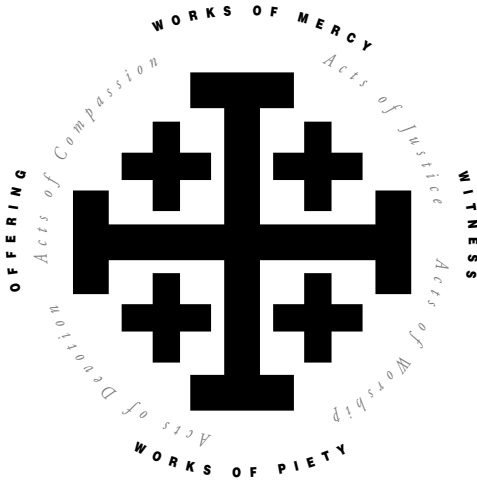

THE DISCIPLESHIP OF TOGETHERNESS:
ESSAYS IN CHRISTIAN UNITY

Crossings Project Booklet #5



by Micah Weedman

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INTRODUCTION

From August 2003 through May 2005, Micah Weedman served as the first “resident-in-ministry” at the University of Indianapolis. During that time, he worked alongside the two University Chaplains and initiated ministries that “built up” the Body of Christ at the University of Indianapolis and beyond. In doing so, he developed a ministry that incorporated opportunities for teaching, mentoring, and pastoral care of students. Students experienced Micah in a variety of ways ranging from “hanging out” in his apartment listening to music to sharing in evening prayer and Taizé worship in McCleary Chapel. They also found themselves challenged by Micah’s friendly but persistent invitation for them to think carefully and theologically about their faith as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, I suspect that more than a few students will remember how Micah nurtured them in their respective professions of Christian faith in a variety of contexts. Some students participated in some of the informal learning and study opportunities that in Micah led such as the *Manna & Mercy* Bible Study and the *God is Not* book discussion group. Others will recall the time that they shared with him in the context of the Christian Vocations courses that he offered each semester and the YMTP 100 “Introduction to Youth Ministry” course that he taught in 2004. Yet another company of students joined in the venture that has come to be known as Allelon House, the ecumenical Christian intentional community that Micah helped found in the fall of 2004. Now directed by Sr. Jennifer Horner, Allelon House is one of the vivid ways that “enriched Christianity” is practiced on this campus.

In preparation for initiating the Allelon House ministry in the fall of 2004, Micah wrote the set of ten essays that we have collected in this booklet. Those who have had the opportunity to live the kind of “discipleship of togetherness” that this intentional Christian community fosters know that Micah’s reflections are grounded in *dailiness* of living with “one another” (Greek: *allelon*). These essays also display another aspect that our campus ministry encourages. The four quadrants of the Jerusalem Cross not only provide different ways of practicing Christian discipleship—in the context of ministries of worship, justice, compassion and devotion—but they also invite students to engage in further study and discernment as they grow in discipleship in relation to “one another.”

Micah’s essays provide the first set of “study resources” for Christian discipleship that our office has produced, and it is fitting that they explore the topic of Christian unity, a subject that U Indy students—like Christians around the world—feel drawn to and struggle with in the context of living as disciples of Jesus Christ. We suspect that some students may be puzzled by the range of topics that Micah has brought together in these ten mini-essays. If readers pay attention to the framework of the “discipleship of togetherness” that Micah uses throughout these ten essays, we think they will find themselves to be challenged as well as edified.

Finally, it must be said that these essays arise out of the testimony of one who is deeply committed to following his own “Christian calling” to a ministry that advocates Christian unity in a world torn by denominational division and unreconciled relationships. Throughout the time of Micah’s ministry at U Indy, he tried to discern and clarify his vocation to Christian unity. As readers of these essays will see, Micah Weedman takes seriously that Christ’s bid to his

disciples to “be one” is a mandate that Christians from various Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Catholic) Christian traditions share with evangelical Protestant Christian congregations in the USA such as the Independent Christian Church/Churches of Christ¹ tradition in which Micah has been raised. As he leaves the University of Indianapolis to continue his ministry elsewhere, Micah will continue to embrace the challenge of his ecumenical vocation in the context of his ministry as a layperson affiliated with the Independent Christian Church.

The Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs is pleased to make this resource available to be used by students in the Christian Vocations program as well as by various participating Christian ministries and registered student organizations at the University of Indianapolis. We offer it to this community of learning with gratitude for all contributions that Micah Weedman and his wife, Jo Ellen Werking Weedman, and their little girl, Emmaline Weedman, offered during the two years that they sojourned with us.

Sr. Jennifer Horner

*Director, Lantz Center for Christian Vocations and Spiritual Formation
& University Co-Chaplain*

Michael G. Cartwright

*Dean of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs
Executive Director, The Crossings Project*

¹ For those who are not familiar with the “gospel ecumenism” associated with the Stone-Campbell movement of Restorationist congregations/denominations, the Independent Christian Church/Churches of Christ—the communion in which Micah Weedman was raised—is deeply committed to bearing witness to the unity to which Christ called his disciples (John 17). Persons interested in learning more about the Stone-Campbell movement may want to consult the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Eerdmans, 2004), a resource that is available for use in the Office of Ecumenical & Interfaith Programs.

Gospel of John 17:20-24, 26

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, 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, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. . . . I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

Paul's Letter to the Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

UNITY AND HOPE

Discipleship & Togetherness #1

My grandfather has Alzheimer's.

He has had it for a decade or so, though it has gotten worse in the past few years. Like most grandchildren, I don't go see him enough, but when I do he always manages to recognize me, or at least to recognize that I'm one of his grandchildren. On a good day, I'll only have to tell him I live in Indianapolis (20 minutes from him in Zionsville) 3 or 4 times before he catches on. On a bad day, he'll ask me 12 or 13 times in a row where I live, what I do, what I have been up to. Most times I visit, he tells me the same story 6 or 7 times before I leave.

I have been watching my mother and her sisters throughout this difficult time. Being around someone—even someone you know and love—with Alzheimer's can be very awkward. It is easy to assume it does not really matter what answers you give, since obviously you'll be asked the same question again in a few minutes. However, my mom and my aunts have a remarkable patience—a hope, really—that compels them to answer honestly and fully every time. It is easy, when my grandfather tells me a story about a University of Indiana basketball game he attended a long time ago, to ignore that I know full well it was in fact a University of Kansas basketball game. My mom and my aunts, though, are quick to remind him: that happened in Lawrence, not Bloomington.

At first, I thought this was an odd way to react. After all, does it really matter whether or not someone saved him a seat in Bloomington or Lawrence, or Knoxville, for that matter, 40 years ago? Is it not a bit picky to remind a man who struggles to know where he lives that one memory from 40 years ago is just a bit off? Eventually, of course, he will lose his memory entirely. He'll forget who I am, as well as my brothers and cousins; he will forget the four daughters who come to sit with him nearly every day of the week; he'll even forget his wife who visits him once or twice daily from her assisted-living center. So, does helping him remember in what year he and his brother-in-law opened their service station, or that I live in Indianapolis, or that his wife was down to visit him just a few hours ago really accomplish anything?

During a recent visit, my thoughts on this changed. My aunt was in from Cincinnati, and was showing my grandfather a book about the 150-year history of Atchison, Kansas, the small farm town where my mother and her sisters were born and raised. There was something quite important about my grandfather reminiscing about living on the prairie. Granted, most of the time he's unaware that he no longer lives in Knoxville, TN, but here he was, for a brief moment, reliving his life 50 or 60 years ago. It occurred to me then why it matters that people help him get his stories straight, help him to navigate the past.

Though no one (as of yet) can “cure” his loss of memory, my family surrounds my grandfather with his stories and theirs in an effort to help him “remember,” that is, to “re-member” him into his own life. It’s fleeting, of course. If he gets a story straight, within a matter of moments he’ll forget part of it, or its setting, or that he has already told it five times in the last 20 minutes. And yet, constantly “re-membering” things is quite hopeful; not hopeful that soon he’ll get his memory back, but hopeful that in God’s final reconciliation, we will be ultimately “re-membered.”

Christian unity is a tricky subject, and when one first begins to take it seriously, it has the potential for being somewhat hopeless.

Of course, what makes it hopeless is not that no one takes it seriously, but that those who do take it seriously often fail at uniting Christ’s body on earth. For example, I come from a tradition of Protestantism that began under the pretense of joining the various divisions of the (Protestant) church. Dismayed by a Eucharist service in which he had to obtain a token (i.e., pass an “exam” to prove he was in line with the denomination’s particular doctrinal views) in order to participate, Alexander Campbell left the Presbyterian Church in Scotland and moved to America in an effort to start a movement among Christians that would bring the body of Christ back into one and erase “denominationalism” once and for all. While in America, he joined forces with former Presbyterian Barton Stone and the Stone-Campbell movement formed and began to take hold on the American frontier (at that time, the Midwest and south).

To make the proverbial long story short, Stone and Campbell believed that the solution to disunity in the church was not another denomination, but rather a movement of “not the only Christians, but Christians only” who were dedicated to being the one church. It was their thought that if congregations relied only on the New Testament for guidance and direction, the trappings of denominational divisions would eventually disappear, and the Church would again be the one unified body of Christ.

