

LOGOS QUESTIONS

What does it mean to be a
Church-community?



University of
St Andrews



LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

What does it mean to be a Church-community?

The Problem with Community

A key struggle in the Church today is something we might call the problem of community.

It is not a problem of questioning whether or not community is good—churches the world over affirm that community is deeply and undeniably good. Nor is it a problem of understanding that community is an essential part of what it means to be *Church*. Instead, we have a problem of apprehension. Given that community is good, and given that community is essential to life in the Church, *how do we achieve it?* In answer to this question, some churches name themselves ‘community churches’—as if the label might achieve the labour. Other churches appeal to the language of ‘family churches,’ nodding to the type of belonging they aspire for their members to experience. But the only reason why churches rely on such marketing devices for their public image is because they feel, perhaps implicitly, that other churches insufficiently exhibit community, or inadequately facilitate family. This suggests to me that the problem we have with community is that we admit that it is good, but aren’t really sure how to go about achieving it.

In this booklet I want to offer three types of answer to the question, “What does it mean to be a Church-community?” First, I want to give an account of community as a theological truth, as identity. Second, I want to sketch out how it is that community becomes an ethical mandate, determining our actions *as* the church. Third, and finally, I want to speak to how it is that ritual actions can activate our consciousness of, and participation in, community.

Before we can delve into these answers, we’ve got to think about the problem just a little more. Why is it that we struggle to apprehend the concept of Church-community? There are a few underlying and linked factors that create this problem. One of these factors is the rise of individualism. When Descartes sat and meditated alone to think his way to an anchor for knowledge, he came upon the realization with which we are all familiar—I think, therefore I am. Descartes’s realization didn’t begin individualism, but it has become emblematic of it in many ways. I, the thinking I, am the starting-point of all that can be known. Not I as a body, but I as a mind. Not I in community, but I in solitude. Kant, some hundred years later, building from such an I, argued that autonomy was dignity. If I rely on sources outside of myself, sources other than his “categorical imperative,” I diminish my sovereign freedom and human glory. Descartes, Kant, and many other (if not most other) thinkers in the Western tradition have contributed over the past four hundred years to an understanding of the person that is fundamentally *individualistic*. I am an I first, to which I am added to a community later; an I, which is added (by personal assent) to a state. Personal autonomy sits on the throne of modern conceptions of identity, and this has left us in a state of confusion when it comes to questions of community.

Another factor that creates our problem in apprehending community is a radical change in worldview. The New Testament is a text written by, and for, persons who lived in a pre-modern world. For them, the world was an integrated place, where nature, the state, community, the divine, and the person within him or herself operated in a kind of cohesive unity. This helps us to make sense of statements like Plato's, that the "state is the individual writ large." There is, in other words, an organic harmony between individual and community which was self-evident to Plato, which is no longer self-evident to us. The reason this is no longer self-evident is due to the Enlightenment, which effected a process of what has been called disenchantment—the systematic separation of these ordered valences of meaning, and the instrumentalization of processes. A key example of this process is the concept of 'reason.' On the ancient model of reason, to be reasonable meant to live in a kind of ordered harmony within

“ We believe in community, and want community, but sometimes it feels like we just don't know how to go about it ”

oneself, with reference to community, nature, and the divine. On the Enlightenment model, to 'reason' means to move in an ordered way from premise to premise. One concept appeals to an integrated whole, the other describes a mechanized process of thinking. In view of this, when the authors of the New Testament write about community, about the state, and about family, they are speaking from, and to, people for whom the worldview contains a very different vision of the person.

Both of these factors set us up for difficulty with respect to community. As individualists, community is always something *added* to our individualism—we think of it as chosen, a function of the will. As people with a modernist worldview, we are confronted by a gap in understanding between the commandments of our Scriptures, and our lived experiences (and capacities) in a disenchanted world. Together, these factors establish our problems with apprehension. We believe in community, and want community, but sometimes it feels like we just don't know how to go about it. That is why it is useful for us to think more clearly about what it means to be a Church-community.

Both of these factors set us up for difficulty with respect to community. As individualists, community is always something *added* to our individualism—we think of it as chosen, a function of the will. As people with a modernist worldview, we are confronted by a gap in understanding between the commandments of our Scriptures, and our lived experiences (and capacities) in a disenchanted world. Together, these factors establish our problems with apprehension. We believe in community, and want community, but sometimes it feels like we just don't know how to go about it. That is why it is useful for us to think more clearly about what it means to be a Church-community.

