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A biblical and evangelical view of Christian community

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In November 2001, Cape Breton's Prince Mine closed. It was the last operating coal mine in the Cape and its closure ended 280 years of mining there.

News reports document that it was a tough day for the miners when the Prince Mine closed. Most of them, like miners in almost every corner of the world, had never known any other kind of life, nor had those who had come before them known any other life. Life in the mine, with its attendant dangers, its close working quarters, like daily life for the all the families in the "company" town's living quarters, had created a very closely knit community. It resembled the kinds of villages found in mining areas around the world, even those mill towns in the Spanish Pyrenees that I got to know when I lived there. It also resembled the close-knit communities around the world in which workers from one generation to another knew only one thing, and their families had, for the most part, had never traveled further than close metropolitan sites. Places like the hill country of Judaea in Biblical times were so different from Cape Breton but so much like Cape Breton at the same time.

Some 200 years earlier -- in fact a mere 20 years after mining had first begun in Cape Breton -- but across the Atlantic some 4000 kilometres away, a young Anglican clergyman named George Whitefield was rattling the status-quo of the Church of England. He had the effrontery to begin to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, not only outside the bounds of his own Anglican parish but even in the open-air -- Lord, have mercy! Worse yet, he had the effrontery to

be preaching not to those whom the bishops and clergy deemed worthy to have the gospel preached to them, those fine upstanding people that one reads about in *Tom Jones* or those fine upstanding social figures so well depicted in Hogarth's engravings. He was preaching -- gasp! -- even to coal miners.

Needless to say, the close knit community of Anglican bishops and priests on the road to securing better positions closed ranks against this young upstart. Whitefield had preached his first sermon, which alienated most of the immediate clergy and his bishop, when he was only 21; he was only 22 when he crossed the Atlantic to preach the gospel in the American colonies and start an orphanage for the poor in the then colony of Georgia; he started preaching in the open in England on his return when he was only 24. Most of the clergy, of course, were of riper years and knew better. So, assuming that Whitefield was just a young turk, they tried to rein him in.

But, as happened with Jesus, "the opposition of the clergy increased the people's inclination to hear [Whitefield]; and their crowding to hear increased the opposition of the clergy. Pamphlets were published against his sermon on regeneration, and sermons were preached against him, his doctrines, and his proceedings." The people welcomed Whitefield gladly. Thousands upon thousands turned out in the open air to hear him preach, and he did so, without technical amplification. (He only found it difficult to preach, he wrote, when the wind was against him.)

As I said, the crowd included colliers, whom the clergy deemed unworthy of the gospel. The Church of England clergy asked: how could they possibly understand something so lofty and so profound as the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? None of the clergy bothered to consider this close knit band of brothers as worthy of hearing the gospel.

But Whitefield did. Here's how the 19th century American historian, Joseph Tracy, tells the story:

The colliers in the vicinity [of Bristol] were numerous, rude, and ignorant. When provoked, they were the terror of the city; and at all times it was thought dangerous to go among them. Whitefield went one day to Hannam Mount, and preached to about a hundred of them. 'I thought,' he said, 'it might be doing the service of my Creator, who had a mountain for his pulpit and the heavens for his sounding-board, and who, when his Gospel was refused by the Jews, sent his servants into the highways and hedges.' The

news spread rapidly among the colliers, and his audience soon increased to twenty thousand. The Gospel was indeed ‘good *news*’ to them, for they had never heard preaching before. ‘Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to hear of a Jesus who was friend to publicans, and who came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was, to see the white gutters made by their tears, which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal-pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep convictions, which, as the event proved, happily ended in sound and thorough conversion. The change was visible to all; though numbers chose to impute it to any thing rather than the finger of God.’ (Tracy 48–49)

Let me turn from these two stories of these two coal-mining communities to the Bible for a moment to consider the subject that you are here to reflect on, since I know that you are not here to listen to stories about miners or even the preaching of George Whitefield but rather “community”.