If you know anything about the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Christian churches/churches of Christ, and/or the church of Christ (commonly call “acapella” or “non-instrumental”) than you know where this is headed. Within a short 100 years of the beginning of the Stone-Campbell movement, the movement faced a crisis. It turns out that relying on only the New Testament is a bit tricky; after all, the New Testament does not say anything about using instruments in worship. If the New Testament Church did not use instruments, than neither should the Church of today. Furthermore, on the other end of the spectrum, if this movement was started as a movement about Christian unity, then perhaps the congregations of this movement should be a little more organized in order to better converse with other Christians. Before long, the movement dedicated to eliminating denominations and bringing about the unity of Christ’s body had split into three distinct—yes, we’ll say it—denominations.

The point being that unity is tough. Furthermore, unity takes more than a particular understanding of the New Testament, or church structure, or the ministry in order to achieve (although these things are all important.) Unity is ultimately about reconciliation—about that reconciliation god has been working on for some time now, and has ultimately revealed in Christ.

Disunity, then, is about sin. As we all know too well, dedicated though we may be to eradicating sin from our lives, only the grace of God's everlasting kingdom turns this into a true reality.

So then, what to do? As mentioned above, certain doctrinal issues are important to discussions of unity. It would be disingenuous for Roman Catholics and protestants to join together without working through the long history of divisions—many doctrinal—that have separated them—kind of like making up after a fight with a friend or sibling without actually discussing what the fight was about in the first place. And yet, the normal Christian is not equipped to jump into discussions about the intricacies of transubstantiation vs. consubstantiation, much less their importance in dialogue between Catholics and Lutherans and other Christians. Surely, we are tempted to think, *not all Christians are called to be trained for such conversations.*

And yet, all Christians are called to practice reconciliation.

In the essays that follow this one, I hope to discuss some things that I think Christians everywhere can and already do—practices—that encourage reconciliation, and in places where reconciliation and unity seem hopeless, re-instill hope in the lives of Christians who are interested in the unity of Christ's body.

But I also hope to demonstrate why we should be worried about unity in the first place. Unity is a matter of doctrine; there is no doubt about that. But unity is also a matter of discipleship.

By alluding to the disunity of the body and my grandfather's Alzheimer's, I do not mean to suggest that the church's divisions have solely to do with our collective memory of the church's past.

The early church, as even a cursory glance at Paul's letters would suggest, faced a good bit of diversity and division. So much so, it could be argued, that the unified body of Christ becomes one of Paul's primary images in his writing. Consequently, I think it a little naïve to assume that if we simply "remember" the unity of the early church then everything will be ok.

Nevertheless, I do want to suggest that our disunity is about a lack of memory—the kind of "forgetfulness" that sin produces.

We have forgotten the garden; we have forgotten God's intent for God's creation. This is evident in our world all over—not just in the church. However, God calls the church to be God's reconciling witness to the world, to be the "memory" that the world (and especially America) seems so intent on disregarding. As disciples of Christ then, we have a special vocation to be together.

While on this campus we might never work through any of the difficult doctrinal aspects of unity, we can be a hopeful witness to the world and to the wider church that unity is possible and necessary—by "remembering" together, as we do in common worship and prayer, and by "re-membering" together, through acts of service. (I am indebted to the writings of Wendell Berry and Stanley Hauerwas for the concept of "re-membering.") It might initially seem a little like telling stories to a man with little or no memory, but I hope that by engaging these reflections, and more importantly the practices they are about, the hope becomes evident in them.

UNITY AND DISCIPLESHIP

Discipleship & Togetherness #2

As a rule, I hate “creative projects” for class.

They always seem to take more time than I estimate they will, create undue messes, and generally cause more toil and sweat than I prefer. However, I mostly dislike them because I always choose those that are most difficult to accomplish.

So, when in a course on Eastern Orthodoxy, the professor assigned a creative project, rather than an elaborate mosaic or icon, or composing a chant, I went for the kitchen and decided to bake a loaf of bread.

Bread plays an important role in Eastern Orthodox theology and practice, so I knew I would be safe in picking something relevant to the course. And as someone who enjoys cooking, and especially baking, I thought this would be, well, a piece of cake.

You know where this is going, of course. Having waited until the night before it was due, I began working my flour, yeast and a host of other sweet ingredients into a loaf, which I then left alone for an hour or so to rise. Upon my return, I realized that the dough was not rising (due to faulty yeast, I would learn), and the \$20 of extravagant nuts and liqueur were now wasted. And I had to start over. This was clearly going to take longer than I expected.

To make a long story short, after several frantic phone calls to my mother, sending my wife on numerous trips to the store, and a number of expletives (for which I would ask forgiveness in the morning), I finally had a beautiful, wonderful smelling loaf of Easter bread, used by the Orthodox to celebrate the resurrection and the breaking of the strenuous fast of Great Lent. For dramatic effect, I had borrowed a prosphora seal—a wooden cross that was imprinted onto the loaf of bread that the orthodox use for communion—and went off to class. Not only did I have a wonderful project (which took far longer than it should have, thus affirming my dislike of creative projects), but I had learned a little something about making bread.

At first glance it seems that bread baking is about sweat and toil. Which makes sense, given God told Adam that it was sweat and toil by which he would feed his family. However, what I really learned about bread-baking is that it's really about how much you owe the other people around you. While the bread was a hit in my class, had it not been for the wisdom and patience of my mother (and her useful knowledge of yeast), in addition to my wife's willingness to set aside her evening to make repeated “emergency” trips to the store, my friend's insistence that I borrow his prosphora seal, and someone's willingness to send me a fantastic recipe, then there would have been no loaf of bread. And so, while I did the “sweat and toil” of kneading

the dough and manning the oven, I was indebted to a whole host of people. The bread we gathered over that next day in class was not merely “my” bread, but rather the result of several people’s efforts.

Making bread has a lot to do with discipleship.

The story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden provides us with a story of how it is we came to be the way we are. The story, as it is *typically* told, goes a bit like this: Adam and Eve, i.e. Humankind, sinned, were kicked out of the garden, and forced to live a life groping again for God. The whole of the Hebrew Bible is about that groping—about our desire to be reconciled with God (or lack thereof) and, ultimately, about God’s constant reconciling action. In the end, God sends Jesus to atone for our sins, since despite our hard work we were incapable of atoning for them ourselves, and that is exactly what Jesus did. Since Jesus made this sacrifice, those of us who believe love him and do our best to follow as his disciples out of gratification for his forgiving our debt. We work hard and feel pain in our work because these are the effects of sin still present in the world. The church is that group of disciples who get together to encourage each other in discipleship.

Sound familiar? Discipleship, then, is that set of actions we do because, well, that’s what Christians do; no sex, no drugs, and only *Christian* rock and roll. The individual believer, this story tells us, is called to be as holy as possible, especially when it comes to matters of the heart and mind. And this can be hard work—like birth pangs, or the sweat and toil of working the field. Our small group or bible study at church may hold us accountable for some things, but the responsibility—that is to say, the debt we owe—is a matter between me and God.

It is no wonder, then, that Christian unity just does not seem to make much difference when it comes to the nuts and bolts of discipleship. As long as I unite my will with God’s, we tend to say, surely all things will work out.

Perhaps we need to look again at the fall story. Without a doubt, it is the primary vision of God’s judgment—it is God demonstrating God’s justice. However, as a great preacher and minister of mine once said, when it comes to God, there’s no justice without mercy (and vice versa). What we often miss in the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the garden is the pattern of mercy, as well as discipleship, that God is laying out already—we can all too easily miss the presence of the Spirit in what is happening to Eve and Adam.

This story is not merely about God’s anger. This text is about *indebtedness*. The point of God’s words to Eve is not that women will always be inferior to men—this clearly is not true. Rather, to both Adam and Eve, God is signaling that community is no longer created without pain—that is, without members being indebted to each other. To Adam, God signals not that it is solely a man’s responsibility to provide food and work the ground—this clearly is not true—but that the fabric of community—the meals a family or group of neighbors share— will result in indebtedness. Few people are able to make bread by themselves—the process of growing the wheat, grinding the grain, and then preparing the bread is too intensive. Rather, bread as a dietary staple means we will rely on someone to harvest the grain, someone else to turn it to flour, and they in turn may rely on us to turn it all into bread.

To consumerist-minded Americans, this sounds at once familiar and radical. Our economic way of life depends on other people producing goods for us (whom do you know who made their own shoes?); yet if capitalism has accomplished anything, it is the reduction of indebtedness to an impersonal state of being. I am not indebted to the 13-year-old Indonesian girl who made my Nikes, but rather the nameless, faceless credit card company that I used to buy them. A different spirit animates this state of being than the One of God.

However, indebtedness, the text tells us, is not just a condition of economic being (despite the American myth to the contrary). The very existence of families and communities brings with it indebtedness. I am indebted to my wife and daughter (and they to me), to my parents and brothers (and they to me), to my church mates, to my coworkers—to nearly every one with whom I have a relationship of some sort.

The whole of the bible can be read as a story about indebtedness—of Israel’s indebtedness to God, and thus, to each other. Jesus comes as the ultimate response to this condition of indebtedness. Yet, he does not merely erase it; he redeems it. Jesus on the cross does not in fact *take away* my debt, as is clear from the numerous relationships I have. Rather, my indebtedness is given a new meaning and becomes one of the ways in which I follow Christ. Debt becomes “spiritual;” not in the sense of having no physical dimensions, but in the sense that it is now a part of God’s Spirit coming into the world. In other words, no longer do I have to measure my indebtedness—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a dollar for a dollar—but rather I can welcome the opportunity to give freely and welcome gifts freely. If one begs from me, I can not turn my back; if one needs one mile from me, I can go two; if one needs my shirt, I can give also my cloak.

