

***Revival of the
Revolutionary
Discipleship
Movement***



Hope for the world

This book calls for a revival of Jesus' revolutionary discipleship movement. Recognizing that a revolutionary movement requires a revolutionary commitment, this book calls for a new and radical commitment to Jesus. It calls for embarking on the lifelong path of revolutionary discipleship and working to transform the world. However, since people are not ready for this commitment or lifestyle, this book intends to help prepare people. This book is for Christians who are:

- working for peace and justice
- disillusioned with churches and institutionalized religion
- seeking an alternative and sustainable way of life.

This book is a follow-up to *Christian Idolatry/Christian Revival*.



THIS BOOK IS NOT FOR SALE

*Revival of the
Revolutionary
Discipleship
Movement*

by Kurt Greenhalgh

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Preface and Acknowledgements

These are difficult times we are living in. Since 9-11 the world has changed. Not so much in new ways but rather in rapidity. Regressive trends have accelerated. The world seems to be getting more violent and dangerous and the nation-state more militaristic. Not a new characteristic - just a change in degree. Consequently, the gap is growing between a radical alternative lifestyle and mainstream society. It is painful to see this gap widening - even as I struggle to close the gap between where I am and where Jesus is calling me. This book is a call to move much closer to Jesus and into a revolutionary discipleship movement.

My apologies for any errors or biases in this book. I write from a background of a privileged, college-educated, white, heterosexual, North American male. Moving towards deeper solidarity.

Unless otherwise noted, the Bible used in this book is the NRSV: New Revised Standard Version, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN, 1990. Also used frequently is the RSV: Harper Study Bible, Revised Standard Version, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

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Come what may...let's follow Jesus and get on with the revolution!

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CHAPTER 1

Hope for a Revival?

Is there hope for a revival?

These are hard times for Christians hungering for radical social justice and renewed spirituality. The past couple decades have been very regressive. All sectors of society seem to be regressing. Government is retrenching on commitments to racial justice and affirmative action. There is a backlash against the women's movement and gay rights. Most of society seems to be taking a more punitive attitude towards poor people, homeless people, and immigrants. Food stamps and other aid programs for poor people are being restricted. Society is becoming more militarized and authoritarian. The U.S. more and more is becoming a police state. Police forces are growing. Police powers are increasing as individual rights are receding. Surveillance and security measures are increasing. Prison and jail construction has boomed. The inmate population has grown to one-and-a-half million Americans - with millions more on probation and parole. Society is more determined to punish individuals, especially poor people and people of color, than it is willing to seriously address root problems. Much of society is showing signs of distress. Despite a long period of high corporate profits, economic stability for many Americans is declining. Corporations, civic leaders, and lawmakers have no solution for a more economically stratified society, the transfer of factories to foreign countries, downward pressure on union wages, the increase in homelessness - especially among women and children, the breakdown of communities and marriages, the persistent violence against women and among youth, and persistent racial segregation in society.

Ecologically, these are hard times for the whole earth. The world's ecosystems are seriously threatened by numerous wars, mounting pollution and toxic wastes, and economic exploitation of lands, oceans, and forests. Deforestation, loss of wetlands, high rates

of soil erosion, groundwater contamination, acid rain, ozone depletion, and global warming bode ill for the future. In some countries important agricultural land is covered with land mines. Tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste continue to accumulate and leak radiation, contaminating the environment. Biological diversity is declining - with an alarming rate of extinction of species. The earth and most of life on it are in trouble.

The Christian churches are not providing a light in the present darkness. The churches don't even attempt to encourage or practice holistic discipleship to Jesus. Neither are they neutral. Rather, the churches obstruct and run counter to real discipleship to Jesus. In large part, although with minor differences, the lifestyles of Christians mesh with the mores of society. As a result, the social forces sweeping the nation are also sweeping the churches.

Alternative, intentional Christian communities, while doing many wonderful things, have been struggling. The past several decades are marked by the disintegration of many alternative Christian communities. Even long-enduring communities have lost some of their prophetic edge or are struggling to maintain members - and could use a new infusion of life and Spirit.

These regressive times seem to defy hope. The tide has changed. The old hopes and visions have dissipated. Conservatism, with some reactionary edges, has settled in. No revival movement seems to be close at hand. How can one maintain hope in these times?

Regressive times do not snuff out the possibilities for a revival. Regressive times offer the possibility of providing a starker contrast between the ways of the nations and the Way of God. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, possibilities for a revival are at our doorstep. Only we need faith to see them and the heart to seek them.

The bad news of the world is only one side of the coin. On the other side is the gospel of Jesus, the good news. Amid the distress and crisis in the world God has been active. God has been actively working to change us and lead us on the path of peace and justice. Even now God is preparing a Way in the wilderness. A secure and

fruitful Way is prepared for us. There is indeed hope for a revival. In fact, the Way is ready now. That is, God is ready and all is prepared. But something seems to be missing. What could it be?

If regressive times do not prevent a revival and if God is fully ready then on what does a revival depend? Not to be evasive, but the answer to the above question depends, in part, upon *which revival* we are hoping for.

A revival of altar girls, Beanie babies, and espresso shops??

Which revival? Puff and fluff? Fire and brimstone? Smoke and mirrors? Or the real thing? Many Christians have hopes and desires for some sort of Christian revival. These hopes can take different forms. In mainstream churches Christians may be inspired and "revived" for months by token changes - by minute but well-rehearsed and well-publicized gestures. Many Christians feel uplifted whenever patriarchal religion shuffles its feet - as if movement of any kind is significant. Glory! - a new church conference resolution on peace! Hallelujah! - an ecumenical meeting of top church leaders! Praise the Lord! - small groups forming to have potluck dinners! Praise the Holy Father! - less than twenty centuries after Jesus, the Vatican now officially approves altar girls! (I never thought I'd live to see the day!) And Hail Mary! Spread the good news: for the new millennium the Pope expands indulgences!¹ What will happen next?? Dare we leave our seats? The benefits of remaining in church have never been greater!

In more lively Christian churches a revival may rest upon stirring people into a yet greater fervor. Speculation about "the end times" and naming "signs" foretelling Christ's imminent second coming adds fuel to the fire. Amen, brother - can you see Him coming yet? No - but I can feel Him - coming closer! Soon and very soon! Alleluia! In some circles a revival may be generated by putting the right ingredients together and simply grinding it out. Bible-pounding speakers, gospel music, and a large sanctuary or tent provide the basics for prolonged meetings on consecutive days or nights. Look! The Holy Spirit is moving! They're swaying and shaking and falling

from their seats! Slain by the Spirit! - Or - did Alice fall when she dozed off? And did Frank go too long without a drink before he started shaking? Hmmm. (I can see the fingers pointing at me now - "Scoffer!" - for "Scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing..." 2 Pet. 3:3) Still another revival may focus more on the bottom line - headcount - with the two most important statistics being attendance and number responding to the altar call. 20,000. 25%. Hosanna in the highest! Joy in heaven! 5,000 souls saved for Christ and added to heaven's coffers! And a few more notches on our ego-straps! Hallelujah!

Well - not to be in any way disrespectful - but the revival advocated for in this book is a little different from the revivals described above. The revival advocated here is a radical, i.e., deep-rooted, revival of holistic discipleship to Jesus. This is a call for a new discipleship movement in our times. Or, to put it another way, this is a call for a revival of the revolutionary movement that Jesus began nearly 2000 years ago.

A radical revival involves more than simple conversion to Jesus, more than a brief encounter with the Holy Spirit, more than a commitment to some form of personal piety, and more than a deepened social concern. A radical revival involves a call for a *lifelong commitment to follow Jesus and his revolutionary Way of changing the world*. To live out this commitment involves forming new discipleship communities.

How can Jesus and the discipleship movement be described as revolutionary? Well, it's true that Jesus is not your ordinary, run-of-the-mill revolutionary. Jesus' revolutionary movement is committed to nonviolence. It is based on the power of love - and is in conflict with the power of violence. Yet Jesus' unique Way of changing the world is not weak or wimpy. On the contrary, the discipleship movement is the grandest experiment in courage and risk-taking. It challenges the powers and authorities of the nations and lifts up the banner of God's commonwealth on earth. It is all about a new way of living infused with the Spirit of life.

The radical revival this book calls for is possible *at any time* because it does not depend upon *external* factors. A radical revival

does not depend upon what politicians are promising or what government leaders are or are not doing. Nor does it depend upon whether the nation is on its normal "peace-time war-footing" or actually engaged in military actions. It does not depend upon national economic growth, a recession, or a depression. A radical revival does not depend upon reforming traditional churches or upon church leaders achieving a higher consciousness. It does not depend upon praying for several years for a revival. It does not even depend upon special autonomous actions by God - such as apocalyptic divine intervention into human affairs, another Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, an imminent rapture, or Jesus' second coming. Then on what does it depend?

A radical revival depends upon us. That is, a revival depends upon some people willingly choosing to follow Jesus and his revolutionary Way. So it depends upon our will, our choices. It depends upon how badly we want to know Jesus and to see God's power working in our lives. It depends upon how badly we want healing for ourselves, for our children, and for the planet. Literally, whether a radical revival occurs in our lifetimes depends upon the choices we make. Or at least upon the choices *some* of us make, since it only takes a relatively small number of deeply-committed people to begin a revival.

The fact that God has prepared a life-transforming Way for us and is fully ready now to lead a radical revival needs to be followed with the question: But are we ready? For we are the ones for whom the stage is set, for whom God has been laboring. We - all who are alive today - are on center stage on planet Earth. It is our time. We are the only ones who can act now. Whether we like it or not, the responsibility for responding to the world's problems is ours. The spotlight is on us. The opportunity is here for us to shine like stars. People of faith who have gone before us, like a "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1), surround us. They are praying for us to act for the sake of the whole world. Who from our generation will follow Jesus? Are you willing to follow Jesus the whole way?

If we are not ready to make a deep commitment to Jesus, and I believe that very few of us are, then we are still left with some choices. One choice is to work for reforms within existing churches.

Another choice is to prepare and get ready for a wild and adventurous ride with Jesus. The first choice - to work for reforms within existing churches - douses real hope. It means business as usual. It means a prolongation of the status quo, of this murderous patriarchal age. It means, in large part, resisting deep-rooted change. The choice to stay within existing churches means postponing, delaying, or rejecting new practices and sticking with deeply-flawed traditions. It means continuing to worship the churches' domesticated Jesus and domesticated Christ. It means continuing to turn away from the raw and untamed Jesus of the gospels. Those who make the first choice need not read any further.² The rest of this book pertains to those who dare to make the second choice.

The second choice means preparing for a much deeper commitment to Jesus - and it offers real hope. Hope for a radical revival. Hope for a new discipleship movement. Hope for the world.

There is hope for a radical revival only if we can leave church institutions behind and take some big steps forward. Every radical reformation or revival in the past has meant breaking away from established religious institutions and old traditions. Christianity began as a Jewish sect and then made a radical break away from Jewish traditions and from the Jewish establishment. The Reformation began when Martin Luther made a radical break from Roman Catholic traditions and eventually from the Catholic hierarchy. The Anabaptist movement made yet a greater break from the Roman Catholic church and church-state traditions. Every new denomination began as a new beginning, as a breaking away from existing churches and traditions. This pattern of breaking away is necessary because as we see Jesus more clearly we can no longer be satisfied with stagnating church paths.

Looking forward

How does one prepare to join Jesus' revolutionary discipleship movement? How does one prepare to make a deep commitment to Jesus? It is good to seek a deeper understanding of Jesus, his mission, and how to live by his liberating teachings and practices.

Beginning a radical revival involves three parts: 1. developing a new vision of Jesus and God's commonwealth on earth; 2. preparing to make a revolutionary commitment to Jesus; and 3. organizing discipleship communities and actually living out the vision and the commitment. The book Christian Idolatry / Christian Revival (C.I./C.R.) focused on part #1 - on exposing Christian idolatry and developing a new and holistic vision of God's commonwealth. This book continues to expand upon part #1 while emphasizing part #2.

Central to the discipleship movement is the leadership of Jesus, the Messiah. This book seeks to encourage people to fully establish and maintain that leadership in their lives. Three chapters cover different ways of reading the Bible and how they can either enhance or undermine Jesus' leadership. Two chapters focus on preparatory steps before making a revolutionary commitment to Jesus. Preparation helps to shorten the gap between our current lifestyles and what Jesus wants us to be and to do. A chapter on baptism explores this subversive commitment-ritual. A revolutionary baptismal commitment can demarcate between followers of "old-time religion" and those on the path of revolutionary discipleship.

Let us begin by expanding our understanding of Jesus' big mission and why Jesus offers so much hope for the world.

Footnotes

1. Roman Catholic Pope John Paul II decreed a jubilee year from December 25, 1999 to January 6, 2001, during which the faithful had more ways of earning and receiving church-sanctioned plenary indulgences. *If* the Vatican was accurately tapping into the mind of God, then these were valuable indulgences that will reduce time spent in "purgatory." It's a rather big "if."

2. The point here is not to denigrate the good work and positive contributions of individual Christians within churches. Rather, the point is that churches, as organizations, lead Christians *astray*. They lead Christians *away from* full-time discipleship to Jesus. For a

radical critique of the churches and degenerative Christianity, see C.I/C.R., 1993.

Waiting for the dawn

Alone in the darkness
waiting for the dawn.
Why keep watch?
Before, there were songs,
there were visions -
admittedly some illusions -
but now -
there is only brokenness -
the long loneliness -
the uneventful monotony
of time slowly passing
waiting for the breath
of new life.

A strange existence
of attentiveness
and dormancy
impatiently enduring
the dark cycle.

In the cold of the night -
sweat dripping down -
the external evidence
of a passion
yet too deep
to be subdued.

A kindling fire -
awaiting new possibilities -
to burst forth.

Yet, for now -
a steadfast determination
to stay awake
waiting to catch
the first rays
of a new dawn.

CHAPTER 2

The Big Mission & Hope for its Fulfillment

The Big Mission

In general terms, what is the mission of a new and radical revival movement? Is it to revive a middle-class model of Christian life? Is it to prop up the nuclear family? Or to form support groups to mend our broken lives? Is it to save a few souls while turning people's hopes to the heavens and a heavenly afterlife? Or to build more churches? Increase church membership? Increase tithing? Is the mission to promote individual piety or individual holiness among Christians? Is it to work with government and the private sector to develop new ways of helping poor people? So many missions! Degenerative Christianity just has too many missions - which hide and distort the big mission.

The mission of a radical revival movement will be to return to the big mission of Jesus. And what is that? Let us examine a passage from Mark which contains the keys to the big mission. The following passage will be referred to throughout this chapter.

"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 RSV)

The gospel - the good news - proclaims that *the kingdom* - or the commonwealth of God - *is at hand* - here and now.¹ *The time is fulfilled*: there is no more need for waiting for God to act or waiting for a Messiah. The period of waiting is over forever.

Jesus, the Messiah, embraces the mission *to proclaim and spread God's commonwealth over all the earth*. This revolutionary mission will necessarily mean "destroying every rule and every authority and power" (1 Cor. 15:24) in order to fully establish God's commonwealth. It would be futile to try to accomplish this mission without a Messiah.

The earth is too big, the world's population too large, and evil is too powerful. Humanity, on its own, can never achieve justice on earth. If humankind could, then there would be no need for a Messiah or for faith and discipleship. Fortunately, God sent a Messiah. A Messiah is necessary to lead this big mission - no one else is capable of leading it. And the Messiah's leadership is necessary in order to fully accomplish the mission.

Another, and simpler, way of describing the big mission is to say that Jesus' big mission was and is *to save the world*.

"For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." (Jn.3:17)

To save the world means just that. It means to bring salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world. The big mission's emphasis is on *collective salvation* (and not individual salvation). It is to reconcile and unify all humanity and all the earth to the living God. So, "to save the world," is just another way of describing the mission to proclaim and spread God's commonwealth over all the earth.

The good news of God's commonwealth on earth comes with a call *to repent*. Jesus' call for repentance means *to turn to God now* in a complete and holistic way. As an example of this type of repentance Jesus' first disciples left behind their old way of life in order to follow and join Jesus in the big mission. (Mk. 1:15-20) Thus began the revolutionary discipleship movement.

During his lifetime Jesus' work included revealing who God is, revealing the Way of life necessary to change and save the world, and beginning the discipleship movement. Since then, Jesus continues to work to accomplish the big mission through the discipleship movement. Jesus commissions disciples to:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." (Mt. 28:19)

So - are we all ready now to go out and save the world? Or does this big mission sound a bit overwhelming? Do we have doubts about its success? What is the basis for these doubts?

Degenerative Christianity has done a good job curtailing faith and hope. Degenerative Christianity has spread its religion through state power, imperialistic campaigns, bloody crusades, self-righteous

evangelistic preachers, and zealous door-to-door "witnesses for Christ." It has replaced the revolutionary discipleship movement with staid religion. It has replaced the big mission with a sedating message of waiting for "the rapture" and Jesus' second coming. And on and on....Thus most Christians are resigned to the power of sin and evil reigning on earth until Jesus' apocalyptic second coming. Even most progressive Christians exhibit unbelief in the gospel by leading deeply compromised lives - partly being faithful to Jesus and partly being enmeshed in patriarchal society and working for incremental reforms.

Doubts have flourished - so Jesus couples the call to *repent* with the call to *believe in the gospel*. To join Jesus in the big mission requires repentance and faith. So - before letting our doubts shut down our faith let us examine this mission and its possibilities for fulfillment a little more closely.

The Mission's Two Major Aspects

The big mission really has two major aspects: 1. inner conversion; and 2. outward expansion. Degenerative Christianity has done an excellent job of distorting both aspects. In both aspects degenerative Christianity has overemphasized individualism over collectivism. It has also emphasized commitment to a patriarchal church and its traditions instead of commitment to Jesus and his Way. So both aspects need to be re-claimed and re-focused.

1. Inner Conversion

The call to follow Jesus is a call to help change the world. But this change begins with oneself. Thus it is also a call for inner conversion. Inner conversion focuses on Jesus/God and on transforming our hearts and minds and, consequently, our daily practices. The primary field of work for a disciple of Jesus is one's own self. We are to change ourselves - since that is what we have most control and responsibility over. As we change ourselves we will affect others. Our transformation is based on the power of love, which is why we should never try to change others by pressure, coercion, deception, manipulation, or violence.

It is God's will that our inner conversion grows ever deeper. The journey of discipleship to Jesus is meant to be a journey of continual progress. Progress means always continuing to change, grow, and mature in faith and discipleship. It is perhaps helpful to remember that we are essentially spiritual beings - we are souls. Our souls have bodies but the body will wear out and die. The soul will live on. If we recognize we are souls and that spiritual progress of our souls does not end with death then we can more easily embrace Jesus' teaching and the revolutionary commitment it entails:

"Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." (Mt. 10:28)

It is a deep truth that this lifetime is primarily for our souls and not for our bodies. Our priority is not first to seek physical pleasures, comforts, and luxuries. Instead we are to follow Jesus and seek first God's commonwealth on earth. Through discipleship to Jesus we will achieve personal transformation and empowerment as we become more and more like Jesus. It is a wonderful calling to be children of the living God and to grow more into the likeness of Jesus, of Christ, of God. By growing and maturing and bonding ever more closely with Jesus/God we allow God's illuminating Spirit to fill our souls and our lives.

The best context for inner transformation is a discipleship community. In a discipleship community our faith can be lived out fully in a supportive environment. A community can support a *life* of service and Spirit-work. It is important to remember that the only lasting work is the work of the Spirit. It is not by our power or by our pride-full accomplishments that we effect change, but rather it is by God's Spirit working through us.

2. Outward Expansion

The obvious second aspect of Jesus' big mission is outward expansion. To save the world and spread God's commonwealth means to bring salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world.

God's commonwealth on earth is spread most powerfully by organizing new discipleship communities. Each discipleship community can contribute to outward expansion. Towards this end

each discipleship community can support three basic outreach ministries: 1. evangelization; 2. prophetic proclamations and actions; and 3. hospitality.² The witness of a Spirit-filled community life and the three outreach ministries will attract people and lead to the growth of the discipleship movement.

With a radical revival we will see this fruitful expansion. Yet we are not likely to see God's commonwealth completely established over all the earth in our lifetimes. There is simply too much work to do, too many people to reach, and too much violent opposition for the big mission to be accomplished in our lifetimes. So we must take the "long view" and accept that the discipleship movement will span a number of generations before completing the big mission. Still, we can be part of this great liberation movement and we can be the ones who begin to turn the tide in our day. And, from a distance (of time), we can joyfully look forward to the end of this murderous patriarchal age and to the full establishment of God's commonwealth. We can look forward to the final resurrection of the dead when God will clothe us with new bodies that will never wear out. Then we will rejoice always. There will be peace forevermore!

That's a nice scenario - but who believes it? Do we have doubts about how far the expansion of God's commonwealth can go? Won't disciples of Jesus always be a small minority of the world's population? And if there's no hope, then why *risk* a discipleship commitment to Jesus? Why not just join the mainstream and pursue our own interests? Why not just join a church and settle down?

Do our doubts prevent us from *believing in the gospel*? What will strengthen *faith* in Jesus and his liberation movement?

Hope for Fulfillment

In Jesus' time there was a milieu of hopes and expectations among the Jewish people concerning a Messiah and concerning God's kingdom. On one extreme, some Jewish people of the Sadducee party were strongly against beliefs in a Messiah and in apocalyptic hopes for radical change. But John the baptizer initiated a very

popular, wide-reaching baptism movement. John instilled hope among many Jewish people in the *imminence* of a Messiah, God's judgement, and God's kingdom. Were not the Jewish people right who believed John's testimony that a Messiah was present among the people? Was it not right to believe the Hebrew prophets who prophesied of a leader/Messiah who would establish God's commonwealth on earth? And was it not right to believe in the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that, eventually, through their offspring all nations would be blessed?

The Jewish people who had high hopes and expectations for a Messiah and for God's commonwealth were on sound footing. There were, however, significant problems concerning some expectations with regards to what, when, and how. What? Expecting God's commonwealth to be like David's patriarchal, nationalistic, and imperial kingdom was wrong. David's kingdom was violent and oppressive while God's commonwealth is nonviolent, full of love, and is liberating for the poor and oppressed. When? Apocalyptic expectations for God's commonwealth suddenly being realized at the time of the Messiah were wrong. Jesus ushered in God's commonwealth on earth -- but it began small -- like a mustard seed (Mk.4:30-32) -- and its full fruition is still in the future. How? Expectations for the establishment of God's commonwealth through a warrior Messiah and through apocalyptic divine intervention were wrong. Jesus came as a Lamb (i.e., pacifist) and the growth of God's commonwealth occurs through the participatory discipleship movement.

While some of the Jewish expectations were wrong, it was and it remains the mission of Jesus to save the world and to establish God's commonwealth over all the earth. As in Jesus' time there is today great opposition to this mission. Not only are the powers and principalities of nations and corporations against Jesus and his mission - but so is much of Christianity. Idolatrous and degenerative Christianity continually misdirects Christians, steering them away from real discipleship. Consequently, Jesus' mission appears to be stalled.

Can Jesus rejuvenate his mission to save the world? Is God able to fulfill God's promises? What have we learned from history? Jesus'

mission seemingly ended in a debacle a long time ago when his male disciples abandoned him in Gethsemane and when he was executed as a common criminal at Golgotha. At that time Jesus' mission also appeared to be dead - a lost cause. The sadness, despair, and hopelessness of Jesus' disciples ran very deep. But this despair and hopelessness failed to take into account two things: 1. the fruitfulness of God; and 2. the power of God.

1. Fruitfulness

Faith in and obedience to the living God always bears fruit. God's blessing on Adam and Eve was to "be fruitful and multiply." (Gen. 1:28) The faithful but childless Abram (Abraham) and Sarai (Sarah) are blessed by God:

"I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted." (Gen. 13:16)

The gospel of Jesus is filled with messages about fruitfulness. The word of God bears fruit. The mustard seed grows into the largest of shrubs. The yeast leavens the whole loaf. Good soil bears fruit, thirty, and sixty, and a hundredfold. There is no limit to God's supply:

"The measure you give will be the measure you get and still more will be given you." (Mk. 4:24)

Jesus asks his disciples,

"`Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' They said to him, `Twelve.' `And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?' And they said to him, `Seven.' Then he said to them, `Do you not yet understand?'" (Mk. 8:17-21)

Do we understand any better than Jesus' disciples? Can we affirm, without any doubts, that there is no end to God's fruitfulness?

In the above passage, Jesus reminds his disciples of how a situation of great scarcity (of food) was transformed into a situation of super-abundance (full meals for all plus leftovers). The numbers of

full baskets collected after each meal are symbolically significant. On Hebrew soil 12 full baskets were collected. The number 12 symbolizes the people of Israel - the 12 tribes (12 sons of Jacob) - and the feeding demonstrates how God's blessings will fill all of Israel. On Gentile soil 7 full baskets were collected. The number 7 symbolizes the whole creation - all the Gentile nations of the world - and the feeding demonstrates how God's blessings will fill all the earth. *It is this lesson of fruitfulness and fulfillment that Jesus' disciples have failed to learn.*

Have we learned this lesson? Are we able to affirm that the fruitful spread of God's commonwealth over all the earth is a sure thing? Did you say, "No"?? To deny the fruitful spread of God's commonwealth is to witness to one's unbelief. It is to stake one's *faith* not in God but in the powers and authorities opposed to God. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth." But how many Christians pray this with *faith*, believing that God's commonwealth will fruitfully spread so that eventually all people will do God's will? Do not many Christians *pray with unbelief*, saying the words but not believing in their hearts? Are our hearts hardened too?

2. Power

It's not just a matter of *faith* in God's *fruitfulness* - but also *faith* in God's *power*. Why is there so little faith today in God's power? Degenerative Christianity loves to deny the *power* of God in our midst, in our present time. God's power is located in the past - and at some future time - but not in the present. It's a great illusion - the weakness and powerlessness and apathy and absence of God in the present times. *It justifies our weakness, powerlessness, and bad faith.* But it's only an illusion.

If we believe in a powerless God in the immediate present moment, then we might as well worship an idol. A lifeless idol also has no real power. But if we believe in the living God then we need to better understand God's power.

The whole Bible retells over and over the powerful acts of God. God creates the heavens and the earth and all living creatures. God

liberates the powerless Hebrew slaves from under Pharaoh in Egypt. God judges the nations and reveals the weakness of their gods. God sends a Messiah to save the world. Jesus' whole ministry is a narrative of God's power. Jesus demonstrates again and again that God's power is operating very concretely on earth.

Many Christians, like Martha in John 11, underestimate the power of God in the present moment. After Martha's brother Lazarus died, Jesus came to Martha and said, "Your brother will rise again." Martha responded, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Martha confessed her faith in the resurrection -- a faith greater than Jesus' male disciples who didn't have a clue as to the meaning of Jesus' statements about his impending arrest, execution, and resurrection. Martha's faith was strong - much stronger than most Christians' faith today - but she did not fully comprehend the power of Jesus/God in the present moment. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life." This is not a statement in the future tense - but in the present tense. As in - right now - immediately. And so Lazarus didn't have to wait until the last day - because God's power is operational on earth, immediately, here and now.

But what about Jesus' last day - when he was arrested, tortured, and murdered? It does show that the power of evil and violence is both real and strong - and that Jesus/God has personally and deeply experienced it. But what some Christians seem to downplay is that the crucifixion is followed by the resurrection. The resurrection conclusively demonstrates that the power of God is greater than the power of Satan. The power of life is greater than the power of death. The power of love is greater than the power of violence. Ultimately, God's power is triumphant.

Jesus' question remains: "Do you not yet understand?" What do we believe? Will the power of evil always reign on earth? Or can we reach another conclusion?

Affirmation

Can we affirm: Jesus and the discipleship movement will succeed in their big mission? God's commonwealth will continue to spread and grow over all the earth because there is no power in the heavens or

on the earth that can stop it. For mature and faithful discipleship communities, fruitfulness is guaranteed. There is no limit to God's supply, God's blessings. God's "storehouses" are always full and overflowing. Fruitfulness does not reach a certain level and then stop. Fruitfulness knows no stagnation. Fruitfulness goes on and on - with a multiplier effect. Similarly, God's power is immense, beyond human comprehension, and far exceeding the power of evil. For mature disciples, all the power necessary is available in the present moment. As discipleship communities mature and become better channels for God's Spirit this power will help fuel the spread of God's commonwealth. So, if one truly has *faith* in God's promises, in Jesus, and in the fruitfulness and power of God, then the logic is inescapable: it's only a matter of time until Jesus and the discipleship movement succeed in their big mission.

The issue then is -- how long? How long before the gospel message is heard *with faith* and people choose to follow Jesus? We remember that *the time is fulfilled*. There is no more need for waiting for God to do something. Now it's up to us. On the one hand, God's supply is unlimited - it is infinite. And God's power is unlimited - it is infinite. On the other hand, without faithful and mature discipleship communities, the channels for God's supply and power are significantly blocked. So it comes back to: God is ready -- but are we ready? Do we want to join Jesus in his big mission, a mission filled with love and joy and fruitfulness and power? It is an awesome mission -- to save the world -- and comes with an awe-inspiring companion: the living God. Are we willing to live fruitful and empowered lives as disciples of Jesus? Do we want to live in a deep, intimate partnership with the living God for the rest of time?

Footnotes

1. I use the term "God's commonwealth on earth" as a synonym for "the kingdom of God" and use it to emphasize the here-on-earth dimensions of God's kingdom. Other synonyms for "the kingdom of God" are "God's house," "God's family," "kingdom of God," and "the beloved community."

2. These three ministries are discussed in chapter 4 of C.I./C.R.. See pages 75-79.

Who controls the news?

Who controls the news?

Corporate-controlled media -
mesmerizing millions -
through endless repetition.

Every day

the news repeats itself -
directing attention -
fashioning storylines -
shaping worldviews.

A powerful tool

well-orchestrated
for numbing minds,
manipulating emotions,
limiting dissent,
and swaying opinions.

And what has become of
the greatest news
of all time?

The *gospel*:

the *good news*

of Jesus, a.k.a. Messiah,
sent from God

to establish on earth

God's commonwealth -

putting to rest

the reign

of violence and injustice.

Gospel of liberation erased.

Glossed over and revised

by ivory tower clerics

in collusion with

the ruling powers.

