

1-1-2011

Community: To What End?

Stephen D. Long

Marquette University, d.stephen.long@marquette.edu

Published Version. "Community: To What End?" in *The Great Tradition—A Great Labor*. Eds. Philip E. Harrold, and D. H. Williams. Eugene, OR : Wipf and Stock, 2011: 70-81. [Permalink](#). © 2011 Wipf and Stock Publishers. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

FIVE

Community: To What End?

D. Stephen Long

After an outdoor sermon was delivered by the Anglican priest, Mr. John Wesley, a number of persons were moved and approached him, asking what they should do to be saved. His response was (and I paraphrase), "Meet me next Thursday and I'll put you in a small group." He did not ask anyone to pray the sinner's prayer. Never did he say, "With every eye closed and every head bowed, let me see a hand." Evangelism, and for that matter salvation, was not for Mr. Wesley a private or individual event; it was communal. "Christianity," he once wrote, "is a social religion." And by that he did not mean, as it is often wrongly interpreted, that Christians should be involved in the public sphere or work for social justice; he meant something more specific. Wesley wrote, "I shall endeavor to show that Christianity is essentially a social religion, and that to turn it into a solitary relation is indeed to destroy it . . . Secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible."¹

Wesley makes two claims here. First, Christianity is not about a solitary, individual relation with God, but can only rightly be understood

1. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) I:1:533.

as “communal.” Second, the communal character of Christianity cannot but be a public witness. I would like to explain both these points and then conclude with how Wesley’s very traditional understanding of the communal character of Christianity contributed to the ministry of the Church of the Redeemer at Northwestern University.

“Christianity is essentially a social religion”

Christianity as a social religion only makes sense because of the way of life Jesus proclaimed as blessed. Wesley makes this statement in the context of his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. The beatitudes give us the end or purpose for community. In fact, they exhibited what Wesley meant by his well-known expression, “religion of the heart.” He did not mean some private existential experience about which no one can judge. He meant a social reality, embodied in the community of faith, that once embodied could not be concealed. Here he is in touch with a central theme in Christian tradition, which can be found in a number of church Fathers as well as saints and doctors, especially St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. It is a theme that has disappeared in much of contemporary Christian ethics. The theme is this: Jesus’ pronouncement of beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount sets forth the end or purpose of the Christian life. It discloses to us true happiness, which is communal.

Anyone who has studied the history of ethics knows that for many ancient ethicists the true end of life was happiness. Every action aimed to make one happy explicitly or implicitly. Nearly all early Christians found what Robert Wilken called “a serendipitous congruence of the Bible and the wisdom of the Greeks and Romans” with respect to this life of beatitude.² (Not all contemporary Christians do; Nicholas Wolterstorff, for instance, does not.) Yet Christians made significant revisions to the ancient understanding. The happiness Aristotle envisioned could not be found solely in immanent, natural human powers, but only in an eschatological promise that comes in the middle of time through the way of life Jesus called “blessed.” When Mr. Wesley speaks of the “religion of the heart,” he does not mean some existential experience of absolute dependence, or a momentary transaction between God and the individual

2. Robert Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003) 273.

sinner. He means the life of beatitude Jesus announced, especially the first seven beatitudes: poverty of spirit, meekness, mournfulness, righteousness (or justice), mercifulness, purity of heart, and peaceableness. He also thought, as did Augustine and Aquinas, that anyone who truly embodied these seven virtues would most likely receive the eighth: "persecution for righteousness sake."

Why did these beatitudes require that Christianity be a "social religion"? We can see this in Wesley's explanation of the beatitude of "meekness," of which he writes, "As it implies mildness, gentleness and long-suffering, it cannot possibly have a being . . . without an intercourse with other men. . . . So that to attempt turning this into a solitary virtue is to destroy it from the face of the earth."³ The true embodiment of a life of beatitude requires living in proximity with others, seeking the same end.

That people bound together communally seeking the same end will bring happiness runs counter to most everything we moderns hold near and dear. Most of the aphorisms by which we are encouraged to live suggest exactly the opposite: "Think for yourself"; "Be an individual"; "An army of one"; "What is a man, what has he got, if not himself then he has not"; "I took a chance I did it my way"; "If Billy jumped off a cliff/bridge . . . ?" "Think outside the box"; "Affirm diversity, pluralism, etc." But for both Scripture and Christian tradition, the modern emphasis on the individual who stands against the community asserting his or her own independence is nothing short of a life of idiocy. We see this in the famous Acts passages in chapters 2 and 4 which extol a life lived in common: "They held all things in common (*koina*) (Acts 2:44), and no one said that what he possessed was his own (*idion*) but all things were common" (*koina*). Here we find a contrast between a life in common (*koina*) with a life lived as if it were its own (*idion*). The word individual and idiot both come from this same Greek word—*idion*.