On a tour of the Czech Republic in the mid 90s, Pope John Paul II, dealing honestly with the wrongs that Roman Catholics had perpetrated in history spoke often of the mutual responsibility for the sin of division between Catholic, protestant and Orthodox Christians. “Indeed,” went the pope’s message, “we are in debt to one another.” This indebtedness, according to the pope, was the beginning of reconciliation.¹ This is where the rubber meets the road for unity and discipleship. As the apostle Paul makes clear, Christ has given to us a ministry of reconciliation. God is reconciling the world to God through Christ, and those who make up the body of Christ are called to witness this reconciliation and to participate in its happening through God’s spirit.

And yet, we have divided the body of Christ, and so now must be reconciled to one another. How else can the gospel of reconciliation that God calls us to embody make sense? How can we tell the world about Christ’s mission to reconcile creator and creation when we ourselves have sold our birthright as the locus for that reconciliation by harboring division?

The starting point, as John Paul II and others have noted, is to pray for forgiveness. Then, we recognize that we are indebted to one another.

In other words, we must embark on a discipleship that brings us together as the body of Christ.

We can turn again to Eve and Adam to see how this plan has been laid out from long ago. Practicing togetherness, of course, is not painless. It requires a kind of conversion, it requires humility, and it requires hospitality. Borrowing from Paul, though, we can know that this pain is in fact birth pangs—the birth pangs of reconciliation, the birth pangs of the new creation and kingdom of God.

And so we labor and deliver, we toil and sweat in the ground, and we make our bread. And in our various celebrations and traditions, we anticipate when that bread becomes for us—all of us—the body of Christ, “spiritual,” in perfect wholeness and unity.

¹This story is taken from George Weigel’s biography of John Paul II, *Witness to Hope* (Cliff Street Books, 2001), p. 765.

CONVERSION AND UNITY

discipleship & togetherness #3

Conversion is an experience we talk about a lot.

Many of us have stories of our own conversions—that time the Spirit clearly spoke to us or, to paraphrase writer Anne Lamotte, the time we left the door open and Jesus slipped in behind us. Many of us remember the first time we converted someone else (or at least someone went through a conversion in our presence). In many traditions, there is a rich history of communally sharing these stories, or testimonies, as a way to encourage one another in the faith.

The longer we live, though, the more the Spirit shows us that conversion is a constant aspect of discipleship—we find that we are constantly being converted to something as a result of our faith and convictions: the Democratic Party, home schooling, chastity, nonviolence, teetotaling.

I have had to undergo a number of conversions in my life. I grew up in the church, a 6th generation member of my denomination, a bona fide son of a preacher man. So while I do not have a traditional Damascus-road type conversion to tell about, there are a variety of conversions that I can look back on. Without a doubt, my favorite (and sometimes I am bold enough to say most important) happened on Palm Sunday, 1998.

I was backpacking Europe at the end of my college career. My companion and I had made an “error” in our itinerary; we had not heard the various warnings about staying away from Italy near Easter, and so we found ourselves crammed into a run-down and overcrowded hostel in Rome the weekend of Palm Sunday. Despite the crowds, we decided to make the best of the visit, and we found that Rome was one of the most comfortable and hospitable cities we had visited or would visit. So, flushed with the success of safely navigating the city and seeing all of the sites, we decided to *really* brave the crowds and attend the Palm Sunday mass at St. Peter’s, at which Pope John Paul II himself would be presiding.

I was going mostly for the tourist effect—mostly so I could say I saw the pope. While I certainly didn’t harbor any dislike or suspicion for Roman Catholicism or for Roman Catholics, I did not know much about the church, and did not really care too much about it. I had always pegged Catholics for people who simply were too different from me—their religion seemed to be about too many things that I just did not know about or care to know about.

As we crossed the river, headed up the *Borgo Santo Spirito* and then across to the famous via *Conciliazione*, we encountered countless people—thousands upon thousands upon thou-

sands of pilgrims—more people than I had ever seen in one place—gathering to retell and remember the journey of our Lord into Jerusalem. What we encountered were not strangers who practiced a weird and often hard to understand Christianity; **these were brothers and sisters in Christ, and the Lord was with them, and also with us.**

And so I converted.

Not to Roman Catholicism, but to a faith that allowed me to learn from these faithful people, to consider them fellow sojourners along the way. I converted to a Christianity that taught me to recognize the presence of Christ not only in my scripture but their tradition, and not only in my tradition but their scripture.

And so I did what every zealous convert does: I began to study. I read what I could about Roman Catholic theology. I read about the second Vatican Council, about the church's incredible presence in the two-thirds world, about the papacy of Pope John Paul II. Occasionally, I would attend the early mass at the parish in my home town. I defended Roman Catholicism to friends and seminary classmates. I wrote papers about Roman Catholic sexual theology, read a gigantic biography of John Paul II. I argued, thought, and even sometimes prayed about how it might be that my own denomination, who sometimes refers to themselves as "free-church Catholics," might be one day united with this great body of Christians.

In some circles, I was beginning to make a name for myself as a friend of Catholicism. Speak a harsh word about empty rituals or Mary-worship, and I was quick with a correction—often scathing, as if you had just picked on my little brother. I was zealous indeed. And to good effect. I believe that my enthusiasm and respect for Roman Catholicism had good impact on conversations and discussions of which I was a part.

Of course, I did not personally know any Roman Catholics.

True, I occasionally went to mass, but usually I slipped in and out of the back without ever speaking to a single person except during the peace. I began to realize that my conversion was not complete while my wife and I were spending a year at the University of Illinois. One Sunday evening, on our way home after our customary afternoon walk and cup of coffee, we passed the large Roman Catholic chapel on campus, and decided to stop in for the evening mass. Amidst the wonderful smell of the incense, the best choir I've ever heard, and the comfort of the liturgy, it occurred to me that I did not know any of the people I was worshipping with. At the non-denominational protestant church where my wife and I worshipped weekly, we knew and were often together with many of the members (despite my not always feeling at ease with the worship service there). And yet, in the midst of learning the appreciate the liturgy, the significance of receiving a blessing from the priest, and how to pray the rosary before mass began, it dawned on me that I had yet to learn anything about *being together* with these people, and this church, that I so wanted to respect. I had converted in the sense that I recognized that this was Christ's body; I just hadn't figured out how to work that into my discipleship.

Theologian and New Testament scholar Gerhard Lohfink, in describing the life of early Christian congregations (namely, those we read about in the New Testament), writes about the “praxis of togetherness.” Praxis is a Greek word that can mean a group of practices that work towards a common goal or end. A practice is something that is done repetitively that helps give shape to our days and lives. For example, brushing my teeth every morning and evening is a practice. Take the practices of tooth-brushing, flossing, visiting the dentist for check-ups, fluoride treatments and root canals, and you have the “praxis of oral hygiene.”

For Lohfink, both Jesus and Paul were concerned with the “gathering or building up of the one people of god¹⁷” Paul sees his own mission as building up, or edifying, the communities of Christians that included Gentiles. Therefore, Paul was primarily concerned with the life of the church, the gathering and building up of the community as a witness to Christ’s own mission. So when Paul admonishes his churches to “admonish one another; bear one another’s burdens; greet one another with a holy kiss; build one another up; be at peace with one another,” he is doing so as a way of helping the church to shape itself as the one people of god.

Lohfink takes these “one another” (*allelon*, in Greek) phrases as the root of the praxis of togetherness. Given that Paul understood Jesus’ mission to involve the creation of true community, these various “one another” phrases signal to us that Paul saw this true community as something that depended not just on being next to one another, but being together.

This is quite significant. Paul was no stranger to doctrinal conflict, nor to the necessity for “orthodoxy,” or “right doctrine.” However, alongside his teaching of doctrine are his instructions concerning the praxis of togetherness. In other words, while unity among the churches on such issues as whether or not gentiles would be included in the kingdom of god was essential for Paul’s understanding of the church, this only made sense in the context of local communities that could “live in harmony with one another” (Rom. 12:16). Alongside the gospel imperative for unity, we can see that there is a coexistent imperative for togetherness.

Furthermore, we can see that Paul understood these togetherness admonitions as discipleship issues. Those things we do—to which we were converted to do—should be leading us to togetherness. And sometimes they do—especially with those people who are most like us, who believe the same way we do, who look most like us. And yet, Paul would remind us, there is one hope, one lord, one faith, one baptism, one god and father—and one body.

Yet we know this body has been divided through sin. And it is sin that causes us to ignore or be suspicious of those of our sisters and brothers in Christ whose place in that body is different than our own. Only through the practices of togetherness—the praxis of togetherness—can we truly be with one another. At the University of Indianapolis, we have a remarkable situation, in that through the various ministries that work on this campus, a “praxis of togetherness” has already been taking shape for some time. In the remainder of these essays, I want to turn our attention to the different activities that we see already on this campus, as well as some that we should see.

