices of the community ('doing') that enable it to address the condition of displacement and embrace its calling to be a sign of God's love for the world.

## **Chapter 2**

### **God's Presence, the Eucharist, and the Body of Christ**

This chapter explores the indispensability of Christ's indwelling presence to the establishment of Christian community. This is clearly pronounced in the worship and Eucharistic practices of the congregation, to which this chapter devotes considerable attention. But first, consideration is given to the biblical-theological character of the indwelling God and its significance for the ongoing life of the community. Following from that is an exploration of Paul's formula 'in Christ' and the Spirit's relationship to the gathered community. Then, the practice of the Eucharist as the practice by which the community of believers becomes distinctively aware of Christ's presence in its midst is examined. Finally, the meaning and essence of communion with Christ as unity in the Spirit is considered. The Spirit enables true divine-human communion and communion between persons.

The indwelling presence of the triune God is foundational to a vision of the Christian community as the Body of Christ. The argument of this chapter augments the thesis that the Body of Christ helps the Christian community to envision healthy ways of living and functioning in community that advance God's mission and address the contemporary condition of displacement.

#### **The Indwelling God**

Human beings were created in the image of God for the purpose of community with one another and communion with God. Despite the entrance of sin, the *imago dei* continues as an ongoing social reality that implicitly underlies the entire Old Testament

witness.<sup>63</sup> Humans are still capable of communion and God sets out to bring them back into relationship with him. Yet the fact of human failure to communally reflect the divine image underscores the necessity of God's ongoing indwelling redemptive presence. God's presence is essential to the success of Israel as a community of people called to channel God's blessing to the nations. Moses knew this. In the midst of rebellion, Moses interceded on behalf of the people and pleaded for God's gracious continuing guidance among them (Exod 33:15).

Without the divine presence the Israelite community could not fulfill its calling. Israel's God consistently proves to be a God of history, a God of covenant, and a God of relationships.<sup>64</sup> The indwelling presence of God among his people is one of the central realities found throughout redemptive history. God's relational presence was at all times meant to draw his people into communion with himself. It was also meant to be celebrated. Intimately connected to the biblical idea of communion is the response of worship. James Torrance summarizes the essence and purpose of worship as the fulfillment of God's creation of community:

It is in this Trinitarian way we have to see worship, as the fulfillment of God's purposes in creation and redemption, to bring us into a life of communion with himself and one another. The triune God is in the business of creating community, in such a way that we are never more truly human, never more truly persons, than when we find our true being in-communion.<sup>65</sup>

The fullness of human potential is only realized through communion with God and one another. That communion not only necessitates a response of worship, but also results in a particular kind of fellowship with one another, a fellowship that is devoid of social

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<sup>63</sup> Grenz, *Social God*, 184–85.

<sup>64</sup> Knowles, *Name*, 57.

<sup>65</sup> Torrance, *Worship, Community*, 73.

stratification. In this kind of community, every individual is equally regarded as precious to God.<sup>66</sup>

### **Being ‘in Christ’**

The New Testament authors perceive the fact of God’s presence in ways that are both continuous and discontinuous with Old Testament thought. On the one hand, the Jewish conception of the divine presence is reflected variously in the life of the New Testament communities. Samuel Terrien writes that it was the “Hebraic theology of presence which dominated all the interpretations of the person of Jesus, from Mark to Revelation.”<sup>67</sup> Christ represents the fulfillment of God’s desire to dwell intimately in the midst of his people and to foster communion among those gathered. Likewise, the post-Pentecost communities, empowered by the Spirit, continued to develop Hebraic notions of the nature of communion. The nature of a communal life characterized by worship and a concern for the humble and oppressed members of society reflected Jewish notions (Acts 2:42–47). On the other hand, the way in which God’s presence and its implications for communal life were conceived was also radically different. In Christ, God’s presence was manifested in a visible form not previously known by the Hebrew people. The author of John’s Gospel states that in Christ, God became flesh and made his dwelling among humanity (John 1:14). God’s presence in Christ was unique and unprecedented. It also served as the model for those who would follow Christ. Instead of finding God’s presence housed in the Jewish Temple, believers were to become the bearers of his presence. The formula ‘in Christ’ is one way in which the nature of God’s presence is

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<sup>66</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 23.

<sup>67</sup> Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 30.

discussed in the New Testament. The Christian community, as the bearer of God's presence, was called to find itself in Christ.

Of the multiple phrases employed by Paul and others to describe the relationship of the community to one another, the formula 'in Christ' is the most frequently recurring.<sup>68</sup> Ernest Best makes the important point that it is "not sufficient to give an explanation of the 'in Christ' formula in isolation from the other formulae describing the union of the believer with Christ."<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, a few scholarly indications are worth noting. For A. J. M. Wedderburn, Christ fulfills the former function of Abraham to be the source or channel of God's blessing to the nations. To be 'in Christ,' is to receive the blessing and promise of Abraham.<sup>70</sup> The point of emphasis for Ernest Best is the 'corporate personality' of Christ that pervades the whole Body. Each member is wholly in Christ and Christ is wholly in each member.<sup>71</sup> Here both the diversity and the corporateness of the Body are affirmed. The community depends on Christ and finds its identity together in him.<sup>72</sup> For Yung Suk Kim, Paul's theology of being 'in Christ' is not a boundary marker between those in the community and those outside, but is "centrifugal, acting as a force for God's love for all people—especially for the downtrodden."<sup>73</sup> For Paul, being 'in Christ' is the fulfillment of God's indwelling presence in the Old Testament. To be 'in Christ' is to participate in channeling God's blessing to the nations. It is a formula that has personal and communal implications. Believers find their identity in Christ personally, even as the community itself becomes shaped by Christ's identity. Finally, it is an inclusive metaphor. Unlike the ethnic nation of Israel, the community that

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<sup>68</sup> Best, *One Body*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Best, *One Body*, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Wedderburn, "The Body," 88–89.

<sup>71</sup> Best, *One Body*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Best, *One Body*, 23.

<sup>73</sup> Kim, *Christ's Body*, 36.



finds itself in Christ is drawn together by God's love. It is the force of God's love that defines those who belong, and God's love reaches to everyone, especially to the downtrodden.

The church is established in and through Christ. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ relates to the church-community through presence and transcendence. Bonhoeffer states that, "the crucified and risen Christ is recognized by the church-community as God's incarnate love for us—as God's will to renew the covenant, to establish God's rule, and thus to create community."<sup>74</sup> Clifford Green summarizes Bonhoeffer's thought:

The signs of Christ's presence are the transformation of sin into the co-humanity of love which actively wills, affirms, serves, and bears the other; sin is overcome in 'active being-for-one another' [tätige Füreinander] where love voluntarily and vicariously identifies with and suffers for others, intercedes for others, and forgives others.<sup>75</sup>

The church-community then, as Christ's presence in the world, is a community-of-the-cross and a community of love. Both of these concepts are essential to understanding the contemporary Christian community today. How this community of love is actualized is the topic of the Holy Spirit's work in the church-community.

### **The Spirit and the Gathered Community**

The same Spirit that came to rest upon Christ (Luke 2:22) is poured out on the Christian community (Acts 2:1–4). The Spirit acts individually and corporately to make manifest the life of Christ in and through the Christian community. Nicholas Lash writes that "it is clear from the New Testament that what constituted the primitive church was the consciousness of this community that it only existed, as a community, in the presence

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<sup>74</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 154.

<sup>75</sup> Green, *Theology of Sociality*, 55.

of the Spirit of the risen Christ.”<sup>76</sup> To be the Christian community is not to collectively revolutionize human society on the basis of human strength and motivation, but rather to be infused by the presence of Christ and the power of the Spirit. Christ is present in a number of ways in his church. The focus here will be on his presence in the gathered community and his presence in the food.<sup>77</sup>

Lash’s comment raises the matter of the relationship between Christ and Spirit in community. In a major sense, the issue is best left to the divine mystery. The limits of this thesis do not allow for a lengthy discussion of the doctrinal details of the exact nature of the personhood of Christ or the Spirit. What is important for the exploration at hand is the fact of Paul’s interdependent usage of both persons of the Godhead. Perhaps picking up on Best’s theme, John Zizioulas says of the ‘corporate personality’ of Christ, that “it is impossible to conceive without Pneumatology.”<sup>78</sup> He goes on to state that,

It is not insignificant that the Spirit has always, since the time of Paul, been associated with the notion of *communion* (*κοινωνία*). Pneumatology contributes to Christology this dimension of communion. And it is because of this function of Pneumatology that it is possible to speak of Christ as having a “body,” i.e. to speak of ecclesiology, of the Church as the Body of Christ.<sup>79</sup>

The church is the Body of Christ when it enjoys communion as a Body gathered into Christ by the Spirit (e.g., Eph 2:18 and 3:14–19). Both are necessary in order for the Christian community to live and be God’s witness in the world. Avery Dulles synthesizes the essence of the church as the Body of Christ and its relationship to Christ by means of an organic image and analogy of the human body. The Body of Christ has an in-built

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<sup>76</sup> Lash, *His Presence*, 140.

<sup>77</sup> Nicholas Lash synthesizes the number of ways in which Christ is present into three: his presence in the gathered community, the word, and the food. Only two of them are treated here. Moreover, the questions of transubstantiation which he addresses are not the focus of the argument. See Lash, *His Presence*, 141–51.

<sup>78</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130.

<sup>79</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 130–31.

divine life-principle, which is sustained by the Spirit on the basis of Christ's redemptive work.<sup>80</sup>

The Holy Spirit gathers the community together into mutual union with Christ and fellowship with one another. At the root of an understanding here is the Greek word *κοινωνία*. Acts 2:44 describes the believers as *having all things in common* (εἶχον πάντα κοινά). Hauck defines an understanding of *κοινά* here as one of brotherly love, which is lived out in the ways described in verses 45 to 47.<sup>81</sup> Similarly, *κοινωνία* means "participation," "fellowship" or "impartation."<sup>82</sup> The idea of *κοινός* finds its origins in Hellenist thought and Luke uses this phrase to "express the fact that the idea which the Greeks sought with longing was achieved in the life of the primitive community."<sup>83</sup> In secular Greek, *κοινωνία* represents "the idea of an unbroken relationship between God and man."<sup>84</sup> The Old Testament does not share this same divine conception of *κοινωνία*, since the relationship of Yahweh to Old Testament Israel does not connote the same sense of intimacy that is evident in the New Testament.<sup>85</sup>

In the New Testament the *κοινωνία* group is most prevalent in Paul where it denotes "the religious fellowship (participation) of the believer in Christ" and "the mutual fellowship of believers."<sup>86</sup> Although the depiction of the Christ relationship is clearly the more common one in Paul's writings, he also suggests that partaking of the Spirit is a mark of the Christian. Paul's benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:13 refers to the *κοινωνία*

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<sup>80</sup> Dulles, *Models*, 42–43.

<sup>81</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 796.

<sup>82</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 798.

<sup>83</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 796.

<sup>84</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 799.

<sup>85</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 801.

<sup>86</sup> Hauck, "κοινός," 804.

of the Holy Spirit. The nature of this *κοινωνία* according to Paul then, involves participation in the life of Christ as well as of the Spirit. Hauck concludes with this summary:

In Ac. 2:42 *κοινωνία* does not denote the concrete community or society of Christians which, while it had not yet separated itself legally and cultically from the Jewish community, already represented a circle of the closest fellowship. Nor can it signify the community of goods (cf. v. 44: εἰς ἅπαντα κοινά). It is rather an abstract and spiritual term for the fellowship of brotherly concord established and expressed in the life of the community.<sup>87</sup>

Biblical Christian community is defined by its participation in the life of Christ and the Spirit as well as its communion with one another. The Spirit is the one who facilitates that communion.