Wesley stated Christianity is a social religion because he recognized that the pursuit and embodiment of the Christian life, primarily attested in the Sermon on the Mount, was not a life that could be accomplished by heroic individuals nor exercised by solitary persons. It requires life in community. How are we to pursue and embody meekness, mercifulness, peaceableness, righteousness, or justice without living truthfully with others who will help us name our own self-deceptions about such gifts?

3. Wesley, *Works*, §I.3, 1:534.

Wesley was on to something here when he insisted that salvation doesn't occur primarily with individuals standing alone, but with people bound together in a common life.

“Secondly, that to conceal this religion is impossible”⁴

Intrinsic to this community's way of life is its witness. Evangelism and mission are not strategies one can implement using the latest sociological analyses. Evangelism is the life of faithfulness. This is the basis of Wesley's second statement—“to conceal this religion is impossible.”⁵ The common life, the life of communion, lived in the midst of various and diverse cities cannot but be a visible and public witness to all the inhabitants of those cities. This too emerges from Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount. “You are a city set on a hill . . .” (Matt 5:14). The end of Christian community is to be a city set in the midst of the cities bearing witness to the city that is coming (Revelation 21). This of course is also essential to the Christian tradition for it is what generated the Christian mission in the first place. It is the call of Israel, into which we have graciously been grafted, the call not to be like the other nations for the sake of the nations. To fulfill this call, God gave them sacred possessions: the divine name, the Torah, and the Temple. We believe that Christ is the fulfillment of these promises. He bears the divine name, fulfils the law, which is a communication of God's own being, and his body becomes the “Temple,” the site of God, which is mediated to us by our communion in Word and sacrament. Christianity's participation in the mission of Israel is what makes it essentially a social religion.

Wesley understood this well. It is why for him the proper relation between law and Gospel was the basis for Christian witness. He stated that there was no contradiction at all between the law and the Gospel. When he first formed the Methodist communities, he gave them three general rules by which they were to live: do no harm, do good, and attend upon the ordinances of God. (Anyone familiar with Aquinas's account of the natural law will see a strong resemblance here: the first two are what he called the first principle of practical reason—do good and avoid evil.) Under each of these rules he placed specific examples, often straight from

4. Wesley, *Works*, §1.1, 1:533.

5. *Ibid.*

the Ten Commandments or other biblical commands. The Methodists were to observe these commands, including the third that called for a common worship life, but Wesley also called these rules nothing more than the “religion of the world” or the “righteousness of a Pharisee.”⁶ The bare observance of these commands is insufficient, even though that is better than their willful violation. The commands, like the law, have an end, which is the “religion of the heart,” the life of beatitude. Wesley feared that the church of his day had the form of religion; it had the law, the creeds, and a proper liturgy, but it lacked the substance—the life of beatitude. He called Christians to gather in a community, bound together by these rules, in order to assist each other in the pursuit of that life of beatitude, which of course always comes as a gift of the Spirit.

When the life of beatitude is communally embodied, it produces a witness that cannot be concealed. This, too, is a common theme in Christian tradition. We find it in the Epistle to Diognetus when the author, whoever he may be, explains the shape of Christian community:

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, *they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.* They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. [Literally, “cast away fetuses.”] They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified.⁷

6. Wesley, Sermon 25, “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, V,” *Works* §IV.7–9, 1:565–67.

7. *Epistle to Diognetus*. Online: http://earlychurchtexts.com/public/epistle_to_diognetus.htm.

If we had time, we could easily trace how this theme of a “common life on display” was prevalent throughout the tradition up until the latter Medieval and early modern eras. As the epistle notes, the common life of the Christian is not an escape, a withdrawal, or sectarian removal from ordinary life. We are found in every city, wearing the dress and eating the food of that city. We still marry and raise children like others. But within these cities, among the diversity of dress, language, food, we nonetheless share a “common table” and offer a “striking method of life.” We are a transnational community—a communion—found in every local precinct. This is what it means to be church, and one cannot be Christian without church. It is why Christianity is essentially a social religion.

