Ecclesial Darwinism and the collapse of koinonia

Michael N. Poellet
Ecclesial Darwinism and the Collapse of Koinonia

Michael N. Poellet
Professor of Systematic Theology,
Lutheran Theological Seminary, Saskatoon

“I contend that we are the first race in the world, and that the more of the world we inhabit the better it is for the human race....If there be a God, I think that what he would like me to do is to paint as much of the map of Africa British red as possible....”¹ These are the words of British imperialist and industrialist Cecil Rhodes as he thundered his way across Southern Africa. Meanwhile back on the serene east coast of the United States, the best selling book of 1885, Our Country: Its Possible Future and Our Present Crisis by the Reverend Josiah Strong, states:

Whether the extinction of inferior races before the advancing Anglo-Saxon seems to the reader sad or otherwise, it certainly appears probable. Look at the Dutch Boers successfully making their way in South Africa, or at the English as they move into Africa and India. Their advance might be God's final and complete solution to the dark problem of heathenism among many inferior peoples.²

These two quotations reflect the vogue of Social Darwinism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Social Darwinism, promulgated more by Herbert Spencer and Alfred Russell Wallace than by Charles Darwin, and seized upon by European and North American political leaders and industrialists from Cecil Rhodes and William Gladstone to John D. Rockefeller and Elihu Root, Teddy Roosevelt’s Secretary of State, provided a persuasive rationalization for expansion with its doctrine of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. With these doctrines in hand the Western world assumed the innate superiority of their civilization, of their race, and of their religion.

“The great law of the preservation of favored races in the struggle for life,” A.R. Wallace writes, “...leads to the inevitable extinction
of all those low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in contact. . . . The intellectual and moral, as well as the physical, qualities of the European are superior; the same power and capacities which have made him rise in a few centuries from the condition of the wandering savage with a scanty and stationary population to his present state of culture and advancement, with a greater average longevity, a greater average strength, and a capacity of more rapid increase—enable him when in contact with the savage man, to conquer in the struggle for existence, and to increase at his expense, just as the more favorable increase at the expense of the less favorable varieties in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, just as the weeds of Europe overrun North America and Australia, extinguishing native productions by the inherent vigour of their organization, and by their greater capacity for existence and multiplication.  

Needless to say, today many peoples and nations of the two-thirds world point out the dehumanizing, oppressive and exploitative consequences of this position. We in the West are trying to be as sensitive as possible to the conditions created by this view. Certainly the church recognizes how many of its earlier mission strategies and tactics were based on this rationale and is in the process of correcting it. James Scherer in his book Gospel, Church and Kingdom details the changes in missiology from the late 19th century to the present day.  

But there is another consequence of Social Darwinism that is not so apparent, because it is not so external. It is the aspect that entails not what we have done to others, but what we have done and are doing to ourselves. It is the aspect of living with the internalized mechanisms of Social Darwinism and appropriating them as the values of "progress" and "individualism". Herein lies the problem. The understanding of progress that Social Darwinism appropriated from Darwin was based on a biological model. Human progress resulted from a competitive struggle in which superior individuals and races triumphed over inferior ones. Thus one's capacity to survive also measured one's moral, intellectual, and spiritual superiority. The contradiction is that the biological criterion of survival provides no real measure for human progress. Survival is a precondition of progress, but it does not insure progress or define progress. In the last analysis natural selection does not necessarily mean the survival of the fittest, but, tautologically, the survival of those who survived. Survival was a brute fact, not a moral, intellectual, or spiritual victory.
Yet the effects remain. In the world (and we know it’s a jungle out there) the law of the jungle still dominates. Competition, consumption, success, growth are still evaluated in terms of the biological criterion of survival. This is no less the case in the church, where we are confronted with the phenomenon of ecclesial Darwinism. The “best” churches are those which have best exhibited the biological capacity to survive—those that remain numerically and financially viable the longest. “A greater average longevity, a greater average strength and a capacity for more rapid increase”—those were the three criteria Wallace said enabled Europeans, both weeds and people, to overrun the world. So too the church?