The Spirit actualizes the church-community, building it up and conforming it to the character of Christ. Karl Barth describes the Holy Spirit as,

The quickening power with which Jesus the Lord builds up Christianity in the world as His body, i.e., as the earthly-historical form of His own existence, causing it to grow, sustaining and ordering it as the communion of His saints, and thus fitting it to give a provisional representation of the sanctification of all humanity and human life as it has taken place in Him.<sup>88</sup>

The quickening power of the Spirit effects the upbuilding of the community first through the *growth* of the community. In addition, the Spirit *protects and preserves* the community because it is in continual danger from both the external pressure of persecution or secularization and the internal danger of the flesh of sin, pride, sloth, etc. The Spirit upholds the community and strengthens it under pressure.<sup>89</sup> C. F. D. Moule differentiates between speaking of Christians as ‘dwelling’ or being incorporated *in*

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<sup>87</sup> Hauck, “κοινός,” 809.

<sup>88</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2.614

<sup>89</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2.661–66.

Christ and the Spirit as being present *within* Christians.<sup>90</sup> The Spirit “is the mode of Christ’s presence with his people”<sup>91</sup> and it is he who “creates in Christians the character of Christ.”<sup>92</sup> The Spirit manifests the life of Christ in the community of Christians as they ‘live and move and have their being’ (Acts 17:28) in Christ.

The community actualized by the Spirit is characterized by love. This love is possible only through faith in Christ. It is volitional, it loves the real neighbor, and it knows no limits. Bonhoeffer suggests several concrete acts in which the community of saints acts as a community of love. Through these concrete acts, Christians mirror God toward their neighbor. First, Christians ought to bear the burdens of their neighbours. In this way the community of saints and Christ suffer with broken humanity.<sup>93</sup> Second, Christians ought to subordinate their own happiness, possessions, honour, and lives for the sake of the ‘other’. Through the Holy Spirit’s guidance, the community is led to live in self-giving and suffering love. In the sharing of pain and suffering, Christ is present. This kind of self-giving love cannot be created by humans; it is a gift from God.

In summary, the church is realized through Christ and actualized through the Holy Spirit. To partake in Christ by and with the Spirit is to enjoy fellowship with him, to commune with him. The Spirit’s role is to upbuild and uphold God’s people. The Holy Spirit acts to create in the community the character of Christ that is marked by self-giving love. The Spirit is active in the midst of the community gathered. The central reason for gathering is worship and the celebration of the Eucharist, to which attention is now given.

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<sup>90</sup> Moule, *Holy Spirit*, 74.

<sup>91</sup> Moule, *Holy Spirit*, 75.

<sup>92</sup> Moule, *Holy Spirit*, 77.

<sup>93</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 179–80.

## The Eucharist and the Body of Christ

Worship is the primary reason for which Christians gather. They gather because the event of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection calls forth a response of celebration and praise. They gather because the Spirit draws them into communion with Christ and one another. At the center of this gathering lies the peculiar activity which is known variously as the "breaking of bread," the "Eucharist," the "table of the Lord," "communion," or the "Lord's Supper."<sup>94</sup> At the Eucharist, Christians celebrate and become aware of Christ's presence manifested among them. During this practice the Body of Christ shares in the event of Christ's death and resurrection. The Eucharist is a sacred form of communion between Christ and his church.

It is maintained that 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 contains the oldest literary account of the Lord's Supper.<sup>95</sup> Although further examination of the usage and origins of the practice that came to be known as the Lord's Supper is not the focus of this thesis, it is significant to note that the Last Supper took place in the context of the Jewish Passover. The Passover meal was an elaborate ritual full of symbolism and redemptive history.<sup>96</sup> The Passover was celebrated in the context of worship where praise and remembrance were given to the One who had faithfully led his people out of slavery. The Passover, as the Lord's Supper, was responsive worship. It was the central event whereby the people of God celebrated God's presence in their midst. Flowing from this central claim, the Passover also performed several other functions. In it, Israelite identity was formed and re-formed, socio-economic barriers were dismantled, and the tribes of Israel were

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<sup>94</sup> Stein, "Last Supper," 444.

<sup>95</sup> Collins, *First Corinthians*, 425. Contra Stein and others who argue for the priority of the Markan version. Stein, "Last Supper," 447.

<sup>96</sup> Stein, "Last Supper," 447.

gathered together in unity. The Christian practice of the Eucharist continues, fulfills, and deepens the purpose for which the Passover was intended.

The Eucharist is the celebration of Christ's presence. Christ is near, in the view of the writer, not through the physical transformation of the elements, but because he promises to be where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20).<sup>97</sup> The presence of Christ through the power of the Spirit transforms the observance of the Lord's Supper to a celebration of his nearness. Stanley Grenz writes:

The presence of Christ through the Holy Spirit transforms our observance of the Lord's Supper from merely a solemn memorial of our crucified Savior into a joyous celebration of the risen and returning Lord who is present among us. The Lord's Supper is, therefore, a communion with Christ and each other.<sup>98</sup>

The Eucharist is transformative communion among gathered believers with Christ. The gathering of the Eucharist is a gathering of believers to remember the event of Christ's death and resurrection, but because Christ is present, the Eucharist also becomes an event where the community participates in the death and resurrection of Christ. It is both a symbol of unity and the occasion of unifying. In coming together to receive the shared grace of God, the community is transformed, healed, strengthened, and unified in the love of Christ, through the Spirit.

Because Christ promises to be present where two or three are gathered (Matt 18:20), the Eucharist is not the only gathering that can claim transformative and celebratory communion. Rather, what distinguishes the practice of the Eucharist from other gatherings of the community in Christ is its fostering of *awareness* of Christ's presence. The Eucharist is a practice whereby the Christian community responds to the

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<sup>97</sup> See Grenz, *Theology*, 532–40 for a presentation on the presence of the Lord in the celebration according to historical-traditional development, and a following discussion on the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>98</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, 539.

ongoing nearness of Christ and the work of the Spirit in its midst. The celebration of the Eucharist is not unlike the pericope of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35). In Luke’s account, the risen Christ comes to walk with the two disciples who are discussing the meaning of his life and death. Not realizing who he is, they proceed to explain what they are talking about. It is not until Jesus takes bread, gives the blessing, breaks it, and gives it to them that they recognize him for who he is.<sup>99</sup> Only then do they realize why their hearts had earlier been burning within them (Luke 24:30–32).

Thus the Eucharist is a celebration that proclaims and reveals Christ’s enduring nearness. The Jesus revealed in the Eucharist is the incarnation of God’s Word (John 1:14). For John Zizioulas, the Eucharist reveals God’s Word as truth embodied in communion.<sup>100</sup> He writes:

The Church has therefore no other reality or experience of truth as communion so perfect as the eucharist. In the Eucharistic assembly God’s Word reaches man [sic] and creation not from outside, as in the Old Testament, but as “flesh”—from inside our own existence, as part of creation.<sup>101</sup>

Zizioulas highlights the important connection in the practice of the Eucharist between communion with Christ and the revealing of God’s Word. Indeed, the two points are closely related in Luke 24:13–35. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus is revealed (although not recognized) as he interprets the true meaning of Scriptures (Luke 24:25–27) just as he is revealed in the breaking of bread. The revelatory practice of the Eucharist brings the community of believers to awareness of Christ’s presence.

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<sup>99</sup> Blacketer, “Word and Sacrament,” 325.

<sup>100</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 114–15.

<sup>101</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 115.



The fellowship of the Eucharist, gathered around Christ by the Spirit, has at its essence the identity formation of the people of God.<sup>102</sup> The Eucharist as identity formation is an act of memory. It is a specific act whereby believers look back, remember, and recapitulate the story of the resurrection of Jesus and its significance for the Christian community today.<sup>103</sup> In other words, it is a reminder that “Christ’s body was broken and his blood was shed for all.”<sup>104</sup> The Eucharist functions to continually shape, redefine, and reaffirm the identity of the community which partakes of the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>105</sup> For the community to partake of the Lord’s Supper is to identify with their story of salvation in the way that Israel remembered the Exodus when celebrating the Passover. It is to define themselves as the people of God built on the death and resurrection of Christ. To share in the story of salvation is also to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. As believers die to themselves, they are able to embrace their new identity in and communion with Christ.

The Eucharist is a subversive symbol of inclusion. Meals in first century Palestine represented rank and status. The wealthy simply did not eat with the poor. By including those whom society regarded as outcast, the Lord’s Supper performed a subversive function. However, the problem facing Paul in the context of the church at Corinth was the abuse of the Lord’s Table. In 1 Corinthians 11, communion with Christ was threatened because the richer Christians neglected to share from their abundance with the poor.<sup>106</sup> By going ahead with their own private meal, the wealthy were alienating the poor

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<sup>102</sup> Bishop and Witherington, as noted in the introduction, emphasize this point. See Bishop, *Some Bodies*, 6 and Witherington, “Making a Meal,” 82–83.

<sup>103</sup> Stein, “Last Supper,” 448.

<sup>104</sup> Van Gelder, *Essence*, 149.

<sup>105</sup> See Bishop, *Some Bodies*, 6. See also Grenz, *Created*, 240.

<sup>106</sup> Barth, *Rediscovering*, 58.

and thus losing touch with the meaning of the Supper.<sup>107</sup> To neglect the weak, poor, and despised was to neglect the Christ who became weak, poor, and despised and thus to negate the function of the Lord's Supper.<sup>108</sup> Rodney Clapp underscores this socio-economically subversive aspect of the Eucharist. Recognizing that food was and is one of the ways in which people signify status, he states that one of the primary purposes of the Eucharist is to disclose and form believers "to be a people who are radically egalitarian."<sup>109</sup> Egalitarianism was an essential motif in the Jewish celebration of the Passover and continues to mark the nature of the people of God. In the Body of Christ, there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal 3:28). The Eucharist makes this evident.

Finally, the celebration of the Eucharist can offer a profound experience of healing. Members who are welcomed to the table, participate in the fellowship of the gathered community, and appropriate once again the significance of Christ's death and resurrection into their lives, come as individuals and communities who are broken, bruised and in need of restoration. Those who assemble at the Table gather, as those with hurts, sins, and unresolved issues, perhaps even as a result of dissension between other members of the community. When they gather in Christ's name, he promises to heal their wounds (1 Pet 2:24). As an act of healing, the Eucharist is also an act of humility, whereby believers humbly submit to the authority of one who has the power to resurrect the dead and to transform the circumstances of their lives.

The Eucharist is both the celebration and the revelation of Christ's presence. During the celebration of the Eucharist, the believers come to renewed awareness of

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<sup>107</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 547.

<sup>108</sup> Barth, *Rediscovering*, 67.

<sup>109</sup> Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 108.

God's Word taking flesh among them. Not only is the community reminded of Christ's presence, but they are reminded of their identity in light of the cross. The practice of the Eucharist as an act of remembrance is also an act whereby the community again participates in and is transformed by the death and resurrection of Christ. The Eucharist calls for unity and inclusion in the Body of Christ. It is also a practice of healing.