In the papal encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, (“that they may be one”—a reference to Jesus’ prayer for unity in John 17), Pope John Paul II notes that the first step to unity is to pray for forgiveness. Next, he says, comes conversion—not conversion of denomination or tradition, but conversion of faith, so that we can recognize the body of Christ in other Christian bodies. Then, and only then will there be an adequate foundation for further talk of Christian unity. Then, and only then, will our discipleship be one that brings together the one body of Christ.

¹Lohfink, Gerhard. *Jesus and Community*. Philadelphia: the Fortress Press, 1984. p. 102 (italics mine). In what follows, I give a very “quick” reading of Lohfink’s section on togetherness; for the complete account, see Lohfink, pp. 99-106.

WASH ONE ANOTHER'S FEET

Discipleship & Togetherness #4

I recently bought my wife a pedicure at a local day spa.

Though we do not normally spend money on these types of things, I thought it would be a good chance for her to relax from her hectic schedule as a mother and a journalist. When she was finally able to schedule her day at the spa, it proved a very relaxing and much-needed break.

Spas have been around for ages, of course, but “day spas” seem to be increasing in popularity—some estimates suggest that Americans spend nearly \$6 billion a year at them, and the number of day spas has grown exponentially over the past decade. After hearing about my wife’s *90 minute pedicure*, I think I know why. Spas claim to focus on a person’s wholeness, and from the complimentary herbal tea to the constant flow of warm towels for her neck and shoulders, it is clear that this pedicure was about more than painted toenails and soft feet. Three separate wax treatments, a number of different lotions and emollients, repeated massages of the feet and legs—all in a comfortable chair in a soothing and relaxing room, surrounded by soft music and aromatic candles and oils.

I think the rising increase in popularity in day spas can be attributed to a number of things. Of course, there is always the pressure both women and men feel in contemporary America to look a certain way and to feel a certain way, and spas certainly play on that pressure. The recent increase in “make-over” TV-shows has only worked to increase this pressure to an exacting degree; no longer is it “enough” to be merely good looking, or in good physical shape. Now we must have flawless skin, perfectly cared-for nails, and just the right haircut.

But spas also seem to speak to a different need that we have. On the day I bought my wife her gift certificate, I was in need of a hair cut, and noticing that a men’s haircut was actually reasonably priced, I scheduled an appointment for later that day. I’ve always enjoyed getting haircuts, but was quite taken aback by the neck and shoulder massage that came along with this one. Not only was it relaxing, it was just plain nice to be touched by another person like that. My wife confirms that her pedicure was much the same (although to a much greater extent)—what is most relaxing and enjoyable is the mere fact that someone is devoting that much time to *touching* you in such a soothing and relaxing way.

Given the way Americans spend money on pedicures, manicures, massages and the like, we must feel the need to be touched.

And who can blame us? Touching is one of the foundations of togetherness—the physical sign that we are not alone with other people. As a new parent, I’ve read a number of research studies that show the impact that constant touch can have on newborns—positive impact that lasts well into the child’s adult years. It makes sense in a world that has done everything it can to lock us in our cars, shut us up in cubicles and offices, and bury us deep in our homes behind walls, gates and garages, that we would feel the need to be touched, and that we would pay good money to have that need met.

And the pedicure, apparently, is a good way to go about it. The sheer indulgence of having someone else so dedicatedly attend to your feet would seem to compensate for all of the atomization that we constantly face in our world. Sitting in a comfy chair, relaxing to soothing peppermint lotion being massaged into your feet, it is easy to feel in touch and touched.

And yet, there is an illusion present. Once the pedicure is over, you owe a certain debt to the person who has taken care of you, but that debt is quickly impersonalized as you pull out your credit card at the cashier’s station, and the illusion of community is somewhat broken. In the end, the human touch we need so much just becomes another commodity to purchase, and the care and “love” we felt begins to fade away as we fumble through our wallets looking for cash or pulling out our credit cards.

Jesus touched a lot of people. Literally.

The gospel accounts of his ministry include story after story of Jesus touching people, especially as an act of healing.

I suppose it could be said that Jesus was pre-dating the day spa movement. After all, people now pay good money to have mud rubbed not only on their eyes, but their whole bodies (though, I suspect, *sans* saliva). In some ways, in a pedicure world, it does not even seem all that radical for Jesus to wash his disciples’ feet.

And yet we should look at this story from John 13. Jesus makes it clear that the foot washing is not about cleanliness—as he says, “one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet.” In other words, the disciples have performed the necessary cleansing so that they may partake in the Passover. Jesus is simply following a normal practice: offering fellow diners water with which to freshen up. However, he does the washing himself.

For Peter, however, this is odd, and he protests (this is one of Peter’s protests that makes the most sense to me; of course, I’d rather people not mess with my feet). Christ, however, is quick to get to the point: if you do not let me do this, you have no share with me. Peter then asks for the full- body treatment.

“So if I, your lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.”

After the meal, Jesus dismisses Judas, and the course to the cross enters its final stage. For the next few chapters, Jesus speaks at length about the role the Holy Spirit will play in discipleship after the crucifixion and resurrection. Then comes, for those of us concerned with Christian unity, one of the most important texts in the gospels: John 17, where Jesus prays for the unity of the disciples. Much can and has been said about that prayer, but one thing I want to point out here is Jesus’ repeated request that God grant to the disciples the unity that Father and Son share—Christ’s love for his followers compels him to ask that the disciples be given a share of what he has.

John 17 should not be read apart from John 13. Jesus makes it clear to share in the unity of God is to engage in a little “one anothering:” specifically, washing one another’s feet.

The kingdom of the world is like a day spa. People pay a lot of money to be pampered, and the pampering is done well. And sometimes, a pedicure or a massage or a facial just makes a good gift. But the fact remains that at the end of the pedicure, the person taking care of you is interested not in being together with you, but with your money. You are indebted, but it is impersonal, cold, and leaves you needing the “touch” you came here for.

So then, the kingdom of god? A friend tells the following story. At a L’arche community, where some of the residents have physical or mental handicaps, a foot washing ceremony took place. One resident was nearly paralyzed by his handicap, and required full-time assistance to even perform daily functions. When it came time for his feet to be washed, he motioned to his caregiver, whispered something, and then an amazing thing happened. A group gathered around him, help position him in his wheel chair, and someone lifted their feet up to his lap, where he washed them, with the caregiver’s assistance.

What a powerful expression of the gospel of foot-washing. This person’s debt had been redeemed, in that he was able to turn the debt of constant care on the part of others into service to others. In other words, his debt to caregivers was not impersonalized by bills and payments, but redeemed by the opportunity to serve in a way reminiscent of Jesus. In a world of pedicures and day spas, this is the kingdom of God.

ADMONISH ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #5

Everything I know about evangelism I learned from a Muslim.

Given that I maintain my faith in Christ and membership in the body, this may seem an odd and confusing confession. During my senior year of college, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Birmingham, England for a semester. I was fortunate enough to take an interesting class on Christian responses to Islam, which was a sensitive and sympathetic look at the faith and practices of Muslims, focusing not on what was wrong with the faith, but rather what significant points of contact Muslims and Christians shared with one another. All in all, it was a challenging and yet rewarding opportunity to find out more about God's children who are Muslims.

During the semester, some good friends from the States came to visit for a week, which we spent in London. The Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park is a famous site of informal discussions between Christians and Muslims (at one point, it had been the location of many violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims; however, in the past decade or so, the conversation has become far more friendly). Given my new interest in Muslim-Christian relations, I thought it might be worthwhile to take my friends to the Speaker's Corner to witness what was going on. We certainly had no intention of converting anyone, and given that my experience in Muslim-Christian dialogue was limited to a classroom (peopled entirely by Christians), I didn't feel that I was skilled enough yet to have a fruitful and non-offensive conversation. Rather, we simply wanted to check out what was going on.

What we found was quite fascinating. Many informal conversations were going on (mostly in friendly little groups scattered around the corner of the park), and to be quite honest, the breadth of scriptural knowledge on the part of many of the Muslims there was astonishing. I'm not talking about knowledge of the Koran (which in this case could have been taken for a given—every single Muslim there seemed able to quote from memory long passages about any topic), but rather knowledge of Christian scriptures. The Muslims there knew the New Testament better than I did, both at that time and now.

As we drifted from conversation to conversation, we found ourselves drawn to one group, in which a kind, older Muslim man was talking with some younger Muslims and a couple of Christians. The man's affection for those who were younger than he was impossible to miss; he relished challenging both the younger Muslims and the Christians, often directing the one to answer the questions of the other.

That he was popular here was not easily missed either, and before long we found ourselves standing within a small crowd of folks who had noticed his presence and gathered around,

and soon we were part of the inner circle of his conversation. As the Christians with whom he had been speaking moved on, he addressed us in a friendly tone, inquiring about how it was we had ended up at the Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park. We timidly told him about our desire to just watch what was happening; he grinned warmly and nodding to the crowd that was around us, informed us that it looked like we were the ones being watched. He then led us into a fascinating talk about the differences, theologically, between Islam and Christianity, and we discussed popular misconceptions about each faith, and shared stories of our educations and the perceptions we had grown up with. At several points, the man's cell phone rang; he repeatedly and quietly reached down and silenced it without answering it. Finally, after several repeated rings, he informed us that it was his wife calling, probably to make sure he was safe. You see, he said, he was on his way to the store for milk and bread, had noticed a friend in conversation, and stopped. That was 90 minutes ago, and he was certain he would be in trouble with his wife at home. We eagerly encouraged him to feel free to go on his way, and that we hoped we hadn't kept him unnecessarily. He winked and told us that to share Islam was always necessary. We thanked him repeatedly for his time and for his witness, and though we would continue to believe in Jesus as our Lord, hoped that he would take our handshakes as a sign of friendship and gratitude. He gladly consented, and as we shook hands, told us that while he wished we could know the joys of submitting to God the way he did, he did hope that at least our conversation would make us better Christians.

