WESTERN INDIVIDUALISM AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY:
TOWARDS A FAITHFUL EXPRESSION OF CHURCH IN THE WEST

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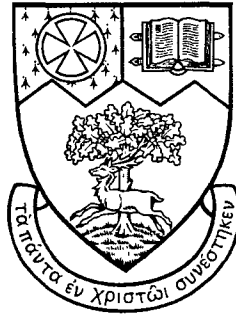
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ABSTRACT

"Western Individualism and the Christian Community: Towards a Faithful Expressing of Church in the West"

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As evangelicals living in Canada, we are tasked with finding a way to faithfully live out the calling of the church in our North American context. Yet as we try to do this, we are regularly faced with the cultural reality of individualism and are often influenced by it in ways that we do not fully understand. This thesis will suggest that the integration of individualism in the Western evangelical church is having a detrimental effect on our ability to create or maintain Biblical community. This thesis will examine the issue of individualism as it relates to Christian community through interviews with 15 evangelical laypersons and pastors. This thesis will also employ secondary sources in the analysis of these interviews, engaging them in dialogue with some classic and contemporary theologians of the church.

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Introduction

For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body- whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free- and we were all given one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many, (1 Cor 12:13-14).

Modern Christianity has become focused on 'saving' the individual, disembodied, isolated soul.[1]

      The centre of Christianity is shifting. In the global south, the Christian church is growing numerically and in other ways as well; but the Western church has seen better days.[2] The juxtaposition of these two quotations, the first taken from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and the second from essayist Wendell Berry, illustrates one of the unique contemporary predicaments of evangelicalism in the West. With its heavy emphasis an individual decision to follow Christ and personal piety thereafter, critics are pointing out that there seems to be a significant sense in which today's evangelical church has become an inward church, a church composed of private individuals who possess no collective life between them. The sentiments of many of the church's critics are crystallized by Bryan Stone who remarks pointedly that this brand of evangelicalism often appears more like a bureaucratic institution than the living body of Christ.[3]

      Jesus himself insisted that his disciples would be distinguished from others by their love for *one another* (John 13:35, emphasis added) and the apostle Paul is consistent in his insistence that the members of the body of Christ bear a sense of collective identity and responsibility as the redeemed people of God.[4] In fact, the New Testament is full of so many "one another" commandments that the concept of individualized

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[1]Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 114.
[2]Hirsch, *Forgotten Ways*, 16.
[3]Stone, *After Christendom*, 135-138.
[4]See Rom 12:4-6; 1 Cor 12 and Eph 3:6 for just a few examples.

Christianity seems almost antithetical.[5]

Although the notion of the body of Christ has held a privileged place in doctrinal orthodoxy throughout the centuries, there seems to be a sense in which the practice of community life has slipped through the cracks in recent times, at least in the West. Stone comments that the preoccupations of modernism, which include a heightened emphasis on reason, have created a church wherein each individual determines the qualities of his or her "personal relationship with Jesus."[6] If Stone is right, then perhaps this individualism partially accounts for the ongoing frustration experienced by many in the North American evangelical church today. For although our churches continue to preach the importance of biblical community, we in the West seem to be at a collective loss for how such a community is to ever to come about.[7] In other words, as a faith where the most important thing is that the individual come to his or her *own* decision about Jesus and learn to appropriate his teachings into his or her *own* life, modern evangelicalism has a hard time building a case for why the church matters at all.[8]

Meanwhile, Western culture as a whole is moving slowly away from the assumptions and preoccupations of the modernist era.[9] With this shift, we are beginning to see an increased awareness within secular and Christian contexts of the importance of meaningful human connection.[10] And all of this is taking place even as we inhabit a culture of increasing displacement and loneliness.[11] The bent of a postmodern generation towards community raises some interesting, and maybe even disturbing questions for the Western

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[5]See for example John 13:35, Rom 12:10, Rom 12:16, Rom 15:7; 1 Cor 1:10 for a few examples.

[6]Stone, *After Christendom*, 135.

[7]In *Beyond Homelessness,* Bouma-Prediger et al note that our culture is one of disconnection which has been spawned by individualism and privatization. 141.

[8]Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 29.

[9]Smith addresses this cultural shift in his book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?;* likewise Stone in *After Christendom* and Frost and Hirsch in *Things to Come.*

[10]Heidegger in Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith,* 23.

[11]In this area I have been influenced in my thinking by Bouma-Prediger and Walsh in their work *Beyond Homelessness.*

church.[12] In recent decades, the evangelical church in the West has become aware of the need to make the Christian message comprehensible to those who find themselves outside the realm of church culture. This has led to many creative expressions and presentations of the gospel message. Yet, the prodding of this present generation demands that we seriously consider whether our attempt to do away with stale and meaningless rituals[13] have actually resulted in an unintentional assimilation of the cultural individualism of the modernist age.[14] Furthermore, we must ask how such individualism interacts with our confession of the "holy catholic church"[15] and our ability to inhabit the meaningful Christian community to which the Mothers and Fathers of our faith (not to mention our Scriptures) attest.

Bouma-Prediger and Walsh describe this present postmodern generation as "a country of exiles who live in the landscape of the temporary."[16] In their work *Beyond Homelessness*, Bouma-Prediger and Walsh describe well the attending sense of disconnection that seems to exemplify this present culture. Quoting Chambers they note, "To be a stranger in a strange land, to be lost is the condition most typical of contemporary life."[17] Although they do not use this language, there is an underlying assumption in *Beyond Homelessness* that the "postmodern homelessness" experienced by many in our increasingly electronic and mobile age, is not to be characterized only by a lack of place, but also by a lack of people, a lack of community. As this generation develops a hunger for

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[12]Throughout the remainder of this thesis I will use the terms "Western church" and "Western evangelical church" interchangeably. This is not in any way to suggest a theological exclusion of Catholic, Orthodox or mainline Protestant churches from the corporate body of Christ, but merely to make the writing and reading processes involved in this work less cumbersome.

[13]By this I am referring to the great push among evangelicals in the late 90s-early 2000s to do away with many of the traditional rituals previously associated with worship in the West. The "Seeker-Sensitive" model of church pioneered by Willow Creek is a good example of this. See also Pastor Bruxy Cavey's multi-site church The Meeting House which meets in movie theatres rather than traditional church buildings.

[14]In *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* Smith claims that one of the continuities between modernism and postmodernism is, "an idolatrous notion of self-sufficiency and a deep naturalism," 26.

[15]Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 29-30.

[16]Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 257.

[17]Chambers in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 8.

community life, perhaps Western evangelicals are being called to once again look at our culture with a critical eye. This is the challenging but never ending calling that the people of God have been assigned since the very beginnings of our history; to find the ways in which His will is *not* done on earth as it is in heaven and to do all that is within our power to make it so.

This work emerged out of a curiosity surrounding the ways in which the ideology of individualism in the West has affected thoughts about and experiences of community in the evangelical church. I was also curious about how this individualism was internalized in Christian persons as they sought to formulate an understanding of the purpose of and need for community with regards to their own spirituality. The importance of personal trust in and confession of Jesus Christ for each believer is not under question in the following work. However, this thesis will suggest that the internalization of Western individualism has had a detrimental effect on the ability of the Western evangelical church to create or maintain experiences of biblical community.

The intention of this work was to get a sense of how Christian laypersons and pastors were thinking about and experiencing Christian community within a North American context. It was also important that the individuals involved be allowed to tell their own stories. For this reason and also because of the relatively limited scope of this work, qualitative research seemed like the best option. Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin define qualitative research as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification."[18] There are of course, many different ways to carry out qualitative research, so for the specifics of my methodology I turned to Barney G. Glasser and Anselm L. Strauss.

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[18] Strauss and Corbin, *Basics,* 17.

Methods

This thesis will employ a two-step research strategy based on grounded

theory methodology created Glasser and Strauss.[19] These theorists recognize the tension

which exists in research between the need to create theory and the need to verify it.[20] Their

proposed solution involves allowing the data to guide the process of creating the theory by

which it is analyzed. This, they believe, ensures that the theory which results from ongoing

analysis of the data will fit and work for the specific phenomenon which is under

observation within its particular context.[21]

In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Glasser and Strauss comment on the

tension which often exists in research between the desire to generate theory and the need to

verify it.[22] In their view, this tension often results in researchers placing too much emphasis

on the verification of prefabricated sets of ideas, at times forcing theories upon a selection

of data which are not well-suited to it.[23] In contrast, they propose a different research

strategy whereby the data itself determines the theory which is produced. This is the basis

of what they call "grounded theory," and it helps ensure that the theory which results will

fit and work within its particular context.[24] Approaching the data this way helps to develop

theoretical sensitivity, an important component of grounded theory. Theoretical sensitivity

is a growing awareness of the subtleties and meaning of qualitative data.[25] It means

allowing the nuances of the phenomenon under observation to determine what is and is not

theoretically important. Theoretical sensitivity is developed when a theory is allowed to be

in a state of continual evolution as it responds to the nuances of information as they are

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[19] See Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*.
[20] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 2.
[21] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 3.
[22] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 2.
[23] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 2.
[24] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 3.
[25] Strauss and Corbin, *Basics*, 41.

uncovered. It is at *this* point, and not before, that seemingly relevant elements of previous theories may be incorporated.[26] In this way, the work of previous researchers is able to be incorporated and utilized without compromising the integrity of the data which is actually being studied.

Grounded theory methodology does not make claims of producing completely objective or exhaustive research results. Even within strict parameters, one set of data always contains more information than can be analyzed fully within one study and the researcher is always forced to make choices. Strauss and Corbin call these interpretive possibilities "storylines," and they stress the necessity that the researcher commit herself to only one of many possible storylines as she gathers and analyzes the data.[27] The storyline which is chosen by the researcher can help to prevent her from becoming sidetracked in the face of so much apparently important information. In this study, the storyline of how individuals were experiencing and thinking about community within a Christian context helped to keep this research focused.

Because of the overtly confessional nature of this work, theological reflection has also been an intentional part of my analysis. Howard Stone and James Duke define this task as follows, "a seeking after understanding- a process of thinking about life in the light of the faith that Christians engage in because of their calling."[28] Graham, Walton and Ward define theological reflection as, "The threefold task of facilitating Christian nurture, of describing the normative ethos and contours of the faithful community, and of engaging in dialogue and apologetics to the wider world constitutes theology as a form of 'practical wisdom' within which faithful discipleship is shaped."[29] Theological

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[26] Strauss and Corbin, *Basics,* 49-50.
[27] Strauss and Corbin, *Basics,* 119.
[28] Stone and Duke, *How to Think,* 2.
[29] Graham, Walton and Ward, *Theological Reflection,* 1.

reflection is a way of looking at particular situations, ideas, persons or events and asking "where is God in this?" In this study, two levels of theological reflection are taking place. The first level of theological reflection has been done by those persons who participated in the research. Through the questions which were posed to them, these individuals produced creative and thoughtful theological reflections on the themes of Christianity, personal piety and community life. On the second level, theological reflection played a role in helping to understand the experiences of these individuals in light of the narrative of God as it has been understood by other theologians of the church.[30] as it has been understood by other theologians of the church.

This study consisted of 15 interviews with persons who attended various evangelical churches a minimum of two times per month. The participants belonged to churches of different Canadian evangelical denominations including: The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists (FEB), The Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ), The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC) and Mennonite Church Canada (MCC). This group was composed of 8 women and 7 men, 3 of whom were pastors in their denominations. Participants were asked to respond to a set of questions designed to bring out their views on Christian life and Christian community. For a list of the interview questions see Table 1.0.

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[30] Graham, Walton and Ward describe this process as "constructing narrative theology," *Theological Reflection,* 89.

Table 1.0: Interview Questions
1 According to your own knowledge and experience, what does it mean to be a Christian?
2 Of the practices and activities listed, please choose three which you feel are most central to your own spiritual growth as a Christian. You are also free to name activities which are not listed [praying alone, sharing a meal, attending church twice per month or more, reading books about faith-related topics, journaling, practising hospitality, listening to music by Christian artists, listening to podcasts or sermons online, small group bible-study, praying with others]
3 Can you describe the role that other Christians play in your own development as a Christian?
4 How many churches have you regularly attended in the past 5 years? If only one, what have been the key factors which have encouraged you to remain at that church? If more than one, what have been the determining factors in choosing new churches?
5 Do you think that meeting together with other Christians on a regular basis is a necessary part of the Christian life? Why or why not?
6 From what you understand of Biblical teaching, what role should the church play in helping people grow in their faith?
7 Based on your own experience, do you think the church today is successful at creating Christian community? Please explain.

The interviews conducted for this study focused on the participants' views and or experiences of the following: the nature/mission of the Christian life, the nature/mission of the Christian church and the role of the church and or Christian community in the development of Christian spirituality. This analysis of how research participants view their own spirituality vis-a-vis the local church was done in order to better understand how the Christian life has come to be contextualized in its Western expressions and the degree to which individual spiritual fulfilment has become a major player in what it means to be a Christian in the West today.

The second stage of this research involved analyzing the data in dialogue with secondary sources which Glasser and Strauss would call this stage "the creation of theory." [31] However, given the explicitly Christian perspective of both the researcher and the participants of this study, it also seems appropriate to classify this practice as

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[31] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory,* 50.

"theological reflection."[32] In this stage I will be looking for the ways in which the 15

responses of the participants line up or create tension with the individualistic nature of

Western culture as understood by cultural analysts[33] and the communal nature of the

Christian life and faith as understood by theologians of the church.[34] This thesis is working

on the assumption that the participants in this study are committed Christ-followers who

long for a Christian life which is both culturally contextualized and Biblically faithful. It is

my hope that entering the responses of these real-life Christians into a dialogue about the

nature of Western culture and the nature of the church will contribute to formulating a way

forward for the North American church as it seeks to be faithful to the vision of the Church

as presented in 1 Corinthians 12: a Spirit-led community which truly exists as one body

with many parts.

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[32]See Stone and Duke, *How to Think Theologically* and Graham, et al, *Theological Reflection.*
[33]See for example Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics;* Bellioti, *Seeking Identity;* Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,* etc.
[34]See Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* Grenz, *Created for Community* and others

Chapter 1: Individualism

Seeds of an Ideology

There are some things that just come naturally. In each of the myriad of cultures that make up our world, there are particular practices, worldviews and assumptions which appear to insiders as entirely self-evident. These are ways of living, thinking and relating which seem to defy all attempts at analysis because they are so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of culture. For Canadians, these involve such embedded symbols as the Toronto Maple Leafs or Tim Horton's Coffee and such cultural idioms as the mandatory "excuse me" or "I'm sorry" when accidentally bumping somebody in the line at the grocery store. But beyond these Canadian quirks, there are also broader narratives which are inherent to our way of being in the world for both Canadians and Americans. In their book *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories that Shape Our Lives,* authors Steve Wilkens and Mark Sanford articulate eight defining characteristics of a distinctly North American way of being in the world. One of these eight defining Western worldviews is the culturally embedded notion of individualism, and it is here that I shall now focus my attention.

Robert Bellah calls individualism "The first language" of Americans.[1] In the introduction to his book *Habits of the Heart,* Bellah also expresses concern that this ideology, which has become so central to the American ethos, may have reached toxic levels in American society.[2] But America is not alone in its pursuit of individual interests. For although we differ in many respects from our neighbours to the south, Canadian social commentator Michael Adams would say that individualism is not one of those differences.[3] Like our American neighbours, Canadians are also being propelled by the quest for

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[1] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart,* 20
[2] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart,* viii; Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics,* 13.
[3] In *Sex in the Snow,* Adams notes, "Over the past three decades, the Canadian personality has evolved from one that could be described as shy and mostly deferential to one that is characterized by a more autonomous and ironic individualism," 9.

individual autonomy[4] and self-definition.[5]

But what is individualism? Like "postmodernism," "individualism" is a difficult word to define, a word whose meaning has shifted and changed over time. In its early days individualism could hardly be called a self-conscious movement, but was rather a derogatory term invented by critics to describe something entirely different from what we understand "individualism" to mean today.[6] Paolo Valesio captures the vagueness of the term when he calls individualism a "complex constellation of concepts."[7] It will be helpful to look briefly at the genesis and growth of this word itself, along with its more contemporary expressions with a goal of constructing a working definition of individualism for the purpose of examining the state contemporary evangelicalism in the West. Our working definition will be applied to the ability, or lack thereof, of Western evangelical churches to create or maintain meaningful community in a congregational context.

Swart and Hollinger both point out that the term "individualisme" originated in 19th century France,[8] and as noted by Swart, it is a term which from its inception has possessed multiple meanings. Even at its genesis this term can be said to have described three distinct ideas: political liberalism, the anti-statist doctrine of laisse faire (economic liberalism), and finally the aristocratic cult of individuality, or Romantic individualism.[9] The concept of individualism was born in the context of post-revolutionary France among a group of counter-revolutionaries called the Theocrats. These writers saw the political liberalism exhibited by the revolution as a marker of the disintegration of society and their ideas greatly influenced the anti-individualistic attitude of writers during the mid-nineteenth

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[4] Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 6.
[5] Adams, *Sex in the Snow*, 16.
[6] Swart notes in "Individualism," that the loose uses of this term attribute the rise of this ideology in Western culture to a wide number of factors including Christianity, Germanic invasions, the Roman Empire, the rise of the bourgeoisie and capitalism, the Renaissance, Protestantism and the Enlightenment. 77-78.
[7] Valesio, "The Beautiful Lie," in *Reconstructing Individualism*, 167.
[8] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics*, 13; Swart, "Individualism," 77.
[9] Swart, "Individualism," 77.

century.[10] Swart credits the Saint-Simonians as the group responsible for bringing the word into popular usage, though Saint Simon himself preferred the term "egoism" during his lifetime.[11]

Hollinger links the popularization of the term with French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville. When Tocqueville came to America in the 1830s, he had intended to merely analyze the American penal system; he left instead with much to say about American culture as a whole.[12] In Tocqueville's own context of post-Revolution France the term was often used to describe the undesirable consequences of the revolution[13] including anti-social impulses or behaviours related to self-interest.[14] These French sociologists called into question the Enlightenment notion that there was an inherent conflict of interest between the individual and society. They looked with suspicion on what they believed to be an ideology out of England, the "mother country of modern industrialism and capitalism."[15]

The Enlightenment was largely responsible for ushering in the age of modernism. Robert Webber describes the three central features of modern thought as follows: the ultimate autonomy of each individual (individualism), increasing confidence in the mental capacities of the human mind (rationalism) and finally, the belief that "objective" truth is discoverable by each individual through the use of reason (factualism).[16] A brief look at the work of Enlightenment thinkers illustrates the increasing prevalence of an individualistic worldview across the disciplines.[17] Isaac Newton and other scientists of the time subscribed to an atomistic understanding of the created world wherein the universe was thought to consist of countless individual actors. This means that science

[10] Swart, "Individualism," 78.
[11] Swart, "Individualism," 78-79.
[12] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics*, 13.
[13] Swart, "Individualism," 80.
[14] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics*, 15.
[15] Swart, "Individualism," 81.
[16] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 18.
[17] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics*, 22; Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 18.

during the Enlightenment understood reality itself as consisting of self-contained units of energy and life. These units, although constantly acting with and upon one another, were understood as wholes in and of themselves rather than as participating together in a broader system. Meanwhile, philosophical thinkers like Rousseau also contributed to the individualized worldview of Enlightenment people. By speaking of institutions such as Church and State as abstractions lacking in any "actual" existence, Rousseau further reinforced the notion that what was "really" real was the individual, leaving all else in the realm of speculation.[18]

The Protestant reformation is another often cited factor in the development of individualism, particularly in the Christian church.[19] According to its French critics, this individualism was to be considered typical of an age so rife with self-interest that it lacked even unified religious beliefs.[20] In his 1928 work *Three Reformers*[21] Jacque Maritain speaks of Luther's "swollen consciousness of the self" and his preoccupation with "the individual will, cut off from the universal body of the Church...stand[ing] solitary and naked before God and Christ in order to ensure its justification and salvation by trust."[22] This emphasis on the part of Luther, Calvin and other Reformers on salvation by faith (i.e. personal faith) has been understood by some as the beginning of modern Protestantism's disengagement with issues of social justice.[23] Moreover, these key reformation doctrines are often held responsible for Protestantism's ultimate descent into a faith whose primary concern is the

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[18] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics,* 23.
[19] Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics,* 24; Swart, "Individualism," 82; Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith,* 74.
[20] Swart, "Individualism," 82.
[21] Jacque Maritain's three reformers are Luther, Decartes, and Rousseau. Mouw, "MacIntyre on Reformation Ethics," 243.
[22] Martain quoted in Mouw, "McIntyre on Reformation Ethics," 243.
[23] Webber remarks that the Reformation marked a shift in history to a visible church to located in time and space to an invisible church marked by belief. *Ancient-Future Faith,* 74.

"inner state" of the individual Christian.[24]

Hollinger and Swart both trace the development and growth of the ideology of individualism in much more detail than it is possible for us to attempt in this relatively brief overview, however, if we are to properly investigate the unique flavour of *North American* individualism and its particular presence in Evangelicalism, it will be necessary to turn our attention momentarily toward the United States of America. It is demonstrable that the underlying ethos and ideology on which this influential nation was founded has something critical to add to the way we understand individualism in our uniquely North American context.