Servile gospel substituted -

stamped with "orthodoxy" -

do not question -
just go to church -
and obey the authorities.
How to reclaim the good news?
Reforming the church,
influencing the media,
lobbying Congress -
is like servants seeking scraps
from their master's table.
Oppression -
garnished with
tokenism and pseudo-respect -
is oppression with a smile.
Did Jesus
petition the Sanhedrin
for a council seat?
Did Jesus stage
media events
to reach people faraway
and build momentum?
Did Jesus need
media outlets
to herald his good works?
The good news is
not about
gaining access to the media
or appealing to false authorities
for paternalistic help.
Rather, it's about
liberation
here and now
stemming from
full participation
in a completely alternative,
revolutionary Way of life.
Until people commit themselves
to live the gospel
and proclaim the gospel,
the gospel will be
no news

and the rich and powerful
will control the news.
So be your own media.
Follow Jesus.
Incarnate the gospel.
So live and so proclaim
the good news.

CHAPTER 3

The Messiah & Hope For Discipleship Communities

Hope For Discipleship Communities

The revolutionary discipleship movement is called to powerfully and fruitfully spread God's commonwealth over all the earth. But what has happened to the movement?

In Jesus' day the "scandal" of the movement was *the Messiah crucified*. No one had conceived that the Messiah, God's appointed liberator, would be executed at the hands of the Romans. Centuries of Christian explanations have helped to smooth over that early "scandal." The "scandal" of the movement today is *nearly 2000 years after the Messiah the world is not saved*. Not by a long shot. Evil is as strong as ever - and there is little evidence of Jesus' liberation movement. What has happened to the movement?

To be powerful and fruitful the discipleship movement needs to be deeply rooted in Jesus and his liberating teachings and practices. *Jesus is the foundation and discipleship communities are the base of the movement*. The current state of discipleship communities reveals the state of the movement. If there are strong base communities then there will be a powerful movement. Without strong base communities there is no movement to speak of - although the Spirit continues to work in and through innumerable individuals.

What is the state of discipleship communities today and where are they? During the past several decades there have been many attempts at intentional Christian community. Some communities have survived and are beacons of light in a very dark world. But most

of these Christian communities have not endured. Ched Myers writes in his 1988 book, Binding The Strong Man:

"The radical discipleship movement today is beleaguered and weary. So many of our communities, which struggled so hard to integrate the pastoral and prophetic, the personal and the political, resistance and contemplation, work and recreation, love and justice, are disintegrating. The powerful centrifugal forces of personal and social alienation tear us apart; the `gravity' exerted by imperial culture's seductions, deadly mediocrities, and deadly codes of conformity pull our aspirations plummeting down. Our economic and political efforts are similarly besieged. The ability of metropolis to either crush or co-opt movements of dissent seems inexhaustible."¹ Radical communities have continued to struggle through the 1990s and into the 21st century.

The discipleship movement is sorely in need of a revival. While the bad news is that many alternative Christian communities have not endured, the good news is that we can learn from both the good experiences and the mistakes that communities have made.

It might be encouraging to note that there is a lot of room for improvement. If we closely study Jesus' revolutionary teachings and practices then we can acknowledge that there still exists a big gap between Jesus' Way of life and that of progressive Christian communities. To acknowledge this big gap is not a judgement on existing communities. As stated earlier, existing communities are doing good works and are bright lights in a very dark world. However, seeing and acknowledging that a gap exists is essential for making progress and building a more powerful discipleship movement. To be satisfied with the current state of the movement is to settle for far less than what Jesus is calling disciples to. The issue is not whether or not existing communities are doing good works - they are. Rather, the issue is whether or not it is possible to close the gap between Jesus and ourselves and to be much more fruitful. To revitalize the movement what is needed are seekers of a more fruitful and powerful Way.

If we are to learn from past and present communities - where do we begin? It may be helpful to look at the organization and structure of a community.² Jesus teaches,

"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)

Organization and fruitfulness are intimately connected. "Internal" organization determines "external" fruitfulness. How a community is organized can limit its' fruitfulness. A community's *organization* may create significant gaps between itself and Jesus' revolutionary Way of life - and it may prevent those gaps from ever being closed.

Our understanding of different communities can be enhanced by focusing on three areas that I believe are the most important for a discipleship community's organization and fruitfulness: 1. leadership; 2. vision; and 3. preparation. It is only natural that past and present communities have had strengths in these areas. But, I am strongly suggesting here, there also have been weaknesses in these areas that set limits to a community's fruitfulness.

1. Leadership

The importance of leadership for a discipleship community cannot be overstated. Everything begins with leadership. Leadership provides and sustains vision. Leadership sets priorities, sets boundaries, and provides a means for resolving problems. Much can be learned from the "horizontal leadership" experiences of other communities, particularly concerning consensus decision-making and nonviolent conflict resolution. But one area where all communities seem to fall short on is the concrete leadership of Jesus. Later on, this chapter will focus on the leadership of Jesus and on what a deep commitment to Jesus means. This is an area where there is much room for improvement. In order to progress, discipleship communities need to more firmly establish Jesus' leadership.

2. Vision

A second critical area is that of vision. The guiding vision of a community is a reflection of a community's understanding of its calling and purpose. Vision provides a framework for a community to live and grow in. Many Christian communities have been prophetic

and visionary in their time. Much can be learned from past and present communities about rural and urban settings, racial integration, sexual equality, communal living, simple lifestyles, nurturing children, houses of hospitality, pacifist practices, military resistance, prophetic civil disobedience, enduring persecution, and other things. But one area where all communities seem to fall short on is not focusing enough on Jesus' teachings and practices as a *whole* Way of life. Communities often choose to live only a part of the gospel and not the full gospel. So - in the area of vision much improvement is possible. In order to progress, a discipleship community's vision needs to be more *holistic* and more solidly founded on Jesus' life, teachings, and practices.

3. Preparation

The third critical area is that of preparation. Preparation is important when first forming a community and also for incorporating new members into a community.

Intentional communities often struggle through community-formation. The beginning of a new community is a critical time for preparation. The early, formative stages of a community are a time of great promise and great danger. The decisions made when beginning a community set in motion powerful forces which shape the very life and future development and/or demise of the community. Too often privileged white Christians, who are often attracted to community, don't see how their biases are being put into a community's foundation. Cracks in the foundation will eventually broaden - and weaken - the community.

"One thing is certain: We have consistently underestimated the difficulties of sustaining alternatives that attempt to counter the grain of the dominant culture at almost every point. So our experience has been repeatedly tempered by demise and failure."³
(Ched Myers)

One of the most obvious things to learn by this record is that more attention to preparation is necessary.

New people entering intentional communities often are not adequately prepared. Without proper preparation of new members both leadership and vision of a community tend to move away from

the foundation in many directions. So there is much room for improvement in the area of preparation. In order to progress, a more deliberate process of community-formation and new-member preparation is needed which emphasizes the critical areas of leadership, vision, and discipleship preparation. Chapters 7 and 8 will focus on discipleship preparation leading up to a new leap of faith.

Are we feeling charged up to start a new community? If not - well - that's okay. If we aren't focused deeply on Jesus, then there are very good, solid, rational reasons for hesitating to forge forward. Everything depends upon the foundation.

Jesus is the beginning point for Christian communities past and present. Each succeeding generation needs to re-discover Jesus. Hope for a revival of the discipleship movement begins with focusing on Jesus and affirming the leadership of Jesus. There is tremendous room for improvement, for advancing the movement. The whole creation is yearning for disciples to make their next growth spurt. There's a whole world to save. It begins with Jesus. Are you in for the ride?

Who is Jesus?

One of the key questions of faith is: Who is Jesus? This question should be tied together with another key question of faith: What are Jesus' new practices? The questions are tied together and ideally disciples will complement strong affirmations of Jesus with strong discipleship practices. But what happens to the discipleship movement when either affirmations of Jesus or discipleship practices weaken?

In very early Christianity followers of Jesus combined fairly good affirmations with fairly good discipleship practices. In general, conversion was to both Jesus and some of his practices, resulting in a new lifestyle. This new lifestyle is referred to in Acts as *the Way*. In today's world, however, our understanding of who Jesus is has largely been separated from our understanding of his revolutionary Way of life. While Christians today run the gamut in their affirmations and

practices, let us look at two problem areas: 1. Christians with seemingly good affirmations of Jesus but weak practices; and 2. Christians with weak affirmations of Jesus but well-intentioned social activism.

1. Weak practices

The first problem area is probably most common. Most Christians may believe they have strong affirmations of Jesus. They often revere, worship, and praise Jesus. But the incarnational aspect of following Jesus as a disciple is largely missing from their lives. Of course, weak practices may be excusable for new and immature disciples - if they have a strong commitment to follow Jesus and to make progress, grow, and mature. But the faith-lives that many Christians subscribe to is divorced from real discipleship to Jesus. Their words of praise, then, are not backed up by their practices. This is, of course, a description of hypocrisy and idolatry. To proclaim Jesus as Lord but not to follow his ways and practices is to present a public facade covering-up an idolatrous faith and lifestyle. Jesus says,

"Why do you call me `Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Lk. 6:46)

"Not every one who says to me, `Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven but (s/he) who does the will of my (Mother) who is in heaven."⁴ (Mt. 7:21)

Actions do speak louder than words. Unless Jesus' teachings are put into practice Jesus is not the real foundation of one's life and faith. And without discipleship practices there is no discipleship movement.

2. Weak affirmations

The second problem area occurs primarily among progressive Christians. Many Christian progressives are working towards some vision of social justice and are giving assistance to help poor and oppressed people. But through their efforts to promote beneficial reforms their affirmations of Jesus often become diluted or watered-down. An attitude often develops which believes faith in Jesus may be helpful but not essential in progressing toward the goal of social justice. Also, in their efforts to be inclusive of people of other faiths, Christians often weaken their affirmations of Jesus. It is true there

are many different spiritual paths that can lead one closer to God. And we can all learn from each other and from different spiritual paths. But inclusiveness should not mean Christians becoming timid about their faith in Jesus.

So, what happens to the discipleship movement when affirmations of Jesus weaken? At this point I will make a sketch of two progressive perspectives. Presented below are two differing affirmations of Jesus with the resulting divergence in vision and practices. One perspective will be labeled "liberal reformist" (or "reformist" for short) and the other "radical." A slash (/) separates the perspectives on each of the six points.

Liberal Reformist Faith Perspective / Radical Faith Perspective

1. A reformist perspective may view Jesus as on par with other great spiritual leaders throughout history. It holds up Jesus as one of many great teachers and guides. / A radical perspective begins by holding that Jesus is unique among all great spiritual leaders. But going beyond this orthodox position it views Jesus not only as the Son of God but also as *the Messiah - the one and only Messiah sent by God to bring salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world*. As the Messiah, Jesus is the sole foundation of a new movement.

2. A reformist perspective may affirm Jesus' greatness - but also validate many leadership positions and institutions in society. It believes in working within the system to support "better" leaders and to reform society's major institutions. / A radical perspective gives sole allegiance to Jesus and his leadership. It does not accept the legitimacy of society's leaders.

3. A reformist perspective may believe that Jesus reveals various truths and is a great ethical guide. It endorses the formulation of ethical codes and righteous laws. / A radical perspective believes that Jesus reveals a unique Way to liberation - a whole new way of living. The truth is to be lived, not codified.

4. A reformist perspective may support a general, isolated, non-historical understanding of "justice" which encourages Christians to take small stands for justice within any organization. It encourages

individual Christians to remain in their positions in institutions and work for change where they are at. It is compatible with individualistic and fragmented lifestyles and a stratified society. / A radical perspective supports a historical understanding of "justice" and "salvation" which encourages people to commit themselves to God/Jesus, and to join the discipleship movement. It supports discipleship communities as an essential base for the discipleship movement. It focuses on changing one's whole lifestyle. It encourages one to leave their individual position in society and join a community whose whole way of life is in solidarity with the poor and with the land. It endorses a completely alternative, egalitarian society.

5. A reformist perspective may seek to better assimilate poor and oppressed people into mainstream society. It presents to poor and oppressed people a vision of justice and liberation that is dependent upon reforming monolithic institutions (groan!). It denies the legitimacy of many poor people's unbelief in and alienation from government & economic institutions and prescribes faith in these institutions. / A radical perspective calls not for assimilation but for breaking away from society's major institutions. It presents to poor and oppressed people a vision of justice and liberation now in God's commonwealth on earth. It offers a strong base in discipleship communities from which to prophetically and nonviolently engage society's powers & authorities.

6. A reformist perspective may support an ephemeral understanding of "community." Christians may experience "aspects of community" in many areas of their fragmented lives. Gatherings at church may be important "community" experiences for Christians living individualistic lives. / A radical perspective supports an understanding of "community" as a common unity in Christ. It supports a holistic Way of life in communal discipleship communities. The life, teachings, and practices of Jesus form the basis for a common Way of life that knits together a new family, a new tribe, a real community.

The above sketch is intended to show that when affirmations of Jesus weaken this adversely affects vision and practices. The liberal reformist faith perspective leads people away from the foundation

(the Messiah) and the base (discipleship communities) of the movement. Thus it undermines the movement.

In these times a revival of the revolutionary discipleship movement must combine strong affirmations of Jesus with strong discipleship practices. What is needed most in these times, and in all times, is a reawakening of faith in Jesus as *the Messiah* - and a commitment to follow Jesus' revolutionary Way of bringing salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world.

To affirm Jesus as *the Messiah* means that only the Way of Jesus will eventually succeed in transforming the whole world. Reformist efforts, while benefiting some segment of the population, will always fall far short of true justice for all. Similarly, all other revolutionary leaders and methods will fall short. Only the Way of the Messiah will eventually bring justice and peace to the whole world.

For a radical revival in these times it will help to begin with a strong affirmation of Jesus. For example: Jesus is the world's one and only Messiah; Jesus is the Son of God and the *Sophia* or Wisdom of God; Jesus is the human incarnation of God; Jesus and God are one. The stronger the profession of who Jesus is, the stronger should be one's commitment to Jesus' revolutionary Way. Let us look further at what it means to combine a strong affirmation of Jesus with strong discipleship practices.

The Jesus Principle

A new movement must be based on some new principle or objective. A new discipleship movement in our times must affirm Jesus in a new way. The Jesus Principle, expressed below, will solidly place Jesus in the leadership position of a discipleship community. It will help insure the strength of base communities. The rest of this chapter, and most of the rest of the book, will show how to establish Jesus' leadership, and describe ways which undermine it and how to avoid them.

As a *fixed principle* for a discipleship community and all its members I propose: *the foremost authority in each disciple's life and in the community's life is the authority of Jesus*. The authority of Jesus is above everything else. Period. No ambiguity. No debate. Our allegiance is specifically to the one to whom we are a disciple: Jesus. It is Jesus who calls us to follow him, and it is Jesus to whom we commit ourselves to a lifelong discipleship relationship. It is suggested here that every adult member of a discipleship community make a deep, personal, public, baptismal-covenant commitment to Jesus. Jesus' leadership is to be the *central point of unity for a community*. Each individual disciple, as well as the collective body of disciples, are then deeply committed to Jesus' leadership.

But why don't we put "the authority of Jesus" in second place - behind "the authority of God"? After all, Jesus is just the Son of God and the Mother/Father is greater than the Son. Let us look at three reasons.

First, placing "the authority of Jesus" foremost is a *leap of faith* consistent with the whole *concept of discipleship*. It reflects a community's answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?" Disciples believe that Jesus is the *fullest revelation* of God. Disciples follow and obey Jesus because there is no clearer revelation of God. Despite the passing of nearly 2000 years, there is no need for another Messiah or for a better revelation of God. God hasn't changed and Jesus hasn't changed. One Messiah is enough. Jesus remains for all time the fullest revelation of God. Therefore, to follow and obey Jesus is the best possible way of being *faithful* to God.

Second, if "the authority of God" is allowed to displace "the authority of Jesus" this would result in placing *our different theologies of God* above the specific person/being of Jesus. Jesus is fairly specific - but our understanding of God fluctuates widely based on our various upbringings. To speak of "God's authority," with only partial reference to Jesus, could lead to more disputes, dissension, and divisions in a community. Placing Jesus' authority in second place would actually discount and undermine the authority of Jesus while inflating our opinions about God. Our egos would rise but our obedience to Jesus would decline. Putting Jesus' authority first can help *overcome* conflicts over people's differing theologies of God.

Third, it is important to avoid a false dichotomy between Jesus and God.⁵ Jesus' authority does not replace or supersede God's authority - it connects us directly with God. By putting first "the authority of Jesus" it is implied that this is based on the authority of God. By so doing a community is upholding the authority of God. By placing first "the authority of Jesus" a community is saying: "Obedience to Jesus is obedience to God" and, "The authority of Jesus is equivalent to the authority of God." A discipleship community affirms that although Jesus is offspring of God, Jesus and God are one. Thus, by putting first "the authority of Jesus" the discipleship movement establishes a strong foundation in Jesus and unified base communities.

Learning To Be On A First Name Basis With J.C.

The faith commitment most needed today is not a commitment to the Bible or to the authority of the Bible or to a creed or to a church or to a particular vision of community or to a practice of hospitality or resistance. The commitment most needed now is a lifelong commitment to Jesus, making Jesus' authority foremost in one's life. This commitment can be the foundation for a new and powerful discipleship movement. This commitment has at least two important aspects: 1. personal bonding with Jesus; and 2. obedience and discipleship to Jesus in a discipleship community.

1. Personal bonding with Jesus

A deep commitment to Jesus must emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus. The core characteristic of this relationship is love. Every disciple is to work on developing a love-relationship with Jesus. God is love and Jesus is the incarnation of God's love. Jesus teaches,

"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." (Mk. 12:30)

We are to love Jesus similarly - with our whole being. Love for Jesus, as for God, is to be desired, respected, nurtured, supported, and put into practice.

A love-relationship with Jesus can emphasize communion with Jesus. Jesus is our "Emmanuel," meaning "God is with us." Jesus longs to be our constant companion - and a companion who is recognized and appreciated. We need to work on bringing Jesus more into our consciousness from moment to moment throughout the day. The presence of Jesus at any moment during a day can be a transforming experience. Our consciousness of Jesus' presence can be heightened through talking to Jesus, praying, singing, silence and stillness, and thinking of Jesus during our daily activities. The more conscious and appreciative we are of Jesus' presence, the greater should be our joy of living in the presence of God.

To talk with Jesus does not mean to dominate the conversation through a monologue. Constant chatter will bore Jesus as much as anyone else. It is also important to hear Jesus. One can hear Jesus in a number of ways: through meditation, spiritual leadings, prophecies from the inner voice, nature, other people, and biblical passages about Jesus. The four gospels in the New Testament are especially important for hearing Jesus and form a common and primary source for all disciples.

2. Discipleship relationship with Jesus

A love-relationship with Jesus is the basis for a discipleship-relationship with Jesus. Jesus speaks with the authentic voice of God - a God of unfathomable love for us. Jesus also speaks with the authority of God - a God who knows everything about us and who always knows the best path for us. Therefore, it is wholly to our advantage to obey Jesus. So while we can develop a relationship with Jesus as best friend and companion it is also essential to have a discipleship relationship where Jesus is our foremost teacher and leader.

To know Jesus is to love Jesus. And to love Jesus is to obey him. Jesus says,

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments....They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my (Mother), and I will love them and reveal myself to them." (Jn. 14:15,21)

Our obedience to Jesus in our daily practices is a much better measure of our love for Jesus than any verbal profession of love. We may have had some encounters - probably too many - with Christians who *talk* much of Jesus and God but whose lives don't come anywhere near to reflecting a life of obedience to Jesus. Some Christians seem to think that the universe revolves around themselves and that Jesus is their personal servant to help them in their quest for happiness and a comfortable lifestyle. Not so. Too much talk about Jesus or God and too little obedience is a certain sign of immaturity and a shallow relationship with God. The discipline of obedience to Jesus and the incarnation of his teachings and practices in our daily lives is what leads to a close relationship with Jesus - not talk.

The path of revolutionary discipleship is not all joy. It can be hard and painful - like getting caught between a rock and a hard place. In order for deep transformation we will be led to face all our points of resistance. And there are many areas in our lives that resist conversion. So the journey of faith always involves a struggle. Besides the internal struggle, following the Messiah also involves conflict with patriarchal society. Ultimately, it involves "carrying a cross." The cross is an ugly symbol of execution by the state, reminding us of our sole allegiance to Jesus and the need to literally lay down our lives for Jesus and for the liberation movement. It is important to be forthright about the struggles within ourselves and with forces outside of ourselves. After having recognized these ongoing struggles, then it can be stated that the fruit of obedience to Jesus is maturity, wisdom, inner peace, and joy. This joy can be magnified by a mature discipleship community which is truly filled with the love of God.

Leadership of Jesus

Even though everyone in a community affirms Jesus' leadership and authority there are many ways of undermining it. The leadership

positions and structures of a community are a primary way of undermining Jesus' leadership. This undermining of Jesus' authority occurs almost universally among established communities and churches.

Christian Idolatry / Christian Revival describes how the ancient Hebraic priesthood and Christian priesthood and clergy are rooted in the purity system.⁶ But what about other positions of leadership? A passage in Mark provides a good answer.

"James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?' They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the (Human One) came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" (Mk. 10:35-45)

In this passage James and John ask Jesus for the top two leadership positions under Jesus. But Jesus teaches a whole different understanding of leadership - of which he is the perfect model. The wrong model of leadership is typified in this passage by Gentile leaders who exercise authority and dominative power over their subjects. In this hierarchical model leaders have positions which elevate them above the rest of the people. But Jesus models "servant leadership" or "leadership from below." Jesus did not seek any position anywhere - and he gave his life in service to others. When Jesus teaches, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all," we need to take the words "servant" (Gk: *diakonos*) and "slave"

(Gk: *doulos*) very seriously. Neither James nor John, nor any free man, would normally seek to become a real servant or slave. Servants and slaves were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Servants and slaves, much like women and children, had little status and held no leadership positions. Slaves have always been subject to much abuse by their owners. To become a "slave of all" emphasizes, as strongly as words can, that disciples are not to exercise leadership through any position or office. So it is a great distortion of the meaning of this passage to translate "servant" as being an elevated or honored position of "deacon" or "minister." It would also be a great distortion today to think that Jesus' understanding of "servant" is in any way similar to being a legislator who might be described as a "public servant." Anyone who has a recognized position of leadership does not fit Jesus' description of a "servant" or "slave." Disciples of Jesus, then, should not be "looking up" and seeking a position of any kind. Rather, in a community of equals, disciples are called to *real* humility and *real* servant-like service.

A passage from Matthew also illustrates the "leadership" that Jesus is trying to instill in his disciples:

"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 RSV)

"Rabbi, father, master" are all titles or positions which in Jesus' time exalted men. (Women, generally, did not have the option of seeking an exalted position.) Jesus teaches his male followers to reject these titles and positions and the authority connected with them. Notice that all authority and leadership belong only to God and to the Messiah. To give authority to human leaders is to undermine God's and Jesus' authority. This is a very radical teaching which most of Christianity today ignores or greatly distorts. Positions of leadership break down the equality of disciples in a community.

"`Discipleship' as a permanent state of following Jesus the true leader, in contrast to rabbinic schools in which the student became himself a master, further guarded against the reproduction of hierarchy in the community."⁷ (Ched Myers)

Disciples of Jesus do not graduate into positions of leadership. Rather, they mature into better servants.

A discipleship community that fully upholds the authority and leadership of Jesus will have no positions of leadership. Similarly, it will have no honorary titles for mature disciples. A community will have no priests, clergy, deacons, elders, or other positions. No one is to be called pastor, reverend, father, doctor, or any other honorary prefix. No one is to build up their name or associate their identity with a position - as in - I am "the pastor" or "the treasurer" or "the president of the women's circle" or "the gardener" or "the cook." It is important to keep our identities rooted centrally in God/Jesus and not in positions, titles, or areas of work. There is work for all and there is servant-leadership in many areas of work. But the work does not entitle anyone to special status or honor. A disciple is to magnify Christ (not herself or himself) through service.

In a similar vein, a faithful discipleship community will neither give nor recognize any honors or awards. What? No award ceremonies? No honorary luncheons? Think of the meetings that will have to be cancelled. And with what will we decorate our walls? Citizens of the U.S. are the most-awarded people in all of history. Almost every imaginable organization gives out awards. Almost everyone can boast of some sort of award. It's a self-esteem builder. But Jesus did not seek the applause of humans:

"I do not accept glory from human beings." (Jn. 5:41)

Jesus sought no human awards - and he gave out no honorary certificates. Instead, Jesus teaches,

"So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" (Lk. 17:10) ("Servants": *doulos*)

Disciples are to find their identity and self-worth in discipleship to Jesus. Our reward is from God/Jesus - and this inner reward of peace and joy never takes the form of human awards.⁸

On the one hand, in a faithful discipleship community leadership is centralized in Jesus. A discipleship community is a family with Jesus/God as the sole leader. On the other hand, leadership is decentralized as Jesus abides in all faithful disciples. All members of

a community are called to practice servant-leadership through obedience to Jesus, i.e., through their Spirit-work and service.

The health and vitality of a community will depend both upon the strength of a community's commitment to Jesus' leadership and the progress and development of each member as a disciple. As in a family, members of a discipleship community will differ in their degree of maturity and progress. Yet a community is to be a family of equals. Progress does not elevate one above others. Rather, progress helps one become a better servant of the community. As members mature a community develops better servants. With better servants those who are least mature in Christ will have more help. Thus they will also grow and mature. In this way - through servant-progress - a community as a whole can develop in Christ in a healthy and wholesome way. Through servant-leadership everyone is nurtured and loved, and every member is valued and encouraged. Most importantly, Jesus' leadership is usurped by no one - Jesus/God rules in and through all.

Hope for the movement

Is there hope for the discipleship movement? Is there hope for the world? The answer is a definitive "Yes" -- if and when Jesus is re-discovered. To be powerful the discipleship movement must have a solid foundation in Jesus and a strong base in discipleship communities. The three most important areas for a discipleship community's success are: 1. leadership; 2. vision; and 3. preparation. Leadership is so important it can't be overstated. Without the right leadership the whole foundation is undermined. The good news for the movement is that vast improvement is possible immediately - and not too hard to achieve. It's quite simple - to make significant improvement - if the right principle is supported as a foundational building block of new communities.

The principle proposed here is: The foremost authority in each disciple's life and in the community's life is the authority of Jesus. If a community is firmly united behind the authority of Jesus and

supports position-less servant-leadership then it has the best leadership structure.

A new discipleship movement in our times can begin with a radical, lifelong commitment to Jesus. This is where real hope resides - in the world's one and only Messiah - and in the revolutionary discipleship movement.

Footnotes

1. Ched Myers, Binding The Strong Man, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1988, p. 455.

2. See C.I./C.R., pp. 1-3.

3. Myers, Who Will Roll Away The Stone?, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1994, p.186.

4. It is good to use female, as well as "subversive male," imagery for God. Female God-imagery glorifies God by restoring a wholeness and balance to God's image that was present at the beginning of creation. See C.I./C.R., pp. 214-217.

5. For a discussion of the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit see chapter 6.

6. See C.I./C.R., chapters 2 and 9.

7. Myers, Binding The Strong Man, p. 434.

8. Perhaps the only exception to this would be mock awards of no material value, given solely for the purpose of humor.

Domesticated Jesus

Domesticated Jesus.
Domesticated Christ.
Multi-million dollar
houses of God?
The business of religion
in the finest
of settings.
Pretty Jesus -
stuck to a cross.
Immobile and mute -
perfect model.
Jesus accomplished so much -
hanging there for us.
(Hang in there Jesus!)
Eucharist box
of communion wafers -
"Body of Jesus"
contained therein.
"Eat with reverence."
Clergy and fine robes
with a kept Jesus
in their backpockets -
or on a short leash.
Jesus kept "respectable" -
for the well-heeled.
Beautiful churches.
Friendly greeters.
Pleasant Sunday mornings.
Domesticated Jesus.
Domesticated Christ.

Revolutionary Jesus

"Revolutionary Jesus":
oxymoron?
or sedated minds?
Illegitimate child,
manger-birth,

friend of "sinners,"
advocate of children,
lover of lepers,
community of outcasts -
earthy revolutionary.
No schooling -
no training -
no conforming -
just unleashed compassion,
passionate love in action -
unbridled revolutionary.
Splashing truths
in the hypocrites' faces.
Outwitting the wise.
No respecter of position.
No cowing to authority.
No dread of reprisal -
fearless revolutionary.
Hitting the road,
sleeping outdoors,
taking it to the streets,
sharing the hardships,
reveling in the camaraderie,
spreading the movement -
gritty revolutionary.
Overturning the tables
of moneychangers.
Reversing the status
of rich and poor.
Undermining patriarchal order.
Bearing the brunt
of Roman wrath.
Stepping out
of the empire's graveyard.
Jesus - Messiah -
genuine revolutionary.

CHAPTER 4

The Bible - Part 1

Jesus' Authority Over Scripture

This chapter, and the next two, will look at the Bible and how its usage can either strongly support or undermine Jesus' leadership. For the discipleship movement to really move forward it is essential for disciples to be able to read the Bible in a way that always supports Jesus' leadership and authority.

The following five principles concerning the Bible were put forth in Christian Idolatry / Christian Revival¹:

* A personal, incarnational relationship with Jesus is primary over "biblical authority."

* Adherence to a believer's inner spirit/conscience/faith is primary over biblical scholars and church doctrine.

* Bible study is meant to be complemented by discipleship to Jesus and is for the purpose of guiding and empowering discipleship.

* The Bible is to be read through "the light of Jesus."

* Human cultural biases are found in the Bible and one tool for identifying these biases is through the use of a Christ-enlightened understanding of the gift and debt system and the purity and pollution system ("gift system" and "purity system" for short).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will attempt to give greater clarity to these principles and show how they contrast with other ways of viewing the Bible. In particular, this chapter will look at how the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and the belief that the Bible is holy affect Jesus' leadership and authority.

Is the Bible Inerrant?

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy is held by a significant number of Christians in the United States, most of whom could be considered evangelicals or fundamentalists.² The basic underlying assumption of this doctrine is that the Bible, in its entirety, is the inerrant word of God. It generally holds that God, through human mediators, authored the Bible and that the Bible's original texts were without error. Consequently, people who believe in biblical inerrancy also believe that all of scripture carries the author-ity of God and therefore can be trusted to be fully truthful. The whole Bible, without exception, is believed to be a divine revelation, containing God's authoritative messages and instructions for past times and for all time.

