

God Is Not Enough: The Story of Christian Community

By Rich Lusk

The story of Christian community begins, as every Christian story does, in the Garden of Eden. Adam was created in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. He was created in perfect covenantal fellowship with the Triune Lord. No sin stood in the way of their communion, as the Creator and creature loved one another in fullness. Moreover, Adam didn't have to earn anything; God had freely and graciously blessed him. He had all the privileges of divine sonship. The Lord had, in the most intimate way, breathed life into Adam, imparting his own Spirit to the first man (Gen. 2; cf. Jn. 20). The Lord gave him access to the Tree of Life and a fatherly warning to avoid the Tree of the Knowledge of Good Evil until the time was right. The Lord gave him meaningful labor, as he was to serve and guard the garden the Lord had planted for him. He had abundant food and a beautiful environment in which to live, worship, and play. All of creation was his, as God's vice-regent. And yet, the Lord evaluated the situation at the mid-point of the sixth creation day and said "It is not good that man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

Alone?! Adam was emphatically *not* alone at his creation. He enjoyed friendship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He was the son of God. He was included in the Triune family. What more could he need? We'd expect the text to read, in harmony with the rest of Gen. 1-2, "And the Lord God said, 'It is good for man to be *with me*, to have *me* as his friend.' But that's not what the inspired narrative says.

Apparently Adam's pre-fall communion with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was *not enough*. God made man for *more than* fellowship with himself. To be complete, to be satisfied, to be fully realized as a creature made in God's image, the man needed fellowship with other humans. He was not only created, as Augustine suggested, with a Trinity-shaped void in his heart that only the Father, Son, and Spirit could fill; he was also created with a human-shaped void that only other people could fill.

This is part of what it means to be made in God's image. God is not a single individual. He is a community of three distinct persons, bound together in an absolute oneness of love and fellowship. For man to *image* this kind of God required a plurality of humans in fellowship with one another. An isolated individual is not a full image of the plural Godhead. Thus, *God is not enough*. People need other people to be complete. We were made for each other.

Because we are made in God's image, God is the model for humanity. The Father, Son, and Spirit mutually indwell one another's lives (Jn. 13-17). The theological term for this is "perichoresis." "Peri" is Greek for "around." We get the word "choreograph" from "choresis." The idea is that the three persons of the Godhead "dance around" or "dance within" one another. Their lives are totally intertwined. They move in lockstep with one another because they abide within one another. But this is precisely how we are to live in Christian community. We are to open our lives to others so they can indwell us, but we are also to seek to "move into" the lives of

others, abiding in them. In this kind of community, as we indwell one another and live “perichoretically,” we image the life of the Triune God.

Obviously, the claim “God is not enough” is hyperbolic. This should not be understood in an idolatrous fashion. Obviously, in an ultimate sense, God *is* enough for man. We can and must still speak of the *absolute adequacy* of God. It is God, after all, who provided all Adam’s needs. It is God who created Eve and gave her to Adam as the crown of his other gifts. God stands back of all Adam’s satisfaction and joy. It is God who ultimately completes Adam.

But our point here concerns God’s creation design. God designed humans to live in community with one another. This is part and parcel of what it means to be *imago Dei*. God made us in such a way that vertical fellowship with the divine would be insufficient; we also need horizontal fellowship with other humans. God did not just make us for himself, he made us for each other.

Or, to look at things from another angle, God made the world in such a way that his presence would be mediated from one human to another. God dealt directly with Adam, but for the most part God deals indirectly with us. He speaks to us, disciplines us, molds us, and so forth, though the agency of others. God works through means, especially the means of humans made in his image.

Community is inescapable. Each one of us comes into existence only because two other people “communed” (so to speak) in just the right way. After birth, we would perish in days, if not hours, if others did not care for us. We learn every social skill we possess (or don’t possess) from others – language, manners, games, proficiencies, etc. And this need for others is not something we outgrow. It is more obvious in the case of infants, but just as real in the case of adults. No man is an island and no man is self-sufficient.

Thus, the pessimistic dictum of existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, “Hell is other people,” is exactly backwards. Hell is the *absence*, not the *presence*, of other people. In fact, in hell, the wicked will be utterly alone, apart from an all-too-personal, all-too-close relationship with the God they utterly despise. Contrary to existentialism, other people do not stifle our freedom or get in the way of our self-actualization. Rather, it is precisely in community that we are free to find and be our true selves. We are not self-made, but God- and others-made.