From the earliest days of their history, Americans have been a people who greatly value the self-made man.[25] In his detailed exploration of American culture, Bellah traces the individualism which he understands to be inherent in American culture, back to some of the country's most venerated heroes. For example, Benjamin Franklin has been called "the quintessential American."[26] Franklin contributed in a significant way to the now prevalent American notion of the individual who gets ahead in the world by his own will and initiative.[27] This notion of the person who pulls himself up by his bootstraps is an example of what can be called utilitarian individualism. This is the notion that society is nothing more than a collection of individual actors and thus, the collective good will be automatically achieved as each person pursues what is in his or her own best interest. This particular brand of individualism is willing to accept a certain amount of restriction on individual behaviour in the form of rules and laws. The understanding here is that the system serves the individual and that individuals can best achieve their own personal good

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[24] This is the position of McIntyre as presented by Mouw in "McIntyre on Reformation Ethics," 246.
[25] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart,* 32; Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics,* 29-30; Lauter, "Early Nineteenth Century: 1800-1865" 632; Swart, "Individualism," 86.
[26] Larson, "Benjamin Franklin," 365
[27] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart,* 32.

by operating within the framework which has been laid out.[28] Utilitarian individualism is a

trait which Bellah understands to be historically inherent in American culture;[29] however

with the appearance of artists such as poet Walt Whitman, Bellah marks the presence of a

different and more aggressive version of the individualistic American impulse.[30]

While utilitarian individualism exhibits a certain "live and let live" approach

to civic life, Whitman is an example of what has been called expressive individualism. This

philosophy, rather than viewing society as neutral with regard to private interests, views the

two as intrinsically opposed.[31] Expressive individualism worships freedom of self-

expression and views outside systems as obstacles to this individual freedom.[32] This notion

is well illustrated in the following quote by Emmerson who, along with artists like

Dickinson, Whitman and Melville demonstrates the growing fascination of American

culture with the individual mind and the individual self;

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.
Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his
bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in
most requests is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion...Whoso would be a man, must be
a nonconformist...Nothing is at last sacred by the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you
to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.[33]

Expressive individualism conceives of success not necessarily as the acquisition of

possessions, but as the acquisition of a life lived by one's own rules, a life rich in

experience wherein one's freedom of expression is not limited by the oppressive regulations

of society.[34]

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[28] Wilkens and Sanford *Hidden Worldviews*, 28

[29] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 48.

[30] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 33.

[31] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133, Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 28.

[32] Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 28.

[33] Emmerson quoted in "Early Nineteenth Century," 634-635. It is worth pointing out that most of the
conversations about the self and the supposed right of the individual to self-expression understood the self in
the narrow light of the white European American male.

[34] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 34.

Individualism is an ideology whose influence can be felt across the disciplines, for alongside artists and social commentators; psychologists in the modernist period were likewise becoming increasingly fascinated with the multidimensional nature of the individual self. Kant is credited for adopting notions of individual autonomy into his ethical theory. Kant asserted that morality consisted in acting out of respect for one's own moral law, the laws that one makes oneself.[35] Likewise Rawls constructed an ethical theory based on rational choice, but both of these thinkers exhibit the utilitarian individualism which is consistent with other disciplines at this time rather than the more radical expressive individualism exhibited by Whitman and Emmerson. This is namely that harmonious collective life requires us to think for ourselves and to be self-legislating.[36]

Freud's conception of the individual was slightly different. Freud's individual was not a free and autonomous subject as portrayed by Kant. Rather, in his view, the individual was his or her own enemy, constantly being acted upon by internal drives and forces. Nancy Chodorow calls the Freudian view "the climax of the development of individualism in Western culture."[37] And yet, she notes that even Freud saw something in the individual which was worth preserving. He located psychological wholeness in a delicate balance of one's relationship to oneself and one's relationship to others.[38]

Contributions of Modernism

American individualism, like individualism elsewhere in the Western world, has been greatly shaped and nuanced by the development of modernism. Following the Enlightenment notion that the human subject could be distinct from the object it examined, modernism elevated the human faculty of reason and so-called "objective" knowledge as

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[35] Schneewind, "Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory," 64, Stone, *After Christendom*, 133.
[36] Schneewind, "Use of Autonomy in Ethical Theory," 70-72.
[37] Chodorow, "Relational Individualism," 198.
[38] Chodorow, "Relational Individualism," 200.

the preferred way by which to understand the world.[39] In his classic essay "The disenchantment of Modern Life," sociologist Max Weber observed that the modern world was one in which "there are no mysterious or incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."[40] Weber critiqued this post-Enlightenment emphasis on reason, or what he calls the "increasing intellectualization"[41] of society as the reason for the so-called "disenchantment" of life in the modern world. What this means is that as more and more emphasis was placed on the individual's capacity to understand the world through reason, the world was becoming a less and less wonderful place. Weber observed that religion was falling (and as he predicted, would continue to fall) to the wayside because people were not prepared to make the "intellectual sacrifice" required of them by religious faith.[42] The result of what Weber called the "disenchantment of modern life" was that people began to withdraw further and further into themselves, increasingly informed about the so called "objective" facts of the physical world, but also increasingly uninspired to live in such a world devoid of mystery and forced to turn to themselves to find purpose and meaning.

Another feature of modernity is what MacIntyre calls emotivism.[43] Emotivism is the notion that reason is not able to make judgements between rival moral positions, and thus, that moral debate is an exercise in intellectual futility and best relegated to the realm of opinion.[44] This of course derives from modernity's growing obsession with scientific method. Truth, it was believed, consisted only of those things which could be scientifically verified. Since morality fell outside of these parameters, an appeal to the

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[39] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 22.
[40] Weber, "Disenchantment," 514.
[41] Weber, "Disenchantment," 514.
[42] Weber, "Disenchantment," 515.
[43] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11-12.
[44] Stone, *After Christendom*, 132.

emotions of private individuals became the only way to engage in moral persuasion.

The Enlightenment created a dichotomy between the individual and the larger community or society of which each individual was a part.[45] MacIntyre describes the notion of the self (invented by the Enlightenment, but carried into modernity) as "essentially autonomous, abstract, empty of any necessary social content, detached from its social context and entirely set over against the social world."[46] In a world where all morality is subjective and where the fabric of society is seen as a negative force bent on crushing each person's innate individuality, the most important characteristic of the truly modern person becomes his or her ability to choose for him/ herself.[47] But the emphasis on personal choice becomes at times a double-edged sword. The severing of the self from the societal context in which it was formed results in a certain ignorance and naiveté about the beliefs which one has supposedly chosen for one's own life. Reflecting on this phenomenon in American culture Bellah comments "in our culture, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than how to know what we should want."[48] This is a comment on the isolation which is the other side of personal freedom of choice. For the ability to choose for oneself is also necessarily the situation of having to make choices *by* oneself. As Bellah comments in the introduction to *Habits of the Heart*, "American cultural traditions define personality, achievement and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying isolation."[49]

With its bold faith in the human capacity of reason to eventually comprehend all things knowable, modernity encouraged people to turn inward in their quest for meaning and truth. So-called scientific knowledge, it was believed, could be arrived at

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[45] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133.
[46] MacIntyre *After Virtue*, 32.
[47] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133.
[48] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 21.
[49] Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 32.

by almost anyone if he or she would only utilize his or her capacity to think logically. Morality and matters of faith could not be arrived at in this way and thus modernity's approach to these matters was to make each individual his or her own moral authority. [50] From this perspective, it is not difficult to see how individualism has come to be one of the defining characteristics of the Western Worldview. In modernity, North Americans learned to rely on the individual, not only as the locus of reason and morality, but also as the starting point from which to understand and act in the world.

The Modern Church

Modernity presented the church with some unique challenges. In "The Disenchantment of Modern Life" Weber describes the secularization that was taking place during this period. In light of the modern notion that everything true can, in theory, be proven scientifically, the bible came under close scrutiny. Biblical stories began to be held up to the light of reason; their narratives understood as hard scientific claims. It is at this point that we see science and religion, once happy bedfellows, become bitter adversaries. As Webber notes, "building Christianity around reason became the crucial task of the Enlightenment."[51] In addition, Stone speaks of what he calls the "bifurcation" of modern society wherein the world essentially became divided into the two distinct spheres of public and private. Modernity's emphasis on reason meant that those things which could rightly be considered "public" were only those which could be confirmed when held up to supposedly universal standards (that is, standards of reason and science). Everything else necessarily fell under private domain.[52]

The church for her part had two responses to this modern dichotomy with Liberal Christianity taking on a similar perspective to that of the secular scientific

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[50] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 6.
[51] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 18.
[52] Stone, *After Christendom*, 134.

community. Because the Biblical narrative did not appear to line up with the rapidly increasing list of new discoveries being made by the sciences, this branch of the Christian church concluded that the faith must be reinterpreted if it was to be of continued value in this new modern world. This analysis resulted in a new understanding of Scripture as essentially mythical in nature and proclaiming a message of love.[53] And in fact, this hermeneutic ushered in by modernity can still be found in many mainline churches today.

On the other side of the divide, conservative Christianity was not prepared to take modernity lying down. In an age where reason reigned supreme, the church followed suit. Conservative Christians sought to undertake the difficult task of constructing a faith that could be understood as both reasonable and objectively verifiable.[54] Here we can see the beginnings of an evangelicalism built around the Bible as the source of all truth, theological and otherwise. At this point, the doctrine of inerrancy gained increasing importance and there emerged a need to defend the Word of God against the onslaught of accusations pointing out its scientific shortcomings. Thus, it is at this point in history that we see the dawn of Christian apologetics.[55] Furthermore, modernity's insistence on the primacy of reason resulted in the teaching that each text of Scripture contained one distinct authorial meaning. This meaning, it was assumed, was discoverable if the reader would only interpret the passage through the God-given faculty of reason informed by careful exegesis and utilizing a particular methodology.[56] Just as in Liberal Christianity, contemporary evangelicalism in the West also bears many of the marks of modernity.

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[53] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 19-20.
[54] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith* , 18.
[55] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 19.
[56] Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 20.

It is now easy to see how the individual could become the most basic unit of the Church shaped by modernity.[57] On the Liberal side, the Bible's lack of apparent scientific credibility landed faith in God squarely in the private sphere, inarguable by reason and thus a matter best left to personal preference. For the theologically conservative (and I would place evangelicals in this camp), the truths expressed by Scripture were understood as singular, objective and lying outside the influence of the context (either the reader's or the writer's). The onus then fell on the individual to use his/her capacities for reason to discover these truths and make a personal acceptance of them.

Postmodern Individualism

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there are many who would say that the days of modernity have passed. And indeed Western culture has entered a new era[58] which has come to be most commonly known as postmodernity or postmodernism.[59] Like its precursor, postmodernism can be tied to the influence of French intellectuals. In *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* James K. A. Smith links the matrix of themes and ideologies associated with this new age to some of the ideas of French philosophers Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard.[60] Also like modernism, postmodernism is a complex system of ideas and attitudes, some of which are entirely contradictory and none of which claim any sort of systematic nature. While the limitations of this thesis prohibit a thorough exploration of postmodern philosophy, Smith offers a concise treatment of the condition of postmodernism. At this point it will suffice for us to make note of several of the key tenants of modernism which have been reinterpreted by postmodernity.

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[57] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 29.
[58] Smart in Stone calls postmodernism "modernity coming of age," *After Christendom*, 17.
[59] See Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come;* Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism;* Stone, *After Christendom* and Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith,*
[60] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 19.

One of the recurring preoccupations of postmodernists is the deconstruction of many of the so-called "objective" truths put forth by the previous era. We can see this in the interest displayed by postmodern artists in the absurd. The absurd subverts the foundations of commonly accepted modes of thought by carrying their logic to the extreme, thus revealing the apparent meaninglessness therein.[61] Modern philosophy taught people to think and act within distinct parameters, and to order their lives around particular values. The aim of many postmodern artists and thinkers is to reveal that these ways of living, thinking and being are in fact, much more arbitrary than they first appear. The short stories of Flannery O'Connor are a good example of this type of deconstruction.[62] O'Connor often constructs her characters in such a way that the reader develops strong opinions about them, either positive or negative. Her stories often end with disturbing scenes wherein the characters which the reader has been led to dislike are put to death in graphic and brutal ways, leaving the reader to question whether this was the type of ending he or she wanted to begin with. Put another way, postmodernism is a way of looking at the world which is inherently sceptical of the metanarratives and broad-sweeping claims put forth by its predecessors. Postmodernism rejects "big stories" of objectivity that claim to offer overarching explanations for all life, everywhere. Instead postmodernism prefers the "little stories" of subjective experience.[63]

In its inherent suspicion of objectivity or neutrality, there are certain ways in which postmodernism appears to reject the individualism inherited from the modernist generation. Reason is no longer understood as the preeminent way of knowing and truth is not seen as something which is easily and simply discoverable. Other ways of interacting with the world including relational, spiritual and experiential are once again being

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[61] Abrams, "Postmodernism," 176-177.
[62] See for example O'Connor's work "A Good Man is Hard to Find,"
[63] See Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*

recognized as legitimate and because of this, the subject of community has fallen into

fashion once again. Advertising is a perfect example of this. Words and images reflecting

community and human togetherness are ubiquitous[64] and yet, there is a significant sense in

which these reflect more of the myth than the reality.[65] The multitude of competing

projections of the world in which we live along with the postmodern insistence that we

question them all, can make the postmodern world feel like a "culturally disorienting

storm" which leaves us searching for a firm foundation out of which to hew our own

identities.[66]

In its rejection of "big stories," the postmodern world appears to be one in

which the community is increasingly viewed as central, yet remains (simultaneously)

increasingly elusive. This is perhaps best evidenced in the insatiable lust for travel and new

experiences exhibited by many members of a postmodern culture. It is this transitory sense

of always being on the move which is labelled by Bouma-Prediger and Walsh as an

inherent postmodern "migrancy."[67] Chambers in Bouma-Prediger defines the condition this

way:

Migrancy... involves a movement in which neither points of departure nor those of arrival
are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that
are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of homecoming-
completing the story, domesticating the detour- becomes an impossibility.[68]

Smith notes that despite their many differences, there are many ways in which modernism

and postmodernism resemble one another. Individualism, he claims, is just such a way.[69]

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[64] Observe for example the slogan of a major insurance company: "Like a good neighbour, State-Farm is there," or the many commercials for restaurants which feature happy-looking people apparently enjoying one another's company.

[65] In *Reaching Out*, Nouwen discusses the irony of a culture bombard with images of relationship and hospitality while we live increasingly isolated lives, 14.

[66] Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 245.

[67] Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 252.

[68] Chambers in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 252.

[69] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 26.

Migrancy is only one of the vehicles through which postmodernism perpetuates the notion that the only one who can be truly relied upon is oneself.[70] Capitalism marks another way in which postmodernism remains faithful to its inherited individualism. Notions of private property and private profit are woven into the very DNA of who we are as a North American People.[71] Yet, as Bouma-Prediger and Walsh observe, an economy which functions in this way necessarily results in a culture that worships novelty above almost anything else.[72] This obsession with "the cult of the new" teaches us to view ourselves primarily as consumers, choosing food, products, experiences and even relationships which promise us the most "bang for our buck."

Combined with its inherent skepticism of metanarratives, the migrancy which has come to define postmodern culture, and the consumer mentality left over from previous generations encourages North Americans to make their own meaning in the world. In a world where objective truth is hard to come by, the only way to do this is through the vehicle of individual choice. Moreover, capitalism and private property encourages individuals to guard jealously those possessions which their own choices have supposedly afforded. It is true that postmodernism has awakened in our culture a hunger for the rediscovery of community, yet many of our ways of acting in the world still betray an individualistic mentality. We feel a yearning to intimately connect with others and yet we feel anxiety when others approach.[73]

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[70] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* 26. It should be conceded however, that modern and postmodern individualism value the self for different reasons and in different ways. Modern individualism idealizes the self's ability through the employment of reason to arrive objectively at the truth. Postmodern individualism however is based on the understanding that all perspectives are in the end, subjective and open for interpretation. Postmodern individualism, then, grasps on to the self as the only trustworthy vantage point through which to view the world, the only sure ground in an otherwise undulating sea of ideas.

[71] This may be truer of Americans than it is of Canadians; however Capitalism is an important part of the North American story and effects to a very great extent the way we do business and life in Canada as well.

[72] Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness,* 261.

[73] Belliotti, *Seeking Identity,* ix.

Individualism: A Working Definition

Having examined something of the origins of the term, individualism, and considered some of the contributing ideas which have nuanced its meaning, the time has now come to put forth a working definition of individualism which will guide the remainder of this thesis. This definition is indebted to Wilkens and Sanford who define individualism as: "the belief that the individual is the primary reality and that both our understanding of the universe and our lifestyles should be centred around oneself."[74] While the notion of self-orientation displayed by the above definition is well taken, it seems that the individualism of our current postmodern context is not so much a consciously held belief[75] but an *unconscious orientation*[76] which places the needs, values and expectations of self at a higher level of importance than those of the wider community. This is related to the North American construction of self primarily as consumer. Some have even commented that the consumerism of the Western postmodern world has created a throw-away culture[77] wherein persons are socialized to evaluate items (whether things, experiences, places or relationships) in terms of their usefulness at any given moment, discarding them when they are no longer of use.

Individualism in this unique postmodern context also seems to contain a significant element of loneliness which is the result of a seemingly endless pursuit of novel experiences. "To stay put in one place is often interpreted as being unambitious, unadventurous- a negation of American values."[78] This is the essence of what was captured in the term "migrancy" mentioned above. In the postmodern reincarnation of individualism,

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[74] Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews,* 27.
[75] i.e. The way one might "believe" in evolution, or the afterlife or the Einstein's Theory of Relativity
[76] Bellah expresses this dimension well when he calls individualism in his book so named a "habit of the heart."
[77] Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness,* 261.
[78] Tall in Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness,* 261.

there seems to be a sense not only of being out *for* oneself, but of being rather out *by* oneself, of being cut off from others in a significant way which makes a self-ward focus not the preferable option, but the only option.[79]

Thus, for the purposes of this thesis individualism will be defined as follows: individualism is the self-ward orientation wherein the self, though not consciously believed to be the locus of all truth, becomes in *practice* the touchstone for understanding, interpreting and acting in the world. This work engages with the responses of real persons, most of whom lead what could fairly be considered a "normal" Canadian lifestyle. Thus, it should be noted that the individualism with which we will engage for the remainder of this work is that of the utilitarian variety as opposed to the more radical and expressive individualism as defined in this chapter.[80]

Individualism and the Church: Is it Really All that Bad?

From the time of its earliest use "individualism" was intended to be a derogatory term; it was coined by critics who were deeply suspicious of the new revolutionary way of life they saw gathering on the horizon. This was a way of looking at the world which was altogether different from the monarchical France of their childhood, a way which they neither supported nor fully understood.[81] These Theocrats spoke out against the Protestant Reformation as symptomatic of a divided people, lacking in social concern and social cohesion.[82] Yet for evangelicals the Reformation stands as one of our most prized historical possessions, a beacon of hope and evidence that God will not altogether abandon his Church to the corruption of human systems.

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[79] See Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*.
[80] Wilkens and Sanford define utilitarian individualism as the belief that social good flows out of the pursuit of individual interests and is willing to concede certain restrictions on behaviour such as laws. *Hidden Worldviews*, 28.
[81] Swart, "Individualism," 78.
[82] Swart, "Individualism," 82.

Although we could enter into considerable debate about the circumstances which prompted the Reformation, the classical Protestant position on the matter warns of the dangers of indiscriminate solidarity within the Church. The darkness and corruption to which the Medieval Church often fell victim warns us against painting individualism with too broad a brush, for surely the ground-breaking work of Luther, Calvin and the other Reformers was nothing if it not a radical departure from the status quo. A primary concern of these men and women of God was to get God's Word, the Bible, out of the control of a power-hungry clergy and back into hands of the people. As it would turn out, this monumental paradigm shift would be spear-headed by a handful of remarkable individuals who were brave enough to make their stand against Church hierarchy, holding them accountable to the very Scriptures by which they kept their congregations in ignorance and subjugation.

The cry of the Reformers, and later of modern evangelicals is a legitimate one. God, they insisted, does not see human beings as an indiscriminate, anonymous mass. He does not punish the children for the sins of their fathers, nor does he allow anyone to ride on the coattails of inherited faith.[83] Instead, even as Joshua called the Israelites to choose whom they would serve,[84] each human person stands responsible to make a choice about the salvation God holds out to us in Jesus.[85] The individual matters to God, a truth which Jesus himself demonstrated on many occasions, especially in his interactions with persons of low social value such as the woman at the well[86] or Zaccaeus the tax collector.[87] This is a truth which the people of God would do well to keep in mind.

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[83] See Jer 31:29-30
[84] See Josh 24:15
[85] See Rom 10:8-10
[86] See John 4
[87] See Luke 19:1-9

However, even as Scripture points us toward a God who protects and cherishes the individual believer, it also contains a strong impulse toward community which we ignore at our own peril.[88] Images which present the Church as the Bride of Christ display vividly and powerfully the notion that our destiny as Christian persons is one of togetherness and communal life. Eugene Peterson expresses it this way:

> I didn't come to the conviction easily, but finally there was no getting around it; there can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life apart from an immersion and embrace of community. I am not myself by myself. Community, not the highly vaunted individualism of our culture, is the setting in which Christ is at play.[89]

Jesus' interaction with his disciples provides a powerful example of what our life can look like as persons in community. Jesus welcomes his disciples into a new and deep kind of togetherness which invites them to be woven together into a spiritual family without losing their individual spark. Likewise, the image of the Church given to us by the apostle Paul is of a human body with many parts, each performing their own function while sharing in a common life.[90] This is a striking picture of the kind of unity and focus which feels so elusive in evangelical churches today.

