

REDEMPTIVE COMMUNITY AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

A Public Faith Curriculum
by Phyllis Crosby

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Purpose

This article connects Christian mission to Christian community demonstrating that Christian community is the primary vehicle for both personal transformation and cultural engagement and shows how Christian communities can make the Kingdom of God accessible to the wider world.

Article Overview

Introduction

Chapter 1 *Reframing the Christian Mission in Light of Christian Community*

The Church's mission is to establish redemptive communities within which and through which Christ is made known to the world.

Chapter 2 *What is a Redemptive Community?*

- A. Jesus as the Centerpiece of Community
- B. Transformed by Grace
- C. Making Community Visible and Accessible
- D. A Counter-Culture of Kingdom Values

Conclusion

Introduction

You've no doubt heard the expression "hidden in plain sight." It's like spending ten minutes looking for your glasses only to find them on the top of your head, or holding your keys in your hand while you search for them. Sometimes the most obvious things can be the hardest to see.

The concept of Christian community in scripture is quite similar; it's so pervasive and yet its full significance can be easy to miss. The biblical idea of community provides the backdrop for everything else in the Christian life.

Rightly understood Christian community will shape how we think about the Kingdom of God. Personal and societal transformation, the Great Commission, evangelism and discipleship, are all colored by our view of community. Thus the very way we understand and carry out our mission is affected. Within a proper community context, evangelism becomes natural and enjoyable rather than the awkward process it is for many; and, resultantly, people come to Christ.

The Pervasiveness of Community

"Okay," you may ask, "but is Christian community really that pervasive in the Bible?" Consider the following:

- *John 17:21-23* – We are to be in community as God is in eternal community ...
- *Luke 6:12* – Jesus began his ministry by calling his disciples and forming a community ...
- *Matthew 6:9-13* – The Lord's Prayer is a corporate prayer, meant to be prayed together ...
- *Matthew 5:14* – We are called to be a city on a hill, not just individual lights ...
- *1 Peter 2:9* – We are a holy nation, not only individual citizens ...
- *1 Peter 2:9* – We are a royal priesthood not just individual priests ...
- *Romans 12:3-5* – We are body parts not individual bodies ...
- *Ephesians 2:21* – Together we are the temple of God not individual buildings ...
- The majority of the New Testament was written to groups rather than to individuals ...

All of these passages reveal our need for interdependence; we are more together than we are alone. Christian community is so much a part of what it means to be a Christian that the New Testament writers never questioned its place in the Kingdom of God.

Introduction Summary Points:

- The idea of Christian community is pervasive throughout scripture
- Christian community shapes our view of the Kingdom of God
- Christian community gives form and structure to personal transformation, cultural engagement, The Great Commission, and evangelism and discipleship

Chapter 1- Reframing the Christian Mission in Light of Christian Community

The Church's mission is to establish redemptive communities within which and through which Christ is made known to the world.

The Christian mission is first and foremost a corporate mission. Our individual callings fit within and are subordinate to this broader corporate calling.

What is God doing?

It is important to realize that God is at work in the world and that he invites us to take part in his work or mission. However our mission does not encompass the entirety of his mission but fits into his overall plan. We need to understand our mission in light of his greater work.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul writes about God's plan as being broader than our individual salvation. In Chapter 1, verse 10, he describes salvation as a plan to unite or reconcile *all things* in Christ. Paul describes our personal reconciliation as one of God's objectives, but explains that it is also a means of a broader reconciliation that comes about as "the wall of hostility" is broken down between people groups within Christian community.

In this broader context, the apostle Paul describes the process of reconciliation that brings us into Christian community. He says that together, in community, we are being built into the temple of God, the very dwelling place of the Almighty.

Ephesians 2:19-22: So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

This passage is not centered on the individual but on the community; we are being built together into a dwelling place for God.

To fully understand this passage we need to realize that the temple in the Old Testament was central to community life as a place of worship and ministry. It was a visible sign that God was present in the midst of the people.

