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# Habits as Signs: Some Reflections on the Ethical Shape of Christian Community

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**Abstract:** The Christian faith is concerned not simply with what we might call “ideas” or “beliefs” but is also profoundly attentive to the question “How then shall we live?” This essay suggests ten particular habits and convictions that undergird, make judgements about, and give shape to Christian faith communities committed to pursuing such a question in ways that embody theological integrity.

**Keywords:** Ecclesiology, Ethics, Faith, Theology

**Zusammenfassung:** Christlicher Glaube geht nicht in dem auf, was man als Ideen oder Glaubenssätze bezeichnen könnte, sondern er stellt auch mit größter Dringlichkeit die Frage: „Wie sollen wir leben?“ Dieser Aufsatz schlägt zehn Haltungen und Überzeugungen vor, die christlichen Gemeinschaften bei einer theologisch integren Beantwortung dieser Frage Orientierung geben.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Ekklesiologie, Ethik, Glaube, Theologie

Whether one has in mind more personal, or domestic, or medical, or political, or economic matters, it is not unusual to claim that the Christian faith is concerned not simply with what we might call “ideas” or “beliefs” but is profoundly attentive to the question “How then shall we live?”<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I suggest that there are particular habits and convictions that undergird, make judgements about,

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1 This is a situation for which Christianity is most indebted to Judaism, even if it could make this debt more public than it typically does. To be sure, many modern secularists such as Peter Singer, Quentin Smith, A. C. Grayling, Kai Nielsen, and others are quick to point out – and rightly so – that religious people don’t have a monopoly on ethics. But I am a Christian theologian, and the brief comments that follow are directed specifically to the Christian community and to its claim to be concerned with what we might broadly call “the ethical life.”

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and give shape to Christian faith communities committed to pursuing such a question. I name ten such habits. It is not an exhaustive list.

Christian theologians are generally quick to highlight that the divine commands do not float free but are rooted in a wider history of God and of God's relationships with Israel and with creation. This is most apparent in the Decalogue which does not begin with a list of "shalls" and "shall nots" but with a story: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; therefore [...]" (Ex 20,2). Israel's ethical life arises from and is shaped by an event through which loosely-related tribes were made one in the shared experience of deliverance by One now bound to them in covenant-love. Believing themselves to be God's people, they understand also that they are the recipients of a divine command to be, as Duncan Forrester puts it, "hospitable and gentle towards the strangers in their midst and open-handed towards the poor" precisely because they themselves have "experienced the bitterness of slavery and the contempt often visited upon strangers and outsiders, and because they have encountered a God who cares passionately for the forgotten and hears the cry of the poor."<sup>2</sup> Likewise in the Second Testament: ethics are no mere postscript to doctrinal teaching – still less is ethics a luxury for those living in easier times – but are inseparable to what it means to follow Jesus in the patterns of life undertaken by a faithful creator.

Reading its sacred texts, therefore, the Christian community learns that faith holds that the source of all good is the *living* God and not a dead Principle, a God with whom creation lives – and who lives with creation – and with whom human persons struggle to discern the signs of the times, and to carve out meaningful lives unblinded to the ambiguities, travails, and brokenness that characterise existence in all its forms. This reading, discernment, and meaning making, is undertaken in solidarity with others, indeed with all those who feel pulled into the history of justice's patient arc and its ties of mutual responsibility and accountability. One might recall, for example, the witness of Václav Havel (no "believer" in the traditional sense) who staunchly defended the idea that truthful living – or what we might simply call "the good life" – cannot be undertaken apart from profound solidarity with others, indeed with those most unlike "us." This means, he insisted, that any person or community of persons concerned to live in truthful ways cannot be what St Augustine once described as *incurvatus in se*, turned in on oneself, but will be characterised by a kind of openness to both the universality and the particularity of the stranger. In his book *Living in Truth*, Havel averred that the

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *The True Church and Morality: Reflections on Ecclesiology and Ethics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 2.

community “must foreshadow a general salvation and, thus, it is not just the expression of an introverted, self-contained responsibility that individuals have to and for themselves alone, but responsibility to and for the world.”<sup>3</sup>