Individualism has not been neglected by Christian scholarship; however, much of the literature up to this point tends to focus on the intersection of this ideology with its implications for matters of ethics, both personal and corporate.[91] This is undoubtedly an important dimension of our lives as God's people and examination of it is badly needed, however this thesis will take a decidedly different approach. The continual frustration experienced by evangelical churches in North America with regard to the

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[88] See 1 Cor 11:28, Heb 10:25 among other examples
[89] Peterson, *Ten Thousand Places*, 226.
[90] See 1 Cor 12:12-14.
[91] See Hauervas, *After Christendom;* Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics;* MacIntyre, *After Virtue;* Waters, *Human to Post-human* etc.

experience (or even the understanding) of genuine Christian community suggests that we

have not fully understood the impact of North American individualism on our present

incarnations of Church. The idea of community has become an abstract idea rather than an

experienced reality.[92] If as Peterson so succinctly puts it, "I am not myself by myself"[93]

then the matter of community becomes all the more pressing. If it is not merely

uncomfortable but in fact *impossible* for me to live out the Christian life on my own then

the issue of community in the Church is worth our very best thinking and our very best

effort. We must be willing to devote more than a token amount of attention toward what it

means to live together as God's people and we must be willing to examine even our most

deeply held cultural ideologies to get there. It is vital that we remove whatever stands in the

way of true Christian community so that we can inherit our destiny as the Church because

as Nouwen puts it "in community, we are no longer a mass of helpless individuals, but are

transformed into the people of God."[94]

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[92] In *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,* Wendell Berry comments on the futility of abstraction noting that abstract purposes destroy the integrity of the local community (23).

[93] Peterson, *10 000 Places,* 226.

[94] Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison. *Compassion,* 54.

Chapter 2: Community

Community: An Evangelical Conversation

Many contemporary scholars have begun to deconstruct the individualism that was passed down by modernism.[1] This deconstruction has provoked a resurgence of interest in the notion of community both inside and outside of Christian circles. For evangelical churches in the West, this shift seems to have inspired a quest to discover- or rediscover- the kind of church community that we imagine was experienced by members of the church in its earliest days, with the so-called "Acts 2 church" serving as the supreme example. "Community" has become a hot topic. This interest in the idea of community is illustrated by a recent search of the popular online book distributor amazon.ca which yielded *29 860* results in response to the search terms "church" + "community."[2]

While this may reveal something to us about the resurgence of interest in the topic of "community" perhaps the plethora of Christian books that are being published on how to form Christian community in the church is indicative of something else as well. Perhaps despite the renewed interest, we in the Western evangelical church are still very far away from an understanding of Christian community that is Biblically based, culturally intelligible and realistically achievable. While there seems to be a great interest in the idea of community among Western evangelicals there also seems to be a lack of understanding about what genuine community is and how it can be achieved. In chapter one we explored the origins and evolution of the concept of individualism and its presence in the Western evangelical Church, the purpose of chapter two is to briefly review how the Western Evangelical church understands the concept of "community" in the contemporary

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[1] See Stone *After Christendom,* 131-141, Weber *Ancient-Future Faith,* Smith *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* Webb-Mitchell *Christly Gestures* 14-19.

[2] http://www.amazon.ca/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=community+%2B+church&x=0&y=0 accessed on November 9, 2011.

context.

The primary aim here will be to examine and evaluate popular evangelical understandings and expressions of community within the church, and to reflect on these in light of some central biblical concepts as well as some of the insights offered by leading contemporary theologians. The final goal of this chapter will be to articulate some sense of what the Christian church, the community of God,[3] is supposed to be and do in this world, and to observe the way in which this ideal picture interacts with the individualism which so often defines us as Christian persons living in the West.

Brett P. Webb-Mitchell observes in his work *Christly Gestures,* that "community" has become a term in contemporary language that is often used but seldom defined.[4] Chapter one touched briefly on the evolution of Western evangelical theology, which ta¹ ng its cue from some of the ideals of the reformation, tends to place a heavy emphasis on the necessity that each individual needs to come to a personal decision to accept Christ. The hope of this personal orientation to Christian faith was that it would result in a faith that was richer and deeper than simply assimilating into a culturally conditioned faith that had little meaning to the individual person. The emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their faith is certainly not without its positive effects on the spiritual health of its subscribers. Great theological minds such as John Bunyan[5] and later A.W. Tozer,[6] are just two examples of authors who beautifully portray the depth of intimacy which is possible between the individual human soul and its Creator God.

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[3] Throughout his systematic theology, *Theology for the Community of God,* Grenz articulates the church as the eschatological community of God.

[4] Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 29.

[5] See Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress.*

[6] See Tozer, *The Pursuit of God.*

However, there is another side to the story of evangelical theology which must be investigated if we are to pursue a viable, contemporary expression of Biblical community in the Western church. Perhaps an honest look at Scripture will lead us to ask ourselves whether our personal-relationship-with-Jesus model has resulted in a truncated understanding of the purpose of the Christian community (the church). The purpose of this chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, is to explore the possibility that indeed we *have* become misguided in our understanding of the communal nature of Christian faith and further, that our individualized approach to Christianity has also affected the way we think about ourselves as human beings, the way we think about Scripture and ultimately the way we think about God. For, as many scholars who study ecclesiology today have observed, when the base ingredient of Christian faith becomes the individual, the church very easily takes a back seat, or even drops off the map altogether.[7]

Yet, as has by now become apparent, the conversation about community in the Western evangelical church is by no means over. The human yearning for belonging, or as Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brain Walsh put it, for homecoming, remains unquieted within our hearts even as Paul's mysterious idiom "the body of Christ" remains unreconciled in our theology and in our daily lives.[8] Elizabeth O'Connor in Karin Granberg-Michaelson asserts that "the church is *both a journey inward* into one's own interior life *and a journey outward* that takes the pilgrim into active service or mission in response to human suffering."[9] Faith is about me in the deepest and most profoundly personal way, and yet, it is not about me at all, and none of my efforts could ever make it so. This is one of the great mysteries of our faith, and it is this mystery which we must

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[7] See Smith *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* 29, Webber *Ancient-Future Faith,* 74-76, Fowl and Jones *Reading in Communion* , Hauerwas *In Good Company* 21-22, Hellerman *When the Church Was a Family.*
[8] See Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness.*
[9] O'Connor in Granberg-Michaleson, *Healing Community,* 1-2. Emphasis mine.

keep in mind as we move towards an appropriate ecclesiology into which we can actually

live as a uniquely Western and twenty-first century expression of the Body of Christ.[10]

Community: The Theological Conversation

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one

body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor 12:12). One element of the vast mystery which is the

Christian message lies in the fact that in Christ we stand as both unique *individuals* who

have been personally redeemed by Christ, and as part of a larger *redeemed community*. This

community which we call the church is referred to variously in the New Testament as God's

temple (1 Cor 3:16), bride of the Lamb (Rev 21:9), and the body of Christ. (see for example

Rom 7 or 1 Cor 12). Despite the critique offered in this thesis of evangelicalism's emphasis

on personal salvation and personal piety, it cannot be denied that Scripture points us toward

a God who places great personal worth on every individual whom he has created. This can

be seen in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures where God seems to go out of his

way to make himself known to persons who considered themselves of no particular

importance. This is perhaps evidenced best by the ragtag group of misfits Jesus singled out

to be his disciples. The very ones to whom the kingdom of God would be revealed. We

would be amiss therefore, to try and engage the subject of Christian community without

first laying out a theological approach to the phenomenon of personhood. The concepts of

the individual human person and the collective body of Christ are inextricably tied together

in the New Testament. This is not to say that the Church as a spiritual community is nothing

more than the sum of its individual parts, but rather that the somewhat blurry distinction

between the individual and the community in the Scriptures would seem to indicate that it

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[10] Grenz remarks, "Despite the move toward postmodernity, there can be no whole-sale return to the ancient world view," *Theology*, 168. Many of the books which are being published about life in the church today place a heavy emphasis on returning to some kind of reincarnation of the early church. Grenz' remark therefore, seems a helpful one for the Western church to keep in mind as it seeks to be faithful within the confines of its own unique cultural and historical setting.

is of no use, theologically speaking, to discuss one unless we are willing to hold in tension at all times the integrity of the other.

Baptist theologian Stanley Grenz observes in his systematic theology that, "Humans are plagued with an identity problem." He goes on to remark that although various institutions and disciplines have conceived of this problem in different ways, the Christian response -and for that matter, the response of all religions persons throughout history- has always been that the identity crisis which perpetually plagues our race is essentially religious in nature.[11] For although we cannot speak for the other species with which we share this planet, we know for certain that human beings have been endowed with the capacity to ask the questions about who we are, what we are capable of and what the ultimate destiny of our race might be. And not only to ask the questions, but to be driven by them so that the quest for meaning becomes central to so many human undertakings from anthropology, to biology, philosophy, art and religion.

Classical sociologist Max Weber was certainly not the only modern thinker to predict that the rapidly advancing realms of science and technology would eventually spell the end for religious faith.[12] But however likely this outcome may have seemed in the face of seemingly endless new discoveries in the realms of science, psychology, sociology and other disciplines, a 2008 report by Statistics Canada indicated that while religious attendance may be on the decline in Canada, over half of adult Canadians continue to engage in religious practices such as prayer and meditation on their own.[13] Already, the findings of this report suggest a certain level of what we might call "spirituality," which appears to remain an important part of life in Canada. Although the findings of this report

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[11] Grenz, *Theology* 166.
[12] See Weber, "The Disenchantment of Modern Life,"
[13] This report utilized data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Study. Clark and Schellenberg, "Who's Religions?" no pages.

do in some ways affirm the secularization hypothesis put forth by Weber and other

modernist thinkers,[14] Reginald Bibby suggests in the introduction to his 2009 article,

"Canada's Dataless Debate About Religion," that organized religion might not be doomed

to perpetual decline in Canada. In the introduction to this article Bibby explains that

secularization has been understood as operating on three levels, institutional, personal and

organizational. He affirms that all three of these have been thought to be generally

operative in our Canadian context since the 1980s.[15] In this article, Bibby sets out to take a

closer look at this assumption with some surprising results. Bibby found that despite

predictions that overt forms of religious expression would continue to decrease as the West

became increasingly secularized,

> ...a cursory look at attendance patterns reveals that current levels are only
> slightly down from what they were in the early 1980s and have not changed
> very much since around 1990. Protestant attendance, led by evangelical
> Protestants, is up; Catholic attendance outside Quebec has levelled off.
> Consequently the national level has stabilized.[16]

While we would certainly be wrong to speak of Canada as a "Christian

Nation," Bibby's results show that the actual state of religion in our country is a far cry

from the complete extinction of faith which seemed to be the unalterable fate of a race so

consumed with scientific study and intellectual advancement. Some have cited the increase

of people claiming no religious affiliation in recent polls as evidence of the declining

influence of religion in Canada.[17] Yet Bibby provides convincing evidence that the

increased number of apparently non-religious responses is not ultimately as consequential

as one might think. Among his more compelling reasons for this is that 40% of religious

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[14] In "Canada's Dataless Debate," Bibby also names Auguste Compte, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx as others who ascribed to secularization during the late 20th century. 252.
[15] Bibby, "Canada's Dataless Debate," 252.
[16] Bibby, "Canada's Dataless Debate," 258.
[17] Bibby, "Canada's Datless Debate," 259.

"nones"[18] are under 45 and as many as 25% are actually children whose parents have made this decision for them. Also of significance is the fact that a study following people who claimed no religious affiliation showed that within 10 years, 2 out of 3 of these re-identified with the religion of their parents.[19] In *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch describe what they call a "desperate yearning" which has accompanied the advent of postmodernism in the West.[20] Bibby's research seems to affirm this sentiment. He notes that the popular perception that Canadians today are not interested in religious involvement is dispelled by the results of a 2005 Project Canada survey which indicated that "62% of Canadians who attend services less than once a month, say they would be willing "to consider the possibility of being more involved in a religious group."[21] What Bibby and other postmodern thinkers are beginning to realize as they observe contemporary Western culture, is that the answers which science and technology are prepared to provide regarding the "how" questions of life on this planet do not seem to be sufficient to address the persistent and troubling "why" of human existence.

In 2002, the year of its release, Pastor Rick Warren's work *The Purpose Driven Life* enjoyed immediate and immense popularity. This work, which became a New York Times Best Seller, is predicated on the notion that human life exists for a purpose, and that that purpose is ultimately found in Christ, rather than in any type of self-centred understanding. This notion of life for a purpose seems to have struck a chord with many North Americans, even in the face of so many alternative ways to conceive of human existence. The success of Warren's book in popular culture is perhaps an illustration of just how pressing the question of meaning continues to be for people in the West. Apparently

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[18] Those claiming no religious affiliation.
[19] Bibby, "Canada's Dataless Debate," 259.
[20] Frost and Hirsch, *Things to Come*, 6
[21] Bibby, "Canada's Dataless Debate," 260.

most of us have not, as Weber predicted, become too intellectual to entertain religious notions.[22]

In this example of popular religion, Warren articulates that the Christian response to the question of human purpose is that the meaning of our lives lies not (ironically) in ourselves, but in the God who made us.[23] Warren uses contemporary non-academic language to capsulize what is in fact a very central (and very old) point of Christian doctrine. The "Nicene" creed of 451 CE states belief in,

> one God and Father all-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God...through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens and was made flesh...[24]

This traditional belief is echoed much later by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who affirms in *Life Together*, that human salvation derives not from our own lives but from the life of Christ.[25] Further, contemporary theologian Stanley Grenz also expresses this notion in his systematic theology entitled *Theology for the Community of God*. He adds that any meaning we can derive from our own life is not inherent in us but originates from God.[26]

These are just a few of many, many historical examples which locate the doctrine of human meaning in God through Christ at the very heart of Christian orthodoxy. Yet this Christian confession runs in direct opposition to some of the most dearly held assumptions of modernism, with its heavy emphasis on the individual as the locus of his or her own personhood. Alasdair MacIntyre describes the modern conceptualization of the human self as "essentially autonomous, abstract, empty of any 'necessary social content,'

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[22] Weber, "The Disenchantment of Modern Life," 515.
[23] Warren, *Purpose Driven Life*, 17
[24] Bettenson and Maunder, "Nicene Creed," 28.
[25] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 62.
[26] Grenz, *Theology* 182.

detached from its social context, and 'entirely set over against the social world."[27] This way

of looking at the modern self sought to strip the individual of the social context and

network of relationships into which he or she had been born in favour of a supposedly more

distilled personal essence. Modernism's attempt to take the individual out of his or her

relational context resulted the assumption that humans make meaning primarily through

their (apparently) autonomous choices.[28] McFayden's 1990 work *The Call to Personhood* is

the author's quest for a more theologically robust articulation of human being.[29] In the

introduction to this work, the author admits that the book grew out of an inherent

dissatisfaction with the so-called easy answers of modernism which too readily presented

human beings as either stark individualists or else mere cogs in some vast social machine.[30]

     As we begin to think about human personhood, it will be helpful for us to

briefly turn our attention to the construction of "the self" in modern thought. As we

examine the evolution of this psychological and sociological concept in light of

individualism, we will notice that it was Enlightenment-inspired modern thinkers who first

began to conceptualize an ideal of the human self which was autonomous and detached

from other selves.[31] This ideal of independent selfhood was tied up in the ability of a person

to make his or her *own* decisions[32] and as Stone says, "by deliberately shedding the

constraints of social bonds and the accompanying ordering of human life to a particular

order of purpose (telos), which is now understood to be merely superstitious and oppressive

relic."[33] Alasdair MacIntyre observes that this understanding of the human individual is one

in which there are no external moral standards but only a moral domain in which,

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[27] MacIntyre *After Virtue*, 11-12.
[28] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133-134.
[29] McFayden, *Personhood*, 4.
[30] McFayden, *Personhood*, 5.
[31] Gilligan, "Remapping the Moral Domain," 239-240; Stone, *After Christendom*, 133.
[32] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133; Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures*, 14.
[33] Stone, *After Christendom*, 133.

"everything may be criticized from whatever standpoint the self has adopted, including the self's choice of standpoint to adopt."[34]

According to Smith, this understanding of the self as the base ingredient for making decisions (moral decisions in particular) and for directing one's life has in many ways become integrated into our thinking in the Western evangelical Church.[35] "There are both continuities and discontinuities between modernity and postmodernity," he says. "The most significant is that both deny grace...both modernity and postmodernity are characterized by an idolatrous notion of self-sufficiency."[36] One place where we can observe an evangelical orientation of self-sufficiency is in the area of Scriptural interpretation. In line with modernism's emphasis on objectivity, the evangelical church has tended to stress private interpretation of biblical texts,[37] under the assumption that the objective meaning is simply "there" and can be easily discovered through the use of reason.[38] Here we can observe evangelicalism's tendency to place the ability for meaning-making in the hands of the individual believer, thus subtly reinforcing the idea that the human person is ultimately self-defining and more or less free from the constraints of social relatedness.

Yet, as we approach a theology of personhood, and ultimately of Christian community, we must concede that modernism's construction of the completely autonomous human subject does not seem line up with the historical confessions of Christianity. For although the theology of the Christian church as well as its Scriptures do appear to uphold the personhood of each individual, they do not appear to conceive of human beings as entirely free. As the creator of human beings, it is God- rather than us- who alone has the

[34] MacIntyre *After Virtue*, 34.
[35] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 29.
[36] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 26.
[37] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion*, 7.
[38] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 56.

authority to determine what it means to be a human person.[39] In his gospel, Mark tells the

story of an evening when Jesus and his disciples got into a boat and set out across the lake.

When a storm began to take shape, the disciples were afraid and woke Jesus (who was

sleeping) to demand that he help them. Instead of grabbing a bucket, Jesus rebukes the

storm itself and the water becomes calm. Rather than comforting the disciples, Jesus'

authoritative word to the storm makes them more afraid, "Who is this? Even the wind and

the waves obey him!" (Mark 4:35-41). While Christian theology understands human beings

as possessing some freedom with regard to the course of our lives, this story indicates that

there is a distinct difference between the authority and power of human beings and the

authority and power of God. Human beings are allowed to make some choices, but the

choices we make always exist within specific parameters which we ourselves have not set

and in the midst of circumstances we cannot control.[40]

The creation story in Genesis clearly establishes God as Creator and author

of human life and also the one who determines its context. In Genesis 2:8 we read, "Now

the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had

formed." In his article "A Foreshadowing of the New Creation," William J. Dumbrell offers

the following commentary of this verse,

> In reporting this, the narrative makes the point that humankind was not
> native to the garden. Yahweh, who is also Elohim, puts man in the garden, so
> that man's tenure in the garden depends upon his relationship with Yahweh
> Elohim.[41]

God is the one who places human beings in the garden, and later it is God

who drives them out (see Gen 3:24). The apostle Paul also draws upon this theme in his

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[39] Grenz, *Theology*, 185.

[40] Grenz, *Theology*, 201-202. It should also be noted that while it is generally agreed upon that humans do
have at least a limited ability to make choices, there is considerable disagreement among Christians as to just
how broad (or narrow) that ability really is.

[41] Dumbrell, "Foreshadowing," 55-56.

famous Mars Hill speech, arguing that this "unknown God" (see Acts 17:23) whom the

Athenians claim to worship is in fact the determiner of all human life:

> From one man [God] made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole
> earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries
> of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach
> out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in
> him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have
> said, 'We are his offspring.'(Acts 17:26-28)

Here Paul describes all members of the human race as having been

specifically positioned by God to be born in particular times and places. God in his divine

authority is described as choosing unique circumstances for human beings for purposes of

his own. In other words, Paul paints a picture of human persons as embedded within

specific contexts over which they have absolutely no say, but which have rather been

specifically ordained by God himself. The Christian understanding of God as Creator- as

illustrated by these and many other passages- would seem to suggest that whatever it means

to be a person must necessarily preclude any assertion of absolute autonomy. For, an honest

look at our lives will confirm that we were not born by our own choosing nor did we

somehow conjure up our own historical or geographical circumstances.

Along with the limitations of human choice, a biblical survey of the concept

of personhood also reveals the notion that the human person is embedded in relationship.

Drawing from the creation account in Genesis, McFayden concludes that the stories

Christians tell about the origins of humanity should render it impossible for us to

understand persons as isolated entities.[42] In McFayden's view, the created biological

difference of men and women serves as a useful way of understanding personhood: "Using

sexual differentiation as a paradigm for humanity points to the fact that what is intended by

existence in God's image is not only distinction (individual or communal discreteness) but

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[42] McFayden, *Personhood,* 18.

also relation."[43] Human beings become who they are by means of the relationships they inhabit. I am a daughter inasmuch as I have parents, a wife inasmuch as I have a husband and a student inasmuch as I have a teacher. Relationships provide the backdrop against which my uniqueness as an individual has meaning. Further, it is not only Christian philosophers who are prepared to recognize this truth. Carol Gilligan observes that human autonomy contains a relational paradox in that individuals "make their own decisions" by observing the decisions of others. This betrays the social component to even supposedly self-initiated action.[44] All of this is to say that there is something about individuality which only makes sense in the context of relationships, and according to a Christian worldview, the relationships which define personhood must be not merely horizontal (person to person), but also vertical (person to God).

Here again we return to the Genesis story. When the first man and woman were created, they were not created as isolated beings, but rather as beings in relationship, related intrinsically to one another as man and woman but also related intrinsically to God.[45] And the nature of the God to whom human beings are related is significant. Grenz observes that what makes Christianity unique among the religions is its understanding of God as Father, Son and Spirit.[46] "God is one, God is three, God is a diversity, God is a unity."[47] The limited scope of this thesis does not permit even the beginnings of a thorough treatment of this mystery which the church has professed since its infancy. However, what we can glean from the concept of God as Trinity is that unlike the ancient Greek philosophers who conceived of God as static and immutable, Christianity has historically confessed a God who is relational by his very nature. Love is a basic characteristic of God

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[43] McFayden, *Personhood,* 32.
[44] Gilligan, "Remapping the Moral Domain," 241.
[45] McFayden, *Personhood,* 18.
[46] Grenz, *Theology,* 69.
[47] Grenz, *Theology,* 85.

because God is eternally involved in dynamic and loving relationships within himself in the mystery of the Trinity.[48] Thus, when the Triune God says at creation, "Let *us* make human beings in *our* likeness," (Gen 1:26a, emphasis added), he is modelling them after his own divine being, a being which is beautifully, powerfully and divinely interconnected from all eternity. Thus, it is significant that first thing which is "not good" in God's creation is that the man is alone (Gen 2:18). There seems to be a significant sense in which Adam is unable to fully express the divine image by himself, but requires the presence of Eve and the relational possibilities which she offers to fully realize his humanity.

