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Michael R. Weed
Editor

M. Todd Hall
Associate Editor

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The Erosion of Community: A Challenge to the Church

Wendell Willis

One of my undergraduate university courses is on New Testament ecclesiology. While I regard this as an important topic, I am often frustrated that my students do not share that assessment. In part, it is my failure to inspire them in the course. But while I accept some culpability, I have learned that I am also fighting against understandings that they bring to the course. The problem is not largely a matter of my challenging an ecclesiology they have, but it is to persuade them that ecclesiology is of value at all. Most have no ecclesiology, nor do they see a need for one. This not to say, or imply, that they are not committed disciples. In fact, most are quite committed believers, particularly if one defines commitment as service to others. They are dedicated to serving others and to supporting each other.

In a provocative, but discouraging, essay entitled “Loose Connections,” Amy Frykholm reports on trends in the last two decades in America. She documents the declining identification of believers with religious groups. Surprisingly, this parallels an increase in personal religiosity. She summarizes, “People do not belong to churches the way they once did, even when they show up for religious services.”¹ This agrees with the research of sociologist Robert Putnam and the point made in his influential book, *Bowling Alone*, as

¹ Amy Frykholm, “Loose Connections,” *Christian Century* (May 2011), 20.

well as subsequent writings and lectures.² While once a nation of joiners, recently Americans have tended to value institutions as support systems, without sensing any obligation that they may have to those institutions.³ In American religion of the present day “church shopping” is not about seeking the most dedicated Christian community, but using those churches which exist for meeting personal needs.⁴

Nor is this lack of interest in commitment to a congregation a reality only for the young. Julia Duin, Religion Editor for the *Washington Times*, has researched and described the drop-out trend in the over-35 group of believers in her book, *Quitting Church*. There are, of course, several reasons she discovered for this trend.⁵ She quotes Frederick Buechner, from his *Secrets in the Dark*,

Much of what goes on in churches, I am afraid, is as shallow and lifeless as much of its preaching and as irrelevant to the deep needs of the people who come to church hungering for a sense of God’s presence that they more often than not never find.⁶

² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

³ Amatai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), urges a model of “communitarianism” in response to the current attitudes of many Americans who insist upon personal rights but have little sense of responsibility to the larger society.

⁴ An example is the Ethos Church in Nashville, TN. A recent article in the *Christian Chronicle* observed, “Though its adherents number between 300 and 400, Ethos Church’s attendance is closer to 1,500. Most are young adults—many visitors—who have not yet become members.” Clearly the church is attracting many, but many fewer actually identify.

(http://www.christianchronicle.org/article2159606~Declining_numbers%2C_but_signs_of_hope%3F).

Another interesting example of this is when many churches dismiss worship on Christmas Sunday to allow members family time. Clearly the personal benefit to those who had frequented these churches trumped church traditions. The “idolatry of the family” is another important concern for the church, but a topic for another time!

⁵ Julia Duin, *Quitting Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). She notes that many Americans continue private religious practices such as Bible reading, prayer, even sharing their faith. “But they have given up on the institution” (18).

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons*. (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), 284.

One of her most interesting conclusions is that more of these older members are leaving because they experience church as too reflective of the American consumer culture.⁷

The Crisis of Community

There have been a number of studies from the fields of social anthropology or cultural anthropology which have sought to explain what a community is. Earlier studies in the first half of the twentieth century focused on structures and economics, but a more recent shift is to look at communities in terms of function. Anthony Cohen suggests that communities are aggregating devices. Those in a community are formed on a basis of a sense of shared commonality. “It is a matter of feeling, a matter which resides in the minds of the members themselves ... they suppose themselves to be more like each other than the members of other communities ... they share symbols.”⁸

In a recent book, Robert Putnam and David Campbell have surveyed the present state of American religious life.⁹ They studied not only the social shifts in American religion and the current statistics of membership, but also the involvement of believers in religious communities. They found that the overall number of communicants has sharply declined in the last 50 years. They draw attention to three major shocks to established American religion in the last century. The first big shock was in the “long Sixties” (long because it lasted well into the Seventies), focused around the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights struggles which alienated many of the Baby Boomer generation. The second shock was the politicization of religion in the Seventies and Eighties when Evangelical Christianity became identified with one political party (the “Silent Majority” and the rise of the Religious Right). The result was that a significant number of younger adults dropped away from all reli-

⁷ Duin, *Quitting Church*, 76–81, 101–108.