Heaven and the new creation are precisely what Sartre dreaded, but in a form he could not imagine. Heaven is, as Jonathan Edwards put it, “a society of love.” It is not the absence of other people, but precisely their presence that makes heaven so heavenly. The saved community is marked out even in the present by this mutual love (Jn. 13). Our love for one another shows that the power of God’s new creation is already at work in the world. This love will be perfected in the resurrection.

Ultimately, salvation itself must be understood in communal terms. Just as sin wrecked our fellowship with God and with one another, so in redemption that fellowship is restored. Psalm 133 spells out the connection between salvation and community in beautiful, poetic terms. Brothers dwelling together in unity is likened to the precious anointing oil flowing down Aaron’s beard to the edge of his garment. The priest’s body and robe become symbolic of the oneness of

the community. The body of the priest is now the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12). The oil – usually symbolic of the Spirit in Scripture – covers the body from head to toe. The psalmist goes on to compare fellowship among the redeemed to the refreshing dew of Hermon flowing down Mount Zion. This is an interesting picture, since Hermon was in northern Israel and Zion in the south. The Spirit, now symbolized by the dew, unites things disparate in space and even culture. The conclusion is remarkable: “For there the Lord commanded his blessing – life forevermore.” That is to say, *eternal life* takes the shape of *community life*. The structure of the psalm itself makes the point: Just as the inner sections of the psalm match (oil and dew, priests and mountains), so the outer sections match (brothers dwelling together in unity and eternal life).

The gospel, then, is irreducibly social. Liberals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century used the label “social gospel” to refer to their program. They substituted salvation from poverty and ignorance through state-mandated welfare and educational programs for salvation from sin and damnation through the cross and Spirit. One theologian characterized the social gospel of liberalism as a God without wrath, bringing men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross. Obviously, that is a total distortion of the biblical teaching.

But in another sense, we could benefit from restoring and redeeming the label “social gospel.” The gospel is social through and through. Traditional Christian teaching claims that outside the church there is no ordinary possibility of salvation. That is to say, forgiveness from sin and incorporation into Christ’s body go hand in hand. Salvation includes a new status (justification) and a new community (the church).

Moreover, the whole Christian life can only be lived out in the context of the church community. The New Testament authors presuppose that followers of Christ will be discipled in the matrix of an ecclesial community (cf. Acts 2:42ff). Numerous apostolic commands only make sense in this light. For example, we are told to love one another, pray for one another, bear one another’s burdens, confess to one another, forgive one another, and so on. In other words, we’re to “one another one another.” But this can only happen in the environment of a church body. It can’t be done in isolation.

American Christians struggle with these things because of our heritage of individualism and dislike for authority (including church authority). Community means you give up some privacy, some of your rights. It means you sometimes have to accommodate yourself to things you wish could be done differently. You have to learn to “give a little,” and to be flexible. It means we have to learn that life together involves becoming vulnerable at times, admitting weaknesses and needs. It also means meeting needs and showing strength on behalf of others at times. Communal life means we are willing to submit to the brethren, especially those God has put in charge of us through ordained office.

But whatever the costs, it is imperative that we learn to live in community once again. We must learn to deal with our differences in a biblical manner (Phil. 2:1-11). We must learn to live under authority (Heb. 13:7, 17). We must learn work together on the common project of building God’s kingdom. We must learn to live as an organic body, in which every part of the community cares for every other part. We must learn what it means to be the communion of the saints, as we confess in the early church creeds. We must rediscover what it means to live shared lives of

generosity, of mercy, of friendship, and of hospitality. Many of these virtues the ancient church excelled in have been lost on us.

American spirituality often treats church community as a “tacked on” extra to a personal relationship with Jesus. In other words, we often act as if God alone is enough, and other Christians were quite unnecessary. “Quiet times,” in which the individual gets alone with God, have replaced the church’s corporate gathering as the pinnacle of spiritual growth. But the Bible points us in a different direction. Remember Adam: life alone with God is not the divine plan for us. God alone is not enough, in a profound sense. We must live in fellowship as one body with other believers if we are to grow and mature as God’s people. As Augustine said, the essence of God’s plan for humanity is mutual fellowship with himself. We are called to share a common life with the Trinity and with one another.

So: Is God enough? Yes, we must insist that he is in an ultimate sense. God is our all in all. But how does God manifest his all-sufficiency towards us? Precisely through giving himself to us in one another. God meets our needs by giving us each other, and together we are called to mirror his life – the life of Triune, perichoretic community.