With the decline in church growth the church has jumped to the unwarranted conclusion that we face a crisis regarding our survival. But I can only claim that this is unwarranted if I refuse to operate under the criteria of ecclesial Darwinism. Is the mission of the church, the structure of the church, or the vitality of the church, to be measured by the biological criteria of “greater average longevity, a greater average strength, and a capacity for more rapid increase”? How do these criteria fit with Jesus’ criteria for the church and discipleship: “For whoever would save one’s life will lose it and whoever loses one’s life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it”? (Mark 8:35) Biologically this is not a very vital passage; it spells extinction, not survival. Ecclesiologically it is constitutive of the very life and function of the church itself. Yet ask yourself, who or what does your particular congregation represent in your local area and community? Does your congregation represent itself, its needs, desires or rights, or does it represent the neighbor, the one who is in need of our help and to whom we are to be little Christs? Douglas John Hall claims that the church operates carefully and predictably within a certain set of rules.

1) The church can support movements and causes that are clearly within the realm of conventional Christianity. 2) The church can support other groups so long as its identification with them does not compromise the church (i.e. so long as fraternization with such groups does not get the church into trouble with its primary sponsor, the dominant culture). 3) The church will take part in activities involving other groups provided it can maintain a clear organizational autonomy (and still more desirable) a clear-cut authority.

While all our good rhetoric about mission and ministry is designed to ensure the better functioning of the priesthood of
all believers in their *vocatio*, their mission to and for the world, the rules and structures of ecclesial Darwinism are so deeply entrenched within the body of Christ that ministry is almost always appropriated and enacted as a way of designating the authority and survival of the church in the world. Again to quote Hall: “It is not the business of the church to turn the world into church.” This is what I would call the goal of ecclesial Darwinism. Hall continues, “It is the church’s business, rather, to point to the presence in and throughout the world of the King who is turning the world into his Kingdom.”6

The trauma is not over, however; it is just beginning. Social Darwinism is not simply lurking in the pews and vestries of our churches, it has manifested itself in illustrious garb in our secular society under the name of individualism. Sociologist Robert Bellah and associates in the book *Habits of the Heart* chart the role this individualism plays in North American middle class society, and more alarmingly, the values, namely survival, that go with it. Margaret expresses this individualist, self-reliant ethic, a grim and lonely ethic of survival, in this way:

I just sort of accept the way the world is and then don’t think about it a whole lot. I tend to operate on the assumption that what I want to do and what I feel like is what I should do. What I think the universe wants from me is to take my values, whatever they might happen to be, and live up to them as much as I can. If I’m the best person I know how to be according to my lights, then something good will happen. I think in a lot of ways living that kind of life is its own reward in and of itself.7

Brian states what happens when this self-reliant ethos of survival confronts a notion of God: “I want to be in control of things, and I figure God put me on earth to take care of myself and not to do his work for him. I’ll leave the big problems for him to solve. Little ones I’ll solve for him.”8 Now even God is dependent upon the criteria of survival. If God is not fit enough to persist in the struggle for life—well that’s God’s problem. If God can’t cope—why should God exist?

Against this backdrop of individualism Bellah highlights this somber and sober conclusion about the church: “... the quasi-therapeutic blandness that has afflicted much of mainline Protestant religion at the parish level for over a century cannot effectively withstand the competition of the more vigorous forms of radical religious individualism, with their
dramatic claims of self-realization..." Concomitant with this stress on individualism and competition is the loss of the sense of community, participation, commitment to the common fellowship—koinonia is the New Testament term. With the internalization of Social Darwinism in the manifestation of individualism also comes the collapse of koinonia. "The notion that one discovers one’s deepest beliefs in and through tradition and community is not very congenial to Americans," Bellah tells us. "Most of us imagine an autonomous self existing independently, entirely outside any tradition and community, and then perhaps choosing one." 