This may seem a ways off from what is supposed to be a reflection about mutual admonishment, but I want to suggest that there is an intimate link between evangelism and admonishing one another. To admonish one another, in the biblical sense, is to hold one another accountable to the gospel that we proclaim. In popular evangelical terms, it's making sure that we all "practice what we preach." In order to build the type of togetherness that Paul intends when he instructs the churches to admonish one another, then, we must begin with our preaching.

On a University campus in which a number of different Christians (not to mention Muslims, Hindus and Jews) are living and witnessing, how do we even begin to think about togetherness through evangelism and admonishment? Don't we all preach a different version of the same gospel? Don't we all maintain different standards of practice? Isn't evangelism supposed to be about conversion anyway?

Let me suggest that while these questions are certainly important, they may not be the only questions we can ask in this matter. Since asking the right questions may be the best we can hope for, then, consider the following questions: How might sharing my understanding of the gospel make me accountable to those with whom I am sharing? What if the type of conversion I wanted to come out of any evangelism was not a conversion to "my way of thinking," but rather, in the words of Brad Kallenberg, "the acquisition of new language skills?"¹ In other words, what if conversion itself is not about accepting certain beliefs, but rather about learning a new way to describe our reality? While each of these questions could form the basis for many essays and books², I think they point us towards one important truth: in the world today, to

evangelize is to invite others into our world more than it is into our worldview, to introduce them into our language more than it is our propositions. In so doing, we invite them not only into the glossy goodness of our religion, but into the particularities of our life. And we invite, whether we admit it or not, their participation in the practice of our faith, however it may come. In short, we make ourselves transparent to those around us, and in so doing, offer ourselves up for review, critique, affirmation: in short, admonishment.

My friend at the Speaker's Corner most likely wanted me to become a Muslim. And yet, he knew full well that to submit myself in that way would take a lifetime of submissions and conversions, and given the brevity of our encounter, was ultimately unlikely. And yet, he continued to offer up his witness, and to ask for mine. As a result, I am convinced that we all left that encounter encouraged and admonished, divided in place and practice, yet together in our love of and submission to God. As I regard the variety of Christians with whom I live and breathe, I am convinced that we too can embark on such a journey, admonishing one another as we invite others into God's grace.

¹Kallenberg, Brad. *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern Age*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002. p. 46.

²For a very good example of what such a book may look like, see Kallenberg, above.

LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #6

“This is the true story of seven strangers, picked to live in a loft and have their lives taped. To find out what happens when people stop being polite and start being real.... The Real World.”

I remember it well. The first season of MTV’s long-running show *The Real World* claimed to do something no other TV show had ever done: strip away casting, scripting and shooting and give us, the audience, a look at what “real life” was about. And so seven people, with varying backgrounds, moved to a posh loft in Manhattan to live together, intentionally, in a community of sorts to show us all what real life was like.

As middle school students, my friends and I knew that every episode of *The Real World* was exciting and different, though we could have no idea at the time exactly how important for TV programming this show would end up being. This first season spawned not only one of MTV’s longest-running shows (the show is now in its 15th season), but a whole host of “reality” TV shows.

The premise for the show remains mostly unchanged. Put a “diverse” group of people together in a living space that they share, and let the cameras roll. People will watch, the thought goes, because people are tired of contrived and controlled sitcoms and dramas that dominate television. As viewers, we no longer wanted characters, we wanted people, and we no longer wanted situations, we wanted real life.

And “real life,” we found out, was all about conflict. It started out somewhat idealistically—for those of you who do not remember the first season as well as do I, the conflicts were about real-enough things: racial tensions between African-Americans and whites, the struggles of trying to make it in the big city, the balance of vocation and community life. The most popular episodes were always the ones in which charges of racism were thrown across the dinner table, when a person’s band did or did not hit it big, or when the group confronted one of the individuals about messy living habits and absentee behavior.

This premise remained completely unchanged for the first few seasons, except for the location—apparently we viewers had had enough of real-world Manhattan for a while. So new people were picked and the show relocated to the West Coast.

In every subsequent season, though, a pattern seemed to emerge: the living quarters always got just a little bit nicer, and the people got just a little bit more angry.

And before long, the participants were no longer struggling artists, musicians, rappers, or social workers, but were instead assigned to a common task—running a business together, or in the most recent season, learning to sail an America’s Cup-winning yacht in the Pacific Ocean. In the first season, some of the “cast members” (as they are “ironically” called) were in their late twenties; one was (gasp!) as young as 18 years old. In the most recent season, the age range was from 19 years old to 24. The conflicts were less lofty than racial tension and sexual identity: the newer seasons have lots of sleeping around and drunken brawls.

In other words, viewers must have been more attracted to the more “racy” of the conflicts—not the ones that produced valid discussions and true reconciliation, but the ones that produced lots of talking behind backs and all-out fights on camera. The less harmony the “cast” displayed, the more likely we were to stay tuned.

If that sounds like a too-critical read of the situation, consider the endless variety of what I call “community reality” shows: Survivor, Big Brother, Joe Millionaire, and The Surreal Life, among others. The basic premise of these shows is that open hostility is what makes for reality, or at least good TV. Any harmony that exists must be of a fleeting and self-serving nature, like the “pacts” that contestants on Survivor often make with one another so someone else gets voted off.

For the oddest aspect of this, consider the first season of VH1’s The Surreal Life, a late spin-off of the The Real World, wherein seven washed-up or has-been celebrities are cast to live in a house together. In the first season, something awful happened: everybody got along. Even the “annoying” character managed to make it through, and the rest of the folks living in the house made peace with him. VH1 made sure that this would not be the case in the second season, and more energy was put into choosing people who were sure to fight with one another. And as if to admit its error, VH1 (owned by MTV) has endlessly shown a behind-the-scenes look at the first season, in which it reveals that in fact! There was a lot of dramatic conflict, but it had been edited out! In other words, in one deft move, vh1 admitted that reality TV shows are edited heavily (also demonstrated in its exposé on reality TV shows in general) and that when editors show only conflict resolution and not so much conflict, ratings lag and correction specials are produced.

The church has its own true story of Christians, picked to live in together in community, and to witness to the reality of Christian community and the need for harmony.

For two thousand years, Christians have been sharing their lives in community. Even in the second chapter of Acts, we get a vision of the church understanding the role community plays in discipleship. Praying together, eating together, and sharing possessions with one another has always been a model of discipleship in the church. The nearly two thousand year old witness of monastic

communities is also instructive: as Christians, we are called to live lives devoted to Christ's mission of reconciliation, which means we are called to live in harmony with one another.

The reality TV shows do demonstrate something real: conflict in community is inevitable. Where these shows fail, of course, is in their telos, or end—the reason for being. Their primary hope is to lure viewers, week after week, and to do so, the conflict that is inevitable cannot be resolved. In the world of Jerry Springer, the work of reconciliation no longer attracts TV viewers.

And yet the work of reconciliation in community is the Spirit's work, and it has been going on as long as there have been Christians. Sometimes, these communities find themselves made up of Christians of all stripes. For nearly 60 years, a community has existed in Taizé, France, dedicated to the worship of God through the togetherness of believers. Believers of every tradition have come to find Taizé a source of healing, a "little springtime" in the midst of the harsh winter of sin and division.

The Allelon House, an intentional Christian community made up of Christian students of the University of Indianapolis, has been established on our campus. The students—Catholic and Protestant—live together under a common rule—a living document that will help them to negotiate the trials and conflicts of everyday life in order to, as the apostle Paul instructs us, "live in harmony with one another" (*allelon* is the Greek for "one another"). Like monastic communities and other intentional communities before it, the Allelon House will be a place where the Christian witness of "harmony with one another" is lived out publicly. The students, like the early Christians in Acts as well as the monastics throughout the ages, dedicate themselves to the teaching of the church, the breaking of bread, and the sharing of life. That there are conflicts is to be taken for granted, of course. However, as students devoted to harmony, the members of our intentional community will enact reconciliation in daily life and worship with one another. That they come from different traditions is no small thing.

Not every believer, of course, is called to live in intentional community like this. And yet, the body of Christ is to be a place of healing and harmony, which it cannot be as long as we harbor the suspicious divisions that have plagued it. All Christians are called to embody the shared life of Acts 2, the hospitality of Benedictines, the togetherness of ecumenical Christians in Taizé. This is also true here at UIndy, where Christians find other ways to live in harmony with one another:

Also on our campus are covenant discipleship groups—groups of students and faculty and staff who agree to hold each other to a common standard of discipleship and live into each other's struggles and joys together. Two councils of Christian leaders—one for staff and one for students, representing each of the Christian ministries on campus—will be convened this year, so that various Christian groups on campus can co-exist and minister together in harmony.