Does the doctrine of biblical inerrancy uphold the leadership and authority of Jesus? All biblical inerrantists would answer, "Yes." They would hold that biblical authority and Jesus' authority are wholly complementary - that the rule of scripture and the rule of Christ are one. For support, it could be pointed out that Jesus affirms the authority of scripture and God's authorship of the Old Testament. But does Jesus really affirm the authority of all Old Testament scripture?

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy can be challenged in various ways.³ I will employ here the tool of the Christ-enlightened gift and purity systems. I choose to use this tool because it affirms, in its own way, the value and worth of the whole Bible. By using this tool all of the Bible contains important lessons that can be learned. Other ways of challenging this doctrine may have the side-effect of discrediting the Bible - or at least making large segments of it irrelevant to people today. Both biblical illiteracy and a negative attitude towards the Bible are formidable obstacles to building a strong discipleship movement.

When the gift and purity systems are enlightened by Jesus it becomes clear that the two systems are fundamentally in conflict with each other. This conflict is found throughout the Bible. However, those who adhere to the purity system will not recognize this conflict. They attempt to harmonize scripture. So it is that biblical inerrantists deny any contradictions in scripture and try to harmonize the whole of the Bible as if it were a unified text. But the real effect of any attempted harmonization of all scripture is the

distortion and perversion of the gift system. Another effect is the undermining of Jesus' authority. How so?

Let us, for the sake of example, make two readings of a biblical passage - one from the perspective of a biblical inerrantist (upholding the purity system) and one from the perspective of a disciple of Jesus (upholding the gift system). The two readings have very different consequences for Jesus' authority.

Since biblical inerrantists uphold the whole of the Bible as being the inerrant word of God any passage will do. For the sake of example, let us analyze Numbers 15:32-36. It reads:

"While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the sabbath day. And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron, and to all the congregation. They put him in custody, because it had not been made plain what should be done to him. And (Yahweh) said to Moses, 'The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp.' And all the congregation brought him outside the camp, and stoned him to death with stones, as (Yahweh) commanded Moses."⁴

How might a biblical inerrantist read this passage?⁵ First, who wrote the text, when, and for whom? There are scholarly differences of opinion as to when Numbers was written. Some biblical inerrantists might attribute, as does the old Hebrew tradition, the authorship of Numbers to Moses, presumably written before his death in the wilderness, and written for the Hebrews who would live in the promised land. Others might support a later date for its authorship. However, the dating of the authorship is not as important to biblical inerrantists as is attributing the ultimate authorship to God. Second, as this passage is a straightforward narrative, a biblical inerrantist would accept this passage as historically true, with each piece of information in the text being factual.

What are "the facts"? A brief recap: After being freed from slavery in Egypt the Hebrews are in the wilderness. A man gathering sticks on a sabbath is caught in the act. He is apprehended forthright (so he cannot wreak further havoc). But then the people are unsure what to do to the man. The problem is brought to the attention of

the whole congregation and to their leaders, Moses and Aaron. The answer to the problem, however, comes directly from God. God is very interested in this particular case and speaks directly to Moses. God gives Moses very clear instructions on how to execute the man. The prisoner is then put outside the camp where a large group of people obediently pummel the man with stones until he is dead.

"The facts" seem pretty clear. But what might biblical inerrantists say is the message that God is conveying through this passage and event? While there may be a number of messages here, the most overt message communicated by this passage to readers/hearers would seem to be about strict, brutal, and lethal punishment for sabbath violators. Obviously behind the message of capital punishment of sabbath violators is the message of the importance of sabbath holiness. This passage supports the law, recorded elsewhere,

"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)

The Numbers 15:32-36 passage *twice* cites Yahweh as the source of the command for execution. This emphasizes that the deadly punishment cannot be questioned - as it is ordered from the highest authority. (Of course, to biblical inerrantists this is quite redundant since they believe all of scripture carries the author-ity of God.) So it would seem that God is emphasizing in this passage a strict understanding of sabbath holiness and brutal enforcement of sabbath laws and codes.

In contrast to a biblical inerrantist, how might a disciple of Jesus read this passage? While seeking to "hear" in the passage the message the original author intended, disciples will also read this passage through "the light of Jesus." It will be helpful to use the gift and purity systems which can detect and highlight human, cultural biases in scripture.

The man in the Numbers 15:32-36 passage apparently violated the sabbath laws. But the gift and purity systems have conflicting understandings of the sabbath. If the passage is read through an understanding of the gift system did the man violate any sabbath laws?

How do the gift system and the purity system differ in their understanding of the sabbath? The 10 commandments, concerned with love for or violations of God and "neighbors," are part of the gift system. The sabbath rest, the 4th commandment, honors God and God's creation and is a form of labor law meant to protect the poorest and least powerful people from exploitation.

"You shall not do any work - you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns." (Ex. 20:10)

The sabbath rest is beneficial to those whose labor is controlled by the affluent and powerful.

In the purity system the sabbath is holy to God. According to the purity system "holiness" (as well as "pollution") is contagious and dangerous. Purity laws and codes are necessary to regulate contact with and relationship to that which is holy. The sabbath is a *period of time* that God has declared holy (a kind of special dispensation). During the sabbath, extreme care must be taken not to violate this special time of holiness. Purity codes are enacted which restrict and burden the people, especially the poor.

The gathering of sticks on the sabbath does not seem sufficient to violate the gift system's understanding of the sabbath. The gathering of sticks is normally a useful activity, providing fuel for cooking or warmth. Since it did no harm to anyone, no violation of God or neighbors seems to have occurred. Whether the man was gathering sticks for pleasure, to stockpile them, or out of need we can't really know. But we can surmise that the man was poor and of low status. He is voiceless, has no name worth mentioning, has no opportunity for a defense or appeal, and has no family support or advocate. That is, he has no advocate in the Numbers 15 passage - but he does have an advocate in the Messiah - the one who comes to bring justice and liberation. Jesus and his disciples were incorrigible violators of sabbath purity codes. On one occasion Jesus defends the poor - his disciples - from accusations of violating the sabbath. (See Mk. 2:23-28) Jesus justifies their behavior, of plucking ears of grain, *simply on the priority of satisfying human hunger*. Jesus teaches that the sabbath was not instituted to satisfy God's supposed needs (for rest, sacrifice, righteousness, holiness) but rather was intended to serve people's needs:

"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

The purity system, however, *reverses* Jesus' teaching and prioritizes the sabbath's holiness over human needs. So the gathering of sticks violated the purity system's understanding of the "profound holiness" of the sabbath. In the purity system the fact that the man did not harm anyone is not relevant. A serious violation is imputed solely by the ideology of the purity system. The man's transgression was directly against God and God's "natural order." Consequently, the man's violation-impurity-contagion was also a threat to the purity of the congregation.

The man is apprehended, taken to the leaders, and receives a sentence of death. This sequence of events clearly follows the logic of the purity system. The people apprehend the man and go up the chain of command and authority by going to Aaron, the high priest, and to Moses, God's appointed leader. Then the command comes directly from Yahweh, the highest authority. We can see here the outlines for the legitimization of a hierarchical order of priests and rulers, law enforcement, and punishments, which the purity system supports. Also, the purity system strongly supports killing as a means of purification. So, according to the purity system the sabbath violator represents a serious contagion and must be killed. And, as a dead body is always a source of pollution, the man is taken outside the camp in order to maintain the camp's purity. Finally, the seriousness of the violation is brought home by having all the congregation participate in the "purification ritual" of stoning the man to death outside the camp.

The above sequence of events is not possible in the gift system. The gift system prohibits killing in the 6th commandment. (Ex. 20:13) Jesus not only forbids killing but goes much further. (See Mt. 5:21-22,38-39.) Also, Jesus stopped an impending stoning of an adulteress saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (Jn. 8:7)

So - did Yahweh/God really authorize the brutal execution of a sabbath violator? The gift system and Jesus' teachings and practices are clearly opposed to such an order. But are we overlooking some

possible explanation which could harmonize these apparent incongruities? Perhaps, a scholarly, biblical inerrantist might suggest, we should think in terms of cultural differences, different ages, or different "dispensations." Surely there is a massive distance in time, location, and culture between Americans today and the ancient Hebrew society for whom the book of Numbers was originally written. Also, human consciousness is evolving and people in later times have the benefit of more of God's revelations. Perhaps the ancient Hebrew people were exceedingly violent - much more so than a gun-infested, nuclear-armed, police-state USA today. Perhaps the ancient Hebrews were some sort of dim-witted morons whom God needed to teach through lethal lessons, making a bloody example of some poor, unfortunate man. ("Please Lord, no more lessons today!") Perhaps God needed to teach a whole congregation to stone to death one of its members in order to teach them the lesson that it is not-so-good-an-idea to pick up sticks on the sabbath. ("Parents - better keep a close watch on your children - or else Yahweh will knock them off.") Perhaps cultural differences and different ages really do satisfactorily explain to the enlightened mind today Yahweh's ancient execution order. Hmm. Or perhaps we should just play stupid: "Who can understand the mind of God? It's best not to question why - God knows what God is doing." Right. Like I can really love and trust a God who reveals such character. ("Hey, macho-man Yahweh - are you having a nice day? Kill any big-time sinners today?") Well, let's try one more angle. Perhaps it's unfair to compare Yahweh's order with Jesus' teachings. Perhaps Jesus, if he had lived alongside Moses, would have ordered the stoning. Could Jesus have ordered the stoning? Does Jesus speak differently in different ages? If Jesus, in the age of Moses, could contradict his teachings during his actual life on earth, then how can we trust Jesus' teachings today? It follows that Jesus could contradict his biblical teachings again and again in future ages. Such a viewpoint *thoroughly discredits Jesus*. It deeply undermines Jesus' teachings and authority.

The issue is not the level of moral consciousness of ancient people. The issue is - Who is God? - and - Has God changed? Jesus reveals the answer. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And Jesus and God are one. Not only during Jesus' time on earth but through all of time Jesus reveals who God is. Jesus' words are eternal. Therefore, it is impossible that Yahweh could command that

which Jesus would never command. It is impossible that God would command that which contradicts the teachings of Jesus. Thus, disciples of Jesus can be absolutely certain that Yahweh never commanded Moses to have a sabbath violator, or anyone else, put to death.

What conclusions can we draw from the Numbers 15:32-36 passage? The words that are reputed to be Yahweh's are in fact a fabrication, a falsehood. Anyone who reads this passage literally, and believes it, is being grossly misled and deceived. This passage, like the rest of the book of Numbers, is filled with fabrications and with human, cultural biases. While the book of Numbers contains ancient history and traditions, the editing of the book in its final form may have occurred as late as 500 B.C. If so, the book was finalized in the "ashes" of Israel's post-monarchy period when the priesthood was trying to re-establish Hebrew identity and priestly authority. The last human author and editor of Numbers had an agenda of promoting the purity system that is contrary to the will of God. The human author embraces the male priestly class and their purity codes, believes in a hierarchical order, endorses strict adherence to law over mercy and forgiveness, and teaches that God commands killing as a means of justice. So we learn something from this passage about how purity, hierarchy, and killing are all linked together and given religious legitimization. We see a concrete example of how the gift system and purity system are in conflict with each other. We learn how human, cultural biases found in the purity system bring a *reversal* in the gift system's 4th commandment: *Instead of defending the poor and the weakest the sabbath commandment is used to murder a poor, innocent man.*

Adherents of biblical inerrancy criticize others for "relativizing the Bible" - by replacing the authority of God throughout scripture with human subjective reasoning. But it is biblical inerrantists who "relativize Jesus" - by undermining his eternal teachings. To uphold the Numbers 15 passage as the inerrant word of God discredits Jesus. By claiming that the entire Bible is the infallible, inerrant word of God biblical inerrantists defend, justify, and enshrine human, cultural biases. As these distortions in scripture accumulate throughout the Bible they help form a very convoluted understanding of God and God's will. To support a doctrine of biblical inerrancy is to advocate

for a distorted vision of God with its inevitable consequence: idolatry. Biblical inerrancy may be a foundational doctrine for degenerative Christianity - but it is anathema for a revolutionary discipleship movement.

Is the Bible Holy?

Is the Bible holy? Adherents of biblical inerrancy would answer the question affirmatively. Also, many other Christians who disagree with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy would also answer affirmatively. How does this belief affect the authority of Jesus?

The belief that all scripture was inspired by God and thus sacred was inherited by the early Christians from some of the Jewish leaders of their time. Some Jewish leaders advocated for strict observance of the Law and viewed the Pentateuch, the wisdom literature, and the writings of the prophets as having the authority of God. The apostle Paul, whose writings are the earliest in the New Testament, was trained in the Hebrew Law as a strict Pharisee. Paul writes,

"For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake." (1 Cor. 9:9-10)

Paul indicates he believes that even a somewhat obscure Old Testament passage was inspired by God and intended for Paul's generation. In Paul's letter to the Romans he refers to the "holy scriptures" (referring to Old Testament scriptures) and to the "oracles of God." (Rom. 1:2; 3:2) The author of 2 Timothy writes,

"From childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Tim. 3:15-16)

In the above passage the author claims that Old Testament scripture is sacred, inspired by God, and authoritative. Neither Paul nor the author of 2 Timothy claimed that their particular writings were the inspired word of God; that was to be claimed by Christians later.

In the early centuries after the Messiah some Christian leaders collected and formalized the canon of the New Testament. The canonization process was quite controversial. Of course there have been many disagreements among Christians, which continue to this day, about which writings deserve to be in the Bible. As early as the 2nd century, a Christian leader, Marcion, unsuccessfully advocated scrapping the entire Old Testament. As late as the 16th century, the Roman Catholic church determined, at the Council of Trent, that most of the books of the Apocrypha were authoritative and officially added them to their Old Testament canon. Despite the various disagreements there developed a common viewpoint that the Bible was inspired by God and is thus a holy book.

Well, as discussed in the previous section on biblical inerrancy, there are serious problems with understanding the Bible as the *inerrant* word of God. There are also similar problems with a more general understanding of the Bible as "the word of God." So how can we gain clarity on this matter? Let us look to Jesus and again employ the analytical tool of the gift and purity systems.

All four gospels depict Jesus affirming Old Testament laws and scriptures. For example:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Mt. 5:17-18)

"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban (that is, an offering to God) - then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on." (Mk. 7:9-13)

"'Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures." (Lk. 24:44-45)

"Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If those to whom the word of God came were called 'gods' - and the scripture cannot be annulled - can you say that the one whom the Father has

sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, 'I am God's Son?'" (Jn. 10:34-36)

Although the gospels show Jesus affirming scripture, there is also another side.

Jesus' view of scripture is more complex than simply affirming all Old Testament scripture. Throughout his ministry Jesus refutes, contradicts, or is in conflict with Old Testament laws and traditions that are rooted in the purity system. Jesus rejects sabbath purity codes and traditions (Mk. 2:23 - 3:6), levirate marriage (Mk.12:18-27), patriarchal divorce laws (Mt. 19:3-9; Lk.16:18), laws of retaliation (Mt. 5:38-41), the ethos of vengeance against enemies (Mt. 5:43-48), capital punishment (Jn. 8:2-11), cleanliness and food codes (Mk. 1:40-45; Mk. 7:1-23), and temple sacrificial offerings (Mk. 11:15-19; Mt. 12:6-7). In many ways Jesus breaks from and unilaterally abrogates Old Testament scriptures.

When Jesus first made his teachings, his statements were not part of any scripture or canon. Jesus was teaching something new - apart from any scripture. And Jesus' new teachings, Jesus' spoken words, had authority even when they contradicted scripture. The key conclusions: Jesus has authority over scripture. Also, much scripture has no authority.

Many religious leaders and scribes, those who were most deeply committed to the scriptures, could not recognize Jesus, the incarnation of the living God.

"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." (Jn. 5:39-40)

This brings us to the problem of being more committed to written scripture than to the living Spirit and voice of God.

The earliest discipleship communities had no New Testament writings. They had only the Hebrew scriptures to guide them. Well, according to the book of Acts, a significant rift developed due to Old Testament scriptures. A faction, committed to scripture and the law of Moses, was at odds with some of the disciples, notably Paul and Barnabas, who were evangelizing the Gentiles but not requiring circumcision and adherence to the law of Moses. A large council of

disciples met in Jerusalem to settle the dispute. The "circumcision faction" claimed,

"It is necessary for them (new male converts) to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

Scripture backed the "circumcision faction":

"And God said to Abraham, `As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised....So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'" (Gen. 17:9-10,13-14)

This passage portrays God as being unequivocal in requiring male circumcision as part of God's everlasting covenant. Not much room there for fudging things - or for male converts to avoid getting proper but painful male "credentials." (How often did they check those credentials? "Attention! The scriptural purists have arrived to begin their inquiry. First order of business - all men - drop your shorts.") The "circumcision faction" had further support. As a Jew, Jesus was himself circumcised - as were all of the first male disciples. No doubt the refrain was heard, "If it's good enough for Jesus and his (male) disciples then it's good enough for me." Case closed? Not quite - although the "circumcision faction" seemed to have a very strong case.

The evangelists in disrepute were able to make a case for their side. How so? Did Paul whip out from his cloak one of his letters and say, "Here. Read this! It is the freshly written word of God. Believe it!" No - no, it didn't happen that way. At least we have no record of it happening that way. The evangelists merely claimed that the *Spirit* was working *powerfully* among the uncircumcised Gentiles. So the issue boiled down to deciding between fidelity to scripture or learning something new from the Holy Spirit that contradicted scripture. Which practice was more faithful to Jesus the Messiah? To their credit the early disciples chose in favor of the Spirit working concretely on earth for healing and liberation. The "circumcision faction" eventually washed out of Christianity - only to reappear again in a new guise.

The guardians of the purity system keep bringing back the doctrine of scripture as the holy and authoritative word of God. The guardians of holy scripture are continually trying to foreclose on the voice of God. That is, they are trying to limit the voice of God to the past, to written scripture. They are trying to make scripture their final authority. They prefer a religion by the book to a dynamic, living faith. This idolatrous error is repeated again and again throughout history. To avoid this error, while still affirming the Bible, let us look at how the gift and purity systems differ in their view of scripture.

In the purity system God's holiness is contagious and dangerous - and requires regulations. The purity system ascribes partial holiness to people or inanimate, human-made objects that come close to God. For example, the purity system ascribes holiness to the tables of the covenant, the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, the temple, the Holy of Holies, the high priest, the clerical class, the church, the sanctuary, the altar, the communion elements, the Bible. As a sacred or holy text the Bible becomes authoritative in and of itself. The Bible then has *authority over people*. The authority of the Bible, like holiness that is contagious, is then easily transferred to the primary mediators and interpreters of scripture: the clerical class of priests, pastors, scribes, and theologians. The authority that the Bible has *over people* becomes the authority that a clerical class, in varying degrees of subservience to a ruling class, has *over people*. The clerical class, along with the affluent and privileged class, are the primary beneficiaries of the doctrine of biblical authority and holiness.

Unlike the purity system, the gift system does not rank or divide people and objects according to degree of holiness or pollution (which results in a social hierarchy). In the gift system all of *God's creation* is holy. (Gen. 1) (The creation is to be revered; only the Creator is to be worshiped.) Also, all people are holy (since they are "made in the image of God" and have the spirit of life within them). As a result of this more universal understanding of holiness, the gift system supports movements for social equality and justice. ("You shall love your neighbor as yourself.") Unlike the purity system which believes God's holiness may be partially transferred to objects, in the gift system *human-made* creations or objects are *not holy*. Church

buildings, sanctuaries, altars, communion elements, religious artifacts, idols, statues, letters, and books are *not holy*.

How is the Bible viewed in the gift system? The analytical tool of the gift and purity systems reveal that the Bible, although benefiting from much divine inspiration, is not all revelation from God. The Bible is a mixture of revelation of God and human cultural biases. On the one hand, the Bible is an invaluable gift filled with revelations of God & the Messiah, wisdom literature, and a partial historical record of the liberation struggle. On the other hand, the Bible was written *within* the historical context of humankind's struggle to overcome many forms of oppression. The human authors of the Bible are all part of this struggle and see and write with varying degrees of clarity. Some authors or editors represent the ruling class and all authors have some bias. Thus human cultural biases are very much a part of the Bible. Even with the clear revelation of the Messiah, the New Testament is still blurred some by the purity system. (See chapters 5 & 6.)

When reading the Bible it is beneficial to identify contradictions in scripture and flaws in the lives and visions of biblical people and authors. Let us remember that the revelation of God throughout history is ongoing and cumulative. In theory, each succeeding generation, if it learns from the experiences and mistakes of the past, should have a progressively better vision of God and God's will. But if we do not clearly identify the cultural biases and errors of our ancestors, then we are bound to repeat the mistakes of the past. Christians who don't see the biases of the past in the Bible will uphold biases in the present. (Who says Neanderthals are extinct?) Disciples must progress in vision. In order for the discipleship movement to make progress it must be rooted in Jesus, rooted in liberation history, and seek to learn both from our biblical predecessors' faithful efforts and from their mistakes and cultural biases.

To conclude, of all books the Bible is the most valuable. But the Bible is not intrinsically holy or authoritative. The Bible is not the *inerrant* word of God or even *the* word of God. Just as it was wrong to subjugate people to the sabbath and its laws so it is wrong to subjugate people to the Bible, to doctrines of biblical authority, and to a clerical class. The Bible, like the sabbath, should serve the

needs of people and be a means towards human liberation. One can hear God throughout the whole Bible. One can learn from all of scripture. But because of the prevalence of human, cultural biases one often cannot hear God simply through the literal words of the Bible. For disciples, revelation comes through the Spirit working within believers who read the Bible through the light of Jesus and in the context of a life of discipleship.

The center and foundation of the discipleship movement is not the Bible but rather is Jesus, the "living Word" of God. Jesus has authority over all scripture and Jesus' voice is not limited to the past or to scripture. Still Jesus/Spirit/God continues to speak. In John 16 Jesus says,

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, (the Spirit) will guide you into all the truth." (Jn. 16:12-13)

Jesus/Spirit/God continues to speak to us today - and this voice is not a recorded message continuously repeating texts from scripture. The Bible, if enlightened by Jesus, can be an extremely valuable resource towards faithful discipleship and the spread of God's commonwealth on earth. But disciples of Jesus must be attentive both to hearing God speak through the Bible and to hearing Jesus' voice today.

Footnotes

1. See C.I./C.R., pp. 17-32. This section provides an introduction to the gift and purity systems.

2. There are a lot of nuances in definitions concerning biblical inerrancy. The following may be helpful.

"Here's how Robert Rakestraw, who teaches theology at Bethel Seminary in Arden Hills, distinguishes the terms:

*Biblical literalists. They tend to believe that every word of the Bible is literally true. For instance, in Luke 16:26, where a rich man speaks of being in a flame of anguish, biblical literalists would assume there was an actual fire, rather than see it as symbolic of suffering.

*Scripture as inerrant. Those holding this view generally believe that the Bible in its original texts has no factual errors of any kind - geography, science, history, theology. They also believe the Bible is infallible.

*Bible as infallible. Those who subscribe to this view generally say the Bible is the final authority for their faith and practice. In reading the text, emphasis is given to discovering what the scripture verses meant in their historical context. Those who hold this view may or may not believe in the inerrancy of Scripture.

Rakestraw said all evangelicals would subscribe to the infallibility of Scripture. The majority of them would also be inerrantists. Fundamentalists would generally subscribe to all three positions, he said."

Susan Hogan/Albach, "Infallible, literal or inerrant? Beliefs vary," Star Tribune, Minneapolis, December 28, 1996.

3. For an in-depth and scholarly refutation of biblical inerrancy see The Ultimate Heresy...The Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy by Rodger L. Cragun, 1996, Boreal Light, Two Harbors, MN, 55616. For another approach see Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, Jesus Against Christianity, Reclaiming the Missing Jesus, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 2001.

4. Translations like the RSV or the NRSV that substitute "the LORD" for "Yahweh" (YHWH) are giving support to the purity system. The purity system believes that God's name is so holy that it can be rarely used or spoken. This upholds the purity system's large and unbridgeable chasm between God and humankind. In contrast to this the gift system expresses God's will for intimacy: God deeply desires to be known by all, to be loved by all, and to be incarnated in all. To replace "Yahweh," the great "I am," with "the LORD" serves to distance us from God. Jesus' use of "Abba," a term actually more intimate than "father," reflects even more of the intimacy that Yahweh desires.

5. Since I am not a biblical inerrantist I will simply propose a likely reading.

Will it please the clerical class?

Who regularly speaks
for God?
All clergy rise.
Well-schooled intermediaries -
"Masters of Divinity" -
officially ordained -
and all "fools" in their own right.
What? Is that offensive?
Does anyone object to "fools" -
but not to
"masters of divinity"?
Are egotism, hierarchy,
pomposity, and false honor
not objectionable?
But "fools"
is iconoclastic -
a fitting redress.
A child spoke out -
"The emperor has no clothes" -
dispelling mystifying pretensions.
Thus the clerical class:
obstructing the Spirit -
replacing discipleship
with cultic religion
and false doctrines -
misleading, misguiding -
fooling the flock -
fooling themselves -
and then acting like -
"Respect our chicanery."
More church-pleasing behavior?
And less God-pleasing
obedience to Jesus?
No way!
Please, all clergy -
quit fooling around -
stop "playing church."
Step down -
and follow the Messiah.

CHAPTER 5

The Bible - Part 2

The Power of the Resurrection

The four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John represent a primary and common source of knowledge about Jesus. Most of what we know about Jesus comes from these gospels. As such, they are indispensable for discipleship to Jesus. But how truthful are they? As discussed in chapter 4, the claim that the Bible is "the word of God" and is intrinsically authoritative is wrong. There is human subjectivity in both the writing and reading of the Bible. This presents a bit of a problem for disciples of Jesus who are committed to Jesus as their foremost authority. How shall disciples read the four gospels in the light of human subjectivity and flaws - and still uphold the authority of Jesus?

A lot is at stake concerning the credibility of the gospels. Certainly disciples must recognize that an easy way of undermining the authority and leadership of Jesus is through discrediting the gospel accounts. To discredit or to relativize much of Jesus' teachings and practices tends to cheapen conversion to Jesus and weaken discipleship. If much of the gospels are discredited then there is little left of Jesus to follow. As the gospels' credibility shrinks one may be inclined to simply pick and choose, hem and haw, and perhaps retreat into academic posturing. Such a piecemeal approach greatly diminishes Jesus' authority. So how are disciples to read the gospels?

There are many ways of reading the gospels besides an inerrantist reading. Biblical scholarship has subjected the gospel texts to much criticism. The production of the gospel texts, their historical accuracy, and their depiction of Jesus have undergone much scrutiny and criticism. At the present time there is a resurgence of interest in "the historical Jesus." The "historical Jesus" is the *real* Jesus of

history - and according to some scholars is quite different from the Jesus depicted in the gospels. In particular, a group of liberal scholars who call themselves the Jesus Seminar have published, individually and collectively, a number of books popularizing the topic and calling into question many traditional Christian beliefs. The Seminar's book, The Acts of Jesus,

"repeat(s) the assertion, published by the 75-person, self-appointed Seminar...that close historical analysis of the Gospels exposes most of them as inauthentic; that by inference, most Christians' picture of Christ may be radically misguided. That their Jesus, in fact, 'is an imaginative theological construct, into which have been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth'....If the Seminar's claims are valid - that little can be known of the most basic elements of his life, let alone of the miracles - then on what is Christian belief based?"¹

The liberal Jesus Seminar scholars, along with many other scholars, have been trying to "demythologize" the gospels, uncover the various traditions and historical settings behind the production of each text, and extract from them traces of the true "historical Jesus." To demythologize the gospels is to remove from them theological overlays, ancient, cultural, symbolic expressions and mythical embellishments in order to arrive at a more rational and truthful picture.

The production of the gospel texts involved many factors, (some of which I will briefly describe), which have brought the texts' historical accuracy into question. Some of these factors are: * Jesus' sayings were passed on through oral tradition. Oral transmissions particularly recounted those sayings of Jesus which were the most socially relevant; much of what Jesus said was lost through the decades. * As the discipleship movement spread geographically, differing Jesus-traditions developed with some differing recollections of Jesus. * Jesus spoke Aramaic. The four gospels were written in Greek somewhere between 35 and 70 years after Jesus' crucifixion - presumably from four different locations in the Roman empire. * The authorship of the gospels, with the history, experience, and credibility of the author at stake, is not known; later patriarchal traditions attributed the authorship to four men - presumably prominent disciples of Jesus. * From the time of Jesus to the time of

the written gospels some of Jesus' sayings probably underwent some modification and/or theological development. * In the process of putting together a narrative-story of Jesus a gospel author may have fabricated part of a dialogue and/or sought to embellish Jesus' history. Certainly there are Old Testament and apocryphal precedents for embellishment. * Gospel authors, in their zeal to document that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, may be guilty at times of writing "not history remembered but prophecy historicized."² * In the later gospels the authors have sometimes used a similar source (the gospel of Mark or the theoretical Q source) in different ways. * Some parables may have had violence added to them. * Some discrepancies in the gospels, such as Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, are irreconcilable. * Each gospel was shaped in the context of issues and events particular to the place and time of the writing. So each gospel has its own particular theological perspective. These theological perspectives give differing views of Jesus. For example, Mark's Jesus tries to keep a "Messianic secret" while John's Jesus openly and frequently declares his divinity and oneness with God; in the first three gospels Jesus is more theocentric while in John Jesus is more Christocentric. * Some gospel texts may be biased against the Jews, blaming them primarily for Jesus' execution, and biased for the Romans, making Jesus appear less threatening to the Romans. * Later editors of a gospel text may have made changes. The original gospel of Mark probably ended at 16:8; later editors added endings. Chapter 21 of John might be a later addition.

Taking the above factors (and others) into consideration, it is well-established among many biblical scholars that the four gospels cannot be read literally so as to depict the actual history of Jesus. Also, the gospels cannot be harmonized to present a single history of Jesus or a unified picture of Jesus. The Jesus Seminar scholars have gone further in their criticisms, debunking much of the gospels as inauthentic, including birth narratives, nature and healing miracles, much of Jesus' sayings, and trial and resurrection narratives. So what sort of Jesus is left after all this? Seminar scholars' views differ considerably. But perhaps some common ground might be that Jesus was an itinerant, a Mediterranean peasant, a Jewish sage, a healer, a social revolutionary, and a victim of state execution.