Bringing these kinds of commitments into the more explicit purview of ecclesiology, we might recall Stanley Hauerwas’s reminder that “saints cannot exist without a community, as they require, like all of us, nurturance by a people who, while often unfaithful, preserve the habits necessary to learn the story of God.” That said, he continues, “such a community must [also] have the skills of discernment that make them capable of recognizing the saints in their midst. Recognizing the saints, especially while they are still alive, is no easy task either. For by their very nature, saints remind us how unfaithful we have been to the story that has formed us.”<sup>4</sup> One might conclude that the very existence of such a community is in itself a demonstration and exemplification of the ethic that is integral to its ground – i.e., to a word that is both confirmed and brought into question by the modes of life of the community who makes it public. As Lesslie Newbigin famously put it, the church is a kind of “hermeneutic of the gospel” itself.<sup>5</sup> Such communities, as Forrester contends,

“[...] are not bolt-holes for the timid and the backward-looking. By their very existence, by the way they structure their common life, by the nature of their celebrations, they make a constructive protest against the established order, ‘the rule of the barbarians.’ They are demonstrations of the viability of another way; insistently, they question by their very existence the adequacy of the community and culture in which they are set. They point to a better way, and are themselves signs, instruments and partial manifestations of the reign of God.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, this relationship between ecclesiology and ethics has a very long history in the Christian tradition. Prior to the Constantinian settlement in the early decades of the fourth century, most Christians, in decreasing measure it seems, considered themselves to be members of a kind of counterculture, a community distinguished from most others by its anticipatory leaning away from the established patterns

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3 Václav Havel, *Living in Truth* (London: Faber, 1987), 103.

4 Stanley Hauerwas, “The Gesture of a Truthful Story,” in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas’ Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology*, ed. John Swinton (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 74.

5 J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI/Geneva: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

6 Forrester, *True Church and Morality* (n. 2), 8.

and towards the coming reign of God.<sup>7</sup> They considered the Christian community to be a sign and anticipation of a new social order living in what they judged to be the last days of the old world. This new order was characterised by a distinct ethic – what we might call the ethics of the resurrection. Out of that event, it is claimed, emerges a particular set of shapes or habits marked by a profundity of promise, and which give rise to at least the following ten basic claims.

## 1 This Community is Grounded in the Divine Story

The Christian community is a counter-narrative to the violence, impatience, and sloganised life that marks the world's politics. It is a community marked by storied patterns of reconciliation, forbearance, dissent, and resistance as ways to expose and call into question the hegemony of ceaseless fabrications built upon shifting sand. In *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, Hauerwas argues that Christians have misplaced how radical their practices are, practices given to free them “from the excitement of war and the lies so characteristic of the world” and to assist them to resist the ever-present temptations to “imitate the false politics of the world for its own life,” politics which, he suggests, are based on fear and envy, and which undermine the joy that Christians ought to find in “the difficult but rewarding task of being church.”<sup>8</sup> Recovery of this task requires that Christians rediscover the narratives, skills, and practices that they share and how these elements of faith are indispensable for forming them as witnesses to God's “Yes” to life in the world.

It seems to be an inescapable detail that to be human is to literally *live* by stories.<sup>9</sup> Stories order our experiences. Stories create meaning for our lives. Stories build the communities of which we are a part. So the British rabbi-philosopher Jonathan Sacks:

At the heart of any culture is the process by which we bring successive generations into a narrative, the story of which we are a part. There is, of course, not one story but many, but storytelling is the place where identity is found, it is the vehicle of continuity [...] Stories tell us who we are, where we came from and what we might aspire to be. A culture is defined by its narratives. If they make strenuous demands on the mind and spirit, then a culture has the

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>9</sup> See Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39.3 (1971): 291–311; Michael Root, “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology,” *Modern Theology* 2.2 (1986): 145–58.

most precious legacy of all. That is why the great dramatists, poets and novelists have an influence deeper and more enduring than politicians or military leaders. If the great stories are lost, forgotten or ignored, then a culture has begun its decline.<sup>10</sup>

