

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY

Lilly Youth Theology Network
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Thank you, Jeff. It's an honor to be here with all of you who are doing such creative, inspiring, important work with our young people. If I might be so bold, I would like to say, in the name of the church and its seminaries, **thank you**.

St. John's participation in this program is one of the things I am proudest of from my time as dean—including hiring Jeff to run it. I remember vividly when this program was presented to ATS schools in Baltimore in '98. I thought it was an exciting idea that had all sorts of potential. But we had just started another grant funded program and the faculty were feeling a bit overwhelmed. A new dean eager to do all sorts of things didn't help. We moved forward with faculty approval but avoided a direct yes or no vote until people had experience in the program. As they did, support grew. The benefits to these young people and the church became clear. Lest you think we are more magnanimous or saintly than we are, the benefits to the School also became clear. Now here we are, 18 years later still doing wonderful, meaningful work—and still concerned about sustaining it.

None of this would be possible, of course, without the foresight, imagination and generosity of the Lilly Endowment. That includes not only funding the programs but also seeing the benefits of harvesting the mutual learning from them by bringing people together like this. In my experience this kind of collaborative work among grantees is one of the hallmarks of Lilly's grant-making and I think it is very wise. Thank you – to the Lilly Endowment, more personally to Chris, Jessicah, now Chanon Ross, John, who's always a conversation partner, and, in absentia, Craig Dykstra, who dreamed this all up.

We are beginning two days devoted to a consideration of community and your programs around the theme: “Catalyzing community.” This is a great image. It's consistent with an insight by the groups of pastors and others our project has brought together to consider community in congregations. They are uneasy with verbs like “build” for community. It's not true to their experience as community formers and, theologically, it makes community too much a human construct with too little regard for the activity of the Spirit. They prefer organic images like “cultivate.” Cultivation contributes to the growth of the plant but we don't create the plant and it can grow without us. “*Catalyze*” makes a similar point with the intriguing suggestion of an indirect agency in bringing about, nurturing community.

I see my role as providing some reminders about the theology of community that might feed your thinking over the next two days. In the spirit of catalyzing and cultivation we might think of my remarks as fertilizer—but let's not push that image any further!

As you know far better than I, community is a concern near and dear to young people – and hence to your work with them. Its importance to the youth and your programs comes through

repeatedly in the essays collected by Kenda Creasy Dean and Christy Lang Hearlson.¹ There is a hunger for community in our age and young people have a particularly big appetite for it. For a variety of developmental and other reasons, young people are eager to make connections; to find others with whom they can connect and ways to connect with them. Our digital age offers ways to connect with more people more often than ever before. We are part of an intricate social network—but is that community? Charles Moore in *Called to Community*, argues, I think correctly, that it is not: “community is more than connectivity. Although it is easier than ever to communicate ... with one another, we are ... losing the ability to commune with one another.”²

To borrow a phrase Maria Lichtmann uses about education, when we are so inundated with connections, we run the risk of being “overfed and undernourished.”³ It’s like social fast food. It feeds our cravings and stimulates a hunger for more, but it’s not really nourishing. So we get a wonderful book by a participant in our project, Chris Smith, written with John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus*.⁴ Learning from the slow food movement, it seeks to move us from “McDonaldized approaches to church [15]” to a recognition that following Jesus is “a lifelong apprenticeship undertaken in the context of Christian community” [14]. Their goal is to “spur our imaginations with a rich vision of the holistic, interconnected and abundant life together to which God has called us in Christ Jesus”[15]. This is a community that nourishes the soul. It’s clear your imaginations have already been so spurred, as you are providing such soul-nourishing, formative experiences of community for the youth in your programs.

But, as you also know well from working with these young people, this hunger for community is a hunger to belong. Peter Block develops this connection extensively in his book, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. “First and foremost,” he observes, “to belong is to be ... a part of something. It is membership, the experience of being at home.... The opposite of belonging is to feel isolated and ... on the margin, an outsider.” Secondly, belonging “has to do with ... fostering among all of a community’s citizens a sense of ownership and accountability.”⁵ This is *my* community—*my* church. I have responsibility for it—for its vitality—and I am accountable to it—to those people who share it with me.

Christianly, theologically, community is about belonging to God as a disciple of Jesus Christ and belonging to the community of disciples—not in the abstract but to a concrete community of living, breathing, sweating, believing, hoping, loving, and sinning disciples. *These* are my people. *This* is my church, my community.