Although we may no longer look to the koinonia of the church as our mother, we still have our heroes. The cowboy and the detective become the role models for the individual in society. The Lone Ranger, the rugged John Wayne character who exhibits "true grit", the hard-bitten and experience-battered Bogart character who whether found in Casablanca or piloting the African Queen or chasing down the Maltese Falcon is a completely autonomous individual who stands outside society. "To serve society," Bellah says these heroes tell us, "one must be able to stand alone, not need others, not depending on their judgment and not submitting to their wishes." And how many times when pastors talk about pastors do we talk about those "Lone Rangers" out there in the parish? Indeed, within the structure of ecclesial Darwinism isn’t the expectation of what a pastor is a notion of someone who is a self-reliant, self-sufficient individualist who can stand alone, without the need of help from others and yet assure the survival of the church? With the aid of trustworthy Tonto (that’s the non-ordained role of the spouse) Kimosabe and the faithful companion are engaged in a never-ending battle of worship and altar guild, confirmation and Sunday School, counseling and choir, and a host of other programs to keep the church alive. And when the time comes and our Lone Ranger accepts another call, someone in the congregation will ask, "Who was that albed person I didn’t have a chance to ask about an evangelism program?"

While a facetious scenario, I don’t think it rings untrue. Reginald Bibby in assessing the status of religion in contemporary Canada in his book Fragmented Gods, reluctantly concludes:
It's hard to say it. But nonetheless it needs to be said. Canada's religious groups are largely responsible for the country's drop-off in attendance. The main reason is that the groups have responded to social and cultural change by offering religion as a range of consumer goods. Rather than saying to culture, "This is what religion is," they have been much more inclined to say to culture, "What do you want religion to be?"... Rather than presenting religion as a system of meaning that insists on informing all of one's life, the groups have broken it down and offered it as a wide variety of belief, practice, program and service items.\(^{12}\)

Within the context of ecclesial Darwinism this loss of attendance is devastating, it threatens the congregation's value of survival, and for the pastor it means "burn-out" for as Bibby tells us, "It's not an easy thing to maintain a positive clerical self-image in the face of an ever dwindling congregation."\(^{13}\) The Lone Ranger never lost.

Moreover, evangelism to bolster members may not be a viable cure for a congregation experiencing the crisis of survival. Bibby's statistics indicate that "Canadians seldom move away from the religious preferences of their parents." There is a very high level of "affiliational stability" and people cannot be expected to nor do they "move in random fashion from one group to another."\(^{14}\) Why aren't the churches full then? Individualism leads to specialization and a consumption-oriented society. Religion too then becomes a commodity characterized in terms of consumption rather than by commitment. People "readily adapt 'religious fragments'," Bibby tells us, "isolated beliefs, isolated practices, and isolated professional services. But they make no pretense that religion informs their lives."\(^{15}\) Nor is the problem confined to urban areas. Bibby's statistics indicate that "the differences in commitment many people expect to find between big city and farm simply do not exist. Canadians living in communities large and small show remarkably similar tendencies..."\(^{16}\)

Bibby explains the conflict many Canadians have with religious commitment in this way: "Many frustrated people have, somewhat defensively, protested that religion is simply not relevant to life as they know it—a simple way of saying that what it frequently enjoins in belief and behavior is inappropriate to or dissonant with the role one plays."\(^{17}\) But while commitment does not work, fragments do. "Religious organizations have
been responding to such a religious consumption style with remarkable efficiency. Ironically, they themselves... have made it possible for Canadians to move with relative ease from religious commitment to religious consumption.” Ecclesial Darwinism has led to the collapse of koinonia. In order to survive, the church has communicated to its people that one can pick and choose those items of Christianity which comfortably fit with the way one wants to live one’s life without any conflict. Thus the times of particular significance within the life of an individual are also the times when one is interested in the goods and services which the church has to offer. Baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals are the blue chip stocks on the Canadian (Western European and United States) ecclesiastical commodities exchange. Koinonia is gone. Participation is replaced by attendance at occasional services.