At gut level, the Christian community understands, on its good days at least, that being human never begins with a white piece of paper. It accepts, with Alasdair MacIntyre, that we ‘never start literally *ab initio*’ but are, rather, plunged *in medias res*, discovering ourselves to be within a story already made for us, one that has been going on long before our arrival and which will continue long after our departure.<sup>11</sup> This is one reason that parents who think that being responsible means not imposing their faith onto their children but letting them “choose a path for themselves” have tragically misjudged the ways of habit and imitation by which we are formed. It is the reason too, as Forrester has argued, that

“Our understanding of what is good and right is not commonly the end result of a process of reasoning, but something we receive from others, absorb from our environment, appropriate, criticize and sometimes modify. Most of our actions are not the result of a period of careful, rational weighing of alternatives, but seem to grow naturally out of the kind of people we are.”<sup>12</sup>

The kind of people we are is a fruit of the stories that have formed and that continue to form us. For Christians, this will most basically include the particular story given to us – namely, Israel’s story, which is also Jesus’ story, a story which finds its most concentrated and particular expression in the ineradicably tragic, irreducibly particular, thoroughly human, and harshly ambiguous three-day journey that the divine life takes in the reality called Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter. It is a journey that leaves many, perhaps most, of the questions that plague us finally unanswered. It is a story that is also embodied deeply and narrated regularly, especially in the drama of the eucharist.

Because the Christian community understands that life itself – not only its own life but all life – is grounded in and disciplined by this particular story, what it calls “ethics” cannot be based on social conventions or pragmatism or utilitarianism, or even on a doctrine of creation *per se* but rather only in the particularity of God’s human mode of being in Jesus Christ. What the Christian community

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Sacks, “In a World Run by MTV, Nobody Has Time to Think,” *The Telegraph*, 6 September (2001), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4265412/In-a-world-run-by-MTV-no-body-has-timeto-think.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 215.

<sup>12</sup> Forrester, *True Church and Morality* (n. 2), 76.

calls “ethics,” in other words, is simply a name for exposing and illuminating what it means when it says “God.” It is the life of God cut by the practices of due attention and the posture of hopefulness that the divine promise concerning the coming new creation is not a fantastical pipedream of human aspirations writ large but the way of the Lord.

This way is also writ large in the patterns of Abraham and of Moses whose election by God to be a sign of a new thing involves a deliberate move away from the centres of power and of wealth – away from the mighty kingdoms of Mesopotamia and Egypt – and towards the margins. It is an invitation, in other words, to be with Jesus where Jesus is, outside the camp, recognizing that “it is impossible to keep company with Christ if we refuse to accept the company he has chosen to keep.”<sup>13</sup>

## 2 This Community Exists for the Sake of the World

To keep company with Jesus is to risk learning that his life is orientated towards the world. This community, therefore, seeks to take seriously St Paul’s claim that the entire world belongs to Christ, that the world – despite all appearances to the contrary – is, in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ words, “charged with the grandeur of God,” and that the world is of unbounded concern to God, as Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical letter *Laudato Si’* reminded us so well. The Christian community therefore refuses to let the world go to the dogs, as it were. It is a community, too, that refuses to live in a ghetto, refuses to retreat from the world into some sanctified TARDIS, refuses to avoid the inescapable truth that its election as a people of God means that it is inexorably concerned with others and so feels responsible for the world, for those who are not counted among its membership. To cite Newbigin again, the Christian community that is true to its calling

“[...] will be a community that does not live for itself but is deeply involved in the concerns of its neighborhood. It will be the church for the specific place where it lives, not the church for those who wish to be members of it – or, rather, it will be for them insofar as they are willing to be for the wider community.”<sup>14</sup>

It is a community that doesn’t live *against* the world but *with* the world and *for* the world. St Matthew’s descriptions of its being a kind of “leaven” and “salt”

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<sup>13</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 109.