Community is about belonging. This makes all the more poignant a comment by Erin Lane, the 30-something author of the delightfully titled book, *Lessons in Belonging from a Church-Going Commitment Phobe*, (and also a participant in our project): “I want to belong, but I don’t know

¹ *How Youth Ministry Can Change Theological Education—If We Let it* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

² *Called to Community: The Life Jesus Wants for His People* (Walden, NY: Plough, 2016), p. xvi.

³ *The Teacher’s Way: Teaching and the Contemplative Life* (New York: Paulist, 2005), p. 62.

⁴ (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2014).

⁵ (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2008), p. xii.

how.”⁶ I think she speaks for many—young and not-so-young. We want to belong – to God and to our fellow disciples, to a real community – but we don’t know how.

You are helping the young people in your programs learn what it is to belong—to God and to each other—in a way that is authentic, responsible, thoughtful, faithful, hopeful. You are helping them learn how to be community, not by giving them a theoretical definition, but as Proffitt and Young describe it, by giving them an experience of “being in community.”⁷ This is a tremendous gift to them and to the church.

We have identified three dynamics of community—Christian and otherwise—that young people make especially evident: We hunger for it. It involves a desire to be connected. It is about belonging. This belonging implies ownership and accountability. We might briefly list a few other characteristics of community in lieu of a definition: Mutuality, Commitment, Mission, Identity, Support, Care, Challenge, Presence, Responsibility (for others and for our life together). Community also involves—and nurtures—a shared narrative and shared practices that give meaning to our lives and provide the basis for interpreting or understanding our lives, our choices and actions, and what is happening to us.

Against this broad background, we can zero in on the question before us: What are the theological foundations for our distinctively Christian community? What are the elements of *our* narrative, of the grand story of God and God’s dealing with the world, that shape our understanding and practice of community? Time—and the capacity of your speaker—mean we will be able to do little more than sketch the major building blocks of that foundation. But as I said, this is meant to be reminders of what you already know. It’s the fertilizer not the harvest. One other thing. Though I separate the points that follow to highlight certain theological affirmations that I see as formative, they interweave in a host of ways as a kind of organic or multidimensional *fabric* that supports and shapes the life of the community as Christian. I have not noted all those connections but they constitute a kind of gestalt: a reality in which the separate parts work together to make a whole that is greater than the sum of those parts. There is a *catalytic* effect in bringing them together!

So let’s begin with some theology in the strict sense of the term: talk about God. I am increasingly convinced that the single most significant theological foundation for Christian community is our affirmation that God is Trinity. I know, mention of the Trinity usually elicits eye-rolling over the thought of something incredibly arcane and abstruse, of interest only to academic theologians with little connection to the life of discipleship. But think about it. Our confession that God is Trinity says that God is three distinct, different persons yet One. The fundamental reality of the universe—God—is relational. **God in Godself is community.** And a community of a particular kind. All the technical debates over this doctrine in the early centuries were wrestling with how to articulate a profound reality: God is three persons who are really distinct. Yet their real difference does not undo their unity, their identity. Real difference is not a threat to unity. This is the kind of community God is.

⁶ (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), p. 25.

⁷ Anabel Proffitt and Jacqui Church Young, “Catalyzing Community: Forming the Community as Catechist,” in *How Youth Ministry can Change Theological Education*, p. 66.

In an age when difference is increasingly seen as a threat not just to unity but to our very identity, when people engage in ethnic or religious cleansing to eliminate the different, the other, sometimes in the name of God, the Trinity is hardly impractical. Indeed, if we as a church lived out our confession that difference is not a threat to our unity and identity, the world would take note. Certainly for our purposes, in thinking about the theological foundations for Christian community, the Trinity is the cornerstone of that community.

Second, as humans we are made in the image of this Trinitarian God (Gen 1:26). We see here Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity, but the reality is that *we* are created to be nothing less than a holy icon of God as Trinity. Augustine and countless others turned this *imago* inward to see a reflection of the Trinity in, for example, the unity of memory, understanding and will in the individual. This is a fertile field of thought but not the field I want to plow. Instead, I invite you to consider the image of the Trinity in our social nature—in community. Both the individuals gathered in community and the community itself are to reflect the Trinity as we love and relate to one another in our uniqueness and difference as well as our bondedness, our unity. This Trinitarian image in us also gives us our yearning for community. Theologically, the desire for connections, the desire to belong is rooted in our nature as an image of the Trinitarian God. As God says in Genesis: “It is not good for [the human] to be alone...”[Gen. 2:18]. We are made for communion with God and each other.

