

THE THEOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF HOLY ECCLESIAL COMMUNITY

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Introduction

The question before us concerns the identity of the church as derived from our foundational theological principles. What we believe about God and His redemptive mission shapes our belief in the church,¹ its identity and mission. The topic of our discussion suggests that, based on our theology, we understand the church to be a community of believers in holy fellowship. Holy fellowship as ecclesial identity, evident in the New Testament,² obtains a particular shape in the framework of a Wesleyan holiness theology. Simply put, what we believe about the divine mission through Christ's atoning work and Lordship, and the enactment of atonement benefits through the Holy Spirit underwrites the character of ecclesial community.³

I suggest that first, holiness theology points us to the triune life of God as the source and model for holy fellowship; second, grounded in the triune life of God, holy fellowship is visibly demonstrated by *kenotic* relationships; and third, theological reflection exemplifies holy fellowship and fosters strong connections between theological foundations and ecclesial practice. Put differently, the Wesleyan theological commitment to a relational and transformative soteriology must translate into a self-understanding of a holy and growing *koinōnia*, created and sustained by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, grounded in the grace and truth revealed to us in the Word.

¹ “We believe in the Church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word.” This excerpt of Articles of Faith XI of the Church of the Nazarene expresses the truth that the Church is a spiritual reality and a visible sign of God's redemptive action in human history (“Articles of Faith: Article XI. The Church,” *Manual, Church of the Nazarene*).

² Small (“What Is Communion and When Is It Full?”) demonstrates the depth and richness of the New Testament concept of fellowship: “*koinōnia* and its family of words occur with moderate frequency in the New Testament. It is variously translated into English as *communion*, *fellowship*, *participation*, *partnership*, *sharing*, *contribution*, and *taking part*. The variety of translations suggests the richness of the term – no one English word can capture the range of meanings,” 76. Likewise, Barclay (“New Testament Words”) identifies the usage of *koinōnia* to mean 1) friendship of persons based on their common faith in Christ; 2) practical sharing; 3) partnership in the work of Christ; 4) fellowship in one faith and in one Spirit; 5) fellowship with Christ through the sacraments, and fellowship with his sufferings—overall, fellowship with God that is demonstrated by walking in truth and holiness (173-74).

Accordingly, the New Testament establishes that *koinōnia* is a necessary expression of new life in Christ. This provides us with sufficient grounds to presuppose that there is theological warrant for holy ecclesial community.

³ Rankin, “A Perfect Church: Toward a Wesleyan Missional Ecclesiology,” 83.

Theological Identity: The Holy God of Communion

God is that perfection of holy loving whereby He exists in triune fellowship—a perfection of holy loving that comes to us in the prism of mercy, loving-kindness and lordship through His mission of creating a community of holy fellowship.

Any talk of holiness begins with the premise that God is holy. He has declared that He is holy, and He has also declared what is meant by His holiness. We understand holiness to be the absoluteness, integrity and perfection of God. Absoluteness, because divine holiness is what makes Him God. Integrity, because holiness refers to that character of God that will always be true, and true to itself. God's character is not conditioned by His creation, but only by itself. Perfection, because holiness admits no ambiguity of character and being. Thus, the holiness of God might be associated with the biblical metaphor, God is light (I Timothy 6:16; I John 1:5). Holiness, as belonging to God alone, qualifies God as Lord. He is necessarily Lord because He is holy, for holiness is that which cannot be compromised in its being.⁴ In other words, God is Lord by right because He is holy.

God is holy and therefore relational in being. He loves in holiness: absoluteness and perfection suggest complete well-being; and therefore, existence for the other. A holy self is a free and whole self, free to give itself in love. Thus, divine holiness out-flows as the love of Father and Son in the Spirit. God is holy in His loving. Holiness describes the character of the love that belongs to God in His triune fellowship--because God loves in holiness and is holy in His loving, the triune fellowship is perfect out-flow of self-giving, surrender, condescension--*kenosis*. The triune fellowship tells us what love is like: love is commitment; love is free; love is self-giving and surrender – this is love that never fails, love that finds expression in relationships of commitment, intimacy and transparency. “Thus, God's will to disclosure to us flows from within the very Godhead; Deity is, by nature, Self-communicating.”⁵