⁸ Arthur P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (Chichester, England: Ellis Horwood Ltd., 1985), 20f.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010). Their data are explained in an appendix based on surveys conducted in 2006, with a follow-up in 2007, in which over 68,000 interviews occurred.

gions. The third shock, which Putnam and Campbell identify as “after-shocks” was the culture debate over sexual conduct breaking out at the end of the twentieth century.

One of the most interesting findings of their work is the significance of the congregation in American religion. They discovered that congregations are the most common form of association in America. Sixty-two percent of those polled said that they are part of a regular place of worship. Over half (58%) of the churchgoers surveyed were “very satisfied” with their congregations; about a third are only “moderately satisfied.”¹⁰

More surprising is why people chose their current congregation. Sixty percent of respondents suggested that most significant was “theology or religious beliefs,” and a close second was “liturgy or style of worship” (45%). Spouse or other family connections were the next two most common reasons, and clergy was less than either. Friends (beyond family) were rated as significant by 20% of the responders, but when family and friends are included together, they form 60%. Most interesting was that least important were political or social views.¹¹

What does this information have to say to contemporary attempts to renew interest in church? It is unclear, because those responding were active in some faith community, and thus probably their concerns do not parallel those who have no such commitments. Nevertheless, I think it does imply that among those seeking congregational commitment, beliefs are significant, and therefore to diminish or avoid theological teaching is an unwise move.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 168f.

¹¹ Ibid., 170. Obviously the numbers add up to well over 100%, but this is because people were allowed to offer several reasons for their congregational choice. Analysis regarding why people move from one congregation to another (Putnam, et al., 172–74) suggests that “Americans may select their congregations primarily because of theology and worship, but the social investment made within that congregation appears to be what keeps them there.”

¹² Putnam and Campbell, 178–79, describe the “emerging church” as a conscious attempt to recover the twenty- and thirty-year-olds who have left churches. Leaders in this movement do not think the key to doing so is the style of worship (often loud and unconventional), but the minimizing of doctrine to emphasize “missional living”

Those who study the nature of communities note that “community” not only assumes that members have something in common, but also that what they have in common distinguishes them from others. Thus community implies both similarity and difference, and those two realities entail a boundary. Some boundaries to community can be physical (a river, a fence); others are governmental (city limits, voting) or even linguistic. While boundaries can serve to exclude people, and some are created for that purpose, boundaries also serve to include people—they create the community.¹³ Any community must have some boundary as part of its existence. This is recognized in most major religions, as E. Frazer has noted:

... the Christian ideal of the communion of saints and the congregation and the Eucharist as forms of community; the centrality of *umma* or community in Islamic traditions and contemporary practice and theology; community is a prominent theme in Judaism, and in Buddhism.¹⁴

It is unfortunate that the need for boundaries is often considered as arrogant and un-Christian because of current debates within our national history. But boundaries are an essential part of communities. Biblically, the existence of boundaries is related to election. While Paul’s struggles with Jewish people (including some Jewish Christians) are occasionally presented as if he were opposed to boundaries (cf. Eph 2:15), he is in actuality re-locating the boundaries of God’s people in faith in Jesus’ work (noted in Eph 2:16 and Rom 11:16-26).¹⁵

and building community. The movement is too recent to analyze its impact or success.

¹³ The initial function of many early Christian creeds was to demarcate the community by stating its beliefs. The creedal controversies of the third and fourth centuries (and later) were sometimes used to condemn others (explicitly).

¹⁴ E. Frazer, *The Problem of Communitarian Politics: Unity and Conflict* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 24.

¹⁵ The pioneer work of E. P. Sanders in several works beginning with *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* has argued that Paul’s argument over circumcision and Mosaic law in Galatians and Romans is not about how one is saved, but the boundaries which mark off the community of God.