### **Unity and the Body of Christ**

It is during the Lord's Supper that believers are again reminded of and drawn together in a common unity of identity and participation in the event of the cross. In the communion meal, believers are again formed and reminded of their formation into Christ's Body and prepared for work in the world. Unity is the work of the Spirit, and is treated here separately not to disconnect its significance from the Lord's Supper, but to emphasize its characteristic as an outflow of the gathered community prepared for work in the world. The community that is sustained in the unity that comes through communion with Christ and fellowship with one another is best prepared to express the love of God to the world.

Indeed, the Apostle Paul's concern for the Corinthian community facing conflict and division among one another is unity.<sup>110</sup> The Corinthians are encouraging disunity by practicing the Lord's Supper in ways that exclude certain members (1 Cor 11:23–26) and by elevating the importance of some spiritual gifts above others. The unity of the Body, as rightly noted by Lionel Thornton, "is a living unity created and sustained by the one

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<sup>110</sup> Esler, *New Testament*, 150. See also Fee, *First Epistle*, 547.

Spirit.”<sup>111</sup> The manner of the Spirit’s uniting is the redemptive love of God. Nicholas

Lash writes of the remedy for the human community fractured by sin:

Love, the redemptive love of God, unites; it unites men [sic] with each other and with God; it creates human community, opening individuals out into fully developed personal relationships of mutual trust, knowledge, and love. . . . We are called to renewed community by God, through Christ, in the Spirit. Our coming together as the community of believers is the expression of our acceptance of this call; our recognition of the situation in which, by faith, we find ourselves: a situation of community in the love of God.<sup>112</sup>

Only as the community is united in the love of Christ is it enabled to embrace its calling to be the Body of Christ and the further expression of God’s love in the world.

Bonhoeffer notes that it is the Spirit who binds the community together in unity. The community assembles together physically under the revealing Word and the sacraments. Among those who assemble, the Spirit is at work to bring about true community. Bonhoeffer notes further that unity is not the absence of conflict but that unity is established through God’s will in the circumstance of conflict. Unity is the unity of one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God, *not* the unity of one theology, one rite, or one opinion.<sup>113</sup> It is the divine unity of Spirit on which the unity of the Christian church is based.<sup>114</sup> Unity is based on the idea of equality. In unity, the human person is not subsumed but is given the freedom to be fully his or herself. What is important in Bonhoeffer’s theology of unity is that unity is not conformity. He seeks to avoid an idealism of community free of conflict, but rather tries to show how conflict and difference can be used by the Spirit to enrich the life of the community.

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<sup>111</sup> Thornton, *Common Life*, 94.

<sup>112</sup> Lash, *His Presence*, 143.

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 193.

<sup>114</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 198.

Finally, the goal of unity and hence the purpose for which the Spirit gathers the community around the common table of Christ is that the community may be strengthened. Worship, of which the celebration of Christ's presence in the Eucharist is central, contains a two-fold purpose. It is directed first towards communion with God. It is also directed towards the fellowship of the Body, so that the Body may be built up.<sup>115</sup> In addressing the need for unity amidst diversity amongst the Corinthian congregation, Paul prioritizes the gift of love (1 Cor 13). It is by this love that the Spirit draws Christians together and enables the building of the community.

### **Summary**

The indwelling presence of Christ is indispensable if the Christian community is to function as Christ's Body in the world. This chapter explored first the ways in which God's presence was manifested among the Hebrew community. To be the Christian community 'in Christ' is for the Body to find its identity in him. It is the Spirit who gathers the community and facilitates communion on both the divine level and the human level. This gathering is exemplified as the community gathers for worship, and in particular as it celebrates the Eucharist. During the Eucharist, members once again find themselves at the mercy of the cross. The communion meal is a sign of the inclusive nature of God's community. It is the practice whereby believers again appropriate the significance of the death and resurrection of Christ and the place where healing is received. Finally, the Spirit is at work to facilitate unity among those gathered during the Eucharist for the purpose of mutual edification and the upbuilding of the community in

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<sup>115</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 19.

love. Only as the Christian community continually encounters the Christ who dwells in its midst, is it enabled to fulfill the missional task to which Christ calls it.

Chapter one laid the foundation for how the Body of Christ metaphor might be applied by describing the contemporary condition of displacement and suggesting several points of engagement for the Christian community. Chapter two contributed to an essential understanding of the ‘being’ dimension of the Body of Christ by illustrating the importance of communion with Christ from which all other aspects of communal life flow. Communion with Christ is the core concept that undergirds identity of the Christian community as framed in the Body of Christ metaphor. The metaphor fosters a vision for healthy Christian community that is centered on Christ and that thus can address the challenges of the contemporary context. Chapter three expands a second aspect of the metaphor—the interaction between God’s initiation and intentional human participation. As persons enabled by the Spirit contribute to the functioning of the Body, the Body is enabled for God’s mission in the world.

## Chapter 3

### Human Intention and the Body of Christ

God has poured out on each member and each group of members a manifestation of his Spirit for the greater purpose of building the Body. As each person and each group of persons is attentive and responsive to that call, the community is enabled to fulfill its mission. This statement brings to light two related issues. First, it raises the issue of intention. Participation in the work of the Spirit requires certain levels of human effort. Second, it highlights the false idealism that pervades common conceptions of Christian community. Regardless of well-intentioned effort, the Christian community faces the reality of human brokenness. Thus this chapter begins by acknowledging these two human dimensions that frustrate God's design for community. Second, it explores the relationship between persons and community. Third, it examines that relationship in terms of the diversity of gifts which the Spirit has given for the flourishing of the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ depends on the faithfulness of each person as he/she performs his/her God-given role for the good of the community.

The focus of this chapter is on the internal operating of the Body and the response of individuals to what God is doing. The Body of Christ metaphor fosters a vision for healthy Christian community in which human creativity and imagination is aligned with the formational guidance of the Holy Spirit. Genuine Christian community is the result of divine initiative and intentional participation. Paul Hanson states it well:

Ideas concerning communal structure must arise from engagement with the God who is creatively and redemptively active in its own world. The most fundamental characteristic of such a notion of community thus seems to be that it is based on the pattern of *divine initiative and human response*.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 3.

As humans respond to Christ's initiation, the Christian community as the Body of Christ is enabled to address the experiences of fragmentation and displacement facing North American individuals and to embrace God's mission.

### **Intentionality and Illusion**

The idea of *intentional* communities deserves qualification. *Intentional* implies deliberate and well-planned action on the part of the individuals who contribute to the formation of particular manifestations of community. Churches that adopt the small group model as a means of building community life are acting intentionally. It takes concerted effort to build and maintain a biblical vision for community even among like-minded people with similar desires and aims. There is nothing inherently wrong with being intentional. Certainly God expects concerted human effort. However, a problem arises when churches and individuals rely on intentional effort alone. For example, once humans have discovered a model that works under particular conditions, the tendency is to expect that model to work elsewhere, albeit with minor contextual adjustments. Although in no way an attempt to disparage some of these genuine efforts as appropriate contextual responses to what the Spirit is doing in the midst of community, intentional effort by itself will not create community. Intentionality, as a single solution to true community-building, is an illusion. The fact and necessity of convergence between divine and human effort cannot be overstated. Contrary to human expectation, the Spirit may foster community in surprising ways and unexpected places that are less than intentional. It is the task of the Christian community to be discerning of just how the Spirit is active in its midst and to participate accordingly.



The idea of community is in some ways illusory because it is composed of human beings. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Henri Nouwen, two theologians acquainted with very different experiences of community that embody physical togetherness, caution against the illusions that pursuit of community as the fulfillment of human longing can bring.

Henri Nouwen writes,

Certainly in a period of history in which we have become so acutely aware of our alienation in its different manifestations, it has become difficult to unmask the illusion that the final solution for our experience of loneliness is to be found in human togetherness.<sup>117</sup>

Similarly, Bonhoeffer warns that ideology can take the place of the divine reality: “Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community.”<sup>118</sup> Genuine community, according to Nouwen, transcends the limits of human togetherness. Physical proximity can actually be in the way of its realization. “It is important to realize that being together in one place, one house, one city or one country is only secondary to the fulfillment of our legitimate desire.”<sup>119</sup> He advocates for a recovery of solitude where one can discover “the voice that calls us beyond the limits of human togetherness to a new communion.”<sup>120</sup> Through genuine experience and wisdom, Bonhoeffer and Nouwen gently rebuke the eagerness displayed by those who would intentionally build community, especially community wherein members share physical living space.

True Christian community is discerning of the variety of ways in which God calls his people to embody his mission. As noted, God’s Spirit moves in different ways at different times under different circumstances. His call to community formation in one

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<sup>117</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 33.

<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 27.

<sup>119</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 46–47.

<sup>120</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 44.

context might look significantly different from another context. While some might be called to very intentional forms of community where members share living spaces and lifestyle choices, other forms of community are equally legitimate. Nouwen's cautions are helpful: true community transcends togetherness and solitude can prepare people for life in community. These cautions remind Christians of human fallibility and the need for the discerning of and reliance on God's unique and diverse initiating activity.

Community that is projected to be the answer to every ailment of twenty-first century North American culture is an illusion. It is the writer's experience that persons engaged in any number of communities—small groups, 'intentional Christian communities,' l'Arche group homes—testify to the same impeding reality of human brokenness. One advocate for 'intentional Christian community' readily acknowledges the dangers of idealism and the humanness factor inherent within community:

I think for most folks, myself included, the temptation to survive on ideals alone is enough to get in the way of building anything lasting. . . . I would guess that often, groups who build things on shared ideals alone are destined to contend with some fissures in their building, so to speak, somewhere down the line. . . . We humans (and again, I speak for myself if for no one else) hate to acknowledge the blindspots in our idealistic vision. . . . We come together over shared ideals and fall apart over our own humanity.<sup>121</sup>

The observation is made in the context of an 'intentional Christian community.' But the argument holds for all forms of community. Karl Barth writes,

Its institutions and traditions and even its reformations are no guarantee as such that it is the true Church, for in all these things we have to do with human and therefore sinful action, and therefore in some sense with a self-expression in which it can be only the semblance of a Church.<sup>122</sup>

The church as the Body of Christ is built upon the very thing which causes it to fall apart.

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<sup>121</sup> Hoogendam, "Community is bullshit."

<sup>122</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2.618.

Certainly, as Marva Dawn so rightly puts it, “our separation from God is the root cause of our separation from ourselves and from each other.”<sup>123</sup> Because of the reality of sin, the Christian community can never be perfectly what it was designed to be—a reflection of Christ in the world. However, that should not be cause for discouragement. For Christ has made it clear that his power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). It is the very brokenness of Christ’s Body in which believers participate as God seeks to establish himself in their midst. Brokenness is not a cause for despair, but for humility. It is indeed only by the grace of God that something beautiful is created out of human beings who offer the best and worst of themselves for the building of God’s kingdom.

### **Personhood and Community**

It is a premise of this thesis that individualism as the dominant mode of existence is detrimental to true human flourishing in community. Yet subordinating individual identity to group identity is equally detrimental in that it glosses over diversity and can neglect the contributions of the minority. Therefore, a mutually-benefiting vision for community is needed that balances personhood and group identity. Each depends on the other for its identity. First, the human person is conceived in relation to the community. Bonhoeffer refers to the concept of the human person as a corporate and relational idea.<sup>124</sup> The human person for Bonhoeffer only exists in relation to an ‘other.’ He states, “The Christian person originates only in the absolute duality of God and humanity; only in experiencing the barrier does the awareness of oneself as ethical person arise.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, personal human identity is dependent on the existence of community. Not

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<sup>123</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 85.

<sup>124</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 5.

