

# Becoming Christian

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# Chapter 1

## Becoming Human

Why become Christian? Why become encumbered with ancient dogmas and rituals? Isn't modern humanity discovering that it can live without such encumbrances? Do we not already have what we need to become truly human and to live full lives? Is not what we need for our becoming, for our human development, sufficiently present in the modern sciences, in psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.? Those are questions that some who seek and who are open to Christian faith ask. For others the above questions are almost beside the point. There are those who have given up on the self-sufficiency of modern sciences. They hold few illusions about a scientific capacity to set things in order when the potential for disorder seems to be as great, if not greater. Many of these people also question the power of a Christian religion, or any religion for that matter, to effect really lasting change and in fact are aware of the atrocities committed in the name of Christ, the Bible and the church. They are aware of a history which includes the crusades, the inquisition, and the institution of slavery whose proponents all found justification in the Bible and in religious language.

The question concerning what it is to be human and how to live a full life remains, however. What I hope will be recognized in the following pages is that Christian faith goes to the heart and core of what it means to be human. It has to do with the essence of human development and fulfillment. Furthermore, it radically addresses the situation of injustice and oppression. In spite of the ways that the language and action of Christians have been a part of the problem, Christian faith, at its heart, has the potential for recognizing the depth of evil and the certain hope of its being overcome. Becoming Christian is inescapably and integrally related to our becoming human. It is not a reality foreign to our humanity but, understood rightly, is a coming to be fully human. It is said of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John, that he came that we "might have life and have it more abundantly." Becoming Christian is not a taking away of our humanity; it is a fulfilling of it. It is not a becoming something other than we are, but rather it is the discovery and coming to be of our true selves. So let us begin here, with our humanity. Let us begin with the question: What does it

mean to become human?

Maybe it seems strange to ask about human becoming in the same way we might ask about Christian becoming. After all, whether or not we become Christian is something we decide about. Can the same be said about becoming human? Can we become anything else but human? No, of course not; but we can decide against our humanity and in ways cease to be human, losing something of what we might have been. If you and I become any thing, it is human beings that we become. Dogs become dogs and cats become cats and human beings become human beings. But dogs and cats do not seem to agonize over decisions as to what to become; it just happens. Not so with humans. We are continually deciding about ourselves, about what we will be. We decide about our relationships, our environment, our societies, our world.

Certainly there is much that goes into our becoming that we have little to do with, that in reality has been decided for us; we might say fated to us. We come into the world already gifted, as is generally the case, with gifts we did not choose for ourselves, but which we can rejoice in. We are born with particular abilities or kinds of potential which we have had no say over—any more than we have had a say over the gift of life itself. Added to this, we come into a world that is already here when we arrive, predetermined, already decided about. We are born rich or poor, in a particular place at a particular time, among a particular people with a particular history and within a particular society with its particular structures embodying in varying degrees, justice or injustice, humaneness or inhumanity, truth or falsity, freedom or oppression. For good or ill, the many relationships that make up our lives affect our emotional, mental, social, even physical development.

We know there is much that goes into making us who we are or that influences our becoming, that we have little or no control over. The human sciences such as physiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology have much to say about these factors which have such momentous bearing upon our coming to be who we are. But our coming to be cannot be summed up by these factors. They are, in a sense, the context or circumstances in which we decide about ourselves and about what we will be. That is, our life is not simply decided for us in advance, but we are continually making decisions about our world and ourselves, acting on the world and acting out our lives.

What we are recognizing here is that our becoming human, our coming to be who we are, is not something that merely happens to us but rather something we do. We are aware of this when we are aware of ourselves deciding about this or that factor in our lives. We are most aware of this when we make major decisions which will determine the direction of our lives, when we decide about vocation, marriage, job, family. At such times, we may realize that the choice we make excludes other possibilities; we are conscious that we could have been or done something else.

We have said something very special here about ourselves as human beings. We have been recognizing that we are not merely shut into our selves, determined by genes and chromosomes, by environment and society, but that we open out to the world and to one another. We are not merely objects that can only be

taken up by another and chipped away at until, like a rock in the hands of a sculptor, we become something or other, but rather we are subjects or persons who take up ourselves, who enter into creative relationships with others, and who give expression to ourselves and the world (which is very much a part of ourselves). We make music, we dance, we love, we grasp truth, enjoy beauty, and we can know joy.

We are this wonderful being who is able to go out to others in order to welcome them. We are this unique creature who has the capacity to know and love others, to enter into the lives of others, and to penetrate a world rich in variety of form and beauty.

But this openness or reaching out to our world and to other persons must be understood also as an openness toward God. This reaching out is infinite in scope. It is an openness without bounds (otherwise, we could not speak of being open, but only of being closed in.) Our reaching out, in other words, to our world and to those persons who make up our world, is always, also, a reaching out to the infinite God, to the One who cannot be comprehended, who cannot be bound by our thoughts, by our defining or delimiting, but who comprehends us, who bears us up. There is, then, in all our knowing and deciding, a knowing and deciding not only about our world and ourselves but about God in whose presence we make our decisions (whether we recognize God's presence or not.) As Augustine put it: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." Our hearts are always reaching out and they are reaching out for God. What we must see is that our coming to be human, our coming to be ourselves, inescapably has to do with the God for whom we were created.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Luke 14:25–33 and Luke 18:18–22.
2. What do these passages say about the decision to follow Jesus?
3. If someone asked you what it meant to follow Jesus, what would you say?
4. What we become has a lot to do with the decisions we make. In Luke 18:18–22 we read about a rich man who decided for his riches rather than Jesus. What do you think he became?
5. What do the followers of Jesus become? Read John 1:10–13.