The attempt to minimize the boundaries of community by emphasizing personal freedom and choice has occurred repeatedly, including within the church. Chaim Potok, in his history of the Jews, describes how European Jewish intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries moved away from accepting a marginalized status to what they thought was full acceptance into the new secular humanism originating in the Enlightenment.

Jews throughout Europe embraced the high culture of the Enlightenment as their ancestors had once embraced covenants with YHWH. They could not know that they were whirling and pirouetting in a pagan dance macabre (484).¹⁶

Their descendants learned by painful experience that the feigned acceptance by the secular states masked an intense hatred that erupted into the Holocaust. Faith communities can too easily assume non-rejection is acceptance.

In a mostly forgotten essay, H. Richard Niebuhr, at the first involvement of the church in Germany during the rise of the Third Reich, warned of the danger when the church identified itself too closely with trust in civilization. He wrote:

During the last generations the anthropocentric faith has entered deeply into the structure of society and has contributed not a little to the megapolitanism and megalomania of contemporary civilization. ... The captive church is the church which has become entangled with this system or these systems of worldliness. It is a church which seeks to prove its usefulness to civilization, in terms of civilization's own demands.¹⁷

When the believing community denies or minimizes their distinction from the larger society often two unintended consequences follow. First, the Christian community becomes less important to Christians, not just in the question of affiliation or attendance, but in shaping values and norms. Since most people want values in their lives, they will get them from other places.

¹⁶ Chaim Potok in *Wanderings* (New York: Fawcett, 1976), 474–512.

¹⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "Toward the Independence of the Church," in *The Church Against the World*, eds. H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, Francis Miller (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Company, 1935), 137.

Every community has certain values essential to its self-identity, and when those values are indistinguishable from all others, the identity of the community is lost. One thinks of Jesus' warning in Luke 6:26, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you." Secondly, in reaction to a less-identifiable community, there is often a tendency for those in the community to adopt a more critical and judgmental attitude toward outsiders (or lapsed members). An unacceptable spirit of pride can develop.

A Biblical Indication of the Importance of the Church¹⁸

One of the more common descriptions of Christian mutuality employed by Paul is seen in the use of the common term *koinōnia* and its cognates. It is found 19 times in the New Testament, all but five of which are in Paul.¹⁹ It is a word with a broad reach of meanings. It is so well known that it is widely used by Christians today to describe church camps, Bible study groups and similar events. The background of this term and its usage in the New Testament is seldom noted, however.

At the most basic level *koinōnia* means what two or more people share in common. It could refer to a wide variety of topics and situations: joint undertakings in war or civic life, marriage (or sexual relationships), business partnerships, friendships, and clubs. Even before Plato there was the proverb, "Friends have all things in common." *Koinōn* was also a political term, referring to a collection of communities with common purposes, but larger than a town or city.²⁰ Provincial cities with a common ethnic background would band together to pursue common interests in relationship to a particular cult.²¹ This wide field of usage should caution us against assuming that the

¹⁸ The following discussion fits better my own training, since, with regard to sociological analysis, Michael is a much more astute analyst than I!

¹⁹ There are three in 1 John and once each in Acts and Hebrews.

²⁰ Liddell & Scott, Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: University Press, 1985), 968. II.b.

²¹ In the first century this cult was quite often a temple for the imperial cult. Cf. Barbara Burrell, *Neokoroi: Greek Cities and Roman Emperors* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 2. This impressive book surveys these cults region by region in the Eastern Roman Empire, with special attention to the manifestations of imperial cults.

term implies “intimacy” or “mystical relationship.” This move is often made with respect to the use of this term in reference to “communion” with the Spirit (or with Christ). When such implications are present, they must be drawn from the total context, not simply the use of these words.

Paul does use the word *koinōnia* to refer to the sustaining work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1). He also uses a verbal form to refer to sharing one’s possessions with those who are teachers (Gal 6:6). Common to many uses, including ones not overtly religious, is the use of this term to describe a partnership. This is the case in Luke 5:10, where with a cognate noun we are told that James and John were Simon’s “partners” in fishing. The same word occurs in Matthew 23:30 when Jesus says that his Pharisee critics fail to recognize that they are “partners” of those who killed the prophets.