<sup>14</sup> Newbigin, *Gospel* (n. 5), 229

and “light” bespeak of its sign-like character, to embody that story described earlier – a story characterised by the scandalous embrace of the “other” and by its encouragement of the flourishing of those small seeds trodden upon by the world’s rule makers. It will do this, I suggest, not alone but in partnership with those who wage life on the suspicion that while the “arc of the moral universe is long, [...] it bends towards justice.”<sup>15</sup>

### 3 This Community Has an Uncertain Existence

In and for the world, the community lives by faith rather than by sight. Each day, it listens for and hangs onto a fresh Word. Consequently, it can never know in advance what the divine will for any particular situation might be. It is a community, therefore, resistant to policymaking and crisis management. This makes it arguably the most vulnerable institution in the world, a community that has been thrust into what Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk termed “an unprecedented history,” a “continuous risky adventure with always hazardous improvisations.”<sup>16</sup> “The Church,” as John Webster put it, “is not so much a cleanly separate society of well-formed persons as a messy set of unfinished and half-successful negotiations.”<sup>17</sup> It is a community called to stay awake to the truth that its strength lies in the knowledge that it is, in principle, weak, fragile, and homeless. It is a community, therefore, which always puts safety last, a community which is entirely uninvested in its own self-preservation and, as Davis McCaughey argued, is “prepared to live without guarantees, without the guarantee of an infallible book, or infallible creeds, or an infallible church.”<sup>18</sup> It is a community free from “the lust for certitude,”<sup>19</sup> whether in religion and its apparatus, or in modernity’s unimpeachable god – experience. It is a community free therefore to throw itself entirely into the embarrassing service of Jesus, and that neither for God’s sake nor for its own but solely for the sake of the world. As it does so, it is a community that is always learning how to fail, always rediscovering its uneven record. Indeed, it

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 252.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Christiaan Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out*, trans. Isaac C. Rottenberg (London: SCM Press, 1967), 162–163.

<sup>17</sup> John Webster, “Ecclesiocentrism: A Review of *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, by Nicholas M. Healy,” *First Things* (2014), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/10/ecclesiocentrism>.

<sup>18</sup> Unpublished comment made at Princeton in 1967.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Davis, *Temptations of Religion* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1973), 1–27.

never finds what it sets its heart on; and it is continuously learning what it means to be glad about that.

The implications of all this for ethics is that the Christian community's witness is marked by a profound letting go, an unmastering, or dispossession. The community of faith is called to live not by finished pronouncements but by a set of live and interrogatory questions, principally those asked by God – such as “Where are you?”, “What is this that you have done?”, “Have you not known, have you not heard?”, “Who do you say I am?”, “Do you have any bread?”, “Who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”, and “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Its task is to maintain this questioning, to resist the ever-present temptation to claim anything more than a settled-position-for-the-meantime on any matter at all (a settled-position-for-the-meantime being a temporary but necessary condition for exercising responsible judgements and a correlate to self-dispossessive obedience), and to keep alive the possibility of new hearings and interpretations that disrupt the settledness institutions are so desperate to erect and preserve, often by recourse to violence.

## 4 This Community is Fundamentally Relational

It is a community marked by a profundity of dependence – upon other communities and their stories, upon the creation, and upon the Ground of all being. Each of these relationships carries certain responsibilities and is, when healthy, marked by the kind of giving and receiving that characterises the divine life itself. It is a community that feels enlarged and enriched rather than diminished or threatened by the presence of the other, and thus by difference. It recognises God's image in the face of the stranger who is not in its own image. It is a community that celebrates and practices relationships as ends in themselves, and therefore resists those brutal patterns that turn relationships into means for some other purpose. It is a community learning not to trust itself to know itself, learning to know who it is only by making itself accountable to the judgement of others, even while not relinquishing the difficult responsibility of making judgements itself. These are some of the extraordinary gifts that friendship and true community bequeath to us all.

Moreover, Christian community is about the way a people who don't necessarily really like each other very much learn to live together as the new political reality, as a new politic marked by mutuality and humility, and cultivating the habits of forbearance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. These are virtues impossible to be had apart from a humble reception of others, a reception styled by listening *to* and *with* others, and by risking whatever transformation results.