<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 49.

only does the human depend on others, but the human person is fulfilled in community. Human persons discover meaningful identity when they come to the realization that their lives do not occur as isolated stories but are connected to a larger drama.<sup>126</sup>

Likewise, true community is dependent upon the existence and contribution of persons. Dawn notes that “if one function is not being performed, the rest of the body suffers.”<sup>127</sup> The vision that Paul has for the church is mutually benefitting: all members are necessary to the functioning of the Body and all find fulfillment in it. Jean Vanier puts it beautifully:

He came to transform fear into trust,  
 So that the walls separating people into enemies  
 Would disappear,  
 And we could join together in a covenant of love,  
     So shall we fully grow up into Christ,  
     Who is the head,  
     And by whom the whole body  
     Is bonded and knit together,  
     Every joint adding its own strength  
     For each individual part to work according to its function,  
     So the whole body grows until it has built itself up in love.  
 Yes, this is the vision of Jesus for our world  
 Announced by St. Paul:  
 One body—  
     With the poorest and weakest among us at the heart,  
     Those that we judge the most despicable, honoured;  
     Where each person is important  
     Because all are necessary  
 His body, to which we all belong  
     Joined in love,  
     Filled with the Spirit.  
 This is the kingdom.<sup>128</sup>

This poetic portrayal highlights the unique importance of the individual in Christ’s Body and at the same time celebrates the unifying work of the Holy Spirit as the Body is

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<sup>126</sup> Grenz, *Created*, 196.

<sup>127</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 85.

<sup>128</sup> Vanier, *Broken Body*, 67–68.

prepared to embrace God's vision for his mission in the world. It paints a picture of how the Christian community by embracing diversity and human uniqueness, is meant to function as a sign to the world.

### **Gifts of Grace for the Body**

The Body is composed of many human parts and each part is necessary to the working of the Body. The community functions most effectively as a Body when each member offers his/her *God-given* role for the greater good of the Body; that is, when each member and the community as a whole responds uniquely to the work the Spirit is doing in creating community. Further, each part is joined into the head that is Christ. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he emphasizes the source of and the purpose for which certain roles are given to the Body:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:11–13).

Again in 1 Corinthians 12 he argues that each person has been uniquely graced by a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good of the Body. Some points that are relevant for this discussion deserve further explanation.

First, individual believers receive gifts from the fullness of grace (Rom 12:6). The Greek word that is often translated 'spiritual gifts' is *χαρισμάτα*, which derives from the Greek word *χάρις* and, means 'grace.' The significance revealed here is that the Father bestows gifts of undeserved grace as a result of his limitless love.<sup>129</sup> These grace-gifts, as Marva Dawn calls them, are particular manifestations of God's power. In fact, she argues

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<sup>129</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 93.

that to “find your gift” is an unbiblical and limiting concept.<sup>130</sup> The ways in which God chooses to manifest his power in the life of believers is limitless. Dawn writes:

Rather, the biblical texts indicate that we each have unique combinations of gifts, very much in the plural . . . our gifts are different according to times and circumstances and personalities and tasks. Therefore, we begin to understand grace-gifts by refusing to limit how God wants to manifest this magnificent love.<sup>131</sup>

The point here is that God prepares his people to do the task to which he has called them. Although there are times in the believer’s life when he/she is called to do a task for which he/she feels less than ‘gifted,’ Paul emphasizes that God’s usual way of working is through his gracious bestowal of manifestations of the Spirit. The task of the believer and the believing community together is to seek continually and discern the way in which they will respond to the Spirit’s initiative.

Second, not only does God grace each person with what is necessary in order for the community to function as his Body, but he graces the community in abundant diversity. Indeed, this seems to be the point of Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 12. Gordon Fee notes that, “Rather than the uniformity that the Corinthians value, Paul urges that they recognize the need for all the various manifestations of the one Spirit. Otherwise there is no Body, only a monstrosity (12:15–20).”<sup>132</sup> The reason that Paul lists such a multitude of gifts is not to promote hierarchy, but to emphasize the necessity for the great variety of ways in which the Spirit enables the community to be the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ depends on the diversity of its members to respond in different ways at different times and in different places. Bonhoeffer underscores the point: “Each member of the community is given his [sic] particular place, but this is no longer the place in

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<sup>130</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 93.

<sup>131</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 93–94.

<sup>132</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 19.

which he [sic] can successfully assert himself [sic], but the place where he can best perform his [sic] service.”<sup>133</sup>

Certain modesty ought to accompany diversity. Diversity is not, as Bonhoeffer states, a license for competition. Paul’s frustration with the Corinthian church was largely a result of the competition that had come to breed among believers concerning which grace-gifts were greater. Instead of giving greater respect to the less honourable parts (1 Cor 12:23), members of the community had been acting in accordance with cultural norms of competition for honour.<sup>134</sup> This leads to a third key point: “There is no such thing as being more or less gifted than another.”<sup>135</sup> That Paul lists the gift of tongues, the one which caused division, last, is indicative of the seriousness with which Paul envisions the diversity of the Body. Yet his diversity is a qualified diversity. Diversity exists for the sake of the community and therefore a balance must be struck between individual liberty in exercising these grace-gifts and responsibility for the community.<sup>136</sup>

The final point concerns the purpose for which grace-gifts are bestowed upon the community. Stanley Grenz summarizes:

Like the human body, the church is a unity made up of diversity (1 Cor 12:1–31). Not all members have the same task to fulfill. But all have the same goal; all are to be concerned for the others and to use their gifts in service to the whole. Together we are to carry on Christ’s own ministry and be his physical presence on earth.<sup>137</sup>

The reason for gifts is the edification of the church.<sup>138</sup> As the church is built up, it is enabled to be Christ’s Body in the world. Paul’s confrontation of the Corinthian church should be a warning for the church in the contemporary North American context. The

<sup>133</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 93–94.

<sup>134</sup> DeSilva, *Introduction*, 565.

<sup>135</sup> Dawn, *Truly the Community*, 97.

<sup>136</sup> Kim, *Christ’s Body*, 100.

<sup>137</sup> Grenz, *Created*, 209.

<sup>138</sup> Fee, *First Epistle*, 572.

Spirit desires to move amongst Christ's Body, fulfilling it and enabling each member and each community to embrace their unique combination of grace-gifts. However, it is possible, that like the Corinthians, some gifts are given priority over others. Every North American denomination inadvertently emphasizes one or more combinations of grace-gifts—whether tongues, pastoral care, or teaching—to the neglect of others. Paul's point is that Christ has sufficiently and uniquely gifted each person and community for ministry in diverse ways. It is the task of the believing community to respond faithfully and with discernment to God's initiating activity.

In conclusion, the Body of Christ as community requires both response to divine initiative and intentional participation. The community functions most effectively as a Body when each person performs his/her *God-given* function (1 Cor 12:12–30) for the sake of the unity of the faith and the building up of God's kingdom (Eph 4:1–16). Communities that seek to be discerning of and responsive to the Spirit's guidance in their midst are ultimately best enabled to be God's witnesses in the world. This chapter has emphasized the responsibility of humans to involve themselves in community life on the basis of grace-gifts. However, what is of primal importance is the Holy Spirit's initiating and guiding function. It is only as communities abide in Christ, that the workings of their ministries are able to bear genuine fruit.

### **Summary**

This chapter raised three main points concerning the proper functioning of the Body. First, community depends on God's initiation and thus requires certain humility about its own brokenness and ability to intentionally participate in what God is doing. Second, persons and community are involved in a mutually-benefiting relationship in



which each fulfills and is fulfilled by the other. Third, each person and community has been sufficiently *graced* by God with the gift-combination necessary to perform its suitable callings. The extent to which the Body is able to achieve its God-given purpose is dependent on the effectiveness of its internal functioning. The success of its internal functioning is dependent on the degree to which the community is able to discern and participate in God's initiating activity in its midst. As each person and community offers its God-given shape to the overall functioning of the Body, the Body is built up into Christ who is its head and prepared for God's mission in the world.

This thesis has explored *how* the Body of Christ metaphor fosters a vision for healthy Christian community. First, Christ is the dynamic presence indwelling the heart and sustaining the life of the Christian community (chapter two). Second, the Body of Christ reflects the converging of human intention and divine initiative in the formation of community (chapter three). In these ways the Christian community is able to exist subversively in a cultural context marked by competitive individualism, loneliness, and fragmentation (chapter one). Thus, the Christian community understood in terms of the Body of Christ metaphor has the potential to mitigate the effects of the contemporary context. In the next chapter attention is turned towards the 'doing'<sup>139</sup> dimension of the Body of Christ, that is, the ways in which the community is called by its life together to witness to the reign of God in the world.

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<sup>139</sup> Arguably, one cannot separate the 'being' and 'doing' dimensions of a community into distinct categories; the considerations discussed thus far exhibit elements of both. However, discussion of the mission of God concerns a certain outward movement which is the expression and the outcome of the other aspects.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Displacement and Implacement as the Mission of the Body of Christ**

This chapter focuses on exploring the implications of implacement and displacement for God's mission in the world. First, a proper Christian definition of community holds implacement and displacement in tension. To be part of a community is to find one's place, in other words, to belong. However, the same acts of community formation that cast the net of social belonging and inclusion around the marginalized, the broken, and the hurting of every tongue, nationality, and culture, are also displacing acts in which Christians are called to advance beyond their own sense of social place for the benefit of the other. Second, God's mission is the expression of the Body of Christ and it requires embracing both implacement and displacement for its realization. Third, the reformation of several core practices can deepen the community's sense of sharing in the mystery of God's mission in the world.

This chapter argues that inclusion in the Body of Christ leads to implacement and true displacement. Through implacement and displacement the community is enabled to share in God's mission in the world. The Body of Christ is an effective metaphor for envisioning healthy Christian community that embodies God's mission and addresses the problem of unhealthy displacement in twenty-first century North American culture.

### **Community as Implacement and Displacement**

This thesis made the point in chapter one that persons in a competitive and individualistic culture who experience lifestyle fragmentation and displacement are at the same time seeking fulfillment in community. The type of community for which people

long is one that satisfies the perceived need for implacement; that is, people are searching for a place to belong. The Body of Christ metaphor affirms the human need for implacement. Therefore, this section further defines the experience of belonging for which people are searching that was raised in chapter one. It then suggests that a true Christian definition of implacement differs from a cultural definition and empowers proper displacement.

### *The Search for Belonging*

As stated in chapter two, humans were created for community. John Westerhoff III summarizes what theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas, Gerhard Lohfink, Stanley Grenz, Miroslav Volf, and others take as foundational to theology, that human life is meant to reflect divine trinitarian communion:

And we who are in the image of God are intended to live in community: a relationship of *creativity* with God, cultivating, preserving, and humanizing the natural world; a relationship of *reconciliation* with one another, expressing the redemption of the world through justice and peace; and a relationship of *friendship* with God, fullness of life in an ever deepening and loving intimacy.<sup>140</sup>

But this is not the North American reality. The North American context has for a long time been dominated by a competitive individualism. It is now increasingly recognized that individualism has failed to nurture meaningful human connection. Even the church has failed to provide the kind of vision for community depicted by Westerhoff. Douglas Hall writes:

Our very congregations, which are supposed to be the Christian answer to the human quest for genuine community, are for many if not most churchgoers not genuine, if not simply artificial. Those who do not “fit” the economic, educational, racial, or sexual mold that the churches still project seem only to accentuate the failure of human community.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Westerhoff III, *Faith Community*, 13.

<sup>141</sup> Hall, “Theologic,” 208–9.