To be church requires an embodiment of all four marks of the church that we confess each week: unity, catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness. These are the work of the Holy Spirit in our common life. The Catholic theologian, Yves Congar, explained this well. The Spirit, he wrote, “is the extreme communication of God himself, God as grace, God *in us* and, in this sense, God outside himself.”⁸ The Spirit, then, is the “principle of communion.” By “principle” is meant the living, animating force. By “communion” is meant a communication that unites communicator and those communicated. The Spirit communicates with that which is not God—creation—bringing it into unity with God and with each other without losing the distinction between God and creatures. For Congar, as for the Christian tradition, we find communion as communication in the very act of the giving of the Divine Name in Exodus 3. He writes, “Spirit can further God’s plan, which can be expressed in the words ‘communion,’ ‘many in one’ and ‘uniplurality.’ At the end there will be a state in which God will be ‘everything to everyone’ (1 Cor 15: 28). In other words, there will be one life animating many without doing violence to the inner experience of anyone, just as, on Mount Sinai, Yahweh set fire to the bush and it was not consumed.”⁹ This unity is expressed in catholicity, apostolicity, and holiness, just as each of them is expressed only in the other three.

Catholicity is both particular and universal at the same time. The church is born at Pentecost where each can hear a common, universal proclamation in the singular particularity of one’s own language. The

8. Yves Congar, *He is Lord and Giver of Life*, vol. 2 of *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 17–18.

9. *Ibid.*, 17.

common and universal is also “apostolic” in that the apostles give us the language of the faith.

That the church is apostolic means that it must always relate to, and therefore be “in conformity with the origins of Christianity.” It was the Apostles who witnessed first hand the person and work of Christ. Their witness is primarily attested in Scripture. But because they claim that Christ is both the beginning and the end, the “alpha and omega,” apostolicity is not only backward looking; it is also forward looking, anticipating the end. Therefore Congar writes, “Apostolicity is the mark that for the Church is both a gift of grace and a task. It makes the Church fill the space between the Alpha and Omega by ensuring that there is a continuity between the two and a substantial identity between the end and the beginning.”¹⁰

If we lose contact with the priority of the apostolic witness, we will also lose contact with the end. The apostolic witness is to be embodied in every local, particular manifestation of the church, and that makes it universal, one, and holy.¹¹ Apostolicity and the other two marks are inseparable from “holiness.” Congar notes, “The Church’s oneness is holy. It is different from the phenomenon described by sociologists and is to be found at the level of faith. The Church’s apostolicity is also holy. It is the continuity of a mission and a communion which begin in God. Finally, the catholicity of the Church is holy and different from for example, a multi-national or world-wide expansion.”¹² Just to have a global corporation is insufficient. We already have many of them. Nor is it adequate to have a federation of autonomous bodies—we already have that, it is called the “United Nations.” The purpose of the church, its ineluctable witness, requires a global *communion* where each does not live individualistically like an “idiot,” but in common. What is held in common is what Wesley identified—doctrine, worship, life. But all of this is for the purpose of a social embodiment of the life of beatitude. A “bare” orthodoxy or common liturgy is insufficient without its fruit in the common life of beatitude, the life of holiness. This brings us back to Wesley. For the “holiness” of the church is its participation in Christ’s work through the Holy Spirit. For Wesley, the beatitudes constitute that work. For what are they but the righteousness exhibited in Christ’s own work? His righteousness is

10. *Ibid.*, 39.

11. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

12. *Ibid.*, 52.

to become our righteousness, the righteousness of his body, the church, through its application to us by the Holy Spirit. Communion without beatitude is not communion; it is form without substance.

The Anglican Mission

Four years ago, while teaching at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary on the campus of Northwestern University, one of my students came to me and mentioned that he was part of a new church plant that intended to start a ministry at Northwestern. He asked if I would consider being the faculty sponsor. When Mike Niebauer, the catechist for this new ministry, explained the vision for it, I was attracted because its primary purpose was to do evangelism not as a program, but through a common way of life. Mike was a graduate of Northwestern and he thought Christians on NU's campus had been too influenced by a kind of evangelicalism that was solitary and individual. It lacked community and connection with the classical Christian tradition, both in doctrine and worship. He wanted to start a community that would remedy this. I explained to him how Wesley's general rules functioned, and we did two things. First, we began a Sunday worship service in the Anglican tradition where we fulfilled the third general rule by providing for both NU students and Garrett seminarians a weekly Eucharist where we could also confess our common faith in the Nicene Creed, something that has disappeared in Methodist churches. We requested and were originally granted the use of Garrett's chapel for this service, although we were eventually asked to leave. Second, we formed a number of small groups that met regularly in order to pursue holiness by using the Methodist General Rules. We had NU undergrads and Garrett seminarians praying together in these discipleship groups for two years. I found this to be an exciting and hopeful development where the vision of Wesley and its rightful place in the Anglican Communion were coming together. We were, and are, something of a hybrid identity—not trying to avoid the proper role of the hierarchical offices in the church, but more concerned for the life of holiness embodied in the local faith community.