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul is explaining how God is building a new temple for the same purpose. New-York-City-based pastor, Tim Keller says that, "the new temple that God is building consists of a community of those transformed by grace."¹ Today, it is Christian community that is the

visible sign of God's presence and a place of ministry rather than a temple built with bricks.

Earlier, it was stated that *the Church's mission is to establish redemptive communities within which and through which Christ is made known to the world.* We make Christ known in many ways, including proclamation, social service and cultural engagement. Our mission involves all three of these but there is something else in addition: Our congregations are to be the tangible expression of God's Kingdom, the visible demonstration of Jesus Christ that is present in and through his followers.

What are we supposed to be doing?

When we look at the Great Commission in light of Ephesians 2:19-22, we see that our mission fits into God's greater mission, part of which is building his temple. As we seek to fulfill the Great Commission, we bring people into a community that is being built into the temple of God. The temple or community then becomes the visible expression of God on earth, making it possible for still others to see and know God. Christian community is a means of making Christ known to the world, but it also plays a significant role in how we are to live our life with God and in response to God. Community is integral to both salvation and sanctification.

We can't get away from the communal aspect of our mission—we are to establish redemptive communities, and it is through redemptive community that we are able to do this. Redemptive community is both the means and the end of our missional objective.

Matthew 28:18-20: *And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

The Great Commission is an incredible passage in which Jesus begins by declaring his lordship over all space and ends with him claiming all time as his own. Sandwiched in between these incredible claims Jesus gives us a four-part command. We are to *go, make, baptize* and *teach*.

Go—We are to go to all nations. This spreading of the gospel is to be both intentional and organic. We are to send out missionaries to new places who intentionally spread the gospel. But each redemptive community also grows and spreads organically causing the gospel to spread locally. Neither of these means of "going" can be overlooked.

Make—We are to make disciples. This part of the command goes well beyond preaching the gospel or even making converts. We are to press on until converts are yoked to Christ in discipleship.

Discipleship requires the “growing together” mentioned in Ephesians 2, which only happens in community.

It is as we are built into the temple of God that we can become agents of reconciliation. Implicit in discipleship is the need to be part of a redemptive community that makes up God’s dwelling place. The community itself is an integral part of the discipleship process.

Baptize—This part of the passage shows the Trinitarian aspect of the command. The Trinity is God in community and we are to baptize new believers in the name of this holy Community. Through baptism we become identified with the Trinitarian God and, in light of John 17:21-23, become hopelessly and beautifully entangled with one another.

Teach—We are to teach disciples to observe all that Jesus commanded. Because Jesus claimed to come to fulfill rather than abolish the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:17), this command encompasses the entire teaching of the biblical narrative, from creation to new creation. We are to observe Jesus’ words and his deeds.

The new life of a disciple is so radically different that we can’t learn to “observe all” quickly or with only one teacher. We learn to live redemptively by living in a redemptive community allowing others to model what it means to live and love as Jesus intended us to. Therefore redemptive community is not only the goal but it is also the means to learning how to live as we ought.

When Ephesians 2 and the Great Commission are seen together, we can conclude that we are intended to live in redemptive communities that reveal Christ to the world. This is the essence of the Christian mission.

When we look at the Great Commission in its entirety, we see that its fulfillment is not synonymous with completing the task of world evangelization; nor is it the same as church planting. Evangelism and church planting are essential to the mission but are not the entirety of the mission. The Church’s mission is to establish redemptive communities (or churches) through which the entire life of Christ can be seen and understood.

Chapter 1 Summary Points:

- The Church’s mission is to establish redemptive communities within which and through which Christ is made know to the world.
- Together, in community, we are being built into the temple of God.
- Our congregations are to be the tangible expression of God’s Kingdom.
- Together, Ephesians 2 and the Great Commission show that we are intended to live in redemptive communities that reveal Christ to the world.

Chapter 2 - What is a Redemptive Community?

If our mission is to establish redemptive communities then the next logical questions are what is a redemptive community and how do Christians become a redemptive community?