What might be some of the effects of the Jesus Seminar's work? Trying to develop a more accurate historical context for the gospels and Jesus can be helpful. Some of their questioning, insights, and new images of Jesus may be quite challenging and inspiring. After hard questioning of core beliefs faith can emerge stronger. The Seminar's emerging view of Jesus as a very radical, egalitarian, inclusive, down-to-earth yet deeply spiritual, sage and healer may be quite refreshing to some Christians. Certainly the focus on who Jesus really is is a good focus for these times. Degenerative Christianity has turned the revolutionary Jesus into a domesticated Jesus. Thus Christians need to be challenged to re-examine their faith and practices and to re-discover the real Jesus.

While there are some positive effects from the Seminar's work, there also are some negative effects. A great deal of critical scholarship of the gospels, and the work of the Jesus Seminar in particular, may have the effect of discounting or discrediting the gospels, encouraging more biblical illiteracy, and discouraging deep commitment to Jesus. The "demythologized image" of Jesus that is coming forth, if it renews a Christian's faith, is more likely to promote a "liberal reformist faith perspective" than a "radical faith perspective." (See chapter 3.) A view of Jesus that discounts or denies Jesus' divinity and power, no matter how inspiring in other aspects, is not sufficient to support real discipleship. It is more likely to encourage a shallow, rather than a deep, commitment to Jesus. A new and shallow commitment to Jesus may be a stage in a person's life - and may represent spiritual growth - but it is not adequate for the demands of real discipleship.

Most of the rest of this chapter will examine the issue of the resurrection, along with the issue of the divinity and power of Jesus, and present a view that contrasts with the Jesus Seminar's. But first I will make a few comments to bolster the validity of the gospels.

Oral transmissions in oral cultures can be accurate; people in oral cultures in general may have better memories than people in cultures heavily dependent upon writings. The gospel texts were not intended to be complete, literal, chronological reports of Jesus' actual history; the gospels re-present important truths, messages, and events from Jesus' life and ministry. The last gospel written, John, makes fun of

literal "readings" (see Jn. 3:4, 4:15, 4:33, 6:34, 6:52, 7:35, 8:33, 8:52); it is foolish to read John literally or with a view towards chronological, historical accuracy. The Seminar's shredding of gospel texts into a pile of pieces, with each piece to be judged individually on supposed historical merits, abuses the narrative-style of each text and uses a poor criterion for supporting or discrediting verses and passages in a text. The dismissal of the power Jesus exercises in each text represents a bias against the gospel texts.

"It is by an abuse of reading that `progressive' bourgeois exegesis has extended the process of demythologization to these sequences (healings & miracles). A result of this procedure...has been to accord greater importance to the *discourses* of (Jesus)...and to reduce the narrative element as far as possible, thus turning the Gospel almost exclusively into a `teaching.' *What* is it that caused this abuse of reading? Rationalistic logocentrism, which is a form of nihilism, and its search for the historical authenticity of the Gospel narrative. Logocentrism supposes the antecedent impossibility of `miracles' and the resurrection, and regards them as dependent on the irrational and therefore on the later work of writing in the ecclesial communities....It must be added that such a logocentric reading, which demythologizes on an *a priori* basis, cannot account for the text of Mark, which has long been the poor cousin among the synoptics, for it becomes fragmented to the point of meaninglessness when all the sequences dealing with powerful practice are eliminated."³ (Fernando Belo)

There is no history from purely objective historians; each gospel necessarily must differ due to different subjective perspectives. Reporters always file different stories about the same event; no single viewpoint of Jesus could possibly be complete or definitive. Despite some discrepancies and differing viewpoints the four gospels can be seen as being quite supportive of each other. In all four gospels Jesus' sayings and practices are remarkably counter-cultural and radical; four such radical and relatively complementary pictures of Jesus coming from four different times and locations in the Roman empire are evidence of high quality texts. Much historical criticism of the gospels is based on speculative historical reconstructions which tend to differ among scholars and change over time; the gospels, even with their limitations, remain the closest and truest representations of Jesus' life and ministry.

Resurrection, Divinity, & Power

Probably the most controversial pronouncement from the Jesus Seminar is that the resurrection is a myth. This pronouncement, more than any other, is one which could steer people away from making a deep commitment to Jesus. After all, if Jesus' execution was just like other executions, and if there was no resurrection, then why would anyone today commit themselves to a life of discipleship to Jesus? Jesus could be looked to as a model of a godly life - but hardly could command the allegiance and following of a unique Messiah sent by God.

What are the Seminar's bases for declaring the resurrection a myth? Some of the factors are: Some early writings do not mention the resurrection - fueling speculation that it may have been a later addition. The apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, which may predate the four canonical gospels, does not mention the resurrection. There is no evidence that the theoretical Q source used in Matthew and Luke mentions the resurrection. Paul's writings are the earliest in the New Testament. In 1 Cor. 15 Paul writes about a controversy over the resurrection. Some in the community at Corinth disputed the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Paul testifies that the Messiah appeared to him - and equates that appearance with the Messiah's other appearances. But Paul's experience was of a visionary nature - not a physical, bodily experience of meeting Jesus. So it is implied that perhaps the other post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were also spiritual visions and not physical. Also, Paul differentiates between our present physical bodies and our more perfect future "spiritual bodies" and states, "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1 Cor. 15:50) So while Paul believes in the afterlife, does he or doesn't he believe that Jesus' physical body was resuscitated and rose from the dead? Mark, the first canonical gospel written, contains no appearance of a risen Messiah. The other three gospels give conflicting and irreconcilable accounts of the resurrection. The resurrection account in Matthew is very brief. The accounts in Luke and John have Jesus mysteriously appearing and disappearing - which make a physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus more difficult to

explain. The gospels' differing resurrection accounts may have more to do with competing leadership authority among the early Christian communities than actual history. (See chapter 6.) Jesus' human and/or divine nature and the nature of the resurrection have been controversial from the beginning of Christianity - with different factions developing among believers in Jesus. Finally, to the skeptical, rational mind the possibility of a physical, bodily resurrection is so scientifically improbable that it can be declared even today that no such resurrection occurred in the past.

So - what is the truth about the resurrection? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? If Jesus was resurrected - was it a physical, bodily resuscitation - or only some type of "spiritual resurrection"? Or, as has been suggested by John Dominic Crossan of the Jesus Seminar, were the gospel accounts of Jesus' burial and resurrection completely fabricated, hiding the more probable likelihood that Jesus' decaying body was finally eaten by carrion birds and dogs? Obviously, since the gospel accounts themselves differ, the historical facts surrounding Jesus' execution and alleged resurrection or alleged consumption by dogs cannot be known with certainty. But, in what follows, I will present some arguments and analysis, using the tool of the gift and purity systems, to attempt to give clarity to issues surrounding the resurrection. To set the context for discussing the resurrection let us look first at how the purity system and gift system view the issue of divinity and power on earth.

The purity system's view

According to the ancient Hebrew purity system there were rigidly unchangeable barriers between God and humanity. God's holiness was considered contagious and dangerous. To approach the holy God when not in a state of ritual purity or to see God results in death. After the temple was built only the high priest, once a year, could enter the Holy of Holies. According to the purity system, then, no human being could claim to be a *divine* Messiah sent by God. Two examples of Jesus being judged according to this purity system belief are found in Mark and John:

"Again the high priest asked him, `Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?' Jesus said, `I am'....Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, `Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard

his blasphemy! What is your decision?' All of them condemned him as deserving death." (Mk. 14:61-64)

"(Jesus said) `The Father and I are one'....The Jews answered, `It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you, but for blasphemy, because you, though only a human being, are making yourself God.'" (Jn. 10:30,33)

According to the purity system, for Jesus or anyone else to claim to be the Son of God was blasphemy. The purity system's view not only prevailed among the religious leaders and the lay people, but it also held strong sway over Jesus' disciples.

Besides disbelieving that Jesus is divine, the purity system also has trouble with the *power* of Jesus. In all four gospels Jesus repeatedly exercises both the power and the authority of God. Jesus' power is a constant source of consternation and trouble for Jesus' adversaries. But what is interesting is that Jesus' adversaries do not question that Jesus exercises great power. Unlike many scholars today, Jesus' adversaries all accept and cannot dispute Jesus' power. For example:

"And they watched him, to see whether he would heal him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him." (Mk. 3:2)

The religious leaders accept that Jesus has power to heal. They only seek here to challenge his use of power on the sabbath. Jesus' adversaries also question by what authority he has power:

"And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, `He is possessed by Be-elzebul, and by the prince of demons he casts out demons.'" (Mk. 3:22)

Jesus' adversaries do not try to claim that Jesus is a magician or a fraud. They accept Jesus' power and simply try to attribute this power to Satan and not to God. Even at his death Jesus' adversaries do not deny his power:

"So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes, saying, `He saved others; he cannot save himself.'" (Mk. 15:31)

The religious leaders mock Jesus. But this mocking is in the context of comparing Jesus' weakness on the cross with his previous great power to "save others."

Jesus' power confounds those who believe in the purity system. In the purity system God's power is based in heaven. Its display on earth

could occur through God's unmediated actions or through the mediation of a divinely-appointed leader. These divinely-appointed leaders were few and far between. Presumably these few leaders would be loyal to God's laws, i.e., they would be loyal to purity codes and rituals and to the priesthood. In the absence of a special leader it was believed by many that Israel's hope for redemption and for God's apocalyptic intervention depended upon people's strict adherence to purity codes. The religious leaders refuse to recognize that Jesus' power comes from God because Jesus continually subverts the purity system's understanding of sabbath laws, holiness and impurity, and religious authority. Due to their faith in the purity system the religious leaders repeatedly ask Jesus for a "sign from heaven." (Mk. 8:11, etc.) A "sign from heaven" would be a display of power from God's dwelling place in heaven (in the sky) that the religious leaders would all accept as being from God. Then Jesus would be accepted as a divinely-appointed leader. (See Lk. 4:9-12) But Jesus refuses to satisfy their purity system understanding of God's power. Jesus' power represents "signs from earth." The power is recognizable, but, to the guardians of the purity system, the source is not recognizable. And so Jesus' adversaries conspire to counter Jesus' life-giving power on earth with the power of violence and death.

The gift system's view

In contrast to the purity system's rigid barriers between God and humanity, the gift system proclaims that God's will is for intimacy and complete reconciliation. Not only is this God's will but God *initiates and actively works* to achieve intimate covenant relationships and justice on earth. So, concerning divinity and power, the gift system takes a different view than the purity system. It is within the logic of the gift system that God could send a human/divine Messiah to reveal who God is (to achieve intimacy) and to actively work to accomplish the big mission of establishing God's commonwealth on earth (to achieve complete reconciliation).

Unlike the purity system, in the gift system there is no heaven-earth dichotomy or God-humanity dichotomy. In the gift system God's creative, sustaining, and redeeming power is continually manifested on earth. Therefore God's power is not far away (in heaven) - but rather is present and active in the here and now on earth.

In the gift system God's power is much more abundant, inclusive, and freely flowing than in the purity system's scheme. While God loves and gives to all humanity, God's power is reflected in those who commit themselves to God (forming a just, mutual, covenant relationship). Those who are committed to God are expected to respond to God's love and gifts by loving and giving freely to others. The more fully that one does the will of God, the more fully God's Spirit can reside *within* that person (in a close, intimate relationship). Not just a *few* can receive God's Spirit, but rather *all* who do the will of God will be empowered by God.

What *primarily* attests and witnesses to Jesus as *the Messiah* are not Old Testament prophecies but rather is *God's power working through Jesus for salvation, justice, and liberation on earth*. God's will and God's power are revealed through Jesus' liberating teachings and powerful practices. Not least among Jesus' practices are Jesus' immediate power to heal and to break down social barriers to create a new, inclusive, and reconciled community. Jesus' power is used concretely for the purpose of liberating humanity from all forms of oppression and discrimination. As *the Messiah*, Jesus' power reflects God's undiluted power - which cannot be anything less than the power to overcome illness, disease, disabilities, and evil spirits.

What also attests to Jesus' Messiahship is the power exercised by Jesus' disciples in Jesus' name. Jesus is not the sole holder of God's power - but rather this same power is available to disciples. The four gospels do not simply exalt Jesus as a divine Messiah - they also promote a powerful (Spirit-filled) discipleship movement. All four gospels attest that God's Spirit/being/power abides in disciples of Jesus. So, for better or for worse, the credibility of Jesus' Messiahship is linked to the power exercised by Jesus' disciples and by discipleship communities.

Jesus' disciples, of course, are often shown as failing repeatedly (as in Mark) or at least are slow to learn. For disciples to provide good channels for God's power requires radical commitment and obedience - and real maturity. Discipleship is a lifelong journey and, unfortunately, too few disciples and communities attain a real depth of maturity. Nevertheless, according to the gift system, God's infinite

power is readily available on earth. It is God's will for this Spirit-power to spread to all as God's commonwealth is established. This power is only limited by the levels of mature discipleship (the channels for God's Spirit) and others coming to radical faith in Jesus/God (the new beneficiaries of God's power). Thus the purity system's and the gift system's understanding of God's power and how it operates couldn't be further apart.

Resurrections

The previous discussion of Jesus' divinity and power can help us understand Jesus' resurrection - and people's different views towards it. How do the purity system and the gift system view "resurrection"?

The ancient Hebrew purity system is against resurrection. In the purity system contagion and death have the final claim on the body. The dead body is unclean, a source of pollution, and needs to be buried. The holiest people, the priestly class, who are closest to God, avoid contact with corpses. Without recourse to the priestly class and to purification rituals there can be no bodily resurrection.

The gift system takes a different view. Death, as part of the power of sin and evil, does not have the last word - even on earth. The logic of the gift system is that God's power is greater than any other power and God's power is fully operative on earth. God's Spirit-power is greater than the power of Satan. The power of life is greater than the power of contagion and death. So the power to resurrect the dead is within God's power.

The gospels depict two kinds of resurrections. First, the resurrection of the dead can be a more unusual and powerful expression of God's healing power towards someone who has recently died. All four gospels present examples of this. In Matthew and Luke Jesus proclaims his power to raise the dead. (Mt. 11:4-5; Lk. 7:22) In Mark 5:35-43 (and repeated in Mt. 9:18-26 and Lk. 8:49-56) Jesus raises a 12-year-old girl who has died. In Luke 7:11-17 Jesus raises from the funeral bier a widow's son. In John 11 Jesus raises Lazarus from the grave. Second, the resurrection of Jesus was qualitatively

different from those just mentioned. As the one who had performed the aforementioned resurrections Jesus' death seemingly could have put an end to this power. However, Jesus was resurrected without any human intermediary. Also, unlike the other resurrections, Jesus was resurrected never to die again.⁴ Obviously, Jesus' resurrection can give hope to all of a type of resurrection from the dead that is permanent. This is all possible within the logic of the gift system. Whether the resurrection of the dead prolongs one's life on earth or, in the case of Jesus' resurrection is permanent, the gift system affirms that God's power is available on earth.

The issue of the nature of Jesus' resurrection fits into the ideological conflict between the gift and purity systems. Was it a physical resurrection or only a "spiritual resurrection"? The idea that Jesus' resurrection was only some sort of "spiritual resurrection" is more accommodating to the logic of the purity system. This view supports more of a dichotomy, distance, and barrier between the physical and the spiritual. The belief in the finality of the pollution and decay of the dead body finds support. A non-physical resurrection would communicate that at least in the physical world the power of death reigns supreme and even God, through Jesus Christ, could not overcome it. By way of contrast, the logic of the gift system is more supportive of a physical, bodily resurrection. A physical resurrection demonstrates in a physical way that the power of God is greater than the power of death. A physical resurrection shows that God's infinite power extends and is given to humanity on earth. This means that the world's powers and authorities are put on notice - their time is limited. God's liberating power is flowing through the Messiah and the discipleship movement here on earth. The gospels support this gift system perspective of a physical resurrection. While Mark's gospel has no resurrection appearance the other three gospels all emphasize the physical nature of Jesus in his resurrection appearances.

The gift system viewpoint is that God's power is not far away or monopolized in any way but is intended to spread freely through the Messiah and through the discipleship movement. So perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised that the authors of Matthew, Luke, and John either state or imply that this power to raise the dead (who have recently died) is also available to disciples. In Matthew 10:8 Jesus

commissions evangelistic messengers to "raise the dead." The author of Luke also wrote Acts. In Acts 9:36-43 Peter helps to raise Tabitha from the dead and in Acts 20:7-12 Paul helps to raise Eutychus from the dead. The author of John implies this power to raise the dead when Jesus says that his disciples

"will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will (they) do." (Jn. 14:12)

Obviously, this practice of raising the dead never really took hold. Acts mentions only the two incidents. But the examples are there and the challenge remains for disciples today to be much better channels of God's Spirit and power.

So the ancient purity system and the gift system have very different views of resurrection. The purity system denies it. And the gift system *goes far beyond* viewing the resurrection of the dead as a one-time event for one person. So which view won out in Christianity?

Conflict with the purity system

The revival of the discipleship movement after Jesus' execution was fueled by the power of the resurrection. A discipleship movement with a dead leader was a dead movement and would become just a footnote in history. But a discipleship movement with a resurrected leader was an explosive *and powerful* movement. Faith and courage returned in abundance despite the lethal power of the Roman empire. Surely the first disciples must have been overjoyed at the resurrection. The following may have been a popular saying:

"O death, where is (your) sting?

O grave, where is (your) victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55 CEV)

The earliest communities could justifiably feel triumphant. The resurrection meant ultimate victory. Hope was unquenchable. The Messiah had overcome death. The Messiah's leadership continued. The messianic movement to transform the world was not dead - it was now stronger. The strongest power of the religious leaders, the Roman rulers, and evil was not strong enough to defeat the Messiah. All that remains is the unstoppable spread of God's commonwealth over all the earth. Yes, that's quite a lot remaining - but the

resurrection revealed the final outcome - eventually evil will be vanquished by God's superior power.

As the revived discipleship movement took off it was not without its faults. The purity system was down but not out. Many of its beliefs still had deep tentacles *within* the disciples. As the resurrection became a foundational belief, a *modified* purity system began to develop *within* the movement. The purity system began to evolve *within* Christianity. It went like this: 1. the ancient purity system would deny Jesus' divinity and deny the resurrection; 2. the modified purity system, while going through some contortions, would affirm Jesus' divinity and the resurrection; and 3. over time, the modified purity system would affirm Jesus' divinity and the resurrection as a matter of absolute doctrine - but greatly distort their meaning. What are these distortions? Let us begin by looking at how the purity system evolved.

While the first disciples joyfully affirmed the resurrection, the hold of the purity system still affected how they viewed Jesus. It took some time for the disciples to overcome their view of Jesus as only a human messiah. It was difficult for them to conceive of a Messiah being both human and divine. Much more so than the first three gospels the last gospel written, John, presents Jesus as fully divine. I believe that this change in perception to viewing Jesus as both human and divine was very important progress. A *human* messiah, with personal faults and ideological blind spots, is *not worthy* of obedience and a discipleship following. Why would future generations follow an out-dated human messiah? They wouldn't - or shouldn't. A Messiah, both human and divine, is necessary to sustain the discipleship movement over the long term and to bring to completion the big mission. A divine Messiah means there is no need for any new leaders or for a new messiah. There is one Messiah for all time - who is worthy of living and dying for. A human and divine Messiah can fit into the logic of the gift system, of God's great love for humanity, God's will for intimacy and reconciliation, and God taking the initiative. Jesus, as a human and divine Messiah, destroys the ancient purity system's rigid barriers between God and humanity. The ancient purity system is irrefutably discredited. Developing the view of Jesus as both human and divine, however, was not without a great deal of controversy and struggle.

The issue concerning the human and/or divine nature of Jesus resulted in a number of factions or sects among believers in Jesus. Some gnostic sects developed in the second century. They believed that matter is evil and that salvation came through gaining a special "knowledge." The doctrine of Docetism claims that Jesus was actually Spirit and only appeared to be a man in physical form. Hence, Jesus' sufferings and death on a cross only appeared to happen but were not real. Obviously if the crucifixion wasn't real then the resurrection becomes irrelevant. In the third century a Manichaean sect developed which mixed gnostic beliefs with other religious beliefs. It developed Jesus' divinity in some strange ways and continued the dualistic opposition between spirit and matter. These sects found many followers. But it should be clear that the above beliefs of these sects find their logic in the purity system. They emphasize the difference between spirit, which is regarded to be of God and is good, and matter, which is regarded to be unclean and sinful. They try, in various ways, to keep the divine in heaven and not on earth. The unity of the divine with a human Jesus is at most temporary. Most tend to deny or downplay Jesus as a physical, human person, emphasize the divine nature of Jesus, and thus maintain the gap between a holy God and a holy Christ in heaven and sinful humanity on earth. While early Christianity eventually declared the above sects heretical - the sects still give a clue and point towards how the modified purity system was developing within Christianity.

Under Roman Emperor Constantine the Christian council of Nicea in 325 declared the doctrine of the trinitarian God and declared that Jesus was fully human, fully divine. While the doctrine upholds the gift system's perspective the modified purity system was working to undermine its meaning. What did the modified purity system emphasize? It was now working within Christianity to emphasize Jesus' divinity and to minimize and distort Jesus' humanity. Both the Nicene creed, and later the Apostle's creed (established around 500 A.D.), say nothing about Jesus' life from the time of his birth to the time of his suffering and crucifixion. His ministry, way of life, teachings and practices, and the discipleship movement are completely missing from these orthodox creeds. What is emphasized instead is Jesus' human birth, his martyrdom, and his divinity. This reductive emphasis well serves the modified purity system. Keeping

the Messiah in heaven and erasing the discipleship movement on earth serves to re-establish the purity system's distance and barriers between a holy God in heaven and a sinful humanity on earth.

The modified purity system today is well-developed, with deep historical roots. The purity system today emphasizes conversion to a risen and glorified Christ. This glorified Christ in heaven is completely disconnected from the Messiah's leadership of a revolutionary discipleship movement on earth. After conversion to a heavenly Christ, church membership becomes a substitute for real discipleship to Jesus. The modified purity system reads gospel texts of Jesus' exercise of God's power as "proof texts" demonstrating Jesus' Sonship and divinity. Then the purity system claims that God's power was limited to Jesus and a few apostles. Thus, once again, the purity system greatly restricts God's power and denies its availability to all humanity.

The *greatest distortion of the modified purity system* is its presentation of Jesus' execution. Jesus' execution is presented as a "sacrifice for sins." In the purity system God's standards of holiness necessitate sacrifices - the shedding of blood. Animal sacrifices were prescribed in the Old Testament. The purity system interprets Jesus' execution as a necessary bloody sacrifice to appease a holy God in heaven. The historical context of the execution is ignored. The guilt of all those responsible for Jesus' execution is ignored in favor of a generic human sinfulness. Jesus' execution/sacrifice was required because of humanity's sinfulness. The cross becomes the symbol of Jesus' unique, heroic sacrifice and atonement for all of humankind's sins. Nevermind that Jesus taught, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." (Mt. 12:7) Only the purity system can justify animal sacrifices. The gift system prescribes "mercy," i.e., direct service to people in need of help. Also, in the Old Testament, Yahweh forbids human sacrifices. Human sacrifices are an abomination in the sight of God. They are offered up by people who worship false gods. So how could Yahweh demand the human sacrifice of Jesus? Only the purity system could ignore Jesus' and God's teachings and turn Jesus' execution into a God-approved human sacrifice for sins. Thus the Christian purity system pulls a real reversal. Jesus seeks to *abolish* the purity system and lead a *powerful* discipleship movement on earth. Instead Jesus becomes the *perfect example* of the purity system (a sacrificial

offering) and the heavenly *figurehead* of weak and hopelessly compromised churches.

In the *Christian purity system's main religious story* the faithful play only a very minor role.⁵ Believers do not actively participate in the great story of salvation. The purity system's *salvation story* emphasizes a heavenly salvation already accomplished through "the blood of Jesus." Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and atonement for humanity's sins are nearly the whole story.

"Faith is reduced to an afterlife insurance policy, paid in full through the blood of our resurrected Lord, and guaranteed by grace. Repentance, conversion, and salvation become words without historical significance."⁶ (Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer)

The continual retelling and reliving of this salvation story encourages detachment, passivity, and individualism among believers. Believers become detached from humanity's historical struggle to achieve justice and peace on earth. Believers are, in large part, passive spectators who cheer and praise Jesus/God. Salvation comes to individual believers simply by their accepting this story and by accepting Jesus as their personal savior. Believers then passively await the final act. In the final act the world comes to an abrupt end when God arbitrarily decides to intervene through Jesus' apocalyptic second coming. Before the final act there is little hope for progress towards justice on earth. Thus, the modified purity system's salvation story works to pacify believers. It marginalizes those people who are most committed to working for social justice. It serves to prop up the reign of the rich and powerful on earth.

The gift system can understand Jesus' execution and death as some sort of "sacrifice" - but in a different way than the purity system understands it. Instead of glorifying the crucifixion the gift system places the crucifixion on the side of debt and curse. It is what Jesus' adversaries do to try to defeat the Messiah. The cross symbolizes how strongly political authorities and religious leaders oppose Jesus' earthly Messiahship. The power of violence and death is the ultimate power of Jesus' opponents. In order to accomplish his big mission Jesus knows that he and his disciples must face and overcome this power. So the real Jesus, untamed and undomesticated, 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." (Mk. 8:34-35)

Jesus provides the example for his disciples. Jesus *gives* - or "sacrifices" - his life for the sake of the cause - the cause of God's commonwealth on earth. Jesus pays the ultimate price for working to establish justice and peace on earth. This is the ultimate *gift* - or "sacrifice": one's life. In turn, Jesus calls upon his disciples to maintain their revolutionary commitment to the end.

It is the power of the resurrection that must fuel the revolutionary discipleship movement. The power of the resurrection can motivate disciples to actively and steadfastly participate in God's *real salvation story*. The resurrected Messiah is able to provide the best leadership for a powerful and global discipleship movement seeking to bring salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world. This salvation story requires active participation.

Let us connect this discussion of the resurrection with the Jesus Seminar and their declaration that the resurrection is a myth. The Jesus Seminar, with their emphasis on the historical Jesus, would seem to counter the modified purity system's emphasis on the heavenly, divine Christ. Yet the Jesus Seminar's view of the historical Jesus is another reductive view - and has much in common with the purity system. The Seminar would strip Jesus of his divinity. This agrees with the ancient purity system which convicted Jesus of blasphemy for claiming to be *the Messiah*, the Son of God. The Messiah, then, wouldn't carry much authority for anyone today. The Seminar would deny Jesus' exercise of God's power on earth - and implicitly deny the availability of that power to disciples today. To deny Jesus' power is something even his historical adversaries didn't do. Finally, in a view that agrees with the ancient purity system, the Seminar would deny the resurrection. So the Seminar would like to quench the power of the resurrection that is crucial for the discipleship movement. Yes, the Seminar's historical Jesus, no matter how countercultural, is still suitable for affluent white Americans who have no desire for real and costly discipleship. "A new vision of Jesus? How interesting! How nice! Tell me some more about it next Sunday. I've got to go home to watch the football game." A new vision of Jesus? Not really. It's just another convoluted variation of the purity

system. Thus the Seminar's work is like going one step forward and two steps backward. This is not progress but another way to regress.

Reading The Four Gospels

Here are some suggestions for reading the four gospels.

1. A gospel text can be illuminated by reading the text in its "proper" historical and literary context. However, this "proper" context is somewhat elusive and transitory. There is a formidable and massive amount of scholarship about the gospels. Three points need to be kept in mind concerning this mountain of scholarly work. First, there is a disproportionate amount of literary biblical scholarship compared to actual discipleship to Jesus. How many scholars in the Jesus Seminar or elsewhere are living a life of costly obedience to Jesus? Disciples of Jesus, no matter what level of education, are already way ahead of scholars - simply by seeking to live the truth of Jesus. Second, lack of discipleship to Jesus absolutely contributes to a mis-reading of the gospels. Think again of the scholars and their practices - and pray for them. It can be no coincidence that Jesus Seminar scholars deny Jesus' miracles and power - thus reflecting accurately the weakness of their faith and practices. Scholarly works, then, can be approached with a healthy dose of skepticism.⁷ Third, good scholarly background for a text can be quite helpful - but it is not *essential*. The bottom line: More important than scholarly input on a text is a deep commitment to Jesus and guidance by the Spirit.

2. The gospel texts can be approached with faith, with a belief that they are essentially truthful. The texts have their limitations and understanding possible biases in the texts can be helpful. But even after all the criticisms the four gospels remain our primary and best texts for learning about Jesus and his liberation movement.

3. Disciples of Jesus can approach the gospel texts with a commitment to maintain Jesus as their foremost authority. Since Jesus is the foremost authority this gives a great deal of authority to each text. When reading the Bible nothing has greater authority than

the teachings, practices, and life of Jesus found in the four gospels. The words of Jesus have more authority than the words of Moses, the prophets, Paul, or anyone else. Instead of discrediting any of Jesus' teachings it may be better to begin by saying that some teachings are hard to understand or appear to be inconsistent with Jesus' other teachings. Then the possibility of author or editor bias in the text can be explored. However, even if some bias can be detected, the passage may contain some valuable meaning. Finally, understanding the authority of Jesus allows a disciple some freedom to creatively use and apply gospel passages in all other areas of life.

4. The Jesus found in the gospel texts can be viewed as not absolutely authoritative but rather as essentially true, essentially authoritative. Disciples are not robots programmed to follow a legalistic code of Jesus' biblical teachings but rather are God's children who are in a process of growing and maturing. Disciples are to be committed to obedience and discipleship to the Jesus of the gospels - and more. First priority remains a personal, incarnational relationship with the living Jesus. This is a relationship of love, companionship, and discipleship. Disciples are to be guided by the Spirit and to seek to hear and obey Jesus' communications today. This relationship with the living Jesus supports and guides disciples in their obedience to the Jesus of the gospel texts.

Footnotes

1. David Van Biema, "The Gospel Truth?", Time, April 8, 1996, New York, NY, p. 54.

2. This is a quote from John Dominic Crossan who emphasizes this point.

3. Fernando Belo, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981, p. 290. I've inserted "(healings & miracles)" and "(Jesus)."