It is important to note, both theologically and practically, — and this is our third foundation — that this desire for community, like the rest of our nature, can be – and has been – corrupted by sin. Personally, I don't think it helpful or wise to restrict the term “community” to only positive, healthy community. There are groupings, a criminal gang, for example, that seem to meet the criteria for community but are very unhealthy, sinful and an occasion for sin. I don't think there are realms of human endeavor that are immune from sin—including community.

Fourth, and related to the idea that we are created for community, we are called to be a people. Specifically we are called *by* God to be the people of God. In the words of *The Church in the Modern World* from Vatican II:

“As God did not create [humans] for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also "it has pleased God to make [humans] holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into ... a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness." So from the beginning ... [God] has chosen [people] not just as individuals but as members of a certain community.”⁸

We see this in the calling of the People of Israel and in the calling of the Church. Indeed, the Greek word for church, “ekklesia” is a compound of “ek” and “klētoi” meaning to be called out, as by a herald calling the people of a town together. In this case the herald calling us together is God.

⁸ *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents of Vatican II*, gen. ed Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1981), paragraph 32

One of the aims of the communities in your programs is to foster a sense of vocation in the youth. Very important. I would add to that, that the community itself has a vocation. *We* are called—as a we, as a community. As with individuals, it is not easy to discern what the vocation of the community is. In fact, our wrestling with our vocation as the People of God is one of the core dynamics of the whole Biblical narrative. It's at the heart of our relation to God, and our character as humans. What do I mean by that?

From the perspective of the Gospel—specifically the cross—we can see that from the beginning we have wrestled with the question of whether we are called to Sovereignty or to Service. Over and over and over again we have made it clear that we want sovereignty, to rule the world. And over and over again God has tried to teach us that we are being called to service, to the kenosis Paul describes in Philippians of following the messiah who “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave....” *This* is our vocation, individually and as a community. But we – understandably – resist. We want sovereignty. That's what's playing out in that pivotal encounter at Caesarea Philippi where, after confessing Jesus as the Messiah, Peter tries to correct Jesus' teaching about how the Messiah will suffer and die. We want to hear our call as a call to sovereignty, not to service. And this is not unique to the first century or to the Jews. It is a basic human desire. We want our messiah to be superman and we want to be his agents. It's how we want to understand the dominion God gave us over the earth and how we see the place and power of the church—or ourselves as Christians—in the world right now. But instead of a Superman we get the cross—and that is our vocation as a Christian community, as the People of God.

Our fifth formative affirmation for Christian community is Jesus' promise that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”[MT 18:20]. There are four elements packed into this promise I would like to highlight for our theological understanding of Christian community. First, it's a promise made *to a community*. Even if only 2 or 3, it's still not just to an individual. Second, we gather *in the name of Christ*. We do not gather in some other name like Caesar, or Uncle Sam, or our own name. We gather in the name of Christ. That is what makes this community Christian. This means that the community has a purpose beyond itself, a purpose that is Christ's purpose. The community is not an end in itself but is about God in Christ and the work of God in the world. Thus the primary concern of the community is not self-preservation, but the mission of Christ. Picking up on our last point, we can say that our purpose, our mission, is service—continuing the service and love incarnate in Christ. Third, while it's a bit of a stretch, I think we can say that there is an *intentionality* implied in the act of gathering. We *choose* to come together in the name of Christ.

Fourth, Christ himself is present in this gathering, this community. I have to confess that I too often fall prey here to the occupational hazard of theology: I've heard and said these words so often, I lose touch with the wondrousness of this promise. Christian community is not just about keeping alive the memory of a dead founder. It is about the continuing presence of Christ in our

midst. That is our identity and our mission as a community. It's important to note, also, that it does *not* follow from Christ's promise to be with us, that God is *not* present anywhere else.

This is closely related to what deserves to be distinguished as a sixth foundation: Christian community is the Body of Christ. This is a prominent image in Scripture that has shaped our thinking about the community. Its basic point is the one we just made: the continuing presence of Christ in the community. However, it highlights a couple additional aspects of this presence and this community. For one thing, Paul uses it to make the point that there are different parts and functions in the community but this difference does not or should not diminish our unity. It's like the point we made about the Trinity. The image of the body of Christ also evokes a connection with the Incarnation. Just as God is really present in the physical body of Jesus Christ so is God present through the Holy Spirit in the Christian community as the body of Christ.

While we may explain it in various ways, many of us believe that the Eucharist *particularizes* this continuing presence of Christ in the community. In this practice we enter into communion in a tangible way both with God and with others. Significantly, this is part of a continuum of promise and presence. It is not just in the elements of the Eucharist that the body of Christ is sacramentally present. The whole community of disciples is the body of Christ and is called to be the continuing, sacramental presence of Christ in the world.

