

GOD'S ETERNAL PROJECT:  
GATHERING, SHAPING AND MOLDING A HOLY PEOPLE FOR GOD'S PLEASURE  
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*A Different World*

At the time I started thinking about this paper, the world was very different from what it is today. In so many silent but profound ways a number of these seismic events have shaped the evolution of this paper as I have juggled with and reflected on issues of leadership, personal faith, global citizenship, identity and belonging. The “plausibility structure” that has for the greater years of my life anchored my sense of mission and purpose has over the last eighteen months or so, been thoroughly rumped.

I would like to put forward four plausible axiomatic statements that seek to repair and reset a new “plausibility structure” to help make meaning and maintain focus on purpose and mission. These axiomatic statements, I believe articulate a coherent and compelling narrative of God’s singular focus, namely, the gathering, acculturation, and nurturing of a holy people for His pleasure. The need to keep our focus on mission and purpose has never been greater than now.

First, the Biblical story is fundamentally a narrative of God’s eternal project of creating a community for his pleasure. This in my view is consistent with the creation narrative depicting how the human being is introduced into the creation order. We note that the human being is introduced into the creation order in a manner distinct from how the rest of creation came into being. And we also note that the human being is unique in character and purpose. God leaves us in no doubt as to why He is creating the human being. Whereas all of God’s creation is aesthetically pleasing to Him, only human beings are relationally pleasing to God. Humans are created for the express purpose of His own pleasure. This creative intent expressed during the

creation moment is echoed in the words of (Isaiah 43: 7; Eph. 2: 1 -11; Rev. 4:11: I Peter 2: 9 – 10).

Secondly, this eternal project of God, of gathering a holy people for His pleasure, originates or emanates from the Community of the God Head and ends with the great gathering of the holy community of the redeemed at the great re-union that will usher in the new age of eternal fellowship with the God. This is what then defines the church community as a pilgrim people, not just in terms of being on a journey, but also in terms of their transformation as a community. “God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character.”<sup>1</sup>

Third, the liminal period, i.e., the age of time between the thought and creative processes of the triune God, and the end time eternal gathering of the redeemed around the throne, is essentially a season for the gathering, formation, and acculturation of His redeemed people into a community of a holy people. This is the essence of what I refer to as God’s eternal project, creating a holy community, for His highest and personal pleasure.

While this work of gathering, reshaping, and molding His redeemed for that eternal reunion, primarily belongs to God Himself and He is fully invested in it, He has by His grace co-opted his redeemed into the execution of this task. One injunction or command that God so clearly imparts to the community of the redeemed, is the responsibility of participating with Him in the ministry of reconciliation. (II Cor. 5: 17 -19). Gerald Bray holds the view that, “For the early Church, the most noticeable work of the Holy Spirit in building the Christian community

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee: *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*; Hendrickson, (1996)

was undoubtedly the way in which he was seen to have broken down the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, making them both one in the body of Christ. From the very beginning, Christians were aware that they constituted a new society, a community which was in the world but not of it. They believed that they were a holy nation, a special people, God's chosen ones. The responsibility of the individual was to conform to this pattern, so that he or she would be considered as worthy representatives of the group. Holiness was not just a sign of separation from the world; it was also the mark of belonging to the new community being forged by the Holy Spirit."<sup>2</sup>

According to Graham Heslop,

Not only is the Christian life incomplete without the community of a local church, but it is also dangerously lacking in accountability and loving correction. In addition to this, it is good for us to be joined to those who are different to us, challenging our prejudices and personal preferences" (Ephesians 2:19-21).<sup>3</sup>

But God not only invites us to be active agents in His mission by appointing us as His ambassadors; He has also endowed us with spiritual giftings that are essential and desperately needed for the edification of the community of the redeemed so that it can be strengthened and equipped to be effective and worthy of its calling. "The Scriptures are also quite clear that since Pentecost the Holy Spirit's primary, basic, ministry is to mediate the presence of Jesus to believers" (John 14:18-21; 15:26; 16:14-15, Gal. 5:25).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Bray, "The Spirit and Community: A Historical Perspective," Bible.org (Dec. 2005) accessible online (accessed 9/14/2021) at <https://bible.org/seriespage/3-spirit-and-community-historical-perspective>

<sup>3</sup> Graham Heslop, "Must Christians Go To Church?" The Gospel Coalition, Africa Edition (July 16, 2019), accessible online (accessed 9/14/2021) at <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/can-christian-not-churchgoer/>

<sup>4</sup> J.I Packer; *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (Grand Rapids, Revell, 1984, 2005).