The term “community” is remarkably absent in English translations of the Bible, at least until recent translations. For example, the King James Version contains not one use of the term “community”. The Revised Standard Version, a mid-20th century revision of the King James Bible, contains 5 uses of the word, all of which occur in 1, 2, and 3 Maccabees!

The NRSV, a late 20th century revision of the Revised Standard Version contains the same 5 uses as found in the RSV, but it also contains a dozen more that aren’t found in either of its predecessors. Of these dozen 3/4 of them are found in the translation of the book of Deuteronomy, while the other half-dozen uses are scattered about the New Testament. More recently, the New Living Bible contains literally dozens of uses of the word “community”, almost all of which, like the NRSV are confined to the Old Testament.

Now, in the vast majority of the cases where the word “community” is used in the Bible it is used in a limited way as an identification of “Israelites”. That is, “community” means an ethnic “community” that can also be identified geographically.

While at first glance, this might be surprising, it really shouldn’t be. The Hebrew words that both the NRSV and the New Living Bible translate are words that are used for an identifiable gathering of an ethnically or visibly distinct group of people, for example, the community of Israel within the eastern Mediterranean or, in the few New Testament uses, the community of Galilean fishermen who were followers of Jesus as opposed to the rest of Israel. In

other words, “community” is used to talk about close knit groups of people whose lives are bound together by common experiences and a common place of living. “Community” in English translations of the Bible, for the most part, identify the same kinds of “communities” of people as our Cape Breton miners and Whitefield’s Bristol miners. Of course, the word “community” could also be used to identify Whitefield’s Anglican hierarchy and the upper-class laity that formed the “deserving” community. But, more on that anon.

The absence of the word “community” in English translations of the New Testament is striking. And this is important to note for anyone who is interested in a Biblical understanding of community. Throughout most of the books of the Bible, “community” means a closely knit group of people whose common experiences of life together made them into a clearly definable and identifiable group. The clearest example is the ethnically unique group called the Jews. And when we arrive at the New Testament, that group is still very much a reality. The earliest Christians, including Jesus, understood their mission as one that took place within a particular space and time that was characterized by closely knit groups of people whose common experiences of life together made them into a clearly definable and identifiable group.

Necessarily, this also meant the earliest Christian mission took place with a clear awareness of boundaries between communities. And these boundaries were clear and infrangible, that is, unable to be crossed. Boundaries, based on clear conventions, identifying those who were “in”, also meant boundaries with equally clear definitions of who was “out”. Such boundaries are the key feature of the Biblical world, old and new, just as they are of any tribal society in the world. The world of the Old Testament, like the one that Jesus and his earliest followers encountered, was a world characterized by a tribal existence in which “we” alone are human or people, while “others” are not real people, or not really human. So, while it is true that “we” in the Bible may be Jewish, “we” in the world of the Bible might also be Roman, or Greek, or Brahmin; “others” might be Gentiles in the Bible, but “others” for Romans would be non-Romans, for Greeks they would be barbarians, while for Brahmin they would be anyone of a

lower caste. The point is: the world is comprised of “we” and “others”. “We” are the community that we are concerned about.

Neither the creative cosmopolitanism of the Persian Empire, nor the cosmopolitan ideology of its virtual heir, Alexander the Great, nor even the imperial benevolence of Rome, challenged these boundaries: each of these hegemonies or great powers simply sought to let these little tribes carry on with their tribal existence, as long as they did not do anything that would challenge the imperial authority to referee the wars that regularly took place among these little tribes, wars of “we” against “others”. These world powers were not about bringing peace but about managing conflict among competing communities.