The partnership connotation of *koinōnia* is found in Philippians 4:14 when Paul praises the Philippians because they became “co-sharers with” (*synkoinōnēsantes*, an intensive form of the verb) him at the beginning of his ministry (in Greece) in the matter of “giving and receiving” (4:15).²² In the “partnership” of evangelism, the Philippians provided funds and Paul provided labor. Philippians 1:5 points to the same reality.

A similar manifestation of a partnership image applying to church community is seen in Galatians 2:9. There, Paul says at the Jerusalem conference that James, Peter and John gave the “right hand” of fellowship and recognized Paul and Barnabas as “partners” in the mission efforts.²³ In Romans 15:26 Paul applies the term to the funds he is raising for Jerusalem. All these “business” metaphor examples are important because the use of this term to describe the Lord’s Supper in 1 Corinthians 10 is too often understood as a private moment shared between the believer and the Lord (a problem at Corinth, as seen in 11:17–34).

²² These terms are financial.

²³ A financial aspect is alluded to by noting that the Jerusalem leaders asked only that Paul “remember the poor” which Paul affirmed.

The point of this rapid survey of a Greek word group is that to describe the church as a “fellowship” (*koinōnia*) is to describe a mutual investment in interest and commitment that creates a joint venture—a partnership. While this partnership offers benefits for stakeholders, it also carries responsibilities. This may well be the hardest sell in the present culture. It is clear from the increased practice of co-habitation rather than marriage, as well as the increased divorce rate among the married, that the American individualistic model tends to value institutions largely based on personal benefit received.

Baptism and Lord’s Supper: Boundaries and Being

Gerhard Lohfink tells a revealing story of an “instant response” chaplaincy program in Germany.²⁴ A church agency in Berlin equipped an automobile with a radio by which a priest, a physician, and a psychologist could be summoned at any hour of the day or night in the event of a crisis. Lohfink asks incisively what ecclesiastical model this unit presents? It reveals a church that is captive to modern culture in that it takes care of individuals, but does not shape a community.

Putnam and Campbell recount a similar event a century earlier in America. On the western frontier of America, the far-flung towns were too new to have churches. A “chapel car” was created for the railroads in which both Protestant ministers and Catholic clergy would bring worship to the settlers. Much like today’s internet churches, these ecclesial inventions provided personal services, but neither asked for, nor could, receive commitments.²⁵

Cohen in particular has emphasized symbols as constitutive of communities. While symbols may be physical, they can also consist of shared ideas: “... the symbolic repertoire of a community aggregates the individualities and other differences within the community and provide the means for their expression, interpretation and containment.”²⁶ Shared beliefs and practices are essential to a community. The fact that others do not share these locates a

²⁴ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 4.

²⁵ Putnam and Campbell, 161.

²⁶ Cohen, 21.

community with boundaries. Boundaries not only exclude those who do not share the community's interests, they also serve to mark off those who do. Again we quote Cohen, "the symbolic expression of community and its boundaries increases in importance as the actual geo-social boundaries of the community are undermined, blurred or otherwise weakened."²⁷

With respect to the Christian community, the sharing of the communion and the practice of baptism for community membership serve both to identify those in the community ("the baptized" or "the communicants") and to distinguish this community from others.²⁸ In a time of decreasing commitments to congregational life in America, the value of symbols serving as boundary markers actually increases. That is why the arguments for an open communion table²⁹ or for diminishing the significance of baptism³⁰ are unwise responses to cultural shifts (presuming, of course, that one places a value upon the church for Christians, certainly no longer a given).³¹ Such reluctance to be a distinct institution reveals the church's lack of faith in its mission and its dependence on the surrounding culture. Again, as Niebuhr well summarizes:

The dependent church rejected theology or found it unintelligible because it accepted a 'theology' which was not its own, a theory

²⁷ Ibid., 50.

²⁸ Thus Robert W. Jenson comments: "Baptism initiates the community of the church; as the liturgical scholarship of all confessions has repeatedly emphasized, baptism is primarily a rite of initiation, a 'liminal' step into a new communal reality with its new possibilities and obligations." Robert W. Jenson, "The church and the sacraments," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 215.