Bibby concludes,

When religion is drawn upon in accordance with the whims of customers, the gods are dismantled. They are custom-made according to individual taste. Rather than looking to them for direction, we direct them, as if we were ventriloquists and they our dummies. When religion becomes nothing more than a consumer item, the customer is in charge. The gods, relegated to an a la carte role, have little to say about everyday life. In Canada the stability of religious affiliation is matched by the poverty of religious significance.

An addendum at this point is in order regarding an implication for the seminary education of pastors. We live a “bureaucratic individualism”, Bellah suggests to us, insisting on finding our true selves independent of any social or cultural influences and yet we manipulate and are manipulated by government agencies, corporations, and all sorts of bureaucratic structures. The best expression of this bureaucratic individualism is the manager and the therapist. Reginald Bibby notes that normally priests, ministers and rabbis are not necessarily good personnel coordinators or business managers. Even though clergy consistently report that most of their time is taken up with administrative matters, seminary training seldom gives extensive attention to teaching these skills. As a consequence, many trained clergy are faced with the difficulty of being prepared best for what they do least, and prepared worst for what they do most.

Bibby then charts how churches that are “successful” today have as a strong component in their success quotient pastors
who are managers and provide therapeutic counseling to people in their flock. The pastor thus becomes truly Christ-like by in-
carnating two natures, manager and therapist, in one person.
The example, par excellence, of the bureaucratic individual-
ist. It is another manifestation of ecclesial Darwinism and the
preservation of the church in its struggle for life.

In this “poverty of religious significance”, as Bibby subtii-
tled his book, how do we as the ecclesia, the called out ones,
the people of God, infuse and evoke within us the appropri-
ation of the abundant life, the koinonia given to us by Christ,
and more importantly, how do we practice that abundant life,
koinonia, with those around us in our communities? Briefly, I
wish to reflect on three important aspects of koinonia: hospi-
tality, participation, and the theology of the cross.

Hospitality is about a relationship [writes Matthew Fox], one cannot
be hospitable without guests. God not only plays the host for us
and becomes the banquet for us; God also has become guest for us.
This is one of the deep meanings of the incarnation, that God let
go of hosting long enough to become guest as well. It is as if the
human race could understand the hosting side of hospitality, but
the guesting side was becoming more and more difficult to grasp.
Love is not just setting the table and giving out food; love is also
the receiving end of the banquet.23

Hospitality means that we become guests. How often has
your congregation wanted to be guest rather than host in your
community? I wonder, did Jesus ever provide a meal for Mary
and Martha, Zacchaeus, Simon the leper, and for all those tax-
collectors’ and Pharisees’ homes in which he ate? “Behold, I
stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and
opens the door, I will come in to [them] and eat with [them],
and [they] with me” (Revelation 3:20). Always the guest; only
twice during his ministry the host—the feeding of the five thou-
sand and the Last Supper. Hospitality as guesting. Are our
churches welcome into the homes, businesses, and organiza-
tions in our communities as a guest? Why or why not? If we
are waiting for an invitation, I don’t think we have caught on
to hospitality as guesting. Jesus invited himself over to Zac-
chaeus’ house for lunch—he was a perfect guest, he R.S.V.P.ed
before the invitation had been sent. What is the church’s role
as guest? To be a gracious visitor, to build friendship—that’s
too superficial. As guest, the church practices hospitality and
builds koinonia by bringing peace.
In Luke 10 we read how Jesus appointed seventy people to be guests throughout the towns of Galilee. They took nothing with them, no money, no extra clothes, no food. And as guests in whatever house they entered the first thing they were to do was say, “Peace be to this house” (Luke 10:5). There is no talk of joining our church as the first word—no ecclesial Darwinism. Rather we impart a blessing and a greeting from God—Peace, Shalom, well-being, wholeness. In a world of anxiety, fear, mistrust, distrust, acquisitiveness, consumption, competition, false-promises, fraud—we say “Peace”.