It would be easy to see these ventures—and the others taking place in our midst—as irrelevant, or insignificant. And yet, in a world apparently obsessed with the entertainment value of hostility and conflict, groups of people witnessing the call to harmonious living seem quite important. The "reality community" shows have assaulted both reality and community, and as such have shaped our perception and understanding of these things. As disciples of Christ, though, the community to which we are called is one based on togetherness—a togetherness that brings together the various members of Christ's body for the healing of the world. As Paul knew all too well, in order for this witness to be valid, we must live in harmony with one another.

WAIT FOR ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #7

Am I a racist?

It's a question I found myself asking silently as I sat in the living room of one of the families in our small group at church. I had certainly never considered myself a racist before—in fact, I had often argued with friends as to why racism is bad in both church and school. I had never done anything, to the best of my knowledge, to enact any kind of racism; on the contrary, I had long ago committed myself to being the type of person who was interested in folks from all backgrounds, of all skin colors. Surely I was no racist.

And yet, here I was silently reflecting on whether or not I had been a racist this whole time and never known it. Our small group had gotten together for our biweekly meeting on this particular evening. As a way to fight off the central Illinois winter blues, the group began discussing plans for a spring getaway and retreat—a time for spiritual “spring cleaning” after a cold and hard winter. My wife and I would be preparing for a newborn baby the weekend the trip was planned, but we were having fun making suggestions about destinations and plans anyway.

At some point, one couple suggested that the group consider renting a few cabins in a popular state park in the southern part of the state. This couple had been there before, and had enjoyed it a great deal, and noted that it was an affordable option for such a large group. People generally agreed that this sounded pretty good, and the group was moving towards consensus when one of the members, who had grown silent, suddenly spoke up.

“There's a slight problem with state parks,” he began. Puzzled, we all stared at him. He continued to tell us that state parks often were a source of conflict for African-Americans, who historically had not been able to participate in the types of cultural recreation that brought about the existence of the parks in the earlier part of this century. Furthermore, state parks were frequently built by the labor of African-Americans, often at great expense to the workers, in situations that were less than just.

In addition, practically speaking, those African-Americans that he knew, himself included, who had visited state parks in the past had found the parks to be inhospitable to African-Americans. One story he told included some Euro-Americans blatantly staring at a family of African-Americans while they went through the buffet line at the park lodge, making racist comments under their breath.

This revelation sparked a six-month-long conversation among the members of our group about racism and discipleship. As someone who had grown up in classrooms and church pews that

were mostly homogenous, I was constantly surprised at the extent to which African-Americans (and Euro-Americans who were married to African-Americans) faced racism—often blatant and spiteful—on a constant basis. The person in the group who had married an African-American told story after story in which she witnessed prejudice against her spouse, her children and even herself in a variety of settings—hotels, restaurants, the grocery store.

After our initial discussion, when we had been talking about a group retreat, we decided that racism was such a pressing concern that we needed to postpone plans for a retreat and jump directly into this. And so the group waited for the trip and began the hard work of learning.

The Apostle Paul instructed the church at Corinth to do some waiting. It seems that at their weekly gatherings and celebration of the Lord's Supper, some of the Corinthian Christians were gathering at the Table, and bringing with them enough food and wine to stuff themselves and get drunk. Meanwhile, poorer members of the congregation showed up empty-handed, and so what was supposed to be the definitive act of unity was quite divisive. The walls that Christ had come to break down were being rebuilt by the very people who claimed Christ as King, at the very celebration of salvation.

Paul's instructions, even in context, seem a bit cryptic. "Wait for one another," he tells them. On one level, it is obvious that he is telling those who are gorging themselves to be patient and courteous—to eat and drink at home, before or after the service. For those of us who have spent time in restaurant purgatory, though, "waiting" brings to mind a much more active form of service. It involves constant attention to the needs and concern of the other. It means creating an experience in which one person, or group of persons, is honored and served by another person by the deliberate meeting of needs.

Paul certainly was not instructing the Corinthians to don aprons and learn how to do a wine presentation. However, my hunch is that waiting for one another involves something more active than merely fending off gluttony until one is the privacy of one's own home. If the Eucharist is to be a time and space in which the body of Christ is transformed into a living entity on this earth, then we must all be willing to know the needs and concerns of those who come to the table with us, and most radically, make those needs and concerns our own.

Throughout our small group's discussions about racism, I came to find that I am much more implicated in racism than I had thought. Certainly I had heard all of the arguments about how all Euro-Americans were implicated, and was willing to believe them at least on a theoretical basis. But once the stories, cares and concerns of those in our group who had suffered became my own, once my life was bound up in theirs (and theirs in mine), it became all too clear. Not because I had necessarily done anything in my past that was explicitly racist (though I did discover a number of "accidental" instances), but rather because I had never even paid attention to the real struggles that African-Americans and other minorities in America face. I had never waited on anyone other than those people closest to me, who generally looked just like me.

Like the Corinthian Christians, I had been coming to the table, bringing with me the good fortunes of my birth, without care or concern for those at the table who did not come with such prepackaged good fortune. Paul's assessment of this type of situation is not a happy one: this is condemnation; it is failure to recognize Christ. It is hell.

I was blessed, though, to be waited on by those African-Americans in our group who had somehow developed sensitivity towards those of us who, slow in learning about racism in America, suddenly realized our own implication. Our confessions, questions, challenges, and stories were met with waiting glances of care and concern, never once backing down from the truth that is togetherness in the church. Certainly the problems of racism were not solved, and I would never claim that I know all the ways in which I am implicated even now. But I was taught some important things about what it means to gather around the Lord's Supper, to be together with other people, and to wait for one another.

In the end, the group decided against a camping retreat, and opted for a work retreat instead. A couple in the group had contacts within the Habitat for Humanity network and had done some work among the rural poor of Mississippi. The group decided that perhaps the best thing to do, given all that we had discussed, would be to work together, to immerse themselves into the lives of those whose cares and concerns were all too distant from our happy lives in a college town. Waiting for one another, apparently, breeds togetherness. Togetherness, apparently, makes it all the easier to wait for one another.

HAVE THE SAME CARE FOR ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #8

Vote or Die.

So saith P. Diddy, and a host of other celebrities throughout the 2004 presidential campaign and election. I have always been wary of MTV's "Rock the Vote" campaign, with its various slogans and sentiments. Not because of any real sense that what they were trying to communicate was wrong, but "Choose or Loose" just seemed dishonest to me. After all, in any election, a great number of people do both.

In 2004, however, I started to notice something that, perhaps latent before, was now coming to the fore. The message, from MTV and its cadre of celebrity representatives, from magazines, newspapers, news channels, radio announcers, from everyone who had a public voice, was incredibly consistent: go vote. You must vote. It does not matter for whom you vote, as long as you vote. Voting is what defines us as Americans; it is what makes us special. When you choose, you exercise your fundamental right, and you must do it at all costs.

It may not seem it at first glance, but there is something powerful here. Those who are preaching this message are, in fact, making claims about why we are here, and how we should be living. Voting, in this particular instance, is portrayed as that which best expresses our political existence, and it does so in a remarkable way. It bridges the gap between public and private, by bringing the prime impulse and expression of what makes us human—choice—to the public sphere in the act of voting. Voting, then, is more than just a once-in-a-while occurrence that is only significant with regard to such things as taxes and the Ten Commandments. It becomes a fundamental practice for understanding who we are called to be, and for bringing us into the fullness of our existence as humans.

That voting has such significance is not what scares me the most. What is most disconcerting behind this voting ethic are the assumptions built into it, which frankly I find to be less than Christian.

Take, for example, the suggestion that it does not matter for whom you vote, just that you vote at all. At the heart of this notion is the long-standing American sentiment that a person's individual choice is the supreme reason for being. We live to make choices, and our systems both of government and commerce are designed, we are told, in such a way that freedom of choice is maximized. From what we purchase at the mall, to the ways we treat our bodies, to the kind of stories we tell about ourselves in order to understand ourselves—these things are all subjects of choice, and individual choice at that. The best we can do as humans is to exercise this choice as often and best as possible.

Voting, then, becomes the culmination of political individualism. That is why, according to the dominant ethic, it is not significant (or as significant) for whom we vote. The actual candidate is not so much the issue, as is the physical and political representation of our right to make an individual choice. It could be said that voting has a “liturgical” function in America—in other words, it is a type of ritual that we participate in, so that we can more fully know who we are. That our candidate might or might not win the election is less important (after all, once the election is over, we are all ready for unity anyway, right?) What matters is that we all show up at the polls, that we all go off by ourselves into the booths, and that we assert our individuality by voting whichever way we choose.

This may seem fine, until we notice the latent dishonesty present in this rhetoric. In any given American election, it really only comes down to two candidates. If you vote for one, you are a liberal, and if you vote for the other, a conservative. If your state votes for one, it is a red state, and those states that vote for the other are blue. Vote for one, and you are pro-life; the other, pro-choice. In other words, voting, the prime act of individual will, really divides us into mass groups, and groups that are often difficult to define. Some people I know defy these categories—those who vote Democrat, but are opposed to abortion or those who vote Republican, but who oppose unrestricted capitalism. Voting ironically brings us together, in the end, but does so by assuring us that what we are doing is being an individual. The assurance of individualism is an odd way to go about creating unity.