His self-disclosure to us is free expression of His holy loving. This is the principal fact of revelation – God spoke, God has spoken, and God speaks because He is holy love—and in this speaking, He communicates Himself. He spoke the Word of creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17) and redemption in Christ (Hebrews 1:2-4), and continues to speak the Word of redemption in the Church by the Spirit (John 14:17; John 15:26), thereby creating for Himself a community that shares in His own holy loving. It follows that the possibility and necessity of ecclesial community is grounded in triune communion.⁶ In other words, “communion is a theological

⁴ God calls His covenant partners to be holy on the basis of His self-declaration “I am the Lord your God...I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44-45). Scattered throughout the biblical witness is this declaration that God, who is holy, *is* Lord, and has covenanted to be our Lord. So frequently is this declaration made, almost in passing, as a given presupposition, that we may rightly take this is truth, as a biblical principle (See also Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 26; 21:8; Isaiah 43:15; 48:17; Ezekiel 39:7; I Peter 1:16. The promise is the He makes holy: Leviticus 22:32; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16).

⁵ Fackre, “Bible, Community, and Spirit,” 68.

⁶ Fackre, 68.

reality before it is an ecclesiological possibility. That is, communion is a statement about God and God’s way in the world before it is a statement about the church and its way in the world.”⁷

Consequently, God’s mission, enacted in the Son and the Spirit, is to create holy fellowship. In His fellowship-creating mission, God discloses Himself freely and capacitates his church to know Him and worship Him. Herein is divine holiness made visible as mercy, loving-kindness and Lordship: He imparts knowledge of His own holy loving, disclosing His essential condescension and self-giving in Christ. He has named Himself our Lord, freely taking up our cause and sharing our lot, taking upon Himself to secure our happiness--this is the “yes” He declares on the cross. By this we know love (I John 3:16), objectively through the atoning work of Christ, and subjectively through the indwelling Spirit of holy love. All the mercies of God -- free grace to all, self-giving, commitment, the prevenient drawing, and light-giving work of the Spirit—flow from the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, the certitude upon which the church stands is this: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost are not only past realities of human history; they are spiritual realities of divine mission always in actuality. In sum, the divine mission assures us of the presence and power of the Spirit in the church. In the church it does happen that we encounter God, believe in Him and worship Him (Matt 28:17). As such, the church is visible sign of the ongoing divine mission. Jesus Christ gave Himself for the church, and by the Spirit gives Himself to the church, and through the church to the world.

The Wesleyan distinction as it concerns the divine mission is this: that the knowledge of God is personal and transformative through the work of the Spirit in our hearts. This knowledge begins with the Spirit’s prevenient action to draw persons to faith and repentance, whereby we are forgiven and reconciled to God, and recreated spiritually by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we are brought into fellowship with God and become partakers of His holiness, being transformed from glory into glory (2 Cor. 3:18), so that attitudes and dispositions increasingly reflect God’s own holy loving. Moreover, biblical warrant and Christian experience attest that believers can receive the Spirit’s indwelling in His fullness, an experience that expels from the human heart all resistance to grace; all inward propensities that hinder our fellowship with Him. This is a defining moment in Christian existence that actualizes the believer’s full self-giving to God, and fullness of the divine indwelling, thus making real the “yes” of cross, that ‘the righteous requirement is fulfilled in us’ (Rom 8:4), so that we may love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Hence, holiness theology affirms that fellowship with God is lived experience in ecclesial community, ensuing in transformed and transformative human personality—holy fellowship.

We have traced holiness theology from its source in the triune life of God, its context in the divine mission, and its ecclesiological expression as divine-human fellowship of mutual self-giving that mirrors and shares in the triune fellowship. The particularity of the Wesleyan tradition, the significance of holiness theology is this: we affirm that the call to holy fellowship is actualized fully in the hearts of believers in the church. From what we have said thus far, we must affirm a fundamental truth of our identity and the nature of our fellowship – our being and

⁷ Small, 77-78.

mission are grounded in the Triune God.⁸ We next consider the shape of ecclesial community that arises within this theological framework.