The church is a community directed towards a mission, a mission whose goal is communion in Christ among all people. We are a people gathered to be sent and sent to be gathered. The church is called (ek-klesia) and sent (apostello) to be the sign and instrument of peace, of communion and solidarity, of inclusiveness. It fosters and deepens this sense of sentness through its word of peace and its action as the hospitable guest. Peace was the first word that the risen Christ speaks to his disciples.

He could have said, “Where were you guys last Friday?” We too could say in bumper-sticker theology—“Jesus is coming, and is he mad!” But in a broken, fragmented, alienated world that already knows threat and fear we need not convince people of that. They have already experienced the Law, the anger of God; our mission is to proclaim the wholesome, healing Word of Peace.

People are afraid to come to our churches. Why? Is it the architecture? Is it the pastor? Is it the liturgy? Is it the people? Is it because since no one from the church has ever been their guest, has ever wished them peace, that they perceive the church as a threat rather than a place of hospitality? Often before we can be the host we must first be the guest.

But then we are hosts, and this relationship of hospitality is also crucial. “Show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ,” James exhorts us in the opening verse of chapter two. As hosts our hospitality often suffers because we do show partiality. Here is where I think there are particularly serious flaws with Donald McGavran’s “Homogeneous Unit Principle” which is an important part of McGavran’s church growth approach to mission. “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class
barriers.” This seems to echo all the traits of ecclesial Darwinism. It tends to support exclusivism, ethno-centrism and parochialism at the expense of being the one, holy, catholic, apostolic koinonia. The scandal of the gospel is blunted by the church acting as the consumer wanting only what it considers to be the best products for its pews, the elements necessary for its survival in a competitive and threatening environment.

Hosts exhibit hospitality. How do we welcome guests and visitors to our services? If they don’t sign the guest register, does anyone know they had a guest in their midst? Jesus helps us to understand the church as host when he shows us the church as servant. The church acts as host and servant when it engages in footwashing (John 13:1–20). Perhaps an error into which some within the church fall is thinking only the pastor can serve as a host. When this happens koinonia collapses. Just so Jesus reminds us that we are salt and we are light (Matthew 5:13, 14). This is not a future conditional clause of what we will become; it is a present tense indicative of who we are—so too we hosts.

At the close of the baptismal liturgy the pastor says to us as guests, “Through baptism God has made these new sisters and brothers members of the priesthood we all share (koinonia) in Christ Jesus that we may proclaim the praise of God and bear God’s creative and redeeming Word to all the world.” We then as hosts respond: “We welcome you into the Lord’s family. We receive you as fellow members of the body of Christ, children of the same heavenly Father, and workers with us (koinonia) in the kingdom of God.” “Workers with us.” Do you mean to say that baptized infants are to host and be responsible for ministry? Yes! They too are now salt and light are they not? Youth ministry, a perennial problem in some churches, now becomes a new and added resource for ministry that always/already was there. Young people, too, are those who minister, who host, and not only those who must be the recipients of someone else’s hosting and work. The dynamism, the creativity, of koinonia as hospitality, as seeing one another as guests and hosts, both within the community of faith and particularly among the community around us, opens all sorts of opportunities for the love of God and the love of neighbor to be expressed. As the Spirit blows where it wills among us and
we learn to be guests of our own communities and see all the
gifts and resources God has placed providentially around us,
then the imaginative possibilities are endless and yet so very
concrete, specific, and extraordinarily ordinary.