Fourthly, the solemn call and mandate to participate in the Koinonia of the Ecclesia, emanates from the heart of the God who is in Community with Himself, and who finds great pleasure in the communion with the community of those He has redeemed who are in the fellowship of community. This call to participate in this community of “a holy people” is primarily an invitation to Community with God and His people. In the Old Testament this radical relationship with His holy people was founded on the covenant between Yahweh and Israel and regulated through a ritual system centered in the Temple through which community was constantly re-enacted and affirmed. Mahohoma has observed that,

The most binding fact among the Jews was the covenant with Yahweh. ...In other words, the covenant with Yahweh was the basis of community in the Old Testament. It bound people in a single movement to God and to one another. ...God made a covenant with a people and not an individual. Thus, individuals were covenanted because they belonged to a covenanted community. Yahweh did not enter into private covenants with people for personal purposes. ...In short, community in the Old Testament is a oneness rooted in the total presence of people to Yahweh.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is unmistakably, central to understanding the character and nature of the Church as a holy people.

With the coming of the new age of the Spirit, God wants to create a new people for himself. This new people would be a community of the Spirit. While we are saved individually, we are saved into a body of believers whose unity is based on faith in Christ and the common experience of being “sealed” or “baptized” by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Fee explains, “God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God’s life and character.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Takesure Mahohoma, “African Religious Spirituality and Inculturation,” *Scriptura*; vol. 117, no. 1(2018) 1-15; available online (accessed 9/14/2021) at <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/scriptur/v117/15.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Packer, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Fee, 1996.

*The Imperative of Christian Community*

It can then be postulated that the abiding quintessential characteristic of the Church is that it is by design, intent, and identity a community. According to Kilama,

Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, we see that God created humans to be relational and live in, community. In Genesis 1-2, God as a community of the Trinity creates mankind to live in communion with him and each other. At the fall these relationships are broken (Genesis 3). But we do not have to wait long for God's gracious response. In Genesis 12 through Abraham, relationship is initiated, and a new community is promised. ... Christ Redeems Mankind for Community. In the Gospels, Christ comes to redeem mankind for community. He restores our relationship with God and in doing so each other (Ephesians 2:11-22). Christ identifies with his disciples as he lives with them in community.<sup>8</sup>

To appreciate the centrality of the community nature of the Christian Church, it is important that we appraise our understanding of the Biblical view of sin. Often in the interest of uncluttering the message of the Gospel a tradition has developed which implies that sin is all but a problem of the individual soul. From this perspective, conversion or spiritual change is then portrayed as a spiritual transaction that takes place in the heart, rescuing the soul from the grip of sin and eternal damnation. Conversion in this sense creates a new individual. In the African context this has often meant the creation of something other than African. According to the missiologist David Bosch,

In this period, mission was specifically viewed as proclaiming individual conversion. The wilderness that was to be tamed was no longer located in the physical and social world; the wilderness was in the hearts of man. ... The personal experience of the truth taught by Scripture gained in importance. It should be noted that the Evangelical Movement that grew out of the Great Awakening and extended to England, Scotland and Wales under the influence of John Wesley and his associates gave little attention to political issues.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Dennis Kilama, "Christians in Community: Redeeming the Concept of Ubuntu," The Gospel Coalition, Africa Edition, (September 2019) available online (accessed 9/14/2021) at <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/article/redeeming-ubuntu/#:~:text=Ubuntu%20affirms%20that%20being%20with,be%20conformed%20to%20biblical%20truth>

<sup>9</sup> David Bosch, *Witness to the World* (London, Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1980).