Holy Fellowship: Doxological Response to God

Holy fellowship is doxological response to God, experienced in ecclesial community as submission, humility and confidence, and shaped by sanctifying fellowship with God. It is the outcome of sharing in God's holy loving.

Ecclesial community is holy fellowship, a gift experienced through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.⁹ Holy fellowship is therefore a reflection triune *koinōnia*, “a communion that reveals the very being of the one God—Father Son and Holy Spirit.”¹⁰ This fundamental reality of ecclesial life shapes the community's relationships with God and one another: holy fellowship shapes and is shaped by doxological response to God.

Doxological response is submission. Communion with the triune God constitutes an irreversible relationship between God and His people. God gives Himself to be known as the Lord, our Lord. Therefore, the principal awareness and response is full submission to His lordship, which is the essential character of true worship. In other words, *koinōnia* between God and His people entails and establishes doxological stance before God. In this sense, worship is not only a discrete act as in public or private times of worship, but as full self-giving in response to divine self-giving. And we affirm that the blessing of entire sanctification does in fact actualize the believer's unconditional surrender to Jesus Christ. This means that as a community, we are called to grow in the knowledge of God until all have passed through and continue beyond the threshold of full surrender. As holiness people, we can actually expect that the Spirit will graciously sanctify His community and create doxological character in holy fellowship.

Humility and confidence are the principal attitudinal characteristics of doxological response. Awareness of the Spirit's sovereign presence finds expression in the life of the church, not only in terms of individual surrender, but as corporate ethos. That is to say, the community surrenders its knowing, being and doing to the Spirit through careful faithfulness to truth, prayerful quest and lived commitment to the will of God. Consistent and intentional focus on the Spirit's sovereign rule in the church is therefore the center that orders and shapes all ecclesial life. Concretely, this means that holy fellowship is characterized by commitment to honoring divine lordship as a common way of life. Therefore, doxological response to God frees the community to live with humility and confidence—humility, because we live in Him, for Him and through Him; confidence, because we are sure that He who guides us into all truth is faithful.

Doxological character carries transformative implications. In submission, humility and confidence, the community grows in its capacity for holy fellowship, allowing deeper sharing of triune fellowship, which is the ongoing sanctification of the community. In this interrelation of worship and sanctification, the community is and is becoming holy ecclesial fellowship that

⁸ McCormick, “The Church an Icon of the Holy Trinity? A Spirit-Christology as Necessary Prolegomena of Ecclesiology,” 230.

⁹ Small, 77.

¹⁰ Small, 76.

reflects triune love.¹¹ In sum, these terms of relationality shape in the Christian community the imprint of Trinitarian character and fellowship.

Accordingly, we speak of the theological necessity of holy fellowship because, the nature of God and the grace of full salvation are such that the church cannot be anything else, or anything less. Holy fellowship expresses God's holy loving and the church's doxological response. In other words, the *ecclesia* must and can exist in holy fellowship with the triune God. But this reality needs to be continually actualized by the Spirit, and is so actualized as the community lives in full submission to its Lord. This is not to say that the church is a holy fellowship regardless of sin. Instead, the community evidences visible transformation, by its life and character of holy love, a unique phenomenon in human history. We must therefore conclude that when a community of believers seems to be wanting in doxological character it would be fruitful to retrieve and reflect on its theological grounds and prayerfully consider whether it has inadvertently allowed competing claims for lordship to creep into its fellowship.

Holy Fellowship: Redemptive Relationships

Holy fellowship, God's own work in His church, bears the fruit of redemptive relationships, which affirm the value of all persons, reflect holy love, embrace accountability and growth through the means of grace and enact the divine mission of reconciliation.

Doxological response to God—submission, humility and confidence—is the basis for redemptive relationships in the community of believers. Redemptive relationships are faithful to the source of fellowship, the divine life itself, and are only possible through such faithfulness. Redemptive relationships affirm that holy fellowship is God's creation and reflect triune self-giving and transparency.