And yet, the interconnectedness of human beings does not appear to diminish the worth of the singular human person in God's sight. Psalm 139 paints an intimate picture of a God who has known and lovingly planned for each member of the human race. Here the Psalmist describes a God who artfully creates the uniqueness of each human being, exhibiting his involvement in the individual's life from the time of his or her conception until "all the days ordained" for that person have been fulfilled (Ps 139:16). The gospels also present a consistent witness of how God in Christ has compassion on the unique and particular suffering of individuals,[49] and also ordains unique and particular destinies for his followers, even calling out those who belong to the same group as purposed for different ends.[50]

The relationship of Jesus' disciples to one another is ultimately tied up with and defined by their relationship to Jesus himself. In Matthew's gospel the mother of James and John asks that special honour be given to her sons. Jesus responds in a surprising way. He remarks that while worldly rulers are defined by the dominating power they exercise over others, followers of Jesus are to be defined by servanthood in the spirit of

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[48] Grenz, *Theology,* 93-102.
[49] See the bleeding woman in Mark 5 or the man with the shrivelled hand in Matt 12 just to name a few.
[50] See the distinct callings of Peter and John in John 21:18-22.

their master (Matt 20:20-28). Here the disciples' human relationship with Christ (i.e. as the ones Christ came to serve) ultimately sets the tone for their human relationships with one another. Human beings are not for one another, but for Christ. Yet paradoxically it is *through* Christ we are able to relate to one another in new and transformational ways. *The Call to Personhood* presents a much more thorough study of personhood than I have had time to develop here. However, in this very brief examination I have attempted to echo McFayden's assertion that we need to think theologically about this issue in a way which more adequately deals with the fact that human beings are necessarily embedded in relationships both to God and to one another.[51]

The metaphors which McFayden uses in this work are those of partnership and dialogue. He writes that in "the mystery of God's grace," the Divine Being has chosen human persons as his dialogue partners, and that all that we are and do can be understood as a response to God.[52] We are free to choose the manner of our responses, but we are *not* free to *not* respond.[53] Prayer and explicit Christian worship are two obvious ways in which human beings engage as dialogue partners with God, however in McFayden's understanding, our whole lives–not just our religious activities–provide ways for responding to God. As we do those things that God has ordained for us as human beings such as working, playing, raising children and creating culture we are offering responses to our Creator. Even when we live in a way entirely contrary to that which God has outlined for us, when we hate our brother and withhold forgiveness from our enemy, we are likewise offering a particular response to God. Because of the gracious action God, human beings are not mere objects upon whom God acts, but subjects, free to form our own subjective responses to the God who invites us into dialogue with himself. Subjectivity then– which

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[51] McFayden, *Personhood,* 5.
[52] McFayden, *Personhood,* 19.
[53] McFayden, *Personhood,* 22.

we possess only because it has been granted us by the Ultimate Subject who is God himself– is a central component of what it means to be a human person.[54]

As image bearers of the Triune God within their human relationships and as dialogue partners with God himself, human beings are neither isolated individuals nor mere cogs in the mass machine of society. Instead, they are subjective partners free to offer their own creative responses to God and to one another. Therefore, "personal identity," says McFayden, "refers to the communicative form...which a person habitually takes and which endures through a plurality of relations within which personal being is given and received."[55] In other words, our identity as individuals is dependent on our relationships because our personal identity is determined by the responses which we make to others. Webb-Mitchell affirms this notion in *Christly Gestures* when he observes that it is only *within* the story of our community that we discover fully our own stories and our own uniqueness.[56] Human personhood is a great and profound mystery, however it is my hope that this section has helped to dismantle some of the modernist conceptions of autonomy and independence with which the human person has been described in the past. I have tried instead to illuminate some of the relational contextualization and intersubjectivity which is (whether we like it or not) inherent to the human condition.

This truth is summed up poignantly at the end of the book of Job, when God responds to Job's questioning[57] with a challenge to Job's independent ability to act in the world: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?" (Job 38:4). The Lord goes on to describe mysteries of plant and animal life, challenging Job as to his role in these things. Job of course has no response but to confess his complete and utter *lack* of autonomy in the

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[54] McFayden, *Personhood,* 23.
[55] McFayden, *Personhood,* 27.
[56] Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 49.
[57] Notice here the outworking of McFayden's observation that God has chosen human beings to be his dialogue partners.

face of all that God has said and done, "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know," (Job 42:3). The end of Job's story shows that this confession marked a turning point in his life. When he attempted to act autonomously in the world, he was met *in dialogue* by a God who reminded him of his intersubjectivity with the rest of creation. When he accepted his context as a creature among creation, God enabled him to become, in some senses, more fully and wholly himself, acting as reconciling priest to those who had wronged him by their wayward council.

How Then Shall We Live?

As we become aware of our role of partnership as human persons in God's economy, the next vital question is this: what does it mean to live the Christian life? This of course, is a vast and complex question, but for the purpose of this thesis, we shall examine it from the perspective of Christian community. In *Reading in Communion,* Fowl and Jones observe that contemporary Christian ethicists in the West have tended to read the Bible as though it was addressed primarily to private individuals.[58] And it is not only the ethicists who are guilty of this kind of approach. One of the key preoccupations of the Reformers was to take Scripture out the hands of the elitist clergy and get it back into the hands of the common people. This was one of the great triumphs of the Protestant Reformation, yet as Protestant ideals continued to be lived out in a culture with a growing individual orientation, it is not difficult to see how the leap was made from a personal engagement with the Bible to a personal reading of its message. In such a context, the Christian life easily becomes a life centred around personal spiritual fulfilment[59] designed to reinforce a personal sense of well-being based on the love and good plans that God has for the

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[58] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion,* 7.
[59] Hellerman, *Church Was a Family,* 15.

individual. [60] In such a system, the Christian life becomes the best way for me to conduct

my own life so as to achieve the greatest amount of hope, tranquility and joy in the midst of

my circumstances. Faith becomes a way of coping[61] and "spiritual formation" becomes a

path to personal satisfaction.

This is a perspective which seems to play itself out across the spectrum of

the evangelical church community. On the one hand, the increased emphasis on personal

choice when it comes to choosing churches betrays a generation which seems to take much

the same approach to looking for a church as to shopping for a car. Foster in Webb-Mitchell

has this to say about the growing number and diversity of programs available in our

churches today:

> A program is a list of events to be performed, a plan of activities to be
> completed. It emphasizes entertainment rather than learning, consumption
> rather than transformation. It tends to embody the values and structures of
> the shopping mall. People are offered a wide range of choices.[62]

In a market culture such as ours, churches are finding that what they have to

offer is being held up and compared to the plethora of other activities and institutions which

are competing for the time, money and energy of people today. Perhaps it is no wonder to

see that contemporary churches have staffing and business needs that churches from

previous generations could never have imagined. Graphic designers, webmasters,

marketing and advertising specialists: all of these are examples of the types of strategies

which the church must employ if it would remain a realistic contender for the attention of a

population which is being pulled in a million directions by the multitude of competing

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[60] Although there might be some validity to a personal reading of Jer 29:11, this interpretation of the text is a classic example of the way in which Scriptures addressed to groups, i.e. To the collective people of God, have become individualized in the Western church

[61] Although Pargament's *Psychology of Religion and Coping* is written from a secular psychological perspective, I think that it also illuminates, at least partially, the way in which Christian faith has come to be viewed by many in the West, as a way to cope with and get the most out of life.

[62] Foster in Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures*, 8.

institutions.

But it is not only on the level of the casual church attender that we are seeing the outworking of our inherent individualism. For personal autonomy seems to be a cultural value so dear to us that even our most respected teachers seem to have adapted it to their message. There appears to be a sense in which even those whom we in contemporary Protestantism have held up as examples of mature Christianity, also seem to adhere the notion that spirituality is primarily an inward and individual phenomenon. A resurgence of interest surrounding spiritual disciplines[63] is an example of so-called "advanced" Christianity which seems to call the Christian person to a form of piety and devotion which is increasingly inward. Of course, spiritual disciplines have a long history in the Christian tradition and certainly predate the advent of modernity with all of its inherent individualism. However, there seems to be a sense in which these spiritual disciplines stand in danger of being misunderstood as we try to make sense of them within our own highly individualized culture. For example, many of the desert Fathers and others who engaged in these disciplines, did so in order to better serve Christ. Although many may have sought out desert life as a means of escaping the world and all of its temptations, they seemed almost inevitably to find themselves followed by others who sought their guidance and direction, thus driving them back to life in community. In Gregory the Great's accounting of the life of Saint Benedict he had this to say about Benedict's transition from hermit to abbot after having supposedly having defeated sexual temptation in his own heart once and for all: "Afterwards, many people began to abandon the world and to hasten to learn from him, for now that he was free from the vice of sexual temptation, it was right that he should become a teacher of virtue."[64] Jesus also models this pattern. For although the gospels often portray

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[63] See for example Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* or Richard Foster, *A Celebration of Discipline.*
[64] "Life of Benedict," 169.

him retreating from the crowds in order to seek solitude, they also describe the great

compassion he felt for the crowds that sometimes harassed him. Although he often needed

to retreat alone or with a few of his disciples, there is the clear sense in the gospels that this

practice reinforced and revitalized his ability to be present with and minister to the larger

community.

In the context of our Western culture there is a possibility that the heart of

the disciplines could be lost or misunderstood. Instead of understanding spiritual disciplines

as a way of strengthening us for life in community there seems to be a danger in our context

that we might misinterpret them as reinforcing the idea the truly spiritual person must seek

some sort of holy isolation from others. In saying this, I do not dismiss the spiritual

disciplines as valid practices. I recognize that these are activities which members of the

historical Christian church have found helpful in cultivating a rich devotional life. My point

in bringing up the increased interest in these ancient practices is merely to be attentive to

the way in which they might interact with us on a spiritual level given our current cultural

milieu of individually oriented spirituality, and individually oriented everything-else.

Me and My Community

Yet, all of this is not to say that the desire for, and indeed the reality of,

community life is entirely absent from the Western evangelical church. The continued

existence of church buildings and church meetings and bible studies and small groups and

house churches indicates that there still exists within our Western spirituality, a space for

corporate life. And furthermore, the resurgence of interest in ideas like small groups and

house church meetings would seem to indicate that there is also a yearning to inhabit some

form of authentic Christian community. Yet individualism is not so much a lifestyle choice

in the Western imagination as it is a worldview. Steve Wilkens and Mark Standford express

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can help me to reach levels of spiritual fulfilment which I would not be able to reach on my own.

Within an individualistic framework, my personal good becomes the foundation upon which I build all other components of my life. This is not to say that an individualistic frame of reference automatically results in a lifestyle of self-indulgence. I do not wake up early in the morning to go to the gym because I necessarily *enjoy* it, but but because I believe that regular exercise will help to keep my body healthy. In other words, I subject myself to discipline for my own well-being. This type of logic applies just as well to behaviour directed toward others; for there are plenty of examples from everyday life which illustrate that seemingly altruistic behaviour is often motivated by self-interest. An individualistic spirituality does not necessarily eliminate the need for corporate life, but instead encourages the mindset that community life should be pursued as a means to achieving individual good and corporate good only as a bonus. In chapter one, we classified this particular orientation towards the world as *utilitarian* individualism.

Donahue and Robinson critique this approach to corporate life which they see at work in the Western church by pointing out the inconsistency with which Christians have come to view the various relationships which compose their lives. They wonder how we can demand such self-sacrifice within our marriage relationships while promoting such a casual attitude toward others who are members together with us in the Body of Christ.[68] Although I do not believe that casual, noncommittal relationships necessarily reflect the heart of church leaders and church attenders who use the language of collective life for personal good, rhetoric such as this betrays a certain self-ward orientation whereby community life gains its value because by it *I* can become a better Christian and can

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[68] Donahue and Robinson, *Church of Small Groups,* 61.

experience more fully the benefits of the Christian life.

According to Webb-Mitchell, the problem is not individualism per se, but selfcentredness which leads us to ask "what can the community do for me?"[69] When we begin with the self-ward focus which Western culture offers as the only one that really makes sense, Christian discipleship comes to be understood, even by devout believers, as one lifestyle choice among a plethora of other lifestyle choices. Perhaps it is this mindset, i.e., that connection with God can occur wherever and however one finds most appealing, which has resulted in the growing number of individuals who have chosen to pursue Christian spirituality without necessarily feeling the need to engage in congregational life. Hellerman notes that, "an American Christian paradigm...understands salvation to have everything to do with how the individual relates to God and nothing to do with how we relate to one another."[70] In this context of what Clapp calls "hyperindividualism," the community no longer holds an authoritative place in the lives of individuals with the result that people no longer feel bound by any type of community consensus which might otherwise govern behaviour and attitude.[71]

Frost and Hirsch would likely say that the exodus of Christians from the institutional church, not to mention the apparent lack of interest among non-Christians in what the church might have to say, are the result of a church grown cold and irrelevant to its present postmodern context.[72] Indeed this has been the position of many sincere Christians who have longed to respond creatively to the growing "Jesus yes, church no" phenomenon in the West. On the other hand, Hellerman's work seems to suggest that the declining participation in collective life (among Christians and non-Christians alike) is not

[69] Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 14.
[70] Hellerman, *Family,* 123.
[71] Clapp in Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 15.
[72] Frost and Hirsch, *Things to Come,* 8-9.

primarily a matter of finding the correct approach, but of attending to cultural individualism. He notes that the personal-relationship-with-Jesus model has resulted in a form of Christianity which was unknown to the early Church,[73] a portable faith where, "I can leave my church-or my marriage- and my personal Saviour will happily accompany me wherever I go."[74] Although Hellerman's comments on church-leaving paint the phenomenon with an over-wide brush, there is a broader cultural reality to which those comments point. For although Christians withdraw from church life for all sorts of reasons, it seems worth investigating as to whether a culturally ingrained bent toward the self might provide a backdrop to give social context to situations we tend to consider in isolation.

Robert Bellah reflects on this possibility in *Habits of the Heart* when he writes about a severing which has occurred between contemporary American people and their histories.[75] After interviewing hundreds of Americans for his social commentary, Bellah observes with bewilderment that the self-made man ideal of American culture has left ordinary Americans with a vague sense of confusion regarding their values and their morality, "in our culture, it is easier to think about how to get what we want than how to know what we should want."[76] It seems from the observations of Bellah and others that the individualism of North American culture has left North American people with feelings of cultural amnesia and historical vertigo.[77] We have lost the cultural sign posts which should have guided us on our journey to discover our identities, leaving us with the near impossible task of coming up with our value systems "from scratch." We have lost the context within which we should have been able to make sense of both our uniqueness and our continuity. We have lost our story.

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[73] Hellerman, *Family*, 123.
[74] Hellerman, *Family*, 136.
[75] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 82.
[76] Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 21.
[77] See Rodriguez' comment in Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures*, 37.

Within our churches, the loss of story is no small thing, for story is not merely an essential part of the Church's identity, it is her very foundation. As Stone observes:

> Social imaginaries- whether the state, the market, the university or the church- are nurtured and passed along in fundamentally story form, complete with beginnings and ends. It is true, of course, that we embody stories in largely unconscious ways. But these stories are no less powerful in forming the way we act or the way we think of ourselves, our neighbours, the church and the world.[78]

Stone goes on to suggest that what the church has to offer to the world comes directly from its rooting in the historical story of God's people Israel. God warns his people again and again throughout our Scriptures of the danger of forgetting. He identifies himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, thereby reinforcing a remembrance of the historical covenant that God has made and kept with his people.[79] When Jesus of Nazareth arrives on the scene, he boldly positions himself as the fulfillment of these covenant promises to God's people. On one occasion he rebukes the Pharisees for failing to see that God was bringing their own Jewish story to a climax in Christ.[80] To lose sight of the continuity of this story –from the time of Adam to the time of Jesus and the apostles and right up to our own day– is to lose the very foundation upon which our faith has been built. Religion in the West has become a private matter, and although this certainly has its advantages from a Christian perspective[81] the result has largely been the internalization of the God-story as something which begins and ends with God's saving work on *my* behalf. Mulholland observes that when religion becomes privatized as it has

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[78] Stone, *After Christendom,* 59.
[79] Stone, *After Christendom,* 63-73.
[80] "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me" John 5:29.
[81] Not the least of which is the freedom we enjoy to worship God without fear or persecution.

done in the West, one becomes a world unto oneself.[82] Is it any wonder therefore, that in an age where Christian persons have come to view their own lives as stories in isolation, that God's grander story becomes lost? Is it any wonder that when salvation begins and ends with me, that the Church becomes at best a utilitarian community to help me on my way, or at worst, an incomprehensible social institution which has little or nothing to do with my own personal relationship with Jesus?

God's Community

In some ways, the word "community" seems too flimsy to bear the weight which has been strapped upon it in this thesis.[83] There are community soccer leagues and community lobby groups, communities of students or scholars or metal workers or unemployed people. But what of the Christian community? What differentiates this community from all of the others? According to Nouwen, one difference lies in the fact that the Christian community is primarily a waiting community,

> A community which not only creates a sense of belonging but also a sense of estrangement. In the Christian community we say to each other, "We are together, but we cannot fully fill each other...we help each other, but we also have to remind each other that our destiny is beyond our togetherness." The support of the Christian community is a support in common expectation.[84]

God's community, the Church, is unique in that it is composed of individuals who come together not for themselves or even for one another, but for the sake of the God who calls them. Nouwen conceives of the Christian community as "a forward-moving group of companions bound together by the same voice asking for their attention."[85] In contrast to other communities which human beings create, the Church is a community which God creates and it is sustained by him who formed it. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, "We have one

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[82] Mulholland, *Invitation*, 148.
[83] Hauerwas says in *Church as Polis*, "Community is too weak a description for the body we call the church," 25.
[84] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 110.
[85] Nouwen, *Reaching Out*, 110.

another only through Christ, but through Christ we really do *have* one another."[86] It is to the

Church as God's community that we shall turn our attention for the remainder of this

chapter.

Christ's Church

"At every period the church has a duty to be clear about its commission, its

situation and its goal."[87] These words from Moltmann are troubling when we read them

against our current cultural backdrop. For, the exodus of Christian believers from

institutionalized churches in our day suggests that perhaps the Western church lacks this

type of clarity with regard to its mission in this twenty-first century context. At the very

least it seems safe to say that the vision and purpose of the Western evangelical church has

become obscured or inaccessible to many of those who also hold to faith in the God it

promotes. But what is the church? This question is vast enough to consume the life's work

of many a Christian thinker, but it is nevertheless an important issue to examine if we are to

begin to understand what we mean by notions like "the body of Christ" and "the Christian

community," and furthermore, if we are ever to come to some sort of understanding about

what it means to live as the people of God in our present situation.

Moltmann notes that any theological doctrine of the church must be three-

fold, taking into account that the Church stands at all times before God, before others and

before the future.[88] In our individualization of Scripture, Western Christians often tend to

focus on the individual as the ultimate locus of the *Imago Dei*, thus conceptualizing the

Church in a utilitarian way, as an institution which may (or may not) aid the individual on

his or her quest to commune with the Divine. Yet, Fowl and Jones state boldly in *Reading

in Communion* that the "likeness of Christ is manifest not simply in isolated individuals, but

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[86] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 34.
[87] Moltmann, *The Church,* 1.
[88] Moltmann, *The Church,* 2.

in the life of believing communities."[89] This sentiment is echoed by Nouwen, McNeill and

Morrison,[90] Peterson,[91] and many others. Although this has been the claim of orthodox

Christianity from its earliest days, there seems to be a significant sense in which individual

Christians are no longer able to recognize this likeness in the institutionalized church.

Stanley Hauerwas notes that the Church has become spiritualized in our day,

more of an abstract set of doctrines to which one holds than a lived reality which one

experiences. He goes on to say that this abstraction of the Body of Christ to a set of

principles or creeds leaves us with no real way of knowing whether or not the Spirit has

abandoned the church.[92] In his analysis, Hauerwas explores the notion of the body of Christ

and asks, "Who has authority over bodies?"[93] Working with the related themes of body and

head, Hauerwas reminds us that to be Christ's very body cannot be a figure of speech or

shorthand for a list of intellectual "truths" which one can affirm or deny. Instead, to be body

of Christ is to derive from Christ our very life. For from its very beginning Christianity was

not a set of doctrines, but a community.[94]

Scripture seems to support the notion that the early church understood itself

as a community rather than simply a set of creeds. The word which the New Testament

writers selected to represent the people of God is the Greek word *ekklesia,* used by the

translators of the Septuagint to represent the Hebrew *qahal,* meaning "assembly." This is a

word which in an Old Testament context, is used to mark out Israel as the "assembly of the

Lord," and in a Roman one, to designate a group of people as called together to attend to a

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[89] Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion,* 63-64.
[90] Nouwen, et al. *Compassion,* 49.
[91] Peterson, *Ten Thousand Places,* 226.
[92] Hauerwas, *Church as Polis,* 21-22.
[93] Hauwervas, *Church as Polis,* 24.
[94] Hauwervas, *Church as Polis,* 28.

particular matter or for a particular purpose (in this case, city affairs).[95] Nouwen, McNeill

and Morrison note in *Compassion* that the composition of the word *ekklesia* (from *ek*

meaning out of and *kaleo* meaning call) tells us something significant about the mission

and identity of the people of God.[96] Although from an exegetical perspective there are

problems with the assumption that a word's meaning is tied up in its components,[97]

Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison's analysis nevertheless tells us something important to tell

us about what it means to be the Church.