And yet, a type of unity is created. Immediately after any election, the mass of people who both chose and lost are lulled by the other side with talk of unity. The losing candidate always makes a speech about the importance of working together, of being united. After all, every candidate for whom we go out and vote (through the demonstration of our complete individuality) is a uniter and not a divider. Of course, this is not any real kind of unity, but rather the cyclical unity that the liturgy of the state creates: we are individuals with absolute rights to choose for ourselves; when we choose, we might also lose, so the important thing is to recognize that choosing is the important part; when we find ourselves, not as individuals, but as a large mass minority whose will is being suppressed, we talk about the importance of political unity. Four years later, its time for more individualism, and the cycle continues on.

There are those who would say this is the way it has to be, since in the end we must be able to speak for ourselves.

After all, they might say, there are so many different voices, so many different perspectives, individualism is the only course that can possibly work, and the only way we can get together is by grouping us all based on the lowest common denominator: our individual choice.

The apostle Paul was aware of the need to manage diversity in any community. The case with the Corinthian church is such that its members were noticing a great deal of diversity among its members—not only in socioeconomic status, but also in understanding of God’s mission, and use of God’s gifts. In many ways, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is about maintaining the unity of the body in the midst of diversity.

In the passage from this letter about spiritual gifts, it is clear that the Corinthian Christians are struggling with their individual identities in the midst of being together. Paul jumps quickly to the point: there might be diversity, but there is one end, one *telos*, and that is the one Body and Spirit of God. Diversity that serves this one end is useful and to be celebrated. Diversity that divides, and seeks another end is to be stamped out. Mere individual choice does not sufficiently guide the process of discernment about gifts; rather, the community must be in tune with the mission of Christ, and must be able to discern how the Spirit is working.

Then Paul uses a famous metaphor: the body is made up of many different parts, and yet each works towards the same goal. This is how it is with the church. So much so, that without each of the members of the body, the body is incomplete. Paul even asserts that the weaker, less honorable, less respectable members of the body are essential to its function, for without them, the body cannot know its purpose. The more ‘inferior’ parts of the body, Paul tells us, have been given to it by God. Why? So that there is “no dissension within the body, but that the members might have the same care for one another.”

This is a far cry from democracy in action.

Our existence as Christians is predicated on caring for those among us, who identify in any way with Jesus Christ and his body. Individualism—even in the form of the Spirit choosing us as individuals to assign us gifts—is subject to the mutual care of fellow believers. As the next chapter demonstrates—perhaps one of the most famous chapters in the New Testament (given its prominence in weddings everywhere)—individual gifts—even the most ecstatic and thrilling—are worthless if we are not using them for mutual love of neighbor. When we exercise our individual identities, we do so for the end of the one body of Christ.

It should come as no surprise that this comes in the midst of Paul’s discussion of the liturgy of the church. In the liturgy of Christ’s body, we are bound together by using our individuality only as we can offer it to those around us as gift (which, as Paul reminds us, is fitting since our identity itself is a gift to us). When we gather at the table, and in the praise of God, we do so not by exercising our individual choice, but by truly caring for those around us.

What has this to do with unity and togetherness? As Paul reminds us, the body is made up of many members with different gifts. He is certainly talking about what we commonly refer to as “spiritual gifts,” but his writing is instructive: those who claim Christ as Lord are gifted in unique and valuable ways, and all are part of the one body. Furthermore, those whose gifts seem less than our own, those whose gifts we might not care for—these are sent to us by God, so that the body might function more perfectly. The very people who claim that Christ is Lord and yet do not seem as worthy as we do are the ones we are to care for. This means in our own congregations, of course, but it also definitely means outside them as well.

So, the liturgy of the church and the liturgy of the state may be at odds. One says, “Vote or die,” as in, exercise your individual will, or you will die, and the other says “Care or the body dies,” as in, submit yourself to the care of others, or the one body of our Lord might die. When we vote, we go forward as a mass of people seeking to identify ourselves as individuals. When we worship, however, we go forward as individuals seeking to praise God in the context of caring for one another—even those whose gifts in the Lord take them into different congregations, traditions, expressions of faith—and we seek to identify ourselves with the one body of Christ, unified in his love.

OFFER HOSPITALITY TO ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #9

Christmas, for me, speaks of hospitality.

It is that time of the year when it seems every week is full of inviting guests into your home, or you being invited into people's homes. And, because it is often quite cold, the homes are always warm, inviting, and the people very much the same. I'm not trying to be overly sentimental, and do not intend to invoke such things as "holiday cheer," but I do have to be honest and admit that I love the time leading up to Christmas because of the heightened attention to merry-making, guest-welcoming, and general warmth and comfort. Pass around the coffee and the pumpkin pie and I am a happy man.

Christmas, of course, is about the incarnation—about that moment when God takes on skin and becomes man, while still remaining God. It is quite fitting that we often associate Advent and Christmas with hospitality. In the Christmas event, Mary's hospitality to the Spirit of God results in God's ultimate act of hospitality—welcoming all of God's creation back into God's mercy through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the life of the Spirit in the church—in other words, God and sinners, reconciled.

Advent and Christmas are such wonderful celebrations. So wonderful, in fact, that it is all too easy to sentimentalize the Christmas season. Christmas carols, cantatas and cards are wonderful ways to celebrate the birth of Jesus, and yet Christians, in America especially, have in large part allowed the trappings of the holiday to replace the mystery of the incarnation such that in the end, Christmas becomes yet another consumer event—the consummate consumer event, actually. Everything at Christmas is measured in consumption—even those Christians uncomfortable with rampant gift buying are often unable to imagine anything other than not buying so many gifts as a way to reclaim what it is we are supposed to be celebrating. But when the spirit of the incarnation becomes merely an idea to celebrate—that is, when the sentiment of God's gift takes precedence over the reality of God's gift—the market moves in, and the reality of Christmas has more to do with standing in long lines purchasing last minute gifts for loved ones and coworkers (who most likely will stand in long lines after the big day returning and exchanging the gifts we stood so long in line to buy in the first place) rather than the incredibility of God-becoming-man in the Palestinian desert.

Don't get me wrong; I like my holiday gatherings to look like picture prints by Courier & Ives.

And yet, I wonder if there isn't some way to move our typical expressions of Christmas hospitality out of the malls, our "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" kitsch, our Martha Stewart

sense of warmth and perfection. After all, the incarnation occurred as an act of hospitality deep in the chill of the Palestinian desert.

As the chilling breeze blows across the scrub brush and sand, a disheartened brown-skinned family seeks refuge. The woman is pregnant, the man a bit overwhelmed. They are aware that opportunities unlike any they could imagine await them as they give birth to the boy in the mother's womb; this child, they know, will be a citizen of a different land. Yet, they seem unable to even find a suitable place to rest for the evening and allow the mother to labor in relative "comfort." They huddle against the wind as they await permission to enter someone else's home so that they might get the mother off of her feet and rest as best as possible. After a while, it becomes clear that even paying for their entrance to warmth and safety will not work, and they face the possibility that they may have to take up "residence" in the invisible confines of a stable out back, outside of the safety and comfort of those who inhabit the land they have come to visit.

The scene I describe is not, actually, the story of the holy family searching for a place to give birth to the Messiah, but rather the reenactment of that story that takes place yearly along the California-Mexican border. The dark-skinned families are Mexicans, seeking the possibilities of a new life inside the United States; those denying entrance are American Christians on the California side of the fence. Every Christmas season, disciples of Christ who are divided by national border patrols gather at the fences that separate them and participate in *la posada*, a liturgical reenactment of Mary and Joseph's search for hospitality and difficulty finding it. That it is Mexicans who play the part of the holy family, and Americans who play the role of those who would deny hospitality to our Lord is no coincidence. Those who live daily near and with the struggles of immigrants who attempt to enter the United States have noticed a striking similarity between the lack of hospitality offered to the holy family, and the lack of hospitality offered to immigrant Mexicans. And so, year after year, they gather, perform the *la posada*, and then exchange gifts of candy and trinkets in a display of togetherness.

This might sound like an overly harsh indictment of American foreign policy, and yet without delving into the intricacies of legislation, let me offer the thought that if this sounds difficult to us, perhaps the dominant culture has won, and for us the hospitality of God's incarnation is best celebrated on the home shopping network, in bowls of eggnog, and at secret Santa parties. Yet what these witnesses suggest, along with many others around the world and through the ages, is that the Christmas event is itself a call to disciples of Jesus everywhere to open up their lives and homes and offer hospitality to one another.

This may sound simple enough, but as the la posada illustrates for us, hospitality is not safe.

It requires that we confront the principalities and powers; that we open up our homes not only to family and friends, but to those who, like Mary and Joseph and the unborn Jesus, are all too easy to ignore. It requires that we risk the comfort that we are offered by our dominant culture

and its protection in exchange for welcoming that (or they) from which we are being protected.

This is risky, of course. We may be hurt by our guests: they may take our cherished items from our homes, our money, our jobs, even our lives. To belittle the risk involved in every act of hospitality is to be dishonest. And yet, to be truthful about what is at stake invites us to reflect on our priorities as well as the potential for joy that is built into hospitality. When for us our safety, comfort, and possessions finally take a back seat to our desire to see the kingdom of God come into this world, then we truly begin to understand the joy of the kingdom. And, I suspect, we learn to continually invite that joy into our homes and our lives.