But, though the earliest Christians, including Jesus, accepted that this was the context for the proclamation of the good news of God’s good plan for His creation, they did not understand that their job was simply to accept this state of affairs. As expressed by Paul the apostle himself, the Christian ideal was not to accept tribal division but to proclaim its overthrow in Christ. This revolutionary proclamation is expressed most clearly in Gal 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” In my classes, I tell my students that this proclamation alone would have been reason to attack early Christian preachers, for breaking down the boundaries is the greatest threat to group self-identities that are constructed on the basis of including only people like me, and excluding everyone who is not like me. Paul would have had everyone against him... and he still does, for the same reasons.

But, as Paul notes in this same letter, as well as in his letter to the Romans, community of the kind that Paul is proclaiming comes at a price. In Paul’s understanding community not of people who are like each other but of unlikes, people who are so unlike each other as to be enemies of each other, is predicated on the assumption that anyone is welcome to it because anyone who wants to enter realizes that he or she, like all others, has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. It is not just the “others”, who have fallen short, as Paul says to the Jews reading his letter to the Romans. As he tells his Jewish readers in Romans 1 and 2, ‘You no

doubt agree that the Gentiles have fallen short, but what about us, Jews? Have we not fallen short, too? Is it only the “others”, the Gentiles, who have sinned against God?” He might also have asked: is it only women who have sinned, and not men, only slaves and not free, only the sick who are subject to God’s just wrath for what they have done or not done and not also the healthy? In other words, this community that Paul proclaims is predicated on the assumption that all are sinners in the eyes of God, who alone is just and holy.

But, the Christian notion of community as Paul proclaimed it did not stop with consigning sinners to Hell. Though, as Paul says, all deserve the punishment reserved to sinners, the Christian gospel proclaims that there is forgiveness for all sinners -- both “we” and “others” -- in the death of Christ and there is life for all sinners in the resurrection of Christ. The new Christian notion of community starts with the assumption that we are all at odds with someone, including God, but that God in Christ has begun to reconcile humans to Himself by the blood of the cross, making a “we” that needs have no “others” unless those “others” wish to remain so.

So, my first point is that the early Christian mission accepted that people understood themselves as being members of closely knit groups of people whose experiences were in common with those who were like them and were radically different from -- even at odds with! -- those who were different from them. My second point is that Paul understood that God the Father, through the work of His Son and by the power of the Holy Spirit, had begun to create a whole new community, one in which “likes” slowly began to embrace “unlikes” as fellow children of God (John 1:12), and thus as brothers and sisters who were beginning to share with each other all that they had and all that they were (Acts 2:42-46).¹ This was beginning to happen and it flew in the face of millennia-long traditions of tribal enmity. And as it happened, miracle

¹ An attempt to express this is found in the NRSV translation of Eph 6:23. There, where the RSV translates the Greek words found in Ephesians 6.23 more literally as “brethren” (Peace be to the brethren), the NRSV, seeking to avoid the gender exclusivity of both the original Greek and the RSV, actually gets at this second meaning of “community” by translating the Greek word “brothers” as “community”: Peace be to the whole community.

of miracles, even their lives, characterized all of them by sins of various kinds, began to change into something that God would indeed bless.

My third point is that it is still happening because it still needs to happen, even within what is often called today “Christian community”. In the first red-hot fires of new life in the first century, Christians like Peter in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius knew that God was doing something new; very soon after those early events, however, and throughout the church’s history, in Whitefield’s day and in ours, there were and are those who have regularly retreated to a pre-Christian understanding of community, one in which “we” are better than “they”. They may do so for reasons of ethnicity, or class, or gender, the same three boundaries that Paul prophetically claimed that Christ had overcome.