Community as Identity

Many times now in Church services I've heard the following illustration: sitting in church doesn't make you a Christian any more than sitting in your garage makes you a car. It's a witty truism, inasmuch as it rightly identifies the fact that church attendance alone is insufficient to identify actual Christian faith. But the witticism relies on some important definitions—'church' must mean the building, and only the building, or the joke falls apart. Crucially, the individual sitting in the Church, among the Church, has a significant likelihood of becoming a Christian, and in this respect the Church is very unlike the garage.

The Church *is* community (although not all community is Church!). Salvation into Christ means salvation into Christ's body, the Church. Salvation into the Church means salvation into a community of people. There are no individual Christians. This means that while there are various, somewhat awkward ways we have to speak about going to church, or being at church, or doing church together, or other strange phrases, in the most fundamental sense Church is what Christians *are*; it is never a building, a place, or a set of activities. In this respect, the answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a Church-community?" is simply, "It means to be a Christian."

Already, you can see how our change in worldview and individualism creates barriers to apprehending this statement. But the situation gets even worse. Not only is the Church a community, it is also a community with scope that stretches the bounds of our imagination. This is part of what we nod towards when we confess with the creeds that we believe

"in the communion of saints." Here we are claiming the global, eternal, and incorruptible identities of the Church-community. That the Church is a global community is likely the easiest factor to imagine. The Church is not bound to buildings, or locality, but stretches to every inhabited continent, every nation, every socioeconomic class, every caste, and nearly every language group on earth. To claim Church-community is to claim membership in a vast, global enterprise.

The Church-community is also eternal. It is not bound solely to this time, but stretches in unbroken connection to all of

those in Christ throughout history. Those saints who have died in Christ are alive (somehow) in Christ now, and therefore the communion is a living, breathing, body of persons throughout time. Lastly, the Church-community in Her glory is incorruptible—that is not to say that Christians and Church-communities don't commit grievous errors—but to insist that the Church's perfection has always been secured by Christ, and not our human efforts. This is the good news of the Church, that she is preserved by Christ for Himself, and despite all our efforts to ruin His work.

“ In this respect, the answer to the question, “What does it mean to be a Church-community?” is simply, “It means to be a Christian.” ”

If the idea of finding identity in a community of persons global, eternal, and incorruptible feels difficult, then perhaps revisiting some of the primary images for the Church in the New Testament will assist us. The most memorable of these, of course, is that of the *Body of Christ* (1 Corinthians 12, John 15). In this image, Christians are organized like the body is organized—different members in different places with different functions and purposes, each fundamentally indispensable to the other, but unified by Christ, our head. I can no more be separated from people in the church that I dislike than I can separate off—and exchange—body parts I dislike. The unity of the Body presses us into an uncomfortable acknowledgement of both the diversity of Christ, and the despair that is Christian disunity. Another key image is that of the *Holy nation* (1 Peter 1, Ephesians 2). God is in the business

of treating with whole nations at a time—they are blessed, or punished, often as a whole. In this respect, the Church is a new nation, bridging the divide between Jew and Gentile. This ‘new humanity’ becomes the fountainhead of our identity and actions in the world. A third image is that of the *Temple of God* (1 Corinthians 6, 1 Peter 2). In this image, we are bound together as the material of God’s temple, a house for His Holy Spirit, unified by means of our purpose and the very presence of that Spirit. In a final image, the Church is envisioned

as the *Bride of Christ* (Revelation 19). In this image the covenant relationship between God and His people is given shape—that the Church, as His promised people, are being perfected in purity for our ultimate union with Christ at the eschaton.

**“ There is no body that is
just a fingernail, no
nation of one person,
no temple made of a
solitary pebble ”**

By degrees, you may or may not find these images helpful, and yet it is important to note that the authors of Scripture did not struggle to conceive of God’s people as a community, as a whole, and that none of these images admits an individualist reading. In point of fact, for each image the individualist reading does disservice to the

heart of the metaphor. There is no body that is just a fingernail, no nation of one person, no temple made of a solitary pebble. While the bridal imagery is the only one favourable to an individualist interpretation, to interpret it that way is to do violence to the purpose of the metaphor. The preciousness of the Church is not in its individuality, but in the quality of its community and the perfection of its Lord. To isolate oneself as a solitary bride of Christ is to violate the Christ whose bride Christians are promised to become.