4. Related to Jesus' resurrection is a somewhat strange resurrection account in Matthew 27:51-53. Was it the first "Night of the Living

Dead"? Truth or fiction? In any case, the author of Matthew firmly believed in the resurrection, in God's power, and in the spread of God's power.

5. Of course, this description is condensed, simplified, and generalized.

6. Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, War Against the Poor, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1989, p. 75.

7. Of course those who do combine scholarly work with some real discipleship probably have the most to contribute.

Business as usual until...

It was somewhat routine -
nailing prisoners to crosses,
hoisting them up,
keeping watch
over their torturous deaths.
Slow, painful
agonizing deaths.
A macabre sight -
a living, human being -
torn from family and friends -
stripped naked,
bleeding and groaning,
hanging for hours
in a public place
for all who care to see.
A nasty job -
delegated to soldiers -
but a necessary one.
The business of killing
always an integral part
of maintaining empire.
Crucifixions
as a method

of population control
demonstrating
absolute power
and the folly
of rebellion.
The underside of empire
publicly displayed.
Signature event.
Pax Romana.
"Peace" - Roman style.
Render to Caesar -
or face the consequences.
Ho hum, Jesus crucified -
business as usual.
Another day, another killing.
But Jesus resurrected -
and all the nations of the world
threatened by -
a greater power.
Oppressed peoples:
take notice -
a new Way is opening -
with a guaranteed promise -
to overcome.
In this new light
the only redeeming option
to the powers and authorities -
is nonviolent resistance.
Faith in the living God -
is resistance.
The Way of Jesus -
is revolutionary -
exposing rulers
as bloody murderers,
as illegitimate usurpers
of God's authority.
Jesus bids us to follow -
to pick up the cross,
counting the costs,
weighing allegiances,

recognizing the greater power,
believing in the promise.
Pax Christi or Pax Romana.
Life or death.
Choose life eternal -
and follow Jesus.

CHAPTER 6

The Bible - Part 3

Internal Challenges to Jesus' Authority

The last two chapters have looked at how differing ways of viewing the Bible can either strongly support or undermine Jesus' leadership and authority. This chapter continues in that vein. The New Testament writings, from Acts to Revelation, are a valuable source for understanding both the dynamism of the early discipleship movement and its internal problems. These writings, all from the first or early second century, reveal information about leadership and authority in the earliest Christian communities.

Early in the 4th century Emperor Constantine began making Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire. But the first several centuries laid the groundwork for this idolatrous merging of the Messianic/Christian faith with the Roman state. In some very important ways idolatrous tendencies began to establish themselves in the first century when most of the New Testament was written.

Jesus' departure (or ascension) opened the door for others to assert their leadership and authority. Consequently, the discipleship movement had many internal struggles over leadership and authority. This chapter will look at some of the struggles over authority within the discipleship movement and how the leadership of the Messiah was often supplanted. This chapter will look at apostolic authority, male authority, church-office authority, and the Holy Spirit's authority. Once again, the analytical tool of the gift and purity systems will be employed. Let us look first at "apostolic authority."

Apostolic authority

Various understandings of the term "apostle" have led Christians to take different paths in community-formation and church structure. The Greek for "apostle" is "*apostolos*," meaning "one who is sent out." There is some authority attached to being an apostle. An apostle is authorized - by Jesus or by a community - to go out and perform some mission, presumably an evangelistic mission. The evangelistic apostle is to be faithful and obedient to Jesus while carrying out the mission. So this much is easily agreed upon. But an "apostle" can take on more authority.

More authority may be attached to being an apostle if apostleship is viewed as a *permanent leadership position*. And if apostleship is a *high position of authority* then being recognized and designated as an "apostle" is very important to establishing one's leadership in a community or church. Also, if apostleship is a special and continuous gift of God-designated authority for the church, then establishing an official church structure for recognizing "apostolic succession" can become very important.

Recognition of who was or wasn't an apostle became controversial. Recognized by all as apostles were the original twelve male disciples who formed a close circle around Jesus. But after that accepted understanding there are disagreements. It is helpful to trace apostleship back to Jesus. What were Jesus' intentions?

The four gospels speak expansively on Jesus' ministry and should provide ample information concerning apostles. The first gospel written, Mark, uses "apostles" only once, in the context of the twelve disciples returning from their evangelistic mission. (Mk. 6:30) The gospel of Matthew also uses "apostles" only once, naming the 12 disciples before they are sent out on their evangelistic mission. (Mt. 10:2) The last gospel written, John, never uses the noun "apostle." So in three of the gospels the highly-politicized term "apostles" appears all of two times. Can we surmise anything from this sparing usage? The gospels were written in the latter part of the first century, 35 to 70 years after Jesus' execution, and presumably from locations outside of Judea. Historically, it is possible that the communities which gave rise to some of the gospels may have been in

tension with other Christian communities which more strongly supported traditions of "apostolic authority." In any case, only the author of Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, uses the word "apostles" more than once.

The first usage of "apostles" in Luke occurs when Jesus ascends the mountain to pray. (Lk. 6:12-16) Here Jesus chooses twelve disciples "whom he named apostles." In this passage the twelve are not sent out on a mission. Rather, the twelve are designated as "apostles" as if it might be a title or position. But what was Jesus' intent when forming the group of twelve? Was Jesus building a new hierarchy, a new leadership class?

The Luke 6:12-16 passage corresponds to, and probably used as its original source, Mark 3:13-19. Although the passages are very similar the one in Mark provides just a little more information. In Mark the twelve are not "named apostles" but instead are disciples who will "be with Jesus" and will be "sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons." Also, in Mark, Jesus gives James and John, in addition to Simon, new names. All of Jesus' actions in this passage are very symbolic and can be better understood in the context of ancient Hebrew society and history. Jesus' ascent up the mountain symbolically parallels Moses' ascent up the mountain to receive the 10 commandments for the old Sinai covenant. Jesus' actions represent the beginning of a *new covenant*. Jesus selects 12 male disciples. The number 12 symbolically represents the 12 tribes who formed the nation of Israel. The 12 tribes are generally traced back to Jacob, who was given the name "Israel" by God, and to Jacob's 12 male sons. Jesus' 12 male disciples, then, when viewed as a group, symbolically represent the formation of a *new nation* - with Jesus as its founder. So Jesus is forming a new Israel - or Jesus is forming God's commonwealth on earth. Jesus' giving of new names to at least three disciples symbolically represents the formation of a *new family*.

Jesus' actions, while deeply symbolic, are also very political.

"What is usually overlooked is the political dimension of this symbolic act. By reenacting a 'new Sinai' covenant on the mountain, Jesus is attacking the ideological foundations of the dominant order....Jesus, having repudiated the authority of the priestly/scrival order, now forms a kind of vanguard 'revolutionary committee,' a

`government in exile'! The community of resistance has been founded."¹ (Ched Myers)

The formation of a *new family* centered around Jesus/God delegitimizes traditional patriarchal households. Jesus' formation of a *new nation* de-legitimizes the rulers and leaders of Israel. Therefore, Jesus' action is essentially revolutionary. Jesus has clearly identified himself as a competitor of established leaders for people's allegiance. Needless to say, strong opposition to Jesus will develop among family members, religious leaders, and political authorities.

In the Mark 3 passage Jesus also grants a certain amount of authority to the twelve disciples. They will become apostles, i.e., they will be sent out on an evangelistic mission and will be equipped with some spiritual authority for the mission. The mission-ary aspect of Jesus' action also reveals that this is far more than symbolic action. Jesus has definite plans for expanding the movement. For the rest of Jesus' ministry every time Jesus gathers the twelve around himself it is a visual reminder of Jesus' plan to spread God's commonwealth on earth.

If the above is generally Jesus' intent for selecting the twelve, was Jesus instituting a position of "apostleship" as a leadership position for a few select disciples? Some believed so. Being one of the twelve was probably pretty "heady" stuff, fueling illusions of power and grandeur. James and John expected Jesus to be exalted in Jerusalem and requested the top two thrones alongside Jesus: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." (Mk. 10:37) The twelve argued among themselves about "who was the greatest." (Mk. 9:34) Peter believed he was: "Though *all* become deserters because of you, *I* will never desert you." (Mt. 26:33) Jesus patiently and repeatedly tried to correct the disciples views on leadership and authority. At one point Jesus taught,

"*Whoever* wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and *whoever* wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." (Mk. 10:43-44)

Servant leadership can never be exclusive leadership for a few designated persons. Rather, it is *the Way for all disciples*.

Notwithstanding Jesus' teachings, the idea of "apostleship" as a designated *position* of leadership and authority emerged in the first

community. In the very first chapter of Acts Peter advocates for finding a replacement for Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus. The 12 disciples were now 11. But why is a replacement important?

The author of Luke-Acts has Peter making an interesting speech in order to justify finding a replacement. Peter relates how scripture had to be *fulfilled*. He then makes a crude appeal to scripture by picking out two disparate passages from Psalms which he, by some wild stretch of the imagination, believes are *prophecies* about Judas Iscariot. Not too accurately quoting Psalms, Peter says,

"`Let his habitation become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and `His office let another take.'" (Acts 1:20 RSV)

Another translation of the second quotation is:

"His bishopric let another take." (Acts 1:20 CEV)

Peter's argument is not to select another disciple for some symbolic purpose. After Jesus' resurrection, as the discipleship movement expands to a worldwide movement, the number 12 loses much of its symbolic importance. (The number 7 would be a more important symbolic number for a worldwide movement.) Nor does Peter mention any mission for which the twelve will be sent out of Jerusalem. Instead, Peter refers to Judas' death leaving a vacancy for a special "office" or "bishopric" (Gk.: *episkope*). While the development of church office and the position of bishop occurred late in the first century Peter seems to think the 12 disciples hold specially-designated positions of leadership for the Jerusalem-based community. Peter continues his argument for a replacement:

"So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us - one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." (Acts 1:21-22)

Of course, picking a replacement for Judas Iscariot does not in any way change the number of disciples who can witness to Jesus' ministry and resurrection. So what is the need for a replacement?

Although Peter's arguments obscure them, there are four important functions of picking a replacement: 1. As a whole, *the community legitimizes the special leadership of 12 disciples*; the 12 are *distinguished* above all the other disciples who *similarly* followed Jesus; 2. *The number of positions is fixed at 12*, providing some

leadership security for the 12; the whole rationale is based on Judas Iscariot's departure leaving *one vacancy*; the number eleven has no symbolic meaning and the eleven might lose their claim to leadership; 3. In one of its first decisions *the community specifically affirms male leadership*; perhaps Peter and some other men felt stung (see Lk. 24:10-12) by women being the first eyewitnesses of the resurrection - and the first disciples/apostles sent by Jesus to bring this good news to others; and 4. Selecting a replacement and trying hard to justify it through "sacred scripture" *helps to erase the tarnished leadership credentials* of the other 11 disciples due to the embarrassing "apostolic" betrayal, mass desertion, and triple-denial of Jesus; to be viewed as "the eleven" would carry a reminder of betrayal; so Judas Iscariot is scapegoated while the other eleven come out clean.

After Matthias is selected he is not heard from again in the New Testament - perhaps accurately indicating the importance of his selection. Indeed this whole exercise orchestrated by Peter seems to be much more important for establishing *special* leadership authority for twelve male disciples than for promoting a radical discipleship movement.

After the twelve received community legitimization as leaders did anyone assume a top position among the twelve? It was none other than Peter who was generally recognized as being first among the twelve. One claim to legitimize Peter's position of authority was by being the first to experience an appearance of the resurrected Jesus. Is that right? Was Peter the first?

In early Christianity Jesus' resurrection appearances became highly politicized. The purity system explains their importance. According to the logic of the purity system God's holiness is contagious and dangerous. God's holiness would be partially transferred or transmitted from the holy resurrected Jesus to eyewitnesses. These eyewitnesses, through spatial closeness to Jesus and special revelation, would be accorded special privilege and authority. (It is difficult to find a similar example today. Perhaps some people might gain status among their friends by meeting the President, shaking the hand of a Hollywood star, or through a sighting of Elvis - but this still would not give someone authority among their peers.) Competition for leadership authority among the first disciples probably led to

various claims and counterclaims concerning resurrection appearances. Thus the gospels when describing resurrection appearances were moving into a very controversial and politicized area. A passage in John is probably meant to counter the authority accorded to "resurrection appearances" and, perhaps, to Thomas' authority in particular. (Jn. 20:24-29) The resurrected Jesus says,

"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." (Jn.20:29)

In 1 Cor. 15 Paul asserts his apostleship based on a resurrection appearance he experienced. Paul also recites the tradition of resurrection appearances that he was taught (vv. 3-7). In this list Peter is cited first and the twelve disciples second. There is no mention of any woman. This indicates that the tradition Paul received sought to erase the memory of women being the first eyewitnesses - and thereby diminished women's leadership and authority. If this tradition belittled women - then who benefited most? Peter, of course, whose eyewitness account is elevated to first place. So who taught Paul this tradition? Gal. 1:15-22 suggests that perhaps it was Peter himself who taught Paul this tradition. And so Peter is generally recognized as the top leader among the twelve. The four gospels, written after Paul's writings, recognize Peter's leadership, but vary in their degree of support for or tension with his top position.

Were there other apostolic leaders who might justify apostleship as a recognized *position* of leadership and authority? James, the brother of Jesus, was viewed as an apostle and held a top leadership position in Jerusalem. (Paul speaks of James as an apostle in Gal. 1:19 & 1 Cor. 15:7.) How did James achieve a "position of apostleship"? It is likely that the purity system elevated James to his powerful position in Jerusalem. According to the logic of the purity system hereditary bloodlines were important both for defining priestly and kingly succession. Also, the eldest male in a family was accorded leadership privileges and responsibilities. Jesus was affirmed as Messiah and "King of the Jews." And so James, presumably Jesus' oldest sibling, was regarded by some as next-in-line to Jesus. (James is mentioned first in lists in Mt. 13:55 and Mk. 6:3.) James' leadership was bolstered by his claim to a resurrection appearance. (1 Cor. 15:7) Since James' leadership position was based

on the purity system he was expected by his followers to adhere to the purity system. James apparently was the leader of the "circumcision faction" in Jerusalem. Paul writes in Gal. 2:12 that people of the "circumcision party" were sent by James to Antioch (to enforce purity codes). While "apostle" means "one who is sent out" there is no record of James being sent out on an evangelistic mission. Instead, James becomes a power broker, firmly settled in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish purity system.

Paul also was an apostle - called by Jesus/God to evangelize among the Gentiles and sent out by the Spirit from the Christian community at Antioch. (Acts 13) As an apostle Paul was equipped with some spiritual authority for his mission. Paul, however, was not content with this authority. Paul desired that all *recognize his apostolic authority* and that he be accorded the *status* of an apostle. In his letters Paul repeatedly declares himself an apostle. In 1 Cor. 15:3-11 Paul describes his place among the ranks of the apostles based on resurrection appearances.

"Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." (1 Cor. 15:8-9)

Humble, eh? Well, almost. Just in case someone takes him literally that he is least of the apostles and unfit to be called one Paul states in his next sentence,

"On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them." (v. 10)

In another letter Paul declares,

"I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles." (2 Cor. 11:5)

This is an opinion Paul would like others to share. So, further in the letter, he expresses his disappointment that he doesn't get the respect he deserves:

"Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing." (2 Cor. 12:11)

Got it? If not, let's review. Some other apostles, with whom Paul is *at least equal to*, are super-apostles. So what does this make Paul? Go ahead - say it - then Paul won't have to toot his own horn - and he can be humble like he wants to be. Really.

Paul isn't quite finished. Paul says,

"And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues....But strive for the greater gifts." (1 Cor. 12:28,31a)

Paul describes a hierarchy of gifts of the Spirit - with the highest gift being that of "apostleship." With an exhortation to "strive for the greater gifts" we might be able to guess which disciple is to be accorded the most status in a community. In communities struggling with the issues of authority and leadership, and with competition, rivalries, and factions, any hierarchy of spiritual gifts will likely contribute to a hierarchy of leadership and status within a community. "Climbing the spiritual ladder" may become a means toward gaining status and rank in a community. Thus Paul, an evangelistic messenger sent out with some spiritual authority, is not content to humbly pursue his mission. Paul desires the recognition and high-ranking status of an apostolic *position*.

The legacy of "apostolic authority" as a position of authority and leadership is far-reaching. One legacy is the canon of the New Testament. All the writings of the New Testament were allegedly written by male apostles. Actually, however, many of the writings were written by unknown authors and later on attributed to male apostles. So "apostolic authorship" gave some writings an undeserved stature. Since the purity system remains prominent, the texts need to be read through the light of Jesus.

Another legacy of "apostolic authority" is that many Christians today equate Paul's authority with Jesus' authority. There are some Christians who even go to the extreme of believing Paul's writings are more authoritative today than Jesus' teachings. Christians who belong to the "grace movement," or who believe in progressive dispensations, may make a distinction between the message of Jesus on earth and the later message of the "glorified Lord" as represented by Paul. In effect these dispensationalists advocate for being disciples of Paul. They might be overheard saying, "If it's good enough for Paul then it's good enough for me." But the elevation of Paul greatly diminishes Jesus' leadership and authority.

While the dispensationalists and biblical inerrantists are a bit overzealous in upholding Paul's authority they do reveal an important

point: Paul's message differs from Jesus' message in many ways. So let us digress briefly here to better understand Paul.

Paul had some important messages to share based on his life-shattering conversion experience and subsequent reflection on its meaning. The following passage may help to explain Paul's conversion experience.

"The sudden reversal that Paul's vision worked in his life makes good sense in terms of the very apocalyptic-mystical tradition that (Alan F.) Segal has described. Segal himself observes that 'no pre-Christian view of the messiah conceived of the possibility of his demise at the hands of the Romans,' and that 'the Jews believed in a messiah who would defeat their national enemies and usher in a period of tranquility. Such a concept virtually eliminated the possibility of a crucified messiah for Paul when he was a Pharisee.' Now, however, Paul 'knows from his mystical experience that there is a divine, crucified messiah.'

We must ask then, what such a discovery would have meant to the apocalyptically-minded Pharisee who opposed and persecuted the churches of the crucified messiah.

Paul's perspective on the death of Jesus is thoroughly and profoundly apocalyptic....In the cross, God has annulled the wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age. Further, since the one whom the rulers crucified has been raised from the dead, the rulers have clearly marked themselves out as doomed to destruction (1 Cor. 2:6-8; 15:51-58). The immediate consequence is that the Christian is no longer obligated to the scheme of this world, which is passing away (1 Cor. 7:31), but is called to obey the God who has chosen the weak, those 'without rank or standing in the world, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order' (1:28, Revised English Version)."² (Neil Elliott)

Paul's gospel message, no matter how valuable, is incomplete and sometimes convoluted. Paul likely never met the pre-resurrection Jesus. So did Paul value and seek to learn from the discipleship experiences of Jesus' first disciples? Paul modestly states that the "acknowledged leaders...contributed nothing to me." (Gal. 2:6) Paul developed his own gospel message apart from the Jerusalem community and the leading disciples of Jesus. (Gal. 1:11-2:10) So the writings of Paul, which are the earliest in the New Testament, tell

very, very little about Jesus' teachings and practices. Did this not contribute to the myriad of problems his new communities experienced?

Perhaps the major legacy of "apostolic authority" is that it helped to erode, replace, and erase Jesus' model of "servant leadership." This erosion was helped along by other degenerative trends.

Male authority

The previous section on apostolic authority presents some ways of how male authority and leadership began to assert itself immediately after Jesus' resurrection. Competition for leadership occurred from the beginning of the discipleship movement - and continued on and on. Some friction occurred between men and women. Many men, but by no means all, were probably disconcerted by the amount of community recognition accorded to women as leaders.

Jesus' teachings and practices were socially revolutionary for women - who occupied a low social position in most of patriarchal society. Jesus' egalitarian, non-hierarchical movement affirmed women disciples as equals with men. Jesus' teachings about becoming servants, becoming a "slave of all," becoming like a child, and that "the last will be first," strongly affirmed women in their servant-leadership. Women could become teachers, prophets, and apostles. The passage in John 4 describes how a "sinner/Samaritan/woman" was quickly transformed into an evangelistic messenger calling her townspeople to the Messiah. Women were the first witnesses of the resurrection and thereby the first disciples/apostles sent by Jesus to spread the good news. In all the gospel accounts Jesus' highest praise for any *action* by a disciple is given to a woman who had just been rebuked by male disciples:

"Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."
(Mk. 14:9)

Since the author of Mark leaves the woman unnamed the emphasis shifts some from recognizing a particular disciple to affirming *female* discipleship. And why might this be important?

"Only when we place the Jesus stories about women into the overall story of Jesus and his movement in Palestine are we able to recognize their subversive character. In the discipleship of equals the 'role' of women is not peripheral or trivial, but at the center, and thus of utmost importance to the praxis of 'solidarity from below.' The story of the anointing of Jesus by a woman articulates this insight. In its final form it is told by a community that already envisions a world-wide mission: wherever the gospel - the good news of the *basileia* (kingdom/commonwealth) - is announced, in the whole wide world, the praxis of this woman will be remembered....Thus in remembering that a nameless woman prophet has anointed Jesus as the messianic inaugurator of the *basileia*, the community also remembers that the God of Jesus is on the side of the poor and that God's future, the *basileia*, belongs to the poor."³ (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza)

Women have a central role to play in spreading God's commonwealth on earth. A nameless woman, with no position, demonstrates that any and all women can put God's love into faithful *action* and receive the *highest* praise from Jesus/God.

The beginnings of Christianity were liberating times. The first communities and the early missionary movement were infused by women's servant-leadership, i.e., by women well-advanced in discipleship. The prophecy that Yahweh's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, men and women equally, was declared to be fulfilled. (Acts 2) Women were part of the first missionaries/apostles and later on women were affirmed as co-workers with Paul. (Rom.16) What may have been a baptismal liturgy declared that cultural distinctions based on gender were now nullified:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27-28)

As noted earlier, however, male authority was trying to re-assert itself from the beginning. This bias against women grew stronger in the first couple centuries after Jesus. The conflict between Christians on different sides of the male authority versus women's equality issue is reflected in many New Testament texts. These texts

are a bit one-sided: they reflect the side that, at least back then, prevailed.

Let us look briefly at one example:

"As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything that they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." (1 Cor. 14:34-35)

What is being said in this passage? There are various contexts and historical settings which, in the end, do little in blunting the message here. For the sake of simplicity, let's begin with a straightforward approach. The above passage supports male authority, particularly that of husbands, and seeks to enforce female subordination. Women are to be domesticated by their husbands. They must be silent during worship (which implicitly allows their husbands more time to shoot the breeze). But if for some god-forsaken reason the women stubbornly insist on learning anything then they are to be instructed in private, at home, by their know-it-all husbands. Furthermore, if a woman breaks this code and speaks in the assembly "it is shameful." Congregants could justifiably feel and act embarrassed - first for the husband, who can't control his wife - and secondly for the whole community, since the community is now deviating from "all the churches of the saints." ("Won't somebody tell that woman, in the name of the Lord, to shut up?") Is this passage really a "command of the Lord" as stated in 14:37? Tough question - but disciples of Jesus have a right to be suspicious about this one.

The above argument appeals not to Jesus but to "the law." Of course it is the purity system embedded in the law which supports male superiority. The passage also argues for conformity with an alleged uniform policy among "all the churches." But that claim is false. At least it was false when Paul originally wrote the letter. This brings us to the question of - who wrote this passage? There are different opinions between scholars as to whether Paul wrote these verses or whether they were an interpolation added later by a copyist.⁴ The passage contradicts Paul's acceptance of women praying and prophesying in a public assembly. (1 Cor. 11:5) Some might attempt to harmonize this incongruity by using an argument (based in the purity system) that Paul accepted single, virgin women

(relatively holy) speaking in the assembly while prohibiting married women (relatively less holy or more unclean) from speaking. But this seems to go against Paul's support for all people receiving the Spirit and spiritual gifts and Paul's practice of working together with married women who were evangelists. So it seems plausible that this passage is an interpolation. But the bottom line is that the message of the passage is rooted in the purity system and is contrary to the liberating works of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

The value of the above passage, besides possibly showing that original texts can be doctored or altered, is that it reveals that the discipleship movement was regressing quite far and quite fast on the principle of women's and men's equality. In the process it was also regressing on Jesus' leadership and authority. This regression is also evident in many of the later writings of the New Testament.

Several letters, whose authorship is uncertain, contain what are known as "household codes."

"The basic form of this code consists of three pairs of reciprocal exhortations addressing the relationship between wife and husband, children and father, and slaves and masters. In each case, the socially subordinate first member of the pair is exhorted to obedience to the superordinate second."⁵ (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza)

Household codes, in various forms, can be found in Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 1 Peter, and Titus. The household codes reinforced patriarchal relationships that were the norm in society. They functioned to reduce friction, conflict, and persecution between the Messianic evangelistic movement and the dominant Greco-Roman society. They also undermined Jesus' leadership and authority. Jesus called followers to make a radical break from the patriarchal family in order to form a new family that had no relationships of domination. Giving sole allegiance to Jesus meant conflict with patriarchal society and with members of one's own family and household. But the household codes encourage conformity to society's norms while interiorizing one's faith in Jesus.

Early Christianity's re-assertion of male authority, regression on women's equality, and support for patriarchal "household codes" can all be found in the texts of the New Testament. These texts have

greatly contributed to discrimination, marginalization, and oppression of women.

Church-office authority

The discipleship movement, early on, long before Emperor Constantine officially endorsed the Christian religion, was clearly degenerating from within. Leadership was a key area. Early on, the groundwork was being laid for an exclusively-male leadership hierarchy. Official church offices or positions were being established: bishop/overseer, elder/presbyter/priest, and deacon.

"The shift which took place in the second century was not a shift from charismatic leadership to institutional consolidation, but from charismatic and communal authority to an authority vested in local officers, who - in time - absorb not only the teaching authority of the prophet and apostle but also the decision-making power of the community. This shift is, at the same time, a shift from alternating leadership accessible to all the baptized to patriarchal leadership restricted to male heads of households."⁶ (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza)

Of course there was a lot of diversity among communities and the shift toward more church institutionalization involved conflict, controversy, and rejection of certain individuals, factions, and communities.

The roots of official church positions of leadership go back to the earliest struggles over leadership. The first community in Jerusalem had early on legitimized the leadership positions of the 12 apostles. Some have traced the leadership position of "deacon" back to a decision described in Acts 6:1-6. Let us look at this decision.

"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, `It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will

devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose....These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them." (Acts 6:1-5a,6 RSV)

The author of Luke-Acts describes how a problem in the Jerusalem community is resolved. Greek-speaking Jews, or Hellenists, become upset when their widows are not being treated equally in the daily distribution. The problem reflects badly on the leadership of the 12 apostles. The twelve have a lot of authority and many tasks including being in charge of the daily distribution. So the twelve use their leadership position and attempt to correct the problem: 1. they summon the whole community; 2. they present what they believe is a good answer to the problem; and 3. they attempt to confer authority on the newly-selected group by laying their hands upon them. So what is their "solution"?

First, the twelve make a decision in favor of a division of tasks. They will give up their responsibilities for daily distribution and serving tables and concentrate on the work of prayer and the word. They justify giving up serving tables because it interferes with more important work - preaching the word of God. But are these two tasks exclusive of each other? And do some disciples have a special calling that precludes table service? Before answering these questions let us look at the other part of the twelve's "solution."

Second, the twelve call for forming a new group of seven male leaders to carry out the important but less-esteemed task of distribution and serving tables. These seven men must be well-qualified (full of the Spirit and wisdom). They will be officially recognized as leaders after the apostles' laying on of hands. So the twelve men maintain their top authority - and perhaps gain an elevated position by installing a new group of male leaders under themselves. What may be seen here are the building blocks for a patriarchal church hierarchy. Ministries and tasks are divided, leadership positions are created, the best qualified men are selected, and ordination is controlled by those at the top of the hierarchy. Jesus' model of servant leadership is replaced by more prestigious and elevated leadership positions.

Let us return to the first part of the "solution." Do the twelve have a special calling that precludes table service? The author of Luke-Acts presents material which critiques the twelve's decision. Unlike the twelve, the seven who are selected to serve tables are also able to preach the word. Stephen is portrayed in heroic terms. Stephen's Spirit-filled witness leads to his martyrdom and great persecution against the discipleship community. Many disciples, but not the twelve, are driven away from Jerusalem. Philip, the second of the seven selected to serve tables, is described as a powerful traveling evangelist and preacher. (Acts 8) So the seven seem to disprove the rationale for the twelve discontinuing their table service.

Does Jesus have something to say about table service? Jesus tells a parable exhorting the disciples to always remain active, vigilant, and awake. Jesus says,

"Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them." (Luke 12:37)

Jesus describes how the master, or God, will humbly serve food at table to the faithful slaves, or disciples. The master's humble table service is surely an example for disciples to follow. But the author of Luke-Acts then has Peter wondering about who Jesus' message *really* applies to:

"Peter said, 'Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?' And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives.'" (Luke 12:41-43)

Surely Jesus' message of table service applies to Peter and the other disciples. But the message doesn't seem to be sticking - so later on in Luke we read:

"A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'" (Luke 22:24-27)

Jesus is the model for all disciples and Jesus describes himself as one who serves at table.

What can we conclude about the twelve's "solution"? Asserting a higher calling in order to discontinue their table service and forming another all-male leadership group are contrary to Jesus' teachings and practices. The root of the problem was the twelve using the designation "apostle" to gain leadership positions and authority. The twelve, then, had too much authority and too much work. They were centralizing authority and beginning to follow patriarchal society's leadership patterns. Creating more lower level leadership positions represented further internal degeneration. The discipleship movement was becoming less egalitarian and more hierarchical. In addition, no disciple of Jesus is above doing table service or other menial service. The twelve's claim to exempt themselves from table service was a repudiation of Jesus' model of leadership.

Many New Testament texts are used to justify establishing official positions of leadership. Texts are used to support apostolic leadership positions, the selection of elders/presbyters, the establishment of deacons, and the position of bishop/overseer. All of these positions were being established in the first century or early second century. The traditions of leadership positions has continued. The official establishment of a priestly, male hierarchy in the Roman Catholic church was a not too surprising consequence of early Christian leadership trends. The Roman Catholic church affirmed "apostolic authority" and claimed "apostolic succession" beginning with Peter and continuing through their popes and bishops. While seeking to reform and modify centralized leadership authority most Christian denominations have likewise established a clerical and church leadership hierarchy. Reforming centralized authority by establishing more categories of leaders is never a solution - it merely repeats the mistake of the twelve and of the Jerusalem community discussed above.