Accordingly, many today, within and outside the Christian family do not realize or have forgotten that this kind of community, in which “we” embrace “others” isn’t just a given or some next stage on the stage of human evolutionary development but rather a community that came at a cost. Unfortunately, many who still claim to be Christian have not done a very good job of explaining to people who, for whatever reason, have no connection with Christian faith that talk of “tolerance” or of a “just society” or of joining together in spite of our differences are really all elements of the legacy of the Christian gospel that permeated the West before the 4th century AD and the East since the great efforts of missionaries over the course of both millennia. It is not surprising that bright world leaders, such as those of post-Mao China, have asked Christian scholars to come to their country to help them understand why Christianity succeeded in making what could only have been a dream into an actual reality. And what those Chinese leaders are hearing again and again is that Gal 3:28 is at the heart of it all, for in those words Paul proclaimed Christian community as a place where all who are enemies gather and receive

forgiveness, all because of Christ. Those leaders are smart enough to know that no other religion or civilization has achieved this ‘community’.²

Yet many “right here in river city”, in the Christian West, find such a statement uncomfortable. It is exclusive, they say. They want community, but not at the historic price that community has been offered, namely, a clear recognition of the scandal of Christ’s death and resurrection. They ask: Can’t we please have community but without Christ? Or, maybe we’ll take Jesus’ teaching, but not the scandal of Christ’s death and resurrection!

Many who say this are simply unaware that their dreams and hopes for the kind of community that I have described are in fact unrealistic without Christ. Our job as Christians is to show that it is not unrealistic but only if it takes shape within the context of Christ’s unique death and resurrection. Our job is to instruct them in matters of history, as much as in matters of faith, so that they are not ignorant. The Chinese leaders know that they are ignorant, and have sought to learn; I wonder if those in the West are too proud to acknowledge their own ignorance of their own history?

But, there are also some Christians -- or better said, Christian alumni -- who are aware of these historic events and who, in spite of their awareness, are embarrassed by the apparent claim to Christian exclusivity and consider that they have graduated to a higher level of consciousness than thinking that community of this New Testament kind can only happen in Christ. These people may be embarrassed by the Christian claim or they may be cowards, unwilling to speak out when others have differing views, but whatever the case “they” look at people like “me” as an “other”, even as Whitefield’s Anglican hierarchy looked at him and called him mad. Some of

² Some forms of Sikhism, for example, that promote this kind of expansive community, may do so as a result of contact with 16th century Christian pietist missions. Likewise, Mahayana or compassionate Buddhism, like many current (that is, not “original”) forms of native religions, may reflect transformations of earlier beliefs in light of contact with Christian mission and missionaries. See also the work of (Jensen) who contends that what we know of Confucianism was shaped in large part by Jesuit missionaries who configured Confucianism apologetically to make it a kind of bridge to Christianity for Chinese.

these people are good people, but I believe that when they are asked at the close of history to render an account of the grounds of their actions, they will find themselves admitting that they have kept the great news to themselves and denied others a real chance to know true community.

Personally, I believe that the greatest challenge for those who would like not just to talk about “Christian community” today but to practice it is first of all to overcome a notion that community is essentially a gathering of “likes”: whites with whites, blacks with blacks, women with women, men with men, Irish Catholics with Irish Catholics, French Catholics with French Catholics, Lebanese Catholics with Lebanese Catholics, Anglican managers with Anglican managers, poor miners with other poor miners.

And given that power brings responsibility, as it did to Persia, and Alexander, and Rome, and eventually to Christian Rome, and Byzantium, and Canterbury, and most recently North America... I think that we who live within the hegemony of North America are given an opportunity to be as evangelically disruptive of pre-Christian notions of community as Paul and George Whitfield were in their day. We can either be like Whitefield’s Anglican hierarchy and oppose New Testament community, or we can be disruptive of the limits that culture imposes on us. We can accept our imperial conflict management position that allows us to referee conflicts between “we’s” and “others” or we can find sacrificial ways to incarnate Christian community that is, community that is centered on the redeeming work of God in Christ through the power of the Spirit. My parish made that choice years ago when we adopted our mission statement: “transforming broken lives into world-changing disciples”. We know that we’re broken and we invite others who are broken to come to Christ and begin to be transformed with us and then, with us, to get on with building that new community. The invitation is there, as Paul might have said in another context, to the coal-miner first but also to the scholar.

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