The point can be made that this domestication of sin in the soul has been instrumental, in shaping an individualistic Christian spirituality. This in turn robbed believers, particularly in the African context, of an essential ingredient of spiritual dynamism, namely, community. Indeed, as Durkheim and in a similar vein, both Troeltsch and Bastide, have opined, it is in community that spiritual or religious creativity takes place. It is in community that Christians can create and through confessing together, recreate a dynamic Christian spirituality commensurate with God's eternal project of re-shaping the current order. The requirement for a personal commitment in order to participate in this communion with God and His holy community of believers is not an appeal to individualism, but a call to confession and surrender for those who would be members of the holy community.

From a biblical context, while sin is both the propensity to rebel against God and the wilful disobedience to God it is however fundamentally, about altered relationships and alienation. The only thing that God pronounces as not good in His creation tapestry, is Adam's loneliness. (Gen. 2:18). When sin shows up in Gen. 3, what God had proclaimed as orderly, harmonious and beautiful is so thoroughly dishevelled. The relationship between God and the first couple that he had placed in the garden is disrupted, and the relationship of the couple is altered, and what was once "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" is now "that woman, the one you gave me." The extent of alienation and broken relationships goes beyond the God-human relationship and the human-human relationships, the whole of creation was thrown into turmoil by sin. (Gen. 3; Rom. 8: 19 - 25). "This is not a wrestling match against a human opponent. We are wrestling with

rulers, authorities, the powers who govern this world of darkness and spiritual forces that control evil in the heavenly world” (Eph. 6: 12).

It is in this contextual understanding of sin as pervasive corruption of God’s perfect and beautiful order of creation and relationships that we must appreciate how central community is for a holy people to be an effective witness to the world. On the way to the “Celestial City” the Christian will need the companionship of the confessing community for identity, affirmation and belonging. There is an African saying that the journey gets easier in the company of others.

We can also surmise that Community should be at the heart of the life, identity, and witness of “a holy people” because, the believer’s spiritual development and growth is designed to be realized in the context of community. It is in the context of community that we know what loving thy neighbor is, caring for the widows and bearing the fruit of the spirit. More than anything else, living in community is a confessional undertaking (Acts 2:42; I John 1). The witness power of living in community confessionally has been observed as one of the key elements behind one of the most enduring Christian revival movements, the East African Revival. Daewon Moon, drawing upon accounts from John V. Taylor’s *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, and others, tells us that:

The first manifestation of a large-scale revival occurred at Gahini in December 1933, through the public confession of hidden sins among the hospital staff (30). As the revival took hold, public confession of hidden sins continued to mark the first stirrings of the revival (31). This promoted a higher standard of holiness of living among followers of the revival, and the changed lives that resulted from the fellowship of the revival became the most obvious appeal to other men and women in the villages. Once having repented and confessed their sins, people were instructed to live a completely new life to please Christ. For instance, it was commonly taught that those who repented should compensate for what they had previously cheated others out of or stolen (32).”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Daewon Moon, s.v. “John Edward Church (1899-1989), Prominent leader of the East African Revival,” BU School of Theology History of Missiology, *Digital Biographies*, available online

It would be fair to proffer that living confessionally in redemptive relationships is much more than the surfacing of hidden sins to each other. It is fundamentally about the humility that frees us to hear God and see Him through the other as we engage in transparent and vulnerable conversations that reveal God to us and us to each other in unfamiliar and unexpected ways. And when the Holy Spirit is allowed to take His place in the midst of these conversations, we reflect ever more clearly the community of a holy people that God is molding. “See how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in harmony!” (Ps 133).