What does it mean to be a Church-community? In this first section, the answer is that it means to apprehend the nature of that community as the people unified in Christ. Being precedes doing; identity is the fountainhead of action. And *in Christ* Christians are fundamentally a community of persons, bound to the Body of Christ, secured into God’s Holy Nation, built into God’s Temple, and promised as Christ’s perfect Bride, linked globally and eternally to all who have found their life in Christ before us. The Church *is* community.

Community as Ethics

I think you will agree that Church-communities that simply sit and ‘be’ their identity in Christ are not particularly effective Church-communities. Christ himself has said that, “If you love me, obey my commands” (John 14:15).¹ The range of these commands is expansive, including, among other things, care for one’s neighbour, restitution of wrongs, visitation of the sick, rebuke, instruction, and the promulgation of the good news.² While the foundation of what it means to be Church-community is rooted in the issues of identity outlined above, that foundation should give life to and be manifested in a fruit of ethical actions. The community displays its Christian identity primarily by means of ethical action. In this section, I want to talk briefly about the nature of that ethical action.

When German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was constructing his doctrine of the Church, he relied heavily on a concept called Vicarious Representative Action. In brief, Christ on the cross acted as a vicarious representative for us—he gave his life for ours, in our place.

Consequently, in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, Christ’s act of vicarious representation becomes determinative for how the ethics of the Church-community are meant to play out. Inasmuch as Christ gave his life for us, we are now to give our lives for one another. “My life for yours,” in Bonhoeffer’s thinking, becomes the motto of the Church in action. To put this another way, my apprehension of the image of Christ as a vicarious sacrifice becomes motivation for me to act vicariously for others around me. Bonhoeffer ties this explicitly to Galatians 6:2, “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” Bearing one another up is the primary business of Church-community.

**“My life for yours,” in
Bonhoeffer’s thinking,
becomes the motto of
the Church in action**

Here, we might helpfully return to the four images of the Church outlined earlier, to show how “my life for yours” plays out in those images. With respect to the Body of Christ, I am expected to do all that I can to support and enrich the life of the body as a whole. If I am full, while another goes without, that is an indictment of my Christian faith. If I am in comfort, while another is in pain, then that is a problem I must address. With respect to the Holy Nation, I bear as a citizen of the Kingdom certain rights and responsibilities—actions toward my neighbour, personal behaviours, carrying with me always the reputation of my citizenship. With respect to the Temple of God, I must be aware that my poor treatment of other Christians amounts to an act of sacrilege. And with respect to the Bride of Christ I must be aware that I am responsible for the protection of the purity of that Bride, in stewardship of myself and others while we wait.

¹ All quoted scriptures are from the NASB.

² See Luke 10, Matthew 5, Matthew 25, Luke 17, and Matthew 28.

Earlier, I mentioned the global, eternal, and incorruptible aspects of the Church, and I mentioned then that they can create difficulties in our apprehension of the reality of Church-community. One specific danger of these aspects of the Church is how they lend

“ This being true, we must reason, I must act as if it is true toward my Christian neighbour ”

themselves to spiritualization. In other words, we can trick ourselves into thinking that we understand them, when all we mean is that we acknowledge them as spiritual truths, rather than seeing them as binding on our treatment of the bodies of fellow Christians around us. The global, eternal, and immaculate Church is not a nice mental platitude, but a binding action upon a given Christian. *This being true, we must reason, I must act as if it is true toward my Christian neighbour.*

In view of this, the whole business of Christian ethical, and of household, codes may be reframed. The life of the household is the life of a community of faith, containing mutual submission, labour for the sake of generosity, ordering of needs to preserve the stresses on the system, discipline of the recalcitrant to preserve the community, humility as a way of life, election of leadership who will steward both doctrine and the community, and so forth.³ These Scriptural lists, rather than onerous repetitions of a law we find discomforting, are the boundaries and fruits of a community life lived in and with Christ, a life lived *for* one another.

What does it mean to be a Church-community? In this second section I have argued that it means to live out practically and bodily the ethics which our community status in Christ lays upon us. A tree is known by its fruit, and a Church-community is known by the lives they live *for* one another.

Ritual as Activation

I have stressed quite strongly just now that being precedes doing, and yet within the mystery of Christianity there appears to be a strange relationship between these two—namely, that sometimes doing precedes being, or, rather, sometimes doing leads to being. This is the heart of ritual, and ritual is at the heart of community formation.