The failure of the church lies not only in the tendency of its members to think individualistically, but also in its lack of understanding of the kind of community that it is to be, one that transcends economic, socio-cultural, and gender barriers.

These two failures of church and culture have prompted seekers to look elsewhere for the sense of personal fulfillment that arises in the context of human connection. The rise in popularity of cultural texts such as *Pampered Chef* parties and *Starbucks* coffee shops points to a longing for authentic human connection. Both of these cultural texts market an experience of community that is formed on the basis of shared consumer needs. Cultural experiences of community are not limited to these physical forms. Albert Hsu suggests, “As society becomes more commercial and consumerist, our sense of self-identity is less and less in any physical gatherings of people and more and more in the imagined and virtual communities of consumer demographics.”<sup>142</sup> North American individuals are searching for a people with whom to self-identify. This kind of longing is not new, nor does it result solely from the recent failures of individualism. H. Richard Niebuhr stated, “Everywhere men [sic] are seeking what they call security, but which is often identifiable as the sense of belonging, of being wholly accepted, supported and valued by a fellowship.”<sup>143</sup> Humans, perhaps now more than ever, are looking for a place to call home; they are looking for a place to belong.

In a society that espouses the myth of individualism, the type of community for which people are overtly looking, can be defined in terms of belonging. Typically, that connection is cultivated around shared interests, need, or demographic criteria. Broadly understood, our culture provides diverse elements and means by which individuals can

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<sup>142</sup> Hsu, *Suburban Christian*, 124.

<sup>143</sup> Niebuhr, “The Churches,” 118.

relate to others like themselves. However one arranges one's life in community, there are several needs that it is hoped the community will fulfill at varying levels: the need for security, identity, acceptance, support and the knowledge of one's value.<sup>144</sup> This list is not an exhaustive representation of the aims of community, but points to one common denominator—the need to belong. When one truly belongs, one finds security, identity, acceptance, support, and the knowledge of one's value. Healthy human flourishing depends on the fulfillment of these needs. Clearly then, a particular kind of belonging is essential to life in community. If one does not experience true belonging, one has the sense of not truly having found one's place in the world.

The North American church understands to some degree the urgency by which it needs to address the crisis of loneliness and individualism facing society. Yet the church on the whole, as noted by Douglas Hall, has failed to address the problem well. Arguably, the reason for this consists both in the parameters by which the church defines what it means to belong, as well as the insufficiency of belonging as a complete definition for Christian community. One way in which the North American church has responded to the problem of disconnectedness facing society and churches, is through its widespread adoption of the small group model. Small groups exist for many purposes. The basic purpose shared by most small groups is to provide opportunities for fellowship, spiritual growth, and intimacy. One small group participant noted the following:

I need people with whom I can feel close, with whom I can share, and I need this regularly. I can easily feel ho-hum about the Christian life. I need others to pick me up and push me on. I can't live Christianity in isolation. It is hard for me to be challenged in the routineness of Sunday worship, Sunday-school classes of fifty and potluck fellowships. I need others with whom to share personally. To struggle over issues and to be challenged to grow.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Niebuhr, "The Churches," 118.

<sup>145</sup> Barker et al., *Good Things*, 97.

Small groups such as this one aim to cultivate security, acceptance, and a sense of mutual identity. They do this on the basis of a common interest or common need, in this case the need for spiritual formation. The most striking thing about this statement then is the fundamental orientation of the small group around personal need and fulfillment. It follows that the experience of community should arise from a mutual fulfillment of the expressed needs of others. Arguably, many people express satisfaction with this type of model. On the contrary, the writer argues that the experience of shared need and shared struggle is insufficient to meet the crisis facing believers today. These criteria alone do not legitimize the full experience of *Christian* community.

In an attempt to delineate the essence of community, Catholic priest and author Ronald Rolheiser critiques several common misconceptions. Each of these misconceptions points to aspects of community that are fundamentally related to belonging. He denies that any one of them can fully comprise what it means to be community. First, biblical community is not primarily like-minded individuals, gathering on the basis of mutual compatibility. Second, biblical community is not a group of people insulated from the world, huddling together in fear and loneliness. Third, biblical community is not a substitute for emotional intimacy. Fourth, biblical community is not primarily formed on the basis of one shared roof, ethnicity, denomination, rule book, or Book of Common Prayer. Finally, biblical community is not achieved through a shared task or common mission.<sup>146</sup> Certainly, each of these elements represents an aspect of community, but none of them encompasses its core. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay agree

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<sup>146</sup> Rolheiser, *Holy Longing*, 114–18. By “mission” Rolheiser is referring to common tasks and projects which the church initiates in fulfillment of its particular local vision. This is to be distinguished from the “Mission” of the church.

with Rolheiser that real community is not a Christian affinity group.<sup>147</sup> Likewise, Henri Nouwen affirms that like-mindedness can narrow community.<sup>148</sup> Rolheiser, Halter and Smay, and Nouwen helpfully remind believers that common interests, like-mindedness, the shared need for emotional closeness, a common denomination, or a common purpose are insufficient for a comprehensive definition of community.

### *True Belonging and Displacement*

The essence of biblical community is obscured when merely those elements that foster more belonging, particularly belonging that is formed on the basis of personal need and fulfillment, are emphasized. Belonging, according to the biblical communities, is formed not around shared need or like-mindedness, but around a common story, the story of God's saving activity in history. Stanley Hauerwas argues that the most important social task of Christians is "to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in the scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story."<sup>149</sup> As it understands its existence in light of the biblical drama, the Christian community is enabled to live as the witness for Christ in a divided world.<sup>150</sup> Likewise, John Westerhoff III speaks of a "story-formed community." He says,

The Christian church was founded upon a story of God's experiences with Jesus and a vision of God's reign in human history. Throughout the church's history this story has formed and transformed, sustained and challenged the community's faith and life.<sup>151</sup>

Any particular manifestation of community has to take seriously the broad implications of being a storied-society (Hauerwas) or a story-formed community (Westerhoff). The

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<sup>147</sup> Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*, 104.

<sup>148</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 154.

<sup>149</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 1.

<sup>150</sup> Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 89–110.

<sup>151</sup> Westerhoff III, *Faith Community*, 27.

Body of Christ is a community of believers that wrestles with the implications of this story for its life together in the world. Through and because of the Christian story, believers find identity, security, and acceptance. It has always been so with God's people.<sup>152</sup>

The Christian story is a powerful unifying force. It renders unnecessary distinctions based on gender, ethnicity, or demographics. Christian community is not a collection of like-minded individuals, but rather a gathering of people who are radically different from one another, who have the power to refine, sharpen, and build one another up. Too often the church creates the kind of groups to which Douglas Hall alludes, groups that exclude people on the basis of superficial or secondary criteria. Contrarily, true community in the Body of Christ consists of many members—"Jews or Greeks, slaves or free" (Gal 3:28)—who are brought together in the one Spirit (1 Cor 12:12–13) on account of the Christ who indwells the heart of Christian community.

Inasmuch as story engenders belonging, it also creates displacement. John Westerhoff III identifies two characteristics that comprise the story-formed community: a common memory and a common vision.<sup>153</sup> Memory speaks to the past, and vision speaks to the future. The Christian story is not static but requires ongoing participation. The very act of bringing about the future requires displacement. One cannot envision bringing about the future of the kingdom of God from the comfort of one's living room or the safety of the church sanctuary. Henri Nouwen writes that "the Christian community is a waiting community, that is, a community which not only creates a sense of belonging but

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<sup>152</sup>The covenant community of Israel was established on the basis of their story of deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy is the persistent refrain to "not forget the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt." In addition, the ancient creedal structure took the form of a story (Deut 26:5–9). In similar fashion, the New Testament creed found in Paul's letter to the Philippians also takes the form of a story (Phil 2:5–11).

<sup>153</sup> Westerhoff III, *Faith Community*, 28.



also a sense of estrangement.”<sup>154</sup> Therefore, participation in God’s ongoing story of redemption in the world as a Body of believers from every ethnicity, language, and culture, involves elements of both belonging and displacement. A second way in which true displacement is evident in the Body of Christ is through its mission.

### **Mission as the Expression of the Body of Christ**

A central element of the Christian story is its mission. Often, churches make the categorical mistake of relegating the *mission* of God to *missions*. Craig Van Gelder notes that the term *missions* “describes the structures and activities that grew up during the modern missions movement.”<sup>155</sup> *Missions* is something the church does alongside service, education, and worship, for example. Yet mission ought not to be understood solely as a *function* of the church, but as its very *nature*. Van Gelder says, “The church, as the people of God in the world, is inherently a missionary church.”<sup>156</sup> Elsewhere, he writes, “the church’s self-understanding is that it is a social community created by the Spirit that is called and sent to participate fully in God’s mission in the world.”<sup>157</sup> God’s mission, enacted by the community, is the expression of his love for the world.

The people of God have always been a missional people. Gerhard Lohfink emphasizes the importance of the missiological theme running through the Old Testament: “Foundational to an important strand in the tradition of Old Testament . . . theology is the idea that God has selected a single people out of all the nations of the world in order to make this people a sign of salvation.”<sup>158</sup> The patriarch Abraham was

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<sup>154</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 153.

<sup>155</sup> Van Gelder, *Essence*, 30.

<sup>156</sup> Van Gelder, *Essence*, 31.

<sup>157</sup> Van Gelder, *Ministry*, 72.

<sup>158</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 28.

chosen by God in order that God would bless him, and *so that* through him all nations would be blessed (Gen 12:1–4). In order to fulfill that divine mandate, Abraham, and the nation of Israel through him, was called to witness to God’s shalom, by living as a community that reflects God’s compassionate, peaceful, and just character.<sup>159</sup> This theme is continued throughout the New Testament. Jesus’ life and ministry accomplished the mandate set forth in the Old Testament: “That God has chosen and sanctified his people in order to make it a contrast-society in the midst of other nations was for Jesus the self-evident background of all his actions.”<sup>160</sup>

Jesus also extended the vision for God’s mission. Through his death and resurrection he inaugurated a new social order in a radical new way.<sup>161</sup> Not only was Israel’s mission as previously expressed imparted to the church, but Jesus himself became the content of that mission. The post-Easter communities no longer witnessed primarily to God’s reign of shalom, but to the person of Christ. In a new way, God’s mission became concerned with proclaiming and encountering the person of Christ, through whom and because of whom, the community became newly empowered to express God’s love to the world.<sup>162</sup> Therefore, God’s mission remains the primary purpose for which he constitutes the church. The church is called to embody a new social order, or “contrast-society,” that is centered on the person of Christ and empowered by the Spirit. The Christian community is called to witness to God’s shalom and to express his love for the world. It does this as much on the basis of what it *is* as by what it *does*.

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<sup>159</sup> Stone, *Evangelism*, 72.

<sup>160</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 123.

<sup>161</sup> Stone, *Evangelism*, 80.

<sup>162</sup> Stone, *Evangelism*, 88. See also Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 40–55 for a discussion on Christ’s mission as “Love in Action” and the shift from Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom to proclamation of the *presence* of the kingdom.