First, since holy fellowship is the God-given nature of ecclesial community, relationships within the community are created by and in fellowship with God rather than common human interests. "The *koinōnia* of the community of faith is not established by our association with one another. Human affinities and human efforts of whatever kind do not create *koinōnia*, for relationships within the community grow from our *koinōnia* with God through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Because God draws us in communion with himself, we are in *koinōnia* with one another."¹² This is rationale for commitment to worship, live and work together in a manner that celebrates diversity, for the bold claim that, in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor free (Galatians 3:28). It follows that the community demonstrates holy fellowship by rich diversity of interests, cultures, professions, and socio-economic levels. Inclusive relationships that arise in the context of triune fellowship are redemptive. The capacity for inclusiveness reflects the community's submission to God; and acceptance of persons from all walks of life expresses the community's conviction that God's universal love ascribes intrinsic worth to all persons. Affirmation of individual worth on the basis of God's love is powerful truth that positively influences relationality. Here is the theological rationale for a

¹¹ McCormick, 231.

¹² Small, 78-79.

community that refuses to draw in its robes, but rather, opens itself up with bold risk-taking to enlarge the circle of fellowship.

Second, redemptive relationships reflect God's own holy loving. In human relationships, this reflection constitutes love that is characterized by integrity, *kenosis* and truth, which can only be found where the Spirit rules. Thus, in fellowship with God, the community's relationships embrace and reflect the transformative power of the Spirit. Integrity will assure relationships of lasting commitment. When *kenosis* characterizes the small and big decisions of daily life, when love seeks the interest of the other, we can be sure that we are indeed partaking of the divine nature. When the truth matters more than personal opinion, we can be sure that the Spirit of truth is enacting holy fellowship. Truth is not only what we assent to, but what we do (John 3:21). Doing the truth in community overcomes the twin dangers of moral laxity and legalism--moral laxity because the collective commitment is not to prevailing notions of goodness, but rather, to the sure teaching of scripture; legalism because the collective commitment is not to our own notions of how holiness should look, but rather, to the Spirit of truth who shapes each member of the community and faithfully undertakes the work of transformation. It is the case, that as a community, we are often perplexed in the face of pressing ethical issues, and we must stand on the side of truth, and must do so with grace.¹³

Third, redemptive relationships are transparent. When humility and confidence are intrinsic to ecclesial culture, the community embraces mutual accountability. Accountability suggests fearless and free communication that fosters common vision and identity. It is commitment to sharing life. In this way, the biblical command to bear one another's burdens is something deeper than encouraging those who are facing trials. Instead, it means that we express our power for self-forgetfulness by really taking up another's struggles. In a sense, the opportunity is for the whole community to hold itself accountable for individual struggles and individual growth. This acts as a powerful means of unifying the fellowship.

Fourth, redemptive relationships flourish in the safety of holy fellowship through the means of grace. Transparency and accountability can only be sustained in the context of the acceptance of all persons as mentioned earlier. This climate thrives through the means of grace, but it is also the climate in which the means of grace are effective. Means of grace include personal and community practices. Community practices are essential for growth, since, as relational beings, we live in the matrix of our relationships.¹⁴ Faithfulness to *kerygma* and liturgy are essential expressions and means of holy fellowship. "Christian lives are formed via celebrative gratitude, self-sacrificial commitment and Spirit directed transformation."¹⁵ Personal practices such as exercise of spiritual disciplines and service to others extend holy fellowship beyond the confines

¹³ Acts 15 is the classic case in the early Christian community of how the Spirit of Truth led a submissive and perplexed church to a position of grace and wisdom. Obedience to His leading required of this community to lay aside its own cultural and religious biases and presuppositions, and to see with fresh eyes how God was drawing Gentiles into fellowship with them. It certainly seemed risky to cast aside so much of the customs they had associated with worship of the living God. Yet, by surrendering to the leading of the Spirit, they extended the hand of fellowship to Gentile believers, without legalism, without moral laxity, with love and honor.

¹⁴ Anderson, "A Constructive Task in Religious Education: Making Christian Selves," 177.

¹⁵ Blevins, 100.

of churchly existence. In other words, as holiness people, we confidently and consistently develop a fellowship around the means of grace knowing that the Spirit will faithfully draw new believers into the community and nurture believers in holy fellowship.