Holy Spirit's authority

Chapter 4 described a dispute between the "circumcision faction" and missionary evangelists. The issue required choosing between fidelity to Old Testament scripture or affirming the liberating works of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit's authority came out on top. Obviously the Holy Spirit has great authority. But how does the Holy Spirit's authority mesh with the authority of Jesus? Can Jesus' authority be diminished in any way when disciples affirm the Holy Spirit's authority?

Let us look first at Jesus' relationship with the Spirit of God. Let us also look at the gender of grammatical terms for the Spirit - with a view towards later historical regression. In the Bible, God can be described with either a male, female, or neuter noun.⁷

The author of the gospel of John describes Jesus as the Word of God. The Greek for "Word" is "*logos*" - a male noun.

"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. In him was life." (Jn. 1:1-4a RSV)

Also in John, John the Baptist testifies,

"The one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'" (Jn. 1:33b)

From the beginning of the gospel of John, Jesus is very closely identified with both God and the Holy Spirit.

The description of "the Word" of God in John 1 bears some resemblance to Proverbs 8 and the description of the Wisdom of God:

"Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?...I, wisdom, live with prudence, and I attain knowledge and discretion...I walk in the way of righteousness, along the paths of justice....The (Yahweh) created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth....Whoever finds me finds life." (Prov. 8:1,12,20,22-24a,35a)

The Wisdom of God is personified, comes forth from God, and is with God from the beginning. The Hebrew for "wisdom" is "*hokmah*" - a female noun. The Wisdom of God may be identified also as the Holy Spirit.

Jesus was very closely identified with the Wisdom & Spirit of God in passages in Matthew and Luke. The Greek for "wisdom" is "*sophia*" - a female noun. In Luke we read:

"For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children." (Lk. 7:33-35)

John the Baptist and Jesus, with different styles, are both emissaries of the Wisdom/Sophia/Spirit of God. The Wisdom of God is confounding to many but is vindicated by her fruitfulness, by all her children, by all the followers of Jesus. Or, as found in Matthew:

"Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." (Mt. 11:19b)

Wisdom/Sophia is vindicated by *her* deeds, i.e., by the deeds of *Jesus*. In another passage from Luke, Jesus is denouncing the religious leaders and says:

"So you are witnesses and approve of the deeds of your ancestors; for they killed them, and you build their tombs. Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and persecute.'" (Lk. 11:48-49)

The prophets and apostles are emissaries of the Wisdom/Sophia/Spirit of God. A similar passage in Matthew is rendered:

"Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify." (Mt. 23:34a)

The words attributed in Luke to Wisdom/Sophia are credited to Jesus in Matthew as if there was no distinction between Sophia and Jesus.

The New Testament has two different accounts of the initial gift of the Holy Spirit to disciples of Jesus. The very brief account in John contains an important truth:

"Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (Jn. 20:21-22)

From this account there can be no doubt about the unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Here the Holy Spirit comes from within Jesus as he breathes it upon the disciples. The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost in Acts also is described as originating from God/Jesus. (Acts 2:33)

The above discussion shows the unity between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Disciples who are committed foremost to the authority of Jesus can also affirm the Holy Spirit's authority - with some qualifications which will be discussed next.

After Jesus' departure, Jesus' leadership was meant to be greatly aided by the Holy Spirit. However, the Spirit's guidance and partnership with Jesus was limited to some extent by the *level of maturity of a community*. Two internal problems developed. The first was overemphasis on the Spirit and the second was suppression of the Spirit.

1. Overemphasis on the Spirit

The early missionary movement was Spirit-driven, Spirit-filled. The movement tended to emphasize, according to Acts and Paul's letters, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Spirit. What was diminished in this emphasis was concrete discipleship to Jesus and to his teachings and practices. New communities were formed that had never known Jesus. The presence of the Spirit and the charismatic gifts of the Spirit often were very important to a community's life. But the deeper conversion and transformation of a community were impeded by a lack of training in discipleship to Jesus.

Serious problems developed wherever communities were committed to the Spirit's leadership but held a weaker commitment to following and obeying Jesus. In general terms here are some of the problems of immature communities with respect to the Spirit and charismatic gifts.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may replace discipleship to Jesus. Without a strong foundation in Jesus, the purity system will find a home and communities will be led astray.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may lead to escapism, to creating a worship experience far removed from a concrete historical context of working for salvation, justice, and liberation on earth. Worship may "spiritualize" Jesus and emphasize entering some ecstatic "spiritual realm." Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, a common gift with little

collective value, can be overemphasized. Apocalyptic enthusiasm - "Christ is coming soon" and "the world is ending soon" - may be overplayed. Gnostic groups and other strange cults may develop.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may lead to spiritual gifts and their exercise in worship being tied to self, ego, and exhibitionism. Instead of authenticity and spontaneity, exercise of gifts and clapping and dancing may be fabricated and staged or done by rote. Charismatic gifts may be overused.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may lead to distorted vision by not providing a sound basis for judging prophecies. Pseudo-prophecies and pseudo-prophetic speeches, sermons, and prayers may be viewed as legitimate. False teachers and charismatic peddlers of a pseudo-gospel may ingrain false doctrines into communities.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may lead to associating charismatic gifts with status, position, and hierarchy. Those who have developed gifts or skills may ascend to a leadership position while most people's talents remain underdeveloped.

* Overemphasis on the Spirit may create a *false sense of spirituality*. A false sense of faithfulness and a false sense of the presence of God may hide many things. Social inequalities of wealth, power, and privilege may be hidden, ignored, or justified. Abusive and violent relationships may be covered-up. An overemphasis on outward appearance, etiquette, and decorum may contribute to a spirituality of self-righteousness.

2. Suppression of the Spirit

As the discipleship movement was splintering and floundering, another internal problem developed - suppression of the Spirit. The authority of the Holy Spirit and the exercise of gifts of the Spirit by women and most men was reduced and suppressed during the period of church institutionalization. The development of positions of authority, a leadership hierarchy, and exclusive male leadership in those positions shifted authority away from the Spirit. The voice of God, the voice of the Spirit was being superseded by the teaching authority and doctrinal control of a religious hierarchy. The

suppression of the Spirit was strengthened when Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity and Christianity began to gain the power to repress and punish deviant voices.

The suppression of the Spirit was also aided by male-only God language.

"The personhood of Sophia was thus a central premise of the emerging theology of the Trinity....Thus Irenaeus of Lyons, a second-century church father, repeatedly cited these same biblical passages about Sophia, but insisted that `Sophia' was really `the Spirit' (in Greek, Pneuma, a neuter noun). As Latin replaced Greek as the premiere language of theology in the West, Spiritus -- a masculine noun -- replaced the neuter Pneuma. One result...was that the Trinity came to be perceived as an exclusively masculine community of persons."⁸ (Neil Elliott and Holly Bridges Elliott)

Each one of the trinity of God/Spirit/Messiah or Yahweh/Sophia/Jesus was no longer described linguistically by either female or male nouns or pronouns.⁹ The use of male-only God language served to legitimize a patriarchal church and a patriarchal society. The Spirit was no longer viewed as empowering disenfranchised people with a liberating message. Instead the Spirit became more of a "silent partner" in a patriarchal godhead and church.

* * * *

The early discipleship movement was powerful and dynamic. Its expansion could not be halted by the repressive and lethal tactics of the Roman empire. The movement, however, ran into serious problems through internal degeneration. Jesus' leadership and authority were eroded by internal power struggles. As disciples asserted their authority, the movement drifted away from Jesus' liberating teachings, practices, and Way of life. The co-optation and institutionalization of the movement that Emperor Constantine concretized could not have occurred without all of the previous internal degeneration. Long before Constantine came to power the movement was in need of a serious revival.

To make progress today it is essential to learn from the mistakes of the past so as not to repeat them. To remain powerful and dynamic the discipleship movement must resist and overcome all

internal challenges to Jesus' authority. Very simply, disciples must not compromise on Jesus' leadership and authority and must not recognize *any leadership position*.

To remain Spirit-filled and Sophia-empowered, commitment to the Spirit must be based upon the foundation of discipleship to Jesus. The Messiah's discipleship movement is the only revolutionary movement that cannot be stopped by any external means.

Footnotes

1. Ched Myers, Binding The Strong Man A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1990, p. 164.

2. Neil Elliott, Liberating Paul The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1994, pp. 143 & 138.

3. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins, Crossroad, New York, NY, 1983, pp. 152-153. To help readers "(kingdom/commonwealth)" has been added to the quote.

4. See Elliott, Liberating Paul, pp. 27,52-54, and Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, pp. 230-233.

5. Fiorenza, p. 253.

6. Ibid., pp. 286-287.

7. I use "male" and "female" rather than "masculine" and "feminine" because the latter are culturally-defined and have a lot of culturally-biased connotations.

8. Neil Elliott & Holly Bridges Elliott, "Male image of God sign of cultural norm, not divine revelation," Star Tribune, Minneapolis, 11-20-93.

9. If Jesus can refer to himself, metaphorically, as a "mother hen" (Mt. 23:37, Luke 13:34) with the emphasis here both on female and chicken, then this certainly opens the door for many metaphorical terms. For example, we might pray: O Yahweh, our darling raccoon, who dost prowl over us at night, keeping watch, be a kind critter to us... OK. OK. Bad example. But our understanding of God needs to *expand* - not shrink down to one gender or one term.

The top twelve (in their own minds)

The time seemed right.
The air was fresh.
Not a cloud in the sky.
So one fine day
Jesus and the twelve stooges
set out
to save the world.
It was a mighty big task -
and the help
didn't seem to measure up.
If one carefully considers
the twelve -
it was a grandiose scheme -
by anyone's account.
A hopeless
and comic misadventure.
Befuddled minds,
delusional expectations,
and competing male egos
seemingly overwhelming
even God's formidable patience.
"Who is the greatest?"
they pondered -
as they jockeyed
for position.
But when the going got tough
the stooges scattered
like frightened hares

at the approach
of a predator
leaving Jesus alone
to his fate.
Betrayal, denial, and abandonment -
from among the inner circle.
If these dudes
were pillars
then the World Trade Center
has a precedent.
The movement
was in shambles -
the remaining eleven
were in hiding,
cowering in fear.
Fortunately, there were
other disciples -
faithful women -
tracking Jesus' body -
and the movement
began to rise
from the ashes
(from the tomb, that is).
For Jesus
it was resurrection
on the first try -
and maybe - just maybe -
he really knew what he was doing.
The movement
was reinvigorated
and disciples and stooges alike
were carried along.
Patience has its rewards.
Thank God for second chances.
Of course,
some never did
quite get it right.
But never forget -
for all the stooges today -
there is always

a place at the table
set especially
for us.
Hail stooges!

CHAPTER 7

Preparing the Way - Part 1

A Confessing Community & Focused Spiritual Practices

Who desires to work powerfully and fruitfully to transform the world? Who desires to live in a Spirit-filled community in close communion with the living God? Who desires to make a new commitment to follow the Messiah as a lifelong disciple? Who desires to put Jesus' leadership and authority before everyone and everything else?

While a revival of the discipleship movement is eminently possible - and the world is crying out for deep-rooted healing - and God is fully prepared to lead it - very few Christians are prepared to make the necessary commitment. So what can be done? For those who are seekers of God's commonwealth on earth, who desire to be pioneers of faith in these times, and who desire to make significant progress, there is hope. It only takes a relatively small number of people to begin a revival. It only takes a small number of people to choose to make the necessary commitment. If people are not yet ready for the new commitment then a time of deliberate preparation is necessary.

What preparatory steps can be taken that will lead to a radical revival? This chapter and chapter 8 will present some practical suggestions for preparing for a revolutionary commitment to the Messiah. The preparation described below is for those who desire to seriously explore what full implementation of Jesus' leadership would mean for their lives.

This chapter will focus on several practices which aid internal conversion to Jesus. Deep internal conversion and connection with Jesus is necessary for a powerful discipleship movement and for

external fruitfulness. In Jesus' liberation movement, liberation stems from the inside-out. A key to this is conversion to Jesus and inner transformation of our selves. This is radical, deep-rooted change - altering our selves at the core of our beings. Our power to change the world depends upon God's Spirit-power residing and flowing through us.

Chapter 8 offers suggestions for external lifestyle changes that will better prepare one for a radical discipleship commitment. Chapters 7 and 8 go together and are not distinctly first step, second step. Internal conversion needs to be reflected in external changes even if the changes are small and significantly less than what the gospel calls for. Chapter 9, however, does represent a step beyond chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 9 will discuss the practice of baptism and its importance for making a revolutionary commitment to the Messiah.

Before proceeding I need to confess that I haven't yet walked this road and so I do not speak from the experience of a radical discipleship community. The discipleship movement I desire to be part of is still ahead of me. This is my attempt at visioning a way to get there.

Ideally, a discipleship community would sponsor a discipleship training-ground with various preparatory practices. In the absence of a discipleship community there is a need for a core group of people to begin discipleship training with a goal of moving towards a revolutionary baptismal commitment.¹

A discipleship training-ground can sponsor spiritual practices of Bible study, prayer, and worship - which will be discussed later in this chapter. What will be discussed first is confession. Confession is not prescribed here as a separate activity but rather as a practice to be incorporated into Bible study, prayer, and worship.

A Confessing Community

Confession needs to be put into a context which keeps it focused - otherwise it will lose most of its meaning.² Described below is a three-part program which can keep confession focused. The three parts are:

1. proclaiming and affirming the goal;
2. confessing our present sinfulness, complicity, & contradictions; and
3. seeking to progress towards the goal.

Let us look at each part.

The first part is proclaiming and affirming the goal. It is important that the goal describes our highest possible calling. This encourages us to realize our great potential and to make the most progress. So what is "the goal"? Below are four formulations of the goal.³ The goal is:

- * Jesus/Sophia/Yahweh;
- * God's commonwealth on earth;
- * Mature, Spirit-filled, communal discipleship communities;
- * Spreading salvation, justice, & liberation to the whole world.

Jesus/Sophia/Yahweh is the goal. As children of God and disciples of Jesus we are called to become more and more like Jesus, like Christ, like God. Could anyone dream of a better goal than children of God growing more and more into the likeness of God? Jesus reveals the most direct path to God. Jesus teaches how to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus teaches,

"You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt. 5:48 RSV)

Anything less than a goal of perfection or completeness or wholeness is unworthy of a disciple of Jesus. If we divert our eyes from Jesus/Sophia/Yahweh then we depart from the goal, the vision, the Way.

God's commonwealth on earth is the goal. Among all of one's daily activities it is important to keep in mind "the big picture." Jesus teaches,

"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?...But strive first for the (commonwealth) of God and (God's) righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt. 6:25,33)

A revolutionary movement to transform the world must prioritize the revolutionary goal. Everything else follows. Everyday needs for food, beverages, and clothing, as well as all activities, are to be subordinated to the goal of seeking first God's commonwealth on earth. A single-minded focus on God's commonwealth can keep the movement on track.

Mature, Spirit-filled, communal discipleship communities is the goal. Disciples of Jesus are to form a new covenant family which takes precedence over one's natural biological family. Chapters 14-17 in John describe the unity meant for God's family. Jesus teaches,

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you....Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world - therefore the world hates you....As you, (Mother), are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." (Jn. 15:12,19; 17:21-23)

A communal, discipleship community is to present a radical and holistic alternative to the patriarchal world. Among other things it is to be characterized by love, unity, and Spirit-power. Communal communities bonded together in perfect unity in the Messiah is the goal.

Spreading salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world is the goal. The goal is for a global liberation movement that is activist, prophetic, and outgoing. Jesus sends his disciples "into the world" (Jn. 17:18) and commissions them to "make disciples of all nations." (Mt. 28:19) The discipleship movement seeks to make known to all people Jesus' liberating gospel. It proclaims a gospel that especially is good news to the world's poor and oppressed.

Four descriptions of the lofty goal have just been described. Regardless of where we are at in our own lifestyles and practices, it is important not to compromise on the goal. The goal represents the ideal final outcome of the journey of faith. It gives vision for the journey. To maintain clarity and direction there must be no deletions, accommodating substitutions, or watered-down versions of

the goal. Confession is appropriate and necessary - but the goal itself should not be compromised.

Once we are clear on the goal - what comes next?

The second part of the three-part program is, in light of the goal presented above, to confess our present sinfulness, complicity, and contradictions. The goal helps to focus confession. Confession focuses on the goal and then acknowledges contradictions between professed beliefs (the goal) and present practices. To expose and confess contradictions does not mean accepting them. We are to live "in tension" with contradictions - and seek to resolve them through progressing in discipleship to Jesus. (In Jesus there are no contradictions.) Confession is always and only an intermediate step from which we must move beyond.

Both individual and collective confession are important. Collective confession helps to keep a focus on "the big picture." Society has created institutions of violence, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. Most Christians need to confess to wealth, power, or privilege gained from unjust economic, political, judicial, military, and social systems. Capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, able-bodyism, etc. permeate our society's institutions and much of our lives. Many Christians have reaped benefits from white-skin privilege, male privilege, or First-World (U.S.-citizen) privilege. The values and relationships of power involved in our food, clothing, housing, energy use, jobs & wages, and leisure-time consumption can be examined and lead to confession of collective sinfulness. Collective sinfulness entangles us all and confession can assist in untangling us and improving our vision.

Individual confession needs to remain focused on the goal and not on the confessors. Confession can be a way for a person to exude self-pity, to try to gain the sympathy of others, and to become the center of attention.

The lofty goal, coupled with individual and collective confession, counteracts tendencies towards being strict, judgmental, exclusive, and self-righteous. Confession begins with *us* confessing *our* sins. Confession can bring about some humility. A basic equality exists: we

are all sinners who are in need of the grace and forgiveness of God. There is no superiority here. Confession, along with inner-transformation, can move us toward greater humility and servant-like service.

The high goal of Jesus provides a basis for examining our own lives and making confession. It can be helpful to shine the light of Jesus into all areas of our lives. The light of Jesus, coupled with confession, counteracts defensiveness and denial of areas of sinfulness.

The high goal, coupled with confession, brings more openness, honesty, integrity, and maturity to a group of disciples. Confession is all about truth, honesty, and integrity. Jesus proclaims,

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life." (Jn. 14:6)

The Way of Jesus is the way of truth. Jesus taught that the devil is a "liar and the father of lies." (Jn. 8:44) So there is a clear contrast between Jesus & truth and the devil & falsehood. Jesus also teaches,

"Do not swear at all....Let your word be, 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one." (Mt. 5:34,37)

Disciples do not swear oaths (as in a court of law) to be held to a higher standard of truth-telling. Rather, disciples are to tell the truth all the time. All lying is a cause for confession - and change. Honesty is essential to integrity. Lying brings a division in one's self, in one's being. Truth restores wholeness - it restores the integrity of the self.

The regular practice of confession by a community will help the community to be humble, honest, open, and joy-filled. It will be the opposite of a self-righteous and exclusive community shrouded in secrecy.

The third part of the three-part program involving confession is seeking to progress towards the goal. The goal helps to reveal sinfulness - and confession makes more concrete the areas that need to change. Then there must be efforts at change.

Confession can be a practice integrated into the following spiritual practices which will be discussed next: Bible study, prayer, and worship. These practices also need to be focused in order to maximize their benefits. Let us look next at Bible study.

Focused Bible study & visioning

What is proposed is Bible study plus a lot more. It is proposed for collective Bible study. A fair amount of time commitment is necessary for what is proposed.

For a group Bible study it can be helpful if the members of a group agree to some basic premises. The premises help shape and focus the Bible study and impact how fruitful it will be. The following four premises, with brief explanations, are proposed.

1. The group would agree to uphold Jesus as the foremost authority in all their discussions. This means that Jesus has authority over scripture, over "biblical authority," and over "the word of God." The Bible is to be read through "the light of Jesus." Priority would be given to reading the four gospels. The teachings and practices of Jesus would be viewed as having the highest authority. The group might choose to recognize and utilize the tool of the Christ-enlightened gift and purity systems.

2. The group would attempt to form a holistic vision of Jesus' revolutionary Way of changing the world. The starting place would be reading the gospels and focusing on Jesus.

Jesus' teachings and practices could be examined in three inter-related realms: economic, political, and ideological. It could be helpful to sketch out a chart like the one found on pages 107-108.⁴

A holistic vision based on Jesus and the gospels can be filled out further. A Bible study group can look at various models of Christian community, focusing on the areas of leadership, vision, and preparation.

To further develop a vision, a number of important issues may need to be looked at in depth. As an example, C.I./C.R. explored various issues. The following list is an example of where a progressive faith might lead disciples:

* Revolutionary discipleship calls for a decentralized, egalitarian, communal lifestyle that requires breaking from private possessions and jobs. All things are to be shared in common.

* Every discipleship community would have outreach ministries of evangelization, prophetic proclamations and actions, and hospitality.

* A discipleship community would have an exclusive commitment to Jesus' leadership and authority and a prophetic, not a reformist, relationship with government.

* A discipleship community would have an uncompromising commitment to nonviolence, peacemaking, and love of enemies.

* A discipleship community would form a family of equals, taking precedence over families based on bloodlines. As equals with men, women would be at the forefront of spreading God's commonwealth over all the earth. Children would be at the center of community life.

* A discipleship community would equally affirm homosexuality and heterosexuality and equally support a monogamous homosexual or heterosexual marriage covenant. One standard of sexual fidelity would be applied to all disciples, whether single or married.

3. The group would engage in confession. Confession can be one important step towards breaking down class, sexual, racial, and ethnic barriers between Christians. Care should be taken to avoid shallowness - which can reinforce divisions between groups of people.

4. The group would agree to engage in group actions. By group actions I am not suggesting activities such as softball games and beer & pizza parties, regardless of their merits. I am suggesting that groups begin an exciting new letter-writing campaign - with the slogan - "Oppose moose droppings - Keep the forests clean!" Or perhaps, "Stop giardia now!" The latter slogan may, however, be too obscure - and not suitable for the masses. (I hope the readers don't take everything here too seriously.)

Common actions could be works of service or protest or prophetic witness. The choice of actions could support diversity and solidarity. Following the common action the group could reflect together on the action. The common actions, in combination with Bible study, visioning, and confession could assist group members in assessing the

costs of discipleship, their progress, and their willingness to make a revolutionary commitment to the Messiah.

Focused Prayer

Prayer is universally recognized by Christians as an important practice. Volumes have been written about prayer. And some people might actually take them off the shelf. And dust them. But does Christians' real practice of prayer leave something to be desired?

Some questions that might be asked about our prayer life: Have you analyzed the quality of your prayers recently? Have you instituted any quality control measures? Can your practice of prayer stand up under rigorous scientific scrutiny? Or tough theological grilling? How many hours a day do you devote to quality prayer? Have you prayed today for someone who is sick? Have you prayed today for those stranded in refugee camps around the world? Do your prayers tend to be dull, mundane, and repetitive? Do you think your prayers might bore God? How often do your prayers and communion with God reach ecstatic levels? And, finally, are you feeling guilty yet?

Prayer is important for internal transformation. But unless prayer remains focused the internal transformation may be shallower than a tub of lard. Alright, I confess I'm spacing. Refocus. Push the re-start button.

Prayer is so good - yet many are reluctant to pray. This may be due to a strong resistance to internal conversion - a resistance to personal change. Prayer is all about change and transformation - not only in our petition-requests for change - but first and foremost prayer is about transforming ourselves. Briefly, here are some suggestions for focused prayer. The first four suggestions are about unblocking our own congested Spirit-channels.

1. A prayer time may begin with focusing on the immediate presence of Jesus/God. Developing an internal focus on God may involve silence, meditation on Jesus or on the awesome love of God,

and listening to the Spirit-voice within. Prayer time is a time for communion with one's best friend, with a God whose depth of love for us is way beyond our comprehension.

2. If we are focusing intently on Jesus/God then we should recognize a need for confession. We can recognize and confess that our thoughts, practices, lifestyle, heart, mind, and soul are not altogether in harmony with Jesus.

3. Jesus teaches,

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your (Mother) also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." (Mk. 11:24-25)

This practice of forgiving others is another means of unblocking the channel for God's Spirit-flow. Forgiving others can help to overcome resentments, fears, bitterness and hatred, thoughts of reprisal, or just plain hard-heartedness. Forgiving others is not the same as reconciliation. Reconciliation requires mutuality and justice. It requires that both persons or parties seek to establish a just and loving relationship. Forgiving others is one part of the equation. By forgiving others we open the door for reconciliation. We love more as Jesus loved and allow God's love and forgiveness to flow more freely through us.

4. Another means of unblocking our channel with God is through praise and thanksgiving. Of course, praise can be shallow, superficial, and rote-like. But real thanks and praise strengthens our communion with God.

5. In our prayers and petitions it is important to remember "the big picture" as well as the small issues. It is good to pray repeatedly, with faith and hope,

"Your (commonwealth) come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Mt. 6:10)

It is important to pray for those who are being persecuted and those who are in jails and prisons.

Prayer can also focus on all daily activities. Prayer can be a time of preparation for all work and ministry. Prayer preparation is helpful

for every task, meeting, problem. Prayer can prepare the pray-er and those for whom one prays. The pray-er becomes better prepared to carry and embody the presence of God into each moment of every day. The pray-er becomes better prepared to rely on God's strength and to be a channel for God's Spirit.

Focused Worship

Worship can focus on the God of Jesus, the Messiah, and on God's commonwealth on earth. Jesus can be affirmed as the foremost authority. In true worship Jesus reigns. Jesus' leadership, teachings, and practices can be invoked throughout the worship.

Worship can be spontaneous or it may be helpful to have one or two designated facilitators. If used, rotation of facilitators is suggested.

Because we are so brainwashed into degenerative Christianity, worship can begin with a short announcement and proclamation about who we are worshipping. A proclamation briefly gives some of the meaning of Jesus' Messiahship and God's commonwealth on earth.

The opening proclamation can be very radical. The proclamation of God's and Jesus' sovereignty de-legitimizes the whole patriarchal world - all the nations, their institutions, and their leaders. Jesus, as *the Messiah*, de-legitimizes all other authorities. Jesus reveals all leaders and authorities, who hold positions of leadership, as fraudulent, as violators of God's will, and, in most cases, as opponents of God's commonwealth. Jesus reveals the nations as illegitimate and as oppressive dominions. Thus, an opening proclamation can help worshipers focus on the true reality of Jesus Messiah and on God's commonwealth on earth. (Those who want a culturally-safe worship have come to the wrong place.)

The biblical reflection/message/sermon can focus on the good news of the Messiah and on the revolutionary Way of bringing salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world.

Focused worship can have a time for confession. Confession time can prioritize collective sinfulness. Brief statements of collective sinfulness may be read or there can be a time of mostly silent, prayerful confession.

Music and songs can employ liberating theology, inclusive language, and female and male verbal God-imagery. New songs can be written and old songs revised. Not everyone has to play an instrument - but musical gifts can be encouraged in all.

Another proclamation can be made before a time of open worship. A proclamation can declare *the Messiah crucified - and the Messiah resurrected*. Worshipers can be encouraged to feel and to open themselves up to this *conquering spirit of Jesus*. This requires some explanation. Jesus' conquering spirit is not imperialistic, dominating, imposing, coercive, or violent. Jesus' conquering spirit is perhaps best understood by a mature community that has already experienced persecution, martyrdom, death. Jesus' conquering spirit is meant to sustain and inspire a community that is pacifist, humble, poor, and persecuted. A conquering spirit overcomes feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and despair. To feel and to experience Jesus' conquering spirit can help worshipers remember that they are part of an ultimately triumphant, liberation history. Worshipers are part of a worldwide movement that absorbs the worst that can be thrown at it - and overcomes.

Although it may seem at first like a bit of a contradiction, focused worship can devote a substantial amount of time to unstructured, open worship. Despite the risks of digressing and losing focus, an open worship time allows freer reign of the Spirit. Open worship time encourages participatory worship where worshipers can share their gifts. Open worship encourages songs, prayer, movement, dance, spiritual gifts, and pertinent sharing and messages. Open worship can help empower worshipers through a freer style of worship.

* * * * *

Internal transformation needs to go hand-in-hand with external changes. Chapter 8 looks at further discipleship preparation and some common areas where change is necessary.

Footnotes

1. Christians can err by too quickly organizing something and then seeking to give it more credibility by giving it a name. Christians can then err further by identifying with it and seeking to maintain it as a permanent institution. A discipleship training-ground doesn't need a name, a fixed location, or accreditation. It is part of a developmental process. It is only a beginning.

2. For a brief critique of church confessions see C.I./C.R., p. 210.

3. I prefer to use the singular "goal" rather than the plural "goals."

4. The chart on the following pages is reprinted from pp. 48-49, C.I./C.R.. The framework for the chart or "grill" and much of its content is derived from Fernando Belo, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981.

Revolutionary self-discipline

Revolutionary self-discipline
exhibited

not in heroic moments
but in daily practices
and in small acts.

A commitment to
deeper things
yet connected to
the mundane.

"Discipline" -

not as a dirty word -
but as a wellspring -
to inner achievement.

Liberation

from the inside-out.

Holistic discipline
of mind and body -
a self-motivated training
with a bent

for revolutionary change
within and without.

A centeredness

rooted
in an unseen force
deep within.
Goal-oriented
yet embodying
patient love.
Self-dignity
and self-composure
in humble service
and in response to
repressive violence.
A willingness
to sacrifice
for the cause.
A willingness
to lay down one's life
for the revolution.
A new creation.

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 worshipping	spirit of humility	<u>One Sanc- tuary:</u> all creation revered	Song & Laugh- ter

CHAPTER 8

Preparing the Way - Part 2

External Changes

The revolutionary baptismal commitment, described in the next chapter, brings one into a *new and different order of existence*. This new order of existence is one where Jesus reigns over all aspects of one's life. To better prepare oneself for this big step many external lifestyle changes can be made.

What are some possible external changes? What follows is not a specific program but rather is a discussion of a few key areas along with some practical suggestions. The areas discussed are: economics, household community-living, solidarity, pacifism, and locations.