Given that mission is intrinsic to what it means to be the church, it follows that all church activity and acts of Christian community should be seen as contributing to God's mission. Because the community is inherently missional, those same acts that facilitate belonging among the people of God also contribute to a sense of profound displacement. Displacement, like belonging, consists both in the actions ('doing') of the community, as well as its 'being.' According to Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, leaving is the first step in the missional process: "since the word *missional* theologically means 'to be sent,' *leaving* is where living like a missionary really begins."<sup>163</sup> Being missional requires leaving the comforts and familiarity of one's own living spaces and ways of doing things. *Leaving* was the essential first step of Abraham's response to God's call (Gen 12:1). Jesus' disciples were asked to leave their occupations and their families, the very things that brought them security, identity, and acceptance, to be a part of his community. Brian Walsh and Steven Bouma-Prediger make use of the sojourning image as "a potent way to capture the Christian way of being in our postmodern world, our age of exile and dislocation."<sup>164</sup> The Christian community is always a community on the move, a community displaced both by who it is and what it does.

Story and mission are the two fundamental characteristics that define the people of God. Both contribute to a sense of belonging and displacement. It is as these two themes are held in tension, that God's mission in the world is made manifest through the life of the community. The life of the community consists of certain practices that contribute to maintaining this tension. If lived out biblically, every practice of the Christian community is necessarily one that fosters a sense of identity, security, and

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<sup>163</sup> Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*, 127.

<sup>164</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 297.

acceptance, as well as a sense of estrangement or displacement. One cannot truly engage in the life of the Christian community without experiencing both of these elements. The final part of this chapter explores the core Christian practices as they contribute to the mission of God through belonging and displacement.

### **Practices of the Community**

A re-visioning of authentic Christian community that expresses God's mission requires the renewal of core practices which strengthen such community.<sup>165</sup> Yet it must be noted that these core practices cannot be separated from the identity of the community in its 'being' dimension. Bryan Stone discusses the tension between these two aspects: "The church is, in the first place, a people rather than a set of practices" and, in the second place, a people "constituted, vivified, and renewed by the Holy Spirit," without whose presence and activity, "our practices are 'nothing' (1 Cor 13:3)."<sup>166</sup> Stone does not prioritize people over practices but emphasizes the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people. His argument is similar to and in part based upon that of Reinhard Hütter who incorporates the idea of practices into the identity of the community:

The church must be understood as a nexus of core practices that at once both constitute and characterize the church. In the form of these core practices, the church subsists enhypostatically in the Holy Spirit, and through them the Holy Spirit performs its economic mission.<sup>167</sup>

Therefore, the community that is characterized and transformed by the Holy Spirit through its practices is enabled to embrace its identity in Christ and to express God's life in the world. Core practices that inform the communion and expression of the Body of

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<sup>165</sup> For a definition of 'practice,' see MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187–90.

<sup>166</sup> Stone, *Evangelism*, 25.

<sup>167</sup> Hütter, *Suffering*, 133.

Christ include baptism, the Eucharist, prayer, Scripture, and compassion. Each of these practices is equally an act of belonging and displacement.

Baptism is the rite by which the believing Body identifies with Christ. Through baptism, individuals enter into God's identity. The identity bestowed on the person in baptism marks both inclusion into the Body of Christ, as well as an embracing of responsibility, which invariably entails displacement from the patterns of life inconsistent with confession of Christ and inclusion in his Body. Van Gelder says of baptism, that it is "a missional act proclaiming to the world that God is calling, shaping, and sending a people for mission."<sup>168</sup> Rodney Clapp goes so far as to relate baptism to an act of civil disobedience. In a society where it is understood that the family is the most important agent of culture, baptism claims a life in the church "as a kind of resocialization, an enculturation according to the standards of the kingdom of God rather than this world."<sup>169</sup> Baptism as an act of inclusion and resocialization is an act of identification that prepares believers to embrace the mission of God.

A second central practice of the Christian community is the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Eucharist allows the community to participate in the suffering love of God. This participation forms and sustains the identity of the community.<sup>170</sup> This participation is also an inclusive act. Choosing to participate in the suffering love of Christ through partaking of the Eucharist represents a choice to define oneself by an alternative story and to stand against the boundaries that divide race, nation, and tongue. In a culture that thrives on these boundaries, the Body of Christ makes a choice that is both subversive and missional. It is subversive because it stands against the cultural

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<sup>168</sup> Van Gelder, *Essence*, 148.

<sup>169</sup> Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 99.

<sup>170</sup> Witherington, "Making a Meal," 82.

mainstream that depends on distinctions of class and ethnicity; it is missional because it invites others to participate and thus seeks to witness to the reign of God. Therefore, the Eucharist continually displaces the Body of believers from cultural norms and visions inasmuch as it draws people into belonging.

Prayer is the community's way of attending to God's presence. Henri Nouwen accentuates the foundational role that prayer plays in the Christian community. Without prayer, there is no Christian community. He warns, "When prayer is no longer its primary concern, and when its many activities are no longer seen and experienced as part of prayer itself, the community quickly degenerates into a club with a common cause but no common vocation."<sup>171</sup> Nouwen's words are a sharp reminder of the futility of human efforts in the creation of the common life and the embracing of God's mission without ongoing communion with the God who initiates community.

Prayer is human participation in the divine life. Through prayer, the Christian community, empowered by the Spirit, intercedes on behalf of individuals both within and outside the community. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the common prayer of intercession takes upon itself the burden of many individuals.<sup>172</sup> It is thus the means through which the community shares in the sufferings of others and presents them before Christ. This kind of intercession that is a sharing of suffering is enabled by the Spirit. As C. F. D. Moule points out, "when we are at a loss and can do no more than groan incoherently, the Spirit interprets even the groaning, turning it into prayer to God (Rom 8:26)."<sup>173</sup> He writes further, "it is the indwelling Spirit relating us to God and making contact for us

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<sup>171</sup> Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 156.

<sup>172</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, 188.

<sup>173</sup> Moule, *Holy Spirit*, 31.

with him.”<sup>174</sup> Thus intercessory prayer, as noted by Philip Clements-Jewery, is partly “God’s own activity incarnated in the thoughts and aspirations and concerns of human beings and expressed in human language.”<sup>175</sup> The responsibility of those who pray is to seek to discern the will of God and to participate in his purposes.<sup>176</sup> Prayer that is the work of the indwelling Spirit enables the community to pursue freedom, justice, peace, and love.<sup>177</sup> To sum up, prayer as participation in the divine life and intercession on behalf of others is made possible by the Spirit’s groaning on behalf of those who pray. In this way the community participates in the divine life, attunes itself to God’s will, and is enabled to perform God’s mission.

Scripture is the community’s way of hearing God. Through Scripture, God reveals his character and design for human life in community. Karl Barth writes, “We stand before holy scripture. This bears witness to revelation, establishes the church, and gives the command, and vocation comes through it.”<sup>178</sup> God’s self-revelation is intended for the community. Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones make the point that Scripture was written to address the concerns and nourish the life of the people of God in community.<sup>179</sup> Rodney Clapp and Bonhoeffer likewise agree that Scripture is to be interpreted by and finds its full destination in the life of the community.<sup>180</sup>

As God’s Word for the community, Scripture has authority for life. However, its full authority is only realized when it is embodied by the community. Fowl and Jones write that, “unless Christian communities are committed to embodying their Scriptural

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<sup>174</sup> Moule, *Holy Spirit*, 31.

<sup>175</sup> Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer*, 35.

<sup>176</sup> Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer*, 34.

<sup>177</sup> Clements-Jewery, *Intercessory Prayer*, 36.

<sup>178</sup> Barth, *Homiletics*, 75.

<sup>179</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading*, 8.

<sup>180</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 17 and Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 127.

interpretation, the Bible loses its character as Scripture.”<sup>181</sup> Clapp offers a nuanced but parallel interpretation of Scripture’s authority in community: “. . . scripture really has authority only when it is performed.”<sup>182</sup> What he intends by performance (and what Fowl and Jones mean by embodiment) is the faithful improvisation of the final act of the redemptive story.<sup>183</sup> Following creation (Act One), the Fall (Act Two), Israel (Act Three), and Jesus (Act Four), the church has the task of extending and fulfilling God’s mission in new and contextually appropriate ways. The community is called to live and interpret its life in light of God’s ongoing self-revelation through the biblical witness.

The embodiment of Scripture in community is contextual. Contextual embodiment, as admitted by Fowl and Jones, is a complex matter.<sup>184</sup> The complexities arise not only as a result of the temporal distance between the settings of Scripture and that of contemporary North American Christianity. Rather, Fowl and Jones argue, the most important complexities are moral and theological. The Christian community must be formed and transformed through the claims of Scripture to the character of Christ.<sup>185</sup> This is not a simple matter of interpretation and application because there is no one context-independent interpretive method:

The aim of Scriptural interpretation is to shape our common life in the situations in which we find ourselves according to the characters, convictions, and practices related in Scripture. Because no one interpretive strategy can deliver *the* meaning of a text, there is no hard and fast method that will ensure faithful interpretation. No particular community of believers can be sure of what a faithful interpretation of Scripture will entail in any specific situation until it actually engages in the hard process of conversation, argument, discussion, prayer, and practice.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading*, 20.

<sup>182</sup> Clapp, *Peculiar People*, 139.

<sup>183</sup> See Wright, *New Testament* for his description of the acts of the biblical drama.

<sup>184</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading*, 1.

<sup>185</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading*, 1.

<sup>186</sup> Fowl and Jones, *Reading*, 20.



Being attentive to God's Word is a communal and contextual practice through which the community is transformed. The community that embodies mission according to Scripture finds implacement in that story and is thereby displaced from competing cultural stories.

Ministry is God's mission of compassion in which the community participates. John Zizioulas writes, "The nature of mission is not to be found in the Church's *addressing* the world but in its being fully *com-compassion* with it."<sup>187</sup> Human compassion finds its origins in the divine character (Exod 34:6) and is given its proper interpretation through the person of Christ.<sup>188</sup> Wayne Whitson Floyd Jr. states that the nature of compassion "involves the radical risk of the involvement of one's very self into the context of the distress of the sufferers."<sup>189</sup> The very roots of the Latin word mean "to suffer, bear [*pati*] with [*com*]."<sup>190</sup> "Suffering with," or bearing the burdens of others as Bonhoeffer puts it (see chapter two), is a core practice of the community that is characterized by self-giving love. Such an idea is antithetical to a self-absorbed culture. By living in self-giving, suffering love, the community truly exists as Christ's presence in the midst of a broken world.

Compassion as "suffering with" is a dynamic process that, according to Floyd Jr., includes three aspects. First, compassion includes a disposition of *responsive solidarity*.<sup>191</sup> Solidarity cries out compassionately on behalf of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Second, compassion requires a *radical recontextualization* of concern<sup>192</sup> or what Nouwen calls a "voluntary displacement."<sup>193</sup> Placing oneself at risk by

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<sup>187</sup> Zizioulas, *Being*, 224.

<sup>188</sup> Floyd Jr., "Compassion," 38.

<sup>189</sup> Floyd Jr., "Compassion," 40.

<sup>190</sup> Floyd Jr., "Compassion," 42.

<sup>191</sup> Floyd Jr., "Compassion," 48–49.

<sup>192</sup> Floyd Jr., "Compassion," 49–50.

<sup>193</sup> Nouwen et al., *Compassion*, 62–64.

entering into the suffering of another person is a displacing activity. Third, true compassion involves commitment to overcoming the cause of suffering.<sup>194</sup> As Nouwen et al. state, “we cannot profess our solidarity with those who are oppressed when we are unwilling to confront the oppressor.”<sup>195</sup> This active justice is best symbolized in God’s vision for shalom, “a term that weaves together peace and justice in the context of a Spirit-created community where human flourishing, blessedness, and wholeness is accompanied by the well-being of animals and even plant life (cf. Isa 11:1–9).”<sup>196</sup> Shalom is characterized by the in-breaking of God’s reign. Paul Hanson writes that, “the community of faith that lives true to its calling is thus a place fostering the process of restoration and healing that lies at the heart of the biblical vision of the inbreaking of God’s order.”<sup>197</sup> Acts of compassion as solidarity, recontextualization, and justice are acts of implacement and displacement that seek God’s vision for shalom and witness to his reign. On the one hand, they foster a sense of implacement among those who suffer; on the other, they displace Christians from detached and self-centered living.