This leads us into the second aspect of koinonia, koinonia
as participation. Participation is graphically expressed by Paul
in the New Testament with his image of the body of Christ.
Consider again some examples, posed rhetorically, as questions
for our reflection. At your congregation does the body of Christ
participate in worship or are most people attenders and specata-
tors as at a movie or a hockey game, watching a few key actors
or players perform and hoping to be entertained? Yet liturgy
means action, work of the people; why don’t they feel they’re
participants? To intensify the question: How many people in
the congregation are seriously affected or concerned if the peo-
ple who were at worship services last week are not there this
week? What difference does it make to me if the person who
sat next to me last week shows up this week at worship so that
we can worship together again? By and large as long as the
pastor and organist, or at least one good singer who can lead
familiar hymns, shows, everyone else is often considered as in-
cidental in terms of key participants in worship. But this is
not koinonia; this is an aggregate, a group of individuals con-
fined within a particular space for a particular time. Paul says
about the body that “The members have the same care for one
another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one mem-
er is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:25–26).
Together—koinonia. How can we worship if members are miss-
ing, and much more, how can we as the body of Christ not care
when these members are missing? I think this is part of what
Paul is talking about in 1 Corinthians 11:29 when he asks us to
“discern the body”. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 Paul had
already noted how the Eucharist exemplifies koinonia, partic-
ipation, both with Christ and with one another: “The cup of
blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (koinonia) in
the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a partic-
ipation (koinonia) in the body of Christ? Because there
is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake
of one bread.”

Eucharist is a time when we participate in worship to renew
ourselves for further pursuit of our vocation in the world. The
Consensus

Lord’s Supper is a time when we as hosts get together with our co-workers and co-hosts and become God’s guests while God is now our host. At this party the food is good, the company all-encompassing, and the ambiance eschatologically heavenly as the risen Christ once again serves a banquet of messianic quality and caliber. I emphasize this aspect of participation in the Eucharist to indicate that koinonia entails not simply attending, not simply being there, but “being-with”. This participation as “being-with” started at our baptism. Paul tells us in Romans 6:4, “We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” With-ness: live with, suffer with, crucified with, die with, buried with, raised with, glorified with—Paul is so taken with Christ that he cannot withhold this confession in Galatians 2:20, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

“Being-with” as participation, as koinonia, is how, I think, the North American churches should respond to people who want to be consumers of Christianity rather than committed participants. For us simply to say we will no longer administer the rites of baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial unless you express your commitment to us is both foolhardy—in a religious context that has fostered this market mentality they can go elsewhere—and theologically reprehensible. To make the Gospel conditional upon their promise of commitment turns the Gospel into a law, into a moralistic and legalistic functional designed to serve our own ends, our old tendencies of ecclesial Darwinism, our ends of self-preservation and survival, while all the while deceiving ourselves and telling these religious consumers, “We’re really doing this for your own good!”

Rather than demanding of the affiliate and occasional attenders their commitment and participation, the concept of koinonia would seem to indicate that what we will do (perhaps “warn” is a better term from their perspective) is promise to be committed and keep up our participation with them. To link it up with hospitality, this means that because they are members of the body of Christ we will not neglect our care for this part of the body. If you will, we will be frequent guests with them, and thus encourage them to be our guests as well. Paul indicates this strategy in Romans 12:9-13,

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly [and sisterly] affection; outdo one
another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.

Let me suggest prayer as a concrete notion of this aspect of koinonia as participation. Here prayer is not announcement time when people who are attending services hear who is sick or recovering from illness, who has had a baby or who has died. Prayer is the time when the body of Christ again cares for, suffers with or rejoices with, the members of the body. If our little toe is stubbed our whole ability to walk turns into a limp; if even the smallest, the least member of our body of Christ is in pain, or neglected, or forgotten, then, indeed, the whole body suffers from that loss. In terms of participation, praying for that other is praying for our own wholeness, health and well-being. Praying for that other keeps and maintains a relationship between that other and ourselves. We will not let ourselves forget parts of the body and we ask Christ as our head to aid us in remembering all members and to give us the faith, hope, and love to continue our promise of commitment and participation with them. Again a question: what difference would it make if the occasional attenders knew that every Sunday they were mentioned in the prayers of the church? Not to turn this into a roll call, but if we are to "pray for the whole people of God, and for all people according to their needs," can we neglect to pray for these people, for us? Parts of our body are missing, our participation is curtailed, we are suffering dismemberment. Some of our fingers and toes have been pulled from their sockets—and now in pain we cry to God to re-member us, to renew us again, to restore us to full health, wholeness, koinonia, so that we can continue with our work of hospitality and participation.