Economics

Before getting to practical preparatory suggestions, let us first envision the economy of a discipleship community. Let us remember that we are envisioning a new and different order of existence.

Jesus' gospel economics are contrary to capitalistic economics. The following gospel principles are in opposition to those found in a capitalist "free market" economy. Some of Jesus' key revolutionary economic principles are:

- *God as supply & security
- *Communal sharing
- *Gift relationships
- *Outward-directed ministry
- *Forgiveness of debts
- *Nonviolence

A discipleship community is to rely on Jesus/God for *supply and security*. Supply is God's responsibility. God is employer and supplier.

"Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly (Father) feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?...Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?'....But strive first for the (commonwealth) of God and (God's) righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Mt. 6:26,31,33)

It is *essential* for disciples to develop a *dependence* upon God for supply.

God can provide a plentiful supply. But to fully access this supply a discipleship community must be mature and faithful to Jesus. Of course, it is inevitable that there will be immaturity among disciples and mistakes will be made and there will be waste and some corruption will occur. Then it will be good to remember that even Jesus' common purse was corrupted by Judas. (Jn. 12:6) Through all difficulties God is always faithful - and will help a community overcome all adversity - as long as the community confesses its failures and continues to seek to be faithful to Jesus.

To rely on Jesus/God for supply means to rely on God for economic security. Jesus teaches,

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven." (Mt.6:19-20)

"Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Lk. 12:33-34)

With God as supply & security there is no need for health insurance, life insurance, savings, pensions, retirement accounts, or any other economic security.

Jesus' gospel economics prescribe *communal sharing* as a counter to a capitalistic ethic of individualism, self-sufficiency, and independent living. One of the most important practices of the first Jerusalem community was sharing all things in common.

"All who believed were together and had all things in common." (Acts 2:44)

"Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." (Acts 4:32)

To form a communal community disciples need to renounce wealth, money, and private property, and to share all things in common. Jesus teaches,

"So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." (Lk. 14:33)

"You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mk. 10:21 RSV)

Communal sharing can be a significant aid in breaking down class, ethnic, racial, and sexual divisions and in melding diverse people together. Communal sharing eliminates economic inequalities, putting all disciples on an equal economic footing. Communal sharing maximizes economic efficiency by removing individual bottlenecks of saving, hoarding, and withholding.

Jesus' gospel economics prescribe *gift relationships* as a counter to capitalist relationships of buying and selling which require monetary exchanges. Even barter is a self-interested exchange and has no merit in a discipleship community. Gift relationships emphasize giving freely to others, with no strings attached, based upon need. A community is to give and share with others what it has first received from God. Jesus teaches,

"Take heed what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. For to (one) who has will more be given; and from (one) who has not, even what (one) has will be taken away." (Mk.4:24-25 RSV)

Those who give more will also receive more from God. Those who do not give will, ultimately, lose what they have kept, i.e., they will receive no reward from God and will have no "treasure in heaven."

The economy of a discipleship community needs to focus on *outward-directed ministry*. The work priorities are the three outreach ministries of evangelization, prophetic proclamations and actions, and hospitality. The priorities for internal community work are the spiritual practices described in chapter 7 - and childcare. Other work is secondary.

A discipleship community needs to reject the tenets of capitalism. Jesus teaches,

"You cannot serve God and mammon." (Mt. 6:24 RSV; mammon: wealth, money)

Disciples of Jesus do not hold jobs in the capitalist system working for wages or salaries. Furthermore, *production and self-sufficiency are peripheral to God's economy*. Jesus' gospel economics emphasize gift-giving, efficient flow-through channels, and ministry to others. The economic priority is on ministry, on giving to others. An economic goal of self-sufficiency would corrupt a community by its adoption of profit-making priorities and by turning the focus of work from outward-directed hospitality and service to inward-directed production. Self-sufficiency would make a priority of first building up a supply for the community's needs and then, secondarily, a surplus for ministry. But a self-sufficient community that limits itself to giving of some measured surplus is no longer following the Messiah.

Jesus' disciples are to be great givers. Jesus teaches,

"Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mk. 12:43-44)

It is not enough to give from wealth or from a measured "surplus." Disciples are to give even at a personal sacrifice. Jesus taught his disciples the principle: Give what you have. (See Mark 6:35-38; 8:1-5.) In service to others a community is to give all that it has - with no fear of depletion. The gospel stories of the multitudes and the loaves and fishes show that a Messiah-centered economy can turn a situation of scarcity into abundance.

Another bedrock principle of Jesus' gospel economics is *forgiveness of debts*. The capitalist U.S. and world economy are based on credit, on borrowing, on managing a debt-load, on charging interest on loans. But the Messiah teaches cancellation of debts. Jesus teaches disciples to pray,

"And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." (Mt. 6:12)

Lending is a self-interested exchange - not a gift.

"If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return." (Lk. 6:33-35)

Jesus compares God to one who cancels an enormous debt and then expects the former debtor to likewise cancel the small debts that he or she is owed. (Mt. 18:23-35; also see Lk. 7:41-43)

In a discipleship community there are no debts and there is no need to borrow money. A corollary of the principle *give what you have* is that a community need not ever go into debt. The principle is: Give what you have received from God. It is not: Give what you have borrowed from someone else. To borrow, to use and to give what belongs to someone else reflects disharmony with God's will and impatience with God's supply.

Jesus' gospel economics also incorporate the principle of *nonviolence*. A capitalist economy which seeks to increase private property and private wealth is heavily dependent upon the power of violence for security. Even most poor people rely on the power of violence to defend what they have. But Jesus teaches'

"But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." (Lk. 6:27-30)

The gospel economy is a holistic Way of life that has as its foundation a revolutionary commitment to the Messiah. While it represents a large step, there are other smaller, preparatory steps one can take before taking the big leap of faith. Some *possible* preparatory steps are: develop a full economic inventory of one's income sources and amounts, investments & securities, money & land & housing, and possessions; for one month keep a record of all expenditures and payments; identify any personal addictions to shopping & buying, gambling, pornography, caffeine, sugar, alcohol, nicotine, illegal drugs, and pharmaceutical drugs & supplements; in small Bible study groups disclose economic inventory, monthly

expenditures, and addictions; pare down wealth & possessions and give more to the poor; learn about the communal sharing practices of different Christian communities; simplify lifestyle; reduce energy consumption; reduce dependence upon motor vehicles; go on low-cost camping vacations; preferentially buy locally-produced, organic foods; support food cooperatives, farmers' markets, and community-supported agricultural farms; reduce or eliminate consumption of meat; recycle & compost as much as possible; plant flowers and trees; participate in a private or community garden; practice diversified, organic gardening; learn about appropriate technology for wind & solar power, ecological toilets & composting human wastes, water collection & purification, and low-cost shelter & housing construction; and increase consumption of edible wild berries, rice, mushrooms, plants, and insects (particularly grasshoppers and cockroaches).¹ (A new economic lifestyle is possible - and comes with deliciously new tastes. Start making your submissions of recipes for new all-natural cookbooks! And remember, a community-household provides the ideal "captive group" for trying out new recipes.)

Household Community-Living

The Messiah is forming a new family of God. The basis of this family is a revolutionary commitment to Jesus and to doing God's will. This can mean a tearing away from one's traditional family.

"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." (Mt. 10:35-37)

Household community-living helps to build a new family. In a community house a subculture of endless meetings provides a special opportunity for prospective disciples to improve their verbal communication skills. Communication skills are important for interpersonal relationships, dealing with household and neighborhood problems, and for making collective household decisions. There are so many important decisions to make. A schedule can be set up

which tells who will cook, who will wash dishes, and who will explain why there are so many dishes to be washed.

Good communication skills are important for dealing with household conflicts. In a community house, addictions, selfish actions, careless words, lies, poorly controlled anger, and irresponsible behavior can all be exposed. Conflict is natural and presents an opportunity for growth. Conflict and problem behavior need to be confronted and dealt with in a positive, supportive, loving way. A commitment to good communication and process from all is necessary to maintain cohesiveness and unity. But there will always be breakdowns in communication and process. If not corrected bad communication and a poor process for handling conflict will result in divisions within a household and a community. Household members need to have a willingness to discuss problems, to listen, and to change. When all are earnest in seeking to follow Jesus then mercy, forgiveness, and grace can abound.

While verbal communication skills are very important they are no substitute for each individual being conscious of Jesus' leadership.

"In retrospect, I feel regret that more of our hours together were not spent in prayer. Perhaps because so many of us have been young and idealistic, or perhaps because we are relatively well educated, we have been overly optimistic about the spiritual power of group discussion. We never would have admitted that we thought that words were the way to the Kingdom of God, yet looking back, I sometimes wonder if we did not behave as if it were so....We have been painfully slow to learn the discipline of silence, to learn how to stop talking, how to wait. I look back and ask, in how much of our seeking together has prayer been a veneer laid on top of our striving....True unity is found only in the service of our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. It is in his service that we are promised our fulfillment."² (Steve Montgomery)

Household members can seek to support a household that values solitude, quiet, prayer, and singing and music. This can be challenging in a high-energy household with a busy workday. But solitude and prayer - spending time alone with Jesus - needs to be an everyday practice rather than a rare occasion. And what about

singing? Well, birds like to sing more than talk - and there's something natural and beautiful in that.

Solidarity

What is solidarity? The discipleship movement looks to Jesus as the model for solidarity. Part of what solidarity means is identifying closely with the poor, the oppressed, the outcasts. Solidarity also means having a physical presence among the poor. Jesus demonstrates solidarity by living as a poor and homeless Messiah. And Jesus was notorious for associating with "sinners and outcasts." Solidarity also means being personally and physically active in responding to the pressing needs of the poor and oppressed. In one of his parables Jesus teaches,

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these...you did it to me.'" (Mt. 25:37-40)

Jesus also provides the example for solidarity that is not shallow, transitory, or piecemeal. Jesus' solidarity is persevering and enduring for all time. Jesus teaches'

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (Jn. 15:12-13)

Jesus demonstrates the revolutionary commitment to live and to die for others. There is no solidarity deeper than this.

What are some practical suggestions to deepen solidarity? Responding to the human suffering of hunger and homelessness can be a beginning place.

Sharing food with others is perhaps the most basic and primary practice of hospitality and solidarity. Jesus says,

"For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." (Mt. 25:35)

"Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward." (Mk. 9:41)

"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed. (Lk. 14:13-14)

A personalist approach to sharing food stemming from a communal household has advantages. First, a household or community can develop personal relationships with some of the poor people they serve. Instead of an impersonal bureaucratic response a community can serve people they know by name with more dignity and respect. Second, a household or community can establish a class solidarity with poor people. The equality of communal sharing in a household can be extended to poor people. Instead of a top-down paternalistic approach where affluent people serve food to poor people, relatively poor disciples serve food to their economic peers. Also, there should be no class division in food supplies with a lower-grade supply of food for poor people and a higher-grade supply of food for those who provide the food. Poor people deserve the best - to sit and eat at God's banquets. So disciples should only maintain one supply of food for all. Third, a personalist approach can offer table companionship with poor people. Instead of a separatist approach where meal providers will return to exclusive residences and affluent lifestyles, disciples can break down barriers and eat side-by-side with their guests. Also, whenever disciples are guests at another's home they should not break table companionship based on the food, i.e., based on their preferences or scruples. Table companionship takes priority. Thus a personalist approach to sharing food strengthens the bond of solidarity between disciples and poor people.

Providing shelter or sharing shelter with others is another important expression of solidarity. The practice of hospitality to strangers, including sharing shelter, is deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian heritage. Since disciples follow a Messiah who was homeless they can learn to identify more closely with homeless people:

"Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the (Human One) has nowhere to lay his head." (Lk. 9:58)

Jesus and his disciples are often on the receiving end of shelter-hospitality. Jesus teaches his evangelistic messengers,

"Whatever house you enter....Remain in the same house....Do not move about from house to house." (Lk. 10:5,7)

"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." (Mt. 10:40)

Since disciples may be dependent upon others for shelter-hospitality then a discipleship community also can seek to provide shelter-hospitality.

Other possible practices to deepen solidarity are: visiting the sick; visiting the imprisoned; personal relationships with poor neighbors, immigrants, prisoners, and homeless people; accompaniment with poor and oppressed people; environmental activism; street theatre; collaborative and coalition social justice actions; prophetic proclamations and actions; and participating in demonstrations, doing civil disobedience, testifying in court, and serving jail sentences.

Pacifism

The vast majority of Christians in the U.S. base their security on military forces, police forces, private security forces, private ownership of guns and other weapons, and a willingness to fight and use violence. Entering into the Messiah's discipleship movement, however, means entering into a new and different order of existence. This calls for preparation.

Basically, the preparation described here is - training, training, training. Just as a full-time soldier/warrior requires a lot of training so also disciples need training for a full-time commitment to a pacifist Messiah. Nonviolence workshops and training can be beneficial for those preparing to join a community and for members of a community. Periodic training can be a regular part of a discipleship community's life.

Nonviolence training for Christians can focus on Jesus and on putting on "the mind of Christ." The Greek word, *metanoia*, often translated as "repent" or "repentance," also can mean "change of mind." To put on the "mind of Christ" means becoming immersed in a Messiah-centered reality which runs completely counter to the values

and beliefs of a patriarchal society. A transformed mind will naturally go hand-in-hand with Jesus' liberating practices.

"A person becomes what he or she thinks....Thought precedes action. Patterns of thought precede patterns of action....Change of behavior requires change of mind. 'Madison Avenue' knows this, states and militaries with their massive propaganda machines know this, and Jesus Christ knows this."³ (Charles McCarthy)

Training to put on the mind of Christ can involve learning in more depth the areas briefly mentioned here: God is love; love creates and rules the cosmos; we are to love ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies; we are to disarm our inner thoughts and our external actions; fear is to be recognized as an enemy; fears need to be confronted; death is not to be feared; the love of God conquers fear; God is our security; security in God involves all realms - economic (provisions), political (protection and companionship), and ideological (guidance); the promise of the resurrection and eternal life is a powerful security.

Perhaps the hardest teaching of Jesus is to "love your enemies." (Mt. 5:44; Lk.6:27,35) This goes far beyond responding nonviolently to persecution. It involves conquering one's inner thoughts for retribution and substituting peaceful, loving thoughts. Training can try to better prepare one to *suffer unjustly* and to *die unjustly*. For people deeply-committed to justice and just relationships this is very difficult. Not being prepared to suffer unjustly will likely result in thoughts of enmity, violent retribution, and punishment. But if one is prepared to die unjustly, then one is better prepared to live in the freedom of the Spirit.

Nonviolence training can prepare Christians for entry into a pacific discipleship community. Nonviolent conflict resolution can be practiced by all members of a community. And nonviolence training can prepare Christians on how to respond to external persecution, hostility, intimidation, threats, robbery, vandalism, and assaults. A community could record, report, and publicize all such instances. Making visible and public such abuses is part of the struggle for justice.

Nonviolence training can prepare disciples for acts of civil disobedience. Nonviolence training also can prepare protesters in how to respond under various circumstances. Appropriate responses can be learned for encounters with angry counter-demonstrators, violent protesters, drunk and disorderly persons, agent provocateurs, and police brutality. The police are a trained para-military force. They have a wide range of tools and tactics and may do bullying, apply "pain-compliance" holds, do charges, beatings, or abductions, use dogs or horses, use tear gas or pepper spray, shoot a water cannon, or use various types of guns to injure or kill. Training can help disciples to maintain their composure under duress - to maintain presence-of-mind, calm, and the peace-of-God - and to make positive nonviolent responses. Training can inform and prepare disciples for being caught up in the criminal legal system and jail. Training can help prepare disciples to resist coercion when in custody.

Locations

Before discussing practical suggestions there are two questions concerning location that need examination.

Where to prepare disciples?

First, where can preparation of prospective disciples take place? Are all locations equal? Apparently not. According to inside information, one can't prepare for discipleship on a personal computer at one's desk in the quiet den of a suburban house. It won't work. It's been tried. There is simply no evidence of even one mature disciple emerging from the suburbs. At least not from Eden Prairie (an affluent suburb located southwest of Minneapolis). This is according to a knowledgeable friend (Brad H.). And he should know -- he's taken field trips to Eden Prairie, with binoculars, trying to spot a Christian disciple. Zippo. Not one. Not even close. Clearly, not the right habitat. Is any more proof needed?

Well, to get perhaps a little more perspective on appropriate location for discipleship preparation let us backtrack. In the Old Testament, before the Sinai covenant, the Hebrew slaves first were

led out from under Pharaoh's rule in Egypt. Then, in the wilderness, outside of the dominion of any ruler, the Hebrew people underwent preparation for the covenant. Preparation preceded covenant commitment which preceded the gift of "the promised land."

Before beginning his ministry, Jesus was guided into the wilderness for a time of preparation (40 days of fasting). Jesus' first disciples also had to make a wrenching break from their homes and hometowns. They had to leave everything in order to follow Jesus. Discipleship formation took place on the move with Jesus - at various locations.

What inferences can be drawn from this? The Hebrew slaves, Jesus, and Jesus' first disciples were led to make a significant break from their previous locations and lifestyles before undergoing preparation. The Hebrew slaves had to be completely disengaged from Pharaoh's rule in order to learn a new way of living. It may be noted that, like Jesus' first disciples, the preparation of the Hebrew people wasn't completely successful. And so the saying arose, "It is easier to get the people out of Egypt than it is to get Egypt out of the people." But preparation is just that - it is only preparation and is not the full commitment. Even so, these examples indicate that the best preparation occurs in locations far from people's normal locations and lifestyles.

It may also be inferred from the above that wealth in any form is unnecessary for building a discipleship movement. The Hebrew people were homeless and Jesus and his first disciples had to leave everything behind. All were living in a state of flux - and were deeply dependent upon God for supply.

Where to locate a community?

The second question to examine concerns the most appropriate locations for a discipleship community. It may be good to think in terms of locations (plural).

"As they were going along the road, someone 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 (Human One) has nowhere to lay his head.'" (Lk. 9:57-58)

The revolutionary discipleship movement's primary commitment is to the Messiah and not to any particular location.

It might seem that, in theory, a discipleship community can begin anywhere people have been freed-up and well-prepared for a deep commitment to Jesus. But are urban and rural locations equally desirable for a discipleship community? A community in either place faces problems related to location. Let us look first at problems with an urban location.

Modern cities are human-made patriarchal constructs sharing little in common with God's natural creation. Cities have a foundation in an exploitive capitalist economic system.

"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 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)....Large metropolises are dependent upon an exploitive, colonizing economic system - and this predatory system cannot be sustained indefinitely."⁴

Not surprisingly, urban living is characterized by a high degree of alienation from God, from the land, and from neighbors.

"The dominant culture of urban modernity is fundamentally characterized by displacement and alienation....Today a majority of city dwellers live an atomized and isolated lifestyle (how many of us know our neighbors?). Without a relationship to culture, land, and community, is it any wonder the modern family is in crisis? The family has been further dismantled by work patterns demanded by twentieth-century capitalism, which have displaced first one and now increasingly both parents from the rhythms of home life. This cumulative alienation has had profound erosive impact upon our humanity, which we have yet to comprehend."⁵ (Ched Myers)

Problems from living in large metropolises need to be realistically addressed. Here are brief descriptions of some problems associated with an urban location:

* Urban areas are the locus of centralized power and governmental rule. Close proximity to governmental power can corrupt and lead to compromise, accommodation, and reformist efforts.

* Cultural temptations, pleasures, privileges, and distractions abound which reinforce individualism and selfishness. Communal commitment and unity are under constant assault.

* The architecture of houses, neighborhoods, roads, transportation, and businesses work against community and togetherness. Everything is divided and subdivided and closely governed by zoning, codes, permits, and bureaucracy. Housing is designed for self-sufficient individual households. Christian communities are either very small or they experience a high degree of spatial division and separateness. A large urban community is more of a fragmented, displaced, and loose network of people than a holistic community.

* The architecture of houses, community space, and urban space do not provide enough space for families with children. As all space in a community-house is utilized, families with children may be squeezed for indoor space. Children need outdoor space to play but city streets are not safe or adequate and city parks, if any are nearby, do not provide enough adult supervision. Christian communities with families tend to be more self-preoccupied and less active in ministry. Christian members of an activist community may mostly be singles or childless couples. Single members may leave an activist community as they approach marriage and starting a family.

* The work pressures from a large population of very needy people, plus the fast pace of urban life, plus urban noise, plus a lack of solitude and exposure to nature can put a lot of stress on an inner-city community. Those who want a deeper spiritual life or a more even pace of work, rest, and solitude may not stay long. The activists who do stay for some time may burn out. So urban communities may experience a higher turnover of members.

* Urban communities are much better at helping disadvantaged people fit into mainstream jobs and achieve a semblance of self-sufficiency than they are at bringing about radical conversion and transformation. The urban landscape by itself presents a difficult setting for achieving deep-rooted conversion to the Messiah - perhaps comparable to sowing seeds in rocky soil or concrete.

To some degree the problems outlined above are intrinsic to an urban location. An urban location is beset by significant structural problems. The solution to the urban problem does not lie in developing new strategies to renew the city. Efforts at re-building or re-vitalizing the city or inner-city neighborhoods are, ultimately, reformist projects. They do not get to the historical, economic, political, and social roots of urban problems. The discipleship movement has a far more revolutionary agenda.

Is a rural location more desirable? Are there problems associated with rural communities? Some problems will be briefly mentioned here. A rural community may become isolated. It may seriously lack external ministries and outreach. With fewer transitory members and more settlers a rural community may turn a discipleship *movement* into a stagnating settlement. A rural community may develop an in-grown, homogenous membership. It may develop an insular, white-ish community and represent a withdrawal and escape from inner-city problems and the difficulties of racial, ethnic, and class integration and solidarity. It may prioritize production and economic self-sufficiency. It may develop a stronger dependency upon the land than upon God.

The problems mentioned for rural communities are serious ones. But they are not, for the most part, intrinsic to a rural location. Most are problems that result from the leadership and vision of the community itself. Good preparation, vision, and leadership at the beginning of rural-community formation can negate them. Then, as long as a rural community is vigilant and faithful the problems may not manifest themselves. Also, the structural problems that hamper urban communities are reduced or eliminated by a rural location.

What conclusions or inferences can be drawn? A discipleship movement can begin anywhere people have been freed-up and well-prepared for a deep commitment to Jesus. But not all locations are equal. There are some reasons to believe that a rural location is better-suited than an urban location for a discipleship community. An urban community faces many structural obstacles to forming and maintaining a holistic, communal community. If this analysis is correct then it could be deduced that in order for the discipleship movement to be sustained over the long run it needs to become a

rural-based movement. The rural setting seems more suitable for a strong base community. But it is still good to think in terms of locations (plural). Base communities in rural areas can be connected to urban outposts, i.e., urban houses of hospitality. Urban outposts, or extended communities, could be vital for outreach ministries and for some training of disciples.

What practical preparatory steps, concerning location, can prospective disciples take? There may be some value for discipleship preparation both in rural and urban locations.

For privileged white Christians more preparatory steps may be necessary than for poor people of color.

"For First World Christians, given the social architecture of division, the preferential option for the poor indeed demands a laborious journey of social relocation. We find this perhaps embarrassing to speak frankly about. It is easier to invoke the rhetoric of solidarity than to face the ambiguities inherent in our attempts to overcome insularity."⁶ (Ched Myers)

Solidarity needs to begin at home. Part of the preparation for privileged whites could be relocation to a poor, racially-diverse, inner-city neighborhood. Privileged Christians could learn in a personal way about the many problems of poor neighbors and about the culture of poverty. Encounters with neighbors can be made with some sensitivity, restraint, and humility. Privileged whites should probably not go around saying, "Hi! I'm white. I'm important. I have big plans. I'm on a mission from God. I'm here to help the poor. By the way, what's your problem?" This won't go over too well with the locals. With a little more humility steps can be taken to seek out racial and cultural diversity. Offering hospitality to the poor and to neighbors in one's home may be helpful.

For all prospective disciples much preparation in a rural location may be beneficial. Rural locations offer more solitude and fewer distractions for discipleship formation. Progress in education, training, and self-discipline may be enhanced in a rural location. Developing a stronger understanding of nature and ecology and a deeper relationship with the land can occur. A rural location may also help build more of a common bond among prospective disciples.

All of the preparatory work of internal conversion and external changes described in chapters 7 and 8 is geared towards preparing prospective disciples for the next big step - baptism. Preparation can involve a lot of work but disciples can look forward to baptism and to the full reign of Jesus/Sophia/Yahweh in their lives.

Footnotes

1. "Some Pacific islanders roast (cockroaches) or make them into a curry that they claim has a zesty cheese flavor." Bud Gordon, "Cockroach outlives his foes," newspaper article.
"`People get grossed out by the idea,' (Karen Kobey) said. `But really, logically speaking, insects are clean. They have a very interesting taste. Grasshoppers and crickets have a kind of nutty taste to me. There's nothing dangerous about it....We are in much greater danger from the poisons used to eliminate insects than (from) the insects themselves'....She started collecting insect recipes and found a cookbook called `Entertaining with Insects,' by Ronald Taylor and Barbara Carter. The book contains recipes for such dishes as Pizza Hopper, Jumping Melon Salad, Cricket Ramaki, Candied Insects, Insect Quiche, Cricket Louis and Insect Divan." Peggy M. Koop, "She jumps at chance to dine on grasshoppers," Star Tribune, Minneapolis, 8-10-89.
2. Steve Montgomery, "What builds unity?," Coming Together, Fellowship of Hope, Elkhart, IN, Vol. 3, No. 3, June 1985, pp. 9 & 16.
3. Fr. Charles McCarthy, "Epistle to the Church of the Twentieth Century: Christian Nonviolence: The Great Failure, The Only Hope," pp. 13-14.
4. C.I./ C.R., pp. 68-69.
5. Ched Myers, Who Will Roll Away The Stone?, 1994, pp. 341-342.

6. Ibid., p. 220.

Step on out

Step on out.

Step away.

No time

to watch at a distance

pondering

life's changing seasons.

No mountaintop gazing.

No soulful reminiscing.

No sedating entertainment.

The time is now.

The moment has arrived.

The doors are all open.

The way is clear.

All that is needed

is will and desire

to take the steps

to be free of fear.

Step on out.

Step away.

CHAPTER 9

The Dangerous Act of Baptism

The last two chapters focused on preparing people for a revolutionary commitment to the Messiah and to the discipleship movement. Preparation, as good and as important as it is, is not the full commitment. Baptism represents the real commitment. There comes a time when people need to make a decision about whether or not they really want to devote their lives to the revolutionary discipleship movement. The moment of truth comes when it is time for people to step up and make the revolutionary baptismal commitment. Who will join the movement?

Originally, baptism involved a counter-cultural commitment, risk, and some danger. Historically, the ritual of baptism became a source of conflict - and has caused many divisions among Christians. Today churches still differ over its meaning and application, but it is a very standard and socially-approved ritual. For most Christians today, while the ritual is regarded as important, it has very little impact on daily life. How did the original and dangerous act of baptism become such a placid act today? What is the history of degeneration concerning baptism?

Before looking at the meaning of baptism today for the discipleship movement, let us review the history of baptism.

Brief history of baptism

John, the forerunner of the Messiah, proclaims in the wilderness, "Repent, for the (commonwealth of God) is at hand." (Mt. 3:2 RSV)
John proclaims the revolutionary message of the arrival of a new world order.

John's radical message strikes a chord among the oppressed people of Israel.

"John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the *whole* Judean countryside and *all* the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." (Mt. 1:4-5)

The fiery prophet John is outspoken, popular, and outside of official channels of power and control. John becomes identified with the ritual of baptism, i.e., as in "John the Baptist." (Mt. 3:1) The ritual of baptism becomes controversial as it is associated with an *undivided commitment* and allegiance to Yahweh - and thus has anti-Roman implications. It draws the attention and ire in Jerusalem of religious leaders who are collaborators with Roman power. The popular *baptism movement* threatens the legitimacy of Jerusalem's religious leaders and their influence over the people. The movement is also potentially seditious - with the possibility of bringing down upon Israel the wrath of the Romans. The religious leaders respond by sending an investigation team to question and challenge John.

"The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?...Let us have an answer for those who sent us...Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?'" (Jn. 1:19,22,25)

John speaks out with authority on all matters including denouncing the sins of Roman-appointed ruler Herod Antipas. Herod responds forcefully by sending soldiers to arrest John.

"But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he shut up John in prison." (Lk. 3:19-20)

Not long thereafter Herod executes John. The young prophet's life comes to an abrupt end due to the blood-stained hands of the authorities.

Jesus emerges from the baptism movement and picks up the revolutionary proclamation:

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the

(commonwealth) of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." (Mk. 1:14-15 RSV)

While John initiates the ritual of baptism it is only preparation for a more powerful baptism by the Messiah.

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, `I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'" (Lk. 3:15-16)

Jesus diverges some from the fiery vision of John - and does not baptize. But Jesus' disciples do baptize - and the religious leaders in Jerusalem are on alert. So, at one point, Jesus responds by departing Judea for the relatively safer territory of Galilee.

"Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, `Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John' -- although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized -- he left Judea and started back to Galilee." (Jn. 4:1-3)

Baptism's meaning is clarified by the story of Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a "leader of the Jews," (Jn. 3:1) seeks to be counted among the faithful - but he is deeply compromised. On the one hand Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin - the powerful Jewish establishment which collaborates with the Romans. On the other hand, Nicodemus is a so-called "secret disciple," who comes to Jesus secretly at night, and who privately confesses his faith in Jesus. (Jn. 3:2) But Jesus confronts Nicodemus,

"Unless one is born anew, (one) cannot see the (commonwealth) of God....Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, (one) cannot enter the (commonwealth) of God....You must be born anew." (Jn. 3:3,5,7)

Nicodemus' "secret discipleship" and private confession of faith are worthless. His "secret discipleship" is a form of self-deception which allows him to maintain divided allegiances between God and the ruling establishment. Nicodemus needs to undergo a baptism experience of being *completely born anew* "of water and the Spirit." The baptism movement allows for no divided allegiances and no "secret disciples."

Jesus' mission leads him to Jerusalem and some major confrontations with the authorities. On the road to Jerusalem Jesus questions his disciples:

"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mk. 10:38)

Ched Myers comments on the above passage from Mark,

"We remember that Jesus had promised a cup to his disciples, which he identified with a 'baptism.' Mark will soon make it clear that this 'cup' refers to the witness of suffering at the hands of the powers. This 'one cup' becomes the center of the community's new symbolic life. Baptism and eucharist both have the same meaning: solidarity with and participation in the way of the cross, embodied in Jesus."¹

The meaning of Jesus' "baptism" expands to mean following the revolutionary path even in the face of the lethal power of the authorities.