Consider, for a moment, some of the rituals that governed the life of ancient Israel. They were commanded to keep a weekly day of rest, the Sabbath, and they were commanded once a year to live in tents, or booths, for a week. The Sabbath reminded them of God's purposes in creation, the tabernacles reminded them of God's rescue from slavery and provision in the wilderness. But embedded in both of these community practices is

³ See Ephesians 5, Ephesians 4, 1 Timothy 5, 1 Corinthians 5, Philippians 2, and 1 Timothy 3.

something important. In Exodus 31:13 God speaks to Israel, saying, “You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, *that you may know* that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.” And in Leviticus 23:42-3, God reminds His people that, “You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, *so that your generations may know* that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” In both cases, the ritual is bound to knowledge—the ritual is designed, and observed, for the sake of transformation. By doing these things, you will know something. (It’s worth mentioning that this whole business is called ritual epistemology—see the further reading section for more information.)

If we understand our Scriptures correctly, then ritual is the God-ordained means by which we learn spiritual truths. One such truth is the one we learn by gathering together as the community in Christ. In that community, we engage in rituals—of gathering, reading, eating, exhortation, worship, initiation, membership, and so forth. These are the core rituals, the performance of which makes actual our understanding, and existence, as the Church-community. Christian ritual activates community.

It is worth reflecting on these factors more. Broadly, there seems to be three categories of phenomena, each contained within the other: habits, containing rituals, which in turn contains liturgies. Habits are the largest group. We have habits of breathing, and of brushing our teeth, of speech fillers, or of exercise. Some of these habits are conscious, and some are unconscious. Within habits we have rituals—practices that are conscious, and chosen, for some benefit they give to us, be it order, or fitness, or a sense of propriety. We greet our children the same way each day we get home, or wake up and read the Bible first thing in the morning, or brush our teeth exactly so many times on each side, or eat tacos every Tuesday night. We also grieve in certain ways, expect certain behaviours at weddings, anticipate standing when we hear the first notes of national anthems, and so forth. A key difference between rituals and habits is that rituals are often tied to *meaning-making*. Our performance of these actions is designed to give structure, purpose, and meaning to our daily bodily operations. Lastly, within rituals fall our liturgies (in other words, all liturgies are rituals, but not all rituals are liturgies). These appear to be that set of consciously chosen activities, governed by the principles of rituals, that help to form us as religious beings.

“**Christian ritual
activates community**”

St Augustine once wrote that “To believe is to think with assent.” In belief, I take my thinking faculty and add to it my will—in some ways it is an act of reinforcement. Similarly, a liturgy might be described as a ritual with assent—a conscious meaning-making action to which my religious will is added. *These things I do for God, and for His Church*. Curiously, in the ancient world *liturgy* was a word that meant something more like *civil service*. My performance of a liturgical action was for the sake of my civic work. If this association is

correct, then here the being and doing of the Church-community come together in unison. I join my fellow Christians in liturgy, which ritually generates our identity, and then binds us in actions performed outside the gathered community.

Conclusion

What does it mean to be a Church-community? It means to *be* the Church, and to *do* those things the Church is commanded to do, and to do them by means of ritual and liturgical action. In view of this, perhaps we can see the exhortation offered by the author of Hebrews in a fresh light: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:23-25, emphasis added).

Further Reading (light)

1. Johnson, Dru. *Human Rites: The Power of Rituals, Habits, and Sacraments*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019.
2. Williams, Charles. *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*. New York: Meridian Books, 1956.

Further Reading (challenging)

1. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
2. Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.

Author Information

Jeremy Rios is a graduate of Wheaton College (BA) and Regent College (MDiv). He is an ordained minister with the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, and is currently writing a PhD at the University of St Andrews with the Logos Institute. His thesis title is, "Sunflower, Stellvertreter, and Symbol: Vicarious Action and Shared Identity in the Theologies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Charles Williams." Jeremy is married, has four children, and has written or co-authored five books.



The Logos Institute at the University of St Andrews is a centre for excellence in the study of analytic and exegetical theology. It is committed to scholarship that reflects a concern for: transparency; simplicity in expression; clear, logical argumentation; and rigorous analysis. It also reflects a radical commitment to interdisciplinary engagement, particularly between the fields of philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the sciences. Its faculty consists of world-leading scholars in the fields of biblical studies, theology, and philosophy.

These booklets are supported by generous funding from the Templeton Religion Trust.

You can find out more, and find our regular blog and podcast by searching for us on facebook or at: <http://logos.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk>

Cover image: Thanks to @AlasdairImes for making this photo available freely on @unsplash