Finally, our understanding of koinonia is grounded in a theology of the cross. Matthew 18—that ecclesiological chapter in Matthew’s gospel includes this familiar parable: "What do you think?" Jesus asks. "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that went astray?" Note, if he finds it, not when. There are no guarantees, nothing is assured, evident, predictable, certain, secure—only this promise: "So it is not the will of my Father in heaven that one of these
little ones should perish” (18:12–14). The little ones, the least of these—the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger, the Central American refugee, the oriental, the Turk, the victim of AIDS, the pregnant teen, the Native peoples, the Norwegian in a German congregation, the lonely, the neglected elderly person, the terminal cancer patient—wherever the horrors of life are so terrifyingly present, shaking the foundations, there is the koinonía of the church, there are the lambs among the wolves.

What is the job description for those of us living the theology of the cross? It is no accident that the Sermon on the Mount precedes the sending of the disciples and the talk about the church (Matthew 5:3–11). The understanding of the church as a theology of the cross koinonía entails first and foremost a God-centered, not a self-centered, quality of life. Arrogance, pride, aggressiveness, mercilessness, revenge, retribution, and quarrelsomeness are not the attributes of koinonía under the theology of the cross. But to be meek, merciful, and pure in heart does not promise an easy life—rather “derision, rejection, and persecution”. We know the cost of koinonía.

A theology of the cross is a transvaluation of all values. “For whoever would save one’s life will lose it and whoever loses one’s life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). Any pretense that survival is the Christian’s foundational value has now been totally demolished in the cross. A new life and value have come forth. We now inquire regarding the integrity of our witness. We always give a witness, but is it positive or negative, law or gospel, country club-institution or the church as koinonía?

Our witness is a kenotic life-style (Philippians 2:6). In giving up its life for Christ’s sake the church finds its true identity. The church must avoid imitating the patterns of the powers which it is to confront and transform. Our power is the power of forgiveness, not wealth, honor, fame, numbers or the power of vengeance. The power of the cross shows us a God who out-suffers, out-loves, and out-lives the worst that all the faithless, sinful powers can do. I remind you of these powerful words of a theology of the cross from Luther’s treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian”:

See, according to this rule the good things we have from God should flow from one to the other and be common to all, so that everyone
should “put on” his neighbor and so conduct himself toward him as if he himself were in the other's place. From Christ the good things have flowed and are flowing into us. He has so “put on” us and acted for us as if he had been what we are. From us they flow on to those who have need of them so that I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness that they may cover and intercede for the sins of my neighbor which I take upon myself and so labor and serve in them as if they were my very own. That is what Christ did for us. This is true love and the genuine rule of a Christian life. 26

“I should lay before God my faith and my righteousness for my neighbor.” This is the very antithesis of any survival of the fittest ethos. Koinonia that begins at the cross continues as a centrifugal force outward into the world, not centripetally into itself. Where the priesthood of all believers in practicing their vocations, their callings from God, engage the world and promote the koinonia of the body of Christ, there we have the theology and the theo-praxy of the cross. To do this concretely, in each and every place, means that each and every Christian and each and every congregation must wrestle with what it means to practice koinonia for them. It will take boldness, confidence, openness, candor and courage. But as Paul says to a struggling koinonia in Corinth: “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient to ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant....Since we have such a hope, we are very bold” (2 Corinthians 3:4, 5, 12).

Notes

6 Ibid. 67.
Consensus


8 Ibid. 64.

9 Ibid. 238.

10 Ibid. 65.

11 Ibid. 146.


13 Ibid. 52.

14 Ibid. 61.

15 Ibid. 80.

16 Ibid. 92.

17 Ibid. 140.

18 Ibid. 110.

19 Ibid. 173.

20 Ibid. 149.

21 Bellah, Habits, 150.

22 Bibby, Fragmented, 120.