Our seventh theological foundation can be seen as a variation on the idea of the presence of Christ in the community: the Christian community is in some way an anticipation of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is the heartbeat of Jesus' preaching. As Messiah, Jesus was God's agent for bringing about the promised kingdom of God. All appearances to the contrary—think cross—this kingdom was breaking into the world in the work and person of Jesus. If not, if nothing really *new* happened with Jesus, he is at best one more prophet pointing to something yet to come. On the other hand, it's clear the world is not the promised kingdom. Hence the decisive *already—not yet* dynamic of the work of Christ and the kingdom. Something new has *already* happened in Christ but it is *not yet* complete.

The term translated as “kingdom” in the New Testament is “*basileia*,” which can also be translated as “reign,” which I find to be a more fruitful term. I know there are important gender considerations here with the idea of God as a male king. But that is not my primary rationale for preferring “reign.” “Kingdom” naturally suggests a place, a geographic entity, which can evoke a kind of passive citizenship. But think of an actual kingdom, especially in the ancient world. We are used to thinking of nations with fairly fixed borders. The ancient world was much more fluid. Pragmatically, the borders of a kingdom or empire can be determined by where the decrees of the queen or king have authority. Word goes out, for instance, that everyone in the kingdom will pay \$100 dollars in taxes. Where people stop paying, you've come to the border. The queen's word no longer has authority. You're no longer in the kingdom.

This is why I think *reign* of God is a more appropriate, more richly evocative translation of *basileia*. The reign of God is not a fixed territory but is where the word of God has authority. If the word of God reigns in your life, you are in the kingdom of God. And of course the Word of

God is Jesus Christ. So we have Origen's wonderful notion that Jesus is the kingdom in himself—autobasileia.

The Christian *community*, then, is that community of people in whom God's word reigns. As such, we are to manifest the practices and behaviors of the kingdom as Jesus reveals them in his teachings, parables, and actions. In this way we are continuing the presence and work of Christ in the world, not just through our *proclamation* of Christ or the kingdom but in our *living* it.

As we do so, the Christian community will be—as Jesus also taught and modelled—a contrast society to the world and its values. There is a conversion, a transformation, in living according to God's word, in letting it reign in one's life. It's worth noting, though, that we do not set out to be a contrast society for its own sake. Our goal is not to be *different* but to be faithful—faithful disciples and an authentically Christian community. If this makes us different or the same as others, so be it. But we should be prepared for the difference. The community should form its members for the challenges of being different than the world.

At the same time, the community, like Christ, also points beyond itself to something more, something yet to come. We are reminded daily that the kingdom has not come in all its glory. The Word of God does not reign throughout the world. It doesn't even reign throughout the church or in my own life. The conversion into, the coming of the reign of God is not yet complete. Thus the Christian community lives out both the already and the not yet of the kingdom.

Some of you may be getting a little theologically nervous about this. Am I suggesting – betraying a Catholic temptation – that this community or perhaps the kingdom itself is a product of our virtue? No. To make that clear, my eighth point: Christian community is a gift.

Where better to turn for a powerful statement of this point than a Lutheran. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his classic, *Life Together*, argues that the Christian community is *Christ's* community, built and sustained by the Holy Spirit, into which we are invited.

“Because God already has laid the only foundation of our community, because God has united us in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that life together with other Christians, ... as those who thankfully receive.”⁹

Further, “Like the Christian's sanctification, Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim”[38]. This is what it means to say that we gather *in the name of Christ*, that this community is *the body of Christ* and an anticipation of the reign of God.

To be sure, there is an intentionality to being a member of the Christian community. I choose to belong to this community, to let God reign in my life. However, it is equally important to recognize that the community is prior to my choosing. I don't just mean that the community is

⁹ *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 5* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 36. Also noted in Proffitt and Young, p. 66.

temporally prior to my action, that I choose to join an existing community. I mean *theologically* prior in the sense Bonhoeffer articulates. The community is a fruit of God's action prior to any human activity. In this it reflects the age-old mystery of gift and achievement, grace and work, in the Christian life. It's why, as noted earlier, the pastors we've gathered who do community well think it inappropriate to speak of "building" community. They know from experience that this too easily suggests a role for human control that is not true to the reality of community life. It does not leave enough room for the activity of the Holy Spirit they experience in their work—but *work* they do! Work they prefer to think of as cultivation—or catalyzing—community.