The called out nature of the Church as the community of God is emphasized

by Hellerman. He notes that while the evangelical understanding of salvation has tended to

emphasize personal salvation *from* sin, for early Christians, the concept had a more

profound and robust meaning. It was not only a saving *from* but also a saving *to*. Through

baptism, the Christian person was understood to have transferred his or her loyalties from

the world with all of its sin, violence and self-indulgence, to the community of the called

out people of God.[98] DeSilva, reflecting on the collective life into which Baptism initiates

the Christian believer says this:

> Baptism assumes a corporate spirituality, in striking contrast to the tendency-
> even pressure- to privatize our faith and spirituality. The celebrant asks the
> gathered congregation, 'Will you who witness these vows do *all* in your
> power to support [the baptized] in *their* new life in Christ?' When the
> congregation answers 'we will, with God's help,' they pledge their
> investment of themselves in the spiritual formation of each newly baptized
> sister or brother. Where congregations embrace this level of investment,
> these acts become not only the duty we render...but also the gift we
> receive...[99]

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[95] Grenz, *Theology*, 605-606.
[96] Nouwen et al. *Compassion*, 62.
[97] In *Exegetical Fallicies*, Carson classifies such interpretation as examples of the "root fallacy," 28.
[98] Hellerman, *Family* 125.
[99] DeSilva, *Sacramental Life*, 55.

The Christian Church is a community which spans human history and pushes forward into the future.[100] Thus, when we begin to think about the Christian church, it is important that we do not attempt to understand it outside of its continuity with ancient Judaism. Grenz reminds us that the story of Israel was central to the early Church, even after God extended his miraculous salvation beyond the confines of Judaism. The early Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, would thus have understood themselves as the bearers of the new covenant that God was making with his chosen community. While the first covenant was made with Abraham and the patriarchs, this covenant was made through Jesus to all who would align themselves with him.[101] As heirs of the new covenant, the church is also an eschatological community, whose full identity and adoption has yet to be entirely realized.[102] In his imaginative fable *The Screwtape Letters,* Lewis paints a vivid image of this often over-looked dimension of the Church as seen through the eyes of the story's diabolical main character Screwtape:

> One of our greatest allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a sight which makes even our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately is quite invisible to humans.[103]

The Church, like so many aspects of the Christian life, is perhaps best described by the paradoxes it embodies. The Church is both past and future. It is God's way of acting in the world (body of Christ) but also the eschatological promise of his return (bride of Christ). It is composed of individual believers, and yet possesses history and tradition which transcends its membership.[104] If then the Church is not reducible to a

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[100] Moltmann comments on the paradoxical identity of the church as both an eschatological *and* an empirical reality. *The Church,* 22.

[101] Grenz, *Theology,* 607.

[102] See Rom 8:23.

[103] Lewis, *Screwtape,* 3.

[104] Grenz, *Theology,* 614; Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 13.

statement of faith, but is rather a community which is somehow involved in the embodiment of the Triune God's action in this world,[105] then the question for the Evangelical church in the West becomes a question which is more physical in nature than we might otherwise have suspected. What does it mean to be the body of Christ? Or more specifically, what does it *look like* for believers in the Western evangelical church to live out the corporate life in which Christ's presence can be found? This is a question which cannot be approached from an abstract or theoretical level, but must instead be grounded in the thoughts and experiences of real people as they strive to participate in the gritty reality of Christian life. While this chapter has hopefully helped to lay some of the theoretical groundwork on the subject of Christian community, the next chapter will investigate if or how these themes take shape in the context of Western life.

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[105] Moltmann, *The Church,* 64.

Chapter 3: Primary Research

No Hypothetical Boys

Several months ago, I had a conversation over tea with my mother. Since she knows that I am studying to be a pastor, she often asks my opinion on various ethical dilemmas and spiritual questions. In this particular conversation, she wondered how I (as a pastor) would respond to a young man in a particular hypothetical situation which she described for me in vague detail. I listened and gave my response in accordance with what I believed about the issue in question, and what my common sense told me would be the appropriate course of action. My mother pushed back on some of my responses, and eventually confessed to me that the situation she had described was actually taking place and that the young man involved was a person whom I knew well. To my surprise, as soon as the person in question had a face, a name and a context, I found myself having an entirely different conversation than I had been having a moment earlier. My initial answers no longer seemed adequate; the situation had moved from the realm of the hypothetical to the realm of the real, and that changed everything.

This thesis grew out of an interest in the church on both a philosophical and practical level. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:2-12 and other passages which use the "body of Christ" metaphor seem to indicate that the church is a spiritual reality which unites believers while at the same time preserving (and even maximizing) individuality.[1] The need to participate in a communal life without losing our individual essence seems to be written onto the heart of each and every human person. Jean Vanier articulates this well in *Community and Growth* when he says, "the question for every person and community is how to remain rooted in the soil of one's faith and one's identity, in one's own community,

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[1] See for example Rom 12:3-5; Eph 3:5-7 or Col 3:15

and at the same time grow and give life to others, and to receive life from them."[2] If this image of Christian community as one body with many parts is more than just a beautiful passage of Scripture but is instead the articulation of a fundamental need for each human being, then we as Christ-followers must be prepared to deal with the real-world ramifications of this Biblical ideal. One of the pastors who participated in this study made the direct yet insightful comment that the purpose of theology is to serve the church. It therefore seems natural for this research to engage real flesh and blood human beings. This seemed necessary in order to ensure that our theological research *about* the church is also of service *to* the church.

The anecdote that I began this chapter with was important for me because it sparked a realization that has been shaping my thinking ever since. When the boy in my mother's story was a hypothetical character designed to make a moral point, I had one set of responses to him. Yet when he became a real person, I was forced to do away with my prefabricated answers and come up with another, more grounded response. When I realized this difference I came to the following conclusion: there are no hypothetical boys. When this person's identity was revealed I came to understand that by engaging this situation on a purely hypothetical level, I was missing out on some of the most important tools for interpreting it. Although I conceded that abstract thought has its uses in theological studies, there are certain truths that cannot be uncovered this way, but must be nuanced and mediated through the thoughts, words and experiences of real people in the midst of real circumstances.

As Christians, our faith is built upon the assumption that the words of Scripture point us toward a corresponding physical reality into which we can actually *live*

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[2]Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 6-7.

as persons on a journey toward God. It is for this reason that personal interviews were chosen as the means by which to explore the effects of Western individualism on the Christian community. I had heard the rumour from both Christians and non-Christians that community in the church was a thing of the past,[3] and yet I personally knew so many sincere believers who longed to experience the reality of Biblical community that they read about in their Bibles and heard about in their churches. In this thesis I am largely indebted to the authors of my secondary sources who provided much helpful insight into the themes discussed. However, I am equally grateful to those individuals who graciously agreed to share their views on Christian faith and Christian community with me through these interviews. The thoughtful responses of these sincere believers helped to illustrate some of the complexity which surrounds these issues and prevented me from presenting the church in a way which was flat and overly simplistic. The sample size of my study was small and I do not claim that any of the conclusions I offer here are exhaustive or representative of the entire North American evangelical population. Yet, these personal interviews help to ground the theoretical ideas that we have explored about the church in the realities of daily life. In this chapter we will explore ways that real people experience Christian community. We will also gain insight into how they envision ways that the church can faithfully embody the witness of Scripture.

Faith and Community through Evangelical Eyes

The data which was gathered for this thesis was collected in thirteen separate interviews conducted over approximately three months. Each participant was presented with the same set of questions listed in the methodology section of the introduction but was encouraged, if desired, to use the questions as jumping-off points for

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[3]Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*, 114.

their own extrapolations on these themes. In line with Glasser and Strauss' notion of theoretical sensitivity[4] this data will present the interviews individually in summary form.[5] The purpose of presenting the data in this way is to allow the uniqueness of each individual's responses to nuance and further develop our thinking about individualism and Christian community as they are contextually experienced. While it must be acknowledged that the notion of interviewing *individuals* for a study about *community* is somewhat counter-intuitive, there is no escaping the fact that communities consist of individuals and are experienced by individuals. The life of the community superseded the lives of the individuals who compose it, yet it is those individuals who give the community texture and form. Individuals also express themselves more easily than communities do and this was the primary reason for making them the focus of interest in my primary research.

Naturally, some participants had more to say on certain questions or in general than others. This is reflected in the amount of page space designated to each. The names of all participants have been changed so as to protect the privacy of these individuals, however denominational affiliation and a few vague details have been included so as to provide a context for our analysis. In the presentation of the data, I have not separated the individuals into categories of denominational affiliation or gender, nor have I separated out the pastors from the laypersons. Instead, I have presented the interviews without any specific order so as to emphasize broader evangelical themes rather than any denominational ones.

Jacob and Lindsay

Jacob and Lindsay are a married couple who attend a medium sized Fellowship Baptist church. Jacob attends seminary and Lindsay works as an office

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[4]Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 46.
[5]It is worthwhile to note that this sample contains two married couples who were interviewed simultaneously. Their responses are likewise presented together, though their individual remarks have been distinguished.

administrator. In response to the question of what it means to be a Christian, both Jacob and

Lindsay expressed something of the notion that Christian life involves acting in a way

congruent with who Jesus is and what he requires. Lindsay used the term "Christ-follower"

to describe this kind of person, and emphasized that living in accordance with what God

requires is something which can only be done through Christ's strength. Jacob added that

the Christian life is two-fold, consisting of both submission to God and also of a change in

personal identity, "from a slave to a participant in the kingdom of God."

The list of devotional activities which was presented to the participants

contained both individual and collective practices. When asked about which practices each

found most helpful for his or her spiritual growth, both Jacob and Lindsay listed both

individual and corporate activities. As a graduate student, Jacob identifies himself as an

intellectual. For him, intellectual engagement is an important component of his spiritual

life, and this needs to take place both individually and with others. He noted that he loves to

read books about theology and or spirituality, but also finds intellectual discussion on these

matters (such as he finds in seminary) very important for his spiritual development. Jacob

also listed worship as an important practice for him. He noted that for him, worship was

"more than just attending church" but involved engaging in praise of God together with

others. When presented with the same question, Lindsay first responded that her "devotion

times" (i.e. Bible reading, writing in her journal and prayer) were important for her

personal spiritual growth. As she thought further, she confessed that she often finds it

difficult to concentrate during these times and prefers "prayer-walks" where she prays for

others and herself while walking around her neighbourhood. With regard to corporate

spirituality, Lindsay stressed the need to be "challenged" in her interpretation and living out

of Christian principles by other Christians, allowing them to point out blind spots in her

own behaviour or thinking.

When asked to specify the role of other Christians in their own spirituality, Lindsay reiterated the importance of being "challenged" by other Christians. Jacob agreed that this was an important part of the role that others played in his own spirituality, calling this function "accountability." He also added that offering encouragement and intellectual stimulation were other functions of other Christians in his own spiritual life.

Jacob and Lindsay have been attending the same church in their local community for over 15 years. However, Jacob hopes to become a pastor and there is the recognition that when this happens it will likely involve leaving their church. Both were quick to point out the relationships that they have developed over the time that they have been with this congregation and to cite these as the thing that would be the hardest to leave were Jacob to get a job elsewhere. They also seem to understand their time at this church as a matter of obedience to God, "We feel we've been called to stay," said Lindsay. Jacob and Lindsay's long history at their church is likely related to the way in which they understand the importance of corporate spirituality. Both responded with an emphatic "yes" when asked whether they thought meeting together with other Christians was an important part of the Christian life. Jacob stressed the fact that life in Christ is about being called to participate in the family of God, while Lindsay added that without the help of other believers, it is nearly impossible to know whether or not one is on the right track. Both felt convinced that loving one another was a central part of Christian life.

With regard to the actual role of the church, both Jacob and Lindsay felt that it had a complex and multifaceted role in the lives of congregants. Growth was an important part of the church's job description vis-a-vis individual faith, especially for the younger generation (Lindsay). Jacob also understood the church as a community, a place

where individuals could make use of their gifts and talents. Evangelism and social justice were also mentioned as important parts of the church's role. Jacob felt that the church should be there for an individual all throughout his or her life, from the moment of birth to the moment of death. However, Jacob and Lindsay thought that the church today was *not* doing a very good job of acting out the kind of community Jacob had described. They gave their own local congregation a rating of 6 out of 10, noting that while they were moving in the direction of community (Lindsay), it was impossible to create community in one hour on a Sunday morning (Jacob). Jacob noted that there seems to be a fear within the church of community life, a fear that others will judge our lives if they have a chance to observe them close up.

Nicole

Nicole is a young massage therapist who attends a rural Mennonite church. For Nicole, being a Christian is primarily about "learning to love and be loved." She also sees an eschatological element to faith in that she believes Christians are called to wait for Christ's return. Nicole chose journaling, listening to Christian music and regular church attendance as the most important spiritual practices for her. On journaling, she expounded that she saw herself as participating in a two-way conversation with God, rather than simply writing down thoughts for her own reference.

Nicole has attended only two churches in the past five years. One is the church in which she was raised, and the other is a charismatic young adults church which she has been attending for the past two years in addition to her home congregation. Nicole explained that her home church (which she called "my Sunday-morning church") feels like a family, which is why she has chosen to continue attending as an adult. She also said that she feels drawn to the "passion and fire" of the church she attends on Sunday evenings. She

described this church experience as "Spirit-filled." When asked about the role that other

Christians play in her own development, Nicole was quick to draw attention to the more

mystical elements of Christian spirituality, noting that other Christians can help to confirm

or deny what one individual thinks that God is saying. "When God is about to move," said

Nicole, "I believe that he speaks to multiple people about the same thing. Others help

confirm what God is saying." Nicole added that other Christians are important to her

because of the encouragement and prayers they offer on her behalf.

Nicole articulated the role of the church in a similar way to her construction

of the goal of the individual Christian life. She understands the church's primary role to

involve loving others and creating a supportive environment. She understands this as a

natural continuation of what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. Consequently, Nicole

understands love as the basis for true community. She answered that this is the indicator as

to whether a church succeeds or fails at creating community.

Chuck

Chuck, a middle-aged accountant who attends a small Pentecostal church, is

by no means a typical evangelical. Chuck was raised in the Roman Catholic Church and

began attending evangelical churches while he and his wife were dating during university.

Although at this point he has been attending an evangelical church for the majority of his

life, he still considers himself Catholic in many respects. For Chuck, being a Christian is

largely an ideological phenomenon involving belief in Jesus Christ and in his saving power.

Chuck did not identify with many of the practices in my list of potentially meaningful

spiritual activities, though he does attend church faithfully nearly every week.

When asked about the role that others play in his Christian life, Chuck stated

that his faith is personal and that others play no role in it. He said that he does not need

others in order to solidify his beliefs. Chuck and his wife have attended 3 churches in the past 5 years. Chuck said that his wife had chosen the first two and that he chose the one which they both now attend. He said that their present church, which is located close to their home in their own community, was chosen based on a sense of comfort and familiarity. When asked whether he thought that meeting together with other Christians was an important part of the Christian life, Chuck answered that he preferred to be around people with whom he shared common interests.

For Chuck, the church's role is primarily one of teaching. He also acknowledged that providing comfort might also be part of what the church was supposed to do, but only for those who sought it out. With regard to whether the church today is successful at creating Christian community, Chuck had some strong words. He said he thought that what the church created was "fake community," where people only pretend to be friendly. Chuck told a story about one of the churches he and his family had attended where they were invited to a different person's house for dinner every night the first week they attended and then never again. Chuck thinks that this behaviour (he called it "hypocrisy") occurs because people in the church are trying to live up to the expectations of others rather than acting out of what is really in their hearts.

Carlo

Carlo is a youth pastor in a small Mennonite church. He and his wife have three school-aged children. Carlo referred to Scripture when asked what he thought it meant to be a Christian. He understands Scripture to lay out a series of standards and consequently relates Christian life to living by those standards. He was quick to add however, that this must happen in the context of community. With regard to those practices which he viewed as important to his own spirituality, Carlo named church attendance, reading books about

faith-related topics and corporate prayer. He added that he sees small group bible-study as important as well.

Unlike Chuck, Carlo sees others as extremely important in his own spirituality. "I lean on others to find blind spots," he said, "I appreciate when they share from their own experience." Carlo also noted that even as a pastor, having a mentor is an important part of his spirituality. He noted that from his mentors he receives practical advice which helps him in his own journey as a pastor. Along with Jacob and Lindsay, Carlo sees meeting together with other Christians as important for individual accountability, to prevent one's own beliefs from becoming misconstrued. He feels that the church should provide practical discipleship, accountability and support for individual believers as a means of helping them to grow in their faith.

Carlo and his family have attended only one church in the past five years. He notes that part of the reason for this is his commitment to the church through his job. However, this is not the only reason he has stayed. Carlo says of his church that it is a supportive environment for his family, particularly his young children. Even though Carlo is committed to his church, he told me that he would leave if he felt his children were not connecting. "I'm solid," he told me, "I am concerned with my children's spiritual formation."

When asked whether he thought that the church today was successful at creating Christian community, Carlo made a distinction between churches which value tradition and those which value community. He seemed to understand flexibility as the key, stating that churches which are willing to commit to new paradigms were more successful in this.

Margaret

Margaret is a real-estate agent and attends a Fellowship Baptist church with her husband and two children. She identifies herself as having been a Christian most of her life. Like Chuck, Jacob and Lindsay, Margaret's view of what it means to be a Christian centres around acceptance of Christ and engagement in a relationship with him. Like Lindsay, Margaret expressed the idea that this is a process whereby the Christian person grows in Christ's likeness. Margaret expresses her spirituality through reading her Bible or other faith-related books, attending church regularly and practising hospitality.

Margaret was not quite sure whether or not it was possible for one to be a Christian without the involvement of others. She thought that perhaps someone could be "saved" in the technical sense, but she felt that it would be difficult to be a true and faithful follower while living this way. Margaret has personally benefited from the influence of other Christians through the insights, encouragement and comfort they have offered to her at various points. For Margaret, the church's role is to be a place of discipleship and teaching where individuals have the chance to develop their gifts and talents. Consequently, teaching plays an important factor for her when she chooses new churches. She also looks for churches which offer more contemporary music during worship.

Margaret views hospitality to be one of the key indicators of community. She said that in general the church today is not succeeding at this, and that the lack of hospitality is an indicator of that. "There's not much hospitality going on in many churches," she said. "You can go to church for years without being invited [to someone's home]. The test of a church is how quickly an outsider can feel welcomed."

Rob and Steph

Rob and Steph are a middle-aged married couple with two young adult children. Rob works as a photocopier repairman and Steph as an office administrator. They attend a local Pentecostal church. Rob and Steph also agree that Christianity involves a personal acceptance of Jesus as "Saviour." Rob also articulated an ongoing element of Christianity when he said that it also involves "striv[ing] to be more Christlike." Like Lindsay, he also used the word "follower." Steph listed praying alone and participating in corporate worship as two practices which were most helpful in her spiritual growth. However, church attendance was paramount for both. "Attending church regularly," said Rob in response to my list of Spiritual practices," "and more than twice per month, if someone in our community only came twice per month we would be calling them to see what was up." It goes without saying that Rob and Steph both view meeting with other Christians regularly (especially at church) as a critical part of the Christian life. Steph observed, "We have noticed that the first thing that goes when people completely give up on God is that they stop attending church regularly. If you're not hanging around Christians, who are you hanging around with?" For her, other Christians are important as a source of support. For Rob, other believers offer accountability. He commented that he has built a rapport with a few close Christian friends who have made a commitment to be accountable to one another.

In terms of the formal role of the Church, both Rob and Steph feel that preaching God's word is extremely important. Steph added as well that the church should be able to make an application of God's word for today, rather than simply preaching the bible from start to finish. Rob added that meeting people's needs is also an important part of the church's role. In this, he seemed to imply that the wider public (and not just the

congregation) should be able to come to the church for this reason. The church should, "meet the need of every person who walks through the front door to the best of its ability," he said. Rob and Steph have attended only one church in the past five years and their reason for staying is similar to those of Jacob, Lindsay and Nicole. For Rob and Steph, staying at their present church is related to obedience to God. "We feel that this is where God wants us to be," they said. "Our church is not full of perfect people but you are not going to find that anywhere. We have a sense of an extended family there. It feels like home..." Rob and Steph obviously feel very connected in their local church, and consequently, responded that they thought that their church was doing a good job at creating community. Steph was quick to add, however, that she did not think all churches are successful at this.

Tim

As the pastor of a large Pentecostal church where he oversees multiple staff members, Tim has a different perspective on many of the above issues than Rob and Steph. When asked what it means to be a Christian, Tim responded that this question has become more complicated in the past 10 years. "10 years ago I would have said, 'Do you know the four spiritual laws?'" Tim says that he would now define a Christian as someone who is "alive to God through Christ, with the Holy Spirit making it real and existential for you." As a pastor, it is not surprising that Tim listed attending church as one of the practices which is most central to his spiritual growth. He also included small group bible study and corporate worship as important, specifying (along a similar vein to Steph) that worship involved more than just singing, but consisted rather of "a spontaneous and corporate seeking of God with an expressive dimension."

For Tim, meeting together with other Christians is important, but like Margaret, he does not think that it is necessary for salvation. He said that he would view somebody who was a Christian without a community as "a Christian with a handicap." He noted that at its heart, Christianity required more than one person to live it out. Tim feels that Evangelicalism is an expression of high modernity. "Evangelicalism has an abysmal ecclesiology," he said expressing his disappointment that his own denomination had followed suit in this regard. With regard to the role of other Christians in his own spiritual life, Tim commented that he was grateful for mature Christians who had mentored and discipled him. He was also thankful for the way in which other "stumblers toward Jesus" reminded him that he was not alone and for the enthusiasm of believers new in their faith.

As a pastor, Tim has been at his current church for a number of years and his decision to remain there has also been related to his sense of calling. Tim commented that he "sensed favour"[6] in his current position as confirmed by the numeric and perceived spiritual growth which his congregation has been undergoing in the last number of years. When asked about the role that the church in people's spiritual growth, Tim had this to say,

> Christians today assume that church is optional...this is just the church they "happen" to be attending, not that it's *their* church. People should have a sense of belonging and covenant and commitment to one another...It's not where you "happen" to go to church today. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The idea that a Christian could just divorce him or herself from the local church is so foreign to New Testament Christianity.