The community of faith is a life-sustaining fellowship.<sup>198</sup> Hanson’s idea of a life-sustaining fellowship incorporates themes of belonging and displacement in the context of mission:

The need for communal fellowship is sharpened when one calls to mind the nature of the world within which we live. Being witnesses to an order of reality that challenges many existing values often leads to difficult choices, even to sacrifice and suffering. Disciples in an often inhospitable environment need the support of others who share their vision, and who derive sustenance from their relationship to God, as experienced especially in common worship and prayer. This grounding in God and in God’s righteous order give the faithful strength to

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<sup>194</sup> Floyd Jr., “Compassion,” 51.

<sup>195</sup> Nouwen et al., *Compassion*, 124.

<sup>196</sup> Stone, *Evangelism*, 70.

<sup>197</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 503.

<sup>198</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 501.

stand united in their testimony that what multitudes call real is ultimately illusory, and that what to many seems illusory is the ‘pearl of great price.’<sup>199</sup>

As a life-sustaining fellowship, the Body of Christ is to be a witness to God’s reign in the world, in the way that Israel was intended to be a sign of God’s shalom. Being witnesses to God’s reign does not only imply concrete acts of mission, but involves ways of *being* the community through sharing practices such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, prayer, Scripture, and compassion.

In conclusion, if the church seeks to foster genuine community, it must take the call to mission seriously. It must consider ways of being together that are consistent with the vision for community portrayed by the biblical text. This includes wrestling with the implications of the biblical story and mission with others who are different. It also includes practices of belonging and displacement that facilitate the ability of the community to witness to the gospel. Jean Vanier’s vision for community summarizes the discussion:

But these two experiences [gentle communion and pain and darkness] cannot be lived in truth unless they are lived in community. This community could be simply a group of people bonded together through prayer and mutual support, with a common vision in their love and concern for others; or it might be a family opening its doors to someone in need; or a community specifically founded to welcome those in pain and distress. Without community the experience of communion will lead quickly to possessiveness and using the other to fill our emptiness; a tendency to manipulate this experience to satisfy our own needs, to respond to our own whims and desires.<sup>200</sup>

Being the Body of Christ as missional community requires that communities practice life together in ways that cultivate belonging and displacement. In doing so, the Christian community witnesses to the mission of God in ways that are both culturally subversive, as well as relevant to the needs of the contemporary context.

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<sup>199</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 502.

<sup>200</sup> Vanier, *Broken Body*, 95.

## Summary

This chapter explored the key themes of implacement and displacement as postures of the Body of Christ that are necessary for the fulfillment of God's mission and the embracing of core practices of the church. True belonging fulfills the human need for security, acceptance, identity and support and empowers proper displacement. These two themes are essential aspects of the Body of Christ metaphor which envisions healthy and holistic Christian community in the North American context.

The Body of Christ metaphor envisions a particular kind of Christian communal life that bears witness to God's love and addresses the concerns of fragmentation and displacement (chapter one). At the heart of this community is communion with God (chapter two), because of which members in community are enabled to participate in the Spirit's activity (chapter three). These two aspects of the Body of Christ shape the character of the community that is to express God's mission through implacement and displacement (chapter four). In the next chapter, focus returns to the condition of unhealthy displacement described in chapter one and examines a particular response to the contemporary context, that of 'intentional Christian communities.' The Body of Christ metaphor helps the church to reclaim a vision for life together that embodies God's mission and bears witness to Christ's presence in an individualistic, fragmented, and displaced culture.

## Chapter 5

### Case Study: ‘Intentional Christian Communities’ as a Contextual Christian Response to Displacement

This chapter applies the theology of the Body of Christ to one concrete Christian response to the problem of displacement detailed in chapter one—that of ‘intentional Christian communities.’ To facilitate this aim, this chapter first describes the contours of ‘intentional Christian communities.’ Second, it evaluates displacement and community with respect to ‘intentional Christian communities’ in light of the larger biblical-redemptive drama and the metaphor of the Body of Christ. Finally it appraises ‘intentional Christian communities’ as *one* biblical and contextual response to the emerging conditions of heightened displacement and fragmentation.

The Body of Christ metaphor envisions a variety of legitimate responses to the problems of displacement and fragmentation, of which ‘intentional Christian communities’ are one. Reflection on a vision for healthy Christian community that is informed by a theology of the Body of Christ helps the church to respond to these issues in a biblically-rooted and culturally-relevant manner.

#### ‘Intentional Christian Communities’

The church has tried, in various ways, to provide a remedy for the ills facing contemporary society. One such response that has regained popularity is the formation of what are termed ‘intentional Christian communities.’ A 2005 article in *Christianity Today* describes the make-up and purpose of the “New Monasticism” that is proliferating across North American settings: “Formed often independently by mostly young, single Christians, these communities are the latest wave of evangelicals who see in community

life an answer to society's materialism and the church's complacency toward it."<sup>201</sup>

Although admittedly diverse, intentional communities share several common commitments that they feel contribute to a counter-cultural way of living. A 2004 conference for members of intentional communities identified the following twelve distinctives for life in community:

Submission to the larger church, living with the poor and outcast, living near community members, hospitality, nurturing a common community life and a shared economy, peacemaking, reconciliation, care for creation, celibacy or monogamous marriage, formation of new members along the lines of the old novitiate, and contemplation.<sup>202</sup>

David Janzen, a member of Reba Place Fellowship similarly identifies the following characteristics:

Common finances and property, living in close proximity, mutual accountability and input in the decisions of members, frequent meals together, common work or ministry, shared spiritual disciplines with a vital worship life together, and at least two years of history.<sup>203</sup>

Participants are committed to a vision for holistic communal life that they believe finds its inspiration in the person of Jesus and in the early church in Jerusalem.<sup>204</sup> They believe that Jesus' call to seek first his kingdom (Matt 6:33) is appropriately embodied in communal living and requires the daily "taking up of my cross."<sup>205</sup> Although most would defend the decision to live in community less dogmatically, at least one member feels that to "give all and follow" is *best* fulfilled in the kind of community described above.<sup>206</sup>

'Intentional Christian communities' advocate for ways of living communally that traditional evangelical Christianity largely fails to consider adequately. First, intentional

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<sup>201</sup> Moll, "New Monasticism," 39–40.

<sup>202</sup> Moll, "New Monasticism," 40–41.

<sup>203</sup> Janzen, *Fire*, 12.

<sup>204</sup> Janzen, *Fire*, 12.

<sup>205</sup> Moll, "New Monasticism," 44.

<sup>206</sup> Gish, "Must I," 26. Gish argues that traditional church structures inadequately enable relationships to develop to the depth that God intends.

communities are committed to formulating an authentic response to the crisis of displacement and its underlying individualism. Second, they address the failures of the modern church in fostering legitimate experiences of human connection. Third, their living arrangements testify to the value of physical togetherness, in contrast to a society whose relational connections are becoming increasingly “virtual.” Fourth, intentional communities uphold ways of living that are economically and ecologically sustainable. By planting gardens or purchasing produce from local farmers, members demonstrate the importance of connectedness with the source of food in the face of a culture that largely consumes with little thought to the consequences of one’s purchase choices. By buying from local vendors or shopping fair trade, members demonstrate commitment to ethical and just economic practices. By considering energy efficient methods of heating and electricity, members express dedication to reducing their carbon footprint. In addition to these essential features, Christian communities base their existence on particular biblical themes and models for community.

‘Intentional Christian communities’ seek by virtue of their practices to be a faithful witness to the gospel and to the reign of God in the world. ‘Intentional Christian communities’ represent a socially subversive movement within the broader cultural milieu. They prioritize the two-fold sense of emplacement—among other people in a particular space. They are also cognizant of the sense of global emplacement and the ramifications that living locally has in a globalized world. They certainly embody an appropriate postmodern, western response to the challenges facing the North American context. But is their response normative according to Christian tradition?

## Community and Displacement in light of Christian Tradition

Human beings were created by God for community. The Genesis creation narrative describes the inherent relational nature ascribed by God to the first man and woman. Following the appearance of sin, God set apart a people for himself through the person of Abraham. These two narratives offer insight into the ongoing character of God's community as it is developed throughout the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament. Understanding the character of the Old Testament community informs a reading of two important New Testament depictions of community: Acts 2:42–47 and 1 Corinthians 12:12–31. Taken as a whole, the biblical conception of community contributes to understanding and addressing the contemporary problems of displacement and fragmentation.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). The history of the earth began, when God created place; it was into this place that God set humanity. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image’” (Gen 1:26a). In exegeting the biblical significance of Genesis 1, Stanley Grenz points to the social dimension of the divine image. Although he cautions against a proto-trinitarian declaration, he does suggest the communal self-disclosure of God that is essential to the divine nature.<sup>207</sup> Being image bearers of the divine presence, humans are meant to reflect that communal fellowship.<sup>208</sup> Grenz gathers from this that “God’s program for the world and hence for humankind as God’s representative in the world focuses on the establishment of community.”<sup>209</sup> From the opening of Genesis, it is clear that human beings are created for community, with God, with one another, and with their creational surroundings. Sadly, sin results in the

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<sup>207</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, 175.

<sup>208</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, 178.

<sup>209</sup> Grenz, *Theology*, 179.



destruction of community.<sup>210</sup> The state of sin is one of disconnectedness and alienation from other human beings, creation, and God. The drama of redemption embodied in the biblical narrative sets about to restore that first vision. Throughout the biblical narrative, God is actively bringing about a renewed vision for community. He does so by calling a people to himself whom he promises to bless *so that* they will in turn be a blessing to those around them (Gen 12:1–4).

Several implications for an understanding of biblical community on the basis of God's call to Abraham are worth noting. First, it is God who calls Abraham. The community is predicated on the basic pattern of divine initiative and human response. Paul Hanson says that

. . . forms of community arise as a people, peering into the heart of life and seeking to align itself with God, who is ceaselessly active to create fellowship where there is alienation, to reconcile where there is enmity, to redeem where there is bondage, adopt those structures of community that best equip it to incarnate God's purpose in its own life.<sup>211</sup>

Second, the community is called for a purpose—to incarnate God's mission of restoration to humanity. Human community under the care of divine initiation is meant to express God's eternal communion in ways which extend God's blessing to the nations. Third, biblical community is a response to God's call to *leave*. It is the image of a sojourning community that dominates description of the Old Testament people of God.<sup>212</sup> Paul Hanson refers to the community of faith as a pilgrim community.<sup>213</sup> Both descriptions highlight the truly *displaced* dimension of the community. Hugh Halter and Matt Smay link the missional and displaced aspects of community, defining *leaving*, not as going

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<sup>210</sup> In Genesis 3, the shame of nakedness results in hiding from each other and from God.

<sup>211</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 3.

<sup>212</sup> Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 299.

<sup>213</sup> Hanson, *People Called*, 3.

overseas, but as “intentionally giving up what is comfy, easy, and familiar.”<sup>214</sup> The call of the community of Israel was a call to embody God’s mission in ways that displaced them from things that were familiar. Finally, it is significant that God promised Abraham a “land.” The identity of that first community, formed by God’s initiative for the sake of the world, was closely tied to a place.