## 5 This Community is a Responsible Community

The possibility of a virtuous life depends upon the capacity to respond to the other. The answer to that ancient question posed by Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?,” is an unambiguous “Yes.” Faith formed by the narratives of its most holy texts is faith marked by an acute responsibility for the other. An ethical community feels this responsibility for its neighbours, and it enacts that responsibility by championing the cause of the most vulnerable among them. Such responsibility is an expression of its freedom, freedom not only *from* certain habits and commitments but also its freedom *to* and *for* such. Of course, responsibility implies capacity, response-ability. The community is *able* to be responsible. It is made free to be responsible.

## 6 This Community is a Free Community

It is a free community because it is the community of a free Gospel. The community is free therefore to doubt, to imagine, to believe, and to risk getting it wrong. It is free to trust its own theological tradition *and to be unbound to it*. It is free to risk reading the Bible as if it wasn’t its author. Were the Christian community a human invention, a human idea kept alive by good will and not by the sheer event of the Word, then it would be marked by fear and control and the stench of death. But the Christian community does not claim to find its freedom in itself. Its claim, rather, is that it finds its freedom is in the divine cruciform love. This alone is why it can be a community free for the service of others, a community unconcerned and unbedevilled with its own survival and expansion, a community liberated from the patterns of propaganda that engulf life in the world. One implication of this is that a free community will be free to interpret its autonomy by its profound unity with others. A community that is not free to limit its freedom and autonomy in the service of others but is obsessed with its own expansion and with the erection of boundaries that limit the freedom of others is a community burdened by the bondage of perpetuity and unduly threatened by the empires that seek to overwhelm the ground it supposes it has gained; a point well made by Ernst Käsemann:

“Church fellowships that imagine they are indispensable and whose thinking revolves about earthly and eternal survival will have to be told that God allows us all to die, that great churches have gone under, that only the bourgeoisie with its claim to ownership and permanence confuses the resurrection of the dead with its own survival. What is indispensable for our Lord is only that we follow him and shoulder the cross

rather than shifting it to the back of our neighbour or stranger, only to make it heavier there.”<sup>20</sup>

And by St. Paul: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” (Gal 5,13).

## 7 This Community Engages “the Powers of this Present Darkness”

The community is not naïve about the situations in which it is called to exercise its witness – amidst the various imperia that manifest in the systems of global capitalism, militarism, nationalism, ecumenism, pragmatism, scientism, protestantism, eudaimonism, cynicism, catholicism, and in every other kind of “ism.” It is a community which recognises, in words commonly attributed to St Paul, that its “struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6,12). Therefore, it is a community that asks how it is, for example, that the religion whose founder said “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth” (Mt 6,19) has come to be so closely associated with the economic systems of unbridled accumulation, and asks how he who commanded his followers to “turn the other cheek” and who was executed by a god-ordained state could find itself so often in bed without adequate contraception with those same greedy and violent powers.

The actuality is that the Christian community is, at best, an unreliable ally of the state, a fact underscored whenever it joins with others who are not of its fold to witness against all those economies that trade on violence, ecological rape, and human indignity, and whenever it embodies an imagination for human society where those who put their trust in God come not only to the aid of their neighbours but also to the aid of their enemies. These are not optional extras of being Christian community, but part of a hope-filled undertaking to carve out, and to be an embodied sign of, truthful ways of being on the most enduring sides of history. So, as one of the church’s more recent confessions has it, “we reject any ideology which would legitimate forms of injustice and any doctrine which is

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<sup>20</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene*, ed. Rudolf Landau and Wolfgang Kraus, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 305.

unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.”<sup>21</sup> To be indifferent to world hunger, or to the plight of asylum seekers or that of the population of Kiribati, for example, is practical atheism, a confession that the God of Jesus is a monster, or dead. And when those who bear God’s name take up arms to wage war, and insist that such action is necessary and unavoidable, they are resorting to the logic of such a Mephistopheles.