Tim also commented that people today do not have an understanding of the role they play in the body of Christ. They tend to view their actions as things they do as private citizens rather than as representations of the church to others.

Tim said that he would give the church a C+ with regard to community. "We're not failing," he said, "We're better than we were." He notes that in the past, people

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[6] i.e. That he was where God wanted him to be.

may have been more involved in church life, but church life consisted predominantly of social activities and lacked the quality of what Tim called "spiritual community." He sees more of this nowadays, but also sees room for growth. Tim noted that "individualism is one of the great sicknesses of modernity" and classified Evangelicalism in its present form as one of modernity's "great incarnations." He sees that the dawn of postmodernism creates some bridges for the church, especially in regards to regaining some of the relationality that was lost. Yet he is also wary, recognizing that each age has its advantages and disadvantages for church.

Kathryn

Kathryn is a young university student who attends a small Mennonite church. Kathryn shares the notion that being a Christian involves confessing sin and believing in Christ. She also acknowledged the ongoing process of continually asking for forgiveness and direction. Kathryn finds that she grows spiritually through a combination of individual and collective practices which include praying by herself or writing in her journal and also through regular church attendance and small group bible study. She views meeting together with other believers as an important part of the the Christian life, designating this practice as "real spiritual food." She noted that in her own life, other Christians offer her both encouragement and challenges. Along with Margaret and Lindsay, Kathryn appreciates the learning that takes place as she gleans from the perspectives of others.

Kathryn views the role of the church as one of support and encouragement. Like Margaret, She feels that the church should be a place where people can be encouraged to pursue their personal gifts so that they can go out into the rest of the world. Kathryn has attended only one church in the past 5 years, and her reason for this is two-fold. Aside from

being the church where her family goes, Kathryn has re-evaluated her church as an adult and found that she is mostly in agreement with its direction, this has played a big role in her decision to stay. She made reference to a unique feature of her church's weekly service which she called "Sharing Time." Kathryn described this as an opportunity for individuals to share with others in the congregation what God is doing in their lives. Kathryn said that this time is meaningful for her, and creates a more intimate Sunday-morning experience. When asked whether she thinks the church today is successful at creating community, Kathryn expressed that she felt her church was doing a good job, but was unsure about others. She confessed that she knew of others who have not felt as at home at her church (or other churches) as she does.

Alison

Alison is a young university graduate who attends a Fellowship Baptist church. The word "follower" which has been used by several other participants in this study is also used by Alison to describe what it means to be a Christian. She conceives of the Christian life as one devoted to a day-to-day relationship with Jesus, "loving him, loving others." Prayer was a recurring theme as Alison described her thoughts about spirituality. When asked which practices she finds most conducive to her own spiritual growth, she answered that private prayer and Bible-reading were extremely important to her, along with engaging in a special relationship with another person with whom she can pray and with whom she can be mutually accountable.

This prayer partner relationship seemed to define the role of other believers in her Christian life. She told me that she saw others as important (in general and to her own spirituality) because they provided opportunity for mutual prayer, encouragement and accountability. Alison herself has changed churches a couple of times in the past 5 years. As

a student living at home at the time, this had a lot to do with the choice of her parents. She told me that her family's reason for changing churches had a lot to do with unsatisfactory teaching at the church they had left. She also changed churches when she moved cities because of university.

When I asked what she thought the church's role should be in helping people grow in their faith Alison was unsure at first. Upon further consideration, Alison told me that she conceives of the church not as a building, but as people. As such, she feels that the church's job is to provide an opportunity for people to hear the message of Jesus' sacrifice and to pray and encourage one another. She also felt that the church should include an out-reaching component that involves showing God's love to the broader community. When asked whether the church today was successful at creating Christian community, Alison said that she felt it really depended on the church.

Cheryl

Cheryl is the mother of four grown children. She works as a dental hygienist and attends a Mennonite church. Along with many of the evangelicals who participated in this study, Cheryl emphasized the life-long commitment of what it means to be a Christian. She spoke of "acknowledging a God who's with you in every part of your life, a personal day-to-day kind of relationship." Cheryl ties her personal spiritual growth to her community and to her own private devotional practices. She listed her personal prayer time and Christian reading materials alongside her church community as important elements in her spiritual growth.

For Cheryl, meeting with other Christians is a very important part of the Christian life. In her own life, other believers offer encouragement, support and mutual learning, which she acknowledged as something which happens "any time you get involved

outside yourself." Cheryl observed that although meeting together is important for spiritual growth, this can take different forms from hearing a sermon to singing a worship song to simply having a conversation. She also noted that busyness can be a real inhibitor to this element of the Christian life, "but then you can start to get stagnant in your walk."

Cheryl sees the role of the church as one of equipping. There is a missional undertone to her thinking here, in that she feels that the purpose of the teaching which churches provide is to enable those who hear to go out and share what they have learned with others. She also feels that the church should be a safe and inclusive environment which welcomes outsiders. Cheryl has attended only one church in the past 5 years and states her reason for staying as the sense of community which she and her family experience through connections to family and friends. "If something happens to our family we know that we will have offers of meals and lots of support," she says. Like Carlo, Cheryl's children also played a big part in their family's decision to remain in that particular church. Cheryl and her husband felt that their children were well-nurtured and well taken care of. They also agreed with the core doctrines and practices of the church. Coming from what Cheryl described as a "family-church," she had mixed feelings as to whether or not the church was successful at creating community. Obviously, Cheryl and her family have strong community ties to their congregation but she noted that inclusivity can be a struggle in such a close-knit church, "we have to ask if we are inviting," she said.

Aaron

Aaron is a PAOC minister at a small rural church. He defines Christianity as both believing in the life, death and resurrection of Christ and as living a life devoted to him (Aaron also used the term "following.") Aaron lists individual prayer, church attendance and faith-related reading (including the Bible) as the most important practices to

his spiritual growth. For Aaron, it goes without saying that meeting together regularly with other believers is a necessary part of the Christian life, "You can only grow so much by yourself and I don't think that the intention of Christ was ever to do the Christian life alone." Aaron has personally benefited from the encouragement that other Christians have had to offer, especially in his younger years. He outlined three levels of relationships which he sees as beneficial for Christians in the church. The first level involves simply seeing others at church each week and " knowing that you are not alone in your faith." The next level is when Christians begin to have deeper conversations with one another through bible study and the third level is the deep relationships which develop through intentional mentoring or discipling.

Aaron and his family have been at their current church for 5 years, and like some of the other participants, he lists calling as one of his primary reasons for remaining in his current congregation. However, he also notes that he enjoys being with the people in his church and enjoys growing together as the body of Christ. Aaron views the church as a place where people can be encouraged through the preaching of the word. He also sees facilitating growth through cell groups as an important part of the church's role.

When asked how successful the church today is at creating community, Aaron answered that he thinks, "we're doing ok." He then added that people today seem to understand the idea that faith is a personal possession, "we buy into this idea of it's my faith, I do what I want." Aaron thought that his church might be doing better than others with regard to community due to its small size, but observed that some people seem to want to "go to a church where people will leave them alone."

Liz

Liz is a young adult who works as a childcare provider and attends a Convention Baptist church. Liz expressed that in her view, being a Christian is a multifaceted phenomenon including belief in Jesus, but also the process of living one's life for him, sharing faith with others and following the ethical teachings laid out in Scripture through the Ten Commandments. Liz finds sharing a meal, regular church attendance and listening to music by Christian artists to be the practices which are most central to her own growth as a Christian.

Liz views communal life as an important element of the Christian life because the witness of others strengthens faith. In her own life, she has observed that faith can easily take a back seat during periods when she does not regularly attend church. Liz articulated the role of other Christians in her own spiritual life as one of support and facilitating growth. She used the term "co-learners" to describe the way in which Christians encounter the Scriptures and the Christian life together.

Liz has attended two churches in the past 5 years. The first church (which she still attends) is the one in which she grew up and where her family and friends still attends. However like Nicole, Liz has also begun attending an additional church which has more of a young adult focus. Liz says that the "young adult atmosphere" and the teaching are the primary reasons she started attending this additional church. Liz understands the church as something which exists for outsiders as well as insiders. She sees it as the church's role to support people in whatever way they need support. This can take the form of counselling or offering practical help such as money for groceries. Liz feels that doing good works in this way will help to dispel some of the stereotypes which surround Christianity. Along with many of the other participants, Liz expressed ambivalence about

whether the church today is successful at creating Christian community. She noted that some churches are more successful than others, but that sometimes preoccupation with other things such as money or building concerns can prevent people from remembering the purpose of what they are doing when they go to church.

Nick

Nick is a young college graduate who attends a Convention Baptist church. Nick articulated learning as a key element of what it means to be a Christian, "Learning about God, about self and about the love that God has for humanity." Being a Christian for Nick also means being willing to share the hope you have with others. Nick listed personal practices such as reading faith-related books and listening to online sermons as most central to his spiritual growth, but also included regular church attendance. Nick feels that meeting with other Christians regularly is important because it is biblical. Along with Liz, he observed that ceasing to do this can result in disconnection from the body of Christ. For Nick, other believers have been helpful because he has been able to learn from their experiences. Nick said that other Christians, "act as a mirror," as he is able to see how their experiences apply to his own life.

Nick has only attended one church in the past five years, and lists his involvement there as the reason. Nick credits his church for its ability to help people feel connected by getting them involved. Nick sees the church's function as primarily one of outreach, "the church is really intended for people who have not accepted the gospel," he said. "The church should proclaim the message of who God is." Nick felt that it was "hard to gauge" whether the church today was doing a good job creating Christian community. Like some of the other participants, Nick differentiated between his own church and other churches. He noted that his church has various avenues for connecting people, but that it

remains a struggle to get people to involve themselves in these things.

Emerging Themes

The diversity of the above responses to questions of faith and community illustrate just how complex these issues can be in the lives of North American evangelicals. The responses of these fifteen individuals contain many interesting and worthwhile research directions to pursue, even within our limited framework. However, good qualitative research involves the ability to formulate and pursue one particular storyline among the many potential storylines which could emerge from the data.[7] The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which North American individualism affects thoughts about and experiences of community in the evangelical church– our ability to see and experience one another as a group of companions listening and responding together to the same Voice.

The limitations of this thesis dictate that the final chapter will not be able to pursue all of the themes which have emerged from the interviews. However, chapter four will delve more deeply into four potential threads of meaning which have emerged from the data and also some of the questions which these threads raise. Of the many themes which could have been explored, these particular four were selected because they seemed to reveal the most about the self-understanding of the research participants as Christian persons living in the West. It was my hope that the self-understanding of these individuals with regard to faith and community might have something to contribute to the broader conversation about community in the Western evangelical church. Further, these themes seemed to represent some of the often unexamined assumptions with which Christians seem to understand the meaning of community in the context of the church.

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[7]Strauss and Corbin, *Basics,* 119.

Question 6 asked participants about the ideal role of the church in the growth of individual Christians. 10 out of 15 participants indicated that teaching of one sort or another was one of the central roles which the church was called to fulfill. Offering support, encouragement, community or practical help were also included in this list, but teaching was by far the predominant answer. How does conceiving of the church as a place which exists primarily for teaching influence the way we experience community therein? How does preaching shape us as a waiting community? This association will be explored further in the next chapter.

The role of other Christians in the individual's Christian experience was a central focus of questions 3-5. These questions were designed to bring out the participants' understanding of the body of Christ, though this term was not explicitly used. According to those interviewed, other Christians were deemed necessary mostly because of their ability to provide emotional support, accountability or to facilitate mutual learning. The next chapter will examine more closely the roles which the participants understood other believes to play in their own Christian journeys and how this might contribute to the value which is placed on Christian community.

Question 7 asked participants whether they felt that the church today was successful at creating Christian community. The results of this question showed that there is a high degree of ambivalence surrounding the issue of community in the church. What was surprising was the distinction made by several of the participants between *their* church and other churches or the church in general with regard to the successful presence of community. The responses of these individuals point towards an understanding of the church which is more local and congregational than global. What does this way of conceptualizing church mean for Christian community?

Finally, the first question which participants in this interview were asked was: "according to your own knowledge and experience, what does it mean to be a Christian?" This question was designed to reveal what each person meant when he/she described him/herself as a person of faith. The responses of the participants to this question, though perhaps unsurprising, merit further examination. Of the 15 interviewed, 9 expressed their understanding of what it means to be a Christian (at least in part) as an intellectual acceptance of certain truths about God. Others used such terms as "following" or "learning" to articulate the heart of the Christian life. Even though almost all of the participants felt that meeting together with other Christians was an important part of the Christian *life*, only 3 out of 15 mentioned community (either explicitly or implicitly) as central to what it actually means to *be* a Christian. Several confessed that they thought you could be a Christian in the technical sense without the influence of other believers, though each of these people also expressed that this would be disadvantageous. These responses seem to suggest that there is some sort of separation of faith from church in the minds of some evangelical believers, a separation of what it means to be saved and what it means to be in community. This is the final theme which will be explored in the next chapter.

What does it mean to be a Christian? What does it mean to be a distinctly *Christian* community? What does it mean to be the Church under the headship of Christ himself? These are the deep questions that have inspired this research. In the next chapter, we use the four themes outlined here to begin to talk about the present state of community in the Western evangelical church with regard to individualism. Drawing again on the wisdom of some classic and contemporary theologians, we will explore the differences between what we say we believe about community in the church and how we are experiencing it in the context of our real lives.

Chapter 4: Emerging Themes

Introduction

The comment which was made by one Pentecostal pastor who participated in this study has continued to capture my imagination: "the purpose of theology is to serve the church." It is for this reason that this study about Christian community was grounded in interviews with real people as they sought to live out the Christian life in a North American context. It was my hope that by juxtaposing the reflections of everyday Christians with the conclusions of some theologians of the church, I would be able to contribute meaningfully to the present conversation about the best way for the evangelical church to be a faithful community– a community in common expectation– within our Western context.

Working from a social science perspective, Glasser and Strauss warn about the dangers of applying an abstract theory to a set of data which may not be well suited to it. The primary danger of beginning with theory is that in an attempt to verify it, the researcher may unintentionally enforce unfair conclusions upon the data.[1] Instead, Glasser and Strauss recommend allowing the data itself to determine those things which are and are not relevant to the area under observation.[2] Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Francis Ward work on a similar premise of allowing the life experiences of human beings to influence the "theory," which results. The difference between these two groups of researchers lies not so much in their methods, but in their purpose. While Glasser and Strauss are primarily concerned with generating sociological theory, Graham, Walton and Ward are interested in the way in which the everyday experiences of human beings interact with the Christian faith as revealed in Scripture. This practice is known as theological reflection which "enables the connections between human dilemmas and divine horizons to

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[1] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 2.
[2] Glasser and Strauss, *Grounded Theory*, 6.

be explored, drawing on a wide range of academic disciplines...["]3

In *Theological Reflection*, Graham, Walton and Ward list seven methods for doing theological reflection. The first of these is a practice they call "theology by heart," and in this method the term "living human document" is used to describe the way in which life experience can be reflected upon and analyzed through documents which turn "life into text."4 This is what I have attempted to achieve through the summaries of the interviews with my 15 research participants. Guided by these and also by the principles of Grounded Theory, it was my goal to allow the responses of the participants to determine the particular focus of this final chapter of reflection.5 If as I suspected, Western Individualism *is* having a negative effect on community in the church (that is, on our ability to listen together to a common Voice), it seemed appropriate to allow the responses of the participants to illuminate the particular areas where this dynamic was at work. As the summaries show, the interviews involved in this thesis have produced enough data to lead in any number of different directions.6 Therefore, the particular issues which I have isolated for reflection are those which I felt represented intriguing commonalities in the research and which seemed most pertinent to our present discussion on the state of the Christ-formed community in the Western evangelical church.

It's All About the Sermon: Is Teaching the Church's Primary Responsibility?

I came to this research with the suspicion that the local church was not as important in the lives of Christians as perhaps it had been at one time in Western history. Over the past few decades sociologists have been observing that religious attendance in Canada has been on the decline. However, Canada's leading sociologist in religion Reginald

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3 Graham, Walton and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 6.
4 Graham, Walton and Ward, *Theological Reflection*, 18.
5 Strauss and Corbin, *Basics*, 23.
6 Strauss and Corbin state that when doing analysis it is important that the researcher choose and commit him or herself to a particular storyline, 119.

Bibby has observed the following interesting distinction between the beliefs and practices of Canadians today: "What has not been in doubt throughout the apparent decline in attendance is the inclination of Canadians to continue to identify with religious groups, primarily groups that are Christian in nature."[7] Bibby's observation that Canadians seemed to be holding on to the label of Christianity without feeling the need to attend services regularly with a local congregation might indicate that there is something going on in the religious community. The gradual secularization of Western culture has long been predicted by sociologists.[8] However, a decline in religious attendance while identification with Christianity remains consistent seems to indicate that it is the institutional church and *not* the actual doctrines of Christianity which is losing its influence in the lives of Canadian men and women. For this reason it seemed important to come to an understanding of what confessing Christians actually thought about the church and what they understood to be its primary function in the spiritual life.

The research questions created for this study were intended to bring out the participants' understanding of both of themselves as Christian individuals and of the Christian community as a whole.[9] While questions 3 and 5 dealt with the role that the participants understood other Christians to play in their own spirituality more generally, question 6 confronted the function of the church directly. Question 6 asked participants, "From what you understand of Biblical teaching, what role should the church play in helping people grow in their faith?" In response, 10 out of 15 participants listed teaching as the church's primary responsibility. There were different ways of phrasing this including, "speaking the truth," "hearing the message," and "the teaching of the word." There seemed to be a general consensus among participants that the church is a place where people go to

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[7] Bibby, "Canada's Dataless Debate," 258.
[8] Bibby dates this thesis back at least to Compt, Durkheim, Marx and Freud. "Canada's Dataless Debate," 252.
[9] See Table 1.0 in the Introduction Section of this thesis

learn about God and/ or the Bible, and that this learning should and often does take the

form of some sort of formal preaching/ teaching.

The notion that the church is a place for teaching is perhaps an answer that

might have been expected from a sample of evangelical pastors and laypersons. And yet, in

the context of a conversation about Christian community, this often taken-for-granted

notion seems to merit a second look. In his contribution to the dialogical work *The Church*

in Emerging Culture, pastor, writer and film-maker Erwin McManus comments that "the

modern Christian era places far too much confidence in the power of knowledge to

transform."[10] Whether McManus' critique is accurate or not, he does draw attention to an

important element of our embedded theology as evangelicals,[11] namely the central role

which theological knowledge has come to play in the life of our congregations. But what

are the implications of such a heavy emphasis on preaching and teaching in the evangelical

church, and how does this interact with the various images of the church presented to us in

the Scriptures? How does preaching allow the whole people of God to, "grow to become in

every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:15)?

In many ways, the centrality of preaching is in our DNA as Protestants.

Among the complex mix of events and ideas which led to the Reformation, one recurring

concern of the Reformers was to restore Scripture to its proper place of authority in the life

of the church. In *The Story of Christianity,* author Justo L. Gonzalez tells how the Word of

God was a vital component in the theology of both Martin Luther[12] and his Swiss

[10]McManus, "The Global Intersection," 257.
[11]Stone and Duke use the phrase "embedded theology" to describe those understandings about God and the world which we have picked up casually from through the circumstances of our lives, through the people with whom we interact and through our church traditions. Because of this embedded theology comprises largely unexamined assumptions. *How to Think Theologically,* 13.
[12]Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity,* 47.

contemporary Ulrich Zwingli.[13] When second-generation reformer John Calvin wrote his famous *Institutes*, it quickly became a best-seller which Gonzalez calls, "the high point of Protestant systematic theology at the time of the Reformation."[14] Calvin was a studious and theologically astute man and his works speak for themselves with regard to the value that he placed on sound doctrine. As Calvinism spread and became the international version of Protestantism[15] his followers quite naturally assumed the zeal for proper understanding of Scripture which had been modelled by their teacher.

The Reformers' emphasis on the Word is not without Biblical merit.[16] In the gospel of Mark, Jesus claims preaching as the reason he was sent into the world (Mark 1:38), and after his ascension Jesus' disciples were enthusiastic to carry on the mission of their Master, spreading the good news of the Kingdom of God to all nations.[17] But what of contemporary preaching? Many evangelical churches today offer sermon series' with catchy titles about topics which–it is hoped– will be appealing to postmodern people. These sermons are often enhanced by the use of video clips and/or rock music, and advertised in graphically attractive ways on the church website. The pastor may be physically present with the congregation to whom he or she is preaching, or (s)he might be broadcast to satellite sites across the country, enabling many more people to benefit from the wisdom of these teachers than could fit into one auditorium.

But what is the motivating force behind the employment of such things? In *The Divine Embrace* Robert Webber expresses concern that in a consumer-driven culture

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[13]Zwingli was a Swiss priest who had come to similar conclusions to Luther during the same time period. Gonzalez says of his ideas that, "Zwingli's reformation was not a direct result of Luther's; rather it was a parallel movement that soon established links with its counterpart," Gonzalez, *Story of Christianity,* 60.

[14]Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity,* 80.

[15]Unlike Lutheranism which remained closely tied with Germany. Heath, "Calvinism" (lecture McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, January 2012).

[16] Reformer Ulrich Zwingli was so adamant on this point that he actually banned music from the church, "on the grounds that nothing should be allowed to lead the mind away from the central task of hearing the Word of God." Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity,* 61.

