

RESPONDING TO THE PRESENTATION

**"JESUS AND HIS NEW COMMUNITY:
PITFALLS, IDEALS, AND REALITIES"**

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Reflecting on the challenges of Jesus and his New Community, this presentation has prompted the responder to consider the sociological concept of community. From this viewpoint community has been defined in at least ninety different ways. The concept can mean a geographic space, a geographical entity, and a place of emotional identity. It is the emotional identity of a community that gives it meaning for most people. A community is conceived as a “system of values, norms and moral codes which provoke a sense of identity within a bounded whole to its members.”¹ A community is described as a domain where certain assumptions about reality are acknowledged to have validity. Communities shape the way we think and act and furnish us with meanings and interpretations about the world.

There are problems in a sociological perspective because sociology is a disturbing discipline. Above all it tries to keep real flesh and blood human beings at the forefront of the stage in all the complexity of their social relationships and turmoil of their social situations. Members of the Christian community were not only products of a theological ideal but also the

¹David A. Hardcastle, Stanley Wenocur, and Patricia R. Powers, *Community Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

products of their social context. The aim of the sociologist is to attempt to understand human behavior.²

The responder has chosen to consider two concepts: the ideal for a healthy religious community as proposed by Jesus and the possible functions of religion in society.

The Ideal Proposed by Jesus

One of the ideals presented for a healthy religious community is redefined relationships. David O. Moberg, former professor of sociology at Marquette University, maintains that the generalized status of a person is affected by the impact of the Christian message. Christianity was a powerful influence in changing the social status of the child when it denounced the exposure of infants and established foundling asylums as one of its earliest formal welfare activities. The religious basis for protecting the interests of the child prepared the way for the moral and social basis that now predominates our society. Child welfare work can be traced largely to Christian influence.³

Christianity has paved the way for much social progress. Jesus challenged a gender-defined society in which gender determines role, rights, and obligations.⁴

²Derek Tidball, *An Introduction to the Sociology of the New Testament* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1983), 12-14.

³David O. Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 132-33.

⁴Richard Rohrbaugh, ed., *The Social Sciences* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1996), 51.

Open social boundaries, a second ideal planted by Jesus, continues to be a challenge for the healthy church. Learning to live in peace and harmony with those of differing social and cultural backgrounds is still a difficult problem for most churches, but it is an essential characteristic of the church that its members at least want to try to remove the social barriers which ordinary society loves to erect. There remains a battle against worldliness in which there is never a cease-fire for the church.⁵

Moberg sees churches as generally supporting the basic social patterns of their society, and one basic social tendency is class stratification as opposed to the ideal of Jesus of open social boundaries. Moberg views the charismatic qualities of Jesus as a symbol of many standards diametrically opposed to strong political evaluations of wealth and prestige sometimes found in churches. Church joining may reflect a quest for social status and respectability. Class-related cultural values permeate the work of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish churches. These values often are contradictory to doctrines which the church purports to uphold. Cliques in church groups and members' attitudes toward political-economic issues typically reflect socioeconomic considerations much more than religious values.⁶

Meredith B. McGuire, professor of sociology at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, writes that "religion supports the status quo."⁷ Her belief is that there is an inherently conservative aspect to religion. Social stratification, in particular, appears closely correlated

⁵Tidball, *Sociology of the New Testament*, 103.

⁶Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution*, 459-60.

⁷Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1992), 214.

with religious belief. She defines stratification as the differential distribution of prestige and privilege in a society according to criteria such as social class, age, political power, gender, or race.⁸

Reacting to the third presented characteristic of a healthy religious community, re-conceptualized patterns of leadership, this responder agrees with Frazier and Campolo that the constantly reiterated feature of the life of Christ that the New Testament makes authoritative is the concrete social meaning of the cross in relation to power and enmity. Servanthood replaces domination and power. The church is to be an alternative society that serves as a visible presence of the way of Christ. The church historically has not been this alternative society.⁹ Likewise, Donald E. Messer in his book *Contemporary Images of Ministry* underscores the fundamental teaching of the gospel as taught by Jesus that whoever wants to be great must be a servant. Yet throughout much of Christian history the image of the church and church leaders has been that of expecting to be served rather than serving.¹⁰

The ideal of Jesus for servant leadership in healthy religious communities often is replaced as those who hold positions gain a vested interest in keeping a basic structure unchanged. Leaders often appear to make certain that their positions will continue.

⁸Ibid.

⁹David A. Frazier and Tony Campolo, *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 231–32.

¹⁰Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 97–99.

The radical exposure of evil has not been a strong characteristic of religious communities. Moberg recognizes that churches seldom have taken a united stand on social issues to expose evil. Churches are advised by Moberg to be persistent in efforts to oppose privileges of properties classes to the detriment of laborers and to unite against other social evils; however, he views churches as more interested in philanthropic welfare than in social reform to remove the underlying problems that create the need for philanthropy.¹¹

The story of Jesus Christ is what provides a distinctive moral vision for the healthy church. Throughout his life he was an agent of social change, refusing to conform to the conventions of the reigning cultural and social arrangements. His social ethic was guided by the boundless love of God that expresses itself in servanthood.¹²

Functions of Religion

Sociologists view religion as having six basic functions. Religion gives support, consolation, and reconciliation because it provides individuals and groups with a sense of meaning in life. Secondly, religion gives new security and firmer identity. It gives a reference point beyond the present life and therefore gives individuals and groups a sense that an order to life exists beyond what appears to them in the present. Religion also tends to make sacred norms and values and thus helps to maintain their dominance over the individual or group. A fourth function is a prophetic function because it can provide standards or values against which existing norms can be examined critically. In addition, religion serves an identity function

¹¹Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution*, 149-50.

¹²Frazier and Campolo, *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith*, 230-31.

because it assists the individual to establish an identity. Finally, religion facilitates growth and maturation.¹³

According to Tony Campolo, sociology professor at Eastern College, "a more proper ordering of the whole of community life according to God's standard is an essential part of the church's mission. Christianity is taken to the world not only to transform personal lives but to transform the social structures within which Christians live and move."¹⁴ Certainly, the healthy church has the responsibility of denouncing the gap between the ideal vision of society and present practices and to provide a new vision that can lead either to major reform of the present society or the erection of a new alternative society. As sociologist Moberg expressed it, "Comfort and challenge are two integral components of Christianity and the emphasis on either to the neglect of the other results in a gross perversion of the Christian religion."¹⁵

Sociologists agree that there is potential in any religious group to perform an integrating function, to unite previously disparate segments of society. Religious sentiment can bridge barriers of tribe, family, nationality, and race.¹⁶ Ann Davis in describing a healthy church stated that persons are looking for a place to belong, to call home. Her belief is that if churches create this kind of atmosphere, no one could prevent people from coming.¹⁷

¹³Paul H. Chalfant, Robert E. Beckley, and Eddie C. Palmer, *Religion in Contemporary Society* (Palo Alto: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1987), 31-33.

¹⁴Frazier and Campolo, *Sociology through the Eyes of Faith*, 221.

¹⁵David O. Moberg, *Wholistic Christianity* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1985), 116.

¹⁶McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 229.

¹⁷C. Anne Davis, lecture, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, February 1996.

The Christian sociologist would see the church as the community of the compassionate. Jesus was compassion incarnate. A healthy church in this responder's opinion is a community of care, a community of the compassionate.

Do we have healthy churches? The challenge is ours to make them healthy!

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