When, in 1944, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Tegel Prison cell that “the church is the church only when it exists for others,”<sup>22</sup> he was recalling (to borrow words from William Stringfellow) that the Bible’s witness is “*always* a witness of resistance to the *status quo* in politics, economics, and all society. It is a witness of resurrection from death,”<sup>23</sup> a reminder that the event *par excellence* of the new creation – namely, the resurrection of the dead God – creates both a community and an ethic which are not determined by that which is passing away but by what is promised and is still to come.

## 8 This Community Practices Discernment

Everything I have noted thus far assumes collective discernment that unavoidably wrestles with those donated texts through which the hermeneutical community might come to better understand the Christ. It is not a matter of reading the mind of Christ straight off the page, however, but of reading distinguished by a profundity of attention to the interweaving and contradictory stories of faith, of concentration upon local contexts, and with the guidance of God’s Spirit.

Such reading is also undertaken with a conviction, formed by the reading itself, that the Christian community is not present to tell the rest of the world how it should live, and that its ethical pronouncements are not written for everyone but for those being formed by the God of Abraham, Ruth (a Moabitess!), Jeremiah, Mary Magdalene, and Onesimus. This means that discernment calls not only for trying to relate ancient worlds to ours but, more importantly, for asking whether or not the community of faith has “the skills to disentangle itself from the competing stories of the world and the vision to see the interplay between its attention to Scripture and its ethical performance.”<sup>24</sup> This is not a question of using sacred texts to identify and resolve certain crisis points, but rather of something much more

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<sup>21</sup> The Belhar Confession, § 4.

<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al., vol. 8 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 56.

<sup>23</sup> William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 100–101.

<sup>24</sup> Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 37.

profound; namely, *participating in* those texts as they train reading communities in the patterns of responsible living which include loyalty to the proper sense of time and a fidelity to the variety of locations they now occupy. So Angus Paddison:

“The Bible is not something we use but is a text profitably embedded within the length of our lives [...] The Bible isn’t a book of rules seeking application – it is the book of the church. Nor is it a text which, independent of its interpretation, has a meaning we can “use.” The Bible isn’t a divine problem-solver. Far more decisively, as the providential strains of figural reading reinforce, Scripture is a text used by God. By participating in the life and liturgy of the church, the people of God hope that Scripture will make use of them.”<sup>25</sup>

Thus the community gathers, reading together texts and contexts, and asking, “What is God calling us to become?” In Baptist ecclesiology, for example, this is the main point of the church meeting. As Paul Fiddes has argued, the meeting’s aim is neither to procure “majority decisions” nor for “one block of voters to oppress and dominate another,” but rather “to search for consent about the mind of Christ.” Indeed, “even when a decision has been made in a Baptist church meeting, the members will want to go on listening to those who have opposed it or been unhappy with it, to gain something from their insights as the decision is worked out in detail in changing circumstances.”<sup>26</sup>

## 9 This Community is Formed by Worship

The kind of community that I have been describing is a body that has to work at it. This stuff doesn’t come naturally, as it were, but requires training. To live lives that would be “unintelligible if the God we worship in Jesus Christ does not exist”<sup>27</sup> requires certain habits that form our bodies in patterns that sign the life of Christ. To repeat a point made earlier, this is a confession that we are formed principally not by our ideas but rather by the stories, the narratives, the activities or “forms of life”<sup>28</sup> into whose patterns we see ourselves and through which the worlds around us acquire meaning. Most of our action, in other words, is not the

<sup>25</sup> Paddison, *Scripture* (n. 24), 43, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 52, 86, 124.

<sup>27</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, “The Politics of the Church and the Humanity of God,” *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 19 June 2012, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/06/19/3528056.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 226.

outworking of our conscious and rational deliberations but is rather the acting out of a script that is under our skins.

So the importance of worship in forming an ethical community. Worship is the training ground in which, it is believed, God meets and forms persons after the character of an alternative rule. Worship is the way that really good news gets into our bones and under our skin. That is why the physicalities of worship and the embodied nature of liturgy – kneeling, standing, drinking, etc. – and the aesthetics of worship, and the role of the imagination, are indispensably vital.