How Israel would strive to witness to God’s character would be nuanced (and misrepresented) throughout the course of its history, but these core principles of God’s initiative, a missional purpose, a posture of displacement, and a creational embeddedness remained and continued to define the people of God in the New Testament. The New Testament communities were, in effect, the fulfillment of the Old Testament people of God. The theologies of the New Testament writers certainly testified to the church as being the true Israel of God.<sup>215</sup> Indeed, the Christian community involves being displaced from the “world” (John 17:13–19) and included in the Body of Christ. Gentile believers are now grafted into Israel’s divine calling. The New Testament pictures several ways in which the church by its very communal existence was to witness to God’s reign.

One popular New Testament text which is often cited as a model for contemporary Christian communities is Acts 2:42–47 (cf. 4:32–35). Acts 2:42–47 is a particular contextual application of what it means to be the Christian community during the time following the resurrection. The vision set forth in Acts 2:42–47 is as follows:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

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<sup>214</sup> Halter and Smay, *Tangible Kingdom*, 127.

<sup>215</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 79.

praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42–47).

The disciples shared things in common, sold their belongings and distributed the proceeds to those in need, and spent time worshipping and eating together.

One can draw clear correlations between Jewish Christian life in first century Palestine and the model of ‘intentional Christian community’ pursued by increasing numbers of people today.<sup>216</sup> Yet it must be asked whether and in what way Acts 2:42–47 can be viewed as a normative and prescriptive paradigm for Christian practice in the contemporary context. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart explore the possibility for historical precedence in the events described in Acts set in the context of Luke’s overarching purpose in writing. They note that church organization and polity or standardization of practice were not Luke’s primary foci. His intent was to describe the movement of the gospel, which was embodied first in the ways described in Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. Interestingly, the particular Jewish model described in these passages is not once repeated in later chapters as the gospel moves out to the Gentiles. One cannot assume then that this model is normative.<sup>217</sup> However, Fee and Stuart conclude that biblical precedents may sometimes be interpreted as repeatable patterns.<sup>218</sup> At best one can conclude that these biblical narratives serve as examples; they are certainly not mandates for all Christian communities at all times.

In light of these considerations, can ‘intentional Christian community’ today be said to be an appropriate biblical response? Yes, but not on the basis of a normative reading of Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–35. However, Christian communities concerned with

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<sup>216</sup> See Janzen, *Fire*, 13 and Gish, “Must I,” 28 for references to Acts 2.

<sup>217</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, 112–14.

<sup>218</sup> Fee and Stuart, *How to Read*, 124.

God's desire for his people ought to be reflective of the biblical themes taken as a whole. These include a communal mission of witness to the world, care for God's creation, an occasional posture of discomfort as needed *in order to* actualize that mission in ways that are creationally-responsible, a total dependence on God's initiating presence, and a desire for unity. These themes ought to be lived in ways that are contextually credible.

Intentional communities, by their response to the prevailing fragmentation and displacement of the contemporary context through offering genuine human connection, physical togetherness, and economic and ecological sustainability, are an authentic response to the needs of our time. The final section of this chapter seeks to situate intentional communities in the context of a larger and more comprehensive model for interpreting Christian community, the Body of Christ.

### **'Intentional Christian Communities' and the Body of Christ**

Paul uses the metaphor of the Body of Christ to describe the Christian community. Metaphors, in contrast with context-specific models such as that in Acts 2, hold greater possibilities for application. Understanding the elements that are inherent within a metaphor allows for flexible application to a variety of settings. A metaphor is not a normative directive, but "a powerful force to *form* a group of people into one with a common purpose."<sup>219</sup> The Body of Christ is a metaphor for community used by Paul to address the particular experience of competition and disunity facing the Corinthian church. Barbara Field argues that Paul's purpose in using this metaphor was "to form the scattered early church into a cohesive whole."<sup>220</sup> As this thesis has proposed, the Body of Christ can be similarly applied to the Christian community in the contemporary context.

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<sup>219</sup> Field, "Discourses," 88.

<sup>220</sup> Field, "Discourses," 88.

It has been argued that several features are important to understanding and applying the Body of Christ metaphor in appropriate ways. These features are reinstated in light of the discussion of ‘intentional Christian communities.’

The Body of Christ metaphor is contextual. It represents a biblically faithful response to a cultural situation marked by fragmentation. It can likewise be applied to the contemporary experiences of displacement from people and from place that results from excessive individualism and consumerism. As a response to the condition of twenty-first century culture, the Body of Christ recommends a biblical vision for implacement that is rooted in relationships with other people and with place. ‘Intentional Christian communities’ represent a contextual and biblically holistic response. They address what other forms of Christian community, such as the house church or small group models do not, that is, the need for humans to recover a sense of creational embeddedness through practices of meeting in person and economic and ecological sustainability.

Members involved in ‘intentional Christian communities’ address the concerns of the surrounding culture in a comprehensive way and also seek to be discerning of the Holy Spirit who is leading them.<sup>221</sup> Further, they display admirable levels of intentionality and dedication required to make such communal living arrangements work. Nonetheless, the Body of Christ consists of many different kinds of persons. Not all Christians find this model functional or appealing. Although lack of appeal may be a lackluster argument against intentional communities, it should be noted that not all people have the same capacity for these intense ongoing formulations of community. It is perhaps conceivable that those who are involved in intentional communities find such living arrangements more natural and compatible with their personalities. To what extent

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<sup>221</sup> Janzen, “Salted,” 17.

are Christians required to engage in relationships and arrangements that are not suited to them for the sake of the Body of Christ? As the metaphor clearly indicates, there should be tremendous respect for the variety of gifts and contributions to the Body. Community is initiated and formed by God. Although God might sometimes bring individuals together in specifically intentional ways in order to witness to his glory, one cannot assume that God operates in the same way with all people and in all cultural and social circumstances.

Finally, the Body of Christ witnesses to God's mission in ways that reflect the calling of the Old Testament people of God. God's mission, initiated with the people of Israel and brought to fulfillment in the person of Christ, is extended to the church. His mission encompasses spreading a vision for restorative justice and shalom to all peoples. His mission is actualized through the life and practices of the community in ways that foster belonging and displacement. Members of 'intentional Christian communities' seem to understand this core tension. They belong to a group with others who are like and unlike themselves, and who share the same story and mission for community. At the same time, many of them "are willing to give up the privileges to which they were born."<sup>222</sup> Yet in the Body of Christ, there are many ways in which God calls his people to fulfill his mission, and there are many ways in which people experience emplacement and true displacement. Intentional communities represent one particular response.

'Intentional Christian communities' faithfully and contextually embody God's mission in the world in many ways. Their practices, if not their structures, can be instructive for other Christians seeking equally contextual ways in which to express God's life in the world. The intent of this chapter was to position 'intentional Christian

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<sup>222</sup> Moll, "New Monasticism," 40.

communities' as one appropriate manifestation of the Body of Christ metaphor in the contemporary context. However, as has been argued, the Spirit animates and nourishes the Body in limitless ways. The task of the community is to be attuned to the Spirit and to embody God's mission in ways that are biblically and contextually rooted. The Body of Christ is a fruitful metaphor for this endeavour.

### **Summary**

This thesis has argued for a reclaiming of community as an essential Christian vision for life together on the basis of the metaphor of the Body of Christ. First, the Body of Christ is able to enhance the Christian community's response to the condition of displacement and fragmentation that marks twenty-first century North Americans. Second, the Body of Christ stresses the centrality of communion with Christ from which all subsequent activity flows. Third, the Body of Christ depends on the willing response of persons and communities in ways that reflect their God-given gifts and potential. Fourth, the Body of Christ exists for the purpose of expressing God's mission of love in the world. Belonging to the Body of Christ empowers it for the proper displacement that is necessary for the fulfillment of God's mission. Finally, there are many ways in which the Christian community can embody the themes inherent in the Body of Christ metaphor that mediate the problem of displacement and embrace God's mission.

## Conclusion

This thesis contended for deeper reflection on the biblical metaphor of the Body of Christ for a contextual self-understanding of contemporary Christian community. It argued that reclaiming the Body of Christ metaphor as a guiding description of the nature ('being') and function ('doing') of the Christian community fosters a vision of the alternative community of God that addresses the problem of (unhealthy) displacement and revitalizes the way in which Christians embrace and embody God's mission. Embracing the metaphor of the Body of Christ can help the church to reclaim a vision for its life together, through which God channels his love to a hurting and broken world.

This thesis attended cogently to several crucial and distinctive ways in which the Body of Christ can function as a guiding metaphor for the Christian community in the contemporary context. First, it offered initial reflection on a particular aspect of North American culture—that of displacement—and what that aspect implies for healthy human flourishing in community. Second, it argued for a fresh embracing of the 'being' dimension of the Christian community and the Eucharist as a central practice whereby the community fosters an awareness of Christ's enduring presence in its midst. Third, it highlighted an approach to looking at the mission of God in the Body of Christ that challenges how Christians typically conceive of community. God's mission is accomplished through appropriating a posture of implacement and true displacement. Finally, it reflected critically on one particular manifestation of Christian community on which little has been written to-date, that of 'intentional Christian communities.' These facets provide a solid foundation upon which to understand and interpret other contextual



applications of the Body of Christ as Christian community. They also contribute significantly to the ongoing dialogue concerning the nature and function of the church.

However, given what has been argued throughout this thesis, there are several ways in which the argument might be pushed to deeper research and reflection. First, the discussion concerning false displacement might be expanded in several ways. Additional research into the distinctives of particular cultural and geographical contexts across North America would facilitate more nuanced dialogue concerning the problems facing North American people. Also, some contextual assumptions regarding displacement might be sharpened. Are there elements of individualism that are healthy? Are some places more beneficial for human social flourishing than others? A second related consideration for further reflection concerns the nature of the community for which people are searching. Is there perhaps some aspect of virtual community that can effectively address some of the issues facing North American persons?

In addition to contextual considerations, the theological arguments of this thesis might be expanded in several ways. So third, a Christological or theological paradigm for true displacement would enhance the argument in chapter four, that inclusion in the Body of Christ is based on an alternative understanding of belonging and displacement. Fourth, the theological theme of discernment is worthy of further exploration. If God initiates and has intentions for community, how do Christians discern and participate in God's intentions? Fifth, this thesis opens up a vision for community that also looks to the future. Therefore, it might be asked how a vision of Christian community as the Body of Christ functions as a proleptic sign of the eschatological kingdom of God.

Some final reflections looking forward consist of additional ways in which the Body of Christ might be applied to various issues beyond ‘intentional Christian communities.’ Therefore (sixth), if the Body of Christ and its practices are founded on an inclusive theology, how should Christians engage some of the more exclusive sacramental practices of some denominations? Seventh, how might the ‘effectiveness’ of the Body of Christ be measured? The notion of fecundity might be a helpful one for countering typical church growth paradigms which emphasize effectiveness in terms of numbers. Eighth, practical application might be extended to include discussion of small groups, ecumenical movements, and specialized ministries.

This thesis has offered several significant insights into aspects of the Body of Christ as Christian community; however, much more could be written. The Body of Christ metaphor asks for an ongoing reformulation of Christian community that is holistic and integrated. This thesis calls the church to the important task of reflecting and acting on its identity as the people of God. It invites theologians, ministry practitioners, and the Christian community to understand and embody its nature and function as an expression of God’s love to a multi-faceted and broken context.

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