An important consequence of seeing community as a gift, as with the gift of grace in our lives generally, is that we do not need to be perfect—or even close to it—to be part of a Christian community. These are not communities of finished disciples but of people on the way. Indeed, the importance of the gift of community is that it is precisely in and through this community that we become disciples. It is in *this* community, with *these* people, engaging in the shared practices of Christian community life, that our discipleship takes shape, our conversion completed, and our transformation into citizens of the kingdom of God occurs. We do not somehow do all that elsewhere and then join the community when we are worthy. As Pope Francis puts it, the church is a field hospital for sinners, for the wounded and broken—which is all of us.

Which brings us to our final point: Christian community is a concrete, historically embodied reality made up of flesh and blood human beings. Given the lofty rhetoric of Scripture and theology on Christian community, it would be easy to see it as a wonderful spiritual ideal, a kind of disembodied, a-historical utopian dream, and lose touch with the actual communities in which we live and the actual people we live with in them.

This community, this body of Christ, is an incarnational reality and as such there is much we can learn from our deliberations on the incarnation of Christ and the relation of his divine and human natures. For instance, just as it is a mistake to see the divine and human natures of Christ competing in some zero-sum game, so we must not pit the spiritual reality of the Christian community against its historical, sociological reality. It is fully both. Specifically, we need to avoid the community equivalent of Gnosticism, Docetism, or Apollinarianism, all of which deny the reality of Jesus' human nature because it is offensive. All those icky bodily functions and fluids and vulnerability are just not the kind of thing any self-respecting God would take on. But God did—and does.

Christ is *really* present, the Holy Spirit *really* at work, not in some abstract ideal of community, but in the historical, cultural realities of our congregations. Yes—in, with, and under all the messiness and dysfunction of that congregation you're thinking of right now! *That* community, *those* people are what we've been talking about. Christian community is messy and always has been. Think of the dissension between the Hebrews and Hellenists in the Jerusalem community or all the problems Paul had to address in letters to his communities. It is not immune to sin and its effects any more than other realms of human activity. Our brokenness is as much a part of Christian community as is the presence of Christ. The Body of Christ is a community in which,

as Thomas Merton puts it, love means “resetting a body of broken bones.”¹⁰ And *that* community is heir to all the promises we described above.

Again, Bonhoeffer is helpful. He warns us of “the danger of confusing Christian community with some *wishful image* of pious community”[34].

“Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself,” he continues, “become destroyers of that ... community even though their ... intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.... They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together”[36].

Or in the words of Jean Vanier, “Stop wasting time running after the perfect community. Life your life fully in your community today.”¹¹

It’s not only easy to forget that the Christian community is a gift; it can be difficult to accept the gift as it is given in reality.

Accepting the reality of this gift does not mean we are complacent about its shortcomings any more than the gift of grace makes us complacent about our own sinfulness. We work tirelessly to eliminate sin and its effects in the community, to be a catalyst of the community as the presence of Christ in the world and an anticipation of the reign of God. The mystery of Gift and Achievement, Grace and Work is always with us.

You have worked hard to be catalysts for such community in your programs. You have given these young disciples a taste of something amazing: the gift of Christian community. For all sorts of reasons, this is probably not a community that can be sustained for a lifetime of jobs, marriages, children, and all the changes, challenges, and joys that go with them. It’s important for these youth and their congregations that they integrate into an actual congregation of other Christians, where they can be supported and challenged in their faith—a topic I know you are addressing.¹²

As important as this integration is to the lives of the youth you have energized—*catalyzed*—I would like to close with a word about how important it is to the life of the church and our churches. By giving these young people a taste of Christian community you have activated their appetite for community and fired their imagination for what a Christian community might be. *You have raised their expectations.* I hope their expectations of both the communities they will go to and of themselves as responsible members of those communities. I hope they will find in those communities support for their continuing growth and formation as disciples. No doubt these heightened expectations will lead to some disappointment, dissatisfaction with the bland,

¹⁰ *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 72. A special thanks to Heidi Neumark for this reference.

¹¹ *Community and Growth*, Revised edition (New York: Paulist, 1989), p. 46.

¹² See Christy Lang Hearlson, “Taking it Home: Separation and Reintegration as Teachable moments,” in *How Youth Ministry can Change Theological Education*, pp. 121-36.

un-nourishing community they may experience in their congregation. But this can be a good thing. It can be a catalyst for action in the congregation, helping it to be what it is called to be; helping it hear and follow its vocation. These higher expectations, the dissatisfaction and action is the gift of youth to us oldsters and to the church.

So I end where I began: **THANK YOU.** Thank you for your work with these young people, for being a catalyst for the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives and through them in the church, the Christian community.