[17] See the book of Acts, Rom 1:15, 1 Cor 9:16 among many other examples.

such as ours, the church can easily become synonymous with almost any other business and Jesus with any other commodity.[18] Webber quotes social commentator Alan Wolfe who says of the evangelical church in America:

> Evangelical popularity is due...[to] its determination to find out exactly what believers want and to offer it to them. The biggest challenge posed to American society by the popularity of megachurches and other forms of growth-oriented Protestantism is not bigotry but bathos [sudden appearance of the commonplace]. Television, publishing, political campaigning, education, self-help advice-all increasingly tell Americans what they already want to hear. Religion, it would seem, should now be added to that list.[19]

Wolfe's critique is perhaps too harsh on the church leaders who make use of innovative techniques and contemporary culture in their preaching. Many if not most of these are no doubt sincere believers who long to ensure that everyone has a chance to hear and respond to the good news about Jesus. And yet, in a culture where entertainment is everywhere and where multiple stimuli compete for our attention, it does not seem a far stretch to add Biblical teaching to the list of "products" which we consume on a regular basis.[20] Among the research participants, both Margaret and Alison indicated that the quality of the teaching comprised one of the main reasons that their families had changed churches in the past five years. Margaret added that her preference for "more modern" music also played an important role. There seemed to be a general sense among those I interviewed that the sermon was the real "meat and potatoes" of what going to church was all about.

Further, the act of "going to church" seems to have become an activity which is more or less passive on the part of the congregation. The order of service at most evangelical churches in Canada usually follows a similar pattern: upon arrival at the building, people choose their seats from a room full of chairs or pews, all of which face the

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[18] Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 221.
[19] Wolfe in Webber, *Divine Embrace*, 222.
[20] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 33.

stage or the place where the band and then the preacher will stand.[21] The service begins with a welcome, usually done by one of the pastoral staff, followed by a series of worship songs. The congregation is generally asked to stand and participate for this part of the service, but even while they sing they are invited to watch and follow the worship band, often while watching visual images behind song lyrics projected on a screen. After a few songs, the congregation is asked to sit as the preacher takes his or her place and begins a sermon[22] which will likely last anywhere between 20 and 50 minutes. Usually the members of the congregation are not asked to participate in this, the longest part of the service. After the sermon has ended, one or two songs might be sung to close the service before the congregation is dismissed.

James White links the Christian ritual of public teaching to Ancient Israel's practice of synagogue worship, a collective event which served as a reminder of their identity before God even in the midst of their day-to-day reality of living in exile.[23] It was an act of collective remembrance in which the people of Israel came together to remember that they were a people with a unique and divinely dictated identity. But even if the practice of coming to church on Sunday morning to listen to a sermon looks much the same as the exiled Israelites gathered in the synagogue, there seems to have been a subtle but important shift in focus. For the Israelites, gathering together for instruction and prayer was a collective act where the *gathering to hear* was what was most important.[24] In contemporary evangelical culture however, it seems to be the hearing itself which is emphasized, with the gathering being more or less incidental.

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[21]In *Introduction to Christian Worship* James White comments on the way in which the buildings we use for worship influence the *way* we worship:"we soon realize that architecture presents both opportunities and limitations, some possibilities are opened and others closed," 82.

[22]Sermon topics in Evangelical churches tend to be chosen by the pastor/teacher rather than dictated by some outside source as a lectionary might do in more mainline churches.

[23]White, *Christian Worship*, 152.

[24]White, *Christian Worship*, 153.

I am not trying to diminish the important role that teaching plays in the life of the Christian community. However, what is potentially concerning in our Western context is that the practice of listening to biblical teaching is becoming an increasingly individualized activity, where what is important is the application of the teaching to the life of each *individual* hearer, rather than to the community as a whole. What is dangerous about this shift is that by interpreting Scripture in an individualized way, we rob it of its power to shape collective identity. For as Stephen Fowl and Gregory Jones assert, Scripture itself is not addressed primarily to individuals, but rather to specific communities whom God has called.[25]

The public proclamation of the Word of God is essential for the life and health of the Christian community, but the community element must not be lost, lest the sermon be reduced to just another self-help resource with a spiritual flavour. Since the sermon serves as one of the most popular forms of spiritual formation in the contemporary evangelical church, Simon Chan's words in *Spiritual Theology* offer a timely correction to the individualism with which Western evangelicals may have begun to approach the ministry of the Word:

> The purpose of Christian formation is not developing a better self-image, achieving self-fulfilment or finding self-affirmation, nor is it the development of individualistic qualities that make singularly outstanding saints. Rather, it is developing certain qualities that enable us to live responsibly within the community we have been baptized into.[26]

Stanley Grenz observes that some people consider the church to be a voluntary organization of which people may choose to be a part according to their own preferences. He suggests instead that the church is an "eschatological covenant

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[25]Fowl and Jones, *Reading in Communion,* 8.
[26] Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 102-103.

community"[27] which has been called together by the proclamation of the gospel.[28] The danger of placing too heavy an emphasis on teaching, or rather on the *quality* of teaching which is presented by a given teacher in a given church, is that it subtly encourages us to be consumers of the church rather than participants in it. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian community is not a theoretical ideal, but a divine reality.[29] In other words, the church is not a group of like-minded people with whom we can choose to be associated, but rather a sacred relatedness which we share with other redeemed persons whether we like it or not. Much as we cannot choose or create our natural families, we do not create the Christian community either. Rather, God creates it and he gives it to us as a gift to be received with gratitude rather than judged with disdain.[30]

As information, sermons or other biblical teaching resources become more easily accessible via the internet, the *necessity* of gathering in order to hear the Word will disappear, and perhaps has disappeared already. Hearing the Word together is a good thing, because through this practice we mark ourselves out as a people called together by God and defined by the story that he is telling in the world. Chan asserts that for modern evangelicalism to move away from its individualistic orientation it will need to move away from preaching and toward what he calls the more "objective mysteries of the faith" (i.e. the sacraments).[31] I would like to suggest that the ministry of the word *can* have such a sacramental quality provided that we learn how to re-orient ourselves around it. If we properly understand the unique ability that this practice has to "unfold[] the story [of God] in contemporary idiom,"[32] then we allow ourselves to be written into the story. As Bryan

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[27] Grenz, *Theology,* 604.
[28] Grenz, *Theology,* 606.
[29] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 35.
[30] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 38.
[31] Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 112.
[32] Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 116.

Stone puts it,

> This story, with its various subplots, twists, turns and surprises, literally "makes sense" out of the Christian life by depicting its beginning, way and end and thereby orienting us on a journey. When inhabited faithfully, this story keeps us from being mere tourists on the journey; instead we become pilgrims who seek to live into the story.[33]

However, if we fail to understand the way the practice of preaching this way, then our present orientation towards individualism might subtly encourage us to become consumers of the Christian community rather than participants in it, to believe that the sermon is really supposed to be a story about us as individuals, rather than a story about God and his community, into which we are invited to participate.

Growing Together: The Role of Other Christians

The role of other Christians in each person's spiritual life was the focus of questions 3 and 5. Despite the emphasis on teaching as one of the church's primary responsibilities, all of the participants (with the exception of Chuck) affirmed that they believed meeting together with other believers to be a necessary part of the Christian life. This was interesting because it seemed to indicate a distinction in the minds of the participants between the concept of "church" and that of "other Christians." The length of this thesis does not permit an exploration of this issue; however it might be worthwhile for later research to investigate how the language we use to describe our Christian communities affects how we act within them. For now it will suffice to take a brief look at the ways in which these research participants valued the contributions of others on their own spiritual journeys and what that may tell us about their understanding of the importance of Christian community.

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[33] Stone, *After Christendom*, 55.

There was a general consensus among the majority of the participants that meeting together with other Christians is important because *other Christians help us grow.* This idea was nuanced in slightly different ways. Some people spoke of growth in terms of encouragement or support that others offered them during difficult times. Margaret said that other believers had "comforted [her] in times of disappointment." Alison and Steph noted that that being prayed for by other Christians was one way that they showed their support, and Liz listed the practice of sharing experiences as helpful for her own growth. "Accountability" was also listed as an important way in which other Christians helped the individual on his or her own spiritual journey. Jacob and Rob used this word to describe the authority which they give to other believers to speak into their lives, particularly with regard to correction.[34] Lindsay was more specific, indicating that other Christians "challenge [her] by bringing out the Scriptures in ways [she] hadn't thought of." Carlo said that others "help [him] to find blind spots."

Mutual learning was also listed as a way in which other believers were helpful to the participants in their lives as Christians. Liz used the phrase "co-learners" to describe how she and her community were able to contribute to one another's spiritual growth. Cheryl also commented that, "we learn things from each other." Kathryn said that the simple act of gathering together with other Christians for the same purpose encouraged growth and constituted, "regular spiritual food." Kathryn added later that her church actually provides a time in the context of Sunday morning worship in which any member of the congregation is able to stand and share with others the things that they have been learning in their spiritual lives or any needs they may have. Kathryn indicated that this practice was very meaningful for her.

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[34] Usually one or two others.

As we investigate the ways in which individualism affects community in the church, we must ask what we mean when we say that other Christians help us to grow. The idea that community is for growth is not necessarily indicative of a self-centred approach to life and faith. In chapter two we explored some biblical presentations of personhood and some of the ways that the Biblical narrative seems to endow individuals with honour through the indwelling of the divine image. In his book *Community and Growth*, Jean Vanier engages some of these same themes from his own experience living in community with disabled adults. From this context, he states that the community should never take precedence over the individual because community exists *for the growth of individuals*.[35] Yet, rather than conceiving of a group of persons who corporately seek what is their individual best interest, Vanier envisions something deeper which he calls *communion* and situates this at the very heart of Christian community,

> Co-operation without communion quickly becomes like a work camp or factory, where unity comes from an exterior reality. And there will be many tensions and strife. Communion is based on some common inner experience of love; it is the recognition of being one body, one people, called by God to be a source of love and peace.[36]

In Vanier's vision of Christian life together, the good of the individual and the good of the community are not separate entities, but one in the same. Vanier echoes some of McFayden's observations when he notes that to be an individual is to be in relationship.[37] For these and other authors, the idea that the community exists for the good of individuals is the same as saying that the individual exists for the good of the community. [38] There is a sense of cohesion in the midst of diversity, much like Paul seems to be implying when he describes the Christian community as one body with many parts and Christ as its head.

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[35] Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 21. Emphasis added.

[36] Vanier, *Community and Growth*, 25.

[37] McFayden, *Personhood*, 18.

[38] See Nouwen, McNeill and Morrision, *Compassion*, and also Stone, *After Christendom*.

The exhortation to attend church or involve oneself in bible study groups on the premise that *we need one another* is one which is commonly heard from the pulpit in many evangelical churches, but is this the full picture of how Scripture invites us to approach the community? The writer of the book of Hebrews had this to say:

> Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching, (Heb 10:19-25).

In this passage there seems to be a sense that the Christian community is bound together on the grounds that each person now lives under certain spiritual realities which affect them all, and should behave accordingly. These are: "confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus," and "hav[ing] a great high priest over the house of God." It is in this context that believers are encouraged to "consider how [they] may spur one another on toward love and good deeds" and not to "give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing." The community, which is referred to in this passage as "the house of God" is discussed as though it were a reality, a spiritual reality perhaps, but a reality nonetheless. Therefore and when the members meet together, they are not creating something so much as they are physically expressing this spiritual fact.

It is for this reason that Chan asserts that evangelicalism needs a theology of the visible church.[39] In his view, the empirical reality of the Church is expressed and actualized when we meet together because through this act we recognize that the spiritual

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[39] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 103.

life– which we might be tempted to think belongs to us alone– is also shared by others.[40]

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove expresses it this way in reference to the shared life experienced

by himself and the other members of his new monastic community,[41] "We're really just a

big family, extended beyond the ties of biology because we've become brothers and sisters

of Jesus."[42]

What Chan and Wilson-Hartgrove both express here is the notion that it is

the corporate identity of the church, rather than the individual which comprises the reality

and the foundation of the spiritual life. Although the author of Hebrews seems to indicate

that meeting together is an activity which is individually beneficial, (s)he does not insinuate

that we should engage in it for this reason, but rather because by this act we physically

enact and remind ourselves of our connectedness through Christ.

Under this assumption, the research question was at least partially unfair.

When I asked the participants to, "describe the role that other Christians play in your own

development as a Christian" I was in some ways setting them up to describe community

using themselves as its primary point of reference. Therefore, when some of the

participants used phrases like "co-learners" to describe the ways that other Christians affect

their own spirituality, they appeared to be demonstrating a rather deep level of community

consciousness. In many ways I found the interview process with these individuals to be a

very encouraging experience. Almost all of the participants seemed to agree on a deep level

with the notion that Christianity had a definite corporate component. However, many

seemed to have a difficult time articulating exactly what that component was and what

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[40] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 108.

[41] New Monasticism is a term describing one of the ways in which contemporary Christians are experimenting with what it means to live in community. These "new monastic" communities usually include married couples and singles who share space and possessions while committing themselves to Christian practices and a common life of simplicity and devotion.

[42] Wilson-Hartgrove, "Living as Community," 54.

made it so vital. Tim indicated that he thought one could be a Christian without a

community but that, "you would be a Christian with a handicap." In Tim's response, but

also the responses of others, there seemed to be a tension at work between the way that

Christianity was implicitly felt and understood by the participants, and the language they

had to speak about it.

This inarticulate ecclesiology is identified by James K.A. Smith when he

asserts that Christianity shaped by modernism often has a difficult time defending "why the

church matters at all."[43] Could it be that the language of individualism is the only language

which evangelicals now have to speak about community? Or perhaps as Alasdair

McFayden has suggested, the influence of modernism has led the evangelical community to

a worldview in which stark individualism and homogeneous collectivism are seen as the

only alternatives?[44] The responses of the participants to questions regarding the role of

others in their own spirituality seemed to me a hopeful indication that the intentional

pursuit of Biblical community is still alive and well within the evangelical community.

But there seemed to be a subtle discord between what was at the heart of

these individuals with regard to corporate spirituality, and the frameworks which

evangelicalism had given them for thinking and talking about the Christian community.

Mantras such as "we need one another," while perhaps true and well-intentioned may need

to be replaced with more holistic and theologically sound ways of looking at the Church as

the God-formed and God-attending community. As we pursue faithful and culturally

intelligible ways to be the church in the twenty-first century, perhaps we shall need to

discard some of the old ways of speaking about the body of believers in favour of new

language and frameworks which will help us to be faithful within our present postmodern

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[43] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* 29.
[44] McFayden, *Personhood,* 5.

context.

Perhaps, as Chan suggests, this will involve moving towards a more sacramental version of corporate life than the evangelical church has previously known.[45] Sacraments such as baptism and communion remind us that the life of faith does not exist merely in our own hearts and minds but is embodied in a very real and tangible way in the life of the believing community. When we are baptized, it is not only a profession of personal faith, but also an initiation into a living community. At our baptism we disassociate ourselves with the world with all its claims upon us and become enfolded instead into the people of God. Likewise through communion we remind ourselves of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which the main plot of our common story.

There is no way around the fact that the notion of "going to church" once a week has taken on stale and legalistic connotations in our day. Yet the writer of Hebrews makes it clear that since the way to God has been opened to us through Christ (Heb 10:20) we have become a persons who are marked by a new identity and gathered into a new people. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon describe the church as a "colony of adventurers in a society of unbelief."[46] As such a distinctive community called out by God himself, the church has a responsibility "not [to] give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing," (Heb 10:25). For by meeting together, even if this takes such a terribly outdated form as "going to church"[47] we represent visibly what we believe to be the invisible reality. By gathering together in committed local expressions both to wait for and to live out the reality of the kingdom of God, we stand as a testimony to the world "that he who promised is faithful," (Heb 10:23).

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[45] Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 112.
[46] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 49.
[47] Which is not to say that the conventional Sunday church service is the only form this can take.

My Church Could Beat Up Your Church

Another of the more surprising discoveries which emerged from my primary research was generated by the final question in my interview which asked participants whether or not they felt that the church today was successful at creating Christian community. Although there were different responses to this question, most of the participants approached it in a similar way. In general, there was quite a lot of ambivalence surrounding this issue, which I had initially thought would provoke an immediate positive or negative response. There was a tendency for participants to make a distinction between "my church" and "other churches." Nick, Kathryn, Cheryl, Rob, Steph and Aaron all spoke positively about community in *their* churches, but expressed much more uncertainty about the state of affairs in other churches. Similarly, Margaret, Nicole and Carlo all said that the answer to the question of community depends on *which* church one is referring to and listed different elements which they considered to be positive indicators of Christian community.

What struck me about the participants' responses to this question was not so much what they said about community in the church but how they said it. While I thought that I was asking a question about the participants' sense of community in the church generally, what I got was responses about their sense of community in the church as it is expressed within local congregations. Several of the participants spoke of the experience of community in *their church* versus how they understood community in *other churches*. This distinction sparked some curiosity about the ways that we talk and think about what "church" means in a Western evangelical context. Specifically, I began to wonder if perhaps the concept of "church" in the West has begun to mean something different for North American evangelicals than it has meant to Christians of previous generations and from other places in the world.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "church" as follows:

> A building for public worship, or the worship performed there; A building for public Christian worship or rites such as baptism, marriage, etc., traditionally cruciform in shape, and typically having a tower, dome, or spire; distinguished originally from an *oratory* or place of private prayer.[48]

This definition of church carries an altogether different connotation than the Greek *ekklesia* which is translated "church" in our English New Testaments. There is a clear indication in the New Testament that the church is not a building, but a people. This is an important distinction and one which, for the most part, the participants in this research seemed to understand. When they spoke of church, most of the participants referred not to the *building* in which they worship but to the *people* with whom they worship. Yet the concept of church in Scripture also has a global, historical and transcendental quality which for the most part did not come through in the responses of the participants. The author of Hebrews encourages his/her recipients with the image of a "great cloud of witnesses," (Heb 12:1) who have led the life of faith in previous generations and Revelation speaks of the New Jerusalem giving light to all the nations, (Rev 21:22-26). These are just a few of the passages which indicate that *ekklesia* comprises a spiritual reality which is far greater than any of its local expressions.

The participants in this study clearly understood that the church is composed of human beings rather than of bricks and wood. However, they were careful to distinguish between the particular church that they attend and other churches which they seemed hesitant to speak about. It has been my hypothesis throughout this thesis that Western individualism has encouraged evangelicals to cultivate a self-ward orientation in our practice of Christian spirituality. Those who were interviewed did not, for the most part, seem to understand themselves as participating in any reality which extended beyond their

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[48] OED online, "church."

immediate experience of the church through their local congregation.

On the one hand, I did ask that the participants respond to the question of community in the church based on their own experiences. In that sense, it seems natural that they would want to differentiate between their own experiences of community in the church and the experiences of others which they would have no way of knowing. In these postmodern times, we tend to place a heavy emphasis on the subjective quality of life, and unlike generations which grew up in modernism, postmodern people are far less inclined to make generalizations. On the other hand, is it possible that the understanding of "church" as merely a local congregation, or more specifically, as the congregation that *I* go to, is indicative of another way that individualism is operative in Western evangelicalism?

Jurgen Moltmann conceptualizes the church as having a paradoxical identity in that it is both eschatological and empirical, rooted in this world while at the same time transcending global and historical boundaries and reaching out into the future. [49] Yet as evangelicals, we seem to have lost our sense of the former. Speaking as a pastor, Tim remarked during his interview that, "Evangelicalism has an absolutely abysmal ecclesiology." Though Moltmann remarks that this tension between the faith of the church and our own experience of the church has existed since the church's early days,[50] it seems as though there have been other expressions of Christianity–both now and in the past– which have been much less atomized than Western evangelicals now find themselves, and have possessed a much more robust sense of the church's global and transcendental qualities.

Catholic and Orthodox Christians, along with many main-line Protestants have long held that the sacraments of the church unite believers through their collective and

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[49] Moltman, *Power of the Spirit*, 22.
[50] Moltmann, *Power of the Spirit*, 20.

physical participation in the divine reality. This sacramental approach to worship is one

which has been lost, or maybe even intentionally discarded by modern evangelicalism, but

which some would like to see reintroduced. In the introduction to his book *Sacramental

Life,* David DeSilva describes well the misconception that many in the evangelical church

have of the sacraments' ability to foster spiritual formation:

> Since I left the Episcopal Church after twenty-four years of being nurtured in
> that tradition, I have met many Christians who assumed I did so because I
> came to my senses about the emptiness of praying the same words from the
> Book of Common Prayer week after week. Some look on the liturgy from
> outside as just going through the motions or praying by rote. Others see
> receiving communion every week as a mistake that makes the sacrament
> ordinary and routine,"[51]

DeSilva goes on to show how baptism,[52] Eucharist,[53] marriage[54] and burial[55] further embed

us in our collective identity as the people of God. He goes on to point out that the

sacraments assume a corporate spirituality. We are baptized *into* a community and this

stands in the face of our culture's temptation to privatize faith.[56] Chan also affirms the great

value which could be gained through a renaissance of sacramental spirituality within

evangelicalism. He remarks, "if modern evangelicalism is to experience a paradigm shift

from individualism to a vision of life-in-community, its whole ascetical apparatus will have

to be remodeled."[57] Modernism taught us to be concerned with "objectivity" and in the

evangelical church this took the form of a preoccupation with our church's own version of

"absolute truth." But as Kregel in Smith has astutely observed, "God's provision of

objective light does not solve the problem of subjective darkness."[58] With so many

denominations and independent Christian churches, it can be easy to lose sight of what it is

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[51]DeSilva, *Sacramental Life,* 11.
[52]DeSilva,*Sacramental Life* 55-59.
[53]DeSilva,*Sacramental Life* 87-89.
[54]DeSilva,*Sacramental Life,* 207-211.
[55]DeSilva, *Sacramental Life,* 225-230.
[56]DeSilva, *Sacramental Life,* 55.
[57] Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 112.
[58]Kregel in Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism,* 48.

that we share with brothers and sisters from other Christian traditions. Chan claims that a

greater emphasis on these "objective mysteries of the faith" will help to steer us away from

a personalized religion and towards full participation in the people of God.[59]

And yet, we must be wary of repeating history. Within the evangelical

tradition, many were inclined to move away from a more liturgical and sacramental

expression of their Christianity because they saw how easily these practices could become

empty and meaningless rituals rather than the heart-felt expressions of faith they were

intended to be. We must ask ourselves if it is possible for the Western evangelical church to

regain in our day some sense of what it means to be connected to the body, across time,

space and history– and if so, what this might look like.