First and foremost *Jesus will be the centerpiece* of any community seeking to represent him to the world. Then also for a community to be redemptive its members must be continually *transformed by grace* encounters with Jesus Christ. Third, the community must be *visible and accessible* to those outside the community so that outsiders can also experience Jesus. And the congregation must establish *a counter culture of kingdom values*, offering alternative ways of living.

A. Jesus as the Centerpiece of Community

Ephesians 2:20-22: ... Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him (Jesus), you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Jesus is the cornerstone of our congregational foundation and so also the centerpiece. So a redemptive community is one in which Jesus is worshipped. It is a place where Jesus' teachings are taught and obeyed and his life is experienced as our new life. Thus, redemptive community will continually remember and retell the human story with God as the redeeming hero.

Lesslie Newbigin, in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* states, "The Christian congregation ... is a place where people find their true freedom, their true dignity, and their true equality in reverence to One who is worthy of all the praise that we can offer."²

Newbigin goes on to say, "A Christian congregation is thus a body of people with gratitude to spare, a gratitude that can spill over into care for the neighbor. And it is of the essence of the matter that this concern for the neighbor is the overflow of a great gift of grace and not, primarily, the expression of commitment to a moral cause."³

The idea of praise and worship of something supremely worthy directly counters modern skepticism and upends the disenchantment that is in vogue today. This gives any congregation where Jesus is the centerpiece a unique message of hope for its neighbors.

B. Transformed by Grace

If your friends and family could look into your Christian community, what would they see? This is a scary question because our communities are not perfect. If they were, Paul wouldn't have needed to admonish the Colossians to bear with one another and to forgive each other. He assumed that people in the faith would have complaints against others.

Part of the reason for assuming that the Church would have relational difficulties was that it was made up of people who didn't naturally get along – Jews and gentiles, Roman citizens and non-citizens, slaves and free men, men and women. The Christian community was racially, ethnically, economically and gender diverse.

When people who are natural enemies are able to live together in harmony with love and respect they become a beacon of God's grace. Just before telling us that God intends to build us together into the temple of God, Paul explains how Jesus' blood destroys hostility between peoples. In Ephesians 2:1-18, specifically verses 14 through 16, Paul explains Jesus' unifying work, "*For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.*"

Of course, even in a homogeneous community, fallen humanity finds it difficult to live in harmony. Yet our sinfulness can reveal God's grace. The power of love and forgiveness comes out when we are at our worst and people care enough to press in and challenge us, all the while accepting us for who we are. These are grace encounters that lead to change. These encounters can encourage us when we become frustrated with brothers and sisters in the faith, knowing that it is through grace that we experience personal transformation.

Redemptive communities are made up of people who are being transformed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ. When we begin to understand the depth of our sin and the cost of our redemption, we become open to the Holy Spirit and can enter a process of humbling and change. When we truly recognize God's grace in our own lives we become conduits of grace for others. This is not an easy place to get to, either personally or corporately, but it is necessary if the community is to be one of redemption and reconciliation.

C. Making Community Visible and Accessible

Windows and Doors

Christian community is designed to be both visible and available to those outside the faith. Through our community, we allow others to "taste and see that the Lord is good." We can create *windows* and *doors* that allow people outside of the faith to draw near and see God in and through his people.

Windows into Community – The outside world needs to be able look in, through our behavior and relationships, and see Jesus Christ. We open ourselves up to this kind of scrutiny by building windows into our communities. We allow people to see us for who we really are. Jesus said that people outside the faith would know that we belong to him if we love

one another. Love is just one window through which the world can see and understand Jesus.

The Window of Love:

Love is the primary attribute of Christian community. Jesus loved both sacrificially and indiscriminately. And we are commanded to love in the same way. This may be one of the hardest commands in the whole Bible to fulfill. In fact it is so against human nature that love becomes a hallmark of the Christian. Our love is to extend beyond family and friends and our Christian community to our neighbors and even to our enemies.

We are identifiable as Jesus' disciples when we love one another:

Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:34-35

Loving one another isn't easy, but it creates a bond of unity:

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you forgive. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another ... Colossians 3:12-17

We can't achieve the level of love that God intends for us alone; we have to do it in community. What better way to reveal him to the world than to be like him in the world?

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. 1 John 4:16-5:1

In the *Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark explains how the early Christian interpretation of God's love provided a window for the world to look in, "... that because God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe, that it must extend to "all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community."⁴

Christian love is to extend to all people. It crosses all boundaries making it possible for many people to come in contact with Jesus through his followers.

The Window of Reconciliation:

Perhaps the most powerful window that we have as a community is that of reconciliation. The biblical view of reconciliation is multifaceted, including not only humanity's reconciliation to God but also reconciliation among peoples. Reconciliation on the human level is a picture and foretaste of our potential to be reconciled to God and is essential to Christian faith.

Let's look again at Ephesians 2. Reconciliation is a strong theme in this passage, and although this passage can apply to individuals, it is specifically speaking of reconciliation between ethnic groups—Jews and gentiles. Note that this passage says that we are reconciled *together with* our former enemies to Christ and *so together* we are growing into a dwelling place of God.

Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands – remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit. Ephesians 2:11-22

This passage is relevant to reconciliation of all segments of society as well as individuals. Christ is committed to tearing down all dividing walls including education levels, class, profession, gender, and urban/rural distinctions. We, as people transformed by grace, are able to facilitate this reconciliation within our Christian communities.

Reconciliation is an essential element of urban mission in the 21st century. Global cities are magnetic, attracting people of all races and nationalities. Many of the people that come to a city are poor and marginalized, looked down upon by those with higher education and income. In addition, many people who come to the city are from other countries, often countries that were once at war with the home country. The list of peoples that need to be reconciled to one another is unimaginably long, including the very personal aspect of family and gender as well as the more global realms of race and nationality.

Relationships within our congregations—specifically love and reconciliation—provide windows for the world to see Jesus. If our relationships are a true reflection of Christ’s love and his kingdom values, people will begin to see him more clearly. Love and reconciliation are just two of the relational windows available to any community.

Doors That Lead In and Out—If *windows* allow the outside world to look in and see Jesus, *doors* allow the stranger to come in and experience Jesus. Doors into our communities are open to outsiders so that they may come in and take God’s challenge to taste and see that he is good. When we welcome people into our communities they experience Jesus firsthand. Doors of course go two ways; not only do we welcome people from the outside in but Christians also travel from inside the community to outside, taking the love of Christ to the world.

The Door of Hospitality

Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.
Hebrews 13:1-2

Hospitality is a biblical concept that is foundational to the Christian idea of community. Though done for the benefit of other people, hospitality is most profoundly a response to God for his hospitality toward us. In such, hospitality takes on a moral dimension; it is something that the Christian must do.

Biblical hospitality goes well beyond the idea of entertaining family and friends. It involves opening ourselves up to people beyond our immediate circle of relationships in order to love and serve them in the name of Christ. When we willingly open our hearts to strangers and offer deep human connection we can meet the deepest human longings in a fellow being. In *The Wounded Healer*, Henri Nouwen says, “that it is through hospitality that the human soul finds healing.”⁵

The word hospitality communicates a kind of welcoming, generosity and care. True hospitality is *generous others-centeredness*. Through hospitality, a host *provides for* and *is attentive to* the needs and comfort of his or her guest. Hospitality is a language that says, “You, my guest, are important.”

When we host a meal or have people in our homes we have the opportunity to develop and deepen relationships. We can convey love and acceptance through our welcoming. Hospitality involves taking responsibility for the comfort of our guests as they entrust themselves to our care. It is through this dynamic of trust and responsibility that we come to know others.

Generosity is an important part of hospitality. Through generosity we provide something at a cost to ourselves. The cost might be time, effort or money but we need to be generous in our hospitality. At times a listening ear might be the most generous gift available.

The Door of Service

Social service is love for love's sake. It is a door by which Christians can go out into the world and live our lives for the benefit or relief of those whom Christ loves. This love is often, but not always, underscored and aided by words.

Christian service involves acts of mercy and a commitment to justice. In the following verses, note the command to take our Christian behavior beyond the church to all men. We are commanded to seek the good, respect what is right, be at peace, do good, be kind, show consideration and give honor to those outside the body of Christ.

- *See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.* 1 Thessalonians 5:15

- *Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.* Romans 12:17-18

- *So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.* Galatians 6:10

- *And the Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all...* 2 Timothy 2:24

- *Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be uncontentious, gentle, showing every consideration for all men.* Titus 3:1-2

- *Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.* 1 Peter 2:17

The Door of Work

There is one door that most of us pass through several times a week: our front door. As we head off to work each morning we can't remain cloistered in the safety of our Christian community. For anyone who is able to make sense of his or her work in light of the gospel this is a great opportunity.

We are told to do our work as unto the Lord. This involves two things; first we do our work according to kingdom values such as honesty, integrity and justice. This alone will be so counter intuitive in some cultures that we will have ample opportunity to explain the gospel.

But there is a second way that we do our work as unto the Lord. In Genesis, we learn that, as image bearers of God, we have been given dominion in this world. Some of us have a great deal of dominion while others rule over very little. It is how we rule our dominion that matters. Our dominion is basically what we have control over. When we structure our realms so as to reflect Christ we are doing our work unto the Lord.

The Door of Proclamation

Proclamation is a door into the faith, and so into Christian community. We invite our friends to come through this door so that they may live and walk with Christ. But many times our friends will first enter our community and later enter the faith.

Community is important to evangelism because it allows us to give our non-Christian friends relational connections with multiple believers while they are in the process of coming to faith. In this way the non-Christian can experience a wider spectrum of the Kingdom and ultimately see more of the King himself.

In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1, the Apostle Paul gives thanks for the Corinthian Church because, *“the testimony of Christ was confirmed among you.”* The truth of the Christian story was being confirmed among or within the Christian community.

Non-believers can experience Jesus firsthand within Christian community but a fuller understanding of the gospel will often require verbal explanation. The ultimate goal of our community is not that our friends will experience our love but that they will experience the love of Christ. It is important that we allow proclamation to play its important role in bringing others to Christ. We don't want to lead our friends into our community but leave them outside of the faith.

D. A Counter-Culture of Kingdom Values

Every society will have aspects of its culture that will resonate with part of the gospel. These cultural elements are clear pictures of God's truth that will be easily accepted. It is also true that every society will recoil when confronted by other parts of the gospel and there will be great opposition to biblical values both personally and institutionally.

Public truth, or the body of assumptions and beliefs that are the basis of public life, are either in conformity with the truths of the gospel or they are not. When public truth is in conflict with Kingdom values, Christian community has two vital roles to play. First our communities and congregations become places where our faith is protected from the onslaught of socially accepted values. And second, through Christian congregations, believers can challenge public truth and help bring it into conformity with the gospel. This is done as we present and live out a counter-culture of Kingdom values.

It is important to note here that we are not trying to create a Christian utopia or heaven on earth. We are not trying to perfect society but we can affect it to some degree. More will be said in the section about cultural engagement.

Community, Guardians of the Faith—Community is designed to be the guardian of the faith, making it possible for Christians to live out the most difficult tenets of their faith without compromising with cultural demands.

Christian values frequently run counter to values held by the general society. This is because Jesus presents an alternative view of life in this world and an alternate approach to everything we do. This new orientation that comes with our new life in Christ corrects (over time, to the degree that we grasp it) the distortions of our fallen perspective. As believers come together in community and begin to live out of God's value system, they challenge one another and become a counter-culture showing a new way.

Many of Christ's commands that tell us what should be normative for Christians are not only counter-culture but often counter-intuitive. Things like loving your enemy and praying for those who persecute you, or the idea of turning the other cheek, serving the needy and regarding the poor as more important than yourself would be difficult if not impossible to embrace alone. It is only as the greater community makes these values normative that many individuals will be able to live them out.

Our views of power, money, sex and status are naturally shaped by our culture. Christian community becomes a place to re-shape our attitudes because the group makes Christ's value system normative rather than that of the broader culture.

A redemptive community is a place where it is considered normal to live in allegiance to Christ and according to his value system. So within our communities, expressions of God's love and grace should be normal – both to other believers and to the wider world. High ethical and moral standards are held in common by the group, making Christ-like behavior normal. This normalizing of the Christian life makes it easier for each member of the community to live in a manner that is often contrary to the broader society. This is also how young believers learn what it means to be a Christian and to trust and obey Christ.

Many practices of the Christian life have both an individual or private component and a corporate and public component. For example growth occurs both privately and communally. Evangelism is done by individuals and in groups. We have personal and public worship and we take personal and corporate responsibility to serve. When the group makes these practices normal it is easier for individual to be successful when apart from the group.

Community, Cultural Engagement—For some, the idea of cultural engagement for Christians is an oxymoron. The idea of “being set apart for Christ” has somehow been translated into “needing to live apart from the world.” But as Christians we are called to live *in* the world, albeit not *of* the world.

But what is cultural engagement and what is the Church's role? How do we represent the Kingdom of God in the life of society?

To consider the Christian's working relationship to the world, let's look at Jesus' call to be salt and light. This passage reveals how we, as

communities, can engage culture and make Kingdom alternatives available to all.

"You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how will it be made salty again? It is good for nothing anymore, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under the peck-measure, but on the lampstand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Matthew 5:13-16

In this passage, it is important to understand what Jesus is referring to as "a city set on a hill." This is not a reference to the cities to which we are trying to take the gospel. We are not looking to create a Christian utopia on earth. The reference is to the body of Christ. We will be like a city set on a hill, with our light shining so that others can see the glory of God. Our light is to be unmistakable – impossible to miss.

Because Jesus refers to his body – the community of believers – as a city, we can agree with Saint Augustine when he says that in every city there are two cities: the city of God and the city of man. Congregations of believers in your city should be a visible expression of the Kingdom of God. Everything that we embrace that is counter to the larger culture is to be displayed as an alternative way to live life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ; how we relate to one another in love, how we deal with both interpersonal strife and ethnic strife, our views of sex, power, money and position are just some of the ways we offer a Kingdom alternative to our culture.

The Anglican pastor, John Stott, in an interview with Christianity today, explains Jesus' teaching in Mathew 5:6:

Regarding social transformation, I've reflected a great deal on the salt and light metaphors, the models that Jesus himself chose in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. "You are the salt of the earth; you are the light of the world." It seems to me that those models must be said to contain at least three things.

First, that Christians are radically different from non-Christians, or if they are not, they ought to be. Jesus sets over against each other two communities. On the one hand there is the world, and on the other hand there is you, who are the dark world's light. Jesus implied that we are as different as light from darkness and salt from decay.

Second, Christians must permeate non-Christian society. Salt does no good if it stays in the saltshaker. Light does no good if you hide it under a bed or bucket. It has to permeate the darkness. So both metaphors call us not just to be different, but to permeate society.

The third, the more controversial implication, is that the salt and light metaphors indicate that Christians can change non-Christian society. The models must mean that, because both salt and light are effective commodities. They change the environments in which they are placed. Salt hinders bacterial decay. Light dispels darkness. This is not to resurrect the social gospel. We cannot perfect society. But we can improve it.

Christian community (a city set on a hill), though not the only vehicle of cultural engagement, is perhaps the primary vehicle of cultural engagement and societal transformation.

Consider how Jesus' doctrines challenge the status quo in today's urban society. Christian communities are the best way that we have to model an alternative way of life.

When a group adopts a value system that causes them to live differently than the greater society and these differences are visible to the broader society, an alternative approach is modeled. Let's look at how the early Church lived out the doctrines of Jesus and the alternative approaches they offered.

Consider the alternative that the early Christians offered the Roman world. In the first and second centuries, cruelty was both widespread and normal in Roman society. Brutal murder was a spectator sport; gladiators battled to the death before huge crowds; men and women were devoured in the arena by wild beasts. A day at the gladiatorial games was the most popular form of entertainment.

In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark says that, "Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death."⁶ Because God values human life and has commanded humanity not to take life, "Christians condemned both the cruelties and the spectators. ... Christians effectively promulgated a moral vision utterly incompatible with the casual cruelty of pagan custom."⁷

It was only as believers lived out the doctrines of love, charity, mercy and justice in the midst of the opposing culture that Kingdom values were established and the Church was able to offer alternative ways to do things. Because of Jesus, Christians viewed all of life differently: They viewed marriage as holy, women as valuable; They opposed abortion and infanticide, cared for the poor, the sick and the needy, and broke down the barriers of race, class and gender. Stark says that, "... as Christian texts and teaching were acted out in daily life (that) Christianity was able to transform the human experiences so as to mitigate misery."⁸

The salt and light admonitions in Matthew are addressed to communities, not just to individuals; we can't be cities alone. Resultantly, Stott's conclusions are true as well for communities – that our ways of interacting are to be radically different. We permeate society as a community and that it is the community that is the key to changing society.

Chapter 2 Summary Points:

- *Jesus will be the centerpiece* of any community seeking to represent him to the world.
- Redemptive communities are made up of people who are continually *transformed by grace encounters* with Jesus Christ.
- The community must be *visible and accessible* to those outside the community so that outsiders can also experience Jesus.
- The congregation must establish *a counter-culture of Kingdom values*, offering alternative ways of living.

Conclusion

When we invite others to embrace Christ, we are not only asking them to take on a new relationship we are asking them to adopt a whole new understanding of reality. In order to accept Jesus, his explanation of the world must be viewed as plausible or reasonable according to how the individual already understands reality.

Plausibility structures are cultural constructs that support assumptions and beliefs within a given society. Christian congregations can help build new plausibility structures that allow individuals to understand the gospel as plausible or reasonable by challenging their existing worldview.

Only when we truly indwell the gospel story, within congregations shaped by that story, can we build plausibility structures for others. We can then show that the gospel is reasonable by demonstrating Christian love, and by living out Christ's values of grace, mercy and justice in the world.

This is why Lesslie Newbigin says that, "If the gospel is to challenge the public life of our society ... it will only be by movements that begin with the local congregation in which the reality of the new creation is present, known, and experienced, and from which men and women will go into every sector of public life to claim it for Christ, to unmask the illusions which have remained hidden and to expose all areas of public life to the illumination of the gospel. But that will only happen as and when local congregations renounce an introverted concern for their own life, and recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of God's redeeming grace for the whole life of society."⁹

Our Christian communities exist for the sake of those who are not members! What a beautiful way to emulate Christ. Redemptive community is not a choice. It is essential to living the life Christ died to give us. And it is essential to successful Christian mission.

The Church's mission is to establish redemptive communities within which and through which Christ is made know to the world—communities that are visible models and active agents of God's redemptive grace.

If you find the idea of developing Christ-like community daunting you are not alone. The goal is not perfection but transparent progression toward Christ-likeness. The objective is not to go out and find new, perfect communities but to work in our current situations to move them into tangible demonstrations of the kingdom of God on earth.

True Christian community is only possible in the shadow of the Cross, where men and women are transformed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Fortunately Jesus himself has prayed for us. Consider the 17th chapter of John, specifically verses 20 through 23, *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”*

Redemptive Community and the Kingdom of God

¹ Tim Keller, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, *The Theology of Christian Community*, 2005.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, p. 228.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, p. 228.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996, HarperCollins, San Francisco, first paperback.

⁵ Henry Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, Random House, Inc., 1979.

⁶ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996, HarperCollins, San Francisco, first paperback, p. 214.

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996, HarperCollins, San Francisco, first paperback, p. 215.

⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 1996, HarperCollins, San Francisco, first paperback, p. 213.

⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 1989, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, p. 232.