Similarly, when worship is seen as an escape from the world and says little or nothing about the world itself and about our living in it then it is difficult to see how it can nourish its participants for broader divine service, or what we might call the “liturgy after the liturgy” which happens in the life of the old world. Those who learn to sing God’s songs in a strange land are those who are learning to disturb the existing order and to practice another way. Unless ethical existence and witness in the world is rooted in and nourished by such worship, it is in constant danger of diluting into something very different from that announced in the coming reign of God. Central here is the practice of intercessory prayer for the world, a palpable fruit of faith’s claim that the world is the object of the divine love, and the location of the divine movement. The fact that a community is given to prayer, to discerning the presence and movements of Christ in its midst, will, one hopes, train it also to discern and to move closer to the real presence of Christ in the neighbour and in the world.

## 10 This Community is a Friend of Time

If one way to think about the Christian community is as “an extended argument about how to follow Christ,”<sup>29</sup> then one might well ask what kind of virtues are needed in order to sustain such an argument. I have suggested nine, and I wish now to suggest one final virtue desperate for rediscovery among contemporary faith communities – patience. My observation is that most forms of Protestantism are marked by an acute case of unholy impatience. But patience – the kind of patience necessary to wrestle responsibly with life’s most vexing questions – is possible when imbedded in the story of the God who has become flesh, in a life lived within the limitations of time and which takes a longer view of things. To be found living in that story is to have “time to disagree because time is

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<sup>29</sup> Paddison, *Scripture* (n. 24), 56.

not strictly ‘ours,’ but is gifted to us and is that space in which we may grow together in love,”<sup>30</sup> and to seek a common mind on things.

But such unity cannot be based on lazy agreement. Rather, unity grows out of disagreement. After all, as John Howard Yoder reminded us, working “together when we agree is not yet the gospel.”<sup>31</sup> Such patience is not about the hypostatizing of our disagreements but rather about the nature and persistence of a profound attention to one another, and of a determination to endure with one another with all the patience of a Job, or a Yahweh, aware that there is much to learn from those who read both Scripture and the signs of the time differently to us, even if one cannot yet see from their point of view, cannot yet share their outlook, their *Anschaung*.

Impatient people and impatient communities are those who communicate that they have nothing to learn from re-reading in the company of new readers. They are those who have little sense of the time in which we are living, and have perhaps tasted too little of the realities in which our existence finds its proper *telos*. They are those, in other words, who often confuse penultimate things with ultimate things, or who confuse their own existence with the reign of God itself. Conversely, patient communities are, as Forrester avers, “fellowships of expectation, aware of their own incompleteness and provisionality and brokenness. Unlike utopian communes they know that they are incapable by themselves of building Jerusalem or establishing the justice of God. They *wait*. But this is not a totally open and vacuous expectancy; nor do they already know and possess what is to come. They await a person.”<sup>32</sup> They await the coming of God, and that waiting shapes their life in the world.

Such communities require trusted, humble, and courageous leaders who help people hear the divine invitation into relationship, responsibility, and risk. Good leaders also understand, as Jean Vanier articulates it, that

“Individual growth toward love and wisdom is slow. A community’s growth is even slower. Members of a community have to be great friends of time. They have to learn that many things will resolve themselves if they are given enough time. It can be a great mistake to want, in the name of clarity and truth, to push things too quickly to a resolution. Some people enjoy confrontation and highlighting divisions. This is not always healthy. It is better to be a friend of time. But clearly too, people should not pretend that problems don’t exist by refusing to listen to the rumblings of discontent; they must be aware of the tensions.”<sup>33</sup>

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30 Paddison, *Scripture* (n. 24), 57.

31 John Howard Yoder, “On Christian Unity: The Way from Below,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000), 177.

32 Forrester, *True Church and Morality* (n. 2), 8.

33 Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, trans. Ann Shearer (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 80.

Befriending time as a gift that makes it possible to attend to things better is a way of affirming that habits are something lived in, towards, and out of. Habits are also worn, identifying one's place and community. They can be enlightening, disconcerting, or gravely sinful. The ten habits named in this essay are, I suggest, apposite to Christian faith communities concerned to attend to the question "How then shall we live?" and to do so in ways that embody theological integrity.