Perhaps this might involve something as simple as the creation of

partnerships between churches across denominational, ethnic or linguistic lines. In some

ways, evangelicalism seems to have division encoded on its DNA. Those of us who grew

up in this tradition have often been taught (unintentionally) that the best thing that people

who encounter problems in their congregations can do is to leave that church, and the best

thing that a church that encounters problems in its denomination can do is to start its own

branch of churches. Yet the Ecumenical movement which is beginning to gain momentum

in and outside of evangelicalism seems a positive indicator that even in our present context

of individualism there are many who long for unity within the church of Christ. Nouwen,

McNeill and Morrison articulate this spirit beautifully in *Compassion* when they write,

> By ceasing to make our individual differences a basis of competition and by recognizing these differences as potential contributions to a rich life together, we begin to hear the call to community. In and through Christ, people of different ages and life-styles, from different races and classes, with different languages and educations, can join together and witness to God's compassionate presence in our world.[60]

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[59]Chan, *Spiritual Theology*, 112.
[60] Nouwen, McNeill and Morrison, *Compassion*, 81.

By being willing to partner together with congregations and people who are decidedly different from us[61] we testify to one another and to the world at large that what is going on in this thing we call the church is something which is bigger than our doctrinal differences.

My *Personal* Savior: Salvation Apart from the Church

At the heart of this thesis lies a desire to see the evangelical church faithfully responding to the call of her Lord Jesus Christ in this day and age. The quest to investigate how Western individualism was operative in the church often led back to the more foundational question of what it means to be a Christian. For unless we are clear about what we mean when we say we are following Christ, we will have no way of measuring whether or not we are living faithfully. For this reason each of the fifteen interviews conducted began with this question: "according to your own knowledge and experience, what does it mean to be a Christian?"

Kathryn said that to be a Christian involved, "Believe[ing] and know[ing] that you have sinned and believe[ing] God... and ask[ing] him to be part of your life..." While Chuck's concise response was similar, "To believe in Jesus and in his saving power." Margaret claimed that being a Christian involved having a "personal relationship with Jesus," and "to have accepted the gift of salvation" while Tim's assessment was similar: "being in relationship with God, alive to God through Christ, with the Holy Spirit making it real and existential for you." These are just a brief snapshot of the responses I received to this question. However, most of the responses had one thing in common which I thought might prove important as we consider what it means to be the church faithfully in the West. 9 out of 15 the individuals represented here articulated what it means to be a Christian in terms of *believing certain intellectual truths about God*, specifically about the identity and

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[61] Be that cultural or denominational difference

mission of Jesus Christ. 3 people mentioned the ongoing nature of discipleship, typically using the word "follow." One person each described the Christian life in terms of love and ethics, and only 3 individuals made any mention at all of the Christian community as being at the core of faith.

This is not in any way wish to diminish the important role that belief in Christ plays in the Christian life. The Apostle's Creed begins with these lines: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of Heaven and Earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." It is upon such beliefs that our faith as Christians is founded. What was intriguing about the responses of the participants was not so much what was mentioned as what was left out. There seemed to be a clear distinction in the minds of the participants between what it means to be a Christian in the technical sense, and what it means to be part of the Christian community. As with some of my earlier findings, the tendency of these individuals to define faith from an intellectual or ideological perspective was not necessarily surprising in an evangelical context. However, it seemed worthwhile to take a brief look at the distinction which seems to have arisen between soteriology and ecclesiology.

Webber addresses the divorcing of Christian salvation from Christian life in *Divine Embrace* where he says, "For those in the modern world, Christianity has been made too easy...the emphasis has been too much on 'believe these truths,' or 'accept Jesus as your Savior," almost as if the Christian life primarily is an idea or knowledge disassociated from life itself."[62] As Western Christians we seem to have drawn a line between our individual salvation and our participation in the church, but is this distinction in line with what Scripture teaches on the nature of our salvation? In his article "The Comprehensive Nature

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[62] Webber, *Divine Embrace,* 201.

of Salvation in Biblical Perspective," Marvin Tate claims that God's salvation always has

both an individual and a communal component, in the Old Testament as well as the New.[63]

He goes on to observe that popular treatments of salvation in Scripture tend to take a lob-

sided approach, overemphasizing communal salvation in the OT,[64] and overemphasizing

individual salvation in the NT.[65] But this approach fails to fully appreciate the

multidimensional nature of God's saving work in creation.[66]

In *When the Church Was a Family,* Joseph Hellerman argues that Scripture

was written assuming the collectivist mindset of ancient people rather than the

individualistic way we understand it today. He asserts that in the early Church there was an

automatic association between God and God's group, the church.[67] Anthony Robertson and

Robert Wall affirm this in *Called to be Church.* They observe that the entirety of Scripture

bears witness to God's desire to create a people for himself who will be a light to the

nations. Under the Old covenant, this takes the form of ethnic Israel. In the book of Acts,

we can see God redefining the boundaries of his community to also include Gentiles. "In

Acts we see God at work to create a new people who are not defined by the old categories

of race, language, gender or social class, but a people united in witness to the resurrection

and in a way of life that embodies what we call 'resurrection practices.'"[68]

Many of those interviewed made a distinction between what it means to be

"saved" in the technical sense[69] and what it means engage in spiritual practices such as

going to church. However, Scripture seems to indicate that life in community was not

merely a lifestyle choice offered to a saved individual. Rather, the new community

[63]Tate, "Salvation," 471.
[64]Tate, "Salvation," 472.
[65]Tate, "Salvation," 475.
[66]See Hellerman *When the Church was a Family,* 73; Tate, "Salvation," 472; Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 109; Webber, *Divine Embrace,* 201 and others.
[67]Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family,* 73.
[68]Robertson and Wall, *Called to be Church,* 79.
[69]By this I mean the inheritance of eternal life.

constitutes the very thing which the person is saved *to*.[70] Instead of belonging to the world

which is perishing, the newly converted individual now belongs to the redeemed people of

God which is being saved:

> In other words, conversion experiences- what the Reformers referred to as
> "justification"- required structures and settings for *sanctification,* for the
> newly converted to grow in faith and holiness. Conversion and community
> belong together. It is no accident that Peter's preaching which led to
> repentance in his listeners is followed directly in Acts 2 by a picture of
> community. Without community, conversion experiences easily lose
> plausibility: one can go back to the old world and the old associations and
> before long one is living the same old way. Conversion requires
> communities that support, express and embody this new faith and life.[71]

As has been previously discussed, there has been much emphasis in recent

decades on creating a church which is "seeker friendly," or which provides a particular type

of worship experience. Christians in the West sometimes seem to seek churches which suit

their tastes and leave when this is no longer the case. But in attempting to create a church

experience which is "user-friendly," so to speak, is it possible that we have given people

mistaken impressions about the life of faith? In *Christly Gestures,* Brett Webb-Mitchell

claims that the real problem facing the Western church today is not individualism, but self-

centredness. Because we no longer feel embedded in communities, we do not feel bound by

the authorities of those communities.[72] Just like salvation, participation in the body of

Christ becomes a *personal choice.*

Yet Chan and Webber would likely say that the result of this approach to the

Christian life is a shallow faith, if any faith at all. Both of these authors assert that as we

move toward a more robust ecclesiology, the evangelical church will have to be straight

forward about the real cost of discipleship. Chan observes, "the more perfected in love the

saint becomes, the greater the identification with the church. The closer union with God,

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[70]Tate, "Salvation," 476; Robinson and Wall, *Called to be Church,* 80.

[71]Robinson and Wall, *Called to Be Church,* 80.

[72]Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures,* 14-15.

the stronger bond with Christ's body."[73] Webber expresses a similar notion when he says of the apostle Paul that, "again and again [he] turns the dominant culture on its head and calls us into a practical living that dies to self-interest and rises to the new life in the Spirit exemplified by Jesus."[74] These authors are but a few of the contemporary and classic theologians who are emphatic about the fact that the Christian life is necessarily a life together. The visible church as it meets in its various local expressions is not a club of saved individuals who may gather if they like. Rather, it is the physical marking of a Spiritual fact,[75] the people that God has made and is making for himself. It is redemptive community *to* which individuals are saved, *from* out of the kingdom of darkness.

From a practical ministry perspective, this may require that we search for ways to be physically together more often than the current 1.5 hours per week which is the norm for many Western evangelicals. It may also require that the nature of our interaction be of a different quality and depth than we currently experience, a quality more appropriate to the eternal brand of togetherness with which we have been marked, more appropriate to our shared hope and to our common obedience. As has already been stated in this chapter, "going to church" has lost much of its appeal in our Western context. But meeting together, as the passage from Hebrews implores us to do need not necessarily take the form it has "always" taken in contemporary evangelicalism. There is room for innovation and creativity as we seek ways to physically embody our spiritual togetherness. Speaking from his experience living in a new monastic community Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove wrote this about what lies at the heart of the practice of community,

[73]Chan, *Spiritual Theology,* 102.
[74]Webber, *Divine Embrace,* 226.
[75]Chan *Spiritual Theology,* 108.

"there is no ideal form of Christian community. In the places where we are, the practice of

living in community calls us to ask, 'How is God leading me deeper into life with other

people?'"[76]

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[76] Wilson-Hartgrove, "Living as Community," 55.

Conclusion: Towards a Faithful Expression of Church in the West

Summary

This thesis sought to examine the effect of Western individualism on Christian community within the evangelical church. It has been the assertion throughout this work that the internalization of Western individualism *has* had a detrimental effect on the ability of the Western evangelical church to cultivate a corporate identity consistent with the common life, hope and obedience displayed by the Scriptures as appropriate for the body of Christ. This research was an attempt to better understand this issue through the employment of qualitative research methods and engagement with secondary sources of a theological nature.

Chapter 1 explored the origins of the term "individualism," tracing it back to its early pejorative uses in post-revolutionary France. In addition, the evolution of this ideology was examined, with particular attention to the ways it became actualized in the contexts of modernism and later postmodernism. A distinction was also made between utilitarian individualism and expressive individualism. This chapter presented a definition of postmodern individualism as: "an unconscious orientation which places the needs, values and expectations of self at a higher level of importance than those of the wider community." This was the definition used throughout this work as we sought to examine the outworking of individualism in the Western evangelical church.

The purpose of chapter 2 was to gain insight into the concept of Christian community as it is expressed biblically and contextually. This chapter sought to examine how popular evangelicalism understands and expresses community in a contemporary Western context, and to compare these expressions with how Christian community has been understood by both classic and contemporary theologians. It was acknowledged here that

the concepts of human personhood and human community are closely linked in the Scriptures. Through an examination of personhood based on the creation narratives in Genesis, and the nature of God as Trinity, we explored the ways in which relationship with others and with God are inherent in the human condition. It was in light of this discussion that we were able to dismiss the modernist notion of the fully independent human subject, preferring instead a reaffirmation of orthodox Christian doctrine which states that the meaning of human life originates not in ourselves but in the God who created us for *himself*. We acknowledged that while many Western evangelicals express a desire to inhabit biblical community, there is a danger that our inherently individualistic Western culture will lead us to think about community in ways which teach us to use ourselves as the primary point of reference. In Chapter 2 the Christian community was distinguished from other communities in the fact that it is formed and exists not by or for those who compose it, but by and for the God who knits it together. Christians in Christ's community do not encounter each other face to face, but side by side with faces turned to God.

Chapter 3 consisted of the primary research conducted for this study which took the form of thirteen interviews with fifteen individuals. The research participants consisted of both pastors and laypersons, who attended evangelical churches of varying denominations at least twice per month. The denominations represented in the research were: The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC), The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptists (FEB), The Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec (CBOQ) and The Mennonite Church of Canada (MCC). During the interviews participants were asked a series of seven questions which centred on the nature of Christian faith and life, the importance of Christian community and the role of the institutional church. The analysis of this research resulted in the emergence of four common threads which seemed to best exemplify how

these individuals were experiencing Christian life and Christian community. These four themes were: the centrality of teaching/preaching in the evangelical church, the role that other believers are thought to play in an individual's life of faith, the nature of church in evangelical understanding and the evangelical portrayal of salvation.

Guided by the threads which emerged from the interviews, Chapter 4 sought to delve deeper into some of the ways evangelicals currently understand Christian life and Christian community with an eye to where individualism might be at work. The aim of this chapter was to make a meaningful contribution to the current conversation about the best way for evangelicals to embody the church in our Western context. First we explored evangelicalism's heavy emphasis on preaching and teaching. Although gathering together to hear the Word of God is an ancient practice, derivative of Jewish synagogue worship, we realized that embodied in a contemporary Western context, this practice is in danger of being interpreted in individualistic ways. Rather than understanding the proclamation of the word of God as a practice which shapes and reinforces our identity as the called-out people of God, our present context of Western individualism puts us in danger of understanding preaching as an activity designed to benefit only the individual in his or her present situation. As a corrective to the consumerist way that preaching is sometimes interpreted, it was suggested that the Western evangelical church explore the more sacramental dimensions of this practice, understanding preaching as a community forming event around which we gather as God's people to be enfolded in his story.

Next we explored the assertion which was made by many of the participants regarding the role of other Christians in their own spirituality. Many of the participants felt that the presence of other believers was important because other believers help one to grow in faith. In this section we explored the apparent tension between an authentic desire for

Christian community and an underdeveloped ecclesiology which does not contribute to an articulation of the eschatological significance of the church. Here we explored the notion that the physical gathering of Christians in local bodies is actually the physical representation of the spiritual reality of the unity of all believers through Christ. In addition we recognized that when we meet together in local gatherings we stand as a testimony of this fact to the world.

The third section of this final chapter explored the possibility that church in evangelical thought has lost its global, historical and eschatological dimensions. Many participants differentiated between the churches they themselves attended and the churches of others. Here we acknowledged that modernism's emphasis on "objectivity" may have caused us to place too much emphasis on our private or denominational interpretations of Scripture, thus cutting ourselves off from both church history and also from our brothers and sisters who embody the Christian faith in the context of other denominations or other nationalities. The Ecumenical movement was seen as a hopeful movement in the church, seeking to restore some of the unity which has been lost as churches (particularly within evangelicalism) have become increasingly fragmented.

Finally Chapter 4 sought to understand the chasm which seems to exist in evangelical thought between belief in Christ and participation in the church. It was here proposed that perhaps our understanding of Christianity as an affirmation of certain intellectual truths about God has resulted in a truncated understanding of the Christian life. Here we explored the more communal dimensions of salvation through and exploration of God's desire in Scripture to create a people for himself. It was suggested here that participation in the people of God is part of the necessary outworking of salvation in the life of the individual believer. It was also suggested that the physical gathering of Christians

together was more than just a beneficial and mutually edifying experience but was instead a necessary part of what it means to participate in the dynamic life of the people God is making for himself.

Forward Vision: The Faithful Western Church

In *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* Jurgen Moltmann commented, "At every period the church has a duty to be clear about its commission, its situation and its goal,"[1] The aim of this thesis has been to draw attention to present situation of the Western evangelical church, situating it against the cultural backdrop of individualism. For this dearly held social value comprises an important element of the situation in which the Western church now finds itself. Although, the goal of the church has in many ways been the same throughout history– to find creative and faithful ways to be God's people before a watching world– the age in which the church now finds herself presents us with some unique challenges, not the least of which is to live in community and to live without the self-centredness in a culture which often promotes individualism as the only reasonable way to live.

In our present culture where the church is often tempted to employ the strategies of the consumer-driven market, we are inundated with countless books and seminars which claim to tell us the best way to create community in our local congregations. Church leaders have tried to accomplish this task in various ways from the formation of shared interest small groups to the employment of flashy Sunday morning worship services. However throughout this thesis we have encountered many wise teachers who warn us of the frustrating reality that we cannot "create" the Christian community all, but only live in the midst of the divine reality which God has created for us. In a culture

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[1] Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 1.

which prefers the pragmatism of strategic planning to the mysticism of waiting on God, the notion that we as Christians cannot create the community we long for could tempt us to throw up our hands and give up on the whole idea. However, this thesis would like to present several practices which may help us to be more attentive and responsive to the waiting, hopeful, resurrection community which the Spirit is *already* creating in our midst.

The first practice which may help us to combat some of the individualism which is so prevalent in our culture is the communal practice of *counting the cost*. In Luke's gospel, Jesus warns those who would follow him that the going would not be easy:

> Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.' (Luke 14:28-30).

In a culture of consumerism, there is near constant pressure on church leaders to "sell" the church to groups of people who seem more or less uninterested. In our attempt to make Jesus attractive, it is tempting to want to emphasize the benefits of Christian living for the individual such as reassurance of eternal destiny along with tranquillity and freedom from guilt in this present life. However, in these verses and the ones that follow Jesus puts more emphasis on the cost of discipleship than any particular benefits to the believer. He warns that the cost of following him will be great, even all encompassing. Just a few verses later he says, "those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples," (Luke 14:33).

Christians and church leaders are often attracted (and rightly so) to the hope that more people will come to a saving knowledge of Christ. Yet perhaps in our attempt to be culturally sensitive we have in some respects failed to be upfront with people about the true cost of becoming a disciple of Jesus– the true cost which may include giving up the

convenience to disengage from our faith communities at will. We know that there is a real

danger that if we make the heavy cost of discipleship apparent in our churches, less people

will be attracted to us or will want to be part of us. But is it possible that by downplaying

the responsibilities of the Christian life such as sexual ethics, spending habits and the

sharing of possessions, we might actually be sabotaging our own attempts to inhabit

community in the church? Perhaps by using the same advertising tactics to attract potential

Christians that companies use to attract potential clients, we are inadvertently encouraging

men and women to approach our churches as buyers in a vast religious market. As an

alternative to the consumerism of Western culture, the practice of *counting the cost* might

be a step away from individualism and in the direction of community.

Despite rising divorce rates, marriage is still seen in our culture to have an

element of permanence. Whether or not a marriage endures, most people do not enter into it

lightly. In the same way, the Christian life– as characterized in part by participation in a

believing community– ought to be seen as a serious commitment. By focusing on

Christianity as lifestyle characterized by discipleship, obedience and sacrifice rather than as

a way to find contentment and satisfaction in this life, we help to ensure that men and

women come to the Church with at least some idea of what they are getting themselves

into. This, it is hoped, will have a positive effect on the level of community currently

experienced by Christians in the West.

In his memoir *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson shares what he has learned about

himself and the kingdom of God through almost 30 years pastoring the same congregation

in Maryland.

> I am a pastor. My work has to do with God and souls– immense mysteries
> that no one has ever seen at any time. But I carry out this work in
> conditions–place and time–that I see and measure…Place. But not just any
> place, not just a location marked on a road map, but on a *topo* a

topographical map–named with mountains and rivers...I do all my work on this ground...Time. But not just time in general, abstracted on a geometric grid on a calendar or numbers on a clock face, but what the Greeks named *kairos,* pregnancy time, being present to the Presence...Salvation is kicking in the womb of creation right now, any time now. Pay attention. Be ready.[2]

The second practice which offers us some forward vision with regard to Christian community is one which Peterson refers to as *topo and kairos* but which will be referred to in this work as *here and now.*

It can be easy in our present context of loneliness and isolation to romanticize notions of what the Christian community will be like if we are ever able to realize it. When we think about community we tend to imagine feelings of togetherness and belonging existing in harmony with others with whom we enjoy sharing life. However, what we often fail to anticipate when we approach community is the very real likelihood that the other individuals who end up in our churches might not be as similar to us as we had hoped. Churches attract broken people of all sorts and from all walks of life. When we entertain idealized hopes for fellowship with others who are like us in temperament, intellect, race, or socioeconomic status we are often disappointed by actual men and women with whom we find ourselves sharing a pew on a Sunday morning. Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to see how many Christian often come to the conclusion that their church has failed to create community.

Yet, Bonhoeffer reminds us that we as human beings are not the creators of the Christian community, but recipients of it. The creator of the community is God himself.[3] As human beings, we prefer to commit ourselves to people with whom we have a natural affinity and with whom we have much in common, yet Bonhoeffer reminds us that the one with whom we are called to community is not the one we would prefer, but the one

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[2] Peterson, *The Pastor,* 7-8.
[3] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 30-31.

who has also been redeemed by Christ.[4] By focusing on what we think the Christian community *should* look like, is it possible that we often miss the reality of the community that God is even now creating in our midst? Bonhoeffer rejects any notion of human authority to determine the parameters of the Christian community. Instead he warns, "The Christian community must relinquish all self-centred selectivity from its midst because the exclusion of apparently weak, insignificant and seemingly useless people from the church might mean the exclusion of Christ himself."[5]

The practice of *here and now* might help us to be awake to the spiritual work of community which the Holy Spirit –not us– is already accomplishing amongst us. If we understand the church, as the people whom *God is making for himself* then our own preferences and prejudices need not limit who is in and who is out. Instead, if we can learn to be attentive and welcoming to those less-than-perfect people whom God brings across our paths , then maybe we can achieve a self-understanding similar to the infant church in Acts of which Luke says that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved," (Acts 2:47). If we are able to relinquish the role of creating the Christian community back to God, then perhaps we will pay greater attention to the ways God is already saving us and knitting us together as *these* people in *this* place as an expression of his waiting, hoping, resurrection community.

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[4] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 34.
[5] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 45.

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CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

McMaster University — Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

Application Status: New ☑ **Addendum** ☐ **Project Number:** 2011 077

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

Western Individualism and the Christian Community: Towards a Faithful Expression of Church in the West

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The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:

☑ The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:

COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.

Reporting Frequency:	Annual:	Other:

Date: Chair, Dr. D. Maurer/ Vice-Chairs, Dr. Tina Moffat & Dr. Bruce Milliken: