

**Christian
Idolatry**

**Christian
Revival**

An uncompromising critique of Christianity &

A NEW VISION of God's commonwealth on earth

**In general, this book is for Christians
in the United States.**

More specifically, this book is for:

- Christians working for justice**
- Christians seeking community**
- Christians disillusioned with churches &
institutionalized religion**
- Christians hungering for a biblically-based,
Spirit-led Christian revival.**

Life-dance

Come!

Join the dance!

Join the celebration of life!

**We are dancing to the music
and the music is God!**

Widen the circle!

Let everyone join in!

There is room for everyone!

**This is the dance of life
and all are invited**

Celebrate!

Let your spirits run free!

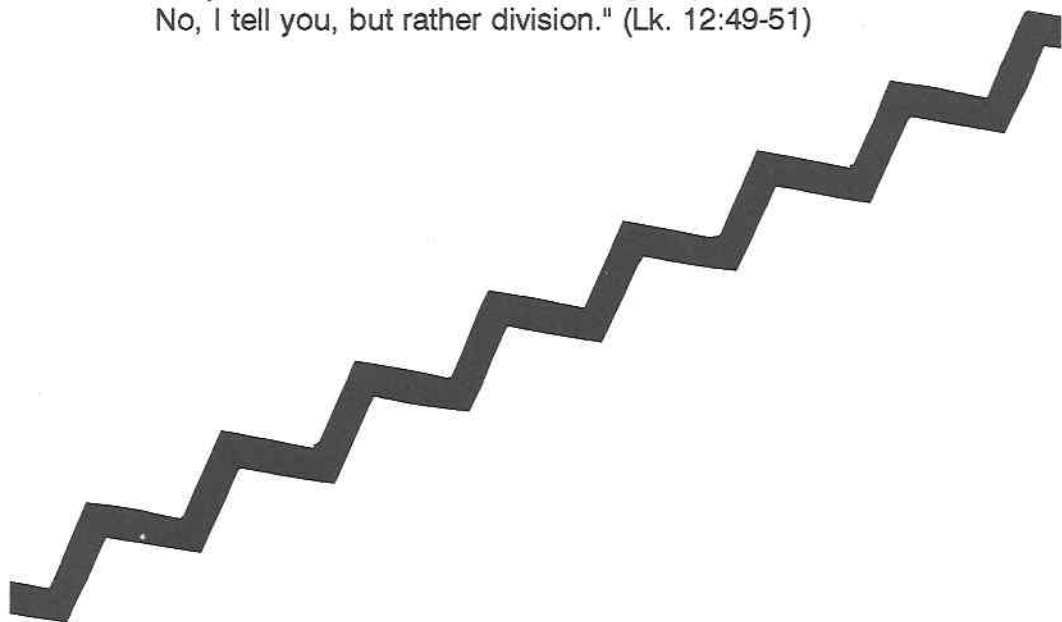
Sing a joyful song

and let our ears hear

the beautiful music that is God!

THIS BOOK IS NOT FOR SALE

"I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished! Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." (Lk. 12:49-51)



"Then the seventh angel blew the trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the commonwealth of our God and of the Messiah, and God shall reign forever and ever.'
(Rev. 11:15)

Christian
Idolatry /
Christian
Revival

by Kurt Greenhalgh

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Preface & Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been a long and lonely project - a labor of passion and pain. The vision of the book evolved over the 7+ years it took to write the book. The vision provided inspiration from new insights and pain over how far I and other Christians are from it. It is with some relief and gratitude that I bring this book to publication.

This book, like any other, has its limitations. It can only be revised so many times before it must, at last, face the readers' scrutiny "as is." I write from a background as a privileged, college-educated, white, heterosexual, North American male. No apologies here - this is simply to inform the readers, and it does make a difference. Responsibility for errors in the text is mine. I ask the readers not to get hung up on any of the book's limitations or defects but to seek to hear the book's essential message.

The principal Bible used in this book is the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Its translation is, I believe, quite faithful to the Hebrew and Greek texts. All biblical quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from the RSV: Harper Study Bible, Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Also frequently used, primarily for its inclusive language, is the NRSV: New Revised Standard Version, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1990. The book was typeset using WordPerfect 5.1, Swiss 721 Roman, 10.5 pt.

I gratefully acknowledge the labor and contributions of countless authors and laborers for truth and justice. Their work and their voices have contributed greatly to my passion and vision. Thanks to all who provided feedback on the book. Thanks to Ted Lewis and Brad Harper for their feedback and support. Special thanks to my parents for their support and especially for critical support near the end of this long project. Thanks to my work supervisors, David Gainey, Carla Gainey, and Joanne Champion, for providing a supportive working relationship during the time this book was being written. Thanks to STH for use of their laser printer.

All thanks and praise to God and to Jesus: all power, beauty, and glory are yours.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Idolatry

God's commonwealth on earth

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'" (Mk. 1:14-15)

Nearly two thousand years ago Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand. Do we still believe this? In our modern technological age - who can believe that the kingdom of God is at hand? How many Christians even have a vision of the kingdom of God so that the announcement that it is at hand is stirring and motivating? And isn't the announcement a bit of a contradiction in terms? If we believe that God's kingdom is far away in time and space - as a kingdom in heaven for a future life - then how can it be immediately present? The questions are serious - for if we have lost our vision of God's kingdom then we are no longer able to proclaim the same gospel that Jesus proclaimed. And if we have lost our vision then, perhaps, we have lost our way.

To reclaim the gospel we must regain a vision of God's kingdom that is "at hand": we must seek a vision of God's kingdom here and now - a vision of "God's commonwealth on earth." To speak of the need for a new vision is to acknowledge the inadequacy, the sinfulness, of present-day religion. If the Christian churches are not proclaiming a true and compelling vision - if the churches are not living out the gospel of God - then what are they doing?

Christian organization & fruitfulness

"I am the true vine....Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,

neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (Jn. 15:1,4-5 NRSV)

The above passage from John 15 states an essential truth: Jesus is the vine, Christians are the branches, and how well the branches are connected to the vine is all-important in terms of the fruitfulness of one's labors. Individually and collectively, Christians' connections to Jesus determine whether or not labor is fruitful. If Christians' connections to Jesus are superficial - if churches are not deeply committed to following and obeying Jesus - then Christians' labor and/or church programs will not bear much fruit. On the other hand, if Christians' connections to Jesus are deeply-rooted - if there exists an incarnational relationship where Jesus and believers abide in each other - then indeed Christians' labor and ministries will be fruitful. Thus "internal" Christian organization determines "external" fruitfulness. And thus it is important to ask: How well do church structures organize Christians? How well do churches connect their members to Jesus? The questions are important because to work and labor for little fruit may bring frustration, cynicism, despair, and burn-out.

The present time is critical both for the world and for Christianity. The world is in crisis and cries out for deliverance. As a consequence of social injustice there is in the world today overwhelming poverty and human suffering. At the same time there is a growing consciousness that modern economic development is seriously harming fragile ecosystems and producing unmanageable amounts of pollution and waste. Thus continuing on the world's present course will only heighten suffering and social turmoil. How is Christianity responding to this world crisis? Among Christians throughout the world there is a stirring - a budding movement that seeks to integrate faith with social justice work and ministries for the poor. In the United States, many Christians have labored to push their churches to deeper levels of involvement with the poor. Many also have chosen to become involved with social justice organizations outside the churches. But what most Christians involved in serving the poor and working for justice have found is that they must work on two fronts: change is needed both in society and in the churches. In large part, the Christian churches in the U.S. have not fully integrated faith with social commitment: the churches do not deeply identify with the suffering of the poor and are unwilling to confront the root causes of social injustice. The fact that the church itself is compromised and is an area for confrontation and conflict should give concerned Christians pause to consider: How fruitful are efforts within the

churches to bring change? How fruitful for spreading the love and justice of God are programs within compromised church organizations?

A clear vision of Jesus' gospel - which proclaims God's commonwealth on earth - can assist Christians in putting their labor into fruitful work. This vision can emerge by focusing on Jesus and by evaluating the "old" vision, faith, structures, and practices of the churches. Questions needing to be answered are: How have the churches compromised themselves with the powers of the world? To what degree have the churches become institutions serving/perpetuating themselves and erecting barriers against the inbreaking, liberating power of the Spirit? What are some of the forms of Christian idolatry in the United States? The answers will reveal areas of sinfulness for which repentance is necessary - and the emerging vision may call Christians to form a stronger "internal" organization. The emerging vision will help Christians decide whether to work for change from within churches or to join/form new Christian communities.

This book critiques Christianity in the U.S., calls Christians to repentance, and provides a new vision for reorganizing Christians. It is hoped that this book will contribute to bringing about a Christian revival - which depends upon "rebuilding the house of God" upon the "cornerstone" of Jesus. What is at stake in these times is the direction and fruitfulness of the fledgling Christian movement for integrating faith and social justice. The potential for the movement is unlimited. If it continues to grow in faith and maturity in Jesus Christ then it may lead to the "shaking down" of the churches as a prelude to the "shaking down" of the nations. The seeds of renewal among U.S. Christians are but part of a great struggle worldwide to reformulate and transform the universal church - to rebuild the "house of God" as a prelude to the final establishment of God's universal commonwealth on earth. The present world setting of massive human suffering, social turmoil, and environmental deterioration is the furnace for refining Christianity. Entering into this furnace, as demonstrated by many Christians in "Third World" countries, comes at great human cost. But the renewal of Christianity for the salvation of the world is the fruit. For the "house of God" must become a house of prayer for all the nations, (Is. 56:7) bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. (Is. 49:6)

While several important issues will be looked at in some depth, e.g., homelessness, abortion, homosexuality, the overall focus of this book

is on building a vision for Christian revival. To begin, let us start to understand the meaning of Christian idolatry.

Idolatry in the "true religion"

How does a religion which upholds the name of the one true God become idolatrous? Understanding 3 aspects of religion can illuminate idolatry in the Bible and in the history of Christianity. The 3 aspects of religion are: liturgical, conceptual, and incarnational.¹ The liturgical aspect involves ceremony, rituals, and worship; the conceptual aspect involves knowledge of God, doctrine, studying and teaching; the incarnational aspect involves following God/Jesus, daily practices and lifestyle. While all 3 aspects are important the heart and core of the Judeo-Christian faith is its incarnational nature. This was definitively revealed through Jesus, the Word made flesh, God incarnate, our "Emmanuel," meaning "God is with us." The Holy Spirit given to Jesus' disciples reminds us, as Paul stated, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20) The John 15 passage about the vine and the branches confirms the intimate, incarnational relationship between Jesus and believers/followers. An incarnational faith actively involves all believers - calling each to daily obedience - calling all to incarnate the love and justice of God in a holistic way. While a healthy, living faith integrates all 3 aspects and emphasizes the incarnational aspect, organized religion often gives priority to the other 2 aspects. But when the incarnational aspect is neglected or deprioritized, religion degenerates and becomes a form of idolatry. For example, let us look at a passage from Jeremiah.

"Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of (Yahweh), the temple of (Yahweh), the temple of (Yahweh).'¹...Thus says (Yahweh) of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward.'²...And you shall say to them, 'This is the nation that did not obey the voice of (Yahweh) their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.'"

(Jer. 7:4,21-24,28)

Israel's liturgical practice of offering burnt offerings and sacrifices in the temple was not evidence of a living faith. On the contrary, Israel's religion had separated the incarnational aspect of daily obedience to God's word from worship of God. While religious practices were maintained the people were actually walking "in their own counsels." Thus their religion had degenerated and they "went backward and not forward." As a degenerative religion it took on an idolatrous nature: the people were going through the motions of serving and praising God while in their everyday lives they were serving "other gods." Idolatry is serving "other gods" and not following daily the way of the living God. "Other gods" does not just refer to foreign gods or idols, as was prevalent in biblical times, but includes any "gods," such as wealth or military power, which people place their trust and security in.

Degenerative religion is religion that fragments faith. It emphasizes certain liturgical and conceptual components of faith but does not integrate all aspects of faith into a holistic way of life. Degenerative religion offers pieces of truth, supporting a fragmented lifestyle and a double-mindedness which purports to uphold the name of God while in fact "other gods" are served. In other words, degenerative religion, on the surface, may appear to be faithful, but it actually supports an idolatrous way of life. By going below the surface one can see that degenerative religion doesn't enhance faith and it is not "neutral" towards faith - but rather its structures and practices actively work against the development of a mature, holistic, living faith. Degenerative religion misdirects faith at its inception and throughout a believer's life. Thus degenerative religion is itself idolatrous and it supports an idolatrous way of life.

Because degenerative religion compromises on daily obedience to God it involves less risks and faces less conflict with the world than an incarnational faith. (See Table 1.) This is particularly true of degenerative religion in this predominantly "Christian" country where persecution is seldom viewed as an integral part of a living faith.

Let us look at more examples of idolatry.

Idolatry in Old Testament times

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew faith degenerated into principally liturgical and conceptual forms. Israel was guilty of idolatry - not

TABLE 1
3 ASPECTS OF RELIGION

<u>Aspect</u>	<u>Features</u>	<u>Primary Emphasis Leads to:</u>	<u>Risk Factor</u>
1. liturgical	worship, sacraments	formal cultic rituals	low
2. conceptual	study, knowledge of God	dogma, law	medium
3. incarnational	following Jesus/God	unique lifestyle (or Way) & conflict with the world	high

because they were lacking in ritual sacrifices and feasts or in pronouncing religious statutes - but because they weren't incarnating God's love, God's justice. The Hebrew people believed they were still worshiping God, but they were following and walking in the way of false gods. One cannot worship God and follow false gods. By following false gods the people had broken their covenant with the God who commanded, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7) and, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and (God) only shall you serve." (Lk. 4:8) By following false gods Israel was no longer serving the only God of justice and righteousness. Without an incarnational faith Israel's worship of God and religious teachings were in vain. The prophets Amos and Hosea declared that Israel's liturgical practices were no substitute for justice.

"I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

"What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away....For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." (Hos. 6:4,6)

The prophets confronted Israel's delusion that it could know God

without practicing justice. In Hos. 4:1 and Jer. 9:3,6 the prophets declared that there is "no knowledge of God in the land" and "they refuse to know" God. The Old Testament prophets declared that without first incarnating God's love, God's justice, one cannot know God, one cannot worship the living God.

"Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Is. 1:13-17)

Idolatry in Jesus' time

In Jesus' time, as in Old Testament times, the poor in the land were oppressed, lacking leadership, and yearning for justice. The Jewish people were referred to as "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6) and as "sheep without a shepherd" (Mk. 6:24) - revealing that their religion had lost the incarnational aspect which would keep the people intimately connected with God. Of course the religious leaders bore much responsibility for presiding over a degenerative religion - and therefore they "will receive the greater condemnation." (Mk. 12:40) The religious leaders "neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith." (Mt. 23:23) The religious leaders placed a high priority on ceremony and ritual purity - but Jesus rebuked them saying, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'" (Mt. 9:13) As leaders who maintained the form and appearance of a religion while emptying it of its essential content they were rightly assailed by Jesus:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to (people), but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Mt. 23:27-28)

Conceptually, the religious leaders controlled the reading of the scriptures and greatly expanded the requirements of the law. Jesus warned his disciples "to beware...of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Mt. 16:12) The rich and powerful Sadducees, who

supported status quo power and who taught there was no resurrection of the dead, were rebuked for their faith in a god-of-the-dead. (Mk. 12:24,27) Jesus confuted the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees, saying,

"Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." (Mk. 7:6-8)

Thus the people were no longer incarnating, serving, and worshiping the living God - but had fallen into the trap of degenerative religion.

Why did Jesus and the prophets so harshly condemn the people's liturgical and conceptual practices? Of course it was due to their idolatrous nature - but also because they were so insidious. The Israelite people thought of themselves as "the elect" who knew the one true God. They could sometimes see that the "pagan" nations were following and worshiping false gods/idols, but they became just as blind when their own religion ensnared them. As their religion degenerated, their sins and their attachment to "other gods" were hidden. The faith that was meant to enlighten people with its liberating knowledge of the only God of justice and righteousness was instead ensnaring, blinding, and mesmerizing the people. Instead of being a means of coming to and knowing God - it was an obstacle. As Jesus said,

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against (people); for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in." (Mt. 23:13)

"Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering." (Lk. 11:52)

At stake was entry into the commonwealth of God, and consequently, the fruitful expansion of God's commonwealth on earth.

Christian idolatry

"Unless (Yahweh) builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."
(Ps. 127:1)

We have seen how, in Old Testament times and in Jesus' time, the people "of the true faith" were led astray by degenerative religion. How have the people "of the true faith" fared under the Christian religion?

Has the Christian religion developed the very same idolatrous tendencies that the Hebrew religion did? In the United States, to what extent have the Christian churches been expanding the "house of God" and to what extent have they been spreading degenerative religion?

After Jesus' resurrection the disciples began to spread the Judeo-Christian faith and the good news of the liberating commonwealth of God. Very early on Jesus' disciples had to confront degenerative liturgical and conceptual tendencies which restricted an incarnational faith. James argues against a conceptual spiritualization of faith:

"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (Jas. 2:14-17 NRSV)

John, likewise, advocates for an incarnational faith:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us - and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." (1 Jn. 3:16-18 NRSV)

Paul, in particular, wrote extensively against the transfer of degenerative Jewish liturgical and conceptual practices into the faithful's life. Paul also castigated the new liturgical practice of communion at Corinth:

"When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor. 11:20-22 NRSV)

The communion practice at Corinth bore no resemblance to an incarnational community of justice and love centered in Jesus/God. Despite the disciples' leadership unhealthy practices arose. But even though factions developed in early Christianity, the existence of incarnational communities fostered the rapid spread of faith, even during times of heavy persecution from Roman authorities.

A major change in the Judeo-Christian faith occurred after 300 AD during the reign of Emperor Constantine. Constantine issued some commands making Christianity the official religion of the state. At the

same time the church became Roman. This transformation, while reducing state persecution, had severe consequences for an incarnational faith. New-found respectability allowed the faithful to institutionalize their religion. The meaning of "the church" came to be associated with a physical institution of professional leaders, their bureaucracy and physical possessions (land and buildings). By establishing itself in alliance with the state, the church distanced itself from the daily lives and struggles of poor people. These changes fostered the growth of liturgical and conceptual aspects of religion while discouraging the incarnational aspect which conflicts with state and culture. From this compromised position many forms of degenerative Christianity have spread throughout the world.

In North America, Christianity spread alongside the white European conquest of native peoples and lands. Today, Christianity is without question the predominate religion in the United States. The success of the Christian churches mirrors the success of a country which has become the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. Magnificent churches now cover the land and Christian teachings are expansively broadcast, pronounced, and published - inundating Americans everywhere with religious messages. Most Americans will state that Jesus is the Son of God. But do the images of successful Christian mission - attractive church buildings, large memberships, important positions in their communities - signify conversion of members to the living God? Or have the churches been neglecting the most important aspect of faith?

The Questions

"King Herod heard of it; for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.'" (Mk. 6:14-16)

The churches and their leaders, never short on teachings, have provided answers to religious questions that members may ask and to questions that members wouldn't ever think of asking. In the process, however, the power of questioning for each individual's growth in faith has been stifled. The key questions of faith, if they are raised, are answered by rote. The questions and the answers have

become largely irrelevant to the daily lives of most believers. This was not always the case.

In Jesus' time, the key questions of faith were raised. Their significance did not escape the attention of even the highest of rulers. As a result, King Herod slaughtered the male infants of Bethlehem, tetrarch Herod Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and sought to kill Jesus (Lk. 13:31), the highest Jewish religious and political leaders plotted against and arrested Jesus, and governor Pilate crucified Jesus. The questions: 1. Who is Jesus? 2. What are Jesus' new practices? and 3. How shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth?² These 3 questions put the faith of Jews to the test and their answers had great implications for daily life. The first question could not be answered on its own. Only by answering the second question could one begin to answer the first. And the 3 questions taken together provoked decisions of faith creating a clear distinction between disciples, deeply-committed to following and incarnating Christ, and everyone else. The 3 questions brought to the forefront of life the call for conversion to a new Way of life. But today the questions are obscured by religious institutions that provide answers which sedate the minds of believers. The challenge and call for deep-rooted conversion is muted.

What answers have U.S. churches given to these 3 key questions? A few of the answers given by a fragmented and compromised Christian church will be examined here.

Q1: Who is Jesus?

Most of Christianity has separated question 1 from question 2. Many churches that herald Jesus as Lord proclaim salvation through the grace of a faith that is separated from works. That is, the faith prescribed is a verbal confession of Jesus' lordship, a recital of a creed, and a commitment to a church that requires little personal change. Knowledge of Jesus and God is mediated to believers through the administration of authority and sacraments by a church hierarchy. But this is the administration of "cheap grace."

"Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins....Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner....Cheap grace is the preaching

of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."³ (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Many churches and religious leaders emphasize an instant in time when one becomes "born again" and "saved" by accepting Jesus as Lord. But conversion may not go much further than the altar. The lack of emphasis on a long-term personal transformation in a discipleship community serving the poor and working for justice is reflective of a religion that stunts faith at its conception.

Jesus is proclaimed as the risen Lord who is to be worshiped and as a heavenly Savior to be praised for dying on a cross. These "parts" of Jesus' identity are separated from all of Jesus' and God's liberating works. It is as if the history of God's liberating works and Jesus' life and ministry up to the time of his crucifixion are largely irrelevant to knowing who Jesus is. But Jesus never said, "Worship me and you will be saved." In fact, Jesus never said, "Worship me." But Jesus did say many times, "Follow me." Jesus desired that people follow him and, as disciples, incarnate his liberating practices. By so doing, then people would know God, then people could worship the living God. Religion that stresses worship of Jesus but not the imperative to follow and obey him is degenerative.

"A deep impulse throughout history, including in our present moment, is for the church to preserve the institution at the expense of fidelity to the gospel. Like the disciples who witnessed the transfiguration, we want to build a shrine and substitute worship for discipleship. Building or maintaining a shrine isn't risky. Discipleship is. Risk-free Christianity should be called by some other name. It is faith lived at the least common denominator. The church, with few exceptions, is good at building shrines and poor at discipleship."⁴ (Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer)

To proclaim Jesus as Lord, but not to follow his ways and practices is idolatrous. It dis-empowers believers and makes Jesus into an idol perched in heaven, removed from personal and historical struggles.

Q2: What are Jesus' new practices?

Church answers to question 2 often serve degenerative religion by minimizing the importance of Jesus' practices. Jesus' practices are treated in various ways. One view sees Jesus' practices as

supernatural miracles which cannot form the basis for normative practices among Christians. Thus Christians are excused from serious discipleship. Or Jesus' extraordinary power, and that exhibited by a few disciples, is downplayed. Either the biblical writer "exaggerated" it to support a lesson or it is relegated to a "special" time in the past - thus denying to believers the power of faith in our present time. The Sadducees, great supporters of the status quo, would have supported this view which tries to keep the power of God under wraps. Jesus' practices and in particular his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount are viewed by many religious leaders as idealistic, impractical for the present, and merely descriptive for a distant future time. At best one can derive from them generic moral principles to guide decision-making - which is a far cry from a summons to a unique Way of life. Following Jesus has often been portrayed as unrealistic for the "common" person - as if only professionals or a chosen few are called to such a vocation. Around the time of the Middle Ages, when the church hierarchy minimized the role of the laity, the monastic orders began to arise. While opening up space for more people to seek and serve God, the orders did not challenge the church as a whole. Low expectations of the laity encouraged a passive following. Another view translates Jesus' practices into pietistic disciplines. Instead of calling people to a holistic communitarian lifestyle, believers are encouraged to practice private individual disciplines in their spare time. Faith becomes private and personal, removed from issues of social injustice and societal conflict. These answers displace Jesus' leadership and encourage faith without discipleship.

Q3: How shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth?

As a result of degenerative religion's answers to the first 2 questions, most believers view question 3 as an academic issue largely irrelevant to daily life. The churches' answers to question 3 do little to change that. The churches' pronouncements of God's kingdom are not "good news to the poor." (Lk. 4:18) Most answers place God's kingdom almost entirely in the future - to be established only at the end of time. The theology of premillennialism supports this. Premillennialism views history with some fatalism - looking for signs of humankind's apocalyptic demise which will usher in Christ's second coming and the establishment of Christ's "1000-year reign" on earth. Jesus' second coming is more closely associated with God's curse upon an unremittently evil humankind than with the extension of God's blessing and fruitfulness through making disciples of all nations. A narrow-minded view sees the few "pure and righteous" being saved

through a dramatic end-times rapture while the "evil pagan" people and world are doomed to destruction. Emphasis is placed on unmediated divine action as the faithful patiently keep watch, remain diligent against "backsliding," and evangelize to save a few souls. Efforts toward peacemaking, social justice, and reconciliation between enemy peoples are seen as naive - without hope for fulfillment.

Another answer may be associated with the theology of "two kingdoms." The kingdoms are: one of "worldly" temporal authority, the kingdom under the state, and one of spiritual authority, the kingdom of God. While locating God's kingdom both in the present (incomplete) and the future (complete) this view basically excludes the possibility of seeing the expansion of God's commonwealth on earth. This view creates a dualism of separate spheres for religious life and civic duties. Christians are to live in and serve both kingdoms. It encourages a fragmented lifestyle where believers serve the world, i.e., obey state authorities, and serve God, i.e., obey religious leaders. Rather than bearing an active, incarnational faith, believers often become passive followers of various human authorities. This view tends to foster a fatalistic view of history where believers, instead of being empowered co-creators of God's liberating commonwealth on earth, are passive pawns of larger forces shaping history towards a predetermined cataclysmic end.

Degenerative religion's answers to question 3 generally deny the immediacy of God's commonwealth, confess the churches' lack of faith in the world being redeemable, and portray God's commonwealth being established by divine action apart from believers' participation. By disassociating God's commonwealth from discipleship, religion stifles a living hope of the blossoming of God's commonwealth on earth - putting out the fire that fuels radical lifestyle changes based on an incarnational faith.

Conclusion

Even in the "true religion" idolatry can be a prevalent reality. The Bible describes at length how the Hebrew faith became idolatrous through degenerative religion. Christianity too can become idolatrous. Can we see it?

Most of Christianity today in the United States is represented by a religion that fragments faith. The incarnational aspect of faith is

separated from a religion which emphasizes the liturgical and conceptual aspects. Most churches have departed from the gospel of Jesus which proclaims the immediacy of God's commonwealth. The call for repentance and deep-rooted conversion is muted by churches' mind-numbing answers to the 3 key questions of faith. Even Jesus can be turned into an idol by worshiping but not following and obeying him. Discipleship to Jesus is presented as a part-time endeavor, supporting a fragmented lifestyle. By neglecting the incarnational aspect of faith the possibility of living a holistic life of discipleship is seldom even discussed. It becomes clear that degenerative religion is not benign - it works against the development of incarnational faith communities. Degenerative religion always seeks to promote itself, seeks to ensnare new members, and directs people's energy, commitment, and devotion towards a false house of God. To be committed to a church or other religious institution that spreads degenerative religion is to be committed to idolatry. Being committed to such a church is not the same as laboring for the true house of God. For when the "cornerstone" is left behind, all such labor is in vain.

Footnotes

1. I was introduced to these 3 aspects of religion and how they can be separated by Fr. Charles McCarthy.
2. These 3 questions, with slightly different wording, are brought out in Fernando Belo's book, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Cost of Discipleship, MacMillan Company, New York, NY, 1963, pp. 45-46.
4. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Brave New World Order, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1992, p. 154.

Spirit of the Living God

Apathy

is no substitute

for justice

Complacency

cannot feed

the hungry

Indifference

will not cause wars

to cease

But

Righteous anger

awakens the spirit

Mourning

cleanses the soul

Sacrifice

disciplines the body

Righteous suffering

focuses the mind

Rage and rebellion

at injustice

speak more to living

than any proper business

for

Passion

is the hallmark

of a righteous God

The living God

is not silly putty

to fill in

spiritual holes

Nor did Jesus

suffer persecution

to puff up

pseudo-evangelists

Creator

of the universe

Liberator

of the slaves

Savior

of the downtrodden

Judge

of the hard-hearted

God of gods

Spirit of fire and water

Hear our plea:

Revive us

from the depths

of nothingness

Make us bearers

of your righteousness

to alleviate suffering

and to suffer unrighteousness

Strengthen our passion

for justice

and our compassion

for those who are suffering

Light our fire

Burn in us

without ceasing

all our days

Blaze a trail before us

'til your love brings forth

the everlasting commonwealth

and we meet together

with all the saints

in the holy city of God

All praise, honor,

and glory belong to

the one who is

the Alpha and the Omega

the First and the Last

the light

that will never go out

Praise to you Lord Jesus

forever and ever

(Amen and amen)

CHAPTER 2

Liberating the Bible

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you."

(Jn. 5:39-42 NRSV)

To rebuild the house of God a holistic vision of God's commonwealth is helpful. This guiding vision of God's commonwealth on earth must be scripturally-based - rooted in the word of God. While affirming that the word of God, revealed through scripture, is authoritative - still it must be acknowledged that biblical interpretations vary greatly and often conflict. Scriptural truth can be illusive. As the above passage from John 5 states: although scripture testifies for Jesus not many of the Jewish people who were searching and studying scripture were led to come to Jesus for life. Since interpreting the Bible can be difficult and often leads to widely divergent viewpoints - is there a way that we can approach scripture so that its liberating truth will be revealed to us?

In chapter 1 we saw that even the "true religion" which upholds the name of Yahweh or Jesus can degenerate and become idolatrous. When the "true religion" becomes degenerative it becomes an obstacle to the spread of God's commonwealth on earth. In the above passage from John 5 Jesus confronts how scripture can become an obstacle to following Christ. While people were committed to studying and interpreting scripture many failed to incarnate the love and justice of God: "you do not have the love of God in you." The importance of scripture overshadowed the importance of an intimate, incarnational relationship with God. The same situation occurs today among many Christians. Just as degenerative Christianity can turn Jesus into an idol, so it can also turn the Bible into an idol when it seeks to give primacy in a Christian's life to Bible study, "biblical authority," and

church doctrine. Primacy must be given to a personal, incarnational relationship with Jesus - following and obeying Jesus and allowing the love of God to abide within oneself.

Religious leaders often use "scriptural authority" to stifle an incarnational faith in their flock. How so? Religious leaders, when speaking about the Bible, often raise and answer the following questions: Is the Bible the word of God? The inerrant word of God? Does the Bible have ultimate authority over Christian doctrine and practice? However important these questions are, another must be asked: who controls the reading and interpretation of scripture? In the Bible many false religious leaders were, in their time, the socially recognized "authorities" on interpreting scripture. But their interpretations and teachings were not liberating. Jesus described the Pharisees as "blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." (Mt. 15:14 NRSV) Too often leaders of degenerative religion proclaim false biblical doctrines - and use "scriptural authority" to enhance their own authority. Religious institutions and their leaders may formulate doctrines and then call believers to obedience to those doctrines. But this can stifle an incarnational faith. Understanding scripture is an interactive process whereby scripture enters into the hearer's heart and mind, is digested and interpreted, and the spirit within oneself aids discernment. I cannot affirm as authoritative that which my inner spirit does not bear witness to. A living, authentic faith requires no less. It is bad faith to set up an external authority for obedience, breaking down the relationship between a believer and their inner spirit/conscience/faith. Obedience to Jesus does not translate into obedience to religious leaders or their doctrines. Faith in Jesus is not a subscription to someone else's beliefs or to human authority. Therefore, the Bible must be placed in the hands of all believers who can then be encouraged to develop their own skills at reading and interpreting scripture. Believers will then become more empowered to question and challenge the "scriptural authority" undergirding religious leaders and church doctrines.

While an incarnational faith in Jesus is always freely chosen, degenerative religion often uses coercion. Degenerative religion sometimes spreads by imposing doctrines and beliefs upon others - and by bringing persecution upon people of differing beliefs. Jesus said,

"Indeed an hour is coming when those who kill you will think that by doing so they are offering worship to God." (Jn. 16:2 NRSV)

Saul (Paul) believed he was serving God by persecuting Christians. Christianity, in turn, has a long history of persecuting Jews, warring against Moslems, and persecuting Christian dissenters ("sects" and "heretics"). Much of the Christian evangelization of the Americas was spread in an imperialistic fashion. Cross and sword went together - and Christianity was imposed upon native Americans and imported African slaves. At the same time the faith and religions of these latter groups were often attacked and completely negated - as if white European Christianity was the exclusive holder of truth. One result of this history is that Christianity in the United States has a Eurocentrist bias - it has adopted many traditions derived from a culturally-corrupted European Christian heritage. For the faithful today this heritage presents difficulties for living an incarnational faith. Much discernment is required in order to choose a liberating life of faith in Jesus. Not only do non-Christian religions contain a mixture of elements of truth and cultural biases but also the "true religion" throughout history has had cultural distortions. Even authentic faith is "tainted" with cultural biases. Because of ongoing revelations of God throughout history the faithful's knowledge of God has varied. For example, Abraham and Sarah, who knew God as *EI* and not as *Yahweh*, could not have known God the same way as Jesus' disciples. Even Paul, who had a very strong incarnational faith, admits, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (1 Cor. 13:12)

Therefore, we cannot structure our faith and lives on past figures and old traditions without questioning social and cultural biases - for all traditions have incorporated some cultural biases. So then - how can we read scripture and recognize cultural biases in the Bible and in present-day society? How can we hear truth in scripture and obediently follow the living God in the present?

Scripture reading must be done with much personal discernment. Scripture reading is a cross-cultural experience, requiring opening oneself up to another's worldview, symbolic expressions, and literary style. Understanding the biblical writer's historical context, the historical editorial process, and checking the accuracy of the translation is helpful. In addition to the above, Christians must seek to read the Bible through the "light of Jesus" - through an incarnational knowledge of Jesus' teachings and practices. In other words, Bible study must be complemented by discipleship to Jesus. Bible study is not an end in itself. Its purpose is not simply for increasing in biblical "knowledge." Bible study is a means for empowering discipleship - to

grow in one's personal, incarnational relationship with Jesus/God. Thus, Bible study will be enhanced through daily discipleship to Jesus, and the "light of Jesus" will help expose cultural biases.

While there are various ways to read scripture, the rest of this chapter will introduce a "tool" that can be very helpful in detecting cultural biases and discerning the truth. This tool will be developed in more depth in later chapters. It involves using a "Christ-enlightened" understanding of the gift or debt system ("gift system") and the purity or pollution system ("purity system").¹ This tool involves some theoretical work because in the Bible the two systems are not well-defined and distinct. In the Bible these two systems overlap to some extent. However, by defining them it becomes clear that the two systems are not only distinct but are in conflict with each other. One thesis of this chapter is that a mature, incarnational relationship with Jesus results in upholding the gift system and shedding the purity system with all of its cultural biases.²

The gift system and the purity system

The following passage can help introduce the gift and purity systems.

"And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' Jesus answered, 'The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' And the scribe said to him, 'You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that (God) is one, and there is no other but (God); and to love (God) with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that no one dared to ask him any question." (Mk. 12:28-34)

In this passage Jesus speaks an essential truth of the Judeo-Christian faith. Jesus' answer also encapsulates the core of the gift system: we are to wholly and completely love God and, consequently, we are, without limits, barriers, or prejudices, to love our "neighbors" as ourselves. The scribe then makes a wise response. The scribe makes

a distinction between two systems at work in his religion: the gift system's call to love God, neighbor, and self and the purity system's demands for religious offerings and ritual sacrifices. Just as importantly, the scribe also recognizes the superiority of the gift system. This discerning response brings the scribe *close* to the commonwealth of God. But why wasn't this insight clear to everyone?

Both the gift system and the purity system purport to support a covenant relationship with God. Each system has its own internal logic, its own understanding of good and evil, and its own practices that correspond with God's blessing or curse. The reason it is difficult to see that the two systems are distinct and in conflict is twofold. First, the purity system portrays itself as being part of a unified whole with the gift system. Secondly, in much of the Bible the purity system dominates and distorts the gift system - thus preventing the clear emergence of the gift system and open conflict between the two systems. Needless to say, the stronger the dominance of the purity system in the Judeo-Christian heritage, the more degenerative and idolatrous the "true religion" has become. So - what are some of the characteristics of these two systems?

The purity or pollution system ("purity system")

The purity system is based on a particular worldview that sees a great schism between God and all of creation. The transcendent God is believed to be separate and distinct from both humanity and the rest of creation. Consequently, based on its worldview, the purity system seeks to draw boundaries between and keep separate the "pure" (representing good) from the "polluted" (representing evil). That which is polluted is considered contagious and threatening, requiring prohibitions against physical contact. Also, because of humanity's sinful and secular nature, that which is most pure and holy is considered contagious and dangerous. (Ex. 29:37; Num. 8:19) To approach the holy God when not in a state of ritual purity or to see God results in death. (Ex. 19:21-22, 34:20; Lev. 16:13; Num. 3:10; Deut. 5:24-25; 1 Sam. 6:19) Thus rigid barriers exist between God and humanity. Humanity can never fully attain "purity" - it can only try to be relatively "more pure" and avoid becoming "more polluted." The purity system seeks to restrict the "violence of contagion"³ - but as this struggle is unwinnable the energy and work put into trying to maintain ritual purity are unceasing. Towards the goal of trying to be as pure as is humanly possible laws and statutes are made to regulate and enforce proper interaction with that which is categorized as pure or

polluted. God's blessing is believed to come through maintaining purity codes and performing purifying rituals. God's curse is believed to come through contact with that which is polluted or through "defiling actions" which transgress the purity codes. Let us look at some of the purity system's classifications.

The purity system demarcates space. It is the presence of God which makes any location holy. According to the purity system's beliefs, God is located in holy heaven - above the earth which is the secular dwelling place of humanity. Because God has chosen the Hebrew people the "promised land" of Israel is holier than foreign land. In Israel where God is encountered - such as in the temple - is holier than other places.⁴ The temple itself has different areas and the inner room called the Holy of Holies, where God's presence is believed to dwell, is its most holy area. The temple's location makes Jerusalem the most holy city in Israel. In contrast to the presence of God, the presence of any source of "pollution" can make a location polluted. (Num. 5:1-4) All bodily emissions (blood, pus, semen, excrement), as potential or real signs of sickness, decay, or death, are unclean and can "pollute" a location. For example, the contact with and secretion of fluids in sexual intercourse render people unclean - hence sexual abstinence for men may be prescribed before worship (Ex. 19:15) or "holy" war. (1 Sam. 21:4-6) Military camps must not be polluted with excrement. (Deut. 23:12-14)

"Excrement is related to death. Later on, in Judaism, Gehenna, the place where offal was burned, became the metaphor for hell, that is, for the place of eternal death."⁵ (Fernando Belo)

Human corpses, as manifestations of death and decay, are unclean. (Lev. 21:1-3) Corpses must be removed from where people live to a place outside the city and be buried or entombed. (Lev. 10:4-5) Even persons hanged upon a tree (or cross) who are "accursed by God" (Deut. 21:23; cf. Jn. 19:31 & Gal. 3:13) must be buried to prevent the land from being "defiled." Thus, according to the purity system, space can be classified in such a way that categorizes all space from the holiest location to the most polluted location.

The purity system classifies and ranks all living things. Humans rank above animals and plants. The Hebrew people are relatively more holy than foreigners. Among Hebrews men are more holy than women. Women are sources of uncleanness. Menstruation renders women and anything they touch unclean for 7 days (Lev. 15:19-30) while the emissions from childbirth render women unclean for either 40 days, if it is a male baby, or 80 days, if it is a female baby. (Lev. 12) Among

a family's children, the firstborn male is the most holy and is entitled to special birthrights. (Deut. 21:15-17; Gen. 25:31-34) Among men, the priests, by virtue of hereditary blood-lines descended from Levi, Moses, and Aaron, are the most pure. The priests themselves form a hierarchy: at the top is the high priest while non-Aaronic Levites and priests with physical disabilities form the lowest rung in the priesthood. Animals, which rank below humans in the purity system's symbolic order, are the currency for sacrificial offerings. Certain creatures, however, are "unclean" - unfit for ritual sacrifices or for human consumption. Mary Douglas explains some of the prohibitions:

"Any class of creature which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness....In the water scaly fish swim with fins....Thus anything in the water which has not fins and scales is unclean....In the firmament two-legged fowls fly with wings....On the earth four-legged animals hop, jump, or walk..."⁶

Creatures not categorically unclean could still be excluded from ritual sacrifices due to blemishes or deformities. Poor Hebrews, who could not afford animal sacrifices, could make less valuable offerings of birds or grain. (Lev. 5:7-11) Thus the purity system's classifications stratify and rank living beings from the most holy man and people down to the most polluted people and creatures.

The purity system's classifications separate and erect barriers between people based on innate characteristics and then grant people differing amounts of power and privilege. Women, orphans, foreigners, the physically challenged (or disabled), and the sick are discriminated against and excluded, partially or wholly, from important social institutions and events. As a result the purity system tends to solidify a hierarchical social order.

The gift or debt system ("gift system")

In contrast to the purity system's worldview of rigid separation between God and humanity the gift system experiences, proclaims, and prophesies intimacy and reconciliation between God, humanity, and all of creation. In the beginning all of creation is viewed as a gift from God and is "very good." (Gen. 1:31) Both male and female humans are made in the image and likeness of God - creating social equality. (Gen. 1:26-27) This equality contrasts with the purity system's view that the firstborn (Adam) is superior to the secondborn (Eve). In the garden of Eden man and woman see, walk, and talk with God. (Gen. 3) This intimacy is broken through human disobedience and results in a world of injustice and oppression. However, God takes the

initiative in seeking to restore intimacy through a covenant relationship: through obedience to God's call Abraham and Sarah enter into covenant with God. In a covenant relationship, God's blessing is incurred through receiving gifts from God (e.g., liberation from bondage in Egypt, the promised homeland, fruitfulness from the land and from women's wombs) and then giving or extending gifts to others. According to the gift system God initiates giving and humanity is expected to respond by giving to others: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18) On the other hand, God's curse, or "debt," is incurred through disobedience - through coveting and through harming others. Thus while the purity system seeks to restrict the "violence of contagion" the gift system seeks to restrict the "violence of human aggression."⁷ The gift system upholds God's promise to "bless all nations" (Gen. 12:3, 18:18), anticipating the spread of covenant relationships to all peoples and the full establishment of God's commonwealth on earth. This runs contrary to the purity system's rigid barriers between God and humanity, between heaven and earth, and its beliefs in the enduring power of pollution.

The 10 commandments, given for the covenant at Sinai, are an important expression of the gift system. The first 3 commandments call for love of God and the last 7 call for loving one's neighbor. Ideologically, Yahweh alone is to be worshiped, the one who liberates the poor and oppressed from bondage. (Ex. 20:1-6) The implicit understanding is that worship of other gods is consistent with supporting unjust and oppressive relationships that characterize a "fallen" world. Economically, the gift system prohibits stealing or coveting that which belongs to a neighbor and calls for remembering the sabbath. (Ex. 20:8-11,15,17) The sabbath rest is a form of labor law, granting even the poorest and most oppressed a break from work. Furthermore, sabbath remembrance of God's creative, liberating, and gift-giving works calls to remembrance that

"the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me." (Lev. 25:23)

Implied is the imperative to remember to give to others, especially the poor and needy, since the land is God's and is not a matter of private property rights. Thus, expanding from the original commandment, every 7 years is to be a sabbath year of rest for the land (Lev. 25:1-7) with cancellation of the debts of the poor. (Deut. 15:1-11) Every 50 years is to be a jubilee year with the land "resting" and being redistributed to the poor. (Lev. 25:8-12) Politically, the gift system prohibits killing, adultery, and defamation and calls for honoring parents. (Ex. 20:12-14,16) For continuity of blessings from generation

to generation honoring and providing for elderly parents is prescribed. Of special concern in a patriarchal society is caring for widows (since the family inheritance passes from fathers to sons). (Deut. 10:18, 14:28-29) Thus the 10 commandments provide a concise covenant code for loving God and neighbor and restricting idolatrous, violent, and harmful actions.

Conflict between the two systems

How do the purity and gift systems conflict with each other? The purity system offers a hierarchical "top-down" viewpoint of the world. It focuses on the affairs of those who are most pure, most privileged, most powerful. But the gift system's viewpoint is "from below" - it emphasizes justice and liberation for the oppressed and gifts for the poor and outcast. The conflict that results is represented in the tension between a rigid, hierarchical social order which the purity system supports and movements for social equality which the gift system supports. But why does the purity system gain dominance over the gift system in so much of the Bible? To answer, it is necessary to look into the origins and the functions of the priesthood.

Although the justification for the priesthood borrows a piece from the gift system it essentially originates and stems from the purity system. The piece taken from the gift system is the idea of "giving to God" - but what this means is distorted and redefined by the purity system.⁸ The Hebrew priesthood begins in the wilderness after liberation from slavery in Egypt. But the theological origins come much earlier. Common among ancient religious practices was the sacrificing of first-born children and animals to a fertility god in order to receive continued fruitfulness. These practices were interpreted as "giving first fruits to God." Abraham, following ancient beliefs, nearly sacrificed his first-born son Isaac. But at the last minute Abraham was led to substitute an animal sacrifice for Isaac. (Gen. 22:1-14) In Egypt, right before liberation, a plague struck down the first-born of the Egyptian people and cattle. Consequently, in the wilderness, the Hebrew people are called on to "give first fruits to God" - meaning all first-born males and first-born animals. (Ex. 13:1-2, 11-15, 22:29-30) The Hebrew priesthood arises as the tribe of Levi is set apart for God as a substitute for the first-born males of all the tribes of Israel. (Num. 3:11-13, 39-48) Thus instead of human sacrifices, a priestly male caste dedicated to attending to God, in conjunction with animal sacrifices, satisfies "God's claims" on the first-born. Sacrificing first-born children

to God is then prohibited (Lev. 18:21, 20:2; Deut. 12:31, 18:10) - distinguishing Israel and Yahweh from other foreign religions and gods. However, the temptation to sacrifice first-born children is great and when Israel succumbs it is condemned by prophets. (2 Ki. 16:3, 17:17, 21:6, 23:10; Ps. 106:37-38; Is. 57:5; Jer. 7:31, 19:5, 32:35; Ezek. 16:20, 20:30-31; Mic. 6:7) So - the Hebrew priesthood originates from the purity system's ancient animal and human ritual sacrifices. But what justifies the selection of the tribe of Levi?

Understanding the role of blood in the purity system helps to understand the Levitical priesthood. The purity system views blood as holy:

"If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement." (Lev. 17:10-11 NRSV; cf. Gen. 9:4; Deut. 12:23) Even animal blood is holy, and sinful humanity, under punishment of death, cannot eat it. Under the purity system "almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." (Heb. 9:22) The blood from animal sacrifices can "purify" both people and objects. In their ordination ritual Aaron and his sons are sprinkled with blood in a purifying ritual. (Ex. 29:21) Even the altar and the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle must be annually purified through animal blood. (Lev. 16:15-19) The purity system necessitates the shedding of blood. The killing of unblemished animals for sacrificial rituals and the killing of profane people who violate certain purity codes are essential for maintaining purity. This brings us to Levi, one of the 12 sons of Jacob and to whom the priesthood is traced back. Levi is to be remembered for being bloodthirsty. On his deathbed Jacob "blesses" his 12 sons - that is, he blesses some of them but curses Levi and Simeon. Jacob curses them because they led a slaughter and a pillage (Gen. 34):

"Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords. O my soul, come not into their council; O my spirit, be not joined to their company; for in their anger they slay men, and in their wantonness they hamstring oxen. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel! I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel." (Gen. 49:5-7)

Levi's descendants are also quick to shed blood. In the wilderness, after the making of the golden calf, "the sons of Levi" slaughter 3000 Hebrews, prompting Moses to say, "Today you have ordained

yourselves." (Ex. 32:25-29) (Indeed, is not the priesthood humanly ordained?⁹) Later, on his deathbed, Moses commemorates this massacre which, according to the purity system, is worthy of a blessing. So Moses blesses the tribe of Levi -

"who said of his father and mother, 'I regard them not'; he disowned his brothers, and ignored his children. For they (Levites) observed thy word, and kept thy covenant." (Deut. 33:9)

Besides these memorable actions the tribe of Levi is distinguished by the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. These 3 children of Amram and Jochebed and descendants of Levi are chosen by God to lead the people out of Egypt. (Mic. 6:4) But despite Miriam's obvious leadership (Ex. 15:20; Num. 12) women are categorically excluded from the Levitical priesthood. While blood is holy any bleeding or loss of blood, as a sign of sickness or loss of life-fluids, is polluting. Thus menstruation or childbirth make women unclean and add to the purity system's view of women as categorically inferior to men. The purity system believes in blood and in blood-lines. Thus, according to the purity system, after the tribe of Levi is selected to form a priestly class, male members become priests based solely upon their hereditary blood-lines "according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent." (Heb. 7:16)

The gift system has an alternative viewpoint to the Levitical priesthood, expressed in the wilderness right before the Sinai covenant with the 10 commandments:

"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex. 19:5-6; cf. 1 Pet. 2:5,9)

This viewpoint points to an equality among all who obey God's voice and keep God's covenant - as a "priesthood of all believers." Or, in other words, a faith community that has no priestly, clerical, or pastoral class.

Why does the purity system gain dominance over the gift system? The priesthood has a vested interest in maintaining its dominance: the purity system justifies their separation as a caste from all other Israelites and provides for their livelihood. This vested interest is reflected in the priesthood's two main functions: presiding over cultic activities (the liturgical function) and interpreting scripture (the conceptual function). The priesthood has exclusive rights to preside over all religious rituals - including feasts, offerings, and worship. In practice, "giving to God" means giving to the priesthood - supporting

the priests' livelihood and the purity system's dominance. By way of contrast the gift system emphasizes giving to one's "neighbors": giving to the poor and outcast. (Lk. 14:12-14; Mt. 25:31-46) The priestly class also upholds the purity system by controlling the reading of scripture. Emphasis on the written word, with interpretations by the religious hierarchy, helps "erase" or repress prophetic interpretations and actions in the present. Some try to limit the Hebrew canon to the Torah - thus further restricting God's voice and keeping God's liberating power tucked safely into the past. Casuistic expansion of laws based on the primacy of the purity system, and the continual emphasis on ritual practices, increase the demands on the people to commit themselves ever more deeply to the purity system. Conflict, however, arises. Many prophets, some of whom come from a priestly line, enter into conflict with the majority of the priestly class by castigating cultus and calling for radical social justice. Jeremiah cries out,

"For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, every one deals falsely."
(Jer. 6:13)

True prophets face religious ostracism and persecution.

"And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that (Yahweh) had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die!'"
(Jer. 26:8)

Thus a third function of the priestly class arises: defending the purity system by persecuting prophets. (Mt. 23:29-35; Mk. 12:3-5)

Throughout Jesus' ministry he is in conflict with the purity system and its priestly caste. The healing on the sabbath in Mark 3:1-6 serves as an example. As mentioned previously, according to the gift system the sabbath is a time for remembrance and for healing - resting land and laborers and giving to the poor. But according to the purity system the sabbath is "holy" apart from the needs of the people, i.e., burdensome sabbath laws are multiplied and used against the poor. (Mk. 2:23-28) According to the purity system,

"The seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to (Yahweh); whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death."
(Ex. 31:15)

How could breaking the sabbath justify killing? Killing is prohibited in the gift system. (Ex. 20:13) But the purity system believes that killing is a necessary part of purifying the chosen race: "So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you." (Deut. 13:5, 17:7, 19:19) Thus the "profound holiness" of the sabbath and the requirement to keep the

land and people "pure" justifies killing sabbath violators. (Num. 15:32-36) The religious leaders watch Jesus to see if he will heal the man with the withered hand - doing work and violating the sabbath. (Mk. 3:2) Jesus questions the religious authorities using the clearest terms in the gift system for expressing the opposition between good and evil, right and wrong:

"Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mk. 3:4)

The leaders remain silent: to answer the question according to the gift system's (and Jesus') framework would affirm Jesus' authority and undermine their own; to answer according to the logic of the purity system, which views all "work" on the sabbath "profane," is to risk losing face among the people who delight in Jesus' healing works. Jesus then follows the gift system by healing the man while the religious leaders follow the purity system by immediately plotting "how to destroy" Jesus. (Mk. 3:5-6)

Let us return to the passage where Jesus answers the scribe's question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mk. 12:28-34) Jesus' answer expresses the essence of the gift system. After the scribe responds wisely, recognizing the primacy of the gift system over the purity system, Jesus says, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." "Not far" may be a compliment but it still leaves much to be desired. The good news of the gospel is that the commonwealth of God is at hand, here and now. At stake is entry into God's commonwealth. What does the scribe lack? It is not enough to "hear" correctly the word of God. As James states, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (Js. 1:22) The scribe showed wisdom in discerning God's word but he had not yet made the break from the religious caste which monopolizes rituals, controls the reading of scripture, and upholds the primacy of the purity system. The gift of the commonwealth of God is given here and now only to those who hear and incarnate the word of God. This means becoming a disciple of Jesus and shedding one's attachments to the purity system.

Jesus initiated a new covenant, abolishing the purity system and the priestly class. Jesus' new covenant fulfills Jeremiah's prophecy:

"But this is the new covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says (Yahweh): I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know (Yahweh),' for they shall all know me, from the

least of them to the greatest, says (Yahweh); for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:33-34 NRSV)

In this new covenant there will be an equality among all faithful and obedient followers of Jesus. Instead of the purity system's hierarchical classification of believers from the high priest on down a new equality will prevail: "from the least of them to the greatest" all will intimately know God. The faithful and obedient will have a direct relationship with God - apart from any human intermediary. Indeed, Jesus came to replace the entire priestly class: "The former priests were many in number...but (Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently." (Heb. 7:23-24) The purity system and the Aaronic and Levitical priesthood are now discredited. But has Christianity accepted this? To what extent does the purity system, in different cultural form, have primacy in Christianity today? This question can only be touched upon here but will, in the following chapters, be answered in more depth.

The following section is not intended to judge or denigrate the work and positive contributions of individual clergy and scholars. Rather, the intent is to delegitimize the authority and special privileges of an entire clerical class that is based in the purity system and is an obstacle to the spread of God's commonwealth on earth.

If Jesus' new covenant banished the priestly class then why has Christianity reproduced a privileged clerical (or pastoral) class? Does not the Christian clerical class perform the same two functions (liturgical and conceptual) that the Hebrew priesthood performed? Does not the Christian pastoral class act as intermediaries between God and the laity? Is not the Christian clerical class male-dominated and, for most of Christianity's history, has it not categorically excluded women from top leadership positions? Jesus, during his strongest tirade against the male priestly caste, taught,

"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all (brothers and sisters). And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. (The one) who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts (oneself) will be humbled, and whoever humbles (oneself) will be exalted." (Mt. 23:8-12)

But Christianity has reproduced a privileged class of predominantly male leaders who wear long robes or fine suits, love the place of honor and the best seats in the churches, and love being called reverend, doctor, pastor, or father. Does not this clerical class violate Jesus' teaching (above) as well as new covenant equality?

Is not the pastoral class rooted in the purity system? (Chapter 9 will follow up on the issue of clerical leadership and its roots in the purity system.) Clergy gain their positions - not through a hereditary bloodline - but through a path similar to scribes and lawyers by way of academic training. The conceptual rather than the incarnational approach to faith is emphasized in seminaries. Many seminarians seek to become "Masters of Divinity" as a stepping stone to an exalted (somewhat) position of church leadership. As in former times a clerical class presides over all important religious rituals, dominates the teaching of scripture, and upholds a purity system. While presiding over Christian rituals, clergy "cleanse" worshipers and "bestow" cheap grace upon them. Yet in doing so they mute the call for repentance and conversion to a holistic, incarnational Way of life in Jesus. (Chapter 9 will further elaborate on Christian rituals, liturgy, and worship.) Similar to degenerative Hebrew practices, Christian sacrifices and offerings do not go directly to the poor and toward social justice but rather go primarily toward the maintenance of a religious hierarchy and bureaucracy, their "temples" (houses of worship), and middle-class charity and missionary efforts. (Chapter 4 will elaborate on paternalistic, middle-class charity.) Thus, by establishing a clerical class, Christianity has drifted away from Jesus' new covenant. Indeed, Christianity's privileged pastoral class represents a perversion of Jesus' new covenant - it is a sign of degenerative and idolatrous religion rooted in the purity system.

Conclusion

How can we approach scripture so that its liberating truth will be revealed to us? The word of God, revealed through scripture, is authoritative. But it is important to resist religious leaders who brandish "scriptural authority." It is bad faith, even idolatrous, to obey unquestioningly religious leaders and church doctrines.

To resist the strong influence of degenerative religion Christians can give primacy to a personal, incarnational relationship with Jesus/God. Furthermore, the Bible needs to be placed in the hands of all believers. When seeking truth in scripture believers must maintain a personal integrity that does not compromise one's inner spirit/conscience/faith. To identify cultural biases in the Bible, in modern religion, and within oneself, scripture must be read through the "light of Jesus." One very useful tool involves using a "Christ-enlightened" understanding of the gift and purity systems. The word

of God, when discerned, needs to be obeyed and incarnated.

The tool of the gift and purity systems reveals that the clerical class is rooted in the purity system and has no part in Jesus' new covenant. In God's commonwealth Jesus is the only "intermediary" between God and all believers. Thus conflict between religious authorities, who have a deep vested interest in the purity system, and faithful disciples can be expected. Also, unless a whole congregation repents, church members may want to make a break from churches held captive to the purity system and priestly-pastoral leadership.

Christians who are interested in holistic discipleship and in envisioning a new vision of God's commonwealth can meet together. Small groups engaged in Bible study and dialogue, with a focus on the call to follow Jesus and enter or form discipleship communities, can be a forerunner to a revival of faith.¹⁰

If the incredibly powerful word of God is incarnated in discipleship communities, then this will lead to the rapid expansion of God's commonwealth on earth. This indeed would be "good news to the poor" - and good news to all who groan under the weight of degenerative religion.

"Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk. 24:32)

Footnotes

1. I will be giving brief and somewhat simplistic descriptions of these two systems. Much of the material in this chapter on these two systems is derived from Fernando Belo's A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981. See especially pp. 37-59. I develop the two systems on a different basis than Belo by using the whole Bible and by gaining clarity through Jesus' teachings and practices.
2. This tool can also be used to detect cultural biases in other religions. All religions have cultural variations of the purity system within them - thus presenting a skewed (and/or idolatrous) version and means to knowing God, knowing truth. But Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6) and presents the Way to truth and liberation. (Jn. 8:31-32)

3. Belo, p. 38.
4. The Jerusalem temple wasn't built until King Solomon's reign but its design helps to clarify theoretical aspects of the purity system.
5. Belo, p. 40.
6. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo, 1966, p. 56.
7. Belo, p. 39.
8. The purity system's redefinition of "giving to God" is highlighted in Mk. 7:9-13. A religious offering negates the 5th commandment of giving to elderly parents.
9. This chapter declares that the priesthood is humanly-ordained. This will be taken up again in chapter 9. While many of the clerical class have led faithful and fruitful lives this fact does not justify a clerical class.
10. Peter Maurin, co-founder with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, had a 3-part program for social change: 1. Round Table Discussions (Culture); 2. Houses of Hospitality (Cult); and 3. Agronomic Universities (Cultivation). The round table discussions, to clarify ideas, emphasize open dialogue, mutuality, and respect - and are not guided by professional clergy or theologians. Round table discussions offer one format for people to interpret the Bible and clarify its modern applications. The base Christian communities in "Third World" countries, organized around laity Bible study, offer much potential too.

Reading the Bible

While others
study the Bible
I read it
While others groan
at the thought
of reading the Bible
I delight in
the word of God

for I know how
to read the Bible
The parameters are in place
to accentuate
the revelation of
the mystery of God
in human history
The truth enters - (cont.)

shattering the complacency
of daily routines -
the humdrum busyness of life
that lures one to sleep
The whole order of life
is rearranged
as the mighty tumble
from their thrones
and Almighty God is found
in the company
of those of low degree
The Bible is not
a web of contradictions
or a dry recollection
of dead history -
but rather -
the storyteller is
a seamstress
patiently moving to and fro -
simplifying the complex -
but keeping all parts connected -
a weaving in and out
of real people's struggles
for liberation
in the foreground of
God's glory and greatness -
the smallness of human life
being woven endlessly toward
a majestic tapestry:
the revelation of God's unity
with all living creatures
The truth speaks:
"My soul magnifies the Lord"
which is as preposterous
as if to say
that a seed
the size of a mustard seed
could blossom into
the joy-filled commonwealth of God
The Bible inspires
expanding the horizons of life
bringing to newness
the mysteries of old

for the mouth of the Lord
has spoken
and the word of God
has gone forth -
to bring to fulfillment
all that is promised -
even so -
"the mountains and the hills
before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees
of the field
shall clap their hands" -
a celebration of life
surpassing all royal galas
and inviting all
of God's creation
to joyous participation

So then - you tell me -
you have tried
to read the Bible -
but cannot??
And what is more -
have you eyes
that cannot see?
ears that cannot hear?
Perhaps you have never
truly read
the Bible!

CHAPTER 3

Holistic Discipleship

This chapter begins to envision broadly God's commonwealth on earth. Based primarily on Jesus' liberating practices, a holistic vision of God's commonwealth begins to emerge. The broad, yet sketchy, vision which this chapter establishes will be developed more fully in the remaining chapters. Also, the broad biblical foundation laid in this chapter will help set-up the following chapters which have a much narrower topical focus.

"Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.'" (Lk. 9:23 NRSV)

To develop a clear vision of God's commonwealth on earth we need to see the wholeness of Jesus' life. We also must understand that Jesus was serious about calling people to follow him every day. If we fail to see this wholeness we are likely to succumb to degenerative Christianity which fragments faith and shreds the truth into pieces. But to see the wholeness of Jesus' life is to comprehend that God's commonwealth is at hand and we are called to enter into a new and holistic Way of life. That is, we are called to the obedience of faith in Jesus - to become disciples who join with others in a discipleship community. This requires a full-time commitment to discipleship which encompasses everything we do.

Do the Christian churches call believers to a full-time faith commitment? Or do the churches call for a part-time commitment which emphasizes the liturgical and conceptual aspects of faith while neglecting the incarnational aspect? Most Christians today live a fragmented lifestyle which pulls in many directions. Religion is but one part of life and its demands are minimal upon the other parts. That is, Christianity has been "compartmentalized": to some degree religious life is distinct from work life, family life, leisure life, and political and economic activity. To some extent each sphere of life is independent of the others. How did this come about? In ancient Israel, through

covenanting with Yahweh, the Hebrew people understood that God was to rule over all aspects of their lives. The people were to follow and obey God in all things and so Israel was to provide a way of life that differed from all other nations. However, Israel's religion degenerated - it "went backward and not forward." (Jer. 7:24) The establishment of a priestly class, who acted as intermediaries between God and the people, distanced the people from an intimate, incarnational relationship with God. Then Israel chose to become a monarchy. In order to legitimize their rule kings needed to be "anointed" by priests. But by ordaining kings, the priestly class, in terms of authority and power, expanded to kings and their court. As a result the people had more leaders/rulers which further distanced the people from God. A somewhat similar process has occurred in Christian history. The early Christian communities, emphasizing an intimate, discipleship relationship with Jesus, provided a holistic alternative to the ways of all other peoples and nations. Christians became known as the people of "the Way." (Acts 9:2, 19:9,23, 22:4, 24:14,22) However, the Christian religion degenerated. Christians established a priestly class and, starting with Constantine, legitimized the rule of government authorities. The religious sphere of life has shrunk as Christianity has accepted and legitimized ever more secular authorities. Today, Christians follow and place their faith and hope in many "high priests" who are not religious clergy, e.g., lawmakers, medical doctors, judges, generals, scientists, bankers, business executives. The role of Christian religion today is one of subservience to other secular institutions.

"Secularization means that the Church, too, finds itself structured, psychically and socially, in the domestic sphere. The clergy become 'out of place' in the world of 'real men,' the world of power and business. They now serve primarily to pacify the powerless - women, children, private citizens - in relation to the male power structures of secular society. Males in the work-world value the Church in this role of domestic pacifier, but also accord the clergy that underhanded contempt with which the masculinist ethic always regards the feminine, that is, that which it has pacified and domesticated in relation to itself. Such men are embarrassed or angered by clergy who 'don't know their place' and who try to interfere in things that they 'know nothing about,' such as political and economic power. Thus the clergy, who have inherited classical masculinist self-images in relation to women and the congregation, now find themselves serving essentially the feminine role in relation to the real power structures of society."¹

(Rosemary Radford Ruether)

Christianity has accommodated itself to the world - it has found its niche and presides over but a small part of a believer's life. But to serve God part-time and to serve "other gods" part-time is idolatry.

Jesus proclaims the gospel of God's commonwealth on earth, calling people to follow him through full-time discipleship. To accept this calling is to accept Jesus' lordship over all aspects of life. The unique Way of life that results conflicts with the idols, secular powers, and authorities of society. How could it be otherwise? If the Way of Jesus was no different from the ways of the nations then there could be no call for repentance and conversion. Indeed, there would be no need for a Savior. But Jesus calls followers to take up their cross daily. The cross - which the Romans used during Jesus' time as a humiliating way of executing rebels and revolutionaries - symbolizes how the Way of Jesus conflicts with society and brings persecution. Disciples are to be "outcasts" - people living outside of mainstream culture - yet visibly giving witness to a new Way of life.

What follows is a brief and condensed "reading" of Jesus' practices in 3 inter-related realms: economic, political, and ideological. This reading is intended to highlight the wholeness of Jesus' life and how Jesus' practices conflict with the ways of the nations. At the back of this chapter is a chart which summarizes these practices.² Taken as a whole, Jesus' life, teachings, and practices present a vision of God's commonwealth on earth. Jesus' practices also form the basis for normative practices for all disciples. While discipleship occurs in different cultural and historical settings the Way of Jesus has common components that transcend all times and places. It is the responsibility of each and every disciple to follow and obey Jesus. Thus the chart at the end of this chapter can also be used by disciples as a "grill" for comparing and evaluating one's own practices with Jesus'. For discipleship communities such a chart can help to maintain the vision of a unique Way of life that resists the corrupting idols of the world. Those readers (disciples?) who disagree with the following articulation of Jesus' practices are invited to formulate their own holistic understanding of Jesus' practices and how they conflict with the ways of the nations.

Economic practices

In the wilderness, before beginning his public ministry, Jesus is tempted by Satan. The first temptation:

"(Jesus) ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' Jesus answered him, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"" (Lk. 4:2-4 NRSV)

Part of the temptation is for Jesus to seek first the satiation of his own material desires, i.e., to acquire food for a hungry stomach. This parallels the priority of the nations of the world who seek economic wealth to satisfy their own desires. (Lk. 12:22-31) But do not "worldly" economic practices utterly fail to eliminate poverty and the suffering of the poor? The other part of this temptation is for Jesus to use divine power apart from God's will for justice. Jesus resists by citing scripture: humankind "does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of (Yahweh)." (Deut. 8:3 NRSV) The first priority is obedience to the word of God - thus establishing a just covenant with God and neighbors. If Jesus came simply as a divinely-powerful "bread Messiah"³ the Jews would gladly have exalted him as king - as they sought to do after a feeding of the multitude. (Jn. 6:11-15) But this would involve no conversion on the part of the people to God's covenant of justice and love for all people.

In the countryside multitudes come to Jesus and he gives witness to a "new" economic practice and order. Jesus responds compassionately (Mk. 6:34) to the needs of the crowd by giving what he has: he preaches the word of God (Lk. 9:11) and heals the sick. (Mt. 14:14) Then, at the end of the day, the crowd is organized into small groups. The little food the disciples have is brought to Jesus, consecrated before God, given back to the disciples who give it to the people. The unity established between God, Jesus, the disciples, and the people results in blessing and fruitfulness: all eat and are satisfied. (Mk. 6:41-44) Economic justice and equality are established. The people are no longer individuals fending for themselves but instead represent one large family sitting at the same "table." This "new" economic practice and order of compassionately responding to people's needs by giving all that one has received from God is the practice of love. It is a normative economic practice for discipleship communities.

In the gift system blessing is incurred through giving freely - with no expectation of return or payback. (Lk. 6:30-36) Thus economic practices of monetary exchange or even barter are without merit in God's commonwealth. In the feeding of the multitude cited above, the

disciples err by complaining of scarcity and poverty (Mk. 6:37) and by looking to the commercial marketplace (the place of self-interested exchange) as the source for satisfying people's needs. If God is at the center of Christian community then a poor discipleship community will experience abundance by sharing all things in common and giving freely what they have in service to others. This is the "paradox" of the gift system: blessing and fruitfulness are incurred through giving freely (Lk. 12:22-34; Mk. 4:24-25) without fear of "depletion" - and curse and barrenness are incurred through seeking wealth, (Lk. 16:1-15) accumulating wealth, (Mt. 6:19-21) or hoarding wealth. (Lk. 12:13-21) Thus the normative economic practice in discipleship communities is not rooted in an inwardly-directed motivation for private gain, self-satisfaction or pleasure but instead is outwardly-directed.⁴

The Way of Jesus conflicts with the ways of the nations and their idols of wealth, money, and private property. Jesus confronts the religious leaders who uphold these idols. The passover festival is a time when the temple accumulates wealth from Jews far and near. But Jesus cleanses the temple of merchants and moneychangers and teaches by quoting from the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah,

"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers."

(Mk. 11:17; Is. 56:7; Jer. 7:11)

Instead of giving blessings to all people the temple imitates "worldly" practices and takes in wealth, covering up its true barrenness (symbolized by the barren fig tree in Mk. 11:12-14). In the confrontation over taxes Jesus brings out the idolatrous nature of money. (Mk. 12:13-17) The tax coin bears the image of Caesar and the inscription on it exalts Caesar as a son of God. Money, as a tool for accumulating wealth (through self-interested trade) and exacting tribute (through taxes) enhances the sovereignty and authority of the nations. Jesus teaches, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' (Mk. 12:17) Jesus, who just symbolically cleansed his house (the temple) of idolatrous merchants and moneychangers, calls the people to do likewise. By giving up that which belongs to Caesar the people may return to holy obedience to the only true God who is sovereign over all. The teaching implicates the religious leaders as having divided loyalties due to their ongoing complicity and accommodation with Roman rulers. Jesus is confronted about his authority and responds by teaching a parable which reflects the history of Israel. (Mk. 12:1-12) Some tenants (the religious leaders) in the vineyard (the promised land of Israel) begin to act as landlords. They treat the inheritance as

private property, accumulating fruits from the land but refusing to give to the poor. Eventually, Jesus asks, will not the wicked tenants be destroyed and the inheritance given to others?

Political practices

In the wilderness, before beginning his public ministry, Jesus faces a second temptation:

"And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall be yours.' And Jesus answered him, 'It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and (God) only shall you serve.'" (Lk. 4:5-8)

The temptation is very direct. To become supreme ruler over the kingdoms of the world Jesus need only worship Satan. The strength of the temptation is that in comparison to the power and glory of worldly kingdoms the, as yet, nearly intangible commonwealth of God must seem paltry. The "reality" of the world, as shown by the demonstrably visible kingdoms "reveals" that Satan and not God has more to offer Jesus. But Jesus counters this idolatrous temptation by again quoting scripture, asserting that one must worship and serve only God.

Jesus gives witness to a "new" political practice and order. (Mt. 10) Jesus forms a discipleship community around himself, tearing the fabric of traditional families. (Mt. 10:1-4,21,34-37) God's commonwealth is then extended - not through conquest or political alliances - but through discipleship communities sending out evangelistic messengers. They travel not as merchants with goods to buy and sell but rather come bereft of wealth and with no collection plate: "You received without paying, give without pay." (Mt. 10:8) They travel not as powerful dignitaries with an armed guard but rather come unarmed as "sheep in the midst of wolves." (Mt. 10:16) These messengers of good news suffer heavy persecution from the authorities. (Mt. 10:17-25) But since they are empowered by Jesus (v. 5ff), by the Holy Spirit (v. 20), and by God (v. 40) the messengers bear much fruit. (Mk. 10:30, 4:20) This "new" political order and practice of forming discipleship communities, sending out messengers, and bearing the cross is the practice of hope. It is a normative political practice for discipleship communities.

The Christian practice of hope represents the "unstoppable" extension and expansion of God's commonwealth on earth. (The only thing that can stop this movement is bad faith, i.e., corruption in discipleship communities.) Lack of wealth cannot stop the expansion. It should be noted that sending out evangelical messengers is a low-cost ministry: the messengers must be sent out without food or money. This is not just a gracious tip for dirt-poor communities. It is Jesus' word for all communities and is essential to the messengers' empowerment. The spread of God's commonwealth is not obstructed by long-standing barriers between people. The gift system extends the gift of community to people whom the purity system categorically excludes as "unclean": prostitutes and tax collectors, (Mt. 21:31) lepers, (Mt. 26:6) Samaritans, (Jn. 4:39-40) and Gentiles. (Acts 10) Persecution - jail, beatings, martyrdom - cannot stop the outward fruitful spread of God's commonwealth. Indeed, persecution of the early Christian communities spurred the rapid spread of faith. While the whole world seeks security through armed protection Jesus offers security that involves unarmed risk-taking. The "paradox" of the gift system is that "whoever would save (their) life will lose it; and whoever loses (their) life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mk. 8:35) The freedom gained from giving oneself completely to Jesus, including the freedom from fear of death, (Mt. 10:26-33) fortify the movement against all the power of its adversaries.

The Way of Jesus conflicts with the ways of the nations and their idols of hierarchical power, weapons, and kings. Leadership in God's commonwealth is through humble service and not authoritarian rule:

"The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leaders as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am among you as one who serves." (Lk. 22:25-27)

While praying in Gethsemane an armed force, sent by "the chief priests and the elders of the people," arrests Jesus. (Mt. 26:47-56) Peter begins to defend Jesus with a sword but Jesus rebukes and permanently disarms him, teaching:

"All who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to (God), and (God) will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt. 26:52-53)

It is, to say the least, presumptuous for anyone to think that Jesus or the commonwealth of God need to be defended by swords, by weapons, by killing. Jesus refutes the popular belief that the Messiah

will be a remake of King David. (Mk. 12:35-37) Jesus' "kingship" is different - it relies on truth and not worldly power:

"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." (Jn. 18:37)

The religious leaders recognize the conflict between Jesus' leadership and that of others, and testify to their allegiance:

"Every one who makes himself a king sets himself against Caesar....We have no king but Caesar." (Jn. 19:12,15)

None of the nations of the world or their rulers accept the kingship of Jesus, his model of leadership, and his Way of life.

Ideological practices

In the wilderness, before beginning his public ministry, Jesus faces a third temptation:

"And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; for it is written, '(God) will give (the) angels charge of you, to guard you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" And Jesus answered him, 'It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time." (Lk. 4:9-13)

The temptation is for Jesus to use divine power, prove his identity as God's Son, and be exalted among the people. By leaping from the holy temple and being saved by angels Jesus will perform a "sign from heaven." (Mt. 16:1; Mk. 8:11; Lk. 11:16; Jn. 6:30-31) The religious leaders will make Jesus the leader of the Sanhedrin, the top religious organization. Jesus will have the top pulpit to promulgate true religious doctrine. But this temptation offers conversion to a God of spectacular power and not a deeply transforming internal conversion to a God of justice and love. It would eliminate any possibility of a discipleship and eschatological movement based on normative commonwealth practices. Jesus refuses the temptation - again quoting scripture - saying that God should not be put to the test. One should not presume that God will do one's bidding.

Jesus gives witness to a "new" ideological practice and order. Jesus, traveling in Samaria, rests by a well, and asks for water. (Jn. 4) A Samaritan woman questions how a Jewish man could break purity codes by drinking from the same cup as her. (Jn. 4:9) Asserting the

gift system, Jesus offers the gift of "living water." (Jn. 4:10) After more questions and revelations the woman perceives Jesus to be a prophet. She asks a question concerning a dispute between Jews and Samaritans over the holiest worship location. (Jn. 4:20) In his answer Jesus speaks of a new age when "neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" will God be worshiped. (Jn. 4:21-24) The woman quickly picks up on Jesus' reference to a changing order - it is something she looks forward to - and she states her hope rests in the coming of the Messiah (and not in old traditions). (Jn. 4:25) Jesus then reveals his identity and the woman faces a moment of decision. She responds by leaving her water jar by the well, leaving her place in the old social order, and enters the city as a messenger of God, calling people to the Christ. (Jn. 4:28-30) A new order is established outside of traditional religious and social institutions. It has no gender, racial, or geographical boundaries and no religious hierarchy to prevent people from going directly to Jesus. This "new" ideological practice of questioning social and religious codes, discerning who Jesus is, and decisively responding to the truth (by making a radical break from established institutions), is the practice of faith. It is a normative practice for discipleship communities.

The purity system, which upholds a hierarchical order, gives honor and privileges to those at the top of the hierarchy. But disciples of Jesus are to "show no partiality" and bestow special privileges on no one. (Jas. 2:1-7) Like Jesus, (Lk. 4:9-13) disciples must resist temptations to pride and ego for special recognition and privileges. (Mk. 10:35-45) The "paradox" of the gift system is that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (Lk. 14:11 NRSV)

The Way of Jesus conflicts with the ways of the nations and their idols of privilege, the patriarchal "traditions of men," and a "god-of-the-dead." Teaching in the temple Jesus exposes these idols ingrained in degenerative religion. (Mt. 23) Instead of being examples of humble, repentant sinners under God's governance, the religious leaders control the law, using it to burden the people and to exalt themselves. (Mt. 23:4-12) Instead of bringing people under God's rule the "living oracles" given to Moses (Acts 7:38) are turned into a system of law bringing people under the rule of men. Jesus teaches, "You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." (Mk. 7:8) Through the "traditions of men" the law regresses into a code of death. Not only are many sinners to be purged through killing - but many servants of God also fall victim. (Mt. 23:29-35) All religion

which does not liberate is in service to a "god-of-the-dead." (Mk. 12:27) Leaders of degenerative religion truly serve a "god-of-the-dead" and are like

"whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." (Mt. 23:27-28 NRSV)

Only degenerative religion serving a god-of-the-dead supports and justifies status quo power, hierarchical authority and positions of privilege, while denying signs of God's power working for liberation in the present.

Holistic Discipleship in the U.S.??

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a (person) building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a (person) who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house." (Lk. 6:46-49 NRSV)

Jesus is the foundation for God's house, God's commonwealth on earth. In the U.S., Christian churches abound. But what are they founded on? Do churches organize Christians around Jesus' unique Way of life? Many Christians take Jesus seriously - but how many walk as Jesus walked? How many Christians pick up their cross daily and incarnate Jesus' teachings and practices? How many Christians are committed to a complete and holistic Way of life that conflicts with the ways of the nations?

Presented above is a broad and holistic framework for discipleship. Although this "reading" is brief and condensed it is suggested here that Jesus' teachings and practices are consistent throughout the gospels and a lengthier discussion would fill out but not significantly alter what is presented here. Indeed, because the Way of Jesus is clear and his teachings so immutable is it not obvious that few Christians are closely following Jesus every day?

Instead of real daily obedience to Jesus most Christians adopt a

"generic" form of discipleship rooted in the "traditions of men," i.e., part-time "church discipleship." For many Christians part-time "church discipleship" does not conflict with, but rather accommodates, an idolatrous way of life. Most churches replace biblical discipleship to Jesus with church traditions. "Church discipleship" and church traditions make it easy for Christians to make excuses for not following Jesus too closely. It is not unusual for Christians to testify that Jesus' Way is too idealistic, too impractical, or too hard. Or Christians will state that Jesus' Way is delegitimized by other biblical texts. Is there not a great deal of delusion and self-deception in these rationalizations? Excuses are a deceptive and cowardly way of saying that the cost of real biblical discipleship is too high. Or, excuses are a subtle way of denying Jesus while still professing to believe in him. But is it not delusion to proclaim Jesus with our lips and then deny him in our lives?

Who is Jesus? Knowing who Jesus is is not so simple. During Jesus' time most Jews who thought they knew God were entrapped in degenerative religion. Similarly, today, are not most Christians who confess Jesus as Lord entrapped in degenerative religion? To truly know Jesus requires a full-time faith commitment.

Christians who are meeting together and seeking a vision of God's commonwealth on earth must be challenged to make a full-time faith commitment - specifically to Jesus. Individuals and small groups also must be encouraged to learn how faith in Jesus results in a unique Way of life that conflicts with the idols, authorities, and traditions of churches and nations. The following chapters will accent these conflicts with churches and nations and raise the stakes of discipleship. Only by seeing the wholeness and conflicting nature of Jesus' unique Way can the costs of discipleship be seriously weighed. Who will answer the question - who is Jesus? - with their whole life?

"Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked." (1 Jn. 2:4-6 NRSV)

Footnotes

1. Rosemary Radford Ruether, New Woman/New Earth, 1975, p. 77.
2. The framework for this chart or "grill" and much of its content is derived from Fernando Belo's A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark.
3. This term is used by Bill Kellerman, Sojourners, Washington, D.C., February 1985, p. 34.
4. This ministry does not attempt to heroically feed the world or heal all the sick. The first priority is to proclaim the word of God. Also, I am not advocating copying the feeding programs of some Christians who impose a teaching of something other than the word of God on people who are principally interested in food.
5. Nancy Schreck, OSF, and Maureen Leach, OSF, Psalms Anew / In Inclusive Language, Saint Mary's Press, Winona, Minnesota, 1986, p. 27.

Modern faith

Jesus -
your words -
no doubt -
are well-intentioned -
and
I will always cherish them
as ideals
but
- get real -
no one
in today's world
takes them
at face value -
so loosen up -
and let us
reinterpret your words
to affirm

our lifestyle.
Let us
raise up
teachers
to comfort us
with soothing words
and heart-warming stories -
preachers
to sugarcoat
your hard words.
But -
not to worry -
we will always
praise you
and always
believe in you.
Thanks again.

Famine on earth

"Help, O Yahweh!
for no one now
is devout;
faithfulness
has vanished
from among the people."⁵
(Ps. 12:1)

There is
a famine
of faith
on earth
The Messiah has come
and the world is
not saved
Nations have not repented
nor have those called
by your name
shown the Way
Therefore
the earth withers
and fresh waters dry up
All creation groans
as the whole world perishes
for faith and integrity
have been banished
from the land
Blindness strikes the people
like a thick fog
covering the earth
All have sinned
All stand compromised
Once again
in deep darkness
the people wander -
for the Way of Jesus -
the path of discipleship -
is no longer walked.

No let up

Most merciful -
to those who hunger
for justice
bring more hunger
to those who thirst
for freedom
bring more thirst
to those who anguish
in search of truth
bring more anguish -
until the time
we seek you
with all of our heart.

"You will seek me
and find me;
when you seek me
with all your heart."
(Jer. 29:13)

TABLE 2: IDOLS & The Liberating Practices of Jesus

DEATH: The Patriarchal World

	IDOLS	Hidden Spirit ----->	Brokenness
ECONOMIC REALM	Wealth Money Private Property	spirit of possessiveness	the affluent and the poor
POLITICAL REALM	Power Weapons Kings (the state)	spirit of fear	the established and the oppressed
IDEOLOGICAL REALM	Privilege God-of-the-dead Traditions of Men	spirit of self-righteousness (hypocrisy)	the dignified and the outcasts

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live." (Deut. 30:19)

IDOLS & The Liberating Practices of Jesus

LIFE: The Commonwealth of God

Jesus' common practices	Symbolic body part(s)	Jesus' specific practices	Hidden Spirit --->	Unity	Yes this too!
LOVE	hands	<u>ACTION</u> giving teaching the word healing serving	spirit of com- passion	<u>One Table:</u> all share and are satisfied	Play
HOPE	feet	<u>STRATEGY</u> forming community sending out unmasking idols bearing the cross	spirit of freedom	<u>One House:</u> all children of God	Dance
FAITH	eyes, ears, heart	<u>ANALYSIS</u> questioning religious & social codes listening (fasting) praying discerning submitting (repenting) forgiving worshiping	spirit of humility	<u>One Sanc- tuary:</u> all creation revered	Song & Laugh- ter

CHAPTER 4

Homelessness: Prism for Covenant & Ministry

We have seen how the "true religion" can become degenerative and idolatrous. Degenerative Christianity has lost its vision: it no longer proclaims the gospel of Jesus and the immediacy of God's commonwealth on earth. It supports a religious hierarchy and traditions which distort the word of God. Culturally-corrupted Christianity fragments faith, supporting a fragmented lifestyle and a part-time faith commitment. Degenerative religion is not benign but ensnares people and works against people trying to enter into God's commonwealth.

So - how does one enter into God's commonwealth on earth? This chapter presents, in some depth, an understanding of God's covenant. God sets the terms for covenant and it is through a whole-hearted, full-time commitment to God's covenant that we enter God's commonwealth. By examining God's covenant, conflict between God's commonwealth and the world will be revealed in several areas. In particular this chapter will highlight the area of economic practices. (The area of political practices will be taken up in chapters 5 & 6). This chapter also looks at how Christian ministry is to be shaped within a new covenant discipleship community. Of course, it is also necessary to critique degenerative Christianity's distortion of covenant and ministry.

As a means for viewing the issues of covenant and ministry in a more relevant context this chapter uses the issue of homelessness as a prism or lens for gaining clarity. Perhaps surprisingly - perhaps not - the Bible has much to say about homelessness and the issues related to it. The problem of homelessness is very much a part of Judeo-Christian history and heritage. Indeed, the Bible presents a faith-history of a people seeking a homeland, first in the "promised land" and then in the "kingdom of God." So it is most appropriate to approach our topic from a historical, biblical faith perspective. The

biblical review will provide the context for both a capsule review of U.S. history and a critique of U.S. Christianity's covenant and ministry.

Biblical review

God creates the heavens and the earth. All the earth belongs to God. (Ex. 19:5; Ps. 89:11; Is. 66:1-2) To humanity is given the responsibility of being faithful stewards of all God's creation. (Gen. 1:27-28) But disobedience brings hardship from the land. (Gen. 3:17-19,23) And violence - Cain murders Abel - brings further hardship and even alienation from the land:

"And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you till the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength; you shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth....Then Cain went away from the presence of (Yahweh)....and he built a city."

(Gen. 4:11-12,16-17)

Humanity fills the earth (Gen. 1:28) but occupies the land through the "violence of human aggression"¹:

"Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth." (Gen. 6:11-12)

Instead of obedience to God humanity develops a powerful historical *narrative* of disobedience, violence, oppression, and death that encompasses the world. (Gen. 4-11)

While the ways of peoples and nations perpetuate injustice, God calls Abraham and Sarah to begin a new historical narrative based on the obedience of faith, God's promises, and covenant relationships. (Gen. 12-17) God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and their family ties. Through faith Abraham and Sarah become homeless - sojourners seeking a promised land. Through faith comes the blessing of an heir through the previously barren womb of Sarah so that she might be known as the mother of nations (Gen. 17:16) - a foretelling that God's faith/salvation narrative will one day overcome the worldly narrative. Isaac & Rebekah and Jacob & Leah & Rachel are likewise sojourners on the path to the promised land. But Jacob's sons break (the unwritten) covenant by selling their brother Joseph into slavery. Consequently, they are led to enter Egypt where their descendants become slaves of Pharaoh.

In Egypt, the Hebrew people multiply, as the Hebrew midwives obey

God and not Pharaoh and let the male infants live. (Ex. 1:15-21) And Pharaoh's daughter spares one male infant named Moses. But the Hebrew people are oppressed and although these slaves are not significant in the eyes of the world (Deut. 7:7) God identifies closely with their suffering:

"I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians." (Ex. 3:7-8)

So God, through Moses' leadership, liberates the slaves "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders." (Deut. 26:8) The liberation is holistic (and not just spiritual) as their whole existence and way of life changes. The people are under God's protection. So, when Pharaoh reneges on his promise to let the slaves leave, and comes with his mighty chariots and army to recapture the Hebrews, they are themselves swallowed up and destroyed. (Ex. 14:28)

Liberation from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, uproots the Hebrew people and brings them into the wilderness where they are once again homeless and landless. Before they can receive the gift of the promised land they must enter into a covenant with God. And all future blessings are contingent upon remaining faithful to the covenant. In their precarious existence in the wilderness Israel learns how to live according to God's covenant. Israel learns dependence and reliance upon God: water, manna, and quail are given by God according to the principles of satisfying need and equality among all. (Ex. 16:16-21) Gluttony, inequality, hoarding, and false securities are not acceptable. Hospitality for the needy - by extending God's gifts to all - is an essential part of God's covenant:

"(God) executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving (them) food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt." (Deut. 10:18-19; cf. Ex. 22:21, 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 24:17-22, 27:19)

In the wilderness the way of God is taught and experienced - but Israel hardens its heart and rebels, so that except for Caleb, Joshua, and the children, those brought out of Egypt perish before crossing the Jordan river and entering the promised land. (Num. 14:1-35)

The spies sent into the promised land are given hospitality and protected, as Rahab, the foreign harlot, joins the faith narrative by fearing God and not the king of Jericho. (Josh. 2) Consequently, under Joshua's leadership, Israel crosses the Jordan river and takes

possession of the promised land, settling into their new homeland. At Shechem the people affirm their covenant with God, affirming that by Yahweh's hand the land is given. (Josh. 24; Ps. 44:2-3) A dramatic shift in land governance begins when Israel chooses to change from a loose-knit decentralized tribal confederation to a royal kingdom "like all the nations." Despite Samuel's warning of the ways of a king, Israel does not repent, and the transition away from "covenanted" land accelerates. (1 Sam. 8) The corruption of God's covenant is highlighted in the story of Ahab's and Jezebel's royal theft of Naboth's land.² (1 Ki. 21) To king Ahab land is a commodity to be bought, sold, or traded. His "modern, progressive" offer, "I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money," (1 Ki. 21:2) is rebuffed by Naboth. Naboth's relationship to land is not owner/property but rather steward/gift. Naboth recognizes that his allotted land belongs to God. It is given not only to him but to his descendants for an inheritance and his responsibility is for just management, preservation, and enhancement of the land. Naboth does not presume to be able to dispose of the land as he, or anyone else, including the king, pleases. After Ahab's wife Jezebel, schemes to have Naboth slandered and stoned to death, allowing king Ahab to take possession of Naboth's land, the prophet Elijah pronounces God's judgement. For murdering Naboth and taking his inheritance, Ahab & Jezebel will lose their inheritance, with their house & family being totally wiped out. Despite many prophets and prophecies calling for repentance, the promised land is transformed into a land of oppression and exploitation. (Is. 3:14-15, 5:8; Amos 5:11; Mic. 2:1-3) Many poor people are dispossessed of all belongings as God's covenant is broken.

"Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover (them),

and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is. 58:6-7)

As a consequence of breaking the covenant many of the "chosen people" are swept off the land, going into exile as captives in a foreign land.

In the midst of the despair and hopelessness of exile God faithfully brings a message of hope of restoration that goes beyond Israel's reclaiming of the promised land:

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the

tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Is. 49:6)

After Babylon is conquered by Cyrus of Persia, a remnant of Israel returns to Jerusalem to re-establish a religious community. Through strict moral piety and religious observance the written letter of the law is elevated - but with the consequence that the voice of God, the voice of the prophet, is seldom heard. The exclusive Jewish community never realizes a return to the glory of king David - much less a fulfillment of God's expanded promises - as the people remain, except for a brief period following the Maccabean revolution, under the domination of foreign powers.

To a poor woman of "low estate" God's promise is renewed and she, in her exultation, proclaims God's justice:

"(God) has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; (God) has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich (God) has sent empty away." (Lk. 1:52-53)

Yet Mary and Joseph begin their marriage on the road and, at Bethlehem, find shelter in an animal stable. Threatened by a prospective newborn king, king Herod slaughters Bethlehem's male infants - as Jesus and his parents flee their homeland, becoming refugees in Egypt. (Mt. 2) Jesus, at the appointed time, is baptized. At this time Jesus leaves his home, family, and job, becoming homeless in order to begin building a new house, a new covenant family. To become part of this new covenant family means leaving everything (Mk. 10:28-30) in order to follow Jesus:

"As they were going along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.'" (Lk. 9:57-58)

Hanging on to worldly securities prevents entry into God's commonwealth:

"How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mk. 10:23)

After entering God's commonwealth, relationships reflect a servant/new-covenant-family model where a basic equality exists among all - and to excel means not to rise up in a hierarchy but to become servant of all. (Mk. 10:42-45) Jesus' fruitful ministry relies on giving - and receiving - gifts:

"(Jesus) went on...preaching and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women...who provided for them out of their means." (Lk. 8:1-3)

The spread of God's commonwealth on earth is interrupted when Judas Iscariot breaks covenant by betraying Jesus. The religious leaders, in collaboration with the Roman authorities, arrest, torture, and crucify Jesus. God's judgement is pronounced in the parable of the vineyard.³ (Mk. 12:1-11)

While the male disciples are huddled in fear, Mary Magdalene and some other women disciples become the first witnesses of the resurrection and bearers of the good news. Jesus, illegally breaking the tomb's royal seal, becomes the first in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus gives the disciples the universalist mission to "make disciples of all nations." (Mt. 28:18-20) The mission points toward the full establishment of God's commonwealth on earth with the full reunion, through the resurrection of the dead, of all the faithful throughout history. The disciples prepare for the baptism of the Spirit and then begin their ministry. Christian communities grow rapidly as the disciples obey God rather than the authorities. (Acts 5:29) Saul (Paul) brings persecution upon Christians until confronted by Christ. Then Paul is converted to a faith in solidarity with the world's poor and oppressed:

"To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things."

(1 Cor. 4:11-13)

Despite persecution and suffering new covenant communities spread and grow. But during the 4th century Christianity's growth is co-opted by emperor Constantine as Christianity becomes the official religion of the state. The meaning of God's new covenant is altered as God's faith/salvation narrative becomes blurred with the worldly narrative (violence, oppression, death). Christianity becomes a status quo institution - an imperialistic religion - admittedly with a small, faithful, and prophetic element.

Degenerative Christianity continues to spread throughout the whole world. But once again, as has occurred many times throughout history, God is "stirring the waters." Another revival is coming - breaking the bonds of institutionalized religion - for God's Spirit is calling people anew to do "new" things...

U.S. historical review

How do Christians "read" American history? How many Christians associate God's faith/salvation narrative with the spread of the United States from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast? What can U.S. history tell us about God's covenant and about homelessness? What are some of the root causes of homelessness in the U.S.?

The United States has sometimes been called a nation of immigrants, a nation of refugees. Many people leaving their homelands and coming to the U.S. have viewed America as a land of promise, a land of opportunity. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of American freedom, states:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me..."

Although America has provided a haven for many, offering opportunities for a new start, a new life - was the land taken in obedience to God's covenant - or through violation of God's covenant? Has the U.S. narrative broken just covenant relationships with God, neighbors, and the land?

The United States, as a nation, is the product of white W. European empire-building. The idol of wealth has always been paramount in U.S. history - and was the reason for its "discovery." Seeking new wealth, European expansion followed the exploration of much of the world by Portugal and Spain in the late 1400's. In 1492, Christopher Columbus, a white man after whom a federal "holy-day" has been named, "discovered" America - an inhabited land against whose inhabitants Columbus personally began a long legacy of genocide. In 1494, another white man, reverently referred to as the holy father, drew the Line of Demarcation which divided the "new world" into Spanish and Portuguese spheres of influence, intending to legitimize Spain's and Portugal's claims to "new" territories and prevent a war between them. Disregarding the Pope's imaginary line and imaginary divine authority, France and England joined in the competition and began to explore and lay claim to North American land. At that time, in what was to become the U.S., there were over a hundred different Indian tribes with distinctive cultures and languages with a population of up to 10 million.

The growth of this new nation of white people reveals a history of

a people seeking to possess and secure a homeland - through violent conquest and dislocation of other peoples. A key to the United States' land expansion was military power and the willingness to employ it again and again. While the native Americans or Indians were being conquered and forced into slave labor by the Spanish in Central and South America and by the Portuguese in Brazil, the Indians in N. America were being violently forced off their homelands by European colonists. Successful "wars" against Indians were followed by favorable treaties, violation of the treaties, more war, etc. In 1800, a huge land area inhabited almost entirely by Indians was "ceded" by Spain to Napoleon of France. Needing financing to support his European wars, Napoleon sold France's claims to this territory to the U.S. for \$15 million. Thus, the land area claimed by the U.S. more than doubled with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. While American attempts to capture Canada in the War of 1812 failed, the U.S. did defeat various Indian tribes and took West Florida from the Spanish. Subsequently, in 1819, Spain gave up its claim to the Oregon territory and ceded Florida to the U.S. In return, the U.S. gave up its claim to Texas. American nationalistic and imperialistic intentions were expressed in the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, establishing a basis for securing U.S. economic hegemony over Latin American markets through military intimidation and intervention. Many Indian tribes were pushed westward in violation of their treaties. Around 1830 the state of Georgia coveted the Cherokees' land which had been secured in a treaty and sought to expel them. An appeal to the Supreme Court invalidated Georgia's law but President Andrew Jackson refused to enforce it. Consequently, in 1838, the Cherokees were forcibly driven westward in a cruel winter march that decimated the tribe. Meanwhile, in 1835, Americans in Texas rebelled against Mexico and formed the Lone Star Republic. In 1845, the U.S. annexed Texas. In 1846, President James Polk ordered General Zachary Taylor to occupy territory claimed by both Mexico and Texas, thus precipitating the Mexican War. In the treaty of 1848, Mexico ceded to the U.S. nearly two-fifths of its claimed territory - Texas, New Mexico, and California - a land area greater than the Louisiana Purchase. The Oregon treaty with Great Britain in 1846 and the Gadsden Purchase from Mexico in 1853 completed the U.S.'s continental expansion.

U.S. expansion continued. The United States purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867 and was periodically claiming islands in the Pacific. In 1898, a few years after Americans, aided by the marines, overthrew the native government in Hawaii, the U.S. annexed the Hawaiian islands. Also in 1898, the U.S. went to war against Spain, resulting in

Spain's giving up claims to Cuba, ceding Puerto Rico and Guam, and selling the Philippines to the U.S. The Philippines became a U.S. colony after a number of years of bloody warfare in which tens of thousands of Filipinos were killed fighting for their independence. The 20th century has seen frequent U.S. military interventions and covert operations in foreign countries to enhance U.S. economic and political hegemony.

Moral and spiritual values, derived from the idol of wealth, underpinned U.S. expansion. American society evolved from white patriarchal European societies who believed that their "advanced and civilized" societies were morally superior to others. White people believed that they were civilized while people of color were savages or "natives." Indians in America and blacks in Africa were judged to be uncivilized, and hence inferior, in part because their societies and cultures were based on living more closely to, more harmoniously with, nature. In particular, white Europeans brought with them a land-value system which conflicted with the Indians. To the white people nature was to be subdued, developed, and exploited. Land was to be divided up and parceled out and to be individually owned as private property. Foreign lands were to be coveted, colonized, bought or sold. But to the native Americans, land belonged to the Great Spirit, was for communal use, and represented the inheritance for future generations. Like king Ahab and Jezebel, (1 Ki. 21) the white people killed and took possession and manipulated their own legal system in a perverse way.

"The U.S. government ratified 371 treaties with these Indian nations between 1776 and 1871....Throughout the following century and to the present day all 371 treaties have been violated, broken, ignored, or otherwise abrogated by the United States. The government of the United States of America has not kept faith with a single treaty made with Indian nations....Chief Red Cloud of the Lakota said: 'They made many promises to us, but they only kept one: they promised to take our land, and they took it.'"⁴ (Rex Weyler)

When Europeans first came to America they were surprised to find a land "unspoiled" and rich in natural resources. In little over 200 years as a nation, the U.S. has ravaged the land - leaving future generations with a declining soil-fertility base, a decline in wetlands, a decline in old-growth forests, a decline in life species, and increasing agricultural and industrial waste and pollution problems. Building the most energy-inefficient agricultural system in the world has resulted in problems with high rates of topsoil erosion, depletion of underground water reservoirs, chemical runoffs polluting water supplies, and

increasing regional dependencies on food imports. Hungry for energy resources and driven by the discovery of large coal and uranium deposits on Indian reservations, large corporations and the U.S. government continue to work to either possess outright Indian lands or to gain lucrative mineral leases on Indian lands. While the nuclear power industry is declining, one still might wonder at the hubris of a nation and an economy which would defy the God of the Bible and the teachings of history by producing nuclear energy for one or two generations and then leave the disposal of highly radioactive wastes for hundreds of generations to come. However, this hubris is consistent with a nation which refuses to honor its own treaties, at best offering paltry monetary compensation for land stolen -- still believing that land is simply a commodity meant to be traded and exploited and that a financial bribe would compensate for the destruction of an environmentally-healthy way of life.

To many oppressed foreigners seeking a new homeland, America was viewed as a land of opportunity - a place where one could become "my own boss" and escape from oppressive economic conditions. And during the period of U.S. land expansion, when it was in the "national interest" to push Indians into reservations and establish new settlements, several homestead acts enabled settlers to purchase land and gain some economic independence. The land prices, while relatively low, still excluded many poor people. But the name for relationships which grant benefits to some at the expense of others and at the exclusion of the poorest is not justice but rather is privilege based on injustice.

The idol of wealth which gave shape to relationships to the land of owner/private-property also gave shape to exploitive labor relationships. Capitalism institutionalized adversarial labor relationships with a labor hierarchy of owner/manager/"hired hands." The goal of maximizing profits and owner equity meant treating workers' wages, health costs, and other benefits as cost items to be minimized, thus exacerbating economic inequalities. The dirtiest, most dangerous, and lowest paying jobs were often, but not always, left to ethnic and racial minorities, white women, and children. Economic growth and "progress" became dependent upon new sources of "cheap" labor (cheap only to those who exploit it - but very dear to those who suffer through it). Immigrants from Asian and European countries seeking a new homeland, e.g., China, Philippines, Italy, Ireland, Greece, entered the country on the bottom of the economic system. Black people, we remember, were violently uprooted from

their African homelands, subjected to brutal trans-Atlantic crossings, and sold into slavery. Their native languages and cultures were suppressed, their education severely restricted, and their servitude enhanced through the teaching of degenerative Christianity.

Economic progress became associated with mechanization, industrialization, and urbanization, moving further away from nature, farm labor, and "replacing the creativity of hands with the precision conformity of machines." Many small farmers, seeking some economic independence, fell victim to the "U.S. narrative" which followed the path condemned by Isaiah:

"Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land." (Is. 5:8)

The capitalist system sanctified greed, brought competition between neighbors, and encouraged the swallowing up of neighbors' farms. Economic factors caused many farmers to leave the land: farm numbers declined from 6.4 million in 1910⁵ to 2.1 million in 1992;⁶ in 1920, 926,000 black farmers owned roughly 15 million acres - by 1978, 57,000 black farmers owned about 4.5 million acres;⁷ the average farm size has been growing for decades and 6% of farms now account for over 50% of farm output;⁸ farm debt and tenancy are increasing; and farmers now represent only 2.2% of our population.⁹ A very unequal and unjust three-tiered agricultural system is emerging: a relatively small number of very large farms controlling and dominating agricultural production; a larger number of medium and small farms facing debt problems and often dependent on non-farm income supplements; and on the bottom there continues to be an exploited class of landless migrant workers.

The decline in rural communities has sent many people to the cities looking for a new home, increasing urban congestion and the competition for jobs. But a transition away from an industrial base, with many high-paying blue-collar jobs being "transferred" to foreign countries, has resulted in many factory closings, displacement of workers, and put downward pressure on union wages. Like the rural economy, the urban economy is moving towards a three-tiered economy: a small, well-paid class of high-tech professionals, technicians, and managers on top; a larger number of middle- and lower-class people being squeezed into an expanding but lower-paying service sector; and on the bottom there are growing numbers of unemployed, poor elderly, single women with children, and homeless.

Like the empire-building W. European nations before it, the United States has turned to foreign lands to increase its wealth. Guatemala is one example of how the U.S.'s pursuit of wealth in foreign countries affects the poor and homeless. Guatemala has plenty of rich farmland which could easily provide enough food for its impoverished population except that, because of land distribution inequities, most of the good land is planted with crops for export to wealthier nations. By 1950, a U.S.-based corporation, United Fruit Company (UFCo), had become the largest landowner in Guatemala, owning 550,000 acres, of which only 15% was under cultivation. In 1951, a democratically-elected government took steps to purchase idle land for redistribution. In 1954, a President Eisenhower-approved, UFCo-sponsored, and CIA-engineered action overthrew the government and placed the military in power. Since 1954, U.S. military aid, counterinsurgency training, and covert activity have supported gross economic inequalities and military repression resulting in over 150,000 deaths and the dislocation of many more. In 1982, CONFREGUA, a large gathering of religious in Guatemala, stated,

"The impression is one of a planned genocide of the Indian tribes who make up one half of the Guatemala population, whose Christian culture and profoundly human traditions are being threatened with extinction. It is estimated that some 150,000 have fled to Mexico, Honduras, and Belize, seeking safety. Meanwhile, within the country, entire villages flee..."¹⁰

At various times in its history, the United States, seeking to populate "new" land and provide "cheap" labor for industrial growth, has encouraged immigration. While the U.S. has admitted a large number of SE Asians since the military debacle in Vietnam, it has historically favored white immigrants and subjected unwanted immigrants of color - recent examples being Haitian, Mexican, Cuban, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan - to persecution, imprisonment, and deportation. Between 1983 and 1986 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) rejected over 99% of Guatemalan asylum claims¹¹ - a rate not conducive to encouraging Guatemalans to pursue legal asylum. Needless to say, immigration law does not begin with acknowledgment that the land belongs to God and that God's covenant is inclusive of all foreigners, all sojourners. Immigration law does not promote justice -- but rather protects the property and privileges of the affluent and defends unjust U.S. foreign policy. Repressive immigration laws gain support from all classes, however, through a nationalistic solidarity of fear: the affluent fear losing their privileged lifestyles and fear a just sharing of God's resources; the poor, who are

mainly attached to the "worldly narrative" and to working within the system for incremental reform benefits, fear the competition that new minority interest groups bring. But like many of the first white immigrants to America, the vast majority of people leave their homelands because of significant social injustices. Yet immigration law subordinates justice and compassion to status quo management and to a politically partial selective process. While amnesties help law enforcement and improve public relations they benefit only a minority of refugees. For many of the estimated 500,000 to 800,000 Salvadorans and 150,000 Guatemalans in the U.S.¹² (state department estimates), there remains the prospect of being hunted by the INS. Like judging a child to be "illegitimate," the INS judges unwanted refugees, depersonalizing them as "aliens" or "illegals," criminalizes their very presence, and creates an underclass of people without rights to jobs and homes who are vulnerable to social and economic exploitation.

There has been a significant increase in homelessness in recent years. Not since the Great Depression in the 1930s have so many Americans been homeless. Definitions and estimates of the homeless population vary widely - from the government's very low estimate of under 1/2 million to the National Coalition for the Homeless' estimate of 3 million.¹³ Many millions more are only one or two paychecks away from becoming homeless. A 1987 study projected that by 2003 there could be 18 million homeless people.¹⁴ Homelessness is both a rural and urban problem, with many farm families becoming homeless and many migrant workers living without decent shelter. Many refugees ("illegal immigrants") are homeless - often surviving by "doubling-up" in the housing units of friends or relatives. Women with young children constitute a growing part of the homeless population. Runaway and homeless youth number up to 1.2 million a year with perhaps 300,000 classified as "hard-core" homeless.¹⁵ Up to 40% of homeless men are veterans - as military service inadequately prepares large numbers of men for re-entry into civilian life. The discharge into the community of thousands from state mental institutions without an adequate support system of counseling, health, and housing services has accentuated homelessness. State mental hospital beds nationwide declined from 535,000 in 1960 to 137,000 by 1980.¹⁶ Prisons and jails hold over 1 million mostly very poor men and women - many of whom will be released without adequate support.

While an economic decline caused most to become homeless during the Great Depression, homelessness grew rapidly in the 1980s

while the economy was expanding. Part of the increase was due to a significant shift of public funds in the 1980s away from social services and towards military spending. In 1980, 305,000 units of subsidized government housing were built while in 1987 only 23,000 were.¹⁷ Federal spending on housing dropped from \$30 billion annually to \$7 billion in 1987¹⁸ - and corruption in government (HUD) misspent much. Urban redevelopment and "gentrification" have resulted in the destruction or conversion to other uses of an estimated one million low-cost single-room-occupancy housing units, displacing many poor tenants.¹⁹ What becomes clear is that homelessness has increased due to the priorities of government and the interests of affluent Americans. Society is organized to serve those who have money. In congested urban areas, as in spacious rural America, the "space" of the poor or vulnerable has continually been encroached upon. While government and business interests devote great amounts of time, mind, and resources into building exclusive luxury space for the affluent -for home, office, recreation, and travel space - poor people are relegated to reservations, deteriorating residences in ghettos, overcrowded jails, or increasingly, left homeless and on the streets.

The homeless condition

To understand the pathos and affliction of homelessness it is necessary to go beyond statistics and analysis to an appreciation of daily experience and struggle. Stereotypes must be broken. Homeless people represent all ages, races, education levels, and have a great variety of job experiences. Despite the great diversity many homeless people have common experiences based on their condition. In particular they often experience latent or blatant prejudices engendered by the purity system. The purity system makes judgements on outward appearances. The purity system upholds the idol of wealth: those who are well-dressed and wealthy are esteemed while those experiencing poverty are looked down upon. Related to this is a popular saying from the purity system: "cleanliness is next to godliness." Society, in general, treats homeless people as "unclean." Living outdoors - in parks, under bridges, in abandoned buildings, in bus or subway stations, or other nooks and crannies, many homeless people are unwelcome and encouraged, by various means, to move elsewhere. Their lack of access to shower facilities or even to toilets enhances society's prejudices. Homeless people are more tolerated if they are "warehoused" - hidden away in shelters - as long as the shelters are "not in my back yard" - not in one's own neighborhood.

Living on the streets there is a greater threat of theft, assault, or rape - yet homeless people often experience police harassment - as if abject poverty was itself a crime. Their sicknesses are easily aggravated by exposure to the elements, poor nutrition, and inadequate rest. Very cold weather may result in frostbite or death. Yet because of their poverty they are unwelcome at most health facilities. Because they are poor and visible on the streets they may be stigmatized as lazy. Yet while all people have daily needs for food and shelter homeless people are forced to expend a great deal of time and energy walking to soup kitchens, standing in lines, and looking for a place to sleep. They may experience much frustration getting jobs with no permanent address, lack of "good" references, lack of transportation, limited or no storage space for possessions, no place to clean-up and change clothes for interviews, and no telephone to receive calls from potential employers. Many homeless people do work regularly - but still cannot afford housing because wages are so low and it's difficult to save up a month's rent plus security deposit.

While government gives paper-pushing jobs to many, handsomely subsidizes middle-class homeowners, and greatly subsidizes and bails out the wealthy, homeless people may bear a social stigma for receiving welfare or using food stamps. The bureaucratic welfare system may treat them in an insensitive, impersonal, and condescending way. Some homeless people prefer rummaging through the prodigious waste of the affluent - going through dumpsters for food or useable items or collecting aluminum cans - rather than taking a paternalistic handout.

In a production and profit-oriented society the disenfranchised are often looked down upon as "liabilities" with a negative worth sapping the well-being of more affluent people. They may be viewed as "parasites" - yet it is society which depends on the blood plasma of poor and homeless people. It is homeless youth who are preyed upon to satisfy society's sexual appetite. Runaway and homeless youth, most of whom come from troubled, dysfunctional homes, are often ground into a street life of prostitution, drugs, crime, and increasingly, exposure to AIDS. It is business that exploits homeless people at day labor pools where they must report very early, often skipping breakfast (and lunch if hired), wait for hours, and if hired work in the worst jobs at minimum wages without benefits (and minus costs such as transportation).

Stripped of worldly securities and status, homeless people often

experience low self-esteem, despair, and hopelessness. They experience not only a material poverty but also a devastating poverty of community, friends, and family. For those with mental disabilities there is greater mental, physical, and spiritual abuse. (The alienating and inhumane life of homelessness could destabilize anyone's mental health.) In their depressing environment, where good options remain illusive, many develop chemical dependencies and a "survival" mentality - simply seeking to get by (and/or "high") from day to day. While alcohol is society's most abused drug, affecting all classes, it is more visible, and hence more socially condemned among homeless people. When intoxicated, homeless people are easy prey for theft - whether on the streets, in a detoxification unit, or in jail. As the means to accessing power in the system, or for surviving on the streets, some develop a "street mentality," developing skills at conning, intimidation, and manipulation. Indeed one might suspect that there are nearly as many predators among homeless people as there are in corporate boardrooms (albeit much poorer).

Homelessness is not a new problem - it is a prominent theme in all of history. Homelessness may result from many different individual circumstances - but from a global perspective it can be seen as an unavoidable consequence of social injustice. Prominent in causing homelessness in the United States has been Americans captivity to the idol of wealth and their willingness to employ all means - economic, military, legal, political - to gain it. While affluent white men, in particular, have benefitted from U.S. institutions, there have always been many others who have suffered greatly so that the affluent might enjoy such privileges. History reveals that the "U.S. narrative" has broken covenant with God, neighbors, and the land.

Christian idolatry

How fully have Christians entered into God's covenant? Have most Christians in the U.S. broken covenant with God, neighbors, and the land? And if Christians have broken God's covenant - then how does this affect Christian ministry for homeless people?

Covenant with Jesus?

To enter God's covenant - to enter into God's commonwealth on earth - means accepting Jesus as Lord and Messiah and, through the obedience of faith, becoming part of a holistic discipleship community.

Faith in Jesus calls for full-time discipleship. Yet, how many churches offer a holistic Way of discipleship to Jesus Christ? The lack of new covenant communities offering a holistic communitarian Way of life gives evidence that most Christians have not entered God's covenant. Instead of advocating for joining in God's covenant most Christian leaders promote church membership. Through part-time faith commitments to churches many Christians have devised their own relationship with God, neighbors, and the land - deluding themselves about their own salvation. Most churches have blurred God's faith/salvation narrative with the worldly narrative. That is, they have been culturally corrupted. A part-time faith commitment conveniently accommodates an idolatrous way of life. Instead of full-time discipleship to Jesus, churches call people to form social clubs, to support building maintenance as well as a church hierarchy and bureaucracy, to engage in paternalistic programs, to make lukewarm social pronouncements through paper resolutions, and to accept a comfortable niche in society. Rare is the church that proclaims costly discipleship, rarer still the church that incarnates discipleship in a holistic community. Most churches represent a superstructure without a base community - and are stuck in restrictive traditions which hinder the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. But without discipleship communities Christians in churches witness to an empty house, to a spiritual void. Christians' commitments to degenerative churches represent a rejection of God's covenant.

Covenant with "neighbors"?

The Bible reveals a God of love and justice whose covenant with one's "neighbors" - loving your neighbor as yourself - is closely identified with loving the "least" of people: the slaves, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the homeless. Jesus shows how to love one's neighbors and enters into a lifestyle of solidarity with the poor. How well do Christians follow Jesus and live with and among poor people? Have not many white Christians, in particular, adhered to the idol of wealth and broken covenant with the poor?

In many metropolitan cities white-male led and populated inner-city churches have declined over the past few decades while white suburban churches have been erected at a fast pace. Inner-city neighborhoods have changed, with an influx of various racial or ethnic minority groups, with a few churches in these areas remaining with a predominantly white, commuter membership. Commitment to poor inner-city neighborhoods by white people was demonstrated by their

feet - as many moved out to the suburbs or to "better areas" (a value-laden term) in the city. Proximity to poor people was thus demonstrably deemed undesirable even as poor people became objects of church evangelization and charity. Many middle- and upper-class Christians, instead of investing in the commonwealth of God and seeking first a home in a discipleship community, invested in worldly securities, in private homes and lands. To maintain the property values of their investments these Christians seek to maintain "good neighborhoods," meaning insulating themselves against and keeping out poor people and problems associated with poor people, e.g., drugs, crime, blight. To this end affluent white neighborhoods invariably oppose the entrance of shelter programs (for the homeless, battered women, drug abusers, ex-convicts, etc.) or the entrance of poor or colored families into their neighborhood. But for Christians to separate themselves from poor people is to give witness to the triumph of fear over love, the triumph of worldly securities over faith. Christians who see poor and homeless people as a separate humanity, as "other," must repent and learn to identify with them as part of the same humanity, the same family - just as God, Jesus, and the disciples identified with them. The pretensions of difference, the self-deception and delusion of judging poor and homeless people to be in some way inferior to oneself need to be overcome through more honesty, more humility, more vulnerability - by laying aside worldly securities and entering more deeply into the pain and brokenness of the world. What is helpful is honesty about one's own brokenness - and not a false cover of outward well-being. This identification with poor people cannot occur intellectually - simply through some verbal affirmation or financial gift. It must occur holistically - through one's feet and one's whole body moving into proximity with poor people.

True solidarity with poor people also requires challenging the idols of wealth and private property. Most affluent and poor churches alike esteem and idolize wealth. Jesus teaches,

"No one can serve two masters....You cannot serve God and mammon." (Mt. 6:24)

In a rich capitalist nation like the United States does not failing to confront the idol of wealth reveal great cowardice and/or great complicity in the worldly narrative? It speaks of being ashamed of Jesus and his gospel.

"Jesus was poor and his message was for the poor. The rich and proud may be ashamed of him and his message, and in fact they are ashamed of him....People who are ashamed of humble clothes, of the campesino's coarse cotton shirt, they're ashamed of Jesus

and his message. And people who are proud of their fine cars, and their elegant clothes, their luxurious houses, they're ashamed of Jesus, too."²⁰ (Solentiname community, Nicaragua)

Christians' separation from poor people and/or the idolization of wealth represent a rejection of God's covenant.

Covenant with the land?

Biblically, both God's covenant and the issue of homelessness cannot be separated from relationship to the land. While the "worldly narrative" throughout history continually produces homelessness, God's faith/salvation narrative is working to extend the gift of the promised-land (old covenant)/commonwealth-of-God (new covenant) to all people. It is the Year of Jubilee (Lev. 25) which restores the inheritance of land to the dispossessed which Jesus announces as synonymous with his mission. (Lk. 4:18-19) So - how committed to nurturing and sharing the land are urban, suburban, or, for that matter, rural Christians?

Has not Western Christianity upheld an anthropocentric bias which denigrates nature? White Eurocentric Christianity brought to the United States a land-value system that supports the rapid economic exploitation of natural resources. Degenerative Christianity, beholden to the idols of wealth and private property, shares much complicity in the dispossession of people of color and poor white people from the land. Christian complicity in environmental degradation, the decline of rural communities, and the growth of large urban centers is quite significant. In large urban centers Christians' alienation from the land is great.

The growth and function of large cities is itself intimately connected to society's pursuit of wealth, exploitation of the environment, and uprooting people from the land. The proliferation of large cities around the world, of 100,000 or more people, is a recent historical phenomenon of the past couple centuries. The infrastructure and institutions of large cities are designed for high-energy usage and the maximization of trade and wealth. Cities are highly dependent upon a large-scale transfer of resources from rural areas - of energy, food, and labor (displaced farmworkers). The supply of the primary energy source for large cities - non-renewable fossil fuels - is limited and its extraction from the earth, refinement, transportation, and use result in great pollution and ecological harm. The technology used to extract large agricultural surpluses for cities - one-crop farming, heavy use of

inorganic fertilizers and pesticides, energy-guzzling machinery, "mining" of aquifers and redirecting of rivers for irrigation, draining wetlands and farming marginal lands - has seriously degraded the rural environment. The high concentration of people into small areas (in urban areas) where large amounts of pollution and waste are generated results in more anti-social behavior, neurosis, and illness. Racism results in people of color carrying the heaviest burden for pollution. One study found that

"the racial composition of a community is the single variable best able to explain the existence or nonexistence of commercial hazardous waste facilities in that area. Racial minorities, primarily African Americans and Hispanics, are strikingly overrepresented in communities with such facilities."²¹

Urban Christians who are environmentally-conscious may lower their energy consumption, recycle, ride bicycles, shop for locally-grown organic produce at food cooperatives, and cultivate the city through food and flower gardens. But this only begins to scratch the surface of our ecological crisis and city dwellers' complicity in it. Recycling and energy conservation in cities, while helpful, are reformist and have little impact on the overall system.

"Rome serves as a case study of what can happen when an urban area vainly seeks to ignore the growth limitations imposed on it by its surrounding resource base. Seeking out far-flung energy resources can serve to delay the collapse, but eventually the day of reckoning must come. Such is the case in our own time. Modern urban areas are supported through a kind of colonization of the world that is quite similar to that which sustained Rome. And like Rome, modern cities, because they have far outstripped the productive capacity of their local energy environments, are extremely vulnerable to collapse once the limits of their national and international resource base are reached."²²

(Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard)

Large metropolises are dependent upon an exploitive, colonizing economic system - and this predatory system cannot be sustained indefinitely. Unfortunately, most Christians, trapped in degenerative religion, have scarcely begun to come to grips with our ecological crisis. A prophetic word is not likely to come from religious leaders - most of whom prefer the more lucrative and socially rewarding positions in large urban or suburban settings. From their compromised positions they rarely challenge the economic idols that bring social injustice and environmental harm. Thus the gospel of Jesus is not proclaimed in its wholeness - and most Christians'

lifestyles and relationship to the land represent a rejection of God's covenant.

If there is little repentance and conversion to Christ - how bad can the ecological crisis become? Before examining Christian ministry some reflection on a passage from Isaiah might be in order.

"The earth mourns and withers,
the world languishes and withers;
the heavens languish together with the earth.
The earth lies polluted
under its inhabitants;
for they have transgressed the laws,
violated the statutes,
broken the everlasting covenant.
Therefore a curse devours the earth,
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;
therefore the inhabitants of the earth are scorched,
and few (people) are left." (Is. 24:4-6)

Fruit from a broken covenant?

Most Christians have broken covenant with God, neighbors, and the land. How has this broken covenant affected Christian ministry for poor and homeless people?

Many Christians, seeking to put their faith into action, have volunteered hours or taken jobs in various programs to help poor people. Many churches have developed programs to respond to inner-city needs, e.g., shelters, food shelves, clothing closets, day care, counseling. Many poor people are being helped. Many good works are being done. But - it is still important to ask: how fruitful are Christians' efforts at bringing deep-rooted changes? Can programs that emanate from churches which have broken covenant with God truly be part of the solution to social problems? More specifically, are church programs part of a holistic vision which confronts the root causes of poverty and homelessness or are they simply an alternative welfare system which treats social injustice lightly and brings plaudits to degenerative Christianity?

When churches help poor people do the services provided more reflect humble "ministries" or paternalistic "programs"? Ministries should emanate from the common and egalitarian lifestyle of new covenant communities. When a discipleship community, which has

chosen to follow Jesus into solidarity with the poor, helps poor people they establish a minimum state of economic justice. That is, class divisions are broken: poor disciples share with other poor people - and basic needs are met. Also, authentic ministry is two-ways: personal relationship with and empowerment of poor and homeless people is intimately connected to the empowerment of those who serve in the ministry. Some healing for all results. But churches create programs. Programs are separate entities from the life of the congregation. They are institutionalized efforts, with paid staff, and with goals that are not centered and focused on Jesus. Class divisions are institutionalized and a paternalistic program results. When affluent people engage in a limited, one-sided giving to poor people - this reflects a paternalistic program which subtly values affluent people more than poor people: affluent donors are looked upon as benevolent and good while poor people are simply the needy objects of charity. The limited charity keeps affluent people affluent, thus maintaining class divisions. Limited charity may justify the giver, placate guilt, and make donors feel good about themselves - while historical social injustices and current inequities affecting poor people are largely ignored. Paternalistic programs encourage and perpetuate unhealthy dependency relationships between donors and recipients. They obstruct affluent people from seeing the suffering Christ in poor people (Mt. 25:31-46) and their own need to be evangelized and converted to a new and holistic Way of life.

Paternalism can be reflected in many aspects of a church program. A narrow institutional and impersonal approach to providing shelter is susceptible to presenting Christianity as a moral code, with "religious superiors" paternalistically monitoring the behavior of "clients" and seeking to raise people up to living by moral codes set by the church. A narrow advocacy/counseling approach which merely seeks to improve poor people's capability of being assimilated into mainstream society is paternalistic. Assimilation alienates poor people from accepting an identity based partly on an understanding of the oppression of poor people throughout history. Instead, the assimilation process supports the "worldly narrative" and looks for defects in poor people, i.e., they are the problem, they are to change their appearance, seek treatment, get educated, find jobs, and conform to society's standards. When upward mobility is the goal, one's self-esteem becomes attached to external works and signifiers of power, subtly reinforcing most poor people's low self-worth. Empowerment and self-improvement need to be rooted in the inherent self-worth of the individual and in a commitment to God, to life, to

justice. But paternalistic programs do not proclaim the Messiah and solidarity with the poor. Rather, they transmit middle- and upper-class values of dignity tied to wealth and individual, privatized self-sufficiency. Paternalistic charity sometimes acts as a replacement for proclaiming Jesus' gospel which is "good news to the poor." When paternalistic charity is accompanied by religious proclamation it is most likely not the word of God being proclaimed but some form of imperialistic Christianity. The more professional and the more government involvement in a church program, the more paternalistic the program becomes. Bureaucratic, paternalistic, professional programs suck up enormous amounts of time, money, resources, and energy while moving farther away from simple justice.

Fundraising for church programs and advocacy for poor people usually compromise Jesus' gospel. Fundraising may involve a guilt-laying, paternalistic approach which treats poor or homeless people as objects for charity and which rewards one-dimensional giving. Check-writing is affirmed as a positive substitute for real relationships with poor people.

"The Gospel...requires direct face to face servanthood and community with the poor. It is not sufficient for Christians to give charity so that surrogates can work with the poor. Such surrogate charity maintains the barriers of wealth, class, and status between the giver of charity and the recipient."²³ (Peter R. Gathje)

Christian programs that use government funds blur God's narrative with the worldly narrative and are significantly compromised. Government funds come from the coercion of taxes and come with "strings attached," i.e., there are many cumbersome, bureaucratic regulations to follow. More importantly, solicitation of government funds testifies to the world that obedience to a poor Messiah is insufficient when it comes to helping other poor people. Christian advocacy for poor people is similarly compromised. Degenerative Christianity seems more interested in seeking to reform the worldly narrative through worldly means (paradoxical folly) than in participating in God's powerful narrative. Christian advocacy often involves lobbying for legislation for more jobs, housing, and welfare payments. But can the gospel of Jesus be reconciled with pleading with capitalistic corporations to provide more decent-paying jobs - or landlords or developers to provide more affordable rental units - or lawmakers to increase welfare payments? Is not Jesus' gospel more liberating than seeking to be dependent upon the benevolence of the wealthy and powerful? Is it not the worldly narrative which idolatrously seeks to transfer people's security to the state, corporation, landlord,

and private welfare - and away from God, covenant communities, and the land? Historically, have not modest governmental reforms placated and co-opted movements for change, redirecting them away from following a more radical, grassroots vision of spreading God's commonwealth on earth?

It should not be surprising that Christians' broken covenant with God deeply affects Christians' efforts on behalf of poor people. While many poor people are being helped in a limited way not much deep-rooted change or transformation is occurring. Christian programs generally support paternalistic charity, counsel for assimilation into mainstream society, and rely on government to bring solutions to social problems. Thus Christian programs pervert Jesus' gospel and have lost the vision of God's commonwealth on earth.

Covenant and Ministry

For Christians today in the United States - how shall covenant and ministry be approached? Let us review. The fruitfulness of Christians' labor depends upon "internal" organization - upon how well Christians are connected to Jesus. If Christians' relationship to Jesus is part-time, half-hearted, or misguided then bearing much fruit is next to impossible. Thus fruitful Christian ministry must emanate from a full-time commitment to God's covenant. To enter into God's covenant means accepting Jesus as Savior and Messiah. Jesus proclaims the immediacy of God's commonwealth, calls for repentance, and offers a new Way of life. Through the obedience of faith in Christ believers are called to turn away from their old way of life and to enter a holistic discipleship community. Three areas are particularly important in this transformation: 1. possessions; 2. family; and 3. jobs.

The new covenant calls for making a break from private property and all possessions. Just as Abraham & Sarah left their homeland, and Jesus left everything to begin his ministry, and Jesus' disciples left everything to follow Jesus, so the faithful today must give up everything.

"So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that (he or she) has cannot be my disciple." (Lk. 14:33)

One reason the gospel is "good news to the poor" is because God's commonwealth does not exclude poor people. Indeed, those with few possessions may find it easier to enter. Disciples are to share all things in common. Any possessions, lands, or houses which a group

of disciples still has after entering into God's covenant are to be acknowledged as belonging to God. Everything is God's gift - and relationships of community-stewards/gifts are to replace "worldly" relationships of individual-owner/private-property. Gifts are to meet people's needs - and not to be hoarded or accumulated. Gifts are not only for a discipleship community but also for serving poor people or for nurturing the earth. Disciples must break any attachment to the economic idols of wealth and private property. While it is God's sure promise that people of faith shall inherit the earth disciples must never become attached to land or houses. Disciples must be committed foremost to Jesus/God - and to find their "home" in a family of disciples. First priority is forming a "living house," (1 Pet. 2:4-5) a new covenant family, with other disciples of Jesus. Homelessness may be a transitional condition for disciples at any stage of their lives. Through persecution the faithful may be dispossessed of communal goods and may even have to move en masse from one location to another. After entering into God's covenant disciples in urban areas may seek the gift of land - "for here we have no lasting city." (Heb. 13:14) While an "exodus" from oppressive cities and a return to the land is to be desired - it must be an exodus in solidarity with the poor and not a flight of privilege to suburbs or rural get-aways. Ideally, rural base communities will have strong connections to urban "outposts" - and a well-organized yet fluid community structure will result.

The new covenant calls for making a break from patriarchal family traditions and joining a new family in a discipleship community. Just as Abraham & Sarah and Jesus and the disciples broke from their families and traditions so the faithful today are to do likewise.

"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Mt. 10:35-38 NRSV)

Another reason the gospel is "good news to the poor" is because society's poor and outcast - who have no family inheritance - the widow, orphan, homeless, refugee, poor - may find it easier to enter God's commonwealth and accept the inheritance of eternal life in God's commonwealth. Disciples of Jesus must break their attachment to family traditions: carrying on a family name and passing on an inheritance. In God's commonwealth relationships reflect a servant/new-covenant-family model. In God's family a basic equality

exists among all classes, sexes, races, (Gal. 3:28; Acts 2:44-45) all serve one another to enhance community well-being, (Gal. 5:13-15; 1 Cor. 12:7-26) and, in a reversal of "worldly" hierarchical relationships, it is the true servant who is most esteemed and empowered by God. (Mk. 10:42-45) There is to be no authoritarian leadership, no separate, privileged class of clergy, and no relationships based on "superiority" or coercive domination. All are to be committed foremost to Jesus/God and then are to love one another as precious sisters and brothers in Christ.

The new covenant calls for making a break from current jobs and finding new work in discipleship communities. Just as Abraham & Sarah began a new nomadic lifestyle and Jesus and the disciples left their jobs and places in society, so the faithful today are to do likewise.

"Follow me..." (Mk. 1:17, etc.)

Another reason the gospel is "good news to the poor" is because the unemployed, underemployed, and exploited may find it easier to enter God's commonwealth and accept the dignified work that is available to all. In contrast to the capitalistic economy which subordinates labor to capital and creates a hierarchy of capital-owner/manager/laborers/-unemployed, in God's commonwealth all work is Christ-centered, done among equals, and contributes to the community's well-being. Also, in contrast to capitalism, where labor is exchanged for money, labor in discipleship communities is contributed as a gift and is not associated with any wage or salary. All work that is good and necessary can emanate from new covenant communities - but communities must not take on too much work. Even while communities are concerned with their internal organization and connection with Jesus they must have an outward focus. The "outreach" work of all communities involves 3 basic ministries:
1. evangelization; 2. prophetic proclamations and actions; and
3. hospitality.

Evangelization is to occur where communities are located - and elsewhere - by sending out evangelistic messengers. Proclamation of the word of God is always to be a top priority. Neither houses, nor lands, nor any possessions are necessary for this ministry. Neither of the other 2 ministries are to replace the imperative to proclaim the good news of Jesus and the immediate presence of God's commonwealth on earth. Healing, conversion to Jesus, and preparation for entering fully into God's covenant are the deep-rooted changes that result from evangelization. This is the fruit to be desired

by all communities.

Prophetic proclamations and actions complement evangelism and hospitality. Jesus broke unjust laws and exposed the idols of the people. So speaking prophetically to the churches and to the nation to repent of their idolatrous ways is a priority. Prophetic actions in solidarity with oppressed people may be done through a coalition of other groups - but without endorsing other groups' political strategies or agendas. Discipleship communities have a unique agenda: proclamation of Jesus as the world's one and only Messiah.

A ministry of hospitality is an essential part of a discipleship community - but it must not supercede the need for the above 2 ministries. Hospitality need not require great resources: remember Jesus' two feedings of the multitudes - which the disciples carried out even though they were far from any city, market, or shelter. Hospitality may involve providing food, clothing, shelter, or visiting the sick or imprisoned.

There are many examples of hospitality ministries. The Catholic Worker movement, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Mauren in the 1930s, emphasizes community living and house ministry. Catholic Worker houses emphasize nonviolence, voluntary poverty, and acts of mercy - including providing shelter and serving meals. Their hospitality work emphasizes "personalism." A personalist approach is essential - for healing requires the intimacy of personal relationships and not depersonalized treatments. Another example of a hospitality ministry is Christ House, in Washington, D.C. It offers 24-hour care for up to 34 sick and homeless guests. Community members live in the same building and barriers between professionals and guests are being overcome through community.

"We are beginning to learn that so much of what we have done is for the poor, and that what is needed is to be with them. It sometimes seems that the doing has kept us from the being, and that the most significant thing that we can do is to be together in solidarity sharing the pain. We are discovering that the opportunity to share meals, worship, parties, and children with our guests...is deeply healing to us all."²⁴

The Open Door Community, in Atlanta, Georgia, is an example of a Christian community that has integrated homeless people into their community. Through deliberate efforts the Open Door Community has also become a racially-integrated community. Begun in 1981 by two privileged white couples, the community combines a ministry for

homeless people with a ministry for prisoners on death row. The community consists both of Christians who have chosen "downward mobility" as well as those who've come from the streets.

A hospitality ministry must avoid the "numbers game" - the view that serving more and more people is better - or that more and more work must be done because the problem of poverty and homelessness is growing. What is needed are not costly, time-consuming, expansive programs but rather focused ministries. Simplicity is important. A hospitality ministry meets basic physical needs while recognizing that deeper needs can best be met through relationship with Jesus/God. Christian ministry can offer dignity and respect for all, hope and new vision, enhance alternatives with freedom of choice, and non-paternalistically witness to the Way of Jesus.

A hospitality ministry involves some risk-taking and fears need to be overcome. With respect to homeless people these fears may include: fear of violence, fear of harassment, fear of being manipulated or used, fear of the unknown or the different or the strange. Fears may also be associated with conflicts with hostile neighbors or authorities. But communities are much better equipped for a hospitality ministry and any attendant problems than are efforts by individuals. Even so, individuals must be willing to bear risks. For example, during the past decade over 400 churches and synagogues declared themselves sanctuaries for refugees from Guatemala or El Salvador - placing themselves in opposition to cruel INS policies. Stacey Merkt's work with refugees in Texas led to an indictment, a conviction for "conspiracy" to transport refugees, and a 179-day prison sentence.

"The indictment was based on the testimony of refugees whose children were being held by immigration authorities on the condition that they would be released only if the refugees cooperated."²⁵

In 1987, while pregnant, she served 2 1/2 months in prison before being released to house arrest.

"We as people of faith need to examine our fears in light of the stories of why the refugees come to us. If we don't take that small step and act regardless of our fears...we'll never know what courage is. It is step by step and inch by inch that we struggle in our process to live out our faith."²⁶ (Stacey Merkt)

The three ministries just described are normative ministries for discipleship communities. Communities must always maintain these 3 outward, gift-extending ministries. They are essential for keeping the community's vision of God's commonwealth on earth. As far as in-

community work the possibilities are innumerable. Hopefully, many communities will receive the gift of land. A rural community must nurture the land and give witness to a new way of life on the land.

"Sustaining a community of life is the first purpose in farming, then conservation, and then finally production....It's a vision of a community not just of people, but of people and their land and other life that shares the land with them. All are part of the community that Jesus came to redeem and that the Covenant was established to bring together in a moral way....Protection of the Earth will require a redistribution of the Earth's resources. The land will not be protected until people again live on it and tend it. It will not be protected by industrial-scale land ownership and land use....From the biblical point of view, nature is only safe from pollution and brought into a secure moral relationship when it is united with people who love it and care for it."²⁷

(Richard Cartwright Austin)

God's covenant calls for faithful stewards to receive the land as gift, to nurture it, and, as much as possible through Christ, to restore the poor to just relationship with it.

Is it not obvious that a full-time commitment to Jesus will not result in a lack of work? Rather, the challenge is one of keeping focused and attentive to Jesus, celebrating that relationship, and not letting work become the controlling organizing principle, goal, and reward of community life.

Conclusion

The U.S. narrative, upholding the idols of wealth and private property, has broken covenant with God, neighbors, and the land. Reservations, ghettos, deteriorating communities, homelessness, and a polluted environment are results of this. Unfortunately, most of Christianity has also departed from God's covenant. Most churches offer a false identity and security through church membership - leading many Christians into a human-devised covenant - and deluding church members about their own salvation. Many Christian churches support the development of a separatist, paternalistic relationship with poor people. Christians' broken covenant with God undermines the fruitfulness of church programs for poor people. So - what must Christians do to put their labor and resources into fruitful work?

First, Christians must prepare to enter into God's commonwealth. To enter into God's commonwealth requires committing oneself fully to God's covenant. God sets the terms for covenant and it is to God's covenant that all people are called. After accepting Jesus as Lord and Messiah, Christians are called, through the obedience of faith, to become part of a holistic discipleship community. The Way of Jesus requires turning away from one's old way of life - and making a break in 3 areas: 1. private possessions; 2. patriarchal family traditions; and 3. jobs.

Groups of faithful people meeting together can discuss the practical implications of joining or forming a new covenant community. Preparation can also include much worship and prayer.

The biblical ritual for embracing the new covenant is baptism. Jesus was baptized before beginning his ministry - and the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit before beginning their full-time, post-resurrection ministry. Individuals must prepare for and then, through a ritual of adult baptism, make the leap of faith into a new covenant discipleship community. Adult baptism signifies this "crossing of the Jordan river" - leaving behind one's old way of life and being "born anew." It means joining oneself with Jesus (becoming "one flesh") through a full-time, lifelong commitment - and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. Only those adults prepared to fully commit themselves to God's covenant should be baptized.

Holistic discipleship communities that are fully committed to God's covenant are necessary for bountiful, fruitful work. After joining a new covenant community disciples will have much to do. Besides internal organization and in-community work disciples can support 3 basic ministries: 1. evangelization; 2. prophetic proclamations and actions; and 3. hospitality. Hospitality involves solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the broken, the dispossessed - to renew the earth according to God's everlasting will. Unlike the nations which organize people to serve the affluent and powerful, God sends servants/disciples to minister with the lowly and forsaken:

"For (Yahweh) your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. (God) executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving (them) food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt."
(Deut. 10:17-19)

Footnotes

1. The "violence of human aggression" is that which the gift system seeks to restrict. It brings "debt," curse, and judgement. People of violence's dominion over the land is "temporary" - for God is working to overcome them.
2. Some of these insights are derived from Walter Brueggemann's The Land, 1977, Fortress Press, Philadelphia. See pp. 93-106.
3. A brief "reading" of this parable is found in chapter 3.
4. Rex Weyler, Blood of the Land: The Government and Corporate War Against the American Indian Movement, Everett House, N.Y., 1982.
5. Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the U.S., Wash., D.C., Government Printing Office, 1975; from: Agribusiness in the Americas, by Roger Burbach and Patricia Flynn, Monthly Review Press, NACLA, 1980, p. 25.
6. "Nation has fewer farms, but size increases, USDA says," Star Tribune, 7-31-92, p. 18A.
7. According to: Calvin Beale, head of population section of the Dept. of Agriculture's Economic Research Service; from: Ebony, "The Disappearing Black Farmer," by Thad Martin, June 1985.
8. Source: Time, "The New American Farmer," Nov. 6, 1978; from: Hunger for Justice, by Jack Nelson, Orbis Press, 1980, p. 137. "Though these very large operations still constitute only 6% of all farms, they take in 53% of all farm cash sales receipts, almost double their share as recently as 1967." A Food First slide show from the Institute for Food and Development Policy states that 5.5% of all farms control over half of our nation's farmland.
9. Source: Census Bureau; from: Star Tribune, 12-16-87, p. 5M.
10. CONFREGUA (Conferencia De Religiosos De Guatemala), Communique, 6-10-82.
11. Source: INS; from: Star Tribune, part of a series on refugees by Frank Wright and Tom Hamburger, 9-13-87.

12. "Catholic order to give alien sanctuary," byline New York Times, Star Tribune, 10-28-87, p. 7A.
13. "You can't avoid the homeless in New York," by Carol Byrne, Star Tribune, 1-26-88, p. 6A.
14. "18 Million Homeless Seen by 2003," by Mary Jordan, Washington Post, 6-3-87, p. A8. The study, "At Risk of Loss: The Endangered Future of Low-Income Rental Housing Resources," by Neighborhood Reinvestment Corp., a nonprofit group funded by Congress, projected increasing numbers of poor people and a decreasing amount of low-cost housing.
15. "Coming of Age on City Streets," by Patricia Hersch, Psychology Today, January 1988, p. 31.
16. Source: A study of the Issues and Characteristics of the Homeless Population in California, California Dept. of Housing and Community Development, Sacramento, HCD, 1985, p. 3; from: "Housing the Homeless," by Gretel Noble, Economic Development & Law Center Report, Summer 1986, p. 6.
17. Mother Earth News, Nov./Dec. 1987, p. 47.
18. Byrne, op. cit.
19. Source: The Federal Response to the Homeless Crisis: Hearings, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Government Operations, 98th Congress, 2nd session, Wash., D.C., General Printing Office, 1985, p. 229; from: Noble, op. cit.
20. Orbis Press has published 4 volumes of The Gospel in Solentiname, commentaries by Nicaraguan peasants on biblical passages read at Mass each Sunday. In October 1977, Somoza's National Guard plundered and razed the community. It has since been rebuilt.
21. "The Integrity of Justice," by Charles Lee, Sojourners, February-March 1990, Washington, D.C., p. 25. The study by the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice was released in April 1987.
22. Jeremy Rifkin with Ted Howard, Entropy, Bantam Books, 1980,

23. Peter R. Gathje, Christ Comes in The Stranger's Guise: A History of the Open Door Community, Atlanta, GA, 1991, p. 34. I have changed the quote from past tense to present tense.
24. From a brochure, "Christ House - A Place to Live and Love."
25. "Innocent in the eyes of God," by Vicki Kemper, Sojourners, August/September 1987, p. 23.
26. "Conspiracy of Compassion," interview by Jim Wallis & Joyce Hollyday, Sojourners, March 1985, p. 18.
27. "With Heart and Hands," interview with Richard Cartwright Austin, Sojourners, February-March 1990, pp. 26-29.

Homeless man there

Oh! Ugh!
Look the other way.
Homeless man there.
Quick. Pass him by.
Pretend like
you don't see him.
If only there weren't
so many of them.
They're so hard
to avoid.
Oh God!
Is he
coming towards me?
Steel yourself.
Look tough.
Whew!
That was close!
Too close for comfort.
I hate it
when they're always around.
Why don't they
just go somewhere else?
Aah! - another panhandler.

"What? - you want
a *dollar*?
Forget it -
I'm not rich -
Why don't you
get a job?"
Damn them.
Life would be
so much more pleasant
if only
they would all disappear.
"Now by chance
a priest
was going down that road;
and when he saw him
he passed by
on the other side.
So likewise a Levite,
when he came to the place
and saw him,
passed by
on the other side."
(Lk. 10:31-32)

Migratory birds

When Fall comes
the migratory birds
take wing
into the horizon
to a destination
far far away.
Carrying no excess baggage
or insurance cards
they unfailingly embark
on a journey of faith.
High above
troubled waters
they move
in a rhythm
ancient
and unwritten
but full of wisdom.
And so
my spirit yearns
to soar into the sky.
Not into some
brick or mortar building
or stuffy gathering
long I.
No -

no - I refuse
to sell out to
anything less than
a full-fledged
Spirit-drenched
revival
of faith
on earth.
My spirit yearns
with deep, deep longing
to be caught up in
God's currents
moving through history
towards a glorious future -
and it is glorious -
and its current
is within reach
if only
I listen to
my heart.

CHAPTER 5

Idolatry: The Competing Covenants of Nation-States

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.¹
(Percy Bysshe Shelley)

The above poem gives notice about the delusions of power. Not all leaders, nations, gods are what they claim to be. History is not kind to those who exalt themselves. History repeatedly records the folly of rulers, nation-states, and their gods. "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Mk. 13:8) - and history repeatedly shows powerful nations falling after they have risen.

But who are these nations, rulers, kings, gods and how is it that so many people for so many centuries have placed their faith and trust in and pledged their allegiance to them? From what or where do nation-states lay claim to the authority to govern or rule? And why do so many people follow nations and their leaders to ruin? At issue are questions of identity, sovereignty, leadership, authority, and obedience. And - yes - idolatry. Of course, it is easy to point out the folly and delusion of ancient peoples - but what about Christians in the United States today? Are there any political idols, myths, and

rituals of the United States that have compromised the faith of Christians? And how shall people who desire to commit themselves fully to God's covenant relate to the authority of state? Nation-states offer (or impose) their own covenant upon citizens/subjects. How does God's covenant coincide or conflict with the covenants of nation-states?

This chapter will continue to develop a vision of God's commonwealth that shows its uniqueness. Along with chapter 6 it will highlight "political practices."

Biblical review

Yahweh creates heaven and earth. Unlike many other gods whose origins involve a struggle for supremacy over forces of evil, Yahweh is understood to have undisputed sovereignty. Yahweh, as Lord of hosts, God of gods, is supreme ruler of the universe. Yahweh lays claim to the whole earth and everything in it.

The works of humankind fail to achieve justice. (Gen. 4-11) So God calls Abraham and Sarah to the obedience of faith, makes a covenant with them, and promises that through them will all nations be blessed. (Gen. 12-17) They and their descendants, through faith and obedience to God's covenant, are promised the blessing of inheriting the world. (Rom. 4:13) It is God's purpose, God's will, God's promise to liberate humanity and all creation and to establish the commonwealth of God over all the earth.

Abraham and Sarah's descendants sin, however, taking a detour to the promised land. Joseph is sold into slavery but rises to a position of ruler under Pharaoh in Egypt. Jacob's family, seeking grain, become settlers in Egypt rather than seekers of the promised land. Under Joseph's management Pharaoh increases in power as the Egyptian people are dispossessed of money, cattle, land, and freedom in exchange for grain. (Gen. 47:13-26) The Hebrew people fare no better. When a new god-king (Pharaoh) arises who does not remember Joseph, the Hebrew people are enslaved. (Ex. 1:8-22) In Israelite history the land of Egypt becomes known as the "house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2) - for God's people cannot happily serve "foreign" leaders, foreign gods. But unlike other gods that support the rich and powerful, Yahweh identifies with the poor and oppressed and calls nations to do justice or face judgement and "wrath." Against great

odds Yahweh liberates the helpless band of slaves from Egypt, showing sovereignty over the nations.

Before entering the promised land, the Hebrew people must enter into covenant with God. In the wilderness, at Mount Sinai, the 10 commandments are given. The first two commandments set forth the exclusiveness of God's rule. Stern language reminds Israel of this exclusiveness:

"You shall fear (Yahweh) your God; you shall serve (God), and swear by (God's) name. You shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the peoples who are round about you; for (Yahweh) your God in the midst of you is a jealous God; lest the anger of (Yahweh) your God be kindled against you, and (God) destroy you from off the face of the earth." (Deut. 6:13-15)

The second commandment, forbidding making or serving any graven image, distinguishes Yahweh from other gods whose images are fashioned and then worshiped by humans. Unlike a human-made idol whose location is determined by humans and can be used for manipulative human purposes, Yahweh is the unseen and sovereign God who speaks, commands, and leads. Yahweh sets before humans the imperative of doing justice to all people - for all women and men are the living bearers of the image of God.

In the promised land, the decentralized tribal commonwealth of Israel, rooted in God's covenant, represents an alternative to the imperial rule of all other nations and kingdoms. In Israel there is no separation between church and state, between religious beliefs and government - for Yahweh alone is sovereign and there can be no legitimate leadership apart from God. Human leadership is temporary, by charisma, associated with the Spirit of God, and not by established royal authority. When Israel tries to make Gideon king, Gideon responds,

"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; (Yahweh) will rule over you." (Judg. 8:23, also see 9:1-24)

Israel, however, falls into temptation, and the Hebrew faith degenerates as the people go "backward and not forward." (Jer. 7:24) When Israel asks Samuel for "a king to govern us like all the nations" God tells Samuel,

"for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (1 Sam. 8:7)

Israel's request is a rejection of God's undisputed leadership. It is an attempt to blend God's covenant with the covenants of nation-states. Samuel warns the people that the ways of kings and nations will

completely violate God's covenant of justice and equality. (1 Sam. 8:9-20) By becoming like all the nations God's judgement will come upon Israel. The oppressive political-military machinery of the nation-state quickly enters, subverting faith and covenant.

King David is remembered as the greatest of Israel's kings, as a prototype for the coming Messiah. The "Davidic covenant" asserts that God will raise an offspring of David to build God's house and establish an eternal kingdom. (2 Sam. 7:12-13) But will this offspring resemble David? Can any king (or governing authority) serve as a model for leadership - deserving people's obedience and allegiance? What does history record of David's "model leadership"? David centralizes and concentrates political power, making his personal holding, Jerusalem, the city of David, the nation's capitol. David builds himself a "house of cedar" and establishes a king-serving royal court. Although no male covenant member, including the king, is to "multiply wives for himself," (Deut. 17:17) David's wives are not all Hebrews, his first six sons are born from 6 different women, (2 Sam. 3:2-5) and later, in Jerusalem, he establishes a sizable harem. (2 Sam. 5:13, 15:16) Although Israel desired a king to "go out before us and fight our battles," (1 Sam. 8:20) David sends his army out, remains in the luxury of his capitol, (2 Sam. 11:1) and commits adultery with a soldier's wife. When she becomes pregnant David uses his authority to cover-up his abuse, setting up the soldier to be slain, and taking the soldier's wife to be another of his wives. For this transgression David receives the curse:

"now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house."

(2 Sam. 12:10)

David maintains a professional mercenary army, glories in military power, and numbers the eligible fighting men of Israel, bringing God's wrath upon Israel. (2 Sam. 24; cf. Ex. 30:12) David's power extends over other nations - but is David spreading the justice of God's exclusive rule and covenant? According to Israelite faith the only acceptable relationship of foreign nation-states to Yahweh is that of submission and obedience, bringing tribute to Jerusalem. Otherwise they are in rebellion against God and guilty of idolatry. But David's rule does not convert foreign nations to an exclusive faith in Yahweh and to God's just covenant. Tribute and forced labor are exacted through dominative imperial power. David also moves the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, increasing royal influence over religious activities and bringing more religious legitimization to kingly power. But David's desire to build a temple adjacent to the king's residence (2 Sam. 7:1-7) is rebuked:

"You have shed much blood and have waged great wars; you shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me upon the earth." (1 Chron. 22:8)

David's breaking of covenant justice leads to grievances and rebellion against David's rule from both the house of Judah and the house of Israel. David's sons ("like father, like son"), growing up with royal privileges setting them above covenant law, include rapists, murderers, and usurpers of the throne. David's parting words to King Solomon are to take vengeance against those whom David holds personal grudges. (1 Ki. 2:5-10) Thus David's kingship reveals a model of leadership that in large part conforms to patterns of leadership found in all nations.

Being ruled by a king like all the nations reshapes God's covenant into a typical nation-state covenant. The gods of the Canaanite city-states and of other nations delegate authority to their state's rulers. The gods support a landowning military aristocracy which exploits the people. The power of the gods is measured by the economic and military strength of a particular state. In Israel the introduction or proliferation of foreign idols is only the most obvious display of idolatry. Just as important is the subversion of Yahweh's leadership as faith is transferred to exalted human leaders, military arms, and stagnate religious practices. The "Davidic covenant" begins a tradition of believing that Yahweh is unconditionally bound for the future to supporting the state of Israel and perpetuating the royal Davidic dynasty. The permanent location of Yahweh's temple adjacent to the king's palace in the city of David further ties religious beliefs to king and state. The temple's subservience to the state leads to a priestly and prophetic class loyal to the king, i.e., a royal religious cult and false prophets. Yahweh, however, remains free and at large. Long before the conquests by Assyria and Babylon, Yahweh raises up true prophets who proclaim the people's idolatry, call for repentance, and announce impending judgement. The reforms instituted by a few kings are too shallow to deter judgement. King Josiah's reforms, which support the centralization of kingly and priestly power in Jerusalem, receive scant notice from the prophetess Huldah:

"Thus says (Yahweh), the God of Israel: 'Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says (Yahweh), Behold, I will bring evil upon this place and upon its inhabitants...therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched.'" (2 Ki. 22:15-17)

Without full repentance hope for Yahweh's intervention is futile:

"Woe to you who desire the day of (Yahweh)! Why would you have the day of (Yahweh)? It is darkness, and not light." (Amos 5:18)

Hope for deliverance through their royal kings and professional armies is also greatly misplaced. Hosea proclaims:

"You have plowed iniquity, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your chariots and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people, and all your fortresses shall be destroyed." (Hos. 10:13-14)

Again Hosea proclaims:

"I will destroy you, O Israel; who can help you? Where now is your king, to save you; where are all your princes, to defend you -- those of whom you said, 'Give me a king and princes'? I have given you kings in my anger, and I have taken them away in my wrath." (Hos. 13:9-11)

Unlike other gods whose influence sways with the fortunes of a particular nation, Yahweh is not simply the patron god of the Jerusalem temple and the Davidic dynasty. Rather, Yahweh is a God of divine freedom and universal sovereignty, who truthfully prophesies judgement for the nations, and who even proclaims judgement against the "chosen people" Israel when they trash God's covenant. Yahweh is a sovereign God of all history and, when it suits God's judgements, may call tyrant rulers such as Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon or Cyrus of Persia "my servant." (Jer. 25:9; Is. 45:1)

In the midst of God's prophecies and judgements against the nation-state Israel, the prophet Isaiah proclaims the coming of a messianic king.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shined....

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder,
and his name will be called

'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' Of the increase of his government and of peace

there will be no end,

upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it,
and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness
from this time forth and for evermore.

The zeal of (Yahweh) of hosts will do this." (Is. 9:2,6-7)

Despite Israel's breaking of the covenant, it is still God's will and purpose to establish the commonwealth of God on earth.

Jesus appears on the scene and proclaims a liberating, new

covenant Way of life:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because (God) has annointed me to preach good news to the poor.
(God) has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk. 4:18-19)

An astonishing message! And people begin to question: Who is Jesus? Is he or isn't he God's messianic king? Is he the one who will establish God's commonwealth on earth? But some people, the established leaders, find Jesus and his message threatening. Neither the Jewish leaders nor the Roman authorities recognize Jesus as Messiah. On the contrary, the Jewish leaders arrest Jesus and question him.

"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?' And Jesus said, 'I am.'" (Mk. 14:61-62)

After abusing and beating him, the Jewish authorities turn Jesus over to the Roman authorities. Before Pilate Jesus confesses,

"You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth." (Jn. 18:37)

After more abuse Jesus is put to death in accordance with Hebrew law (Jn. 19:7; Mk. 14:64) and under Roman judicial jurisdiction. The Jewish leaders, collaborators with Roman officials, confess their idolatrous faith,

"We have no king but Caesar." (Jn. 19:15)

The spread of Jesus' new covenant Way respects no national boundaries - and reconciling the whole world is the goal.

"Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens 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 once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God." (Eph. 2:12-16 NRSV)

Christian idolatry & the covenant of the United States

The first Christians were deeply committed to God's covenant - to

Jesus' new covenant which resulted in a unique Way of life in a discipleship community. God's covenant required a full-time commitment and allowed for no compromise with God's leadership. As a result many Christians in the early church were killed for refusing to pay homage or give allegiance to Caesar. The Christians suffering martyrdom knew that the commonwealth of God and the unjust rule of nation-states are not compatible and Christians cannot divide their allegiance among both. But, like the Hebrew faith, the Christian faith degenerated. During the 4th century Emperor Constantine issued some commands and Christianity became the official religion of the state, of the Roman empire. In the process the church became Roman. By forging an alliance with the state the church committed a sin similar to ancient Israel's crying out for "a king to govern us like all the nations." Like ancient Israel, Christianity attempted to blend God's covenant with the covenants of nation-states. By joining itself in partnership with the state the church compromised its faith in God's/Jesus' undisputed leadership. By blending God's covenant with the Roman covenant Christianity lost its vision and could no longer proclaim the immediacy of God's commonwealth on earth.

Through its alliance with Roman rulers Christianity committed the age-old sin of idolatry. How so? Didn't idols and gods begin disappearing with the rise of monotheistic Christianity? In fact 4th-century Christianity took on a similar role that false gods and idols had played in legitimizing the covenants of nation-states. Christianity *modified* but essentially continued the ancient, idolatrous tradition whereby gods bestow divine authority upon the rulers of the nations. Christianity developed theology suggesting that God's covenant and God's leadership could be compatible with the covenants of nations and their leaders. Theology suggested that nations and rulers can have a God-sanctioned leadership role in the world - thus giving them something like a "divine mandate" to rule. But by sanctifying the rule of emperors, kings, princes, feudal lords, etc., Christians idolatrously began to divide their allegiance between God and state. Like ancient Israel the church was giving lip service to God while at the same time following the traditions and ways of the nations. By merging God's covenant with the covenant of a nation-state the church demonstrated its unbelief in the unique new covenant Way of Jesus. Thus the disappearance of religious idols in the "Western Christian world" occurred not through conversion of peoples and nations to Jesus' new covenant. Rather, the Roman empire adopted a compromised Christian religion as its exclusive religion and degenerative Christianity began to stamp out "pagan" idols with the backing of royal national

power.

Due to centuries of bad theology and idolatrous practices Christians often have a difficult time understanding that the covenants of nation-states necessarily compromise God's covenant and God's leadership. Many Christians fail to grasp two key components of Jesus' new covenant: 1. Jesus is the sole leader of God's commonwealth on earth; and 2. entry into God's commonwealth is based on a covenant commitment to the living Word and Spirit of Jesus/God. In today's secular world, however, the covenants of nation-states seek to idolatrously transfer people's allegiance and obedience away from the living God and the free-moving Spirit to human authorities and to a written, legal code. Let us remember:

"Our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life." (2 Cor. 3:5-6)
Confusion may arise due to associating "God's law" with written, legal codes and associating God's leadership with human governments. Thus it is helpful to draw some lessons from history.

Law-giving and governing authority belong only to God who is sovereign over all creation. There is but "one lawgiver and judge, (the one) who is able to save and to destroy." (Js. 4:12) And what is God's law? In a broad sense, since God's word is truth (Jn. 17:17) all God's words are a law unto themselves, forming a spiritual law. (Rom. 7:14) In this sense God's word/law is good and immutable:

"Not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Mt. 5:18)

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Mt. 24:35)

In a narrower sense God's law is represented in the Old Testament by the 10 commandments which form the basis of the old covenant at Sinai. While ancient Israel entered into covenant with God and initially embraced the 10 commandments they ran into trouble with respect to the leadership and means to implement God's law and establish justice. Serious problems set in when God's leadership role and governing authority were moderated or replaced by established governmental leaders and a written, legal code. Ancient Israel's faith degenerated by seeking established royal leaders to take over God's leadership role. (1 Sam. 8:7) But neither king David nor any other royal leader could provide leadership worthy of allegiance and obedience. And through human governance law became an "instrument of sin." Laws, statutes, and ordinances multiplied into a

large body of legal codes. But all these laws could not give life or establish justice:

"If a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law." (Gal. 3:21)

Human authorities made some attempts to enforce the laws but partial enforcement of a legal code could not establish justice or bring obedience to the living God. Indeed, just as Samuel prophesied, (1 Sam. 8:10-18) the ways of governmental leaders violated covenant justice and Israel, like all the nations, came under God's judgement and wrath. Then, as a final proof of the impossibility of human government and legal codes to achieve justice, Jesus Christ - the one who came as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets (Mt. 5:17) and "who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21) - was put to death according to Hebrew law. (Mk. 14:64; Jn. 19:7) Since Israel represented the only nation on earth that had accepted God's covenant and laws, the utter failure of Israel to achieve justice demonstrates the futility of any nation-state, under any set of legal codes or governmental leaders, to secure order and justice. Thus Jesus' new covenant is exclusive of the covenants of nation-states and no nation-state has a "divine mandate" to replace Jesus'/God's leadership with human authorities and written, legal codes.

But what about Romans 13? What Paul writes in Romans 13 is not a tract for obedience to the state or for sanctifying the authority and sovereignty of the state. On the contrary, Paul has clearly shown that all peoples and nations reproduce a sinful and unjust order. (Rom. 1-3) God's "wrath" - God's judgements on unjust people and nations - is operative over the whole world. (Rom. 1:18-20) And according to Paul's thesis, salvation belongs not to any nation but only to people of faith drawn from among the nations - both Jew and Gentile. (Rom. 1:16-17) A clear distinction is made between people of faith in Christ as "vessels of mercy" and other peoples as "vessels of wrath made for destruction." (Rom. 9:22-23) After entering God's commonwealth, after becoming "vessels of mercy," Christians are prohibited from re-entering and participating in God's "wrath." (Rom. 6, 12:19) When Paul writes of governing authorities in Romans 13 it is well-established that they are "vessels of wrath made for destruction." Paul upholds the universal sovereignty of God by placing human authorities under God's universal dominion. (Rom. 13:1-2) Governing authorities cannot establish God's justice on earth - they are simply "ministers of God's wrath." (Rom. 13:3-6) Like Nebuchadnezzar or Cyrus they are God's "servants" (Rom. 13:4) only in the very limited sense of bringing punishment upon evildoers - and they themselves fall under God's

judgement and wrath and are excluded from God's commonwealth. As Paul states, "the rulers of this age are doomed to pass away."² (1 Cor. 2:6) The Romans 13 passage is part of an exhortation to Christians for good conduct in relation to those who persecute them (Rom. 12:14-21) and to those who would rule over them. (Rom. 13:1-7) By loving the unfaithful, Christians, and not the secular authorities, do justice by fulfilling God's law of "loving your neighbor as yourself." (Rom. 13:9-10)

Since the time of Constantine the relationship between church and state has undergone changes. But the vast majority of Christianity has never repented of the idolatrous blending of God's covenant with the covenants of nation-states. For over 1000 years Popes and church officials sanctified rulers and were influential in the governing of European nations. While the Reformation in the 16th century challenged Roman Catholic corruption, its practice of economic indulgences, and its justification of church structure and authority, only a small prophetic part of the church broke away from the church-state alliance. Most of those breaking away from Roman Catholicism gave their support to nationalist churches. To this day many churches in Europe receive their funding from government taxes - demonstrating the close bond with state authority.

Most of the churches in the United States have altered but not broken the alliance between church and state. Churches in the U.S. have been strongly influenced by English and European traditions. Before the American revolution 9 of the 13 colonies had state-churches which limited participation in voting or holding government office to affluent white men who were members of the official church. While after the revolution there slowly evolved a separation of many functions of church and state, traditional theology and practices of sanctifying state authority have had a lasting influence. Most churches today function in a role of subservience to the state by legitimizing immense governmental power and operating in a small religious sphere. Most churches encourage patriotic allegiance to the state and the forming of one's identity within a nationalistic perspective. Service to God and country are patriotically intertwined. But what are some of the specifics of the national covenant of the United States?

Nation-states offer covenants that are quite different from Jesus' new covenant. Governments and leaders always seek to gain legitimacy to govern/rule their citizens/subjects. To gain people's loyalty, support, allegiance, and obedience nation-states can appeal

to religion and/or make a secular appeal based on general social benefits derived from government. For example, a standard justification of modern government is that it can effectively "protect life, restrain evil, and secure order and justice." Governments also purport to offer benefits to citizens such as "freedom" and "security" and to be just interveners into economic and social activity. As mentioned previously, religious legitimization for national covenants, while very strong, is not as direct as in the past. With the decline of religious gods and idols many Western nations received strong, but not absolute, legitimization from degenerative Christianity. Furthermore, the United States government has sought to avoid some of the abuses of European church-state alliances and being overly dependent upon any single Pope or church. The United States has allowed more religious diversity and has tried formally to separate church from state. While still seeking support and legitimization from Christian churches the U.S. government has also sought to increase its legitimacy by developing its own national myths, rituals, and secular idols. That is, in the manner of a secular religion, the U.S. government has sought to create illusions of sovereignty, unity, justice, and to propagate its own reality, truth, life-history.

The United States has offered Americans a "democratic covenant." More seductive than a national covenant for a monarchy or totalitarian government, the democratic covenant not only offers "benefits" derived from governmental rule but offers token participation in many aspects of government. In this covenant the foremost secular idol to legitimize the state is the idol of governmental law. In the United States 2 main documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, authorize the rule of governmental leaders and written, legal codes. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed on July 4, 1776, "That all men are created equal," and have rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." While listing at length the injustices under the rule of the king of England, the Declaration nevertheless asserted that it is through human governments and their legal codes that people are "to secure these rights." The U.S. Constitution, formulated in 1787, laid the basis for a "constitutional system of government," establishing a "nation of laws." All high office holders take an oath of allegiance to uphold the "rule of law" based upon the Constitution. According to American mythology these documents are surrounded by an aura of sacredness and their authors are reverently referred to as "our founding fathers." Every year a national holy day, i.e., a secular holiday, July 4th, commemorates the Declaration of Independence. It is the Constitution which creates the secular trinity:

the much-heralded "checks and balances" of power between the judicial, executive, and legislative branches.

The high priests of the Supreme Court form the top of a priestly hierarchy. In their secular temple in Washington, D.C., the final arbiters and interpreters of the nation's legal codes pronounce judgements which a scribal class of lawyers and judges religiously study. Ultimately, the Supreme Court's word is law. The priestly rituals of all courts uphold the mystique of power and authority: judges dress in robes, they sit in elevated seats, at their entrance all must reverently rise and stand, court officials surround and obey them, court procedures follow strict and formal rituals, court discussions are often in mystifying legal language, and, of course, at the word of judges human beings are locked up in cages for long periods of time.

As the highest office in the nation, the presidency is honored and revered. The position is idolized as the object of many children's dreams and the heart's desire of most high-ranking politicians. Every year millions of Americans make the pilgrimage to visit the White House - the official palace of America's foremost man (and "first lady"; to date all presidents and vice-presidents have been white men). As chief executive and commander-in-chief of the armed forces the president is the nation's "heroic leader." The media hounds and broadcasts each statement and movement of the president. American history is read in terms of presidents' leadership abilities and children learn to recite the names of the greatest presidents. In Washington, D.C. - a city of idols, a modern day Babylon - monuments and shrines have been erected to 3 presidents: wealthy slave-owners George Washington and Thomas Jefferson; and Abraham Lincoln who "saved" the Union, sacrificing hundreds of thousands of human lives in order to preserve America's foundational myths. Although politicians are not noted for truth-telling, the office of the presidency has a cleansing and purifying effect. Americans are inculcated to "believe in" and trust the president. When the president speaks the American people are called to "rally around the president." And not unusual is for the president to call upon God to bless America.

In the House of Congress reside the scribes and Pharisees - the lawmakers who propagate laws for the common people to follow but who live in a world of privilege and power. Like actors on a stage, their campaign promises, moral posturing, and self-righteous pronouncements suit their hearers' fancies while leaving unfulfilled the content of their words. By continually proposing and/or passing "new

and improved" laws they keep the public tuned into the channel whereby "honorable" "public servants" righteously address America's problems. But like blind guides they propose but do not solve, they speak but do not act. During the president's state of the union address they perform as cheerleaders seeking to infuse meaning in the annual ritual and boost public confidence in, and allegiance to, the politicians who have America's problems "under control." Annually they bow down to the secular altar of the Pentagon - giving the riches of the land to America's "sacred cow" while the needs of poor people go unmet. And periodically they run in election contests - which are stacked in the incumbents' favor - but which, as a "showcase for democracy," allegedly give the winners a new "mandate" to rule.

In all 3 branches of state power stands the primary symbol of the sovereignty and power of the state - the American flag. Like a sacred idol, laws govern the handling, display, and disposal of the flag. Like ancient idols the flag is an inanimate object to which humans ascribe great virtues and value. Like an idol which humans become emotionally attached to and identify with, Americans ritualistically pledge allegiance to the flag or devotedly stand and gaze upon it during the ritual playing of the national anthem. This piece of cloth seeks to unify, under the power and sovereignty of the state, people living under great social and economic injustices. But is this unity the same as that created by the blood and cross of Jesus?

The U.S.'s democratic covenant makes many promises concerning freedom, security, opportunity, equality, and justice - but has it delivered? What sort of order and justice has America's constitutional government established? Were the U.S.' 2 foundational documents really concerned with establishing an equal and just covenant for all Americans? Or, like the revolutionary war, were they practical steps taken to effectively transfer governing power and authority from a foreign elite to an independent local elite? Before and after the revolutionary war America was a class society with deep divisions between rich and poor, male and female, free and slave. These 2 documents were written by and for, and thus granted power to, privileged white men. Women, viewed by men as inferior to men, were excluded from the new government. Blacks, as slaves, were excluded. Indians, with rival land claims, were excluded. Poor white men, who couldn't meet state property qualifications for voting or holding office, were effectively excluded. Thus the rhetoric of political leaders and the ideals of written documents failed to match the reality of widespread social injustice.

If at its inception the Constitution legitimized an unjust order, have over 200 years of its mechanisms for government secured a just order in today's United States? As one example - how have African-Americans fared? The Constitution itself sanctioned slavery. For purposes of white male representation in the House of Representatives, southern states (primarily) could count slaves as three-fifths persons, (Art. 1, Sec. 2) states were obligated to return runaway slaves to their original state and owner, (Art. 4, Sec. 2) and the importing of slaves as a legal activity was guaranteed for 20 years. (Art. 1, Sec. 9) After the 20-year period enslaved Africans continued to be imported illegally as that law went unenforced. Under the totalitarian institution of slavery blacks endured unconscionable treatment. The Supreme Court, in 1857, ruled that Dred Scott could not sue for freedom after living in a "free territory" because he was not a citizen - thereby reinforcing slaves' status as property. Contrary to popular belief the civil war was not fought to free slaves but erupted over rival economic policies desired by the northern and southern elite. Both President Lincoln and his Republican party pledged not to interfere with slavery in slave states. But, after a couple of years of war, it became politically expedient for Lincoln to make his Emancipation Proclamation - declaring free only those slaves held in states not under Union control. After the war, freed blacks owned little or nothing, lacked formal education, and faced the southern white elite's reasserting of itself through exploitive labor relationships, organized racial violence, and discriminatory legal codes. While some blacks became poor small farmers, many more suffered greater poverty as tenant farmers, migrants, farm laborers, domestic workers, or very low wage-earners. In crowded city tenements epidemics of hunger and disease took many black lives. Raids, lynchings, and beatings occurred with legal impunity. Black prisoners were leased-out and exploited as slave labor in the southern jail system. In 1896, the Supreme Court, in Plessy v. Ferguson, justified segregated facilities. While the courts, police, state militia, and army were used many times to crush new unions of farmers or laborers, the largest unions were discriminating against and excluding blacks. In the 1920s the Ku Klux Klan grew to 4 1/2 million members. After the Great Depression some laws were passed to recognize and regulate unions and establish minimum wages, social security, and farm subsidies - laws which bypassed many unemployed blacks or those employed as tenants, migrants, or domestics. Through WWII many blacks lost their lives in a segregated U.S. army. In 1954 the Supreme Court, in Brown v. Board of Education, overturned their law on segregated facilities but could not come close to establishing equal education for blacks -

whose poverty remained a major obstacle to accessing "quality" schools and "higher" education. Blacks, with some whites, organizing and acting for desegregation were met with violence and repression from local law enforcement agents - with thousands jailed, beaten, or killed. National law enforcement agents often passively allowed states to violate federal law or, as in the case of the FBI and their COINTELPRO unit, sought to suppress and disrupt the black movement. Civil rights laws were passed but social and economic inequality remained, black leaders were assassinated, and jails remained full of poor blacks. In many ghettos discontent erupted in riots/rebellions. In the decades since the 1960s laws aimed at integration have helped to establish a black middle-class while leaving intact institutions of white wealth and power. Institutions such as banks, corporations, the legal system, and schools continue to treat blacks more critically and with more disciplinary actions than whites. And recent court decisions have chipped away at black legal gains including "affirmative action."

The so-called "war on drugs" further illuminates the functioning of the political and legal systems. Emphasis in the "drug war" has been on "law enforcement" (rather than on education, treatment, or increasing economic opportunities). But what groups are bearing the brunt of this offensive? The U.S. state department has assisted many foreign political and military leaders known to be involved in the illegal drug business. Also, evidence implicates the CIA in the importing of some illegal drugs into the U.S.³ - but it's not high leaders in government who are going to jail. Neither are many affluent whites. Recent studies show that blacks, who make up 12% of the population, also account for 12% of the nation's drug users. Most cocaine is sold by whites who also account for around 80% of its customers.⁴ But white people have the privilege of selling in offices and using in middle- or upper-class neighborhoods, the privilege of affording treatment, the privilege of competent defense attorneys, and the privilege of white-collar judicial leniency. Poor blacks, however, operate in the area most severely controlled and punished: street crime. While possession and sale of society's most abused drug, alcohol, is legal, marketing in illegal drugs draws very stiff penalties for street sellers. In the past decade the jail and prison population has doubled - with about half of prisoners jailed on drug-related charges. There are now over 1 million Americans behind bars - the highest incarceration rate in the world.⁵ African-Americans make up nearly 50% of the jail and prison population, 1 of every 9 black men between 18 and 26 is locked up, and 23% of black men in their 20s are either

in jail or prison or on probation or parole.⁶ Blacks also receive harsher sentences than white people. In 1987 the Supreme Court ruled, in *McClesky v. Kemp*, that although a clear racial bias was evident in the use of the death penalty the sentence could be carried out because it is the responsibility of each individual defendant to prove bias in their particular case.⁷ Thus a high percentage of young black men are being "criminalized" - and it is well-known that the prison system is more apt to "harden" prisoners rather than "reform" them. While poor neighborhoods deteriorate billions of dollars are spent to "house" people in prisons or jails. A booming industry in jail and prison construction is also being supported by national and local governments in order to keep up with increasing jail populations.

The "war on drugs" has not been establishing justice or wiping out drug use. The partial enforcement of prohibition of illegal drugs utterly fails to get at the roots of social and economic injustice which dictate its economic importance in poor neighborhoods. The "war on drugs" punishes poor people, particularly blacks, in a discriminatory fashion. Thus the "war on drugs" fails in the area of justice. Where it succeeds is in rallying people to support the state, to support increased police powers and hard-line "law-and-order" policies, and to divert attention from larger issues of social injustice.

So, looking back over the history of the United States, how have African-Americans fared? Never have the Constitution, or courts, or governing bodies established or secured a just order for African-Americans. On the contrary, injustice has reigned through the law and the courts, on the slave ships, on the plantations, in the ghettos, and on the streets. What allegiance then should blacks give to the democratic covenant of the United States? Should they devote themselves to incremental reforms, placing their hope and faith in better rulers and new and improved laws? To broaden the issue, how much faith in and allegiance to the national covenant should Christians have?

Most Christians, who have broken covenant with God, are partially or deeply committed to the U.S.'s covenant. Most Christians idolatrously divide their allegiance between Jesus and the state. While many Christians directly serve government many other Christians are led into the errant path of reformism. A reformist stance means working to reform an institution from within it. With respect to our nation-state's covenant it means attachment to, and believing in, the American democratic covenant. Instead of seeking first the

commonwealth of God on earth, many Christians focus their attention - their time, energy, and resources - on reforming or changing governmental institutions. Many Christians support special interest groups and the lobbying of Congress to change or create new laws. Many Christians are caught up in registration and election campaigns. But where does all this lead? Election campaigns do not promote the name of Jesus or the will of God. Rather, for politicians, campaigns promote the ego, the self, and a reliance on deception and false promises. Voting, or lobbying for laws, hooks people into election races and media hype, into a system of law that is rooted in coercive power, compromise, expediency, and self-interest. Voting deepens personal complicity in this system, gives credence to the illusion of democratic equality, and confers a cloak of legitimacy to the sovereignty and authority of the state. Does not a reformist approach lead people away from a full commitment to Jesus' new covenant?

Many oppressed groups, through costly struggle, have pressured governmental institutions to make reforms which moderately help some segment of the population. But this never-ending history of justice movements achieving modest reforms serves to legitimize state sovereignty: the governmental system purportedly is capable of ministering justice to all people - despite the unending reign of injustice in America. Reforms are deceptive substitutes for justice.

"How skillful to tax the middle-class to pay for the relief of the poor, building resentment on top of humiliation. How adroit to bus poor black youngsters into poor white neighborhoods, in a violent exchange of impoverished schools, while the schools of the rich remain untouched and the wealth of the nation, doled out carefully where children need free milk, is drained for billion-dollar aircraft carriers. How ingenious to meet the demands of blacks and women for equality by giving them small special benefits, and setting them in competition with everyone else for jobs made scarce by an irrational, wasteful system. How wise to turn the fear and anger of the majority toward a class of criminals bred - by economic inequity - faster than they can be put away, deflecting attention from the huge thefts of national resources carried out within the law by men in executive offices."⁸ (Howard Zinn)

Reform movements do not seek to get at the roots of social injustices or to establish justice for all people. Rather, they set as goals incremental changes in a fundamentally unjust system. Governmental reforms placate and co-opt movements from following a more radical, grassroots vision of transformation through spreading God's liberating commonwealth.

The commonwealth of God is separate and distinct from human governments and their laws - for God's commonwealth cannot be established or spread by governmental power.

"Nothing distinguishes the kingdoms of man from the Kingdom of God more than their diametrically opposed views of the exercise of power. One seeks to control people, the other to serve people; one promotes self, the other prostrates self; one seeks prestige and position, the other lifts up the lowly and despised."⁹

(Charles Colson)

Jesus did not come preaching law enforcement, the building of more jails, or even the reforming of the political establishment. Jesus came - not to increase God's wrath - "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (Jn. 3:17) Jesus proclaimed a new covenant, calling people to commit themselves fully to God's covenant. But American Christianity has been deeply compromised by its idolatrous faith in, and allegiance to, the U.S. government's covenant. Christianity's theological justification of the sovereignty, authority, and leadership of the state is a perversion of the gospel of Jesus. It engenders divided allegiances between God and state, makes easy and comfortable the compromising of one's faith to avoid state persecution, denies the vision and gospel of God's commonwealth on earth, and promotes reformism as a substitute for holistic discipleship. When we put our efforts into reformulating legal codes or selecting new governmental leaders we are witnessing to our personal lack of faith in Jesus and his new covenant Way of life. Jesus spoke a parable about compromising the gospel message through reformist practices:

"No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins." (Lk. 5:36-38 NRSV)

The gospel presents a holistic Way of life that cannot be broken into pieces and patched onto or melded together with old traditions of legal codes and the ways of the nations. Similarly, the uncompromising message of the prophets to those who divide their allegiance between God and "other gods" is: without repentance people cannot escape God's judgement and wrath. Allegiance and obedience to the state, its leaders, and its legal codes cuts people off from Jesus and from God's commonwealth.

Most churches have broken covenant with God. Most churches

encourage allegiance to the nation's covenant. Not only have compromised churches failed to achieve unity in Christ but they have placed faith and hope in government which can never unify the people through justice. The U.S. government has always been and is now a racist, classist, and sexist institution - and most churches are similarly divided. It has been said that Sunday remains the most segregated day of the week. Churches are the most segregated institutions in society. The gulf separating Christians of different races in the U.S. is very wide and is but another powerful witness to Christianity's broken covenant with the living God.

The Messiah and the new covenant

Who today really believes that Jesus was/is the Messiah? Who really obediently follows Jesus and is fully committed to Jesus' new covenant? Today, nearly 2000 years after the life of Jesus, sin and injustice still reign among all nations. Is not a new Messiah needed? But if we hope for a new political leader or party to establish justice in the United States - are we not deluded, having failed to learn from history? For if justice comes from the nations, from their leaders, or from their laws, then why is there any need for a Messiah to liberate the world? If we hope for a broad-based coalition to reform the world's governments - are we not still deluded? Throughout history many movements for justice have arisen, many partially-rooted in God's word or Spirit. Movements by oppressed groups - farmers, migrant workers, wage earners, tenants, women, blacks, peace activists, environmentalists, etc. - have risen, brought reforms, and receded. Today, many people are trying to build movements for change. But, according to the Bible, only one movement offers hope for fulfillment, for establishing justice on earth. Not too surprisingly this movement is tied to God's undisputed sovereignty, God's own covenant. Biblical history instructs us that salvation/liberation, for us and for the world, comes only through the obedience of faith in Christ. There will be no new Messiah - though many will exalt themselves. What is needed today is not another Messiah but rather a people committed wholly to Jesus and to his new covenant Way of life. The movement of faith in Jesus is the only true hope for establishing justice on earth. While ancient Israel entered into covenant with God and held God's law they lacked the leadership and means to implement God's law and establish justice. But Jesus' life marks the turning point of all history. Jesus frees us from relying on government leaders and written, legal codes - for Jesus is himself the incarnation

of God's word/law. Now God's law can be implemented through the obedience of faith in Jesus. Through Jesus' leadership and through the means of God's Spirit, God's word/law can be incarnated in one's life and in discipleship communities. Only Jesus can provide the concrete leadership to unite an expanding multi-national cross-generational movement of faith that will usher in God's commonwealth on earth.

It is God's will "to bring about the obedience of faith...among all nations." (Rom. 1:5) And God's will alone will be done on earth. All the agendas, righteous posturing, policies, and laws of political leaders and nations are folly - for God will "bring to nothing things that are." (1 Cor. 1:28) All the resistance and protest movements against national and international injustices that do not adhere to Jesus' new covenant will fall short. To do God's will is the only "effective" work, the only fruitful work. Proclaiming allegiance and obedience only to Jesus will shorten many lives for

"they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name."
(Mt. 24:9 NRSV)

But the new covenant Way of Jesus is the only movement that will bring justice and liberation to the ends of the earth. But if today there are so few fully committed to Jesus and the new covenant isn't that commitment also a futile cause? No - for it only takes a small number of fully-committed people to begin a revival - and then God's word will be bountifully fruitful. In due time God's will will be done on earth and the righteous, through faith, "shall reign on earth." (Rev. 5:10) Alleluia!

Let us draw some conclusions. Jesus' new covenant must be viewed as exclusive of all other covenants. After all, how many gods, how many covenants, how many leaders can one follow? The faithful must be aware of the danger of compromising their faith in God's undisputed leadership. Does not history reveal that both the Hebrew faith and the Christian faith degenerated through attempts to blend God's covenant with the covenants of nation-states? Every nation-state offers to, or imposes on, its citizens/subjects a covenant to gain their allegiance and obedience and to legitimize the state's authority to rule. Thus those who enter new covenant communities must make a clean break from the nation-state's covenant. This may entail leaving government jobs, refusing welfare assistance, declining jury duty, resisting military induction, and refusing oaths or pledges of allegiance to the state. In order to maintain a prophetic, and not a reformist, relationship with the state, disciples can speak and act in

opposition to very unjust laws and policies, refuse to lobby or advocate for specific laws, politicians, or parties, and avoid being seduced into the electoral process. Enduring state-sponsored persecution and praying for the world's rulers are also important.

New covenant discipleship communities are to provide a powerful, life-giving alternative to governments, their leaders, and their legal codes. Part of this alternative is establishing just and unified communities that integrate people of different races and cultures. Just as in early Christianity when Jesus' new covenant brought together Jew and Gentile so today Jesus can bring unity among diverse people. Indeed, for people poor and discriminated against there are many advantages to God's new covenant. Jesus, who is "King of kings and Lord of lords," (Rev. 19:16) is equally accessible to all his disciples and is also ever-present, immediately accessible. Thus, unlike a nation-state's government there is no exclusivity which limits access to governmental leaders primarily to a class of affluent and powerful people. In God's covenant there is no hierarchy or authoritarian human leadership. Rather, Jesus demonstrates leadership through truthful living and humble service. Also, God's covenant offers immediate economic, political, and social equality. So why labor endlessly for partial justice through a state's covenant when God's covenant offers justice now? Through adult baptism and a full commitment to God's covenant one receives immediate forgiveness of sins. There is no jail time or debts to repay (although apologies and humble penitence towards people harmed by one's past behavior may be appropriate). God's covenant offers much healing, blessings, and joy immediately. And God's covenant has the best life insurance: the promise of resurrection from the dead and eternal life. Indeed, there is the immediate gift of eternal life which begins with conversion and baptism and continues with resurrection. Finally, God's covenant recognizes no national boundaries, no prejudicial barriers, for God is impartial and God's sovereignty is universal. Racial and ethnic justice and unity will come only with the spread of God's commonwealth. At present the only thing lacking are disciples uncompromised by any other covenant. But a revival of faith on earth is coming - and it will - indeed it must - recognize God's undisputed leadership and God's universal sovereignty.

"There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God."

(Ps. 86:8-10 NRSV)

Footnotes

1. Ozymandias may have been Rameses II, the Egyptian pharaoh who oppressed the children of Israel. His statue was at Thebes.
2. During his life Paul was protected by the Romans from some Jews - thus the positive view of secular authorities' meting out "God's wrath." One might speculate that if Paul, whom historians believe was killed by Roman authorities, had written during the time of fierce Roman persecution of the church he might have emphasized, like the author of Revelation, the role governing authorities play in waging war against the faithful.
3. A good source of information on this was the Christic Institute.
4. "Drug war focuses too much on blacks, observers say," by Ron Harris, Los Angeles Times byline, Star Tribune, April 24, 1990, p.1A. Studies cited are by the FBI and the National Institute for Drug Abuse, both in 1988.
5. The Sentencing Project reports an incarceration rate of 455 per 100,000 people in the U.S. in 1990. South Africa is second at 311 and Venezuela is third at 177. The one year cost of holding 1.1 million Americans in prisons and jails was \$20.3 billion. "Group says U.S. still heaviest prison user," Star Tribune, 2-11-92.
6. A report released by the Sentencing Project in Wash., D.C., also showed that the rates for Hispanic men and white men in their 20s under the criminal control system are 10.4% and 6.2% respectively.
7. Each state execution of a prisoner represents a ritual human sacrifice to the god of state-vengeance. The state uses ritual human sacrifices to direct the public's anger, fear, and frustration over social ills onto individual scapegoats (usually from the lower class) - and thus diverts attention from long-standing economic and social injustices aided and abetted by government. A successful execution supports the myth that justice has been done and the chief "executor of justice" is the state. As long as the public supports this myth and not the barbaric reality there are powerful reasons for the state to continue executions/human-sacrifices.
8. Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, Harper & Row, 1980, p.573.

9. Charles Colson, Kingdoms in Conflict, Morrow/Zondervan, 1987, p. 274. Despite many interesting and valuable insights Colson adheres to the idolatrous theology and double-mindedness which this chapter critiques.

Who will lead us?

Jesus -
the people are
beside themselves -
the people are clamoring
for a leader -
but Lord -
the people will not
turn to you -
they will not
repent
You say,
"Comfort, comfort my people" -
but they will not
be comforted
"Who will lead us?" they ask
They turn and look
They see themselves
"Here am I!"
says one -
then another - too many -
the self-appointed
seeking the people's favor
The people fall in line and follow
for a time
until disillusionment sets in:
the fruit of decadent seeds
sprouting up
The plant withers
The leader falls
Again the cry goes up,
"Who will lead us?"
Amidst the turmoil
and confusion
the communion cup
passes around -

but long forgotten is the
leadership of
the washing of feet
of outcasts -
the breaking and distributing
of bread for the hungry -
the compassionate blood
of shared suffering
poured out for the downtrodden
So near
and yet
so far
Lord - without you
the people are leaderless

The Constitution

The Constitution -
it is just paper -
and on it are written
the words of men -
it has no power
to sustain the needy
or assist the forsaken.
It has no eyes to see
or ears to hear
the cry of my people.
Can the pulp of a tree
set my people free?
I have given my life
as a light to the nations.
Heed my voice
and not any other.

CHAPTER 6

Liberation: Sword or Cross?

This chapter, like chapter 5, will look at "political practices" and how Jesus' unique new covenant Way conflicts with the ways of the nations. Also, this chapter and the next two chapters will focus on important issues that can be very divisive among Christians: violence & war, abortion, and homosexuality. These issues can be explored before joining or forming a new covenant discipleship community. The positions taken on the issues can give shape to very different communities. But since there is only one "new covenant," discernment of God's will is critical. By building a consensus before forming a community, Christians can prevent highly divisive internal issues which can fracture a community. The issues can also broaden the dimensions of our vision of God's commonwealth.

The issue of when to, how to, or whether to support violence or war is troublesome for many Christians. Part of the problem stems from difficulties reconciling Old and New Testament biblical passages. The Old Testament contains a great number of stories of violent retribution and war, with laws and leaders to justify it. The New Testament practices and teachings of Jesus contrast significantly with these traditions of justified violence. So, in light of these differences, how can a whole community take a firm stand on the issue? Or must a community resign itself to having a wide spectrum of opinions and stands on the issue?

From chapter 2 we recall that Christians must seek to read the Bible through the "light of Jesus" - through an incarnational knowledge of Jesus' teachings and practices. After all, Christians are not known as "Christians" because we are disciples of Moses or disciples of David, but rather we are called "Christians" because we are called to be disciples of Jesus, called to the obedience of faith in Christ. Naturally then, daily obedience to Jesus should complement Bible study. And the recognition of the authority of Jesus' teachings and practices will

help disciples discern God's word throughout all of scripture. Also, a helpful tool in reading scripture is an understanding of the gift and purity systems. This tool is particularly helpful because it recognizes conflict in scripture, identifies cultural biases, and can distinguish between the "traditions of men," rooted in the purity system, and the authentic, prophetic, and authoritative word of God. So then, let us approach the issue of violence & war from a perspective that recognizes the authority of Jesus and uses a "Christ-enlightened" understanding of the gift and purity systems.

Biblical review

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

(Gen. 1:1; Ps. 33:6,9)

God spoke - and it was so. Through the word of God the universe was created. God's power, authority, and sovereignty were undisputed....John writes of Jesus,

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made....And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father." (Jn. 1:1-3,14)

The authority of Jesus is equated with that of God.

Early in the record of primeval history Cain murders his brother Abel. (Gen. 4:8) God pronounces judgement on Cain - yet protects him with a mark and says, "If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." (Gen. 4:15) It is not God's will that anyone should harm the murderer Cain for God knows how human violence escalates. And so it does escalate. Lamech, a descendant of Cain, after taking vengeance and killing a young man who struck him, states, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Gen. 4:24)....The disciple Peter inquires of Jesus,

"How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven." (Mt. 18:22)

Disciples of Jesus are taught to multiply forgiveness - not vengeance.

God's will is to establish God's universal commonwealth on earth. Collective salvation is a primary theme throughout the Bible. But the "earth is filled with violence." (Gen. 6:11,13) Even God's judgement

does not alter humankind's unremittingly sinful and violent ways. (Gen. 6:5, 8:21) So, God intervenes in a new way by calling Abraham and Sarah. This call (Gen. 12) is contrasted with humankind's organization.¹ (Gen. 11:1-9) Humankind claims land, builds a city-state, centralizes power through the tower, and seeks to exalt itself - acting completely in autonomy from God. But Abraham and Sarah obey the voice of God and make a break from their heritage of country and family. Through the obedience of faith Abraham and Sarah are promised the gift of land and a universal heritage transcending national boundaries: "by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice." (Gen 22:18, 12:1-3)....Amidst the corruption and violence of his day Jesus says,

"I came not to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my word has a judge; on the last day the word that I have spoken will serve as judge."

(Jn. 12:47-48 NRSV)

Because of its disobedience to the word of God the world is continually under God's judgement - but it is God's will to save the world through the obedience of faith in Jesus. Like Abraham and Sarah, disciples of Jesus must obey the word of God and make a break from possessions, culture, and heritage. (Mk. 10:17-30)

The politically weak clans of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants are sustained by God's promise and do not try to take possession of the promised land by warfare. And Israel's deliverance from Egypt is achieved not through human warfare but through the word and power of God. Unlike other gods that are associated with powerful rulers and mighty nations Yahweh chooses a people that are slaves and introduces a new form of political leadership. Moses seeks to help the oppressed Hebrews and, on his own initiative, kills an Egyptian. But when Moses' leadership is questioned he flees from Pharaoh in fear. (Ex. 2:11-15) God confronts Moses through the burning bush and Moses is converted to a new form of leadership.² Moses returns to Egypt unarmed as a prophetic messenger of Yahweh, confronting mighty Pharaoh with the word of God. According to God's word and through God's power alone Israel is delivered from Egypt and the mighty army and chariots of Pharaoh are swallowed in the sea....In the garden of Gethsemane Peter lifts up a sword to violently defend Jesus. (Jn. 18:10) But Jesus rebukes and disarms Peter, saying, "all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Mt. 26:52) Peter becomes a leading messenger of the gospel of Christ to the Jews, confronting the authorities not with weapons but with God's

word. (Acts 5) Similarly, Saul (Paul) seeks to serve God by persecuting and killing Christians. (Acts 7:58ff) But on the road to Damascus Saul is confronted by Jesus and becomes a leading and unarmed messenger to the Gentiles, confronting people and rulers with God's word alone. Paul writes,

"For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness....And take...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Eph. 6:12,17)

On the mountaintop God gives Moses the 10 commandments, the essence of Israel's covenant with God. (Ex. 20:1-17) Yahweh's leadership in delivering Israel from Egypt makes Yahweh the sole king and ruler over Israel - whose people are to be equal, just, and holy. (Ex. 19:3-6) This is unlike the human kings that rule the nations with great power over their subjects. And unlike a foreign suzerainty treaty in which a vassal is obligated to give military aid to the suzerain, the Mosaic covenant forbids killing and has no martial obligations³....Jesus ascends the mountain and gives the Sermon on the Mount. (Mt. 5-7; Lk. 6:20-49) Jesus speaks,

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them....Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches (others) so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but (whoever) does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 5:17,19)

Whoever relaxes or annuls Jesus' teaching shall, of all people, be called "least." Jesus continues,

"You have heard that it was said to (those) of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that every one who is angry with (another) shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults (another) shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." (Mt. 5:21-22ff)

Enmity arising from one's heart and derogatory words spoken against another, while much less severe than killing, are still harmful to others and whoever does so incurs God's judgement. Thus Jesus expands upon one of the 10 commandments, not only prohibiting killing but also declaring sinful all expressions of enmity towards one's neighbors. Jesus concludes the Sermon,

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you? Every one who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what (that person) is like: (he or she) is like a (person) building a house, who dug deep, and laid the foundation upon rock;

and when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house, and could not shake it, because it had been well built, But (whoever) hears and does not do them is like a (person) who built a house on the ground without a foundation; against which the stream broke, and immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great."

(Lk. 6:46-49)

Obedience to the word of Jesus, as with the word of God, is imperative to keeping covenant with God and belonging to the true house of God.

In the wilderness the Hebrew faith begins to degenerate as cultural biases are integrated into the faith. In the wilderness the overburdened, prophetic leader Moses is influenced by a "priest of Midian." (Ex. 18:1) This foreign priest, albeit related to Moses through marriage, seeks temporarily to replace God's voice, saying, "Listen now to my voice." (Ex. 18:19) The priest counsels Moses to establish a political hierarchy, selecting "able men" as "heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds" to "judge the people at all times." (Ex. 18:25-26) The establishment of a priestly class (see chapter 2) also increases the number of intermediaries between the people and God. Later in Israel's history Jeremiah decries Israel's backsliding:

"Thus says (Yahweh) of hosts, the God of Israel: 'Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' But they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in their own counsels and the stubbornness of their evil hearts, and went backward and not forward. From the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt to this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or incline their ear, but stiffened their neck. They did worse than their fathers." (Jer. 7:21-26)

....The scribes and the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. (Jn. 8:2-11) According to Mosaic law the crime results in capital punishment (for the man too). (Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22) Jesus bends over and writes with his finger in the ground, bringing to remembrance that God's law was "written with the finger of God." (Ex. 31:18) Mosaic law is suspended when Jesus says, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (Jn. 8:7 NRSV) No person, except Jesus, is righteous enough to

execute physical punishment upon others. (cf. Rom. 2:1) And Jesus rejects the role of judging over and settling people's worldly disputes. (See Lk. 12:13-14) God's word/law is meant to be obeyed and incarnated and not to form the basis for any human political hierarchy or law enforcement system.

The Hebrew faith degenerates further with their "conquest" of Canaan and during the time of their tribal confederacy. The exodus event, when Yahweh alone liberates the slaves, is interpreted by the Hebrews as a "war" fought by Yahweh and so they proclaim "Yahweh is a warrior." (Ex. 15:3) While the paradigmatic exodus event involved no human fighting Israel quickly enters into human warfare. Israel's priestly class and purity system sanctify "proper, legal" warfare. Yet, Israel's approach to warfare still *differs some* from the warfare of other nations. Israel's "holy war," a sanctified cultic activity, is *intended* to maintain Israel's dependence upon God, who alone can give victory to Israel, and raise the ethical standards of warfare. In times of need, Yahweh, through a human intermediary, is consulted and calls Israel to war. Israel relies not on a professional army but on male volunteers. The volunteers are consecrated and the military camp must maintain ritual purity. (Deut. 23:12-14; 1 Sam. 21:4-6) By choice Israel rejects reliance on advanced and superior weaponry, symbolized by "horses" and "chariots."⁴ (See Deut. 20:1; Ps. 20:7-8; Joshua 11:6-9; Is. 2:6-8, 31:1; Deut. 17:16) There is no permanent position for a military leader, e.g., Joshua has no successor and the military leader Barak's role is temporary and subservient to the prophet Deborah.⁵ (Judges 4:4-10) Israel's "herem," or sacrificial ban, "dedicates" the "spoils" of war not to the fighting men but to God. However, despite these unusual characteristics and "noble" intentions warfare remains a brutal and dehumanizing activity. Thus, in Canaan, the *herem* requires Israel to completely exterminate all living creatures (human and animal) from resisting cities. (Deut. 20:16-17, 7:1-5,16; Ex. 23:33; Joshua 6:21)....Jesus teaches,

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Mt. 5:43-44ff)

While the phrase "love your neighbor and hate your enemy" is not explicitly stated in the Old Testament there is no doubt that it was a prevalent attitude and consistent with the "holy war" tradition. Among Jesus' contemporaries it was probably espoused by Zealots or other Jewish nationalists seeking to overturn Roman rule through violent revolution. The purity system, which makes divisions among all people, restricted the meaning of "love of neighbor" to loving only the

people of Israel (but excluding "sinners" in Israel). Jesus' startling extension of "love of neighbor" to include "enemies" completely undermines the purity system's human judgements, and consequent violent actions, against any and all people. And, according to Jesus, only through love of enemies can the faithful reflect the love of God and distinguish themselves from people who don't know the one true God. (Mt. 5:45-48)

The degeneration of the Hebrew faith solidifies when Israel cries out for a king like all the nations. (1 Sam. 8:4-18) Israel's warfare comes to conform with all the nations - while lip service is paid to the older Yahwist holy war tradition. (The holy war tradition, with its obvious roots in the purity system, is still relatively close to the paradigmatic exodus event and is strongly anti-monarchy, anti-hierarchical, anti-military establishment.) A royal court develops with a royal priestly cult and false prophets. When God is consulted before warfare it often is comparable to the role played by diviners of other nations who are subservient to king and army. (1 Ki. 22:6) God's voice becomes partially or wholly replaced by the voice of worldly wisdom, such as given by Ahithophel to king David.

"Now in those days the counsel which Ahithophel gave was as if one consulted the oracle of God; so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed." (2 Sam. 16:23)

Military service no longer is viewed as voluntary. King David calls for a census (2 Sam. 24) ordering the "commanders of the army" (v. 2) to number the "valiant men who drew the sword," (v. 9) paving the way for conscription. David builds a professional standing army, setting up a military hierarchy with "commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds." (2 Sam. 18:1; cf. 1 Sam. 8:12 & Ex. 18:25) Although David's corrupt practices conform to the ways of the nations he uses symbolic action and deception to align himself with old Yahwist holy war traditions. For example, David hamstringed some (but not all - as in the holy war tradition) of the horses (symbolizing superior weaponry) of a defeated king, keeping a portion for himself:

"David hamstrung all the chariot horses, but left enough for a hundred chariots." (2 Sam. 8:4; cf. 1 Chr. 18:4; Joshua 11:6,9)

Another example is described in 2 Sam. 11:1,11, 12:26-31.⁶ David's personal professional mercenary army, the "servants" of David described in 11:1,11, under commander Joab, defeat the Ammonites. They then withdraw from the city and allow David to lead the militia of all Israel to an "official" victory over the Ammonites - thus securing David's leadership over all Israel. But following the ways of the nations, no matter how well mis-represented as being faithful to

Yahweh, incurs God's judgement. God's true prophets bring to the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah a stunning message concerning warfare: a nationalist defense of the holy land against the fierce, "pagan," imperial powers of Assyria and Babylon is not only wrong, but to engage in military resistance against these powers is to fight against God! To the king of Judah Jeremiah speaks a prophetic word (or treasonous, depending on one's viewpoint):

"Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as (Yahweh) has spoken concerning any nation which will not serve the king of Babylon? Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are saying to you, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon,' for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you..." (Jer. 27:12-14, cf. 21:3-10)

Israel originally wanted a king to defend themselves from other nations - but after getting their royal king and professional army they find that God is against them. By becoming like all the nations Israel severs itself from Yahweh, bringing God's judgement in the familiar human form of one nation conquering another....(The section on Christian idolatry follows the biblical review.)

God's true prophets, while pronouncing God's judgement, also prophesy Israel's deliverance through the coming of the Messiah. Hosea prophesies of Israel's restoration.

"And I will make for you a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety." (Hos. 2:18)

Isaiah prophesies of the Messiah, using some "holy war" imagery but without worldly weapons and human warfare.

"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots....but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked....They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of (Yahweh) as the waters cover the sea." (Is. 11:1,4,9)

From Zechariah, another prophecy presenting a Messiah very different from worldly rulers.

"Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the

nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." (Zech. 9:9-10)

From Micah and Isaiah:

"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of (Yahweh) from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Micah 4:2-3 & Is. 2:3-4)

The issue of war and peace is prominently and intimately connected with the Messiah - who is coming to put an end to war. But to do so - will the Messiah resort to the violent ways of the nations?....Jesus says,

"If my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight...but my kingship is not from the world." (Jn. 18:36)

Paul writes,

"We are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ." (2 Cor. 10:3-5)

While awaiting the Messiah Israel remains under foreign domination. Around 167 B.C., under Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Israel's temple is plundered and "profaned," idol worship is decreed, and Jewish religious practices forbidden under penalty of death. Under the leadership of Judas "Maccabeus" a violent revolution begins. The revolutionary Maccabees achieve some victories and around 164 B.C. the temple is "cleansed" and dedicated. (And thus Jews every year celebrate the eight-day Feast of Hanukkah (Dedication) or Festival of Lights.) A modicum of independence is achieved but around 63 B.C. Israel is taken over by the Romans. Roman rule brings demands on the Jews for paying tribute and homage to foreign rulers. Revolutionary fighters such as the Zealots continue in the guerrilla war tradition of the Maccabees. The Zealots, seeking a more decisive, apocalyptic form of intervention from God - a warrior Messiah - reject Jesus' leadership. When a cataclysmic end comes in 70 A.D. it is the Zealots and not the Romans who are crushed: Jerusalem is pillaged, the temple destroyed, and the (imagined) "heroic" struggle of the Zealots ends in their mass suicide in their last stronghold at Masada....God's will will be done on earth - but how shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth? Jesus teaches,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and

take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mk. 8:34-38 NRSV)

Jesus' words help to distinguish between two competing ways facing people who recognize the illegitimacy of the ruling powers. On the one hand are armed revolutionaries and on the other are Jesus' disciples. The worldly way to "gain the whole world" is through warfare - through conquering other peoples and nations. Armed revolutionaries fall to the temptation that Jesus resisted (Lk. 4:5-8): the temptation to seek the power of the state, the throne of worldly kingdoms. They rely on weapons and violence to kill their enemies and "save their own lives." Yet even if victorious - should they "gain the whole world" - they incur God's judgement and "forfeit their lives." How so? The gift system prohibits killing. (Ex. 20:13) In the gift system killing others incurs debt (or curse); the "just debt" for killing another is the forfeiture of one's own life (in the Judgement to come - for God alone is judge). Where then is the "profit" in armed revolution? - for none of the spoils of war that are gained can be "given in return for their life." On the other hand is the Way of discipleship to Jesus. The cost of discipleship is made clear: "deny yourselves...take up your cross...lose your life for my sake and the gospel." To "deny oneself" is to resist and turn away from the worldly temptations to wealth, power, and privilege and to follow Jesus. The cross symbolizes persecution from the authorities. In Jesus' day it represented the risk of capital punishment Romans mete out to armed revolutionaries - a humiliating death on a cross. While the Zealots, among others, are "ashamed" of Jesus and his teachings and have no portion in God's commonwealth, those who "lose their life," i.e., give their life, on the nonviolent path of discipleship incur blessing and salvation.

Christian idolatry

How can Christians justify warfare? This was not an issue for the first Christian communities. At Jesus' death there were only a small number of disillusioned disciples of Jesus. But over the next 300 years Christians grew in number until Christianity became a sizable movement in the Roman empire. This occurred despite times of

intense persecution: under several Roman rulers to be a Christian was a crime punishable by death - and there were mass killings of Christians. Despite this persecution the Christian communities remained pacifist and drew many converts. This movement of faith was radically altered when Constantine came to power and made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. Only after accepting this alliance with the nation-state did Christians need to address the issue of how to justify warfare. So how have Christians justified war?

Since the time of Constantine Christian leaders have faced the same dilemma as their Hebrew ancestors: how to justify mass killing, mass slaughter (war) in the name of God?⁷ The dilemma of Christian leaders, however, was much more difficult. First, Christians had to reconcile war with the witness and teachings of Jesus. Second, they had to sanctify warfare of the secular nation-state (in contrast to theocratic Israel whose God was both spiritual and political leader). The latter point will be addressed first.

Sanctifying warfare of the secular nation-state

The idolatrous alliance between church and state brought new theology sanctifying state authority and sovereignty. (See chapter 5.) This theology looks upon the secular nation-state as relatively "good" - as performing a valuable service in God's order for the world. Unlike Old Testament theology which looks upon all nations (except, at times, Israel) as idolatrous and in rebellion against God's sovereignty, this new theology sanctifies most nations in a general way. Since coercive power and violence are essential to a state, Christian support of the state implies Christian support for state violence. But since blind or blanket support for state violence is unacceptable, church doctrine was needed to differentiate between "just" or "unjust" state violence. Early in Christianity's alliance with the state the "just war" theory developed.

Augustine's "just war" theory, adapted and developed further by many other theologians, sets forth guidelines for evaluating the "justness" of war. Briefly, these guidelines include the following: 1. war must be justly instituted by proper authorities and be a last recourse after nonviolent efforts have been tried; 2. war must have a just intent or purpose - such as being defensive and not offensive; 3. war must employ just means and be motivated by Christian love - killing combatants and not civilians and restricting force proportional to the

aggressor; and 4. victory must be likely - bringing a just and peaceful resolution. Not to be overlooked, Augustine and others also state that clergy should be exempt from, and not have to soil their hands in, military service. Much could be said about the illusions contained in each of the above points - but priority here is given to understanding how the "just war" theory functions.

The "just war" theory, while quite different from the ancient "holy war" tradition, functions in a similar manner. It functions to sanctify warfare, i.e., it gives religious legitimization to the violent carnage of war. The "just war" theory is an intellectual construct. It is not a practical tool for guiding military planning or waging war. Real war has many unknowns and uncertainties, is always justified by state propaganda, and is always concerned primarily with goals and not means. But the "just war" theory is very influential. How so? How does it influence the church hierarchy and Christian laypeople? Through their alliance with the state, official Christian leaders, e.g., bishops, priests, pastors, professional theologians, have deep vested interests: they occupy positions of privilege in churches or colleges, their institutions have tax-exempt status, and the officially ordained receive exemption from military service. The church hierarchy has much at stake in their relationship with the state - and the "just war" theory is an important "compact" in that alliance. It functions to reinforce the allegiance, patriotism, and nationalism of compromised church leaders. And it functions as a smokescreen behind which clergy can run to avoid lay criticism and avoid taking a decisive and confrontive stand against the state. It also functions to muzzle those leaders who would dissent. Dissenting church leaders are muzzled by engaging in the issue in privileged space on an intellectual level and by being placed on the "defensive" trying to buck established church doctrine and bureaucracy. As for laypersons, most have little interest in the intricacies of church doctrine - but they have absorbed and internalized the knowledge of the alliance between church and state, between God and country. Church war doctrine, then, functions to strengthen allegiance to the state and, in times of national crisis, eases the path into military service. While many young men are swept along by the tides of patriotic fervor, tremendous pressure is placed on young individual Christian men who consider refusing military induction.

Christians have a long history of warfare - but their slide into conformity with the nations did not begin immediately. The first Christian communities were pacifist. Around A.D. 170 some Christian

converts remained in the army but were forbidden to kill. There were few Christians in the army until Constantine's time. But it took only about a century before all soldiers in the Roman legions were expected to be "Christian." Christian support of warfare, in doctrine and practice, became the norm and set the stage for the crusades of the Middle Ages. In 1095 the Roman Catholic pope, Urban II, invoked the first crusade to "defend" (conquer) the holy land from Moslems/Turks/infidels.

"The Pope had promised that all crusaders would be free of taxes, that their debts would be forgiven, and that the journey would be the equivalent of all sorts of penances, so that their sins would be washed away."⁸

Under the banner of the cross and assured of forgiveness of their sins the Christian crusaders went off to kill, rape, and pillage. Christian killing was not limited in these times to Moslems but also included Jews, pagans, and other Christians. In 1291, nearly 200 years after the first crusade, Acre, the last major Christian stronghold in the holy land, was captured. Inter-Christian European wars were accompanied by the exploration, land-grabbing, and "Christianizing" of the Americas. Sword and cross were partners in the conquest of native Americans. The United States has fought many wars - always justified according to the nation's leaders - most of whom were Christian. Many American Christians view WWII as a "just war." Yet of the 52 million deaths from the war nearly half were civilians - which no church doctrine attempts to justify. The U.S. was responsible for many - with massive saturation bombings of German cities and the dropping of atomic bombs on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By the end of the war the U.S. was a thoroughly militarized society committed to using against civilians the most "barbaric" and genocidal weapons ever created. Mass slaughter - financed, researched, produced, planned, trained, and executed - in the name of God. Are the ways of Christians different from the ways of the nations?

Not only do most Christians support nationalist wars but some support, mostly in a few "Third World" nations, revolutionary violence against the state. Religious adherents of violent revolution against the state are not new. The Maccabees and the Zealots led violent revolutions - although justifying it from a singularly Jewish perspective. During the Christian Reformation, Thomas Muntzer became a leader of the Peasants' War. He proclaimed a Christian theology which called for the elect, the peasants, to destroy the wicked, the political and ecclesiastical authorities, and establish God's kingdom on earth. But in a decisive battle near Frankenhausen in 1525 the peasants' army

was slaughtered and soon thereafter Muntzer was captured, tortured, and executed. The American revolution has been viewed by most American Christians as a "just revolution" even though Christians fought on both sides, with many Americans at the time supporting England. The American civil war was a violent revolution fought by many southern Christians against the U.S. federal government and northern Christians. More recently, in 1979, revolutionary Nicaraguan Christians were instrumental in overthrowing Somoza, a U.S.-backed dictator. Subsequently, in the 1980s, many Christians in the U.S. supported the revolutionary (or counter-revolutionary) violence of the "contras" in Nicaragua.

A Christian rationale for "just revolution" is a modification of the "just war" theory. Let us examine a formulation for "just revolution." First, violent revolution is based on the right to self-defense, a principle recognized by all nations and in "just war" doctrine. By definition, oppressed people never initiate violence since they are long-standing sufferers of institutional and structural "violence." Unjust economic, political, legal, and social systems violate the basic humanity of poor people. In many nations huge disparities in land, resources, and wealth are maintained and enforced by the state, resulting in unsanitary living conditions, massive hunger, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, unemployment or degrading employment, and homelessness. It is stated that the 3-fold "cycle of violence" - 1. structural violence, 2. people's rebellion, 3. repressive state violence - must be broken at the first level of structural violence. Second, violent revolution is based on the ineffectiveness of nonviolent methods. When nonviolent means have been tried and, by themselves, do not bring significant change, violence, as a last recourse, is justified. Some states violently repress legal avenues for change, make peaceful means illegal, or offer paltry reforms as a substitute for justice. Since the rich and powerful will not willingly give up power - violent conflict is inevitable. Third, violent revolution must present a realistic vision and program for a just order. This vision must be significantly different from an exploitive and abusive status quo order - thus justifying the sacrifices involved in war. A Christian might take up arms then, as the "loving Christian choice," attempting to put an end to perhaps centuries of structural injustice which will then benefit many generations to come. Fourth, Christians may support violent revolution because the Bible reveals a God of justice who takes the side of poor and oppressed people. But the historical record shows that since the time of Constantine the weight of church doctrine and leadership has, in large part, supported state power at the expense of

poor people. Much of Christianity has acted as "paid chaplain" to the rich and powerful.⁹ Churches have been more concerned with maintaining "order" - an unjust social order - than in seeking justice.

"The question of the Constantinian church has to be turned completely around. The true question is not 'What degree of justice (liberation of the poor) is compatible with the maintenance of the existing order?' but "What kind of order, which order is compatible with the exercise of justice (the right of the poor)?'Social change is taken for granted not as good in itself (not change just for the sake of change), but because it is implied in the search for an order - which has to be a new order since the existing order does not achieve this aim - in which this right of the poor takes precedence."¹⁰ (Jose Miguez Bonino)

The God of history demands working for justice here and now and not passively accepting unjust conditions and hoping in a heavenly afterlife. Nonviolence has often been preached to the poor as passive submission to the state, making the church an accomplice of a violent and unjust status quo order. The primary issue, then, must not be violence or nonviolence but rather the priority must be justice and how to apply both nonviolent and violent tactics towards a more just order. Thus, under the conditions stated above, revolutionary violence and not state violence is believed to warrant church support.

But does the God of Jesus Christ really bless the discerning Christian's use of violence to kill other people? Do not both the "just war" and "just revolution" theories sanctify idolatry? What are the "idols" supported by these doctrines?

While the "just revolution" theory includes valid criticisms of traditional church support for the state, it operates within the same framework of justifying state authority and sovereignty. The goal of violent revolution is to gain control of the power of the state. Thus at its core is the idol of state power - the rule and sovereignty of humans. This is the idol Jesus rejects in Luke 4:5-8. Violent revolution merely reproduces the patriarchal nation-state - a state based on dominative power, violence, and coercion. The world is divided into nationalist states with artificial and transient land boundaries demarcated by past wars of conquest. To violently compete to gain control of the human political hierarchy of the state, in order to rule and judge the people, is to conform to the ways of the nations. To engage in violent revolution is to elevate humans into judges making supreme decisions of judgement by killing people created in God's image. While violent revolutionaries embrace the means of dominative

power, seeking to replace present office holders with new human leaders, Jesus espouses God's leadership and "servanthood from below."

To gain state power violent revolutionaries rely on the idol of weapons, on military might. Reliance on "the sword," on weapons, is an essential aspect of revolutionary "empowerment" and "transformation." But advocating liberation through violent revolution is condescending to poor and oppressed people in its prescription of liberation by guns and in its definition of the enemy. Weapons represent a power external to the human body. To rely on any external object, in this case weapons, for dominative power and security is idolatry. It presumes the weakness of the body and spirit - and thus it disempowers the self. Giving weapons to the oppressed is viewed by revolutionaries as "empowering" - tending to equalize power. But in terms of human development and potential, viewing poor and oppressed people as potential killers, seems to underrate their human ability. Education and training accompanying weapons is dehumanizing: a certain group of people is identified as "enemies" and violence is taught as a means of resolving problems, including murder of the opposition. Violence is the negation of creativity. The poor and oppressed are the historical victims of violence and have much experience in the end results of violence - which doesn't really end because violence begets more violence. Those who are identified as "enemy" - usually the army and police - often draw much of their personnel from the lower class. Killing them is really killing members from other poor families. So in the hope of replacing the people in positions of power, great numbers of poor people will fight and kill each other with many civilians being killed along the way. Is there not another way? The prophets and Jesus do not teach violent self-defense. In the Old Testament, after Israel conformed to the ways of the nations, it learned the hard way that even in wars of self-defense God was against them. And Jesus teaches love of enemies. Paul echoes this, saying, "Bless those who persecute you...Repay no one evil for evil...never avenge yourselves...overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:14-21) Jesus also teaches internal conversion and empowerment resulting in unarmed, prophetic confrontation of rulers, relying on and speaking the word of God.

To justify the carnage of warfare requires promoting the idol of ideology (a mythology of values and beliefs, e.g., "holy war," or patriotically defending the "fatherland" or "motherland," or fighting for freedom, democracy, socialism, communism, or whatever). Why does

war always require some commitment to a glorified ideology? Is it not, in part, because the "means" of war - killing, bombing, etc. - are undeniably cruel and must be justified by faith in some future "end" which is very good? Ideology is the intellectual device to justify separating "means" from "ends." That is, ideology encourages use of real destructive means to support imaginary positive ends. If a violent revolution is successful, the real cornerstones of the new government are dominative power and violence and not the imaginary ideals propagated through ideology. Victory means the ascendancy of the military and the inevitable glorification of the fighters. But Jesus teaches,

"So whatever you wish that (others) would do to you, so do to them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Mt. 7:12)

Here there is no deceptive separation: the desired "ends" are simply incarnated and practiced here and now. This word exposes the falsehood of hypothetical, imaginary, and deceptive Christian justifications of violence. John also confronts delusions about not truly loving our neighbors as ourselves:

"Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them....Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1 Jn. 3:14-15, 4:20 NRSV)

How can it be said any clearer?

Reconciling war with Jesus' life & teachings

For Christians this idol of ideology needs to be examined further. It is time to return to the question: How do Christians reconcile "just war" or "just revolution" doctrines with the witness and teachings of Jesus? (from p. 119) Simply put - they can't. Jesus' life and teachings are simply irrelevant to these doctrines. But how can Christians ignore Jesus Christ? Some attempts have been made to reconcile Jesus with killing and war. A few theologians have painted Jesus as a Zealot or sympathizer of violent revolution but this imaginative view is contradicted by all scriptural and historical records. Other Christians have interpreted Jesus' teachings as naive idealism or lofty principles or only valid at some future time - but not pragmatic for, or applicable in, the "real world." According to this view some "wise" theologian must "correct" Jesus' teachings in order for them to be applied in today's world. This is of course a deceptive way of discrediting Jesus, of still calling him "Savior" while emptying him of the content of his life

and message (i.e., turning him into a hollow, "plastic Jesus"). Perhaps the most pervasive rationalization, though, is based upon a false dichotomy between private and public ethics. According to this fragmented view Jesus teaches a purely private code of ethics that is applicable only to a private sphere of life. In the sphere of public politics and ethics Jesus is viewed as silent - opening up a huge "gray" area where Jesus provides no clear guidance. Thus Christians should love their individual personal enemies but may at times, according to church doctrine, kill and slaughter the state's enemies. Isn't this dishonest? It allows those compromised by the nation-state's covenant to claim to be "Christian" even while they deny Jesus' universal authority. What has happened? Compromised churches have replaced the word of God with the idol of ideology/traditions-of-men - the ungodly doctrines fabricated in the minds of professional scribes and theologians. According to the Old Testament prophets the issue of war and peace was prominently and intimately connected to the coming of the Messiah. And in the life of the early pacifist Christian communities Jesus' teachings on nonviolence and love of enemies were extremely relevant in the face of fierce persecution. But today, most churches and Christians bear witness that Jesus is silent and irrelevant on the issue of war and peace. If these churches are disobedient to Jesus and, in fact, are ashamed of the words of Jesus - what is their future? History records the outcome of unbelief and idolatry: they incur God's judgement and wrath. The unfaithful have no inheritance in God's commonwealth - they have no future on earth.

The costly cross

When the issue of war and peace, violence and nonviolence, is raised it is necessary for many of us to go back to step one of Christianity. That step is conversion to Jesus. For all people there is a door to life - the door of repentance.

"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." (Rev. 3:20 NRSV)

Repentance means turning away from a sinful and oppressive world and giving oneself, completely and wholly, to the Messiah. A major problem of Christianity today is that most Christians are not fully-committed to Jesus. How then can we proceed down the path of discipleship? With conversion to Jesus comes the imperative of the obedience of faith. Yet many Christians either have no conception of the authority of Jesus or else they misread scripture and associate

God's word and authority with the "traditions of men." Many Christians, who rightly cringe at the thought of obedience to a church hierarchy and to church dogma, fail to grasp the necessity of obedience to the word of God. But God is one, and if God's Spirit resides within us it cannot but greatly desire to say "Yes" to God. How could it be otherwise? For Christians, failure to obey Jesus, the living Word of God, is to break covenant with God. Jesus says,

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32)

Christians are called to embark on a particular path to liberation - the Way of obedience to Jesus in holistic discipleship communities. Jesus says, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Mk. 8:31) The patriarchal world will pass away - but Jesus' words endure forever. If we are not obedient to Jesus' teachings and practices who is being deceived? On whose side are we? Surely it is not God who is fooled.

Associated with step one is the cost of obedience to Jesus. Jesus says,

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me....Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

(Mt. 10:16-18,21-22 NRSV)

There is no naivete here. Neither is there ambiguity. As usual, Jesus states things quite clearly. For disciples, persecution and martyrdom can be expected. Disciples must carry the cross and, "like sheep in the midst of wolves," nonviolently face persecution and death. But do not most American churches and their leaders cringe at the thought of persecution?

"The fact of aggression, oppression, and injustice in our world also serves to legitimate the resort to weapons and armed force in defense of justice. We must recognize the reality of the paradox we face as Christians living in the context of the world as it presently exists; we must continue to articulate our belief that love is possible and the only real hope for all human relations, and yet accept that force, even deadly force, is sometimes justified."¹¹

(U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops)

Here religious leaders testify to their unbelief. The "paradox" they face is truly their hypocrisy - of being called to live one Way of life but actually supporting another way. Who are naive - except those who think that evil and injustice are something new in the world? And so Christian leaders sanctify "deadly force" - a euphemism for killing, mass slaughter, war. But Jesus says,

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul."

(Mt. 10:28)

The power of evil is the power of dominative power, coercion, fear, violence. And the ultimate power of violence is the power to "kill the body." This power was used to kill Jesus. But the meaning of the resurrection is that this power failed. It failed to stop Jesus' leadership of the movement of faith which will bring liberation to the ends of the earth. Through the cross Jesus triumphed over the powers of sin and death.

"...that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage." (Heb. 2:14-15)

For obedient disciples "survival," i.e., eternal life, is guaranteed by the risen Christ. Thus Christians are called to a "resurrection faith" - to taking the "long view" that sees beyond death to resurrection - and which frees believers from the fear of death.

"Why is faith so scarce? I think the clue to this is simply fear. If we are going to be triumphant over fear, we must have an assurance of triumph over death. The clue, then, to the triumphant faith of the early Christians lies in the power of the resurrection. They did not go everywhere preaching the ethics of Jesus. They went everywhere preaching that this Jesus whom you slew, God has raised from the dead. Death had lost its sting, the grave had lost its victory.

The life, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Jesus is one package. I think the weakness of liberalism today is that it...shuns the inevitable consequences of the Jesus Life, which is crucifixion, and it thereby denies the power of the resurrection. When we are given assurance that this Jesus and the kind of life that he lived cannot be put out, that the light is still shining in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it, then we are freed from our fear."¹²

(Clarence Jordan)

Why is faith so scarce? While the power of evil failed at the time of Jesus' death and in the following couple centuries - it scored a significant victory through Constantine's co-optation of the movement of faith. By turning Christianity into an established religion supporting the power of violence, Constantine helped resurrect the power of the

fear of death. And so the fear of death permeates most of Christianity. Today most Christians have some awareness of the cost of carrying the nonviolent cross of Jesus. But, lacking a resurrection faith, we are afraid to do so - for we are in bondage to fear.

Obedience to Jesus is costly - and the cross is an ever-present reminder of that cost. The cross symbolizes persecution and death. It is Jesus' sure word that many disciples will be brutally murdered. But the cross also symbolizes victory over death. Disciples, then, are called to bear a costly cross with a resurrection faith. We are called to be a courageous and joyful people who face death with a strong conviction that Jesus will raise us from the dead.

At their outset new covenant discipleship communities are advised to take a stand on the issue of violence & war. The issue is really about whether or not we will follow Jesus and carry the cross. The issue really goes to the depth of our commitment to Jesus. Will we go the whole route with Jesus? Much of what passes today as pacifism and nonviolence is quite shallow. Many of those who "talk the talk" of nonviolence fail to "walk the walk." Some couch-pacifists may criticize violent urban crimes and faraway wars from the privilege of affluent houses and lifestyles. But affluent lifestyles in the United States are often built on violent and exploitive economic practices. And when our own safety and possessions are threatened many of us may reach for weapons or call for armed intervention. Or we may engage in protest demonstrations against weapons or war but fail in our personal lives to tame anger, threats, name-calling, enmity, violence.

A part-time commitment to nonviolence is not the Way of Jesus. Neither is the Christian vocation of peacemaking an individualistic activity. Rather, Jesus calls us to a holistic and pacific Way of life in discipleship communities. This Way of life is incompatible with society's war-making economic, political, legal, and military institutions. This Way of life calls for wisdom and maturity. New covenant communities, if they are to lay a strong foundation, must always nurture a spirituality of nonviolence. New covenant discipleship communities can develop strategy and practices, in obedience to Jesus, for living according to God's peaceful Spirit in a brutal world. Violence (and intimidation & power games) may be countered with nonviolence training, disciplined nonviolence, organized resistance, networks of solidarity, prayer, and, of course, endurance. "The best defense is a good offense" (is this not in scripture? - see Mt. 5:38-42); communities must be committed to outreach ministries, giving to

others, and not hoarding. Connected with this is a commitment to simplicity in lifestyle, with few valuable items. As peacemakers, disciples may creatively unmask and expose military idols, love our enemies, offer hospitality to refugees and any people victimized by military involvement, pray for rulers, and courageously bear persecution.

A full commitment to Jesus comes with a cross. We must carry this cross in one of the world's most violent nations. Therefore our "resurrection faith" must be real - because the power of violence sure is real. Yet the resurrection stands for victory.

"For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for (Yahweh) shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. (Ps. 37:9-10)

Footnotes

1. I am indebted to Millard C. Lind and his book Yahweh is a Warrior, 1980, Herald Press, for many insights into the Old Testament including his analysis of Gen. 11-12.
2. Lind, p. 62.
3. Lind, p. 73.
4. Lind, p. 84.
5. Lind, pp. 76 & 81.
6. Lind, p. 118.
7. The arguments cited below do not apply to the "peace" churches of the anabaptist tradition as well as those individual Christians and communities that reject warfare.
8. Jay Williams in consultation with Margaret B. Freeman, Knights of the Crusades, American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1962, p. 32.
9. The term "paid chaplain" is used by Fr. Charles McCarthy, "Epistle to the Church of the Twentieth Century: Christian Nonviolence - The Great Failure, The Only Hope," p. 2.

10. Jose Miguez Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethics, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1983, p. 86.
11. The quote, cited in Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer's book The Politics of Compassion, Orbis book, NY, 1986, p. 85, is from p. 25 of a "pastoral letter" on war and peace.
12. A quote by Clarence Jordan from "The Substance of Faith," cited in "Walking By Faith," by Elizabeth Dede, Hospitality, The Open Door Community, Atlanta, September 1990, p. 9.

Swords into plowshares

"They shall beat their
swords into plowshares,
and their spears
into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up
sword against nation,
neither shall they learn
war any more."
(Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:3)
The last war is over,
the battlefields are empty.
The land,
satiated with blood,
can soak up no more.
Blood of the innocents
blood of the martyrs
blood of the warriors -
it is over.
Finished.
The earth is still,
yet unable to comprehend:
all evildoers
have departed.
They are no more.
Gone forever.
Banished
from the face of the earth.
It is the dawn
of time immemorial:

golden warmth
peace, serenity
eternal joy
awe-inspiring beauty.
The ancient promise -
fulfilled.
God's word,
mocked for ages,
is, in the end
victorious!
The longshot -
the pipedream -
the foolishness
of a vagabond
from Nazareth -
comes through!
A dreamworld -
yet awesomely real.
A dream
still in the making -
step by step.
A promise
to be embraced
and held onto
forever
and ever
for all time
eternally
time without end...

CHAPTER 7

Abortion & the Roots of Violence Against Women

Since the leap of faith into a new covenant discipleship community is a big one, it is helpful for a community to have a broad vision, a strong foundation, and a core group of disciples sure of their identity. For this reason it can be useful to explore a few important and potentially divisive issues before taking the leap into a community. Better to defuse a divisive issue and work towards some consensus at the outset of community-formation than to let the issue unexpectedly fracture a community at some point down the road. Also, an in-depth exploration of a divisive issue can result in revelations that broaden our vision of God's commonwealth. The divisive issue that this chapter focuses on is abortion. The exploration of this issue can begin to reveal, in particular, how the roles of women and children in God's commonwealth contrast with the world.

The abortion issue is not an abstract or minor one - but affects many people. Worldwide over 40 million abortions are performed each year. And thousands of women die from botched abortions. In the United States one and a half million pregnancies are deliberately terminated through abortion each year.¹ The abortion issue has brought out two opposing groups - the "pro-choicers" and the "pro-lifers." The pro-choice group is principally concerned with women's rights and the pro-life group is principally concerned with the rights of the unborn. Both groups contain many Christians and their positions leave little ground for reconciliation. How can Christians gain clarity over such a divisive and emotion-filled issue? To begin to move toward a unified position in a new covenant community it is helpful to step back from today's emotion-filled rhetoric. As a first step it is helpful to view the abortion issue from a historical biblical perspective which addresses both the oppression of women and the process of pregnancy and childbirth. Then the positions of pro-choicers and pro-lifers can be critiqued. Finally, Christians can be called to return to following Jesus/God and to incarnate the new vision.

Historical perspective

Unlike other nations and peoples which make images/idols of their gods, Yahweh creates man and woman in the image of God and forbids all graven images. Thus worship and love of Yahweh is forever tied to doing justice and loving one's neighbors (who bear the image of God). Thus an equality is established between man and woman and between all peoples. Adam and Eve are blessed and the first part of the blessing is to have children: "Be fruitful and multiply." (Gen. 1:28) But through disobedience they receive a curse and are banished from the garden of Eden. The curse for the woman foresees a new reign of suffering and injustice:

"...in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Gen. 3:16)

Curse and separation from God brings woman into a patriarchal world: a world where men rule over women. The depth of women's oppression is revealed: its roots extend into the institutions of marriage and family. In God's commonwealth marriage is based on equality and children represent a blessing. But under "Patriarchy,"² i.e., in this fallen patriarchal world, marriage is characterized by inequality. Also, the blessing of children will only come through suffering as women's labor and reproductive power are subjugated to male control. Male control is not simply based on coercion and violence against women - it also is dependent on social and cultural conditioning. That is, male dominance is enhanced to the extent that women internalize patriarchal values of male-superiority/female-inferiority and accept the distorted role and identity that a patriarchal world gives to them. This internalization of patriarchal values is highlighted by a woman's desire to get a husband and enter into a patriarchal marriage:

"yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."

Separation from God and from God's commonwealth brings people into a world that distorts and perverts human relationships. A patriarchal world distorts both male and female sexuality and identity. Under Patriarchy, two major gender roles for women are: 1. childbearing for a patriarch; and 2. providing patriarchal sexual pleasure.

1. Childbearing for a patriarch

Childbearing for a patriarch came to define a woman's primary

function and identity in society. And just as a patriarchal marriage brought inequality between a husband and wife so childbearing and child-raising brought inequality between boys and girls. According to ancient patriarchal lineage, power and wealth are passed as an inheritance from fathers to sons. (Current practices continue traditions of patriarchal lineage and male superiority as most women getting married today adopt the last name of their husband.) The economics of patriarchal lineage meant that investments into raising girls were for another man's benefit while raising sons was for one's own family heritage and for the parents' welfare in old age. Thus, the birth of a girl was often viewed as disappointing. Worse still, misogyny, in the form of infanticide, the abandoning of female infants, was (and still is) practiced in some nations. But the birth of a boy was seen as a spiritual blessing. Thus Eve remarks on the birth of Cain, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." (Gen. 4:1) Sarah, in her desperation to provide male heirs for Abraham, gave him the Egyptian slave Hagar. Hagar's pregnancy enhances her status and causes great jealousy between the two women. The story illustrates how patriarchal values can divide women against each other and also that while women, as a class, are oppressed, discrimination/racism can result in varying degrees of privilege among women. (In the United States, a long history of slavery has meant that white women, as a class, have had far greater access to privilege than black women - or other women of color.) While a woman could enhance her status in society by bearing sons, this narrowly-defined identity greatly limited options for creative self-expression and also resulted in a social stigma when a woman was childless. Labeled as "barren," society's reproach fell on the woman, not the husband, when she "failed" to bear children. Thus Rachel, upon finally bearing a son said, "God has taken away my reproach." (Gen. 30:23) While childbearing could enhance a woman's status, the law of Moses makes very clear the subservient nature of this role.

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband's brother shall go in to her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her." (Deut. 25:5)

Bearing male children is not only important for patriarchal families, it is important for the patriarchal state. Another reason men are valued, and feared, more than women is because the state views and values men as instruments of violence. As mentioned in chapter 6, while God's old covenant at Sinai contained no martial obligations, the

covenants of nation-states may require military service of their subjects/citizens. One measure of the power of rulers is the size of their "pool" of male warriors. In the wilderness, before invading Canaan, Moses directed a census counting

"every male, head by head; from twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go forth to war." (Num. 1:2-3)

King David also "sinned greatly" by preparing for conscription and calculating his power in the number of Israel's adult male population. (2 Sam. 24) (Today, to enhance the United State's war-readiness, all 18-year-old males are required, under the threat of a felony charge, to register for the draft.) While Patriarchy highly values adult men, women and children are treated as less valuable. Jesus' miracle feeding is substantiated by the number of men: "Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children." (Mt. 15:38) And while male children are valued more than female children not all male children are of equal value. In the patriarchal state the value of male children is differentiated by class, ethnic, and racial lines. While patriarchal societies often have encouraged women to be "patriotic" and bear more children, thus increasing a nation's "manpower," these same states may take a different view towards the procreation of minorities or poor people. The Egyptians oppressed and enslaved the people of Israel. "But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied." (Ex. 1:12) The Egyptians feared the Hebrew population explosion and viewed newborn infants, particularly males, as a threat. Thus the king of Egypt directed the Hebrew midwives to kill all newborn males. (In the 20th century, Germany under Nazism instituted a program to exterminate Jews while at the same time promoting higher birthrates of a "pure Aryan" race. In the U.S., many affluent whites decry the population explosion among poor and oppressed peoples throughout the world - but don't decry North America's exorbitant and wasteful consumption of the world's resources and goods. In response to this threatening population growth experimental drugs and birth control methods, including coerced sterilization, have been foisted upon so-called "Third World" countries and upon women of color in the U.S. The U.S. also ranks very poorly in infant mortality rates among affluent nations, largely because of society's lack of health provisions for women of color. In 1989 the black infant mortality rate in the U.S. was 18.6 deaths by age 1 for every 1000 live births - compared to 8.1 for whites.³)

Male control over childbirth has grown over the centuries. The traditional roles of midwives and women healers has been supplanted by predominantly male doctors. In Europe, from the 13th to 17th

centuries, the Christian church unleashed a holocaust, termed the Inquisition, which slaughtered innumerable thousands of women, many of whom were healers and unmarried. The rise of science, drugs, and licensed, predominantly male physicians helped build a patriarchal medical establishment. The professional medical establishment can be characterized as being elitist, mechanistic, fragmented, and highly technological - in contrast to being participatory/educational, personal, holistic, and organic/preventive. The American Medical Association, in an effort to extend their medical authority, lobbied against abortions unless performed by licensed physicians. By 1900 all abortions had been criminalized (except to save a woman's life). New technology continues to extend the domain of the patriarchal medical establishment over childbearing.

"When we are discussing reproductive and gene technologies, we should never forget that we are not talking about help for involuntarily childless women, but about a politics of power and control. What we are facing is an international multi-billion dollar competitive race among scientists, pharmaceutical companies, medics, and politicians to lead in conquering this 'last' frontier of human domination over nature. We are talking about the production of the 'right' child to the 'right' parents in the 'right' countries."⁴ (Gena Corea, et al.)

In vitro fertilization, genetic engineering, sex predetermination, and fetal-tissue research represent the latest dehumanizing efforts to expand the power of the patriarchal medical establishment.

The medical establishment's encroachment over women's natural and historical roles in health care has had many detrimental effects. Like the woman in Jesus' time "who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse," (Mk. 5:26) many women are physically victimized and economically exploited by the male-dominated medical profession. Women's bodies are continually subjected to male medical personnel for examination, analysis, and treatment - for supposed, potential, and sometimes real health problems. The real health problems are, in many cases, the result of doctors' iatrogenic (disease-spreading) handling, treatment-injections, and surgery-mutilations. Pills, injections, and intra-uterine devices (IUDs) have been prescribed to prevent or control pregnancy without knowledge of their hazardous long-term side-effects. Among the most notorious have been Depo Provera shots, Diethylstilbestrol (DES) injections, and use of Dalkon Shield IUDs.

The natural process of pregnancy and childbirth has been turned into a hierarchically-managed, monitored, and medicated procedure. Childbirth is firmly implanted in hospitals - a place for the sick. Birthing classes often teach women to be passive, obedient patients, dependent upon medical "experts" and "powerful" machines and drugs. The message communicated to women is that they are not competent. Alienation begins as soon as pregnant women are institutionalized - by requiring them to change into hospital uniforms, positioning them on their backs, and hooking them up to machines. Invasive "routine" vaginal exams, uninvited visits by student interns, and pre-labor tests like ultra-sound or amniocentesis build up precedents for medical interventions during labor. Drugs, which also enter the baby, are used as painkillers, to bring sleep, or to stimulate contractions. In many places episiotomies, an incision in the perineum, are routinely conducted for vaginal births. Major surgery in the form of Caesarean births - surgically removing a baby through an incision in the mother's abdomen - is a common delivery method for many doctors - who don't like the "lack of control" of natural vaginal births. The more lucrative, higher-risk Caesarean deliveries accounted for an incredible 24.4% of the 3.8 million births recorded in the U.S. in 1987.⁵ Many healthy newborn babies are routinely separated from their mothers immediately after birth.

2. Providing patriarchal sexual pleasure

Besides child-bearing for a patriarch, a second major gender role for women is providing patriarchal sexual pleasure. Under Patriarchy, male sexuality has intimately connected sexual pleasure with the violence of dominative power. Hence sexual assault and rape have long been an integral part of patriarchal male sexuality - merely the extreme on a continuum of male control over female bodies. On the other end of the continuum might be the massive societal pressure, which most women accept and internalize, to always "look pretty."

Patriarchal male sexuality has viewed women as objects for male pleasure, often using the penis as an instrument of violence against women. Historically, women have been treated as male property, being given from fathers to husbands. As male property, rape in marriage was institutionalized - the consent of the wife to sexual intercourse was unnecessary because she was the property, the possession of her husband. As a crime, rape was simply the "theft" and "defilement" of one man's property by another man. In wartime, women and children were considered part of the "spoils of war" to be

reaped by victorious male soldiers. Historically, and to the present day, hundreds of millions of women have been raped during and in the aftermath of war - with no social sanction against the male rapists. In ancient Israel any woman, single or married, who was raped was considered defiled, undesirable to all other men. An unmarried rape victim's only "honorable" option was to marry the man who raped her. King David's daughter, Tamar, pleaded with her half-brother not to rape her, "Do not do this wanton folly. As for me, where could I carry my shame?" (2 Sam. 13:12) Afterwards, the rape victim "Tamar dwelt a desolate woman" (v. 20) while king David did nothing to reprove his rapist son. (Today, in the U.S., almost all wife-rape and incest-rape go unreported and only around 2% of reported rapes end in a rape conviction. A report by the U.S. Surgeon General conservatively estimates that 15 million American women have been physically or sexually abused or raped.⁶ No woman escapes sexual harassment or illicit touching.)

To justify women's subjugation, Israelite theology departed from the original equality of man and woman created in the image of God. Israel's purity system viewed women as ontologically impure, carnal, unfit for the priesthood. Menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth were all causes of "uncleanness" which required periods of "purification." Thus, with the onset of physical maturity, women were (and are) socialized to view their bodies as "dirty" - alienating women from their bodies at a time when patriarchal society begins to pressure them into being sexually desirable, sexually active.

While a married woman in Israelite society was expected to be monogamous, a man could own many wives, depending upon his power and wealth. King Solomon, during the "glory" years of Israel, could boast of having "seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines." (1 Kings 11:3) Most men, if they could not own extra women, could at least "rent" a woman - indulging in prostitutes and supporting the "world's oldest profession." Prostitution, as a dehumanizing trade reducing a woman to a sexual commodity, can be understood as a "sophisticated" form of rape, providing men a "civilized" means of access to women's genitals through economic power instead of through brute force.⁷ (In the U.S., new communication and production technologies have spawned a huge multi-billion dollar pornography industry which promotes misogynist ideology and makes cheap "recreational sex" accessible to all males. Much of the U.S.'s future is sacrificed to satisfy the male sexual appetite - as "one and a half million children under sixteen are used

annually in commercial sex (prostitution and pornography)."⁸)

Modern capitalist development

The advancing stage of capitalism in the United States continues to keep women's labor and reproductive power under male control, undoing much of the efforts for women's liberation.

Industrial capitalist development first diminished women's economic value and hence power. Industrial capitalism changed traditionally integrated work and family life by introducing centralized workplaces of mass production. Family and home life became separated from the production of commodities for the marketplace. Traditional family functions were eroded further by the growth of governmental functions, public schools, hospitals, and nursing homes. In the home, women's labor was unpaid and hence devalued, reinforcing their economic dependence upon husbands. Married women supported patriarchal capitalism by reproducing the labor force, performing child care and housekeeping tasks, and providing emotional mending for husbands working in alienating and exploitive jobs. Privatized, personal home life also supported capitalism through the materialistic consumption of goods and individualistic efforts at self-fulfillment, i.e., the romanticized pursuit of "the good life," the false utopia of financial independence and security. The U.S.'s early industrialization and expansion needed to employ few married women because labor was supplied by immigrant men and rural migrators to cities. Many girls and single women were employed in a segregated job market laboring long hours for slave wages well below the wages of working men. So economic and social pressure was strong for women to seek a traditional patriarchal household and a socially-affirmed role as mother. In 1890, less than 5% of married women held jobs outside the home.⁹

20th century capitalist development has *shifted* many women's economic dependence away from husbands and the land and *towards* the corporation and welfare state. This shift weakened patriarchal society's emphasis on the gender role of childbearing for a patriarch while placing more emphasis on providing patriarchal sexual pleasure.

With farm numbers declining from 6.4 million in 1910 to 2.1 million in 1992, capitalism was reshaping economic and social life. A disenfranchised, mobile society was being spawned - uprooting people from the land, from stable rural communities, and from

extended families and drawing people to transitory and transferable jobs in urban centers. The cost of living is generally higher in urban centers than on farms; also, while children contribute some labor on farms, in urban areas they are much more of an economic burden. Thus, capitalism's diminishment of rural community and formation of a mobile urban society necessarily also increased stress on and/or fractured many isolated nuclear families.

Capitalism also was bringing many women out of the home and into the commercial labor force - a change necessitated by World War II. While women's employment dropped considerably at the war's conclusion, it has risen steadily since. Wartime labor needs, rapid economic expansion following the war, the maintenance of a large predominantly-male army, and the growth of low-paying service industries necessitated bringing large numbers of women into the paid labor force.

At a time when a modicum of economic options was offering women the illusion (for the majority) of "economic independence," the development of modern contraceptives and the 1960s "sexual revolution" were guaranteeing to men the continued sexual availability of women - but with fewer costs. Women were inculturated into increased expectations for sexual activity. A selfish individualistic ethic promoted short-term sexual relationships at the expense of long-term committed relationships. A national trend shows teenagers engaging in sex at a younger age and having more sexual partners. The Centers for Disease Control reported that 40% of ninth-graders and 72% of 12th-graders have had sexual intercourse.¹⁰ Treating sex as a consumable commodity reinforces a patriarchal male view of women as sex objects and further weakens male responsibility for pregnancy and childcare. The burden of responsibility, like the stigma for promiscuity, falls upon women. While only 15% of teenage mothers in 1955 were single, by 1984 56% remained unwed. Pregnant teens often drop out of school, limiting their development of marketable skills. Besides historical discrimination against women in employment and wages, bearing children further functions to keep women in an inferior and dependent economic place. Childcare centers are expensive and few businesses offer them. Leaves of absence from jobs for childbirth are often without benefits and with little or no allowance for a mother returning to her job at full-time status after a year or so. Working mothers carry a double burden of performing traditional household and childcare duties while holding (alienating) outside jobs.

Despite abortions numbering 1 1/2 million a year, many women are choosing single motherhood. Single mothers and their children make up a growing percentage of society's poor - with nearly one out of every four children now growing up in poverty. Hypocritically, while rich white men pass laws spending hundreds of billions of dollars of "public" funds on military weapons of death, running up huge budget deficits that rob future generations, it is mothers raising children who, when accepting very small amounts of public assistance, endure a dehumanizing welfare system and bear a social stigma for not making a "positive contribution" to society. Similarly, it is the few welfare cheats, and not corporate officials stealing millions of dollars from government contracts, who go to jail.

God's family

While Patriarchy continues to control and exploit women, God has another agenda. Throughout history God has been working to overcome Patriarchy and to establish the commonwealth of God on earth. Jesus, as the fulfillment of the Old Testament law and prophets, continues God's liberating works. Jesus, as the founder of a new covenant family, also initiates a radical break from patriarchal society. While affirming the blessing of motherhood and childbearing, a dramatic break occurs from patriarchal lineage and control. Jesus' forerunner, John the baptist, like Jesus, is given a name by God apart from patriarchal family tradition. (Lk. 1) Mary, the mother of Jesus, accepts God's promises and conceives a child apart from a husband or male "seed." Mary risks the scandal of an "illegitimate" child and is prevented from being a single mother early in life only through a dream telling Joseph not to divorce her. (Mt. 1:18-25) Upon Mary's visit to pregnant Elizabeth, "the babe in (Elizabeth's) womb leaped for joy," (Lk. 1:44) for God's Spirit was with them. As a sign of God's identification with poor and oppressed people, Jesus is born among the animals far from patriarchal centers of power, wealth, and privilege. (Lk. 2:7,12) Jesus renounces the identification of the Christ as David's son, thereby denying that God's commonwealth is merely a duplicate of David's patriarchal kingdom. (Mk. 12:35-37) Jesus, who remains single and chaste, apart from perpetuating a family name and inheritance through children, becomes the foundation and point of entry for God's family/house/commonwealth on earth.

In a radical break from all cultures, the family of Jesus/God is based not on blood relationships but on faith and obedience to God's covenant of justice and equality. (Mk. 3:31-35) Indeed, the spread of

God's commonwealth, with the growth of God's house and family, inevitably tears the fabric of traditional patriarchal families. (Mt. 10:34-39; Lk. 12:51-53) To break male domination of and emotional dependence upon women, Jesus organizes male disciples as poor servants. After his resurrection, Jesus first appears to Mary Magdalene, calling her to be a witness to his male disciples of his resurrection. (Mt. 28:1-10; Mk. 16:9-14) As full partners in God's commonwealth, (Gal. 3:28) Jesus views women's primary function not as patriarchal childbearers or as men-pleasers, but as holders and incarnators of God's word and Spirit. (Mk. 3:31-35; Lk. 10:38-42, 11:27-28; Jn. 4; Mk. 14:3-9) Jesus sends his disciples, male and female, "to make disciples of all nations," and to bring to an end the age of Patriarchy. (Mt. 28:18-20)

Mainstream women's movement

The resurgence of a women's movement followed the great cultural upheavals of the 1960s - the black civil rights movement, the "sexual revolution," and the anti-Vietnam-war movement. Like its predecessors, the modern women's movement unleashed tremendous creative energy. But while spinning off in many directions, the mainstream element elevated the divisive abortion issue above all others, making it a litmus test for judging one's commitment to women's rights. By so doing, many were turned away from the movement and much creative energy was ineffectually channeled. How and why has the abortion rights banner failed to radically challenge Patriarchy?

Feminist analysis of historical injustices and the questioning of traditional gender roles led many women to seek change. The predominant participants in the early movement were white, middle- and upper-class women, and their values became reflected in a mainstream agenda. Emphasis was placed on gaining greater access into exclusive male domains - allowing for the greater assimilation of privileged (university-trained) women into the patriarchal offices and organizations of power, wealth, and privilege.

The growing consciousness of women's rights opened new ground in the area of birth control. On January 22, 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court rendered their Roe vs. Wade decision, ruling in favor of the woman.¹¹ The ruling legalized induced abortions, upholding a woman's right to privacy during the first trimester of a pregnancy,

strictly limiting government interference in the second trimester to protecting the woman's life, and granting governmental authority to act in the third trimester to protect the life of both the now "viable" fetus and the mother.

Grasping upon these newly gained abortion rights, the mainstream movement became intent upon mobilizing support for and protecting them from encroachment. The women's movement grafted around the abortion issue articulate rationales for the right of a woman to control her own body, to reproductive freedom, and to certain medical services. But the mainstream movement's ideology and actions reveal the movement's lack of commitment to the poor and its vested interests in Patriarchy.

The abortion option is defended as an essential part of women's "reproductive freedom." "Reproductive freedom" does have some positive implications as far as a woman taking responsibility for her life-giving power through self-knowledge, self-control, intentional abstinence or uncoerced sexual intercourse, or choosing birth control methods. But the promotion of abortion rights under the guise of "reproductive freedom" supports, in practice, the traditional female gender role of providing patriarchal sexual pleasure. How so? Widespread abortions do not reflect a responsible exercise of "reproductive freedom." On the contrary, widespread abortions support the patriarchal cultural norm of engaging in heterosexual relationships without just and mutual commitment and responsibility. This is in harmony with the patriarchal value of treating women's bodies as a commodity for male consumption. Reproductive freedom such as this brings women the same "freedom" that many men (of all races and classes) enjoy - to pursue "low-cost" sexual relationships. Yet, this "freedom" to evade responsibility for pregnancy is often illusory and costly for women. For many women it means not accepting and affirming their life-giving power, not viewing their bodies as sacred and demanding just and mutual relationships from committed men. Championing abortion rights, under the banner of "reproductive freedom," does not promote self-love and responsible relationships.

Championing a woman's right to choose an abortion is a defensive, reactive strategy taken to counteract abortion foes. Yet abortion is not a positive choice. Abortion cannot transform unhealthy relationships and it cannot enhance oppressive economic and social realities. Abortion is, in fact, a means for maintaining the status quo. It does not

challenge male abdication of responsibility for children. Instead, it reinforces the brokenness in male-female relationships and sets up women to bear fully the burden of social responsibility for intercourse, pregnancy, abortion or children.

The abortion option is defended as one which can empower women by giving them more "control" over their bodies. But since this "control" occurs only after the fact of pregnancy, abortion, as with hospital births, simply maintains the patriarchal medical establishment's control over women's minds and bodies. How so? While making decisions for oneself can be empowering, the clinical operation of abortion is not empowering.¹² The language used concerning abortion reflects the absorption by the mainstream women's movement of the normal alienating language used by a professional patriarchal medical establishment. The abortion option and language teaches a woman to objectify the life within her, i.e., to look upon the embryo or fetus as an "enemy," as an object which is a threat to her present and future wellbeing. The language employed is couched in euphemisms - removal of fetal tissue, terminating a pregnancy, evacuating the contents of the uterus - terms which separate and distance a pregnant woman from the life within her. While around 90% of abortions occur during the first trimester of pregnancy - when there is no possibility of the fetus being viable independent of its mother - still the fetus may be well along the course of human development. At 18 days the embryo's heart pumps blood through its own bloodstream. At six weeks the nervous system begins to function and the skeleton begins to develop. At seven weeks the fetus has all its organs, its own face and brain waves. At 12 weeks the fetus, now about 3 inches long and weighing an ounce, only needs growth. The euphemisms and rationales which view the fetus as a lifeless object bear some similarity to the patriarchal practice of dehumanizing people to justify persecution or killing - similar to terms like savages, niggers, queers, Japs, gooks. Thus the language surrounding abortion fails to reconcile a woman with her body and with the new life within her.

The medical establishment has profited handsomely from their alliance with women patients. With 1 1/2 million abortions conducted each year, with up to 40% of abortions conducted on repeaters, abortion has become a common method of birth control. The "control" occurs when a pregnant woman passively allows a medical professional to invade her womb with poison or tools and remove and destroy the fetus. While the physical risks of legal clinical abortion are

minimal, abortion does little for emotional, psychological, or spiritual healing. As a violent option to remedy a symptom without dealing with the root causes of the problem, abortion fails to be empowering.

The mainstream women's movement strongly promotes abortion rights while neglecting to promote the choice of motherhood as a means to empowerment. By so doing they lend support to historical patriarchal violence against women. How do abortions fit into Patriarchy's violence against women and how can the choice of motherhood offer an alternative to it?

A patriarchal world stratifies people and creates social hierarchies. Generally speaking, in the U.S. a small group of white men are at the top of the social hierarchy and hold much power and authority. Women and minorities are discriminated against in varying degrees and are disproportionately represented at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Although a social hierarchy is violence (i.e., as stated in chapter 6, unjust economic and political systems violate the basic humanity of poor people and can be called "structural violence") and is ultimately enforced by violence (by police, security, and penal forces), still a hierarchy depends upon the cooperation of most of the people in the hierarchy. This cooperation comes through propagation/inculturation of the hierarchy's distorted values, i.e., through people being taught to obey authority and to value and respect the system's rewards (or threatened punishments).

A social hierarchy's rewards and punishments are meant, in part, to direct people's anger and aggression against "enemies" or against people lower in the hierarchy. For example, in general, black violence against whites receives severer punishments than black-on-black violence. Also, violence by men against women is to some extent sanctioned by society - and much of it escapes any punishment. In a similar manner then, abortion is violence directed "horizontally" or "downward" in the hierarchy. Just as depression is anger turned inwards, so abortion is violence turned inwards against oneself and the fetus. Abortion directs a woman's energy and aggression inwards, severing the relationship between a woman and her fetus. And the more that women direct their aggression inwards the more they remain in their oppressive place in the social hierarchy.

So - how can choosing to carry the fetus to term and become a mother be an empowering alternative to abortion? The pain of a woman's "travail" in childbirth is a common biblical metaphor. It may

either describe unmitigated suffering (Ps. 48:6; Jer. 6:24; 1 Thess. 5:3) or it may describe redemptive suffering which results in blessing and fruitfulness. (Is. 42:14; Mic. 4-5:4; Jn. 16:21; Gal. 4:19) Redemptive suffering is connected with making life-affirming choices which will lead to the growth of God's commonwealth on earth.

"Shall I open the womb and not deliver? says (Yahweh); shall I, the one who delivers, shut the womb? says your God. Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her -- that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast; that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom. For thus says (Yahweh): I will extend prosperity to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you." (Is. 66:9-13 NRSV)

Motherhood need not occur in the service of Patriarchy. Motherhood, with all its hardships, can be a positive, life-affirming choice - especially when communities are organized to share the hardships and the joys. Why then has the mainstream women's movement focused so much more effort into organizing around abortion rights? Could it be that for affluent women in the movement, it is much easier to promote ideology, support legislative agendas, and develop programs treating individual women with quick-fixes than it is to form community and enter into deeper solidarity with poor people?

Abortion rights are sometimes defended in terms of preventing unwanted and neglected children, helping poor people, and preventing more children from growing up in poverty. Such an argument in favor of abortion rights, however, tends to legitimize social injustices and ineffectually channel efforts for change. How so? The above argument for abortion rights reflects a cynical, paternalistic, and racist view. The view is cynical because it reflects a status quo perspective, affirms despair, and denies hope for a dynamic and changing future. In the Bible, God has clearly identified herself with the alien, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the oppressed - with those victimized and cut-off from patriarchal societies. To judge *a priori* before a birth that any particular child will grow up unwanted or abused and never find meaning in life is to presumptuously deny the possibilities and power of God's grace to redeem the forsaken. Such cynicism is anti-gospel. The view is paternalistic and hypocritical because it reflects a value judgement denigrating the value of poor children while implicitly upholding the criterion of wealth (often a product of historical injustice) for determining a parent's fitness for

raising children. Why is the argument never made to justify abortion in order to prevent children from being corrupted and entrapped by affluence? To a poor woman of color who is denied equal access to education, jobs, housing, and health care, gaining access to an abortion clinic must hardly seem like a cherished right.

"In other words, those women who lack adequate food, clothing, shelter, education, daycare, jobs, and other opportunities taken for granted by most Americans, are to be offered abortions precisely because these needs remain unmet."¹³ (Elizabeth Moore)

It becomes clear why few women of color participate in mainstream women's organizations which promote and defend abortion rights. As another method of population control for oppressed people, abortion is no substitute for justice. By it middle- and upper-class women offer to poor women another paternalistic service or program (abortion services) rather than taking a holistic, committed stand for justice.

"A radical organizer, herself from a poor background...said of legalized abortion: 'Of all the rights that poor people have demanded...this is the right that we've never asked for but we got.'"¹⁴

The abortion rights movement offers false hope to women and especially to poor women. It encourages hope in patriarchal medical advances and in patriarchal government. Hope is placed in the development of "safe and effective" means of contraception.¹⁵ But history has shown that all contraceptive devices entail risks and side effects and that women have long been guinea pigs for medical experimentation. Hope in new technology promotes consumerism and support for the status quo while diverting attention from unjust social structures. The abortion rights movement also places hope in politicians and laws as a means of securing justice.

"Roe vs. Wade has won another victory for patriarchy: it has kept women focused upon and deeply emotionally invested in the system. Since the moment the decision was handed down, men have forced feminists in dozens of states to spend among them millions of hours trying desperately not to lose it piece by piece....The Supreme Court will continue, now that the decision has accomplished its purposes, to gut Roe vs. Wade, perhaps retaining as much as is necessary to keep feminists still trusting the system, still under control."¹⁶

(Sonia Johnson)

While the plight of poor people worsens, efforts are directed towards

lobbying and organizing to preserve laws for abortion rights. Is it not yet clear that real vision and hope for the future must lie elsewhere? The mainstream women's movement, with its promotion of abortion rights, is deeply invested in patriarchal society. Are there not more fruitful paths for women's liberation?

Anti-abortion movement

Like the women's movement, the pro-life or anti-abortion movement cannot be considered a unified whole, but rather has much diversity within it. The Roman Catholic hierarchy has long opposed abortion. Many fundamentalists, evangelicals, and conservative politicians have lifted up abortion as a central moral and political issue. A small portion of the political Left opposes abortion. And a few extremists continue to threaten, vandalize, or bomb abortion clinics. While the movement's composition and tactics have some variance, it is unified around the goals of overturning the Supreme Court's Roe vs. Wade decision and greatly reducing the number of abortions. The movement, which has adopted the "pro-life" title, as a whole does not challenge but rather strengthens Patriarchy. How has the anti-abortion movement failed to be life-affirming?

The anti-abortion movement's development and use of certain principles reflects its patriarchal dualistic thinking. The movement proclaims the principle of the sanctity of life and that life begins at conception. Furthermore, every life represents a unique individual, as every cell of a fetus has a unique genetic code, and every individual is entitled to rights - foremost being the right to life. These principles have been developed to separate and establish the rights of the unborn apart from pregnant women's rights. It is this fundamental separation of rights and how they are applied that exposes the fallacy of the movement's moral positions. The following logical excursions, based on the above principles, examine some common charges put forward by the movement.

The movement often proclaims that abortion is murder, abortion kills babies. Also, two decades of legalized abortions and over 25 million abortions are compared to the horrors of the Nazi holocaust, to the worst carnages of history. Even women impregnated through rape or incest-rape who have abortions may be viewed as guilty of murder since life begins at conception and the embryo is completely innocent of any wrongdoing. This represents a typical patriarchal reversal of

truth - morally censuring and stigmatizing the rape victim while, implicitly, redeeming the behavior of the rapist. Logically, one could infer that when pregnancy results, rape has considerable redeeming value since an "ultimate good" - the creation of a human being (represented by the fertilized egg) - has resulted. Forcing an impregnated rape victim to carry her pregnancy to term would be to act in consort with the rapist. Forced pregnancy devalues a woman to being simply a childbearing machine - a receptacle for the "all-important" fetus. This supports the historical patriarchal view that women's highest calling is childbearing. Forced pregnancy would greatly add to the rape survivor's physical and psychological stress, likely cause a loss in schooling or work, and adversely affect some relationships, while not addressing the responsibility for raising the child. In cases of rape-impregnation, to call abortion murder would be to condemn the survivor for choosing to reassert some control over her body and life by expelling part of that which cruelly entered and violated her. Yet this is the logical extension of principles that the anti-abortion movement holds to be absolute.

The movement's comparisons of abortion with the Nazi holocaust accomplish another patriarchal reversal of truth. This charge would stigmatize millions of women as the worst kind of murderers when women are the historical victims of male violence. Despite varying amounts of power and privilege, women as a whole represent an oppressed class. For the most part, abortion, as inward-directed violence, is a response to women's oppressive conditions. Women who have abortions are not a threat to others in society. This is radically different from male murderers who terrorize neighborhoods or who systematically prepare for and wage war or who, during WWII, systematically slaughtered a particular citizen population. Comparisons with the Nazi holocaust demean the WWII carnage endured by the Jews (and others), hypocritically judge women, and absolve Patriarchy of responsibility.

Criminalization of abortion would place women in the spotlight for the "crime," while men would remain invisible, irresponsible, or at least one step removed. Logically, if abortion is murder, then it would carry the same penalties as any other premeditated murder - otherwise the movement would be implicitly devaluing the life of the unborn - which they hold as equal to the life of any person. Also, according to standard law, a person (the pregnant woman) hiring another (the doctor) to kill (abort the fetus) would be equally guilty of murder. Obviously, many more women's prisons would be needed.

Women using modern contraceptives which are abortifacients, including some birth control pills and intrauterine devices which work by blocking the development of a fertilized egg, could be investigated for suspicion of murder. Logic would also dictate the necessity of homicide investigations into all abortions - including the 20% or more of pregnancies that end in natural miscarriages. This is not entirely theoretical. One of Adolf Hitler's first actions was to close contraception clinics, ban abortions, and subject to questioning women who had miscarriages.¹⁷ Why hasn't the anti-abortion movement raised as a moral issue the "carnage" of miscarriages and stillbirths - and advocated for more research to prevent them? Don't their numbers dwarf the Nazi holocaust and the number of induced abortions? Is it because nature or God is responsible - and not women? Another question: Is slicing an acorn the same as cutting down an oak tree? In nature, an acorn is not comparable to an oak tree - for many seeds fall to the ground, some begin germination, but few end up as trees. Is it not similar with fertilized eggs?

The anti-abortion movement has heralded new technology which has lowered the age of viability for the fetus apart from the mother - now stalled at around 23 weeks. But new technology has also resulted in in-vitro fertilization (IVF). At IVF clinics fertilized eggs - "babies" or "children" to anti-abortionists - are kept in freezers waiting to be implanted in anxious middle- and upper-class women. Only a few of these will survive - should the rest be investigated as murders and be given proper funerals? Again this is not just theoretical. In a 1989 divorce case, Tennessee state judge W. Dale Young awarded "custody" of seven frozen fertilized eggs to the woman, calling the eggs "little children."¹⁹

The point of the above logical excursions is not to make light of a serious issue - for the charges made against women are insidious, the emotional and psychological damage great. Rather, the point is to reveal the logical and oppressive ramifications of principles that are held to be absolute.

The anti-abortion movement sometimes compares itself to the '60s black civil rights movement, employing arguments of discrimination against the unborn.

"(Some pro-choicers claim) that abortion is only a feminist issue. Nonsense. Abortion is no more a feminist issue than slavery was a slaveholder's issue. The fate of the unborn is the responsibility of all mankind and, like slavery, can only be resolved by the concern of

many. Jesse Jackson, in the January 1977 issue of National Right to Life News clarified the distinction: 'There are those who argue that the right to privacy is of a higher order than the right of life...that was the premise of slavery. You could not protest the existence or treatment of slaves on the plantation because that was private and outside your right to be concerned...The Constitution called us three-fifths human and the whites further dehumanized us by calling us 'niggers.' It was part of the dehumanizing process.' Today, the Supreme Court refers to the unborn as 'not viable.' And, certain feminists argue, as many slaveholders did, that it is not anybody's business but their own."¹⁹ (Hans Jacobse)

Abortion is indeed a societal problem and raising the issue of discrimination should lead the movement to a deeper social and economic analysis. Racism has been a potent anti-family force, particularly with respect to African-Americans. The slave trade uprooted blacks from their homeland, tore apart black families, and subjected Afro-Americans to many humiliations. "Emancipation" from slavery was followed by economic exploitation, illiteracy, discriminatory black codes, and organized violence (e.g., the KKK). Today, very high unemployment rates for young black men and limited job opportunities discourage family commitments. The modern welfare system hands out paltry sums as a sort of pacifier to protect white racist economic institutions and often discriminates against two-parent households, working against committed relationships. More than 55% of black children are now born to single mothers, with 60% of black female-headed households living in poverty.²⁰ One survey of abortions showed that the highest rate was among nonwhite women, most of whom were black.²¹ Taking all these factors into account one might assume that the movement would speak out loudly against racism and economic injustice, lending financial, political, and moral support to poor black women who choose single motherhood instead of abortion. Instead, the predominantly white anti-abortion movement, much of which is opposed to sex education in public schools, seeks to impose "after-the-fact" (of conception) "moral responsibility," i.e., sacrificial motherhood, while abandoning the poor and people of color in inner-city ghettos. The movement gets to proclaim "righteous principles" and claim credit for "saving babies" while poor women and their children bear the burden of living in poverty.

Much of the anti-abortion movement has had a single-issue focus and has looked to the patriarchal state for legal solutions. Much effort has gone into supporting lawmakers and the appointment of judges, particularly to the Supreme Court, who are anti-abortion. The

Republican party, which stated in their 1988 & 1992 party platform, "The unborn child has a fundamental, individual right to life which cannot be infringed," has drawn support from the anti-abortion electoral bloc. For some political conservatives, outlawing abortion fits into their package of supporting "family values." This means, in part, a return to traditional patriarchal gender roles - particularly childbearing for a patriarch. It is reminiscent of Hitler's goal of returning women to "Kinder, Kuche, Kirche" - children, cooking, church - and "restoring the male-dominant family as the model of authoritarianism."²² Keeping mothers in the home is highly valued. This translates, however, into a lack of support for childcare, making it difficult for single mothers to get off welfare or, when working, to provide adult supervision for children. Support for women's shelters is also greatly lacking. This despite a March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation study reporting that one of every 12 pregnant women in prenatal clinics was battered, increasing the likelihood of miscarriage, low-birth-weight babies, and birth defects.²³ This disregard for women is shown again by the proposed "Human Life Amendment." This amendment has little to do with life or equality. The fact that the same political conservatives who opposed the equal rights amendment for women support granting individual rights to fetuses shows that the intent is not so much a concern for life and justice as it is an attempt to reassert traditional patriarchal control over women and childbearing. Most conservative "pro-life" lawmakers have supported cutbacks in social services for poor people, enormous military budgets, foreign wars, capital punishment, tax breaks for the wealthy, and multi-billion dollar corporate and bank bailouts. Thus the politicians elected in part by "pro-lifers" rhetorically promote the right to life from conception until birth and then, in many ways, support policies of inequality, injustice, and death.

Much effort has gone towards legal remedies at the local and state level to regulate and restrict abortion. One strategy promotes "men's rights." Before getting an abortion a woman would have to get the consent of her husband or male lover. One court case saw two men who were complete strangers to a woman try to be appointed as "guardians" of the fetus. But in a patriarchal society the issue is not a lack of men's rights but a lack of male responsibility and a failure to establish committed, just, and mutual relationships. Granting dominative power to men to prevent abortion speaks nothing of male responsibility - it just gives men power to impose their will upon women who have to bear the responsibilities of pregnancy.

Some other attempts to control pregnant women through laws include: requiring parental consent for a minor, requiring physicians to notify a parent or guardian, requiring physicians to test fetuses to show fetus inviability, requiring abortion centers to have facilities similar to hospitals, requiring women to read anti-abortion literature and sign an "informed consent" form, requiring a "waiting" period, barring use of public funds for counseling or referrals for abortion, barring usage of public facilities for abortion, and barring public funding of facilities used for abortion. One thing these attempts at controlling women through laws reveal is the pro-lifers' lack of healthy connections to, and personal relationships with, women most likely to have abortions. Might this reveal a class and racial bias?

An issue of growing concern is drug addiction. A 1988 study of babies born in 36 hospitals by the National Association for Peri-natal Research and Education found that 11% of mothers had used illegal drugs while pregnant.²⁴ An estimated 1000 babies a day are born damaged by drugs. Some states are arresting and prosecuting women with drug addictions who have given birth to "cocaine babies." Some people have suggested involuntary incarceration for pregnant addicts - but most jails and treatment centers are already overflowing. Also, imprisoning pregnant women would keep some women away from prenatal care while reinforcing incarcerated women's guilt, shame, and low self-esteem. It would only temporarily assist the fetus before placing the baby back into the environment from which the problems arose. Such a law further empowers the patriarchal state and moves towards making pregnant women wards of the state, i.e., laws may prosecute women for fetal neglect or require women to undergo counseling, diet changes, drug treatment, hospitalization, or surgery. Is it not hypocritical when laws would stigmatize or incarcerate women, who are the primary caregivers and caretakers of children, as the guilty party while not addressing the root causes of abortion in an oppressive patriarchal society?

A few anti-abortion groups have led a movement of large-scale direct actions and civil disobedience (CD) at abortion centers (sometimes referred to as abortion mills or abortuaries). Nonviolent CD for a just cause can be a powerful community consciousness-raiser as well as being personally empowering. By taking risks and placing one's body in a position consistent with one's words, one clearly demonstrates the depth of one's convictions. Personal costs in terms of fines, jail time, injuries, or job loss have historically proven necessary to effect positive social change. But CD can be a self-

righteous exercise if it isn't carried out in the right spirit - in the spirit of love and humility. To approach CD in the right spirit requires a commitment to peaceful and just "means" and not to desired "ends." While CD is necessarily confrontational, Christian demonstrators should treat all persons with dignity and respect - or else the CD will be a cloak for self-righteousness and moral imperialism.

The organization Operation Rescue, led by Randall Terry, has been at the forefront of the CD movement. But Terry's militant rhetoric, "This is a war," and, "We have to confront the enemy on the enemy's turf," lends itself to self-righteousness and to cloaking aggressive and hostile behavior behind a peaceful front.²⁵

"Operation Rescue spokespeople say they don't condone violence; theirs is a peaceful Christian movement. But in the 'training' tapes Terry distributes to his flock, he suggests it may be necessary to 'physically intervene with force' because 'that is the logical response to murder. (And) abortion is murder.'"²⁶

Women approaching abortion centers sometimes have been besieged by demonstrators who yell at the women not to "murder your babies" and who confront women with large photos of aborted fetuses meant to shock. Women have a long history of being treated as objects and verbally and physically harassing and laying a guilt trip on any woman, pregnant or not, is reprehensible behavior. It witnesses to the self-righteousness, callousness, and misogyny of the demonstrators.

How deep is the commitment of anti-abortionists to poor women and children? Don't most pro-life ministries only seek to assist pregnant mothers until birth? Isn't a strong theme of anti-abortionists the promotion of "adoption - not abortion"? Those who promote adoption as a positive choice would be advised to first give up their own children so that they then may recommend it out of personal experience. Otherwise, taking babies away from mostly poor mothers to satisfy the oftentimes ravenous desires of, often childless, middle- and upper-class couples might seem to be something other than unselfish.²⁷ There is no need for anyone, any couple, who desire to care for children, to wait or go without. Of course, it is healthy Caucasian babies that are in great demand for adoption, with waiting lists of years, while demand is less for minority infants, disabled infants, and older children. While all children need to be cared for, especially orphans and the disabled, don't most middle- and upper-class white couples prefer to adopt, "possess," name, and raise a child "of their own," while maintaining their status in society, rather than to sacrificially enter into solidarity with poor women and their

children? Who is pro-life and who is leading a selfish, privileged existence?

Christian repentance and transformation

The abortion issue must not be restricted by the dimensions of current popular debate nor be addressed as a single issue, reflecting a culture-bound, fragmented perspective. The preceding analysis has attempted to place the abortion issue into a much broader historical context. Abortions are a symptom of a patriarchal world. This world is characterized by the historical subjugation of women's labor and reproductive power to men. Women's oppression runs deep - it is rooted in the institutions of patriarchal marriage and family. Under Patriarchy, 2 main gender roles for women are: 1. childbearing for a patriarch; and 2. providing patriarchal sexual pleasure. The large number of induced abortions in the U.S. today is a symptom of our modern patriarchal capitalist society. Oppressive economic and social structures have created a supportive climate for abortions. Capitalist development has been systematically breaking down community and family relationships - and has given extra weight to gender role #2 for women. Capitalist development has uprooted people from the land, spawned a disenfranchised, mobile urban society, undervalued women's labor, popularized sex as a consumable commodity for individual satisfaction, and made child-raising a significant economic burden for single mothers or isolated nuclear families. The cultural ethos emphasizes sexual engagements without long-term commitment and responsibility. Abortion represents an economical quick fix to the unexpected complication of pregnancy - and has become a common form of birth control.

The abortion debate has been dominated by two groups - neither of which offers a just and liberating solution to women's oppression and widespread abortions. Pro-choicers promote abortion as a positive choice even though abortion is violence turned inwards - another form and a continuation of historical patriarchal violence against women. The pro-choice rationales also lend support to women's gender role #2 and in many ways support a patriarchal society. Anti-abortion efforts are basically rooted in white middle-class values which support patriarchal state, family, and religious traditions. They lend support to women's gender role #1. They also put the onus for change on individual pregnant women while, in large part, absolving patriarchal society from responsibility for women's

conditions. Thus the two popular sides to the abortion issue don't offer any real hope. How then can Christians respond to the issue?

"We are under obedience to nurture life as God's greatest gift to us. If we wish - as I do more and more - to take a public stand on this issue, then I think the route of legislation and constitutional amendments is the way of death. It is not for us to judge women who feel compelled to choose abortion. I would propose instead that first we put our own house in order."²⁸ (Shelley Douglass)

Many churches have tried to shed light on social problems while not allowing the light of Jesus to first shine through them. Concerning the issue of abortion there is a need for Christians to take a stand and to speak the truth - but most important is the need for Christians to live the truth, i.e., the need for an incarnational base community response. Before offering moral pronouncements to society, the church itself stands in need of repentance and transformation.

Moral pronouncements condemning abortion made from churches that lack discipleship communities exude hypocrisy. One illustration of a fragmented, hypocritical position is the Roman Catholic hierarchy's condemnation of all abortions while it has historically supported war.

"The traditional Christian moral consciousness has been fixated upon the problems of reproductive activity in a manner totally disproportionate to its feeble political concern. This was summed up several years ago in Archbishop Roberts' remark that 'if contraceptives had been dropped over Japan instead of bombs which merely killed, maimed, and shriveled up thousands alive, there would have been a squeal of outraged protest from the Vatican to the remotest Mass center in Asia.' Pertinent also is Simone de Beauvoir's remark that the church has reserved its uncompromising humanitarianism for man in the fetal condition."²⁹

(Mary Daly)

Without discipleship communities Christianity can overemphasize the conceptual aspect of religion. Misplaced idealism and moral imperialism may result. Attempts by the Roman Catholic hierarchy to discipline some of its members in the U.S. who made public "pro-choice" statements reflect the desire of religious authorities to form unity through (misguided) "doctrinal purity." Emphasis is placed on an abstract idealistic belief, e.g., the ultimate sanctity of unborn life. The perceived sinner, i.e., the woman about to abort, is viewed as separate and distinct from the "holders of truth," and idealistic

expectations are pushed onto every pregnant woman, i.e., all pregnant women should do this & this..., with coercive repercussions as the ultimate enforcer. The church hierarchy, with its dogmatic expectations, leaves little space for women to voice their concerns, their reality. Either pregnant women receive moral condemnation and religious ostracism for abortion or they affirm their predominantly male "moral masters" by conceiving and individually bearing the costs of motherhood. All the while, the self-righteous religious authorities remain separate from the actual lives and realities of their members.

The Christian church has much to repent of. The Judeo-Christian heritage is deeply patriarchal - enmeshed in the "traditions of men." Christianity has idolatrously built a patriarchal religious house which is deeply complicit in the world's violence and discrimination against women. Christians must be called to repent of: our support for all theology and traditions of male superiority and male domination over women; our complicity in historical holocausts, atrocities, and everyday institutionalized sexism and violence committed against women; our support for patriarchal traditions and institutions that use dominative power to control women's bodies and labor; and our support for economic and political institutions that divide and stratify people.

In particular, Christians need to repent of supporting the patriarchal state's control over women's bodies through criminalizing, penalizing, or controlling women during pregnancy. The patriarchal legal system, based on dominative power, is adversarial. It relies on coercion and force to control and regulate opposing parties but is unable to bring reconciliation based on just relationships. This inherent defect is magnified in the abortion issue where pro-choicers and pro-lifers have set women and their fetuses against each other. For the courts to adjudicate and define individual rights serves only to legitimize the courts and absolve the larger patriarchal society of responsibility. Pertinent here is Paul's admonition to the community at Corinth,

"If then you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who are least esteemed by the church?" (1 Cor. 6:4)

Christians must not be fooled into reformist practices which offer the illusion of justice and quick solutions. No doubt many middle- and upper-class white people prefer to support legislative, police, and court actions, government bureaucracy, and paternalistic handouts than to sacrificially enter into God's commonwealth on earth.³⁰ But, as James wrote,

"Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?"

Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes (himself/herself) an enemy of God." (Jas. 4:4)

Are Christians on the side of Patriarchy or on the side of God? Those who promote a law solution are not witnessing to Jesus but are witnesses for the state, for the anti-kingdom.

God's house/commonwealth is not the same as patriarchal government. Neither is God's house the same as patriarchal churches. Christian reformist efforts toward new legislation or new church resolutions divert attention from the immediate call to follow Jesus. The paramount problem facing Christians today is not the genocidal evil of the world, but rather Christians' own lack of faith and obedience to Jesus. It is necessary to move beyond the limitations of traditional (or modern) patriarchal churches and enter fully into God's commonwealth. So - how does God's house/commonwealth present a new and powerful Way of life for women, their offspring, and for men?

Jesus, born apart from a male "seed" and father, initiates a radical break from patriarchal lineage and represents the cornerstone for God's new house. Inevitably God's commonwealth tears the fabric of traditional patriarchal families. The tear occurs immediately through the ritual of adult baptism - the public ritual marking entry into Jesus' new covenant, into God's commonwealth, and into a discipleship community. As part of this ritual believers may be christened with new Spirit-inspired names - at the same time dropping their patriarchal surnames. This public and powerful commitment to Jesus marks the entry into a new family of Christian sisters and brothers that is based on equality rather than male superiority.

God's commonwealth offers women a life very different from that in a patriarchal society. The replacement of patriarchal lineage and naming traditions can remove a conscious or subconscious basis for female inferiority and low self-esteem. Communal sharing of all things can break women's economic dependence upon the welfare state, corporations, and husbands. "Economic security" rests instead on God, the whole community, and the land. Marriage in God's commonwealth is based on equality and mutuality; the woman's identity is not submerged in the husband. Furthermore, discipleship communities practice nonviolence and will not tolerate verbal or physical abuse by husbands. Pregnant women can benefit from alternative health care in discipleship communities which may include prenatal care, childbirth classes, support for midwives, and home

births. Childcare is the equal responsibility of husband and wife - with the community also contributing. For single mothers the community's corporate responsibility for childcare can be particularly beneficial. Children have a central place (i.e., highly-valued) in a community's "internal" life. Jesus says,

"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 19:14)

Unlike patriarchal society which often favors boys or views children as economic burdens, social burdens, or as potential threats, in God's commonwealth all children are loved and celebrated as precious gifts. Shared childcare frees up time for mothers to develop other skills. Through communal work enterprises women may participate equally in workplace decisions and be freed from working under patriarchal bosses. The absence of sex discrimination allows women to explore and develop more of their long-repressed creative talents.

To further their discipleship small women's groups can be organized. Small groups can strengthen intimacy - through listening, encouragement, prayer, and healthy affection - and strengthen accountability to one another - through confession, feedback, confrontation, and, when necessary, disciplinary measures. In their groups women can cultivate a deeper passion for justice for all people and for seeking first God's commonwealth on earth. From personal experience women can name how Patriarchy has degraded and violated women. Support can be given women who have been harassed, put down, beaten, raped, or who have given a baby away for adoption, or had a miscarriage or an induced abortion. Women can be encouraged to turn away from all patriarchal trappings including cosmetics, "men-pleasing" behavior, and self-deprecating relationships with men.³¹ The spread of God's commonwealth on earth depends upon the emergence of a powerful female identity rooted in self-love, self-honor, self-knowledge, self-discipline, and in God's word and Spirit.

God's commonwealth offers men a new vision for "manhood." Unlike patriarchal society which views men as potential threats and instruments of violence, Jesus organizes men as poor, nonviolent servants. Not meant to be "heads" of households or to take pride in power and authority over others men are instead transformed into disciplined channels for God's word and Spirit. Courage and bravery come not through heroic displays of violence but through love for all people, a passion for justice on earth, and a fearless bearing of persecution. Small men's groups can further discipleship and

encourage a sexuality based on self-control and service. Based on personal experience men can express disgust, shame, and outrage at how patriarchal male sexuality has degraded men (as well as women). Marks of patriarchal manhood - promiscuity and aggression - must be rooted out.

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."(Rom. 12:1-2)

Celibacy, as one means to fruitfully serve others, needs to be upheld as a worthy option. And sexual intercourse needs to be redeemed from religious ideas of being inherently dirty or sinful and from secular ideas of being simply a means for selfish recreational pleasure - to being experienced as a holy act of love between two deeply-committed partners.

"The availability of adequate contraception is both necessary and illusory: illusory because it may not always work, and whether it works or not, may seem to remove all personal responsibility from an act of love whose transforming depth of unity - two in one flesh - is consistent only with the mutual intention of living a life together. If as men or women we are unwilling to take responsibility in love to care for the full life of our lover (and for a possible new life), then the incredible gift of making love is making death - an act whose uncaring contradiction kills spiritually and physically. To contraception as a genuine social priority should be added the need for a radical awakening, especially in men, to chastity as an alternative to the uncaring sexuality which is a psychic, spiritual death, and results in abortion."³² (Jim Douglass)

Men can be encouraged from their youth to enter into a lifelong covenant relationship with a woman before intercourse. Indeed, men must practice viewing women with "new eyes and a new mind," rejecting the objectification and fetishization of women as sex-objects. Fawning over and giving special privileges to a woman based simply on her "looks" must also be rejected.

"(Yahweh) does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but (Yahweh) looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7 NRSV)

"My brethren, show no partiality....But if you show partiality, you commit sin." (Jas. 2:1,9)

Finally, men need to be encouraged to make a much deeper commitment to raising children. Childcare must not be viewed simply as a duty or as an adjunct to "real work" - but must be integrated, as a healthy and vital practice, into a holistic lifestyle.

After Christians put their own house in order they will be able, with integrity, to speak God's prophetic word to a sinful, patriarchal world. Outreach ministries - evangelization, prophetic proclamations and actions, and hospitality - form the bridge between discipleship communities and the world. Outreach ministries must be noncoercive, nonpaternalistic. While identifying sinfulness and taking a firm stand for justice, individuals must not be judged or condemned. Jesus says, "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged....You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your (brother's or sister's) eye." (Mt. 7:1-2,5)

While declaring that abortion is violence, abortion is sinful, Christian communities must also recognize that widespread abortions are a symptom of a great political, economic, and social sickness which Christianity shares complicity in. Decisions for abortions, much like divorce, reflect the brokenness of relationships that are the fruit of Patriarchy. Therefore, in a hospitality ministry, all pregnant women must be treated with great respect regardless of any woman's predilection for abortion.

Women, through a sacred trust from God, have been given the life-giving gift to conceive and bear children. Until birth the mother and her fetus are unified; while each is unique, they are still one. They are united and bound together by God.

"O (Yahweh), you have searched me and known me....Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?....For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb....My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." (Ps. 139:1,7,13,15-16 NRSV)

God identifies with the woman and her fetus, and the fetus' first experience of God is through the woman.

"...the Hebrew word *racham*, which has often been translated as mercy, love, or compassion, can also be translated as 'womb-love.' It is a love that surrounds, protects, nourishes, prepares, and tenderly carries us, a love that gives of the very life of the creator. The psalmist declares, 'Gracious is Yahweh and righteous; our God is womb-love.' (Ps. 116:5)"³³ (Judith Malionek)

All attempts to enter into relationship with the unborn which circumvent just relationship with a pregnant woman are a violation of God's handiwork. A just relationship with a pregnant woman is the

only conduit for properly relating to her fetus. Everything else is sinful. Christians who seek to impose their will, their moral standards upon others, bear witness to the darkness that is within them and not to the light of Christ. A noncoercive hospitality ministry to pregnant women must allow space and grace for women to arrive at their own moral conclusions and decisions concerning pregnancy. Pregnant women need to be encouraged to accept their condition, take responsibility for their actions, and bear and keep their offspring through love and acceptance and not through self-righteous moral judgements.

In a similar way, single and immature men should not face severe social pressures to fit into someone else's idealistic expectations of them. Many men are not prepared to take on the full responsibilities of parenthood each and every time they engage in heterosexual intercourse. Have not "shotgun weddings" proven to be ultimately unhealthy and destructive? Those who don't know Jesus can't be expected to reflect the light of Christ. Outreach ministries are meant to draw people to the light - to Jesus. Outreach ministries provide witness to the light and invite people to accept Jesus and enter into God's commonwealth on earth.

Patriarchy always has been, is now, and until its demise will be - the darkness. Jesus and his disciples in new covenant communities are the light. Only through witnessing to the unifying, healing, and peaceful power of Christ, and not by using the divisive, violent power of the state, can meaningful social change occur, i.e., the spread of God's commonwealth on earth. Only through incarnational love in discipleship communities, with ministries with poor people, can reconciliation be forged between "pro-lifers" and "pro-choicers." Only by providing a powerful alternative Way of life can true witness be given to the sovereignty of God, the holiness of the human body, the sanctity of all life, and the human responsibility to humbly care for the environment and wildlife, nurturing and revering all of God's creation.

Footnotes

1. "Fewer pregnancies ending in abortions, CDC statistics show," Associated Press byline, Star Tribune, 12-18-92, p. 7A. The Centers for Disease Control reported 1.43 million legal abortions for 1990. Also, there were 344 abortions for every 1000 live births in 1990; the abortion rate was 24 per 1000 women of childbearing age.
2. Patriarchy: a world paradigm, in which the basic separation between male and female, with men holding greater power than women, is a primary and determining characteristic of most institutions and relationships. This primary separation between male and female has led to other basic separations: the separation of people from nature, with humankind exploiting the environment; the separation of mind from body, with "rational, logical thought" dominating and repressing the body's natural instincts and feelings; and the separation of body-world from God-spirit, with a distant, transcendent male god "repressing" an immanent, connected-to-all-things God. Biblically, Patriarchy begins immediately after the exile from the garden of Eden.
3. "U.S. records its lowest infant mortality rate ever," Associated Press byline, Star Tribune, 2-7-92, p. 7A. The report was from the Centers for Disease Control.
4. "FINRRAGE," by Gena Corea, Jalna Hanmer, Renate D. Klein, Janice G. Raymond, & Robyn Rowland, woman of power, Issue Fourteen, Summer, 1989, p. 33.
5. "Caesarean-section births needn't be repeated, doctors say," Star Tribune, 10-27-88, p. 1A. See also Star Tribune, 3-21-89, p. 8E.
6. "Men's group seeks to change attitudes that foster battering," by Karin Winegar, Star Tribune, 1-12-89, p. 1E.
7. The close relationship between prostitution and rape is indicated in a study of adolescent female prostitutes in Minnesota which found that 75% had been victims of incest-rape. Reported in Ms., November 1981, "Incest: A Rational Look at the Oldest Taboo," by Elizabeth Janeway, p. 78.
8. Source: "Children - A Big Profit Item for the Smut Producers," by

John Hurst, Los Angeles Times, 5-26-77. Cited in Take Back the Night, Laura Lederer, ed., William Morrow and Co., Inc., New York, 1980, p. 78.

9. Richard Edwards, Michael Reich, and Thomas Weisskopf, The Capitalist System, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1978, p. 337.
10. "Half of high schoolers - and 70% of seniors - say they've had sex," AP byline, Star Tribune, 1-4-92. The CDC survey is based on 1990 data gathered from all 50 states, Wash. D.C., Puerto Rico, & the Virgin Islands, and has a sampling error of + or - 3%.
11. The ruling came too late for Norma McCorvey who ended up having the baby and giving it up for adoption.
12. A small number of women perform safe, early-term (up to 8 weeks), at-home abortions through "menstrual extraction." While health care practiced apart from the medical establishment can be empowering, some of the arguments used here can also be applied to these abortions.
13. "A Matter of Welfare," by Elizabeth Moore, Sojourners reprint, November 1980, p. 10.
14. "Will Somebody Please Be Consistent," by Mary Meehan, Sojourners reprint, November 1980, p. 7.
15. New and improved contraceptives may lessen the dimensions of the problem of widespread abortions but they don't affect the root causes of abortion. Norplant (progestin) capsules are gaining adherents as an effective, long-lasting (up to 5 years) contraceptive. But they have also drawn the attention of some legislators and judges who have suggested coercive methods for increasing its usage among a targeted group of women (e.g., women on welfare, women convicts, women with AIDS). The French drug RU486 (mifepristone) is being touted as a highly effective morning-after pill and as an early-term abortion pill. As an alternative to abortion surgery the drug promises to be much cheaper, more convenient, and to greatly increase privacy. Scientists in India reported an effective birth-control shot effective for one year (the main element being beta-hCG which uses a woman's immune system to produce antibodies to hCG). Research can identify short-term side-effects of new drugs but

long-term effects may only be known after many years of usage by many women.

16. Sonia Johnson, Going Out of Our Minds: The Metaphysics of Liberation, The Crossing Press, Freedom, CA, 1987, p. 333.
17. "The Nazi Connection: Authoritarianism Begins at Home," by Gloria Steinem, Ms., November 1980, p. 14.
18. On appeal, the Tennessee state Court of Appeals awarded "joint custody" of the fertilized eggs to the man and woman. Appealed again, in 1992, the state Supreme Court sided with the man, ruling the man's privacy rights would be violated if he were forced to become a father.
19. "Humanness is the issue," by Hans Jacobse, Minnesota Daily, 3-11-80, p. 5.
20. "Poor and Getting Poorer," by Vicki Kemper, Sojourners, March 1986, p. 18.
21. "Nonwhite women most likely to have abortions, study shows," NY Times byline, survey by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, Star Tribune, 10-26-88. For one year, for nonwhite women between the ages of 15 to 44, the rate was 5.3 per 100, while the national average was around 3 per 100.
22. Steinem, p. 14.
23. "March of Dimes says 1 in 12 women beaten by male partner while pregnant," AP byline, Star Tribune, 4-15-89. The study also reported another 15% of pregnant women being battered before pregnancy.
24. "Treat, don't jail, pregnant addicts," by Ellen Goodman, Boston Globe byline, Star Tribune, 8-18-89.
25. "Abortion foes demonstrate in 27 cities" & "A crusade turns militant," by Carol Byrne, Star Tribune, 10-30-88 & 12-12-88.
26. "Where Did Randy Go Wrong?," by Susan Faludi, Mother Jones, November 1989, p. 26.

27. Naturally, the practice of "surrogate motherhood," the selling of babies, is to be condemned. Like prostitution, this practice arises because of the demands of the affluent and their willingness to use money, regardless of human degradation, to get what they want.
28. "Without Judgment," by Shelley Douglass, Sojourners reprint, November 1980, p. 11.
29. "After the Death of God the Father: Women's Liberation and the Transformation of Christian Consciousness," by Mary Daly, Womanspirit Rising, Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow, ed., Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1979, p. 61. Since writing this, Mary Daly has repudiated the Christian religion.
30. While most people of all classes and color prefer "benevolent" government to personal, sacrificial commitment, it is affluent whites who benefit most from the illusions of a utopian popular democratic government.
31. Patriarchal beauty standards are insidious in generating self-hatred. Artificial prettiness implicitly devalues the natural beauty of the body. Efforts to "look pretty" are efforts to fit into a patriarchal gender role based on false images. They support the objectification of the female body, bring alienation from one's own body, and work against self-acceptance, self-love, self-esteem. "Natural beauty" is: being created in the image of God - it changes with age but never disappears.
32. "Patriarchy and the Pentagon Make Abortion Inevitable," by Jim Douglass, Sojourners reprint, November 1980, p. 8.
33. Letter by Judith Malioneck, Sojourners, February 1989, p. 40.

Let's not be sentimental

Let's not
be sentimental
Patriarchy must end -
and the sooner
the better
That's right -
and not just war
rape
torture
imprisonment
exploitation
pornography
prostitution
abortion
omnipresent fear -
but also
patriarchal marriage traditions
- lineages
- inheritances
- beauty contests
- awards
- patronage
everything patriarchal
The discipline of
the new woman
and the new man
sheds no tears
for the warped traditions
of ages past
The hand put to the plow
brooks no looking back
nor does the heart sorrow
for little pleasures (old habits) denied

The labor and new life
itself are
gifts
to be rejoiced in
Life
in God's presence
Joy in
the fullness of God
Fearless courage
to tread a new path
disdaining
all dangers -
with eyes set firmly
on the prize

CHAPTER 8

Homosexuality: Unmasking the Purity System

Another very divisive issue among Christians concerns the morality of homosexual orientation and practice. The issue is of great importance. It has great bearing for putting the "Christian house" in order. The issue of homosexuality really is just an extension of the more basic issue of sexuality. And the issue of sexuality goes to the core of our being and affects all our relationships. To be in error concerning matters of sexuality opens up cracks and raises roadblocks within God's house which greatly impede the spread of God's commonwealth on earth. Developing healthy attitudes and practices concerning sexuality is critical for a Christian revival and for spreading God's commonwealth. How can there be wholeness, healing, freedom, unity, etc., without a healthy sexuality? Outward liberating practices stem from internal strength. Without a secure sexual identity will there not be divisions within a person and throughout a community? Are not communities more likely to be torn apart from unhealthy internal relationships than from external persecution? All Christians must be called to incarnate a healthy, disciplined, and liberating sexuality which reflects a wholeness in Christ.

An in-depth biblical analysis of sexuality can provide a solid foundation and context for reading the biblical passages that relate to homosexuality. This analysis, going beyond what was presented in chapter 7, can further broaden our vision of God's commonwealth. It can provide the insights to examine (briefly) Christianity's past and present, reveal what Christianity needs to repent of, and call Christians to incarnate the new vision in discipleship communities.

Biblical sexuality

This section employs the analytical tool introduced in chapter 2 -

using the gift and purity systems. Let us briefly review the two systems. The gift or debt system encourages giving freely to others to incur blessing and seeks to restrict the "violence of human aggression" which incurs curse. The purity or pollution system delineates and maintains boundaries "to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean." (Lev. 10:10) Then the purity system promotes purity codes and sacrificial rituals to incur blessing and seeks to restrict the "violence of contagion" which incurs curse. While the gift system views the interplay of good and evil only in terms of internal thoughts and external actions, the purity system often ascribes good or evil based on innate characteristics which are associated with purity (e.g., a priestly blood-line) or pollution (e.g., blemishes, deformities). These two systems overlap in much of the Bible but when sorted out they can be seen to be in conflict with each other. This conflict occurs as the purity system supports a rigid, hierarchical social order while the gift system supports movements for social equality. So - how do these two systems, which are fundamentally in conflict with each other, inform our understanding of sexuality?

God's will is to spread and establish God's family/house/commonwealth on earth. But the purity system seeks to build up the "houses" of men - to build up a patriarch's "house." And from chapter 7 we know that God's house is far different from the houses of men. So - what are some of the specific ways the purity system works against the building up of God's house?

Before looking at sexual deviations, let us examine how the gift and purity systems view sexuality in general and in a covenant relationship.

According to the gift system all of creation, including man and woman, "is very good." (Gen. 1:31) All of creation stems and flows from God and is essentially good. Thus, according to the gift system, the human body is "good": "and the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." (Gen. 2:25) It is only sinful human behavior that distorts this essential goodness. The purity system, however, has a different perspective. According to the purity system rigid barriers exist between a holy God and a sinful humanity. God's "holiness" is considered dangerous and unrestricted contact with God can cause death. (Ex. 19; Deut. 5:25; Num. 4:20) Humanity must labor to become relatively more pure but can never achieve complete purity. Thus the purity system views humanity as essentially polluted.

Furthermore, the purity system delineates gradations of holiness or pollution - and this also relates to parts of the body. For example, the holier parts of animals being sacrificed were their blood, fat, kidneys, and the "appendage of the liver," while their more polluted parts were their entrails, legs, and dung. (Lev. 4:8-12) In humans the head and right hand are holier parts - while the body's genitals are the "shameful parts." In the purity system nakedness has a connotation of being shameful. (Gen. 3:10, 9:22-27; Ex. 20:26) The Hebrew word, *ervah*, translated by the RSV as "nakedness" is defined as "nakedness, shame, unclean(-ness)."¹ This shows the close correlation between nakedness and "impurity." Thus, not only does the purity system view humanity as essentially polluted but it also views the genitals, apart from any human behavior, as a relatively more polluted part of the body.

The gift system expresses the blessing of a heterosexual marriage covenant as a man giving himself to his wife so that the two become "one flesh":

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one.' This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church."

(Eph. 5:31-32; cf. Gen. 2:24)

In a patriarchal society this description of matrimony, of a man breaking from his father's (and mother's) "house," can only reaffirm the equality of men and women and the mutuality of a covenant relationship. Paul's statement (above) not only affirms the essential goodness of this covenant marriage union but also compares it to the unity between Christ and all faithful and obedient people. The unity between husband and wife, of which sexual intercourse is an integral part, is compared to Christ and the church. Thus sexual intercourse in a just marriage covenant is viewed as essentially good. Paul further states that his analogy "is a great mystery." But to whom is this such a great mystery? It is indeed an unfathomable mystery and impossibility to those who uphold the purity system. While the gift system proclaims intimacy and reconciliation between God and humanity, the purity system sees rigidly unchangeable barriers between God and humanity. Thus, in the purity system unity ("one flesh") between God (through Christ) and all the faithful is impossible.

Besides not understanding how God is incarnated in Christ and in all people of faith, the purity system has greatly distorted the mutuality of the marriage covenant. In the marriage relationship the gift system affirms mutuality and sexual intercourse (1 Cor. 7:3-5) and recognizes

children as a blessing and a gift. (Gen. 1:28; Deut. 28:4) But the purity system holds that women are inferior to men. Thus instead of a man and a woman mutually giving themselves to each other, marriage has been fathers giving their daughters to men as subordinate wives. The wife joins the patriarchal "house" and lineage of her husband and, in ancient Patriarchy, a wife was the property of her husband. This grave distortion of the gift system and the marriage covenant was so established in the ancient world that it was reflected, in part, in the 10th commandment which assumes male dominance and male ownership:

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's." (Ex. 20:17)

The purity system also views sexual intercourse within the marriage covenant as something that is "dirty." From chapter 2 we recall that according to the purity system all bodily emissions are unclean, often requiring periods of purification. Emissions from menstruation, sexual intercourse, and childbirth result in "uncleanness." (Lev. 12, 15) Thus sexual intercourse always results in ritual uncleanness - distancing "sinful" humanity from the holy God. The "pollution" of sexual intercourse necessarily is related to an understanding of good and evil - and necessitates ritual cleansing - or punishment. The "double" pollution of heterosexual intercourse with a menstruating woman shows the gravity of the "pollution":

"If a man lies with a woman having her sickness, and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood; both of them shall be cut off from among their people." (Lev. 20:18)

While childbirth renders a woman "unclean" (for either 40 or 80 days depending on the sex of the baby), the purity system affirms that children, particularly males, are a blessing from God. (Ps. 127:3-4) In fact, because the purity system emphasizes blood relationships and patriarchal genealogies a premium value is placed on childbearing. The emphasis on blood descendants puts great social pressure on all men to marry and have children. The gender role of childbearing for a patriarch supports a production-oriented sexuality for women and results in a great social stigma and moral judgement on women who are childless or sonless. (See chapter 7.)

Thus significant differences between the gift and purity systems are apparent. The gift system upholds the goodness of a just and mutual

marriage covenant and of sexual intercourse in marriage. But the purity system supports an unequal marriage covenant, views sexual intercourse in marriage as a source of ritual impurity, and confers a sense of shame on a marriage (and sexual relations in a marriage) that doesn't produce children or sons.

Let us next consider sexual deviations. Both the gift and purity systems have strong prohibitions concerning promiscuity - but they have a different rationale and emphasis.

The gift system prohibits adultery (the 7th commandment, Ex. 20:14) and prohibits coveting a neighbor's spouse for oneself (the 10th commandment, Ex. 20:17). Jesus' teachings against lust (Mt. 5:28) and against divorce & remarriage (Mk. 10:11-12) strengthen the gift system's prohibitions against promiscuity. The gift system's rationale against promiscuity, beyond that of simply not harming a neighbor's marriage relationship, rests in understanding the concept of a holistic giving of two people to each other.

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Mk. 10:7-9)

Paul borrows from this concept to prohibit intercourse with prostitutes:

"Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, 'The two shall become one flesh.'" (1 Cor. 6:16)

According to the gift system, sexual intercourse, being the deepest physical union of two people, must be part of a holistic gift relationship. Just as commitment to God is to involve the whole self - heart, soul, mind, strength (Mk. 12:30) - so sexual intercourse must involve the whole self through a lifelong covenant commitment. Without this deep commitment the wholeness and goodness of the human person is violated - and what was meant to be a "gift" becomes a self-centered exchange, a demeaning one-sided "giving" of oneself, or a selfish "using" of another person.

While the gift system's prohibitions against promiscuity have a rationale based on holistic giving, fidelity, and not harming one's neighbors, the purity system's prohibitions reflect a concern for the building up of a man's "house."

Of central concern to the purity system in the building up of a man's "house" are maintaining the "purity" of women and producing "pure"

offspring, especially sons, to carry on their father's name and material inheritance. The purity of offspring depends upon a woman being a virgin until marriage and then upon the wife's fidelity to her husband. By thus limiting a woman's sexual activity to one man, the husband is assured that the woman's children are "pure": they come through his "seed" and belong to his "house." While a man could have more than one wife and not become "defiled," a great social stigma was attached to women who had sexual intercourse with anyone other than her original husband.² It was the responsibility of fathers to safeguard their daughters' virginity until they married:

"Do not profane your daughter by making her a harlot, lest the land fall into harlotry and the land become full of wickedness."

(Lev. 19:29)

A newly married man could charge his wife with not being a virgin and, unless she could prove otherwise, she was to be stoned to death. (Deut. 22:13-21) Her "crime" was stated thus:

"she has wrought folly in Israel by playing the harlot in her father's house." (Deut. 22:21)

Such promiscuity brought shame and defamation upon her father's "name" and "house." Needless to say there was no similar law against sons not being virgins when they married. A man, if he suspected his wife of adultery, could accuse her, bring her before a priest, and have her "tested" through a ritual. There were no such provisions for wives accusing husbands - and the inequality is expressed:

"The man shall be free from iniquity, but the woman shall bear her iniquity." (Num. 5:31)

Penalties against a man raping a betrothed woman were severe because the rapist "violated his neighbor's wife" (Deut. 22:24); the offense was against the rapist's male neighbor who had claims over the woman. A master who raped a "betrothed slave," however, faced only a minor penalty because of the dual male claims over the woman. (Lev. 19:20-22) Raping an unbetrothed virgin - if the man was discovered - required a financial payment to the woman's father and marriage to the woman. (Deut. 22:28-29) The requirement, in this case, of the rape victim marrying the rapist was a "humanitarian" clause because rape/sexual intercourse "polluted" the woman - making her undesirable to all other men. If she remained in her father's house she would be stigmatized as a source of shame for being "polluted," unmarried, and barren. The penalty against a man committing adultery "with the wife of another man" (Deut. 22:22) was severe - both were to be stoned to death. Only men had the authority to get a divorce. A remarried woman could never return to her former husband "after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before

the LORD." (Deut. 24:4) Thus for a remarried woman sexual intercourse with her new husband "defiled" or "polluted" her. Such terminology is not applied to men who marry more than once. A divorced woman was stigmatized and the most holy men - the priests - were forbidden to marry a "polluted" woman:

"They shall not marry a harlot or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God." (Lev. 21:7)

The "pollution" of an illegitimate sexual union was passed along to any offspring of such a union:

"No bastard shall enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD." (Deut. 23:2)

A bastard's "house" remained "polluted" forever ("even to the tenth generation") - with all descendants carrying on the "pollution" of the original sexual act. Thus the purity system attempts to build up a man's "house" by maintaining the purity of women and their offspring. It strongly prohibits promiscuity for women while for men it only emphasizes not violating another man's claims over a woman.

Besides promiscuity another example of sexual deviance is incest. The heterosexual incest prohibitions listed in Leviticus 18:6-18 are rooted in the logic of the purity system. The list is broad and covers an extended family. This list is based in part on the purity system's classifying principles of "compatibility" and "difference." For example, wearing clothing that is part wool and part linen is prohibited because they are considered "incompatible." (Lev. 19:19) Also prohibited because of incompatibility are planting a field with two kinds of seed or breeding cattle with a different kind. (Lev. 19:19) Fernando Belo explains,

"Compatible elements can be joined only if they are different. Incest is forbidden because it is a union of the same flesh."³

The extensive blanket prohibition of male heterosexual intercourse with women of the "same flesh" is a simple way of maintaining the order and purity of a man's "house." Men must look for heterosexual relationships with women from outside their own extended family in order to maintain civility, order, and purity in a patriarch's house. An important exception to the incest prohibitions, as well as the promiscuity prohibitions, is the levirate marriage custom. (Deut. 25:5-10) If a brother dies with no sons, with no male heirs to carry on the father's name and inheritance, the widow is to marry her husband's brother. Thereafter,

"the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his

brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel."
(Deut. 25:6)

If the brother refuses to marry the widow he will suffer shame and defamation of his own name:

"So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house." (Deut. 25:9)

This exception reveals how the purity system's incest and promiscuity prohibitions are subordinate to the goal of building up a man's "house" and how a contradiction in the purity system is resolved in favor of this goal.

While the Bible has no explicit prohibitions of incest rooted solely in the gift system - principles from the gift system are better suited for understanding and prohibiting such conduct. While the purity system bases its prohibitions on restricting the "violence of contagion" the gift system seeks to restrict the "violence of human aggression." Parents or other adults who engage in sexual intercourse with children can be prohibited based on the violence of sexual exploitation of children. Indeed, all child abuse needs to be prohibited. And while the Leviticus 18 list only covers acts of male heterosexual incest the gift system's prohibitions would equally prohibit acts by both sexes, whether homo- or heterosexual. Some of the forms of incest in Leviticus 18 can be prohibited based on prohibitions against adultery and promiscuity. Also, the gift system emphasizes the principle of "extension" - extending gifts, including giving oneself in marriage, to those outside of one's extended family: "a man shall leave his father and mother..." Thus the gift system provides better means for understanding and prohibiting conduct often termed "incest."

Sexual "dysfunction," while not really a form of sexual deviance, bears mentioning. Previously discussed is how being childless brings shame and dishonor to a woman because of the purity system's emphasis on childbearing and the gender role assigned to women. The purity system places shame on men for being "disfigured":

"He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD." (Deut. 23:1)

A priest with any sort of blemish or physical defect, including "crushed testicles," was relegated to the bottom of the priestly hierarchy and was forbidden to

"approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD who sanctify them."
(Lev. 21:23)

A man with defective sexual organs was stigmatized as "polluted" by

the purity system. "Proper" male genitals were also important for another reason. The primary sign in the purity system for membership in God's covenant was male circumcision of the penis. Furthermore, a man without healthy genitals could not have heirs to prolong his "name" and "house" - which was the primary sign in the purity system of God's blessing.

While the purity system often renders judgements based on appearances and emphasizes male "circumcision of the flesh," the gift system emphasizes "circumcision of the heart" - the hidden, inner conversion which then results in liberating practices. (Deut. 10:12-16, 30:6; Rom. 2:28-29) The gift system emphasizes a covenant of justice to love one's neighbors as oneself. In this covenant "barren" women and "eunuchs" are not "polluted":

"Let not the eunuch say, 'Behold I am a dry tree.' For thus says (Yahweh): 'To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which shall not be cut off.'" (Is. 56:3-5)

And likewise:

"Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says (Yahweh)...and your descendants will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities." (Is. 54:1,3)

Jesus also redeems the status of eunuchs (Mt. 19:12) and Paul upholds the single life. (1 Cor. 7:7-8,26-27) The house of God is not based on blood relationships - as Jesus was childless and God is a "heavenly father" who "adopts" the faithful as "his" own children. (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5) Thus, according to the gift system, neither physical deformities or the number of one's children incur blessing or curse. Rather, what is important is faithfulness and obedience to God's covenant.

The foundation has been laid to examine the biblical passages related to homosexuality, to sort out the purity system from the gift system, and to formulate a perspective on homosexuality solely from the gift system.

Two passages in Leviticus prohibit homosexual acts:

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22)

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them." (Lev. 20:13)

How does the purity system enter into the above prohibitions? The passages, which only speak of male homosexual acts, likely prohibit the specific act of male homosexual anal intercourse. The logic of the purity system lends gravity to the prohibition. The act of anal intercourse involves "mounting from the rear" - an imitation of animal intercourse which, in the purity system's natural hierarchical order, violates the "higher" status of and differentiation between humans and animals. Also, while sexual intercourse always involves an exchange of fluids creating uncleanness or pollution, anal intercourse involves contact with the relatively most polluted area of the body: the anus. The penalty prescribed for such an act is execution. As mentioned previously, while the gift system prohibits killing (the 6th commandment, Ex. 20:13) the purity system views killing as one of several means of purifying the social order. Thus the above prohibitions have roots in the purity system and, by themselves, are not authoritative for Christians today.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah, recorded in Genesis 18:16-19:29, has often been used by Christians to condemn homosexuality. The hero of the story is Lot who responds to the 2 visiting male angels according to the gift system. Lot gives aid to the travelers, upholding the law of hospitality to strangers. But all the men of Sodom ("to the last man" v. 4) surround Lot's house and demand "to know" (or rape) the strangers. Lot's offer to give his two virgin daughters to the mob instead of turning over the strangers, while reflecting patriarchal misogyny (i.e., the women have no voice in the matter of their imminent gang-rape), helps clarify the point of this ancient story. The primary issue is not gang-rape or the imagined "homosexuality" of the mob but rather the stark contrast in responses to the law of hospitality to strangers. Lot goes to the extreme in trying to uphold it while the men of Sodom go to the other extreme in seeking to violate it. Lot's offer of his virgin daughters makes clear that sexual pleasure is not the mob's primary interest - since presumably, even in Sodom, most men would have, according to a modern-day understanding, a primary heterosexual orientation and would be practicing heterosexuals. The mob's primary intent, then, is on humiliating the strangers in a particularly patriarchal way.

"In the ancient Middle East the practice of subjecting the defeated enemy to anal penetration has been clearly established. Kenneth Dover reminds us "that human societies at many times and in many

regions have subjected strangers, newcomers and trespassers to homosexual anal violation as a way of reminding them of their subordinate status.' Was this, within the ethos of patriarchy, the ultimate emasculation: reduction to womanhood?"⁴

(George R. Edwards)

As in male prison sex, where no women are available, men who take the dominant role by mounting another man often still consider themselves heterosexual - i.e., their concept of heterosexuality is tied to being the "dominant" person in a sexual relationship - regardless of the sex of the other person. So the Sodom story emphasizes xenophobia - and may reveal more about patriarchal heterosexuality than it does about homosexuality. As confirmation of this "reading," none of the prophets, when referring to Sodom or Gomorrah, ever speak about homosexual behavior. The sins that the prophet Ezekiel specifies are not sexual:

"Behold, this was the guilt of your sister (sic) Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, surfeit of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy. They were haughty, and did abominable things before me; therefore I removed them, when I saw it." (Ez. 16:49-50)

When Jesus refers to Sodom and Gomorrah it is in the context of hospitality to strangers: he states that on the day of judgement Sodom and Gomorrah will fare better than those towns that will not receive his disciples. (Mt. 10:15) Christianity, however, has misread the Gen. 18-19 passage and misused it to condemn homosexuality. But such a reading is as absurd as taking the heterosexual gang-rape story in Judges 19:22-25 and using it to condemn heterosexuality.

There are several Old Testament passages denouncing cult prostitutes.

"There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel." (Deut. 23:17) Canaanite fertility cults had "sacred" prostitutes serving as priests and priestesses. And Israel often fell into the temptation of adopting idolatrous worship practices. In Israel, because women had only a very marginal role in cultic activities, this was particularly reflected in the spread of male cult prostitutes (and hence male homosexual acts). (1 Ki. 14:24, 15:12, 22:46; 2 Ki. 23:7) But since idolatrous sexual cultic activities are sinful regardless of who is engaging in sex, these passages have no more bearing on homosexuality than they do on heterosexuality.

It is possible that David entered into an opportunistic homosexual

relationship with King Saul's eldest son, Jonathan. Jonathan loved David greatly:

"The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul....Then Jonathan made a covenant with David, because he loved him as his own soul." (1 Sam. 18:1,3)

The relationship served David's aspirations to become King Saul's successor. Jonathan, the heir apparent to the throne (according to the purity system's traditions of inheritances and birthrights), vowed to support David as Saul's successor. (1 Sam. 23:16-18) Saul, however, was fearful and angry at the prospect of his lineage losing the kingship and his descendants being wiped out in a bloodbath. (1 Sam. 24:20-22)

"Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan, and he said to him, 'You son of a perverse, rebellious woman, do I not know that you have chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame, and to the shame of your mother's nakedness? For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established.'" (1 Sam. 20:30-31)

Later, David laments Jonathan's death and Jonathan's great love for him:

"I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; very pleasant have you been to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." (2 Sam. 1:26)

Later still, David spares Jonathan's son while delivering 7 other male descendants of Saul to be slaughtered. (2 Sam. 21:7-9) What can be inferred about homosexuality from David and Jonathan's relationship? Although this probably is an example of a prominent homosexual relationship there are other factors involved in this relationship which should prevent any hasty conclusions about homosexuality, either positive or negative.

The Old Testament prophets, who speak at great length about the idolatry and sinfulness of Israel and the other nations, never mention homosexual behavior. They do speak frequently, often in metaphorical terms, about heterosexual sinfulness.

Similar to all the Old Testament prophets, Jesus never mentions homosexual behavior. Concerning heterosexual behavior Jesus upholds the options of monogamous marriage or celibacy (Mt. 19:3-12) and speaks against male lust, adultery, and patriarchal divorce traditions. (Mt. 5:27-32)

Three passages from Paul refer to homosexual behavior: 1 Cor.

6:9-10, 1 Tim. 1:9-10, and Rom. 1:26-27. The specific meanings that Paul intended for the first two passages are hindered by translation difficulties.

"Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers - none of these will inherit the kingdom of God."

(1 Cor. 6:9-10 NRSV)

The Greek words *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* are translated by the RSV simply as "sexual perverts," while the NRSV translates them as "male prostitutes" and "sodomites." While some interpreters believe Paul's statement supports a general condemnation of homosexuality other translators believe that Paul's words refer to specific historical forms of homosexual behavior. It is likely that *malakoi*, translated by the NRSV as "male prostitutes," refers to male youth who prostituted themselves for adult men. This was one of several forms of pederasty (men having sex with boys) that was quite common in Hellenistic cities. Paul's word *arsenokoitai* is found in no one else's writings prior to or during his time - making a specific translation more difficult. Used in conjunction with *malakoi* it could well mean those men who bought the services of *malakoi*. Since Paul's list omits female prostitutes - he simply cites male heterosexual "fornicators" or "johns" (Gk.: *pornos*; see Paul's usage in 1 Cor. 6:13-18) - it seems unlikely that Paul would condemn young male prostitutes without also citing the adult men who paid for their services. As with heterosexual prostitution it is the male buyer who has the "dominant" power in the relationship and who deserves equal if not greater condemnation. The NRSV uses the word "sodomites" - but this is a poor translation. The word is not historically faithful to the text. Christianity helped coin the word through a distorted reading of the Sodom and Gomorrah text. It is not a precise word - various laws have interpreted it as homosexual or heterosexual anal intercourse or oral sex or sexual intercourse with an animal. To conclude, the above passage most likely condemns specific forms of male sexual behavior, both heterosexual and homosexual.

The text from 1 Timothy 1:9-10 is quite similar to the 1 Cor. passage and will only be briefly looked at.

"This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching..."

The NRSV translation "fornicators, sodomites, slave traders" comes from 3 Greek words: *pornoi*, *arsenokoitai*, *andrapodistai*. The first two words were used in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 and may identify the male buyers of female and male prostitutes, respectively. The additional word *andrapodistai* can be translated as "slave traders" or "kidnappers." It probably refers to those people who dealt in the slave trade selling children to men, often for sexual purposes. Thus we have another grouping of words which condemn certain forms of exploitive heterosexual and homosexual behavior. But it would require a real lack of fidelity to the text for any interpreter to read into the above two passages a blanket condemnation of homosexual practice.

The final passage from Paul relating to homosexual behavior is also contested as to its meaning. The issue here though is more a matter of interpretation than translation. When the following passage is read out of its textual and historical context its meaning can be distorted.

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error." (Rom. 1:26-27)

In order to avoid a simplistic and biased reading the text must be carefully examined.

The letter to the Romans is Paul's major theological treatise. Paul describes the universality of sin and injustice for Greeks and Jews alike. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul focuses on the Greek world and describes how they, in their self-deception, have chosen idolatry rather than worship of the true God. Paul's major example of this idolatry is the above passage (v. 26-27) and it is then followed with a listing of vices that, when taken as a whole, illustrates the sinful and idolatrous condition of the Greek world. In this context, it is very likely that Paul chose an example of idolatry (v. 26-27) that was both highly visible and easily recognized as such. However, the brevity of the example and the passage of time have led to disputes about the specific historical facts behind his example.

Is it not striking, and perhaps quite significant, that Paul begins the example with female sexual behavior? The Bible nowhere else mentions or alludes to female homosexual behavior. Why isn't it mentioned elsewhere? Throughout the ancient patriarchal world

women were greatly oppressed, to some extent confined under male control, and unable to exercise many freedoms. But in the Greek world there was a place where female restraints were loosened - during idolatrous "pagan" worship rituals and religious festivals.

During Paul's time some of the most popular deities worshiped were Aphrodite (Venus), Dionysus (Bacchus), and Cybele. Much revelry took place during cultic festivals although practices differed in different locations.

"In general Aphrodite is the goddess of beauty, love, and marriage. Her worship was universal in the ancient world but its facets were many and varied. At Corinth, for example, temple harlots were kept in Aphrodite's honor; at Athens this same goddess was the staid and respectable deity of marriage and married love."⁵

According to Greek mythology, the love goddess Aphrodite blessed both heterosexual and homosexual lovemaking. Some of her many sons, by different fathers, reflect her free-wheeling lovemaking: Hermaphroditus is permanently united with a nymph and henceforth has both male and female sex organs; Priapus is a fertility god who had an orgiastic cult following; and Eros (Cupid) is a god of love, and oftentimes, a god of male homosexuality. Worship of Aphrodite, like that of Dionysus, often involved "sex reversal."⁶ Men dressed as women and women as men, with women sometimes shaving their heads. Worship of Dionysus, the god of the vine, of nature and wine, was characterized by ecstatic frenzy and could include drunkenness, promiscuity, and savage participatory animal sacrifices. According to mythology Dionysus' sexuality became ambivalent - a feminine god often accompanied by Maenads (wild women) - and worship of him was popular with women. The worship of the Asian earth goddess Cybele, popular in the Greek and Roman world, was orgiastic in nature. Worship of Cybele was led by male priests who practiced mutilation/castration.

Cultic events were the only time where women could be temporarily freed from the heterosexual marriage bond - and cultic rituals were the only events that could closely associate deviant female and male sexual behavior. So, historically, there is considerable weight to believing that Paul is referring to idolatrous cultic behavior. But many interpreters of scripture believe instead that Paul is simply describing widespread homosexual behavior occurring during society's regular social life. But historically, can this view be backed up? First of all, in the ancient world there was no word for "homosexuals," no conception of "homosexual orientation" as a distinct possibility separate from

heterosexuality, and no conception of a "homosexual alternative lifestyle" that revolved primarily around homosexual relationships. In that patriarchal world there existed a social imperative for men to marry in order to provide heirs and continue a family's patriarchal lineage. Thus heterosexual relationships were a universal norm. So Paul could not be referring to people, in everyday life, who completely "exchanged" heterosexual relationships for homosexual relationships. At most Paul could be referring to people in heterosexual relationships promiscuously engaging in homosexual acts. Secondly, while it was common for some Greek men to engage in homosexual acts, women could not "openly" engage in a homosexual relationship. Thus, to believe that Paul is referring in his principal example of idolatry to an invisible (i.e., socially nonexistent) practice of female homosexuality and comparing it on a similar level with male homosexual behavior is not credible. (It could also be a mistake to read a modern conception of "lesbian sexual intercourse" into Paul's description of "unnatural" female relations; Paul's description of male homosexual behavior is more easily recognizable in his day.) Thirdly, it should be recognized that only a minority of men in the Greek world engaged in homosexual acts. If Paul is describing regular everyday social behavior then how does the practice of a small minority become an example of universal sin? On the other hand, if Paul is referring to idolatrous cultic practices, then even if only a minority engage in it the practice symbolically implicates the whole culture because of religion's central role in society's life. It is also the public and central role of cultic sexual behavior that would most support Paul's descriptions - "dishonorable passions" (v. 26), "consumed with passion" (v. 27), "shameless acts" (v. 27) - and buttress Paul's immediately preceding statement that

"they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator." (Rom. 1:25)

So it seems likely that Paul is referring to cultic behavior. But since cultic events could include both heterosexual and homosexual behavior why does Paul emphasize the latter and call them "unnatural"? When Paul speaks of what is "natural" he is not appealing to "nature" for guidance - since Paul would not call people to look to animals for moral guidance - and besides, homosexual behavior is common to many species. Also, what Paul considers "natural" may only be a contemporary cultural norm. Another passage from Paul illustrates this:

"Judge for yourselves; is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not nature itself teach you that for a man

to wear long hair is degrading to him?" (1 Cor. 11:13-14)

In the above passage Paul argues that women must wear veils when praying and that long hair for men is unnatural and degrading. Yet Paul's argument against long hair for men runs counter to the biblical tradition for Nazirites, among whom were Samuel and John the Baptist. Nazirites were consecrated to God and took vows including one to let their hair grow long. Paul uses the term "degrading," basing it solely on outward appearance (long hair) rather than on moral behavior, thus clearly revealing his argument's basis in the purity system. As such, his argument collapses and has no authority over Christians today. So when Paul calls something "natural" Christians today must use some discernment and not rush to hasty judgements.

Returning to the Romans 1:26-27 passage: what was "natural" and normative in Paul's day were heterosexual relationships. Social examples of male homosexual practices were adjuncts to heterosexual relationships and were not viewed as a replacement for heterosexual relationships. So, Paul is likely describing a particular cultic event in which both women and men, who in everyday life practice heterosexuality, are led into "sex reversal" and some of the men in particular engage in orgiastic homosexual acts. Such an event would justify Paul's description of "unnatural relations." Also, such an example would fit well into Paul's text. In the Romans 1 text Paul uses the term "exchange" several times (v. 23, 25, 26) to emphasize a radical departure from God. The example of homosexual cultic behavior by people who are normally practicing heterosexuals best fits Paul's "exchange" terminology.

To conclude, a careful reading of the Rom. 1:26-27 passage indicates that traditional readings of the passage which make a blanket condemnation of all homosexual practice are reading more into the passage than is there. Based on a contextual and historical reading it is most likely that Paul, in his major example of Greek idolatry, is making a reference to cultic behavior that is public, lustful, and orgiastic. Such a passage does not lend itself to making a sweeping judgement covering all homosexual relationships.

A review of biblical passages shows that while the Bible holds certain forms of homosexual acts to be sinful there is no clear pronouncement that Christians today may use to judge homosexuality in general. Therefore, to move towards greater clarity, it is necessary to develop an understanding of homosexuality based solely in the gift system.

The purity system promotes purity codes which are often based on innate characteristics or external appearances. These codes tend to create double standards, support discrimination, and uphold an unjust hierarchical social order. For example, the Old Testament purity system institutionalized double standards between priests and laity, men and women, and Hebrews and foreigners. The modern purity system views homosexual intercourse as "unnatural" and as inherently unclean, i.e., always sinful. The purity system declares that two people of the same sex can never authentically and intimately love each other because of the impurity of same-sex sexual contact. The purity system sees only the external physical contact between two same-sex people and reaches a judgement that disregards moral standards such as love, mutuality, justice, commitment, fidelity. Thus the purity system establishes a double standard between homosexual behavior and heterosexual behavior: all homosexual acts are sinful because of their innate impurity; heterosexual acts, however, may either conform to or violate purity codes, depending on a man's relationship to a woman.

The gift system takes a different view. The gift system calls for loving one's "neighbors" as oneself - thus supporting movements for social equality. The gift system erases distinctions of race, sex, ethnicity, and wealth which divide the population into unequal classes of people. The gift system upholds one standard of behavior for all people. Thus homosexual acts must be judged according to the same standard as heterosexual acts.

According to the gift system all people are created by God and have an essential goodness. Furthermore, the gift system declares that no part of the body is "unclean" or to be considered a "shameful part" - for the body reflects the image of God and is, in a sense, holy. Love, in its most intimate physical form, does not make someone "unclean." Thus neither heterosexual or homosexual intercourse are inherently "unclean." On the contrary, the gift system affirms the goodness of heterosexual intercourse in a just marriage covenant. Heterosexual intercourse is judged not on the basis of the external physical contact but rather on the relationship between a man and a woman. Thus, by applying the same standard, the gift system affirms the goodness of homosexual intercourse in the context of a lifelong, monogamous, just covenant relationship, i.e., in a just marriage covenant.

But the purity system, which puts a premium on building up a man's "house" through blood descendants, asks: Isn't it self-evident that man

and woman are biologically made for each other with children being the natural fruit? The purity system might label as "under a curse" homosexual partnerships that cannot produce children. But according to the gift system God's covenant of justice takes priority and heterosexual marriages and children apart from God's covenant do not incur blessing. God's house is based not on blood relationships but on faith in and obedience to Jesus. In the gift system God redeems the outcasts, blessing the eunuchs and "barren" women who adhere to God's covenant. So it is any individual or couple, heterosexual or homosexual, in covenant with God that is blessed.

Finally, the purity system raises a debate over the origin of homosexual orientation: is homosexual orientation an innate characteristic, self-chosen, culturally and environmentally induced, "natural" or "unnatural"? But the purity system fails to ask: What is the origin of unjust patriarchal heterosexual relationships? The gift system affirms a partnership that is rooted in a holistic giving of oneself. The purity system has distorted this holistic giving through unjust patriarchal relationships of male headship (and pre-arranged marriages - with fathers giving daughters away). But the gift system affirms equality: to honor both one's father and mother (Ex. 20:12) and, for marriage, "to leave one's father and mother" for a new just and mutual partnership (becoming "one flesh"). Ideally this giving of oneself in marriage entails free choice of a partner and entry into a just and mutual covenant. According to the gift system it is "enough" that two adults, regardless of sex or sexual orientation, can freely choose to give themselves to each other in a just covenant: such is an authentic gift relationship and a good practice. By thus being able to judge the goodness of the practice - of the real experience - people can induce the positive and natural origin of homosexual orientation. Indeed, can not one see the wisdom of God in creating diversity to challenge all human prejudices?

To conclude, the gift system is free of all the purity system's prejudices that would condemn just and mutual homosexual partnerships. Before God there is no distinction between homosexual practice and heterosexual practice.

Toleration of homosexual practices has varied in different times and cultures. But historically, most patriarchal societies have not sanctioned long-term homosexual unions - forcing alternative and less healthy homosexual practices. The Judeo-Christian heritage, deeply enmeshed in the purity system, has played a major role in the

repression and persecution of homosexual people.

Call for repentance

Today many church denominations are reviewing issues of sexuality and, in particular, their stances toward homosexuality. Although there is some movement for change, traditional church doctrines and practices have deep roots among many church members and greatly impede any movement towards justice. Current church discussions fall far short of a prophetic call for repentance. Without such a call the gospel is muted and no significant change, no significant Christian revival is possible. In what areas or ways have the churches fallen short?

Besides a failure to read the Bible through the light of Jesus, churches today fail to accept responsibility for their part in a history full of violent heterosexist oppression. Even a brief look at this history is illuminating.

With the rise to power of Constantine, Christians began to put into law some of their moral codes concerning sexuality. Not surprisingly, much of the codes were based on the traditions of the purity system. Male homosexual acts were made illegal in 4th century Rome. Theologians like Augustine helped Christianity develop a theology of "natural law" which spread views of sexual intercourse as "dirty" and sexual pleasure outside of the purpose of procreation as sinful. Homosexual acts were viewed as crimes against nature, establishing a double standard where homosexual acts were more heinous than heterosexual sins. In Europe punishment of homosexual acts, along with other forms of "deviancy" (e.g., religious "heresy" - Judaism, Islam, witchcraft), intensified in the 12th century and thereafter. Roman Catholic doctrine and writings by theologians such as Thomas Aquinas were quite influential in determining secular law. An unknown number of thousands of men and women in Europe were executed under various sodomy laws. (The slang label "faggot" is rooted in the practice of using kindling twigs (faggot) to fuel the burning of a heretic or deviant.) By the 18th century punishment continued but was usually less severe. The stigma and punishment attached to homosexual acts were powerful forces - particularly in traditional rural settings. But larger urban areas sometimes were more tolerant of homosexual activities. Urbanization's breakdown of extended families and traditional values, supplanted by the anonymity of city life and the

infusion of ideologies of the state, occasionally led to thriving urban pockets of homosexual subculture. Still, it wasn't until the late 19th century that the terms "homosexual" and "homosexuality" originated. The terms were used to identify a particular group of people who had a "deviant" sexual orientation and lifestyle. "Homosexual" became a term for labeling people based upon one aspect of their life - giving them a sexual-based identity. Psycho-analysts invented theories about homosexual people having degenerate genes, mental illness, or later, with Sigmund Freud, of having malformative childhoods. Also,

"the sexologists of the early 20th century promoted the idea that a lesbian was a 'man trapped in a woman's body' - known as the congenital inversion theory."⁷

Homosexuality was regarded by many as a condition in need of treatment/exorcism/rehabilitation/punishment. Every state in the United States passed laws punishing homosexual sodomy. Nazi Germany, which viewed Jews as "degenerate" and a source of pollution to a pure Aryan race, also sent many homosexual people to concentration camps. Identified by pink triangles on their clothing thousands were worked to death or died in gas chambers. During the McCarthy "commie-witch-hunts" of the 1950s, stigmatizing of and discrimination against homosexual people increased. Already discriminated against in the armed forces, homosexual people were classified in 1953 as security risks by former general Eisenhower - leading to more job discrimination. Widespread church discrimination led to the founding of a predominantly gay and lesbian church in 1968 (the Metropolitan Community Church). Police harassment led to the Stonewall Riot in 1969 - marking the beginning of a radical gay movement. In 1974 the American Psychiatric Association removed "homosexuality" from its list of pathological disorders. A U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1986 upheld a Georgia sodomy law and ruled against a gay man who had consensual sex in his home.⁸ About half of the states in the U.S. still have sodomy laws - with the majority of those laws banning both homosexual and heterosexual oral and anal sex. Few cities guarantee civil rights for gays and lesbians and discrimination continues. Incidents of harassment or "gay-bashing" (violent assaults specifically directed at gays or lesbians) have increased in the past few years.

Besides bearing great responsibility for directing discrimination and violence at people who engage in homosexual expression, Christian churches' theology and practice have fueled the spread of homophobia. Homophobia is the intense fear and/or hatred of homosexual people and homosexuality. Homophobia is the underlying emotional current that supports the stigmatizing of a sexual minority.

Homophobia is very pervasive and powerful today: the stigma attached to being homosexual is so great that probably only a minority of people with a homosexual orientation have "come out of the closet" to be publicly identified as gay or lesbian. Almost all children grow up under heterosexist expectations from their parent(s), school teachers, and religious leaders. Homophobic adults may spread irrational fears about homosexual people: they offer unhealthy role models for children, lead children astray, or worse, seduce and molest children. Youth learn early the derogatory labels - queer, dyke, faggot - associated with homosexuality. Peer pressure, including vicious teasing of and threats against homosexual people, keep youth afraid of any behavior that might be considered homosexual. The stress on gay teens can be enormous and lead to depression, self-hatred, or suicide.

"A 1986 report for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that young gay men and lesbians were two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people, and may account for a third of youth suicides each year."⁹

Even relating to homosexual people, if one knows of any, may bear social disapproval. With few homosexual role models or support groups and with discrimination in employment, housing, and social standing, there is much pressure on a homosexual person to remain "closeted." To "come out," therefore, is to overcome strong fears of rejection from peers, family, church, and state. People of color who "come out" may face a more unsupportive environment than white people - as an oppressive code of silence concerning homosexuality is often stronger in communities of color. Also, the gay movement is sometimes identified as being a white people's movement.

A more virulent form of homophobia leads to scapegoating - blaming homosexual people for society's problems - as some fundamentalist preachers do. Pervasive homophobia represents a very repressive power which functions to keep homosexual people invisible, silent, or - if seen or heard - blames and shames them for being "unacceptably" different. But homophobia reveals more about the person who has it than it does about homosexual people. Homophobia, like other prejudices, gives rise to false judgements which are projections of evil from the heart of the judger onto those who are judged. Homophobia itself is based on deep-rooted fears - upon alienation from and insecurity about one's own sexuality. Thus, homophobia gives evidence of a deep need for repentance and transformation.

Christian churches have been at the forefront of making false judgements condemning homosexuality. In conjunction with these false judgements the churches have been promoting a shame-based sexuality. A shaming theology judges a whole class of people - gays and lesbians for example - as inherently inferior/defective/sinful. It judges a class of people not on moral behavior but on some innate characteristic. Rooted in the purity system it is similar to Old Testament theology that viewed all women as less holy, more unclean, and inferior to men. For example, a 1986 Roman Catholic document from the Vatican states that the "inclination of the homosexual person" is "ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil" and "must be seen as an objective disorder." This can be understood as a modern rendition of the purity system describing the "uncleanness" of a class of people. This shaming theology would deny gays and lesbians from openly, honestly, and positively affirming their basic identity and self-worth because their basic sexuality is deemed defective - and hence, shameful. This theology seeks to invalidate basic and natural desires of the heart for love and sexual intimacy and turn all such desires into shameful desires.

Many churches' condemnations have been affected by mounting evidence that homosexual orientation is not a matter of personal choice but rather occurs naturally and may be genetically and biologically determined.¹⁰ As a result many churches have tried to nuance their judgements by making a distinction between "homosexual orientation" and "homosexual practice." While the former is viewed as morally acceptable, the latter is judged as sinful. People with a "homosexual orientation" may then be counseled to remain celibate so as to avoid the "sin" of "homosexual practice."

"But gays and lesbians who fully embrace their same-sex orientation experience the distinction between orientation and practice as little more than a euphemistic rejection cloaked in affirming language."¹¹ Indeed, such a distinction is still rooted in the logic of the purity system. The purity system often makes judgements based simply on outward appearances but the gift system locates the initial struggle between good and evil in the desires of the heart. If an outward action is sinful, then the gift system also declares the desire of the heart to do such an action is sinful. (See Mk. 7:20-23; Mt. 5:27-28, 23:27-28) Churches that only accept "homosexual orientation" continue to promote a shaming theology. Such a theology encourages "right" outward appearances, deceptively seems to remove judgement from inner desires, yet maintains a blanket judgement upon all "homosexual practice." In effect, the stigma and shame placed on

homosexual people remains - although a subtle duplicity (which attempts to separate inner desires from outward actions) confers (superficial) moral acceptability. Even a celibate homosexual person may be viewed (privately) by heterosexual Christians as a long-term church "project" for conversion to heterosexual "normalcy."

Besides bearing responsibility for directing discrimination and violence at homosexual people, fueling homophobia, and promoting a false and shaming theology, Christianity has been at the forefront in spreading prejudicial stereotypes. In particular the churches have spread the stereotype of a "gay lifestyle." The term has sinful connotations which smear the reputation and credibility of all homosexual people. Many churches use this prejudicial term to justify their condemnation of "homosexual practice." According to this prejudiced thinking any acceptance of "homosexual practice" is an endorsement of a "gay lifestyle" that is characterized by promiscuity and short-term sexual relationships. But, in fact, there is no "gay lifestyle" that characterizes homosexual people any more than there is a "straight lifestyle" that characterizes heterosexual people. There are gay and lesbian subcultures just like other subcultures that oppressed groups such as Asian-Americans or deaf people form. There is also a problem of promiscuity - but it is not universal to the population of homosexual people - nor is it a problem rooted in same-sex orientation. Our society gives much institutional support to monogamous heterosexual marriage. Yet promiscuity, adultery, and divorce are rampant among heterosexual people. The cultural "masculine identity" particularly bestows status upon promiscuous men and society puts much pressure on people to be sexually active and seek "sexual fulfillment" inside or outside of marriage. For homosexual people there are even greater pressures for promiscuity. The stigma and the judgements upon homosexuality are so great that long-term relationships are difficult to sustain. Strong public censure and the lack of role models encourage short-term hidden (or secret) sexual liaisons. For some, short-term sexual relationships may be a vehicle for receiving a boost of acceptance and affirmation of which the prevailing heterosexist culture seeks to deprive them. Also, while heterosexual intercourse may be inhibited, to some degree, by the prospect of pregnancy, there is no such inhibition in homosexual intercourse. Despite these pressures for promiscuity some homosexual people choose long-term partners or remain celibate. Yet most churches condemn both long and short-term homosexual relationships. Is it not hypocritical for Christian churches to deny legitimacy to long-term homosexual unions and then stereotype gays

and lesbians as promiscuous? Is it not also hypocritical for heterosexual Christians to advocate celibacy as a norm for all homosexual people? Celibacy has always been recognized by Christians as a special calling from God and not a mandatory obligation of faith. Yet many heterosexual Christians would apply this more rigorous standard of conduct to others (homosexual people) based not on a special calling from God but on the basis of the imagined impurity of homosexual love.

To add to church and societal prejudices against homosexual people the U.S. is experiencing an AIDS epidemic which is often misconstrued as a homosexual epidemic. An estimated 1 million Americans have been infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) that leads to AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Although worldwide HIV has been spread primarily by heterosexual intercourse, in the U.S. 57% of HIV cases have been contracted by gay men through homosexual intercourse (compared with 6% contracted through heterosexual intercourse).¹² Since the disease was first diagnosed in 1981 over 180,000 Americans have died from AIDS-related illnesses. The epidemic is expected to increase during the 1990s as HIV infections turn into AIDS. As yet, there is no medical cure or vaccine. Christianity shares some complicity in the epidemic due to: 1. not affirming long-term homosexual relationships; and 2. not addressing the economic roots of poverty and drug abuse since poor people and people of color have been hit hardest by the disease.¹³ The unfolding human tragedy is further compounded by responses from many people of ignorance, fear, and prejudice. Many people wrongly believe that AIDS can be spread through kissing or saliva, coughs or sneezes, casual contact, "contaminated" doorknobs or toilet seats, or through mosquitoes or other biting insects. This ignorance increases societal anathema towards HIV-infected people. People with HIV often are ostracized by church, family, and friends. Some fundamentalist Christians view AIDS as a mark of God's judgement and punishment of homosexuality. HIV-infected people face discrimination in employment, housing, and medical care. Many have become homeless as a result. A large number of medical professionals are unwilling to treat HIV-infected people. And much of the population fears treatment from HIV-infected health workers. What all these responses to AIDS have in common is that they find support in the logic of the purity system. The purity system attempts to separate the "pure" from the "polluted." The purity system fears the spread of contagion and responds to illness by stigmatizing, separating, and then avoiding all contact with sick people. The worst

illness in biblical times was "leprosy." Much fear and ignorance surrounded it and it was taboo for healthy people to come into contact with "lepers." Today many people react to AIDS-infected people in a similar way. And in the future, as social, economic, and environmental problems mount, there is increased likelihood of even more scapegoating of, and violence against, homosexual people in general and HIV-infected people in particular.

Christians have much to repent of in their attitudes and practices concerning homosexuality. But the larger issue is simply sexuality. And the proper context for transforming practices is in discipleship communities. Christians are to seek first God's commonwealth on earth and to make the leap of faith into discipleship communities.

New covenant discipleship communities must seek to be inclusive. In particular, Christian communities must be places of welcome for society's "outcasts," welcoming people from groups that society scorns and discriminates against. These may include homeless people, gays and lesbians, people with mental or physical disabilities, people of color, people well-advanced in years, former prostitutes or prisoners. Especially if a community has many white middle-class Christians its "saving grace"¹⁴ could be the presence of these "colorful" people. Diversity is a blessing to be celebrated - it gives witness that a community is on the journey to wholeness. To welcome gay and lesbian Christians on an equal basis as heterosexual Christians carries the responsibility of always standing in solidarity with them. Discipleship communities, as one family, together must bear the scorn, rejection, and persecution of ignorant and homophobic people.

Concerning sexuality, discipleship communities must: seek to raise children without a heterosexist bias, counter homophobia, encourage and support the "coming out" of gays and lesbians, affirm both the goodness of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and apply only one standard of conduct to all. Discipleship communities must uphold the options of celibacy and monogamous marriage. The deepest sexual intimacy is to be reserved for couples, either heterosexual or homosexual, who give themselves to each other in a marriage covenant. Sexual promiscuity by heterosexuals, homosexuals, or bisexuals, along with other sexually sinful behavior (sexual harassment, assault, rape, child abuse), must be strongly prohibited and disciplined within communities.

Promiscuity can be viewed as a symptom and a manifestation of low

self-esteem, low self-worth. For men, who through patriarchal traditions have received stature through promiscuity, it is particularly important to rediscover the essence of our self-worth. Men have sought status and identity in doing, achieving, conquering -in works rather than in being. But it is in being where true self-acceptance, self-worth, self-love needs to be rooted. Christians must recognize the precious and priceless gift of being a living human being in God's image and believe in the essential goodness of all people. If our identity and self-worth are based on works then we will always be judging and criticizing ourselves and others. But if our identity and self-worth are rooted in being then grace and forgiveness will abound.

Also, in the context of a disciplined, safe, and nurturing community Christians can learn to be much more affectionate with people of both sexes. The presence of gays and lesbians can help break down some homophobic fears and inhibitions of same-sex affection. It is quite likely that Jesus began the practice of disciples kissing one another which Peter writes of (1 Pet. 5:14) and Paul repeatedly mentions in his letters. (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26) This affection, however, should be a consequence of obedience to Jesus and not be a shallow substitute for costly discipleship. Physical affection becomes natural as a part of deepening friendships and as a result of right relationships established in God/Jesus/Spirit. And, as people are at different stages in their self-healing and discipleship, the beginning point is that no one has a right to touch another person without their permission.

Developing healthy attitudes and practices concerning sexuality is essential for the internal strength of discipleship communities. Consequently, it is essential for the fruitful spread of God's commonwealth on earth. Discipleship communities are to reflect God's wisdom and justice - giving witness to loving, compassionate relationships among an integrated heterosexual and homosexual community. Through this internal strength communities may then powerfully express love of neighbors and enemies. Discipleship communities must take prophetic stands against societal oppression of, and violence towards, gays and lesbians and offer to all the love of Christ: hospitality, forgiveness, healing, support, and a common life together.

Footnotes

1. James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Of The Bible, Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary - 6172, World Bible Publishers, Iowa Falls, Iowa, p. 91.
2. For an exception to this see below the levirate marriage custom.
3. Fernando Belo, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1981, p. 38.
4. George R. Edwards, Gay/Lesbian Liberation: A Biblical Perspective, Pilgrim Press, New York, 1984, p. 26.
5. Mark P. O. Morford & Robert J. Lenardon, Classical Mythology, David McKay Company, Inc., New York, 1971, p. 98.
6. See Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger, "Sexual identity in Corinth: Paul faces a crisis," The Reformed Journal, December 1978, p. 11-15.
7. Review by Phyllis Wiener in Star Tribune, 11-91. Review of: Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America by Lillian Faderman, Columbia University Press.
8. Michael Hardwick, from Atlanta, was arrested in his bedroom but not prosecuted. He brought a civil suit to strike down the sodomy law but lost in the Supreme Court decision. The Supreme Court ruling was by a 5-4 margin.
9. "Growing Up Gay," by Kurt Chandler, Star Tribune, 12-6-92, p. 25.
10. Two studies reported in 1991 support this: Salk Institute neuroscientist Simon LeVay found a critical difference between gay and straight men in the structure of the brain that governs sexual behavior; Northwestern psychologist J. Michael Bailey headed a study that found up to 70% of the likelihood of a man being gay can be attributed to genes.
11. Brian Jaudon, "From Debate to Dialogue," Sojourners, July 1991, Washington, D.C., p. 33.
12. Star Tribune, 12-30-92, Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control,

p. 2E.

13. "Hispanics make up 17 percent of the nation's AIDS cases and are contracting the deadly disease faster than any other ethnic group, Surgeon General Antonia Novello said in the first general AIDS report since 1986." From the Star Tribune, 6-19-93, p. 7A.
14. The term "saving grace" is used to emphasize that without real solidarity with poor and oppressed people, middle-class dominated communities will tend to degenerate. The term isn't meant to imply that there is any substitute for God's saving grace through Christ.

The shame

Jesus was shamed:
stripped naked -
spit upon -
beaten and whipped -
nailed to a cross.
What humiliation!
What embarrassment!
Unmarried -
without children -
a name
certain to be
erased from history -
a lost cause -
Jesus -
parched with thirst -
dangling -
unable to move -
are you not a curse?
Have you not brought
dishonor
upon your mother and father?
and disgrace
upon your followers?
...
But then
came the resurrection.
My redeemer!
My liberator!

To you
my heart goes out.
You rekindle
my fire.
I'm burning
away the shackles
that hold me down -
to free my soul.
The condemnations -
the shame -
the web of fears -
where are they now?
Burned to a crisp -
the smoke
blown away
by a fragrant breeze
of resurrection power.
Standing in your presence -
unashamed -
undefiled -
whole -
am I not whole?!

And oh - how the mighty
have fallen
from their thrones.
Their mockery -
their abuses -
remain
their everlasting shame.

AIDS

AIDS -
if it's a sign
it's to awaken us
from our stupor -
it's to pull from our hearts
a wave of compassion
to wash the scales
from our eyes.
Over us
the world drapes
its cloak of deception
to dissipate our passion -
to inhibit our love -
to prevent us from seeing:
we live in
a day and age
of slaughter.
Everywhere
death is on the march
and we
slumber on.
The time is now
to exercise our freedom -
to choose life -
to free our passion
for living fully
in our power.
The time is now

Chapter 9

Worship in Spirit & Truth

Our vision of God's commonwealth on earth is not complete. There is yet another critical issue for new covenant discipleship communities to address: corporate worship. Why is corporate worship so important? There are so many different worship traditions - are any better than others? What forms shall corporate worship take in discipleship communities?

A strong devotional base, centered on Jesus, is necessary to sustain a discipleship community. Remember the parable of the vine and branches. (Jn. 15) If the branches (disciples) become disconnected from the vine (Jesus) they will die and bear no fruit. Christian works must emanate from strong internal connections to Jesus. A strong devotional base is the root which keeps the branches nourished. Without a strong devotional base how can a discipleship community be joyful, enduring, and fruitful? How can Christians serve poor people, resist worldly ways, bear persecution, and commit themselves to the long haul without steady nourishment and empowerment from the Holy Spirit? Without a strong devotional base will not their wells run dry, their members burn-out, their relationships fracture, and, even if they maintain some semblance of an "alternative lifestyle," become cynical re-entrants into patriarchal society?

While personal disciplines of Bible study, prayer, solitude, and revering-the-earth are part of a strong foundation, the practice of corporate worship is the epitome of devotion. Worship is to be at the heart of every believer's and believing community's life; it is central to both individual and corporate identity. Worship centers us around what we value most. A faithful life is necessarily a devotional life - with time eagerly and freely given to worship. Worship is as necessary for the health of the soul as is food and water for the body. Worship of Jesus/God is a bottomless well from which to draw nourishment. Worship should be the most natural activity -- but, unfortunately, for

many, it's not. And degenerative religion has a lot to do with why it's not. Worship in degenerative churches is not the same as worship "in spirit and truth." (Jn.4:24) To develop a new vision for corporate worship it will be helpful to understand how degenerative Christianity has distorted worship. Then it will become clear what changes from churches' worship services are necessary for deeply empowering worship in God's commonwealth.

Before examining some aspects of worship let us review the proper context for worship. Worship of God, we remember, can be a cover for idolatry. God's Spirit, speaking through the prophet Amos, says, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:21-24)

Worship in degenerative churches, which fragment faith and neglect or deprioritize the incarnational aspect of daily obedience to Jesus, can be idolatrous. Worship must be tied to daily obedience, to an incarnational lifestyle. Indeed, God is to be "worshiped" all the time - during times of corporate worship and through day-to-day practices, creating a worship - life-service continuum. And what does this daily service entail? We remember Jesus' answer to the question, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mk. 12:29-31)

Worship of God is inextricably tied to loving one's "neighbor" as oneself.

It is not enough, however, to simply worship "God" and to find some expressions for "love of neighbor." Christians must place Jesus at the center of worship. Christians must specifically worship the God of Jesus Christ. Jesus definitively reveals what love of God and love of neighbor means - revealing specific practices and a unique Way to liberation. Thus the proper context for worship of God is in an all-encompassing lifestyle of obedience to Jesus/God, i.e., in a new covenant discipleship community.

With the above in mind, can we discern how Christian churches in the United States today restrict and/or distort worship of God? What changes are necessary to worship God "in spirit and truth?" (Jn. 4:24) Four areas will be examined: 1. worship location; 2. worship leaders; 3. liturgy and sacraments; and 4. language.

Worship location

Does it matter where God is worshiped? Historically, it has mattered a great deal.

"Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem....God is spirit, and those who worship (God) must worship in spirit and truth.'" (Jn. 4:20-21,24 NRSV)

The Samaritan woman's query concerned a serious issue which divided Samaritans from Jews. Samaritans worshiped on Mount Gerizim while Jews believed no worship location was superior to Jerusalem. Jesus, however, refers to a changing order, a new age with different priorities. The coming of God's commonwealth was (and is) at odds and in conflict with various religious groups' worship practices. What is at the heart of this conflict between Samaritans, Jews, and Jesus concerning worship location?

The controversy over worship location can be explained by using the analytical tool of the gift and purity systems. Chapter two describes how these 2 systems conflict with each other - with the purity system supporting a hierarchical social order and the gift system supporting movements for social equality. Both systems would affirm that the presence of God is holy and that God's presence is the criterion to judge whether any location is "holy." But the two systems differ considerably on the distance (or intimacy) between God and humanity.

According to the purity system the transcendent God is believed to be separate and distinct from both humanity and the world. Thus in the purity system's symbolic order God is located in "holy heaven" above the earth, which is the secular dwelling place of humanity. The purity system believes God's "holiness" is contagious. So wherever on earth God encounters humans is considered a holy place, and is thus regarded as a proper location for worship. Mountains, or "the high

places," are viewed as relatively closer to the heavenly God and are prime locations for worship. Abraham, when he is to make a burnt offering to God, climbs the mountain and builds an altar. (Gen. 22:2,9) In the purity system God's holiness is also considered dangerous and one can only come relatively close to God - and even this access is limited to the relatively more holy people. Thus, in the wilderness, Israel "purifies" itself before approaching the base of Mount Sinai, while only Moses ascends the mountain. (Ex. 19)

The gift system, however, proclaims intimacy between God and humanity through commitment and obedience to God's covenant. The covenant at Sinai, based on the 10 commandments which prescribe love of God and neighbor, are an important expression of the gift system. But what happens to this covenant? Instead of each person obeying and incarnating God's commandments the purity system immediately circumscribes and distorts the covenant. The purity system ascribes God's "holiness" to the tablets which contain the 10 commandments. Israel then builds a tabernacle - and inside the tabernacle is the ark of the covenant - and inside the ark are the tables of the commandments. Furthermore, the tabernacle is attended to exclusively by a priestly caste. Then the priestly caste directs the people's time, energy, and resources towards religious practices which stem in large part from the purity system. The covenant, the 10 commandments, and God's imperative for justice, become encased, entombed, or buried within the purity system. And the common people's distance from the holy God becomes a wide gulf separated by the operations of a priestly class and the tabernacle. By ascribing God's holiness to physical objects (the tabernacle, ark, & tablets) the purity system begins to exert human control over what symbolically represents the "presence of God." The tabernacle, which journeys with Israel, (Ex. 40:34-38) becomes the locus of worship.

Israel's faith degenerates further by the change in the locus of worship from the mobile tabernacle to the fixed location of the temple in Jerusalem. The ark of the covenant, representing the presence of God, was mobile and could symbolically lead the people of Israel - across the Jordan river, into the promised land, and against Israel's enemies. But establishing a fixed location for the ark and for worship further restricts God's leadership and gives more power and control to humans. This human control can easily lead to "forgetfulness," i.e., straying from God's covenant of love and justice.

An Old Testament example of forgetfulness concerns the feast of

Tabernacles. The feast of Tabernacles (ingathering), sometimes called the feast of booths, was one of three major Jewish festivals - the others being Passover (unleavened bread) and Pentecost (harvest or weeks). The feast of booths comes after the harvest and calls for the people of Israel to camp out in makeshift shelters for seven days. (Lev. 23:33-43) It calls to remembrance how Israel dwelt in booths after their deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Thus, at a time of harvest and abundance in their promised land, this feast reaffirms the gift relationship between God and Israel - recalling God's gift of deliverance and Israel's dependence upon God for all things. This feast, however, was "forgotten," in Israel until after Israel's return from exile in Babylon. (Neh. 8:17) But the feast calls attention to the sovereignty and freedom of God and to human dependence - and mitigates against the human tendency to replace faith in God with human control over religion and life.

It is king David who, with some divine resistance, (2 Sam. 6:6-11) leads the ark of the covenant to his royal dwelling in Jerusalem. David desires to permanently tie the presence of God to his kingly power by building a temple. But David is rebuked:

"Thus says (Yahweh): Would you build me a house to dwell in? I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling. In all places where I have moved with all the people of Israel, did I speak a word with any of the judges of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" (2 Sam. 7:5-7)

It is left to king Solomon to build the temple adjacent to his royal palace.

"Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands; as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?'"

(Acts 7:48-50)

The temple in Jerusalem functions to centralize worship under a priestly class loyal to a ruling class. The centralized worship location helps the priestly caste protect its turf, control and monopolize religious rituals, uphold the primacy of the purity system, and shroud God's imperative for justice.

The spread of synagogues maintains the temple as the center of Jewish identity, the center of Jewish economic, political, and social power. Synagogue leaders read from scripture but uphold the purity

system's laws and rituals. The faithful are directed to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem and offer their sacrifices and tithes there.

It is in a synagogue, after Jesus challenges the priestly class and their purity laws, where opposition against Jesus begins to solidify into a plot to kill him. (Mk. 3:1-6) And it is in the temple, after Jesus rids it of the purity system's ritual offerings and sacrifices, where the chief priests and scribes become determined to kill Jesus. (Mk. 11:15-18) Jesus' male disciples, always slow to understand, marvel at the beauty (and the symbolic power) of the temple:

"And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!' And Jesus said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.'" (Mk. 13:1-2)

Later, Jesus teaches,

"But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations."

(Mk. 13:9-10)

The "holy" temple is to be destroyed and followers of Jesus are to be persecuted by religious and political authorities and cast out of the synagogues. Where then are Christians to worship God?

Is there a replacement for the temple? During his ministry Jesus gives notice of a different center and practice for holiness:

"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. And if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the (Human One) is lord of the sabbath." (Mt. 12:6-8)

The temple and its practices of sacrifice, rooted in the purity system, are inferior to Jesus and his liberating practices. A further clue to the temple's replacement is given in the false accusation against Jesus:

"We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" (Mk. 14:58)

The temple, made with hands, representing human control over worship, will be replaced by one not under human control. The coming change in the locus and leadership of worship is evident in Jesus' parable of judgement against the religious leaders:

"(The owner) will come and destroy the tenants, and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this scripture: 'The very stone

which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner."
(Mk. 12:9-10)

Significantly, as Jesus died on the cross, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." (Mk. 15:38)

"Jesus has reconciled the people to Yahweh and each other, thus rendering void the priestly apparatus. Yahweh is no longer a recluse in the Holy of Holies, but present among the community."¹

(Ched Myers)

The tearing of the temple's curtain from top (heaven) to bottom (earth & humanity) symbolizes the end to the purity system's barriers between God and humanity. The temple built by human hands and stemming from the purity system has come under God's judgement - and it is Jesus who replaces it.

The new locus for worship is: wherever Jesus is. And, according to the intimacy proclaimed by the gift system, Jesus now lives in and through faithful disciples.

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?....God's temple is holy, and that temple you are."

(1 Cor. 3:16-17)

Jesus is the cornerstone of God's new house - not made with human hands.

"Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." (1 Peter 2:4-5)

In the Old Testament the covenant with the 10 commandments was the foremost written expression of the gift system. In the New Testament Jesus comes as the incarnation of "the law and the prophets." (Mt. 5:17) Jesus, the living Word, becomes the center of new covenant discipleship communities. Those things which circumscribed and distorted the old covenant - the ark of the covenant, the synagogue, the temple, along with their priestly hierarchy and purity codes and rituals - are "obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Heb. 8:13) But what degenerative religion did to the old covenant - have not Christians done likewise to Jesus? Has not degenerative Christianity, rooted in the purity system, circumscribed and distorted Jesus and his call to a unique Way of life?

The early Christians, faithful and persecuted, often worshiped in homes - a humbler but safer meeting place than synagogues. But with Christianity's idolatrous alliance with the state under Constantine the

purity system regained its old prominence. With the state's protection and encouragement church buildings were constructed wherever Christianity spread. Church buildings, made with human hands, began to be reverently viewed as "houses of God." Once again God was "encased" in officially-sanctioned houses of worship. Establishing fixed locations for worship gave more power and control to humans. Churches became the turf of a privileged priestly caste. And this clerical class, in alliance with the state, supported an unjust, hierarchical social order. While lip service was given to "the church" being the body of all believers (a house not made with human hands) in reality the meaning of "church" became associated with the religious hierarchy and their church buildings.

In imitation of the Hebrew purity system and temple, the interior of a church is demarcated with varying degrees of holiness. The "sanctuary" is a relatively more sacred area in a church where worship of God is designed to occur. The sanctuary itself is divided into several areas: the "narthex" or rear, the "nave" or central area where the "common people" congregate, and the "chancel" - the front or head area where the clergy officiate. The chancel, with the altar, pulpit, and clergy, is a relatively more sacred area of the sanctuary. Oftentimes the chancel is elevated and the pulpit even more so - and as "higher ground" (closer to heaven) symbolizes this more sacred space. On some altars is a tabernacle: "a receptacle for the consecrated elements of the Eucharist; esp: an ornamental locked box fixed to the middle of the altar and used for reserving the host."² (Yo - Jesus - are you really in there?) The layout of the sanctuary and the operations of a clerical or pastoral class serve to distance the "common people" from God. Thus the construction of churches and their interior design represent a triumph of the purity system.

John Wesley, a leader of the Christian-Methodist revival of the 18th century, while not prohibiting church construction had some awareness of the pitfalls:

"Thus Wesley was appalled by the construction of churches that appealed to the taste of the wealthy. 'Let all preaching-houses be built plain and decent; but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable: otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us. But if so, we must be dependent upon them, yea, and governed by them. And then farewell to the Methodist discipline, if not doctrine too.'"³ (John Wesley)

Church buildings serve the interests of affluent Christians. In churches Jesus' new covenant is distorted. The "good news to the poor" of

Jesus' unique Way to liberation is replaced by religion that supports social inequalities. Thus church buildings represent the turf of degenerative Christianity. To worship in an officially-approved fixed location gives credence and legitimacy to the purity system, the clerical class, and the organization of Christians in a false house of God. God does not dwell in houses built by human hands. So where are faithful disciples to worship God?

As the new locus for worship, Jesus replaces all fixed locations for worship. The emphasis is shifted from any sacred location, rooted in the purity system, to disciples who incarnate Jesus and his liberating practices. According to the gift system all of creation is "good" and thus offers faithful disciples one open and "holy" sanctuary fit for worship of God "in spirit and truth." Faithful disciples, then, have freedom to worship God wherever they are. The early Christians often worshiped in homes - and Christians today may do so - perhaps defying some laws governing worship locations (zoning laws) which require officially-approved fixed locations for "church worship." Many faithful disciples will be led to live and worship in poor urban neighborhoods. Paul and Silas worshiped in jail (Acts 16:25) - a prime location for solidarity with poor and oppressed people. In rural areas especially, natural outdoor settings may sometimes be desirable. Peacemakers may confront military idolatry by worshiping at the military's sacred locations of high security military bases, missile silos, or weapon-testing areas. What needs to be emphasized is that while God can be worshiped anywhere by faithful disciples, some locations, like churches, serve the purity system and misdirect Christians.

Worship leaders

Does it matter who leads worship? In the Old Testament the Hebrew priesthood, stemming from the purity system, presided over religious activities. But Jesus came to replace the entire priestly class:

"The former priests were many in number...but (Jesus) holds his priesthood permanently." (Heb. 7:23-24)

The Christian faith, however, degenerated and reproduced a privileged, clerical class. How has Christianity reproduced a similar clerical class rooted in the purity system?

The accepted path today to becoming a clergy member is through seminary training, seminary "knowledge." For church leadership positions the modern purity system believes not in blood-lines but in

seminary knowledge and accreditation.

The conceptual rather than the incarnational approach to faith receives primary emphasis in seminary. This represents a fragmented approach to education. For the most part seminary training is separate from the "real world."⁴ Students accumulate knowledge apart from struggles for social justice and apart from a real, grassroots discipleship community. Knowledge is separated from practice - from application and reflection. This separation of knowledge from practice supports a hierarchical (professor to student) transfer of knowledge which leads to conformity. Students, to a certain degree, must be conformists, seeking "approved knowledge," acceptable grades, and a certified degree. Students are molded to accept church traditions and to fit into degenerative churches. Seminary training is also individualistic and competitive. Each student pursues his or her self-interests, pursuing the goal of attaining an individualistic leadership slot in a church or other organization with which they oftentimes have had little or no relationship.

In large part, seminary training reflects society's prejudices and is exclusionary. Most believers do not have equal access to seminary. Like all other "higher education," seminary education is a commodity to be bought and sold. Due to the very high costs of seminary a class bias favors students from affluent, privileged backgrounds who have college degrees. Despite some scholarships, loans, and school-related jobs, access to seminaries is quite restricted and often reflects the class, racial, and sexual biases of society.

Is not seminary training a human-devised, expensive, and discriminatory method of producing a privileged class of church leaders? Authority from God is not gained through acquiring credits and degrees in seminary and such "knowledge" does not bring one into a special relationship with God. Let us recall the Mark 12:28-34 passage where the scribe responds wisely but still has not entered into the commonwealth of God.⁵ The scribe has knowledge but has not yet made the break from the priestly caste and purity system. The word of God must be heard and incarnated. Paul writes,

"Knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up. If any one imagines that (he or she) knows something, (they do) not yet know as (they) ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by (God)."

(1 Cor. 8:1-3)

More important than how much knowledge we have is being known by God. And how do we become "known by God"? According to the

gift system true love of God is expressed by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Through developing a just and loving relationship with poor and oppressed people - we both incarnate and meet our God - and become known by God. (Mt. 25:31-46; Lk. 10:29-37) But the knowledge gained in seminaries leads to positions of privilege in middle-class-oriented churches which distances clergy from the daily lives and struggles of poor people. Clergy enter into the domain of offices and bureaucracy, into a position of status and honor, removed from physical labor, exempted from military service, with provisions of a middle-class salary, benefits, and pension. Thus while the purity system upholds seminary training as a means to a pastoral position and becoming closer to God, the gift system reveals that seminary training distances future clergy from poor people and from God.

Besides seminary knowledge (and usually a Master of Divinity degree) aspirants must be ordained in order to join the ranks of the clergy. But is ordination from God or from humans? Ordination is a ritual for dividing believers into 2 classes: the ordained clergy and the laity. The clergy are conferred with 2 leadership roles in worship: 1. presiding over the most important religious rituals (the liturgical function); and 2. preaching (the conceptual function). By greatly restricting most believers' participation in these two very important roles, ordination serves to set apart and exalt clergy. The talents of a small clerical class are exalted while most believers' talents are suppressed. By dominating these two roles the clergy act in the old priestly role as intermediaries between God and the "common people" - distancing the people from God. And then some clergy will complain about how church members put them up on a pedestal, with higher expectations for work and moral perfection. Can they not see? These clergy fail to see the purity system at work: their "higher" education, their ordination, their leadership in preaching (up in the pulpit), their officiating of rituals, their robes, their titles, their salaried position, all proclaim (symbolically) that clergy are "more holy" and "closer" to God in the same way that the Hebrew purity system upheld priests as the "most holy" people in Israel. If clergy want equal treatment as other Christians can they not resign and break away from the clerical class and the purity system?

Just as God doesn't reside in fixed locations for worship so God's authority doesn't reside in fixed positions of human leadership. Jesus is now the sole intermediary between God and humanity - allowing all disciples an intimacy and immediacy of access to God which was and is impossible through the mediations of a clerical class. And just as

faithful disciples are the "temple" of God so all disciples form an inclusive "priesthood of all believers." The only ordination that the gift system recognizes is the "ordination" by God of believers through adult baptism. Through baptism God gives the Holy Spirit to all who commit themselves fully to Jesus and to his new covenant. If God gives the Holy Spirit what more can humans confer on one another? (But of course degenerative religion turns baptism into a Spiritless, status quo ritual.) While the purity system distances most people from God by ascribing God's holiness to certain objects (tabernacle, tablets, communion elements) or locations (temple, churches) or an exclusive class of people (priests, ministers), the gift system unequivocally declares that there is no spatial separation between God and faithful disciples. This new covenant equality of all disciples must not simply be affirmed on an imaginative, intellectual level - but must be practiced in reality. As a community of equals - without a clerical class - all participate in worship, sharing their gifts.

Who should lead worship? Worship must be centered and rooted in Jesus, "our high priest," the living Word of God who reveals the unique Way to salvation/liberation. In discipleship communities worship may be spontaneous or, if desired, a worship facilitator may be designated. While a facilitator may be any faithful disciple, some rotation of facilitators will enhance equality and healthy maturation of the worshipping body.

Liturgy and sacraments

"But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding the form of religion but denying the power of it." (2 Tim. 3:1-2,5)

Might these words apply to Christians today? Has not Christianity multiplied churches which hold the form of religion but deny the power of it? In officially-sanctioned worship locations presided over by a clerical class, worship has often been packaged as a form of consumption for a consumer society. In tightly-structured 1 or 2 hour services, churches try to fill the spiritual hunger of their members. Yet it is often quite a challenge to keep worship relevant. The religious language and mystifying symbols and rituals of worship may not always cover up worship inadequacies.

"I live in a world in which God is silent, from which he is apparently absent, in which the conventional routines designed to celebrate his

presence only make the spiritual void all the more embarrassing."⁶
(Thomas Merton)

Lacking relevance, some worships may try to be entertaining. Or they can always fall back on staid traditions. Might some worships be "the opium of the masses" - simply feeding worshipers delusions about their relationship to God and the heavenly afterlife? Is this criticism too harsh? After all, it is these worship services which constitute the essence of the much-heralded "freedom of religion" in this country. Shall we delve into church liturgy and sacraments before making such a judgement?

Worship is often presided over by clergy wearing "vestments" - the ceremonial robes whose mystifying symbolic meaning is irrelevant to most but whose real function is to set clergy apart and support upper-class standards of dress. Such dress encourages worshipers to prepare their outward appearance (clothing, make-up) before worship rather than preparing their hearts. While robes or suits enhance the status of clergy, they encourage poor people, if any are in attendance, to feel inferior for their lack of "fine" clothing.

Worship may have an "invocation." The clergy, representing an intermediary between God and the people, "invokes" or calls God's presence and power into the gathered congregation. In contrast to this, faithful disciples don't "call" God into their presence, they simply "listen" to hear the God who is already present.

Worship often includes a recital of a creed. The congregation will together read and give intellectual assent to a formulation of Christian doctrine. These creeds, however, have little impact on day-to-day practices and lifestyle.

"We...are particularly good at doctrine and right order. What we're not as good at is Christianity as a way of life (putting our bodies where our doctrines are) and being disorderly when and where we really ought to be. The weakness that this creates is that you can go to church and confess to all the creeds -- new ones and old ones -- and at the same time you can make bombs, plan wars, hate Willie Horton, oppress your workers, beat your family, and usually it will make no difference to your church membership."⁷

(Murphy Davis)

The lack of daily obedience to Jesus in discipleship communities with disciples being accountable to each other makes the recital of creeds a practice which substitutes a pseudo-unity for real community.

Worship may include "confession" and "absolution." The generic confessions of sin may at times actually call to mind real sins. But without God's imperative for wholesale change and obedience they tend to justify the sinfulness and poor efforts of worshipers. Of course, they are not intended to alter worshipers' behavior or lifestyles. They simply function as a "set-up" for the next act: the clergy proclaiming blanket forgiveness of sins. It is this simple and easy way to feel good about oneself that is part of what German theologian and war resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer condemns as "cheap grace."⁸ True forgiveness requires genuine repentance and, when appropriate, efforts toward reconciliation with people harmed. Reconciliation with one's friend or neighbor cannot be accomplished by simply confessing to God or clergy. (Mt. 5:23-24) Jesus referred to religious leaders as "whitewashed tombs" for hiding their inner sinfulness (Mt. 23:27) - and blanket forgiveness of sins is a practice of "whitewashing."

What worship worth its salt doesn't have a time for an "offering" or "collection"? The "offering" is a practice which helps to suppress gifts of worshipers as it elevates financial donations as the primary gift to be offered. These financial gifts are then "consecrated" through song and prayer. Like the Jewish temple with its marketplace, money-changers, and treasury, churches today give money a central role in their scheme of worship. But money is a symbol of the authority and sovereignty of the state and is a tool of the state for exacting tribute (taxes). Does not Jesus' saying have some application to today's churches?

"Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Mk. 11:17) Instead of giving out God's blessings to all who come to them, both the Jewish temple and Christian churches suck in the livelihoods of worshipers and hide the barrenness of their religious practices. The purity system calls for giving money to the temple or to churches - but the gift system calls for giving directly to poor people.

"When our churches have stewardship campaigns, they focus on the importance of subscribing to the ecclesial budget. If it is said in the taking of a collection or an offering that this is returning to God a portion of what we have received, then the meaning of the offering is that we give to God by giving to the church....For (Methodist revival leader John) Wesley, stewardship means giving to the poor - period. We give to God not by giving to the church but by giving to the poor. Stewardship is not a prolongation of the Temple tax; it is the practice of solidarity with the poor....We will have to consign to oblivion all the stewardship literature and campaign strategies

that make of stewardship and of tithing a new temple tax....We must forswear all this ecclesiastical diversion of funds for our own institutional maintenance. Of course, if we begin here some may claim that the church needs the money. But why should this be so? Is it not so because we have somehow deluded ourselves into thinking that it is good and right to build not just one temple in Jerusalem, but hundreds of them in every town and village? Do we anywhere read that Jesus or his disciples launched a building campaign?....And is it not plain that our commitment to building serves to divert a vast proportion of our resources that otherwise might be used to feed the hungry and clothe the naked? Are these temples, then, anything other than open defiance of God?"⁹ (Theodore W. Jennings, Jr.)

Worship usually includes a sermon or homily. Although the word of God should have a central place in worship the clergy have not been proclaiming the whole gospel of Christ. They have counted the cost of preaching the gospel and have chosen instead to dilute the word of God for fear of offending church members, for fear of a decline in the collection plate, or for fear of losing their jobs. One tribute most clergy pay to the affluent is their silence and failure to proclaim that serving "mammon" in capitalistic businesses is incompatible with serving God. One tribute most clergy pay to the state is their patriotism and muting of the nonviolent Way of the cross. Some churches even have the American flag in their sanctuaries. One tribute most clergy pay to themselves is their propagation of the purity system and the substitution of fruitless worship "service" for true faith and obedience. Still today most clergy have yet to "learn what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'" (Mt. 9:13; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6-8) In faithful discipleship communities it is likely that several will have a "gift" for preaching or teaching the word of God. We remember that when

"Paul...prolonged his speech until midnight...a young man...sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead." (Acts 20:7-12)

So some rotation and diversity of speakers may prevent unnecessary casualties. Occasionally, no sermon and/or an open reflection on scripture by the whole community may be desirable.

The liturgical order is often quite rigid. Worshipers may be told when to stand up, when to sit down, when to shake hands, what words to read, and what songs to sing. Church processions - whether

of the choir, the children, the clergy, or the whole congregation - are marked by their banality - by their lack of risk-taking and their lack of confronting the powers and authorities of the world. This is liturgy rooted in the "traditions of men" and not in the passion and spirit of Jesus. Spontaneity in word or song, movement or dance, must not be killed.

Some church worship services affirm charismatic gifts - speaking in tongues, prophesying, seeing images or visions, laying on of hands. Charismatic congregations often seem to desire to achieve in worship a mystical spiritual "high" - as if intimacy with God is possible apart from incarnating, in one's daily life, Jesus and his liberating practices. Many charismatic churches support hierarchical authority, emphasize a spiritual realm where individuals combat demons in spiritual warfare, and deny hope in God's plan for establishing the commonwealth of God on earth. Thus these charismatic churches give charismatic gifts a bad reputation. But charismatic gifts should not be stifled like most churches do. Rather, they should be exercised at appropriate times and be subject to the word of God and to community discernment. Gifts of the Spirit are gifts indeed.

The most significant new covenant rituals have been distorted by the purity system. Infant baptism is the modern purity system's counterpart to infant male circumcision. Male circumcision was the purity system's ritual marking entry into the old covenant. Infant circumcision brought a male infant into the covenant based on blood-lines (by being a child of covenant members). Similarly today, infant baptism usually reflect the fears and desires of parents to "save" their baby through a safe, culturally-accepted ritual without facing the costs of discipleship. The parents' fears and desires are complemented by the clergy's desires to increase church membership and perform in their priestly role. Indeed, the most important actors in the infant baptism ritual are the clergy, whose status and officiating fool the congregation into believing in this status quo ritual. Infant baptism denies individuals the most important question they should face and struggle with (Who is Jesus?), weakens personal faith-commitments, and results in Christians who blend into in-grown, homogeneous churches and into the cultural mainstream. Churches that prescribe adult baptism usually support part-time faith commitments and fragmented lifestyles. Thus, to a great extent, baptism has lost its meaning of complete commitment to Jesus and to the exclusive sovereignty of Yahweh.

Jesus wasn't baptized until the age of 30 - when the "Spirit descended upon him." (Mk. 1:10) So, likewise, new covenant communities can restrict baptism to adults. (New covenant communities can also help their children and youth get wide exposure to different cultures and religious traditions.) Adult baptism is the gift system's ritual marking entry into Jesus' new covenant (and into a holistic discipleship community). Baptism consists of adults publicly giving their whole lives to Jesus, and of God giving believers a full dose of the Holy Spirit. As stated in chapter 7, this ritual of union can include receiving new Spirit-inspired names to replace surnames.

Like baptism, the sacrament of church communion, or Eucharist or Mass, has been distorted by the purity system. Church tradition may require clergy to invoke God's blessing on the "host" (bread) and wine and then distribute the "consecrated elements" to lay members. Thus symbolically, God's "holiness" flows down to the clergy and "elements" and then to the "common people." The ritual can become a private experience among passive worshipers. As a mystifying, hierarchical, and individualized ritual, communion becomes the negation of a communion of equals who share a common life together. Church communion has little practical relationship to the daily practices and fragmented lifestyles of worshipers. This is not to be the case in new covenant communities.

In new covenant communities communion needs to be more of a private, semi-exclusive practice - limited to baptized Christians who are committed to a total, holistic Way of discipleship. Communion, as a reaffirmation of commitment to Jesus and his practices, must flow out of the common practices of the community. Communion encompasses 3 major common practices: 1. "love" - exemplified by communal sharing of all things - brings unity at "one table" - and is the basis for sharing the bread & body of Christ; 2. "hope" - exemplified by forming a new covenant family and carrying the nonviolent cross until death - brings unity as "one house" - and is the basis for sharing the cup & blood of Christ; and 3. "faith" - exemplified by all confessing Jesus and worshiping as an inclusive "holy priesthood" (apart from a clerical class) - brings unity as "one living sanctuary" - and centers the sacrament in Jesus' leadership. Communion proclaims "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 11:26) - a proclamation which requires disciples to face death daily (Lk. 9:23ff) and to be prepared to die for their beliefs.

Marriage, as well as a vow of chastity or celibacy, are sacraments to "be held in honor among all." (Heb. 13:4) In a discipleship

community marriage must not support a patriarchal order of male dominance but must affirm the couple, heterosexual or homosexual, as equals. Marriage, in a discipleship community, must complement a couple's covenant commitment to Jesus/God. Let clergy and judges perform marriages with whomever they will, but let discipleship communities only marry faithful disciples of Jesus.

So, we see that the liturgical content of church worship services leaves much to be desired. Yet millions continue to go to these services. Obviously, worshipers must draw some nourishment from the smorgasbord of religious food offered during worship. But is this the purpose of worship? And what is the fruit of such worship? Is worship to be a filling station serving religious food which is then dissipated in an otherwise secular existence? Is worship meant to keep worshipers' contentedly deluded about their fragmented faith and individualistic lifestyles? True worship of the living God does not support a middle-class consumer lifestyle. Instead, worship is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus which is "good news to the poor." The gospel of Jesus calls people to enter God's commonwealth now - to become part of a holistic and unique Way of life in a discipleship community. Worship services that fail to serve the main course of Jesus' gospel are in service to degenerative religion which thrives on giving scraps to malnourished worshipers.

Language

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says (Yahweh)." (Is. 55:8)

How has culture affected religious language? How has Patriarchy shaped Judeo-Christian imagery of God? What changes in verbal imagery of God will enhance worship "in spirit and truth"?

The way of God is not the way of men. (Is. 55:8; Acts 5:29) But the ways of Christian churches are the ways of men. Patriarchal Judeo-Christian traditions have developed sexist language and theology, making God into the image of men. While Christians may intellectually acknowledge that God is not exclusively male their male-God language, doctrines, and male-dominated clergy have, in reality, deeply impressed in Christians the belief in a male deity. Theology, rooted in the purity system, has justified male-headship and male-leadership as being part of a divinely-ordained natural order.

Thus the churches have mirrored and justified patriarchal society's hierarchical order and subjugation of women. A long-standing argument in favor of male-headship is simply that Christ came as a male and referred to God as "Father." But did Jesus come to legitimize the ways of men or did he come to "subvert" them and offer a new Way?

First, let us look at a teaching of Jesus to better understand the subversiveness of his God-imagery.

"But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant; whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." (Mt. 23:8-12)

In Jesus' patriarchal society men completely dominated religious, political, and economic activities. Jewish women were kept uneducated, their movement was very limited, and even their speaking in public was greatly restricted. In Jewish culture rabbi, father, and master were all terms of authority which divided people by establishing an "order" which exalted some men while giving everyone else an inferior status. In the above teaching, addressed to men in the temple, all male authority that exalts men is rejected by Jesus who confers such authority only to God, the "Father" in heaven, and to Christ. Jesus is attempting to level human relationships to where all are equal. Yet if hierarchical relationships persist, disciples of Jesus must occupy the bottom of any hierarchy - they must imitate Christ and be "servants." The above teaching shatters the foundations of a patriarchal society. It undermines the continuation of power and property through a male lineage and genealogy. Children, especially males, were identified by their lineage, by their fathers. Jesus calling God "Father" was part of his subversive strategy to separate himself from a patriarchal lineage that would label him as "son of Joseph" (Jn. 6:42) or even "son of David." (Mk. 10:47, 12:35-37) By refusing to call any man "father" and by calling God "Abba" or "Father," Jesus also makes known a relationship that radically confronts patriarchal God-imagery and traditions. Jesus reveals the intimacy of a child-parent relationship which disciples, who have broken from the traditional authority of their male parent and patriarchal lineage, are to have with God. All God's children are to intimately know and commune with God apart from any male authority figure.

Second, to use Jesus' maleness to justify male dominance and

discrimination against women is clearly bad theology rooted in the purity system. It makes having similar sexual organs as Jesus an essential criterion for leadership - for being "closer" to God. But both male and female are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and in Christ there is no division between male and female. (Gal. 3:28) To even think in terms of superiority over others reflects an attitude that Jesus totally rejects. But Christian tradition, rooted in the purity system, has magnified Jesus' genitals while undermining his teachings and practices. Instead of eliminating all male-headed hierarchies, men have exalted themselves as clergy-leaders, reproducing and multiplying "fathers" (priests, pastors, reverends) and "archfathers" (bishops, pope). Many have idolatrously fashioned God into a male God and have completely excluded female imagery of God. How long shall Christians bind themselves to traditions rooted in the purity system?

Is it not long past time to worship God with female, as well as "subversive" male, verbal imagery? Female imagery of God is present in both the Old and New Testaments. Jesus could metaphorically refer to himself as a "mother hen" (Mt. 23:37) and use parables where a woman represents God. (Lk. 13:20-21, 15:8-10) Jesus' use of "Father" was not a permanent name for God but an affectionate term with "subversive" implications. Today, however, "Father" justifies long-standing patriarchal traditions. These religious traditions, in combination with society's systemic assault upon women, have profoundly damaged women's self-image and self-esteem while fueling male arrogance and pride. Who then, can object to including female God-imagery in worship? It should be remembered that objections to this are rooted in the purity system - based on a "natural order" that denigrates mother-sister-daughter-woman-female as inferior. It is these negative images of women that must be rooted out of all faithful disciples. Female God-imagery glorifies God by restoring a wholeness and balance to God's image that was present at the beginning of creation. An obvious beginning point is using the term "Mother" since it is the equivalent female term for "Father." Also, if "God" connotes maleness, whether consciously or subconsciously, then occasional use of "Goddess," with its overt female imagery, can be helpful to re-imagining God. Christ can be referred to and experienced as "sister" as well as "brother." Female verbal imagery of God is in its infancy - and its growth is essential to the healing of this planet.

What changes are necessary to worship "in spirit and truth"?

Changes are necessary in our understanding of worship locations, worship leaders, rituals and sacraments, and language. Worship "in spirit and truth" must be both visionary and rooted. Worship must give birth to and nurture the vision of a "new heaven and a new earth." (Is. 65:17) And worship must be rooted in practice - in daily obedience stemming from discipleship communities. What is needed is not an exhortation for change, a committee resolution, a referral for "further study," a resignation to token changes - but immediate transformative practices. How can we settle for token changes when God's commonwealth is at hand - here and now?

Footnotes

1. Ched Myers, Binding The Strong Man, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1988, p. 443.
2. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam Co., Springfield, Mass., 1967, p. 896.
3. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr., Good News to the Poor: John Wesley's Evangelical Economics, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1990, p. 65.
4. Even internships at churches do not bring students into close solidarity with poor people. Most churches are middle-class-oriented and fail to deeply integrate faith with social commitment.
5. See chapter 2 for a fuller reading of this passage.
6. Thomas Merton, Faith and Violence, University of Notre Dame Press, 1968, p. 211.
7. Murphy Davis, "The Image of the Enemy," Hospitality, The Open Door Community, Atlanta, September 1990, p. 4.
8. See chapter 1 for a quote from Bonhoeffer on "cheap grace."
9. Theodore W. Jennings, Jr. This lengthy quote is from passages on pages 105 & 190.

Life-dance

Come!
Join the dance!
Join the celebration of life!
We are dancing to the music
and the music is God!

Widen the circle!
Let everyone join in!
There is room for everyone!
This is the dance of life
and all are invited

Celebrate!
Let your spirits run free!
Sing a joyful song
and let our ears hear
the beautiful music that is God!

Our Mother

Our Mother
Birther of the cosmos
Praiseworthy be your name
Your commonwealth come
Your will be done on earth
Share bread daily with all
Forgive our debts
As we forgive our debtors
Empower us in time of trial
Guide us through darkness into light
All power, beauty, and glory are yours
Now and forever
Let us rejoice in your loving presence
Alleluia
Praise you most merciful Goddess
Praise you passionate Jesus
Praise you healing Spirit
Alleluia Alleluia

CHAPTER 10

Repentance & Revival

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.' And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you become fishers of (people).' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him." (Mk. 1:14-20)

Nearly two thousand years ago Jesus appeared proclaiming the good news that the commonwealth of God is at hand. A fruitful movement began which spread and greatly affected not only Israel but also the Roman empire and the rest of the world. Yet today, the world, and even Christianity itself, is in need of revival - of hearing again the gospel of God. How do we hear the gospel today? Do we believe that God is working to establish God's commonwealth on earth here and now?

God's commonwealth is at hand - but there is a catch. God's commonwealth doesn't impose itself upon people. People enter into God's commonwealth and are empowered through conversion. Thus the good news comes with the call for repentance.

In the Old Testament repentance was sometimes expressed through fasting, ceasing evil works, putting on sackcloth, and sprinkling ashes on one's head. This demonstration of humility before God was often, but not always (see Is. 58), seen by God as a sincere form of repentance. But now that the Messiah has come - this is not the form of repentance that God desires. The repentance that Jesus calls for is expressed in the verses following Jesus' proclamation of good

news.

Simon & Andrew and James & John leave their jobs, their families, and their homes in order to follow Jesus. It is this radical turning away from one's old way of life and giving oneself wholly and totally to Jesus and to the commonwealth of God that demonstrates repentance. It is not enough simply to repent of a single sin here or an individual sin there. Rather it is necessary to repent of a whole way of life that is not centered around Jesus. There is no particular judgement here on the value of fishing as a profession. There is no particular judgement here on the upbringing these brothers received. There is just a call for a total commitment to follow Jesus which requires leaving behind one's old way of life. The combination of hearing the good news and giving oneself completely to Jesus results in a community that powerfully experiences the grace and love of God. It is a community that does mighty works and is fruitful. Through repentance and the obedience of faith the gospel bears much fruit. On the other hand, without repentance and deep commitment the good news bears little fruit.

Jesus came preaching good news and repentance to the Jews. The Jews were believers in the one true God. It was the other nations, the other peoples, who didn't know God and who needed to repent. But Jesus came preaching repentance to the Jews. This is significant because today it is necessary to preach repentance to Christians, to the ones who uphold the name of Jesus. And what do Christians need to repent of?

Vision and organizational strategy for revival - culled from chap. 1-9

1. Today, in the United States, Christianity has many characteristics of an idolatrous, degenerative religion. In large part, the churches no longer proclaim the gospel of Jesus - they have lost the vision of God's kingdom/commonwealth on earth. Having broken their fidelity to the gospel, churches substitute fruitless religious practices for real faith and obedience. Many churches give priority to the liturgical and conceptual aspects of faith - and neglect the incarnational aspect which leads to a unique, holistic Way of life. Thus the religion espoused by most churches fragments faith and supports an idolatrous, fragmented lifestyle. Churches that spread degenerative religion are not benign - they actively work against the formation of incarnational communities. Degenerative churches always seek to

promote themselves, seek to ensnare new members, and direct people's energy, commitment, and devotion towards a false house of God. Today, millions of Christians remain stuck in the trap of degenerative religion.

A Christian revival depends on rebuilding the house of God upon the cornerstone of Jesus. A revival hinges on two parts: 1. developing a new vision of God's commonwealth (based in large part on the life, teachings, and practices of Jesus); and 2. reorganizing Christians around the new vision, based on a new and deeper commitment to Jesus.

As a first step the 3 key questions of faith must be raised anew: 1. Who is Jesus? 2. What are Jesus' new practices? 3. How shall the Messiah establish God's commonwealth on earth? The mind-numbing, faith-killing, hope-dousing answers propagated by degenerative Christianity need to be swept like cobwebs from our mind. We must envision Jesus & his gospel in a new way and reassess our relationship with Jesus. Do we really understand God's/Jesus' strategy for bringing salvation/liberation to the ends of the earth? How deep is our commitment to Jesus?

2. To rebuild the house of God a holistic vision of God's commonwealth is helpful. This guiding vision of God's commonwealth on earth must be scripturally-based - rooted in the word of God. There are dangers, however, in this quest for vision. One danger is that the conceptual aspect of faith will receive a higher priority than the incarnational aspect. Also, if the Bible is exalted as an external authority for obedience which breaks down the relationship between a believer and their inner spirit/conscience/faith then the Bible has become an idol. Christians have often fallen into idolatry by following leaders who brandish "scriptural authority" and who seek to impose dogma upon and enforce "right beliefs" among believers. "Right beliefs" have also been imposed on non-believers through European state-churches and through a racist and culturally-imperialist evangelization of the Americas.

Christians who are seekers of a new vision of God's commonwealth on earth can be called together and organized into small groups. The Bible must be placed in the hands of all, whose search for truth in scripture will be aided by: 1. using the light of Jesus; 2. discounting the authority of church doctrines and religious leaders; and 3. maintaining an integrity with one's own experiences and inner

spirit/conscience/faith. Small groups engaged in Bible study and dialogue can focus on Jesus, the call to discipleship, and formulating a vision of God's commonwealth.

A valuable tool for Bible study is using a Christ-enlightened understanding of the gift and purity systems. When sorted out these two systems conflict with each other. The clerical class, justified by the purity system, has a strong vested interest in maintaining the purity system. But the clerical class has no part in Jesus' new covenant. Thus conflict between religious authorities, who adhere to the purity system, and faithful disciples can be expected. Christians who are members of churches will have to face the issue of whether or not to make a break from churches held captive to the purity system and priestly-pastoral leadership. All who are engaged in Bible study can be encouraged to respond to new truths and practice their faith daily.

3. To form a vision of God's commonwealth we must envision the wholeness of Jesus' life. Faith in Jesus must be understood as a full-time commitment to discipleship. But degenerative Christianity calls believers to a part-time commitment, removes most of the costs of discipleship, and fails to offer a liberating alternative to the ways of the nations. Most churches accommodate themselves to the idols of the world, find their small niche in society, and function in a role of subservience to secular institutions. Degenerative Christianity makes conversion to Jesus a simple, private, "spiritual" matter. Discipleship is largely considered an individual matter - to accommodate a modern, fragmented lifestyle. But to serve God part-time and to serve "other gods" part-time is idolatry.

Individuals and small groups seeking a new vision must learn how conversion to Jesus results in a holistic, complete Way of life. While conversion occurs individually, a full-time commitment to Jesus calls believers to join or form a holistic discipleship community. Although cultural and historical settings vary, Jesus' practices form the basis for normative practices for all discipleship communities. So Christians must avoid committing themselves to churches or communities that lack or distort major aspects of Jesus' life. Also, Jesus' life, teachings, and practices reveal a unique Way of life that conflicts with the idols, authorities, and traditions of churches and nations. Only by seriously considering the sacrifice, conflict, and persecution that comes with conversion can individuals honestly appraise the costs of discipleship. Thus while seeking a new vision individuals and small groups must question whether or not they are truly willing to make a lifelong

commitment to be disciples of Jesus.

4. What are some of the basic facets of God's commonwealth? The issue of homelessness can serve as a prism for illuminating covenant and ministry. Neither homelessness or God's covenant can be separated from relationship to the land. It is God's will to extend the gift of the promised-land (old covenant)/commonwealth-of-God (new covenant) to all people. But before entering God's commonwealth one must commit oneself to God's covenant. Disobedience to God's covenant by breaking just relationships with God, neighbors, and the land results in social injustice, homelessness, and judgement. The "U.S. narrative," like that of other nations, has upheld the idols of wealth and private property, violated God's covenant, and produced much poverty, pollution, and homelessness. Degenerative Christianity has also broken and distorted God's covenant. Most churches lead Christians into a human-devised covenant, into a part-time faith commitment. Most churches support the idols of wealth and private property which result in exploitation and degradation of the environment. Instead of entering into God's commonwealth many Christians have invested in private homes, lands, and worldly securities. Most churches support a separatist and paternalistic relationship with poor and homeless people. Not surprisingly, church programs for poor people, while doing some good and assisting many people, result in little deep-rooted change or social transformation.

So, how does one enter into God's commonwealth on earth? First, one personally accepts Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Then one makes a public, full-time commitment to God's covenant. Through the ritual of adult baptism individuals or small groups take the leap of faith into a new covenant discipleship community. The new covenant Way of Jesus calls for breaking from: 1. private possessions; 2. patriarchal family traditions; and 3. jobs. In God's commonwealth disciples share all things in common and form a new family based on equality and mutual service. In Jesus' new covenant family, disciples find their "home." The gift of land may be sought and, when possible, discipleship communities can establish strong rural-urban connections. In discipleship communities all work is Christ-centered and community-originated. The "internal" work of communities may vary depending on the circumstances. But the "outreach" work of all new covenant communities involves 3 basic ministries: evangelization, prophetic proclamations and actions, and hospitality. A hospitality ministry can emphasize simplicity, "personalism," and a free sharing

of God's gifts with poor and homeless people. Through a full-time commitment to Jesus/God and to a new covenant Way of life, Christians' labor will bear much fruit.

Individuals and small groups can seek to develop a common vision of God's commonwealth that reflects fidelity to God's covenant, fidelity to Jesus' unique new covenant Way. If a number of people share a similar vision they can discuss the practical implications of forming (or joining) a new covenant community. People may want to begin taking small steps, in their personal lives or as a group, towards community formation. Bonding of group members can be strengthened through Bible study, dialogue, prayer, worship, and group actions. But adult baptism and entry into a discipleship community should proceed only when people are prepared to fully commit themselves to Jesus' new covenant.

5. A full-time commitment to God's covenant will bring conflict - and temptations to compromise or shrink back. So, a guiding vision, which clearly shows some of the dimensions of God's commonwealth, can help preserve unity and resolve in times of conflict. Small groups, then, may desire to expand the dimensions of their common vision before forming or entering into a discipleship community.

The relationship between "church and state" can become a serious problem for faithful communities. History reveals that both the Old Testament Hebrew faith and the Christian faith degenerated through attempts to blend God's covenant with the covenants of nation-states. Israel, by seeking a king like all the nations, turned away from God's undisputed leadership. Israel's history, from the monarchy to Jesus' crucifixion, revealed that no nation-state, under any governmental leaders or under any written, legal codes, could achieve a just social order. The Christian faith similarly degenerated when the church entered into an idolatrous alliance with the Roman empire. Despite alterations in the church-state relationship most of Christianity in the U.S. remains deeply compromised by its sanctifying of state authority. Most Christians profess faith in God and allegiance to the U.S. government. Most Christians believe in the secular idols of written, legal codes and trinitarian government. But the U.S. government has always been and is now a racist, classist, and sexist institution which can never establish a just social order. Similarly, many churches are divided along racial and class lines.

God's covenant is different from and exclusive of the covenants of

nation-states. Yahweh is a God of universal sovereignty whose commonwealth spreads over all national boundaries. Only God's commonwealth can establish racial, ethnic, and international solidarity and justice. Thus those who enter God's covenant (Jesus' new covenant) must not compromise on God's leadership. Only through faithful discipleship to Jesus can God's commonwealth spread and bring justice and liberation to the ends of the earth.

Discipleship communities are called to a prophetic, not a reformist, relationship with government. So Christians who commit themselves fully to God's covenant will be faced with making a break from our nation's covenant. Entrants into God's commonwealth may leave government jobs, refuse welfare assistance, decline jury duty, resist military induction, refuse oaths or pledges of allegiance to the state, abstain from the electoral process, and not lobby for specific laws. Privileged white Christians, in particular, can learn to practice a deeper form of solidarity with oppressed groups than promoting a shallow, reformist agenda. White Christians can work for full integration and justice in discipleship communities and outreach ministries and learn the cost of true solidarity with our sisters and brothers of all races, nationalities, and ethnic groups.

6. Some issues, like violence and war, can be very divisive. The temptations to support or use violence can be very strong and are potentially destructive to a community. So, before a new covenant community forms it is wise to form a consensus on the issues of violence and war. Then the dividing line can be clearly drawn between the community and the world - and not within the community.

History shows that human violence and war are primary characteristics of the world and of the nations and that both the Hebrew faith and the Christian faith degenerated by conforming to the violent ways of the world. Yahweh liberated the Hebrew slaves from Egypt without resorting to human violence. And unlike the covenants of nation-states God's covenant at Sinai forbade killing and contained no martial obligations. But the Hebrew faith degenerated. Through the purity system Israel developed "holy war" theology justifying human warfare. Then Israel slid into greater conformity with other nations by establishing political and military hierarchies with a professional standing army. After the early pacifist Christian communities the Christian faith similarly degenerated. Christianity developed "just war" theology and sanctified warfare of the secular nation-state. Since the time of Constantine Christians have fought in an endless number of

wars. But all wars and violent revolutions violate God's covenant. Participation in war is idolatrous. Combatants in war generally uphold the idols of state sovereignty & human governance, weapons & military might, and human-devised ideologies. Most churches continue to replace the word of God with the truth-shredding "traditions of men" which contradict Jesus' teachings and practices.

Jesus' new covenant offers a Way that is different from the violent ways of the nations. The Way of Jesus requires more than commitment to a shallow form of pacifism (such as opposition only to wars and nuclear weapons). The Way of Jesus calls followers to a holistic life of nonviolence. Discipleship communities, if they are to remain close to the heart of God, must always nurture a spirituality of nonviolence and resist temptations to use violence. The peace of God can be nurtured within each disciple. Disciples can develop peaceful relationships and practice nonviolent conflict resolution. By bearing Jesus' nonviolent cross disciples can nurture a "resurrection faith" which overcomes fears of persecution and death and which boldly proclaims the love and power of God. As peacemakers in a violent world, disciples may participate in nonviolence training and organized nonviolent resistance, develop local and international networks of solidarity, creatively unmask and expose military idols, minister with people victimized by militarism, love our enemies, pray for the conversion of rulers, and endure all violent persecution and atrocities. True liberating freedom, union with God, and eternal life are the rewards for all who adhere to Jesus' new covenant Way.

"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32)

7. Another potentially divisive issue to explore before forming a new covenant community is abortion. An in-depth exploration which addresses both the oppression of women and the process of pregnancy and childbirth can overcome divisions and broaden people's vision of God's commonwealth. In particular, such an exploration can reveal how the roles of women and children in God's commonwealth contrast with the world.

History reveals a patriarchal world that distorts both female and male sexuality and identity. The patriarchal world is characterized by the subjugation of women's labor and reproductive power to men. Women's oppression runs deep - it is rooted in the institutions of patriarchal marriage and family. One major patriarchal gender role for women is childbearing for a patriarch. In the patriarchal family boys

are more highly valued than girls because sons are necessary to perpetuate a patriarchal family lineage. Also, boys are more highly valued than girls because males are viewed as instruments of violence who can supply military "manpower" to a nation. A second major gender role for women is providing patriarchal sexual pleasure. Due to historical traditions of male dominance, patriarchal male sexuality has intimately connected sexual pleasure with the violence of dominative power. Men learn to view and use women, whether freely or through coercion and violence, as objects for sexual pleasure.

The large number of induced abortions in the United States today is a symptom of our modern patriarchal capitalist society. Capitalist development has been systematically uprooting people from the land, breaking down community and family relationships, and giving extra emphasis to women's gender role of providing patriarchal sexual pleasure. Widespread abortions are one consequence. Neither of the two groups that dominate the abortion debate offers a just and liberating solution to women's oppression and widespread abortions.

The Christian churches also have not been able to shed much light on the abortion issue. Most churches are deeply compromised. Christianity has idolatrously built a patriarchal religious house which is deeply complicit in the world's violence and discrimination against women. But God's house/family/commonwealth is not the same as patriarchal churches.

God's commonwealth offers women and men a new vision for womanhood and manhood and a unique path for empowering transformation. Jesus' new covenant family is characterized by equality rather than male superiority. Entry into Jesus' new covenant occurs through the public ritual of adult baptism. As part of this ritual believers may be christened with new Spirit-inspired names which replace their patriarchal surnames. Marriage in God's commonwealth is based on equality and mutuality. Also, children are to occupy a central place in community and be integrated into a holistic Way of life. Childcare is the equal responsibility of husband and wife - with the community also contributing. While marriage and childbearing are affirmed in God's commonwealth, women's primary role is as bearers of God's word and Spirit. Communal sharing of possessions, shared childcare, communal work enterprises and outreach ministries, and small women's groups and men's groups all can encourage the fruitful release of women's and men's creative talents. By maturing in discipleship women and men can give witness to a powerful

alternative to patriarchal churches and society.

After Christians put their own house in order they will be able, with integrity, to speak God's prophetic word to a sinful, patriarchal world. Outreach ministries of prophetic proclamations and actions, hospitality, and evangelization can shed light on the abortion issue, reach out to pregnant women and others, and call people to Jesus.

8. Another potentially divisive issue to explore before forming or joining a new covenant community is the morality of homosexual orientation and practice. And the issue of homosexuality really is just an extension of the more basic issue of developing healthy attitudes and practices concerning sexuality. These issues are very important for expanding the vision of God's commonwealth, putting the "Christian house" in order, and building up the internal strength of a community.

The Judeo-Christian heritage, deeply enmeshed in the purity system, has much that requires repentance and change. The purity system has greatly distorted sexuality. The purity system views humanity as essentially polluted, views the body's genitals as "shameful parts," supports an unjust patriarchal marriage covenant, believes sexual intercourse, even among married couples, results in ritual impurity, supports a production-oriented sexuality for married women (in particular), stigmatizes childless wives and body defects and "illegitimate" children, supports purity codes that have double standards for men and women, and supports the overarching goal of building up the "houses" of patriarchs. While the Bible judges some specific homosexual acts as sinful, the Christian purity system stigmatizes homosexual orientation as "unnatural" and condemns all homosexual practice. As a result, degenerative Christianity bears great responsibility for directing discrimination and violence at homosexual people, fueling homophobia, promoting false and shaming theology, spreading prejudicial stereotypes, and reacting with fear, ignorance, and prejudice to the AIDS epidemic.

Those who enter God's covenant can base their sexuality in the gift system. The gift system views humanity as essentially good, affirms people's worth simply in "being" (and not through "works"), views the body and all its parts as "good," applies one standard of conduct to all, affirms the freedom of all adults to give oneself to another adult in a just marriage covenant, affirms the goodness of sexual intercourse in a just marriage covenant, and, through entry into God's covenant,

redeems all "sinners" and "outcasts." Since God shows no partiality, God makes no distinction between heterosexual and homosexual practice. Hence, discipleship communities need to stand in solidarity with homosexual people, counter homophobia, and affirm the goodness of homosexual intercourse in a just marriage covenant. When Christians put their own house in order then they may take prophetic stands against societal oppression of, and violence towards, gays and lesbians. And, of course, communities can offer a compassionate hospitality ministry, with an open invitation to accept Jesus and enter into God's commonwealth on earth.

9. A critical area that must not be neglected in our vision of God's commonwealth is devotional practices. A broad vision of God's commonwealth recognizes the importance of a strong and deep devotional foundation. Besides practices of Bible reading, prayer, solitude, and revering-the-earth, the practice of corporate worship is of great importance. To worship God "in spirit and truth" new covenant communities will need to clear their worship channel from the interference of the purity system and degenerative church traditions.

The purity system establishes boundaries that symbolically distance people from God. The purity system designates certain fixed locations for worship and supports the construction of worship houses. These church buildings often have official state-approval. In the new covenant, however, Jesus becomes the locus for worship - replacing all fixed locations and designated worship-houses (churches). And the gift system declares that there is no spatial separation between God and faithful disciples: God's presence and holiness are located in faithful disciples of Jesus. Thus worship "in spirit and truth" occurs not at any state-approved fixed location or human-constructed worship-house but at the various locations where disciples gather.

At fixed worship locations the purity system supports a priestly caste of professional clergy who symbolically distance most worshipers from God. The modern purity system reproduces a privileged, clerical class through a primarily conceptual path of seminary knowledge and accreditation. The purity system establishes an ordination ritual which divides believers into two unequal classes. The privileged clerical class then functions as intermediaries who distance worshipers from God. However, in the new covenant Jesus becomes the sole leader of worship, replacing the entire clerical class. And the only ordination that the gift system recognizes is the ordination of the Holy Spirit through adult baptism that creates an inclusive "priesthood of all

believers." This new covenant equality is to be reflected in participatory worship where all share their gifts.

The purity system can distort all religious rituals. The purity system can turn communion into a mystifying, hierarchical, and individualized ritual which has little meaning for daily practices. However, in the gift system rituals emanate from the common practices and experiences of faithful discipleship communities. For example, communion encompasses 3 major common practices: "love" (exemplified by communal sharing of all things), "hope" (exemplified by forming a new covenant family and carrying the nonviolent cross), and "faith" (exemplified by all confessing Jesus and worshiping as an inclusive "holy priesthood" with no clerical class).

The purity system shapes theological and liturgical language to support an unjust patriarchal society. God is fashioned into a male deity who supports male-headship, male leadership, male-dominated hierarchies, male traditions. Women are explicitly or implicitly devalued. But Jesus presents a new Way, subverting the "traditions of men." Accordingly, for the healing of the planet, it is helpful to worship God with female, as well as "subversive male," verbal imagery.

By rooting out the purity system from all beliefs and practices, new covenant discipleship communities can worship God "in spirit and truth." Worship, as central to a deeply devotional life, then can be very unifying, healing, and empowering.

Foundational vision

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a (person) building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a (person) who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house." (Lk. 6:46-49 NRSV)

This book has attempted to reveal that most churches in the United States are not built upon the rock of Jesus. How then shall they endure the storms that are coming? How shall we endure the storms

that are coming? For those who have ears to hear: it is time to reorganize ourselves into a living house built on and rooted in a whole-life commitment to Jesus. The time is now to reorganize ourselves into communities that are truly based on Jesus' new covenant Way.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Prov. 29:18 CEV) This book has also attempted to present a broad and holistic vision of God's commonwealth that is always faithful to Jesus. A broad vision is necessary in order to lay a deep and solid foundation. If groups of people are in the process of forming a new covenant community then it is strongly suggested here that believers form a common vision that encompasses many areas of life. A community or a movement short on vision will easily fragment or degenerate. A new covenant community's vision, of course, should flow and expand with experience. But unless a solid start is made - built on the whole foundation of Jesus' new covenant Way - the powers and pressures of the world will likely neutralize or overcome the community. Also, while we cannot know the future we can know and lay a deep community foundation now. Laying a deep foundation means that the initial leap of faith will be great. If we see Jesus clearly we know there is a big difference between Jesus' unique Way of life and our fragmented lives and church traditions. To begin a new covenant community we must again risk taking a large step of faith by leaving our old way of life and finding new work and a new family in discipleship communities. To begin a community by compromising on important aspects of discipleship is to begin by refusing to follow Jesus. Why deceive ourselves? And why not do God's will? It is, after all of humankind's folly, God's will that will be done on earth. And cannot those who wish to base their faith on a shallow foundation simply join a church? But if we truly want to enter God's commonwealth on earth then let us look intently at Jesus, view the broad dimensions of God's true house, and count the costs of discipleship. But let us not compromise on vision or shorten the leap of faith.

Perils on the journey

"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether (you have) enough to complete it? Otherwise, when (you have) laid a foundation, and (are) not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock (you), saying, 'This (one) began

to build, and was not able to finish.'" (Lk.14:28-30)

Jesus warns us to count the cost before choosing to set out on a life of faith. In the '60s and '70s there was a small revival of intentional Christian communities. The vast majority of these new communities crumbled and broke apart. Ched Myers writes about the failure of Christian community:

"Is the gospel too demanding, we too frail, the world too overwhelming? What is the 'good news' to those of us who have been broken by the vision, who have wept bitterly as we realized that we had both deserted and been deserted?....Is it that we simply made too many mistakes, or were too idealistic, and that if we are to continue it must be with some scaled-down version? Or is it that we just have to keep on trying until we get it right? Please God, not that, not again....

There is no happy resocialization back into the middle-class bosom of America, for no other reason than we know too much to live the lie. It is a terrible realization that, despite experiences of miscarriage, collapse, debacle, defeat, and despair, there is still no more compelling alternative to the corruption of the age than radical discipleship."¹

Many who started down the path of discipleship fell away. The casualties of intentional communities are many. There are many reasons for these failures - but ultimately, these failures are ours - and failure is not an unexpected part of discipleship. Regardless of our failures - God's word remains - and there is salvation nowhere else. Our ultimate allegiance and commitment is to Jesus - and if a community breaks up - fails - our commitment of discipleship to Jesus remains. We are not trying to build a secure and ideal discipleship community - we are trying to be faithful to Jesus - and what must not "fail" is our personal commitment to Jesus. For those who have the ears to hear: the time is now for forming new discipleship communities - not in order to re-experience the pain of failure - but rather to heal the wounds and to renew our journey on the path of discipleship. Learning from mistakes can make disciples more mature, more willing to endure and resolve conflict. But, again, let us count the cost. There is the likelihood of communities failing, people dropping out, and the certainty of persecution.

Persecution can take many forms and it is a sign of faith if a community can stick together through it all. There are historical examples of whole communities moving en masse from one location to another because of persecution. Also, in many foreign countries Christians have been imprisoned, raped, tortured, or murdered

because of their faith. This same cost will be more equally shared by North American Christians when there is a significant revival here of discipleship communities. Through all trials and tribulations a community must learn to stick together as family. "Count it all joy, my (sisters and brothers), when you meet various trials..." (Jas. 1:2) This word from James makes sense only if a community endures. Faithfulness in times of persecution is the greatest test of faith - and to pass through such times without compromising one's faith can only bring more joy. How badly do we want to experience and radiate the love and joy of God? Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt. 28:20) Will we stay with Jesus?

"There is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content....For the love of money is the root of all evils."

(1 Tim. 6:6-8,10)

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth." (Mt. 6:19)

New covenant discipleship communities undoubtedly will be sorely tested by materialistic desires whether they are in "lean times" or in "bountiful times."

Lean times may result from inadequate preparation for community formation, lack of follow-through, immaturity & bad decisions, or significant persecution. In lean times materialistic desires, a possessive spirit, and a powerful fear of poverty can undermine a community. Bickering, hoarding, shrinking back from ministries, and internal community disintegration may result. Lean times, however, are opportunities for maturing in discipleship. Jesus offers a comforting word for lean times: "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink..." (Mt. 6:25ff) As part of God's family, discipleship communities must endure lean times, stick together as family, and learn "godliness with contentment."

Bountiful times, both in terms of material abundance and growth in new converts, also presents temptations for internal corruption. A resurgent craving for material security can take hold of a community, resulting in the "laying up of treasures." A community that gravitates toward middle-class values (e.g., higher standards of living, accumulation of goods, savings accounts, health & life & house insurance, middle-class vacations) is a community being converted into yet another form of degenerative religion. Also, a large increase

in a community's members can result in a rigid institutionalization of structures. The trappings of institutionalization may be avoided by limiting community size, supporting new community formations (or spin-offs), and supporting decentralized structures within and among communities. Discipleship communities can seek unity through love (and loose affiliation) and not through a mammoth organization with centralized operations, centralized authority, and one large membership base. A revival movement will endure and be fruitful only through daily obedience to Jesus and by maintaining a smooth flow-through of God's gifts to others beyond one's own community.

"And Jesus began to say to them, 'Take heed that no one leads you astray'..." (Mk. 13:5ff)

Can one be a feeling, compassionate person of faith in these times and not be hungering and thirsting for revival? But this hunger can be exploited. In these times many will come and encourage apocalyptic speculations about the "end times" and when Christ will return. Many will be led away from the Way and led into

"myths and...speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith; whereas the aim of our charge is love." (1 Tim. 1:4-5)

Paul and the early Christians believed that "Christ is coming soon" (Rev. 22:20) - and this belief was an encouragement to radical discipleship. Much of modern degenerative Christianity puts down this ancient faith as misguided - and doesn't the passage of nearly 2000 years prove it? Yet it is the sinful and idolatrous state of Christianity which prolongs this age. What hypocrisy! If Christians were only obedient to Jesus then they could better understand Paul's and the early Christians' belief in the impending return of Christ. Faithful discipleship hastens the "end times" - it brings history closer to completion. Yet all speculations as to specific times when Christ will return are in vain:

"It is not for you to know times or seasons which (God) has fixed by (God's) own authority." (Acts 1:7)

"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only (God)." (Mk. 13:32)

"Christ is coming soon" - but "soon" does not indicate a specific time and will probably not be in our lifetimes. It is so much a part of modern American culture to expect immediate gratification. But borrowing from native American culture, faithful disciples can view their labor as preparing the way for the next 7 generations. As for now, disciples must carry the cross unto death. Like many Jews in Jesus' time, who desired a Messiah to immediately and miraculously

impose God's kingdom on earth, so today some Christians expectantly await Christ's second coming - but refuse to obey Jesus' call to leave all and follow him. They await Christ but refuse to be converted to Jesus. They await paradise but won't enter God's commonwealth on earth. Is not their wait in vain? God is also waiting (and working) - and it is God's waiting that will not be in vain. God's power is as unlimited as is the breadth of the universe. God's unfathomable power is waiting to be tapped. Unfortunately Christians' connections with Jesus are badly clogged up. Let us not be deceived: there will be no revival of faith on earth, there will be no new outpouring of God's Spirit, until people once again risk committing their whole lives to the obedience of faith in Jesus. And it's just a matter of time. Will we be the people that risks obedience to God? Or will the world have to wait for some more worthy future generation?

There is much work to do:

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into the harvest."

(Mt. 9:37-38)

The work to be done is enormous - but not overwhelming - for it is God's Spirit that will bring the work to completion - and we are only to be a few of God's humble servants. Therefore let the coming revival rest not on vain deceptions and false apocalyptic hopes but on a sober "counting of the costs" and then on the joy of communing with God in a new covenant discipleship community.

Responding to the call

There is only one Way. The whole world is perishing and there is only one Way that will lead to justice on earth. Millions are dying, billions are suffering under great duress, ecosystems are being destroyed. And there is only one promising response: to follow Jesus. God's will will be done on earth. There is no future in breaking God's covenant and in being disobedient to God's word. The costs of discipleship are high but the costs of disobedience to God are higher still - and these costs are being borne by the world. To do God's will is the only "effective" work, the only meaningful work, the only fruitful work. And God's will has been revealed. The Way of the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ is the world's only hope for bringing justice and liberation to the ends of the earth. Jesus comes proclaiming the good news of the commonwealth of God on earth. Jesus issues the call to enter, saying, "Follow me."

How do we respond? It is not enough to give a verbal response. It is not enough to make a double-minded lukewarm response. It is not enough simply to compare ourselves with others and think that we are "better," i.e., relatively more faithful. God is not deceived. It is necessary to respond whole-heartedly - with our whole lives. The choice is offered: to take the leap of faith - or - to turn away.

"Now it happened that as (Jesus) was praying alone the disciples were with him; and he asked them, 'Who do the people say that I am?' And they answered, 'John the Baptist; but others say, Elijah; and others, that one of the old prophets has risen.' And he said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'" (Lk. 9:18-20)

Footnote

1. Ched Myers, Binding The Strong Man, Orbis books, Maryknoll, 1988, pp. 455-6.

You've shown

You've shown
you're willing to give
But now
are you willing
to sacrifice?
You've bent
but haven't broken
Still your will is
in control
You're not all mine
says a jealous God
Still you're holding out
as if time passing

will change my Will
My children
I can wait you out
It is for your good
that discipline comes
How shall you endure in a
divided house
when tribulation comes?
Did Jesus lay down his life
so that you might go
your individual way?
Hearken to my voice

Revival

I've been taken
to the depths
so that I might see
what's there:
fear
loneliness
emptiness
and more.
But the bottom
is not my home:
it's not
my dwelling place.
So I move on.
I rise up
lighter -
having discarded
my excess baggage:
my heavy burdens
my imposing desires
my accusing anger
my stubborn will.
The heap-pile of my
decaying garbage
mesmerizes me
but the aroma
awakens me.
I move higher
but my feet
still touch the ground:
having developed roots
in the deep places
I am stretched
but not torn,
intertwined
but not lost.
And as I pass along the way
I see myself
more clearly

reflected
in the eyes
and lives
of others:
my sisters and brothers.
Touching one another
brings
to the surface
our deep connections --
our unfulfilled
unity
in the process
of becoming.
From the heart
come words
and expressions
of pain
and sorrow,
warmth
and love --
It is more than a beginning --
it is --
a homecoming.
So...
Nourished
by the rich soil
(made ever richer
by composted garbage),
heartened
and enlivened
by rubbing shoulders
with the folksy people
climbing out of ditches,
I begin to hear
the music
(cont.)

in the background
growing louder.
The music freely flows
from my heart -
through my lips -
yes -
we are singing!
My feet
begin to move
and in the ritual
of the dance
I remember --
I do not forget --
my journey into joy:
where I have been
where I am now
where I am going.
The answers now
are not so important
as the connections --
and even the questions -
which remain -
dim
in the glowing crescendo --
for the radiance
of the light
overcomes.