This kind of hospitality takes practice, of course.

We do not learn it overnight. And yet, being able to welcome one another as though we were Christ is our common vocation as Christians, as is welcoming those who would otherwise go unwelcome as if they were Christ. It is not surprising that it is an enriched group of Christians—both ethnically and denominationally—that meets every Christmas at the Mexican border for la posada.

I say it is not surprising because I think this is how the Spirit acts. As we practice hospitality, we do in fact get better at it. So for these folks who stand in the desert and remember God's own hospitality, it would only make sense to offer hospitality to not only Christians with different skin colors and languages, but also the different colors and languages of the Church's many traditions. When we open our lives and homes to our neighbors and to the strangers that God sends us, the walls that we build around ourselves, the walls that keep folks that look, talk and believe differently than we do, begin to crumble, and we find that our neighbors and strangers sent our way are not who we thought they were.

If offering hospitality to one another and neighbor-love are related, as I think they are, then perhaps Jesus parable of the Samaritan is instructive. Because of our own cultural sensitivities (and lack thereof), we often miss the importance of the adjective, "good," in the title. The thought was, of course, that Samaritans were not good, were not capable of such goodness as the hospitality that this man shows. And yet, as Jesus demonstrates, it is often those people we most assuredly think are incapable who offer the best neighbor-love around.

Without diminishing the particularities of Jesus' telling of the story, let me put it this way: The parable is a direct attack on our walls of division. If your comfort is in American borders, the Good Samaritan is a migrant farmer. If your comfort is suburban white America, then the Good Samaritan is the nameless black man put on the news to scare us. If your comfort is in the walls of your denominational identity, then the Good Samaritan is the person you've written off as fake, insincere, unorthodox, with no personal relationship with Jesus, with a too-personal relationship with Jesus, with an idolatrous view of Scripture or Tradition or both or neither.

Offer hospitality to one another. Allow the incarnation to come into your home, be the incarnation in the homes of others—be together with those with whom it seems too hard to be with. This is how we participate in the life of a God who became a man roaming the desert, with no place to lay his head.

BE SUBJECT TO ONE ANOTHER

Discipleship & Togetherness #10

My wife and some friends from church are growing a garden.

This sounds like a quaint thing to do. A group of women from the church gather together in their mutual garden and share parenting, spouse-ing, and working advice. It is easy to imagine that they tell funny jokes about their husbands and children, and drink lemonade. We can almost picture how this could look for the church: the women gather for some “fellowship” time in their garden, children in tow, while the men all gather for their own fellowship playing sports, or at the local watering hole, or fixing things. In the churches in which I grew up, this is the way things are supposed to be—this is the “order” that God intends for the world: women discipling together in the context of women’s work and play, and men discipling together in the context of men’s work and play.

When this began, this is, in fact, how I imagined it. The first day my wife went over to the garden to begin planting and weeding, I met up with some of the guys from church for some “hanging out.” It was great fun; when we both returned home, we shared stories we had heard, anticipated together the bounty that might emerge from the garden, and felt satisfied that we were reaching out in relationships with the folks in our church.

The next time, however, was not so simple. My wife needed to go to the garden to weed some ground cover that was getting out of control, and to pick some lettuce and radishes before the rabbits got to them. I immediately thought about getting together with some of the guys, until my wife reminded me of the pile of laundry, of the dishes that needed to be done, and the need to have dinner ready for our toddler when they returned. So, while she went to the fields to provide some food for our table, I stayed home and did the dishes, straightened the house, and made preparations for dinner.

There is nothing quaint about this garden. A group of women have committed themselves to, in the middle of the city, providing food for their families. For those families as busy as my own, this means the men have to pick it up a little. We have to change the diapers, sweep the floors, put dinner on the stove. And it’s not just a trade-off. It is not as simple as “you go garden, I’ll stay this time and get some stuff done.” I have my own commitments to keep, and so often we have to plan in advance when the bathroom will get cleaned, and the diaper pail changed. Mostly my daughter goes with my wife to the garden; often she will need to stay at home with me.

Before I continue, let me offer a clarification. I am not a bumbling idiot when it comes to domestic work. I am a good cook, am a thorough cleaner, and I know how to involve my

daughter in the meaningful art of home-work. My wife comes from a family of farmers, and is at home in the soil. I say this not to blow our own horns (for there's always something left to clean or put away, and thus far my wife has brought home only a handful of lettuce and some radishes). I mention this because our arrangement is not a quaint experiment, a "trading spaces" experience from which we'll return to our "regular" roles as everyone chuckles at our naïve attempts. It is simply part and parcel of being subject to one another.

I was at a wedding not long ago, and the preacher talked about women being subject to their husbands.

At a small group meeting a few weeks back, a woman tried to tell me that the "order" that God desires is this: God—husband /man—wife/woman. Women still are not paid as much as men. Women who work outside the home are often responsible as well for the "2nd shift" work at home. Some denominations fail to recognize the women who are leading congregations. Some congregations eagerly welcome women in leadership roles, only to assign them the work men do not wish to do. I was shocked once, while cleaning the women's restroom at a church, to find a poster on the wall noting whom to call in the case of domestic abuse (I was immediately glad, of course, that someone was reaching out to abused women in this way, but shocked that even in the church, these posters are necessary). Pornography, which depends on the subjection of women to the consumptive patterns of men, is a multi-billion dollar industry in America.

This essay is not primarily about marriage; it is about togetherness and unity in the church. But given the disunity between men and women so prevalent everywhere, marriage is a helpful image. Many people claim to have a marriage that is a "partnership of equals." I cannot say the same for my wife and I, because I am often in her debt as she does more work than myself, and vice versa. At any given point in our days, it is unlikely that anything is "equal."

Still, though, we are intentional about a marriage of mutual responsibility. We are each concerned with raising our child(ren), creating and maintaining our home, being active in our church, and responding to God's call on our professional skills. This is why the writer of Ephesians' admonition to "be subject to one another" makes sense to me. In marriage, each gives herself or himself up to the other for a common end, a telos: witnessing to the unity that exists in God's kingdom. This is why the image of Christ as groom and Church as bride pops up—marriage is to be an icon for what is happening in the present and coming kingdom. People freely and knowingly subject themselves to each other for the purpose of sowing God's word in the world.

But, if marriage is to be an icon, then we must all reflect and pray on it. This mutuality cannot only exist in marriage. In fact, this mutuality begins in the church, the ultimate sign and foretaste of God's kingdom, and is to be embodied by single, married, divorced, widowed and everybody in between. The admonitions in Ephesians 5 that so often are used to support a patriarchal understanding of marriage come, importantly, after chapter 4, in which the writer, when talking about unity, exhorts readers to "bear with one another in love." To bear with one another means taking on one another's struggles out of love for each other. We all, hopefully, love

women who are a part of our lives. To love them in a way worthy of the calling which we have received means taking seriously the burdens that women face and bearing those burdens as we can. This may mean that men, especially in the church, must do what has often been relegated as “women’s work,” such as welcoming the small children, defending other women, attending to the details of parties and ceremonies. Of course, Jesus, a man, did these things.

Bearing with one another in love leads to being subject to one another.

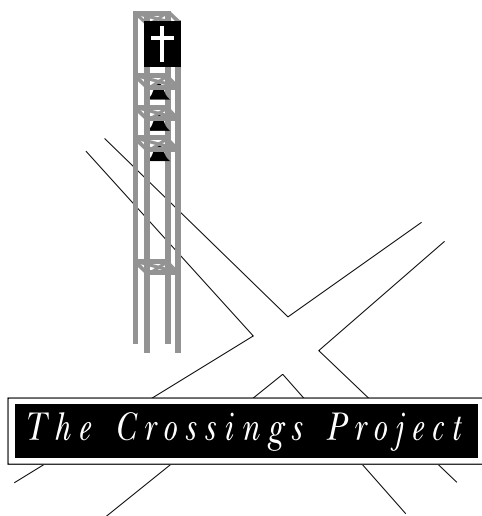
In a world obsessed with power and the powerful, we are called to be subject to one another. We are called to give up that which makes us powerful and stand in solidarity with those who are less powerful. Jesus did not seek to use his authority to change Jewish rules and laws regarding women, and the poor, and outsiders, and tax collectors. He merely bore with them and subjected himself to them. Of course, this is true power, and it threatens those who think themselves powerful. But this is the model we are called to follow, and so we must seek, in the name of togetherness, to subject ourselves to those who are so often ruled over as someone (or something) else’s subjects.

This does not require that you be married, or that you have a garden.

In fact, those who are married may need to be subject to those who are not, and vice versa. Certainly those who do not grow their own food need to be subject to those who grow it, and likewise. The point is, the call for Christian togetherness is a call that asks us to consider the joys and struggles of being with other people in a specific way: by allowing our desire for control and power to be sacrificed in the interests of the kingdom, thus subjecting ourselves often to the very people the world would rather we did not. This is ultimately about justice, about the true justice of God and God’s reign. When we subject ourselves to one another, we are caught up in the struggle for a just life that our neighbors are living. We realize that our neighbors are often the ones who have been acting neighborly all along, even in the midst of oppression and prejudice. We know better than to think that this will effect great or immediate change. But we are free to not worry about this, because we are not the subjects of power or the powerful, of the world or its false gods, but rather of one another, just as Christ was for his church.



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