²⁹ For example, see the discussion between Sharon Warner, Jerry Sumney and Sharyn Dowd: Sharon Warner, "The Gate to the Communion Table," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 40 (2005): 127-130. Jerry L. Sumney, "A Communion Table for the Baptized," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 40 (2005): 221-223. Sharyn Dowd, "The Invitation to the Lord's Table," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 40 (2005), 276-280.

³⁰ As is described by David Falk, "Baptism and Membership: An Alternative Perspective," *Direction* 33 (2004): 48-59.

³¹ For a concise argument regarding the function of baptism in conversion see: Robert Stein, "Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998): 6-17

of life which was essentially worldly. It wanted action rather than creeds because its creed was that the action of free, intelligent men was good and that God's action was limited to human agencies of good will.³²

Conclusion

In his *Confessions*, book 8, Augustine tells of the conversion of Victorinus, a teacher of Rhetoric in Rome, who became a Christian late in life. At one point Victorinus, an old man, told Simplicianus, the father of Ambrose the bishop of Milan, that he himself had studied the Christian scriptures and believed the gospel. He said privately to Simplicianus "Understand that I am already a Christian." But Simplicianus replied, "I will not believe it, nor will I rank you among Christians, unless I see you in the Church of Christ." Victorinus retorted, "Do walls then make Christians?" Later he did confess his faith before a gathered congregation and was the occasion for Christian rejoicing.

My point is that the present trend toward less open identification with a Christian community has significant consequences not only for those communities but for believers as well. Christian leaders are unwise to respond by minimizing the importance of the community—the church—and by removing or minimizing the boundaries important to self-identity. The church is more than the sum total of its members. It is the *communio sanctorum* and the long history of the Christian community which is rooted in its Savior and the earliest believers. Involvement in the church community is essential to the formation of identity and values for members of the Christian faith. As my friend, Michael Weed, once quipped, one purpose of the church is to make us better than we want to be!

³² Niebuhr, 153.

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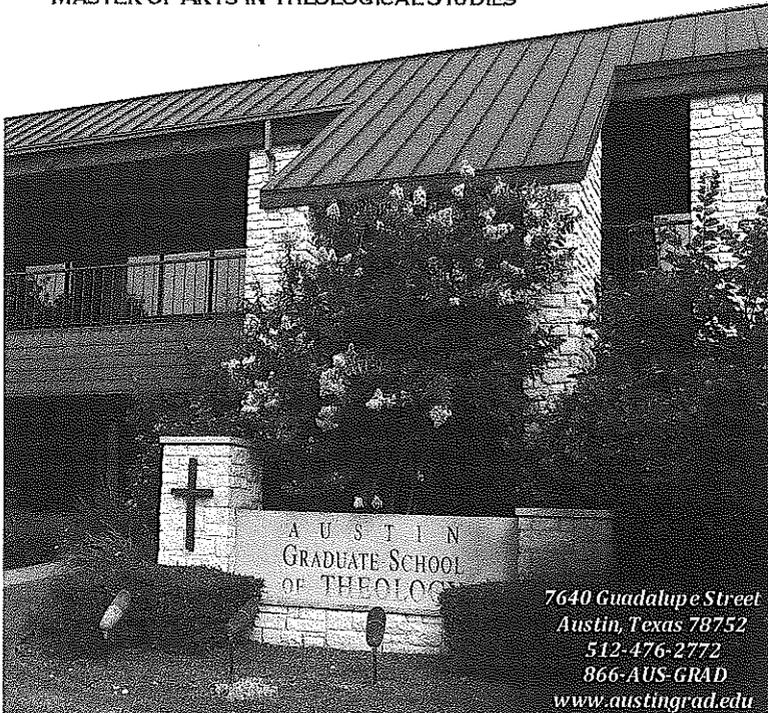


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Contributors

M. Todd Hall is Director of the Library and Instructor at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Allan J. McNicol is A.B. Cox Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack C. and Ruth Wright Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Stan Reid is President of Austin Graduate School of Theology

R. Mark Shipp is Pat E. Harrell Professor of Old Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

James W. Thompson is Professor of New Testament and Associate Dean at the Graduate School of Theology, Abilene Christian University

Michael R. Weed is Billy Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Wendell Willis is Professor of Bible at Abilene Christian University