During the liberation festival of *Passover* Jesus is confronted by Jerusalem's leaders:

"Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?" (Lk. 20:2)

Jesus counters by asking Jerusalem's leaders about the populist hero John and where his authority originated:

"`Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' They discussed it with one another, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' *all the people will stone us*; for they are convinced that John was a prophet.' So they answered that they did not know where it came from." (Lk. 20:4-7)

Support for Jesus from the Passover crowds prevent the authorities from arresting Jesus during the day.

Only after the disciples have a *full understanding* of "carrying the cross," will they receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. They learn soon enough. Through a collaboration of religious leaders and political authorities Jesus is executed on a cross. After Jesus' resurrection he says to the disciples,

"You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit....You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:5,8)

Before he departs Jesus gives to his disciples "the great commission":

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt. 28:18-20)

The revolutionary discipleship movement is to proceed courageously with its global mission - undaunted by the execution of the Messiah.

When disciples are under fire from the authorities the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive," (Jn. 14:17) will aid them.

"In the synoptic gospels, the promise of the Holy Spirit is regularly associated with the ability to speak boldly and coherently in court or before the authorities (Mark 13:9-10, Luke 12:11-12, Matthew 10:17-20). Likewise, the promise in John is connected with the trials of persecution (15:18-25, 16:1-4) and the Spirit is named with a courtroom term. The *paraclete* is one 'called alongside' to stand with disciples in court, a counselor in the manner, say, of a defense attorney."² (Bill Wylie Kellermann)

The first baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs on the day of Pentecost and it helps to revive the discipleship movement.

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability." (Acts 2:2-4)

The first experience of glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues," has a very outward-directed purpose. By speaking in many foreign languages the disciples proclaim the gospel in the native language of many peoples - and many join the movement.

"So those who welcomed (Peter's) message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added." (Acts 2:41)

The grassroots movement, empowered by the Holy Spirit, operates apart from all official authorities.

Baptism into the movement brings about a radical social equality. The first baptism at Pentecost fulfills the prophet Joel's prophecy,

"In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy." (Acts 2:17-18; Joel 2:28-29)

Paul's passage in Galatians may reflect a part of early Christian baptismal liturgies:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:27-28)

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza comments on the above passage:

"The baptismal declaration of Gal. 3:28 runs counter to the general acceptance of male religious privileges among Greeks, Romans, Persians, and also Jews in the first century C.E. It was a rhetorical commonplace that Hellenistic man was grateful to the gods because he was fortunate enough to be born a human being and not a beast, a Greek and not a barbarian, a free man and not a slave, a man and not a woman. This cultural pattern seems to have been adopted by Judaism in the first or second centuries C.E. and found its way into the synagogue liturgy. Three times a Jewish man thanked God that he did not create him a gentile, a slave, or a woman."³

Baptism brings people into a community characterized by social equality.

"(Gal. 3:28) repeats with different categories and words that within the Christian community no structures of dominance can be tolerated. Gal. 3:28 is therefore best understood as a communal Christian self-definition rather than a statement about the baptized individual. It proclaims that in the Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant. All the baptized are equal, they are one in Christ."⁴ (Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza)

The movement is radically inclusive. Philip baptizes a foreign eunuch (Acts 8:38) and Peter baptizes a foreign soldier. (Acts 10:48) Previously Jesus had said to the religious leaders,

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the (commonwealth) of God ahead of you." (Mt. 21:31)

People considered outcasts by society are some of the first to enter the movement.

The baptismal commitment precludes oaths of allegiance to secular authorities. As a result many disciples in the first centuries are killed for refusing to pay homage to Caesar. Waves of persecution strike at the movement.

"1 Peter suggests the baptismal covenant. This, in a letter to a community facing a campaign of state terrorism and its spin-off mob violence. The hymn line, 'by the light of burning martyrs,' refers specifically to Nero's practice, then current, of lighting his garden parties with human torches - Christians bound aloft. New horrors were being invented. Hold on to your baptism, 1 Peter urges, like a raft in the storm, a passage through chaos."⁵ (Bill Wylie Kellermann)

In the year 202 Roman Emperor Septimus Severus makes baptism a criminal act and continues the fierce persecution of Christians. Despite brutal repression many people are attracted to the movement and are willing to undergo a lengthy period of preparation leading to baptism.

"In the pre-Constantinian period, when the church was outlawed and with some regularity systematically persecuted, the reception of members was a rigorous and often risky proposition. Those wishing to become 'hearers' (*catechumens*), were brought to the community by sponsors who could vouch for them. Thereupon they entered into a three-year period of prayerful instruction and preparation, which concluded with an intensive time of examination and exorcism and fasting....Hence, the greatest influence upon the Christian liturgical year in this period was the confessional rigors of baptismal preparation."⁶ (Kellermann)

The outlawed movement grows to be the largest faith in the Roman empire.

Unfortunately, as the movement spreads it is rife with internal problems. (See chapter 6.) One problem is that of differing baptismal practices.

"Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:14-17)

Paul discovers some disciples in Ephesus who know only the baptism of John. So Paul baptizes them again. (Acts 19:1-6) In one of his letters Paul cites baptism by different evangelists as a source of division among those baptized. (1 Cor. 1:10-16) In another instance, Peter baptizes some Gentiles *after* the Holy Spirit has fallen upon them.

"Peter said, `Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:47-48)

Differing baptismal practices tend to erode the full meaning of baptism.

Beginning in the 4th century the meaning of baptism undergoes major degeneration. The Roman Emperor, Constantine, starts Christianity on the road to becoming the official religion of the state. In return, Christians are expected to take oaths of allegiance to political authorities. Under the protection of the state Christians can build churches and own lands. And the murderous Roman legions become "Christian."

"There was soon enough the spectacle of soldiers marching into the river and being baptized while holding their right hands out of the water; by remaining unbaptized, those hands could still wield the sword. By 438, the Theodosian Code declared that *only* Christians could be soldiers, since the presence of those who believed in pagan gods might jinx the fortunes of the army."⁷ (Lee Griffith)

Baptism gains the stamp of approval from the state and is both regulated and promoted by the state. Under Constantine large baptisteries are constructed where baptism by immersion is to occur. Baptism is to be done by proper church officials - or else there will be severe consequences from the state.

"A series of imperial edicts from approximately 390 to 420 A.D. decreed death to those who rebaptized or were rebaptized."⁸ (John S. Oyer)

Eventually, church and state make infant baptism the norm. A so-called "Christian society" is created by fiat, by the power of the state as infants are baptized into the state-religion. Jews, pagans, Christian dissenters ("heretics"), and others are subject to persecution.

A new baptism movement arises in the 16th century. In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli promotes some reforms, but the city council decrees that all infants be baptized within eight days of birth. Consequently, in 1525, in defiance of the law, a group of people rebaptize each other. This marks the beginning of the anabaptist movement.

The anabaptist movement goes beyond the limits of most Protestant reformers.⁹ Most Protestants, while breaking from the Roman Catholic church, continue to support a union between church and state. Prominent Protestant leaders, like Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin

"completely rejected the notion of religious liberty. Catholics and Protestants alike agreed that dissenters had to be dealt with by force if they did not yield to persuasion."¹⁰ (Walter Klassen)

Anabaptists break from both the Roman Catholic church and from partnership with the state. They reject church- and state-sanctioned infant baptism. They believe that commitment to follow Jesus and commitment to the "discipline" of a Christian community require an adult decision. While anabaptists hold a number of common practices, e.g. following the example of Jesus, refusal to take oaths, refusal to bear arms, support for religious freedom, egalitarianism, and subjecting private property to the needs of the community, the movement becomes identified with one practice - adult baptism.

The practice of adult (re)baptism brings a strong reaction from other Christians. A wave of Christian-sponsored terror targets anabaptists. Rulers, Catholics, and Protestant reformers seek to capture and kill anabaptists. Thousands of anabaptists are imprisoned, tortured, drowned, burned at the stake, or beheaded.

Even more anabaptists flee their homes, "go underground," and hope for a time and place with less Christian-led violent persecution.

Baptism today

What does baptism mean if it is an accepted part of a nation's social and cultural values? Most Christians today are deeply conformed to society's dominant economic, political, and cultural values. So while there are different baptismal practices among Christians today there is little controversy surrounding the practice of baptism. No one today is being persecuted specifically because of their practice of baptism.

Before looking at what revolutionary baptism means let us examine some of the different practices among Christians today and how baptism has lost much of its original meaning.¹¹

One difference that has divided Christians concerns how water is applied during baptism. Most Protestants practice aspersion (sprinkling of water) or affusion (pouring of water). Roman Catholics generally practice affusion. Orthodox and Baptist churches and the Mennonite Brethren practice immersion. To make an issue out of how water is applied is to prioritize *form* over *content*. It gives higher priority to the mechanics of the ritual than to the substance of the action.

Of course, a major difference that has divided Christians concerns infant baptism versus adult baptism. Roman Catholics and Orthodox and most Protestants promulgate and mainly practice infant baptism.

Infant baptism is the modern purity system's counterpart to infant male circumcision. Circumcision of male infants was the purity system's ritual marking entry into the old covenant. Females, held by the purity system to be relatively more unclean and inferior to males, were discriminated against and excluded from this covenant ritual. Infant circumcision brought a male infant into the covenant family based on blood-lines (by being a child of covenant members). Similarly today, infant baptism is a ritual to bring an infant into God's

family usually based on parents' membership in a church. It is understood as a blessing - as an act of God's unmerited saving grace - making the baby a member of God's adopted family. It helps to increase church membership and satisfy parents' desires to "save" their baby. But why should parents be worried about the baby's "salvation"? It must be due to the purity system, doctrines like "original sin," and an understanding of God as both loving and wrathful. According to the ancient purity system all are "born of woman" and hence "unclean" at birth. All are "born of the flesh," "born into sin," born into a "fallen world" which is under God's judgement and wrath. So, if a baby or a child should die without being baptized, parents might worry about the soul of the baby going to limbo - or to hell.

Infant baptism is a safe, culturally-accepted, status quo ritual. Infant baptism originally became the norm through the collusion and power of the state. The infant being baptized has a completely passive role in the ritual - and has no choice about the matter. "Salvation" becomes trivialized, i.e., it becomes separated from a radical commitment to God and to the historical struggle and movement for justice and peace on earth.

"The practice of baptizing infants was introduced and made general, thus doing away with the break involved in conversion."¹² (Fernando Belo)

Infant baptism weakens personal faith-commitments - as people are "born into" a particular church and identified as being part of the "people of faith." Infant baptism can encourage a stronger loyalty to a church institution than to Jesus. Many people identify themselves with a denomination more readily than with a commitment to Jesus. This results in Christians who blend into in-grown homogeneous churches and into the cultural mainstream.

Baptists, Pentecostals, and anabaptists mainly practice adult baptism. The meaning of adult baptism differs among churches. Unfortunately, adult baptism is tied to church traditions and is disconnected to a life of discipleship to Jesus. In the case of some anabaptist groups baptism is associated with a communitarian way of life. But the communitarian lifestyle is not prophetic and holistic enough. Many communities are very insular, inward-directed, and patriarchal.

Going beyond infant and adult baptisms are posthumous baptisms. The Mormons believe in posthumous baptisms. A passage from Paul seems to be supportive of this practice:

"Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?" (1 Cor. 15:29)

Baptisms on behalf of the dead have brought controversy to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1991, after being pressured from Jewish groups, the Mormon church directed members to stop baptizing Holocaust victims. In 1995, the Mormon church purged the names of nearly 400,000 Holocaust victims from their baptismal records.

Posthumous baptisms reveal an adulation of the "saving power" of baptism. Can baptism be part of "salvation" - apart from meaningful human participation? While in infant baptism the infant is essentially passive, in posthumous baptism the dead one is both passive *and absent*. Those who feel in their hearts a deep calling to evangelize among the dead may be advised to pray about it - and to get-a-grip on what they can and cannot do.

Most churches call for a member of the clerical class to preside over the ritual of baptism. But the clerical class is rooted in the purity system. Jesus came to abolish the purity system and to replace the entire clerical class. It is then of some irony that the ritual that is supposed to mark entry into Jesus' revolutionary Way is presided over by officials who represent a major violation of that Way.

For most people baptism brings them into homogeneous churches. Churches are the most racially segregated of major institutions in the U.S. Most churches are also characterized by grouping people together who have a relatively similar level of affluence. And most churches have a clerical class, hierarchies, and sexual inequalities. So what do placid, routine, socially-acceptable church baptisms have to do with the Messiah?

Baptism into the revolutionary discipleship movement

Jesus, the Messiah, began the revolutionary discipleship movement. To join the movement requires a radical commitment to Jesus. Baptism is the ritual for making this commitment.

Baptism represents a new covenant commitment. A covenant is a sworn or vowed commitment between two or more parties. Jesus' new covenant represents a *mutual commitment* with the involved parties being: God, the person(s) being baptized, and those already baptized.

Jesus calls people to make a new covenant which supersedes and takes precedence over all other commitments. The new baptismal commitment is to be the *deepest of all commitments*. The revolutionary baptismal covenant is a greater commitment than a marriage covenant or traditional familial bonds.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Lk. 14:26-27)

In the above passage Jesus does not literally mean "hate." Rather, relative to a relationship with one's natural family, one's relationship with Jesus and with other disciples is to be far, far stronger.

God is fully prepared for a mutual covenant commitment with all interested people. Those who wish to join a revolutionary movement, however, are not prepared. Therefore significant preparation time is needed before baptism. Or so I would advocate.

The time of preparation before baptism can vary widely. On the first baptism of the Spirit (on Pentecost) thousands were baptized on the very first day they heard the gospel. (Acts 2:37-42) Some early Christian communities adopted a 3-year period for baptismal preparation. With such great variance in preparation time what will guide the movement in these times?

Here are some reasons for a lengthy preparation time. 1. The baptismal commitment is meant to be the deepest of all commitments. It should not be taken lightly. Like marriage, it is not something to be rushed into. One should not enter a marriage

covenant without some preparation. Even more so do people need preparation for a lifelong revolutionary commitment. Those who want to be baptized with little preparation can be baptized elsewhere. 2. A decision to be baptized should not be based on some emotional high, short-lived passionate feelings, or misconceptions. Thorough preparation and a holistic commitment of "heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Mk. 12:30) is desirable. 3. Preparation time may be related to the "quality" of the baptism. Much of U.S. culture supports instant gratification and short-term commitments. Baptism is not another form of consumption or experimentation or an easy escape from all of one's personal problems. Outward appearances and expressions of sincerity are not a replacement for inner conversion. So cultural temptations for instant baptisms can be resisted. 4. Besides leadership and vision, preparation is one of the three most important areas for a strong base community. If preparation is devalued then this will weaken the base. Without adequate preparation newly-baptized members can significantly erode the vision and leadership of a community. 5. Significant preparation time can reduce the "immaturity factor" that can be so disruptive and destructive of communal living. Immature members of a community can burn up a huge amount of emotional and physical resources of a community. A healthy community needs to maintain a high level of trust among its members.

The baptismal commitment is only for adults. Baptism requires a deep, personal, public, and lifelong commitment. The baptismal covenant is to be the deepest of all commitments - deeper than a marriage covenant. Entry into the revolutionary discipleship movement must be by free will. This calls for a fully-conscious, mature, adult decision. As an example Jesus was baptized around the age of 30. Jesus' disciples were not baptized with the Spirit until after Jesus was arrested, tortured, executed, and resurrected. Thus even Jesus' first disciples were not baptized with the Spirit until they had a full understanding of the costs of discipleship. A discipleship community may set a guideline for a minimum age for baptism.

Baptism is not for infants, children, or youth. Discipleship communities may choose to have "baby dedication" rituals which involve commitment by the community to raise a baby as one of God's children. Children are to be at the center of a community's social life

and are under the parents', community's, and God's nurture and grace. Communities can encourage their children to get wide exposure to different cultures and religious traditions. It may be well for a community to choose a policy of not baptizing their own grown children. Those being baptized should be free from parental and community influence. Thus, a community's children, when they are adults, could choose to be baptized into another discipleship community. This would help a community maintain an outward focus for ministries and expansion of the movement.

The baptism that is most needed today for a revival of the discipleship movement is a *baptism of commitment to Jesus*. The baptism proposed here upholds "the Jesus Principle." The person being baptized would make public vows, i.e., would make a verbal commitment before witnesses. The commitment would be to Jesus, to the principle that *Jesus is always the foremost authority*, and to the lifelong path of discipleship. The baptismal covenant commitment would also include a strong declaration of who Jesus is. Such a baptism places one entirely under the authority and leadership of Jesus.

The baptismal commitment could include a verbal renunciation of "Satan, evil, and idols." Baptismal preparation could prepare one to renounce at the time of baptism:

- * all private wealth and private property
- * all positions and titles
- * all weapons and violence
- * dominative power, patriarchy, and the state
- * all recognizable traditions of the purity system.

Besides being an act of commitment, baptism is also an *entry ritual*. Baptism publicly marks one's entrance into the discipleship movement, into a communal community, and into a new family. The renunciations above can be humbling. But they help an adult to enter "as a child." Jesus taught,

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the (commonwealth) of God as a little child will never enter it." (Mk. 10:15)

Entering a communal community means making a commitment to share all things in common. Before baptism one is free to use and dispose of one's assets and property, if any. After baptism, however,

one enters into a community's communal economy and any possessions would be at the disposal of the community.

People being baptized into the movement would enter with a "clean slate" - with respect to sins and debts. From the perspective of a discipleship community people being baptized would receive forgiveness of all sins and forgiveness of all debts. Society might retain sins and debts but a discipleship community would not. Debts would not be repaid. One exception might be if a debtor were imprisoned then a community might seek to repay the debt in order to free the prisoner.

Baptism marks one's entry into a new Messiah-centered family. Part of the baptismal ritual may be receiving new names. People being baptized may be christened with new Spirit-inspired names - while at the same time dropping their patriarchal surnames. Names are important, and the replacement of patriarchal naming traditions can be a powerful symbol of one's deep commitment to the revolutionary Way of the Messiah.

By what methods shall baptism be administered?

The method of water application during baptism - whether aspersion, affusion, or immersion - is not important. Symbolically, immersion is the most powerful. Immersion symbolizes a total commitment, a total "cleansing." Baptism signifies being "born anew," being "born of water and the Spirit." Baptism signifies a "crossing of the Jordan river into the promised land." Baptism brings about an immersion into a revolutionary Way of life.

Baptism can be administered by a discipleship community which has no clergy and no positions of leadership. The community, as a whole, takes responsibility for the practice of baptism, for preparation, and for who, when, and how to baptize. Jesus gave the commission (Mt. 28:18-20) to baptize "in the name of the (Mother) and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" - that is, "Yahweh, Jesus, and Sophia." The baptism "of water and the Spirit" does not mean that people do not already have, in some measure, the Spirit present within them. It does mean that the baptismal covenant is a *mutual commitment* and when people commit themselves fully to Jesus then

God will commit more fully the Holy Spirit to disciples - with charismatic gifts of the Spirit a sign of God's presence and commitment.

* * * * *

The baptism described in this chapter is good news for the world:

"For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God....We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." (Rom. 8:19,22)

A baptism which truly upholds the leadership and authority of the Messiah is an exciting prospect for all of creation.

Baptism is the entry way into the revolutionary discipleship movement. It definitively means stepping over the line of what family, church, and society deem proper and acceptable. Baptism becomes, once again, a dangerous act. It means lifting high the banner of Jesus, the Messiah, and God's commonwealth on earth. It means embarking on a journey deep into the heart of God - and into the fullness of life.

Footnotes

1. Ched Myers, Binding The Strong Man, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1988, p.362.
2. Bill Wylie Kellermann, Sojourners, Washington D.C., May 1994, p. 39.
3. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, Crossroad, New York, 1983, p. 217.
4. Ibid., p. 213.
5. Bill Wylie Kellermann, Sojourners, Feb.-Mar. 1994, p. 29.
6. Bill Wylie Kellermann, Seasons of Faith and Conscience, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1991, p. 116.

7. Lee Griffith, The Fall of the Prison, Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993, pp.143-4.

8. John S. Oyer, "Sticks and Stones Broke Their Bones, and Vicious Names did Hurt Them!," Christian History, Volume IV, No. 1, Worcester, PA, 1985, p.17.

9. Anabaptism means to re-baptize or to baptize again. Some anabaptists, and their descendants include Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, Bruderhof, Brethren in Christ, and Mennonite Brethren.

10. Walter Klassen, "Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant," Christian History, Volume IV, No. 1, 1985, p.34.

11. Some of the following analysis of baptism in this section comes from C.I./C.R..

12. Fernando Belo, A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1981, p.286.

13. This is a revision of a poem, "The kingdom," which was printed in 1984.

The commonwealth¹³

The commonwealth of God
is not for those
who are ashamed of Jesus
but is for those
who cannot resist God's love
The commonwealth
is not for those
who despise the Way of the cross
but is for those
who seek redemption and liberation
The commonwealth

is not for those
who seek their own gain
but is for those
who offer tender mercies
The commonwealth
is not for those
who cling to petty possessions
but is for those
who desire to share God's bounty
The commonwealth
is not for those
who are afraid to give up what they have
but is for those
who dare to enter with nothing
The commonwealth beckons
Its light is light enough
The Messiah awaits
on his humble throne
ready to serve
all those who enter
Come and enter!

CHAPTER 10

Hope: Always Forward

Speeding up the revolution

The big mission of the Messiah and a global discipleship movement is to bring salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world. Progress towards the goal over the past two millenniums has varied greatly - with some spurts, some declines, and some times of little apparent movement. It is appropriate to raise the questions: How is it possible to speed up the revolution? How can the movement continually go forward and make steady progress towards the goal?

It is God's will to establish the commonwealth of God over all the earth. Yet, *the only way* to enter God's commonwealth is by free will, free choice. So a problem presents itself: fulfillment of God's will can be delayed by human choices. Furthermore, the Way of the Messiah is seldom presented to the world. The Christian churches continue to distort the gospel and steer people away from radical change. Without mature discipleship communities revealing the Way of the Messiah the world cannot experience God's healing and restoration in any powerful way. Consequently, the world is perishing.

While human choices can delay God's will, the converse is also true: human choices can speed up the fulfillment of God's will. To help speed up the process and to provide leadership God sent a Messiah. The Messiah, in vital partnership with the revolutionary discipleship movement, is the bridge between God's promises & will and their fulfillment. To speed up the process in these times there is a great need for a revival of the discipleship movement.

A radical revival will get back to the roots, foundation, and truth of Jesus, the Messiah. The discipleship movement proclaims and embodies the truth of Jesus. The movement affirms that Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life." (Jn 14:6) The movement affirms that

Jesus reveals who God is. There is no clearer revelation of God. The path of discipleship to Jesus is the clearest and most direct way to God. The discipleship movement prioritizes Jesus' leadership, teachings, and practices.

The discipleship movement affirms that the Messiah reveals *the only Way* that will eventually *succeed* in bringing salvation, justice, and liberation to the whole world. The Messiah, in union with the discipleship movement, represents the world's only true hope for establishing justice and peace on earth. The discipleship movement is, as some might aptly call it, the mother of all movements. This movement delivers. To join the movement and speed up the revolution one must choose radical *conversion* to Jesus and *immersion* in a communal discipleship community. Jesus is the foundation and discipleship communities are the base of the movement.

To fulfill the big mission Jesus needs disciples. Jesus needs us. The whole world needs us. Jesus bids us to follow him. This is a calling to be part of something far greater than oneself. The calling to follow the Messiah is the only calling that will satisfy our deepest longings and desires. It is a calling to an immersion into the deepest realms of life. It is a calling to enter into a spiritual river, a spiritual flow, a spiritual power that is refreshing, uplifting, life-giving, and eternal. It is a calling to enter into a movement that resonates with all of God's creation. To join this ever-flowing movement it is necessary to set forth, as on a raft in a river, and to merge with God's current.

False hopes abound - but there is only one true hope. Jesus and the revolutionary discipleship movement represent the world's only true hope for establishing peace and justice on earth. Since there is real hope nowhere else, choosing to make a lifelong commitment to follow the Messiah is an incredibly good choice. It will rank among the best decisions ever made in all of history.

The question for each of us is, "How will I respond to Jesus' call?" Will I join with those who have begun to turn the tide of history in favor of justice and liberation?

With the Messiah, saving the world is more than a dream and more than a possibility - it is only a matter of time. How much time? The answer depends upon people's choices and upon the vitality and progress of the movement. The process of change can be greatly speeded up. The process of change is not all that mysterious. The process of progressive social change has been described this way:

"All truth passes through 3 stages...

1st It is ridiculed.

2nd It is violently opposed.

3rd It is accepted as being self-evident." (Schopenhauer)

This description of social change is probably applicable to the discipleship movement. What is unusual about the discipleship movement is that it doesn't represent a single-issue truth but rather embodies truth as a holistic Way of life - a completely new lifestyle centered around Jesus/Sophia/Yahweh.

A new truth will contrast sharply with society. A clearly-presented truth tends to polarize. It helps to clarify between good and evil. The truth can remove the facade of goodness and respectability that often surrounds and covers evil. Between good and evil there is no middle ground. The truth requires one to choose sides. The truth brings conflict to the surface - and generates more conflict between good and evil.

A revival of the discipleship movement will bring a sharp contrast with society. Conversion to Jesus and immersion in the Messiah's Way means making a radical break from mainstream society. The revolutionary discipleship movement represents a wholly alternative Way of life. The movement lets Jesus be the fulcrum for reshaping society: disciples commit themselves fully to Jesus - and then let the chips fall where they may. God will be our judge. Surely, taking such a large step forward with Jesus will bring much conflict with mainstream society. Disciples cannot expect to be well-received by society. On the contrary, Jesus teaches that disciples will be harshly ridiculed.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." (Lk. 6:26)

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the (Human One). Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in

heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." (Lk. 6:22-23)

As the discipleship movement grows it will face another stage of conflict with society. Social disapproval will include some violent opposition. The Messiah expects and tells us as much.

"If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you." (Jn. 15:18)

"For they will hand you over to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them....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." (Mk. 13:9,12-13)

"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)

The challenging and costly Way of Jesus involves "carrying a cross" and having the discipline to nonviolently endure persecution and even violent death. This is an essential part of Jesus' Way of saving the world. If there was an easier way the Messiah would have shown us. Jesus would have taken the easier route if there was one. There is no easier way. All other ways will fall short. The Way of Jesus is the fastest, most direct, most effective, and most fruitful way to change the world.

To move into the final stage of world transformation, the movement must successfully pass through stages of harsh ridicule and violent opposition. If the movement withdraws, caves in, or is corrupted by compromises or co-opted by reformist leaders then, of course, history will have to repeat itself. The next revival of the discipleship movement will again have to pass through stages of ridicule and violent opposition. In order for the movement to prevail, disciples must be well-prepared for this cosmic spiritual struggle. Truth will prevail if the movement holds firmly to the truth.

The Way of the Messiah is *the Way of love*. As polarization occurs and as opposition to the movement grows stronger, this allows *love* to shine ever more brightly. The stark contrast between violent opposition and the powerful Way of love will attract ever more

people - and the movement will grow and eventually truth and love will prevail.

Eventually, multitudes of people will accept the truth of the movement as being self-evident. When the new truth is finally accepted it will mean accepting a completely new Way of life - and the world will be transformed. God's will will be done on earth - and all of creation will rejoice. What is prayed in the Lord's prayer will be fulfilled. The Messiah will succeed in the big mission. Jesus' liberation movement will prevail. The future is wedded to the movement. The future is God's will reaching completion.

Steady Progress

Jesus shows the way to real and everlasting progress. The way to make the most progress is to make a lifelong commitment to Jesus. This means joining the revolutionary discipleship movement and entering into a communal discipleship community. To make this commitment is to sink deep roots, lay a sure foundation, and build upon the rock.

Jesus is the foundation. It is wise to start by laying a deep foundation. It is important not to short-circuit the process and lay a shallow foundation. The beginning process can be approached very deliberately. Much preparatory work is necessary before making a lifelong revolutionary commitment to Jesus.

Jesus is the leader. Each person who joins the movement can make a baptismal commitment that affirms Jesus' leadership and authority as foremost. Jesus will provide guidance and leadership for the journey. There can be no crushing setback, devastating failure, or giving up of hope. Every mistake, setback, failure, obstacle, persecution, or death of a sister or brother is meant to be overcome. And the movement will overcome - with the one who has overcome. Jesus is always with us. Jesus will guide disciples step by step. And there is only one direction in which the Messiah leads. Forward. Always forward.

Jesus is the foundation, Jesus is the leader, and Jesus is the goal. We begin, proceed forward, and end with Jesus. This is the sure way to avoid degeneration and regression and to make everlasting progress. Make Jesus our aim and keep our eyes focused on the goal. And the whole universe will bend and be transformed.

"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." (Is. 43:19 RSV)

"All things are possible with God." (Mk. 10:27 RSV)

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The God of love

The God of love
is for all time
the center
of my seeking.
It is the nighttime -
before the coming of
the dawn
of new birth for humankind.
The stars at night -
holders of a promise -
with a message -
"I am here -
you shall find me."
In the darkness -
I can feel you -
your presence surrounds me -
I love you.
The light of ages past
uplifts me -
stars and galaxies in motion -
all is yours -

it is your creation -
I breathe it in -
it fills me with wonder.
All this and more -
belongs forever to your children.
I love you -
you will not leave me -
the center of my questing -
I will pursue you.
With my heart
with my whole being
and with my life
in every way
I long to say -
"thank-you."
It is my prayer.
It is a blessing.
I am with you.
You are with me.

Morning

the awe of living
the gift of life
the beauty of the morning light
glistening through the trees
coolness of the air
warmth of the sun
both refreshing to the body
the forest undisturbed
canopy for small creatures
songbirds singing
flitting from tree to tree
yellowthroats, redstarts,
and chickadees
happy to be alive
soil, trees, and sky
linked together

newness and oldness
motion and stillness
perpetual timelessness
the earth breathes
all is alive
beauty beyond measure
the preciousness of life
unfathomable
the Spirit of life
everywhere
wonder and joy