Redemptive relationships enact the divine mission of reconciliation. The church is visible sign and vehicle of the divine mission, because the existence of the church witnesses to reconciliation between God and His creation as a true, actual, space-time reality, as well as an eschatological hope. “Just as *koinōnia* expresses the good news that God has reconciled us to himself in Christ, establishing communion with us, so also *koinōnia* expresses the ministry of reconciliation that is central to the life of the community, establishing communion among us. The reconciliation that is a central feature of communion’s actuality is not confined to dramatic instances of real or threatened division; it also encompasses daily search for generosity of spirit, harmony, and love.”¹⁶ As holy fellowship is enacted in redemptive relationships, the community is necessarily an agent of reconciliation.¹⁷ This is because, first, fellowship with God entails sharing His passion for fellowship with His creatures. Second, a community of holy fellowship is itself a means of grace—it is transformed and transformative. Third, self-forgetfulness shapes in us genuine interest for the well-being of the other, a quality both rare and irresistible. Thus, holy ecclesial fellowship enacts the divine mission by virtue of its existence and character.

I have spoken of ecclesial community as worshipful in its culture, happy, holy and free in its fellowship. This is not to say that all members of the community are thus characterized. Instead, I suggest that if a community understands itself in this way, if this identify is revisited and reaffirmed frequently, then it becomes the cultural norm of the community. Neither do I suggest that a community of holy fellowship happens instantaneously. While it is true that the Spirit regenerates and entirely sanctifies in the threshold experiences of the two works of grace, these experiences are inseparable from ongoing growth in the capacity for holy love, a growth that is unique to each individual and each community. The spiritual identify of the church is established by the Spirit in a moment, but obtains human expression over time, and how much time is a factor of the community’s context.

The Interrelation of Ecclesial Practice and Theological identity

The interrelation of ecclesial practice and theological identify, necessary for thriving holy fellowship, is marked by prayerful and humble dialogue, attentive to the Spirit’s illumination of inspired Scripture, that nurtures practitioner-scholar synergy.

Finally, we must consider the interrelation of theology and ecclesial practice. We have thus far aimed to show that what we believe about God and salvation defines ecclesial community as holy fellowship, expressed in doxological response to God and redemptive community relationships. In sum, the triune life of God is the basis of and model for holy fellowship, and such fellowship is actualized in the church by the Spirit. Undoubtedly, it would be imprudent for us to presuppose a unilateral relationship between theology and ecclesial practice. Should this be the case, theology itself would become static, its voice would become distant from the community; and the ecclesial community, without the voice of theology, would have to seek

¹⁶ Small, “What Is Communion and When Is It Full?” 81.

¹⁷ Blevins, 103

alternative grounds for its practices. Eventually, there would be deep dissonance between what we believe and how we live. Accordingly, we do not raise the question of whether a theo-praxis¹⁸ relationship should exist, but rather we *do*, and must *continually* reflect on the kind of interrelation that would best contribute to the community's flourishing. I propose that theo-praxis interaction should operate as a vital dimension of holy ecclesial community. Concretely, theo-praxis interaction, as service for and within the community, reflects holy fellowship by its high valuation of prayer and humility; its attention to both the inspiration and the illumination of the Holy Spirit; and its approbation of practitioner-scholar synergy.

Theological endeavor, if it is to be fruitful in service to God and church, begins and continues in a spirit of humility and prayer. Humility is that fine virtue that graces us with the capacity to genuinely attend to other perspectives. It opens up our minds to fresh ideas. It makes us willing to accept that theology is an ongoing task, a conversation that happens in the church. Humility allows us to be a listening community. We listen to our received beliefs, the witness of scripture and to the experiential input of the community. Most of all, we pray for wisdom. We pray because theology is prayer. We pray because we do desire to hear the Spirit of truth. As scholars and practitioners, by these means, we engage in a process of critical thinking and discernment – a conversation between the “common” sense of the community and the “canon” sense of scripture. “Fostering critical thinking can be a difficult task in our communities. It takes courage to release one’s control of knowledge and trust the Holy Spirit to guide ... the pursuit of truth. This type of thinking begins by asking hard questions of the historical, cultural and psychological assumptions that influence Christian life and practice.”¹⁹ In this way, we are faithful in telling the story of Jesus with words that make plain sense.