After two years of working with the Church of the Redeemer at Northwestern, for reasons that still mystify me, we were asked to leave Garrett's campus. By that time we were an officially recognized ministry at Northwestern University, so the ministry continued on NU's campus.

I have since left Garrett, but Mike carried on the vision and they still graciously allow me to preach when I can. He, along with others, continues the vision of catechists starting small, local communities bound by a common life of doctrine, worship, and the pursuit of holiness. I still find this resonant with Wesley's vision and wonder if in the future the Spirit might lead us to a renewed communion between Wesleyans and Anglicans.¹³ Church of Redeemer at NU continues with small discipleship groups. They still provide a weekly Anglican Eucharist service, but no longer with any official cooperation from the Methodist seminary. They are raising up leaders who will start similar ministries at other Midwest universities.

Conclusion

Let me offer some concluding comments as an outsider—as a Methodist who longs for a visible global communion—on the present crisis besetting Anglicanism. I must confess that as a Methodist who had worked primarily in Catholic settings, I knew little about the crisis in the Anglican Communion when I consented to be the faculty sponsor for Church of Redeemer at Northwestern. I know a bit more about it now and I would be pleased that, if by God's grace, the crisis among Anglicans could result in bringing us back in to that communion. We Methodists were a movement that accidentally became a church, and we do not do church well. We need the order, discipline, and common liturgy of the Anglican Communion, just as it could benefit from our emphasis on holiness. Somehow, in opposition to Wesley, we thought we could have the substance of holiness without the form of the general rules, the creeds, and a common liturgy. That has not worked well. However, I think we could also contribute our charism to the Anglican Communion. The purpose of the order of the church is not an end in itself but a means to embody Christ's life.

It does not come as a surprise to me that the Church of England and The Episcopal Church in the United States experienced an acute crisis at the end of Christendom, one that has struck and will strike most of Protestantism, but surely there is a reason that it struck this church so forcibly. Turning to Wesley might help us understand why.

13. I'm encouraged that Mike's band is called "John Wesley's Band," which can be found online: <http://www.myspace.com/johnwesleysband>.

John Wesley proclaimed that the “mystery of iniquity” arose in the Church when Christians were no longer willing to claim that they were “of one heart and mind” and no one’s possessions were his or her own. For him, the “lasting wound” to the Church was when Constantine “called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honours, and power upon the Christians, more especially upon the clergy.”¹⁴ This individuated the Church and made it more committed to acting like the nations of the world rather than being “for the healing of the nations.”¹⁵ Is this not in large part the crisis before us? It is the crisis of “Constantinianism,” which does not refer only to the events in the fourth century. (I am well aware that Justinian in the sixth century was much more Constantinian than Constantine.) It refers to the Caesaropapism in which throne and altar are brought together into a unity such that the church primarily serves the interests of the ruling authorities. Perhaps it is my Methodist background or the fact that I work in a Catholic setting, but it seems to me that insofar as the unity of the Anglican Communion is defined by the Archbishop of Canterbury—given how he is appointed—this lingering problem of “Caesaropapism,” or at least “investiture,” remains. This is not because I have any animus toward the Archbishop—in fact I am a huge fan of the theology of the present holder—but because I think identifying the office of unity through a single, nationalist identity (appointed by the Queen and Prime Minister) continues the improper individuation of a catholic communion.

Of course, the problem is not just the Church of England—another version of “Constantinianism” and/or investiture can be found in TEC. Note the language by which the “Chicago Consultation” recently challenged the proposed Anglican covenant:

The Episcopal Church was founded shortly after the American Revolution. In keeping with that democratic tradition, the Church’s constitution and canons and its historical polity provide us with both the strength and stability of the General Convention’s governing and legislative processes as well as the local ability for dioceses to discern and elect the bishops who can best serve them and make other decisions about their common life. We believe that these canons have served us well, are essential to the Church’s continued

14. “Mystery of Iniquity,” II.463.

15. *Ibid.*, II.466.

health and bind together the strongest elements of our common spiritual heritage and tradition of democracy.

The specifics of the American national polity provide the basis for the ecclesial polity in opposition to the catholicity of the Church. Once again, the Church is improperly individuated. Communion cannot take place when our national traditions, be they British, American, Canadian, or African, take precedence over what we hold in common.

I recognize that this is an easy accusation to make, but more difficult to defend, and yet more difficult to remedy. Nonetheless, I find wisdom in Wesley's diagnosis. As long as any part of the body refuses to hold in common our possessions, including our sacred possessions, will we not continue to experience our lingering wounds?