In the present moment when we live “in the shadow of the valley of death,” what is our agenda for nurturing, and expanding the circle of this community of a holy people called Nazarenes? What we can opine from the ideal Christian “portraiture” in Acts 2, is that the community of a holy people can only be the product of the Holy Spirit and not the product of a compromise with the forces of this age. God calls upon a holy people to be the leaven that transforms the world into God’s glorious kingdom because,

Atheism, consumerism, and materialism are systematically destroying the place of Christian values in the society. Unabated greed and cutthroat competition is driving people to over-use resources and endanger the ecological balance. The society is ignoring the needs of the weak, the infirm, and the poor. The minority rich are holding all the

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(accessed 9/14/20221) at

[https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/church-john-edward-1899-1989/#:~:text=John%20Edward%20Church%20\(widely%20known,CMS\)%20in%20Rwanda%20in%201933](https://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/church-john-edward-1899-1989/#:~:text=John%20Edward%20Church%20(widely%20known,CMS)%20in%20Rwanda%20in%201933). Note: Internal citations from the passage include the following: (30) John V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda: An Attempt at Understanding* (London: SCM Press, 1958), 98-99; (31) Some scholars note that the practice of public confession of sins in informal meetings was strongly influenced by Frank Buchman’s Oxford Group movement. Hastings, *The Church in Africa*, 596; Ward and Wild-Wood (eds.), *The East African Revival*, 14; (32) Church gave an account of several senior Christians at Gahini compensating for what they had stolen, after their confession of sins. Church, “News of Gahini Hospital from Dr. J. E. Church,” *Ruanda Notes* 47 (January 1934):17.



world's wealth and resources, depriving the majority poor of their basic needs. The Church needs the courage of the Spirit to be a witness of Christ's values in the society. She must work for the upliftment of the weak, the poor and the marginalized. She must challenge every political or social structure that deprives a person of his or her dignity. She must identify herself with the weakest in the society. The Spirit leads the Church to be Christ-centred, to cherish and practise the values of Christ in the society. Indeed, it is a difficult task to confront the evil prevalent in the society. Evil in any form tries to crush the forces of good. However, the Church must not be worried because she has the Counsellor (Spirit) with her. The Spirit equips the Church with the internal strength to be the living witness of Christ in this society.<sup>11</sup>

All the while we must be unequivocal that a holy people can only be truly a witness to the world if it remains in the vine and open eared to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Without Christ, holiness tends to have all the charm of an ingrown toenail. If holiness is not first and foremost about knowing Christ, it will be about self-produced morality and religiosity. Such incurred self-dependence is quite the opposite of what pleases God, or what is actually beautiful. Nothing is more holy than a heartfelt delight in Christ. Nothing is more powerful to transform life.<sup>12</sup>

What shall we then say to these things? The pithy issue here is not to be lost in the optics and forms in which a Biblical principle is expressed in a particular context and occasion. The issue to ponder in the context of this radical community depicted in Acts 2:42 and in the East African Revival is the principle that God's holy people must live in companionship with each other in redemptive relationships under the tutelage of the pilgrimage God who is redemptively leading them through the Holy Spirit, to a glorious restoration where they will once again live "naked and not ashamed". Of necessity, we must ask, is the "portraiture" of a holy people given to us in Acts 2:42 and affirmed in several other references in the New Testament an aberration or the real model of a holy people, that in our age we have emptied of content and meaning? I would argue

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<sup>11</sup> Reginald Alva, SVD, "The Role of the Spirit in the Mission of the Church in the Light of the Teachings of *Dominum et Vivificantem*," *Journal of the Nanzan Academic Society Humanities and Natural Sciences* (9), 135—147, January 2015 available online (accessed 9/14/2021) at <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/236155412.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Derek Burnside, "Keeping in Step with the Spirit," ([derek.burnside@capernwray.org.uk](mailto:derek.burnside@capernwray.org.uk))

that in the context of God's "eternal project" what we see in Acts 2: 42 is, indeed, to borrow from John Wesley, the "lively portraiture" (living portrait) of Jesus and indeed how we shall be when we are eternally re-united with Him. What becomes material then, is, how do we as Nazarenes live and model this holy community not in seismic episodes but in perpetual witness to a holy God in defiance to the powers and principalities of this world and in radical obedience to the Holy Spirit promptings as envisioned in (I Peter 2: 9-10).