Scripture is inspired and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. As the community submits to scripture, the Spirit illuminates truth so that we *hear* the Word. The theo-praxis relationship is not aimed at accommodating theology to prevailing culture. It seeks congruence between belief and practice. This means that theo-praxis conversations should clarify what scripture means so that experience is explained in terms of scripture. What I mean is this: the community refers to its theology to know what it believes. The community examines its practice and experience to see if this is a faithful reflection of what it believes. Then it goes back to theology and allows practice and experience to contextualize theological formulations so that what the church believes and teaches resonates or connects with the lived situations of the community. This interrelation comes under the Spirit’s leadership in the church, since it is one dimension of holy fellowship. So it is, that the Spirit illuminates our minds and we hear the truth again and again, and we can set it forth in words that make “common” and “canon” sense in the community.²⁰ Through this ‘hearing’ of the Word, the truth is relevant. This ‘hearing’ gives the ecclesial community direction and courage for fresh articulation of the truth. “The Bible does not speak its Word fully until the Spirit has opened our eyes in our historical context to the issues and idiom of this time and place, whether in the crises of society or the intellectual claims of the hour.”²¹

¹⁸ Theo-praxis – a term coined to succinctly refer to the interrelation of ecclesial life and its underwriting theological precepts.

¹⁹ Blevins, “Communities of Holiness, Communities of the Spirit: Developing an Ecclesial Conversation for Discipleship,” 101.

²⁰ Fackre, “Bible, Community, and Spirit,” 69.

²¹ Fackre, 74.

“Theologically, creative discernment acknowledges the power of the Holy Spirit to empower new structures for the sake of conveying God’s free grace, so that the presence of Jesus Christ might be revealed in the most remarkable places and during the most mundane practices.”²² In sum, as is right in holy ecclesial community, we expect, trust and submit to the epistemological power of the Spirit.²³

Contextual-practical-experiential—these tags are often associated with Wesleyan theology, and rightly so. We are primarily concerned with having and sharing a lively faith that translates into transformed lives. As such, we are intentional about putting feet to our theology. Likewise, the theo-praxis relation gives theology feet, and makes feet theologically driven. The ecclesial community benefits from a dynamic and challenging scholar-practitioner synergy—a synergy fuelled by humility and prayer, under the Spirit’s leadership. This relationship may take many forms—formal or informal, large or small, gatherings such as this one. But beyond such, I’d like to suggest that scholar-practitioner might be a fruitful way of understanding ecclesial leadership. There is in fact, no rule that one must be either one or the other. On the contrary, ecclesial practice is the necessary context for theological reflection, and theological reflection is the necessary basis for meaningful ecclesial practice. It is therefore beneficial to the church that in our universities and seminaries, we strive to train scholarly practitioners, and practical theologians. Scholarly practitioners acquire tools and skills for ongoing theological pursuits. Practical theologians test theological formulations within community life. Thus, the academy belongs in the church and serves the church as a dimension of holy fellowship.

Conclusion

Our discussion has taken us through the implications of the relationship between theological presuppositions and ecclesial identity. We have noted that this is a necessary relationship in the sense that our theology determines ecclesial self-understanding and shapes ecclesial culture. In tracing the connection between a Wesleyan holiness theology and ecclesial identity, we have seen that the community is a holy fellowship because it shares and reflects the fellowship of the triune God who is holy in His loving, and who gives Himself to be known in the church. Ecclesial response to God’s self-giving is doxological in that the community responds to the actuality of divine sovereign presence with submission. The community thrives in holy fellowship as its doxological response deepens under the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Through the means of grace, holy fellowship is actualized in redemptive relationships that display love and enact reconciliation. Thus, ecclesial community as holy fellowship participates in the divine fellowship-creating mission. Finally, humble and prayerful theo-praxis interaction conditioned by the Spirit’s illumination is a significant dimension of holy fellowship, which dissolves any tendency for disjunction between church and academy. Instead, the academy belongs to and in holy ecclesial community. With gratitude, we live in continued admiration of God’s holy, triune loving that stoops down and extends mercy and loving-kindness to draw the creature into holy fellowship.

²² Blevins, 102.

²³ Fackre, 72.

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