## Chapter 2

# Creaturely Becoming

You and I have to become. It is a necessity. We do not already have it all in advance. In fact, we begin with virtually nothing, a speck of life; and it is not until we have been out of the womb for close to a year that we begin to be conscious of ourselves as distinct from other people and a world, and only over a period of time do we develop a will and increasingly decide for ourselves and about ourselves. We do not begin as possessors of life in its fullness but must grow, and growing means continually going out after life, deciding for life. And indeed it is life that we seek as children, and if we have not lost our childlikeness as adults, we continue to seek life. Watch a little child encounter a butterfly, another child, a speck on the floor, blades of grass under its bare feet, and you are looking at all of us enraptured by life, by its manifold wonders; you are looking at humanity—before it has lost itself or before it is caught by the struggle to merely survive—humanity, reaching out to the fullness of life, receptive, open, welcoming of that life.

We are also looking at a creature that does not have life in and of itself, but must reach out to life, must daily take in, daily become something more than it was the day before, daily coming alive in some new way. That is true not only biologically—we consume other life forms in order to develop physically—but it is also true spiritually. We do not give life (at least not as the source of life) but rather life is a gift. We are receivers of life. Another way to say this is that we are creatures. We are radically dependent. We are not only dependent on each other, our environment, our civilization, the world; we are dependent on Life Itself, on God—for life.

We cannot survive without one another. We cannot become our true selves without God, the Creator. When we speak of God as Creator we are pointing to something that is very basic to our experience. We experience life as a gift and we ourselves—in and of ourselves—are not the givers. We are dependent upon God for our very existence. God is the source of our life, the One from whom all blessings flow.

God is also the goal of our lives. Whether or not we have ever been able to put this into words, or have been able to recognize this in our experience, we are

creatures who in all our reaching out to life in its many forms and expressions, are reaching out to the One who is Life Itself. We reach out for God. We may be able to see this in the restless, unending nature of our searching and reaching out.

A young child stands before the window of a toy store and with forefinger extended says to Mother, "If I could only have one of those, I would be happy—that is what I want, right there." On this occasion, the child receives what has been requested. Three weeks later the child stands before another store window: "If I could only have one of those . . ." The child becomes an adult, the toys change, the wants change, except that underneath all the particular wants there seems to be an inexhaustible want. We are a people wanting. But we are not finally fulfilled by any particular want, by any particular thing or relationship or experience in our lives. We are in want; we hunger and thirst. Can we say what it is that we hunger and thirst for?

I ask that question of young people from time to time and the answer often forthcoming is "happiness." They believe that when all is said and done, in all their searching, they are essentially searching for personal happiness. And it seems self-evident. In fact, the answer is there in one of the founding documents of the United States of America. We have certain inalienable rights: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." It is a credo Americans relish. With a kind of arrogant self-consciousness, we pursue our goal of personal happiness in ever new ways. But the search is unending, the goal elusive. We can always seek something more and still not find, still not be satisfied.

Is it truly happiness that we want? Is there something more fundamental which we are seeking? Look at the child delighting at the reflection of window light upon the wall, the child's hands outstretched toward that which it beholds. The child is reaching out not to happiness, but to life, to being. Delight follows. Happiness, or better yet, fulfillment, is not gained by pursuing it but by seeking for something else, and then not really a "something" but life itself. We seek life and not just this or that particular life, but the fullness of life. We seek God. So it is that the French philosopher and mathematician, Blaise Pascal wrote, "In the heart of every human being is a God-shaped vacuum that can only be filled by God himself." That is also the way scripture speaks: "As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." (Psalm 42:1-2). That is how Jesus spoke: "Seek God's reign alone and God's righteousness and all these things—(What things? Let us say happiness or fulfillment)—shall be yours as well." (Matthew 6:33) The pursuit of God goes to the very heart of our coming to be. We are that creature "created in the image of God," created for God. We can become, however, "anxious about many things" and our lives encrusted by many preoccupations—or shall we say avocations. The basic calling of our true selves is overlaid, hidden by much that is peripheral. We can live as if it is not true that in God "we live and move and have our being." Nevertheless, it is still given to us, as a basic and inescapable fact of our being, to "seek God, in the hope that we might feel after him and find him." (Acts 17:27)

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Genesis 1:1–2:25.
2. Notice the relationship of God's word (And God said) and creation (And it was so).
3. What is different about the human creation?
4. What does it mean to be made in the image of God?
5. What are you dependent upon God for?



## Chapter 3

# Ceasing To Be

If the source and goal of our lives is God, if it is God that we truly hunger and thirst for in all our wants, why can it seem that God is so distant or, for some, nonexistent? Why is not God more self-evident? In one sense, God is supremely self-evident, for the most fundamental desire or hunger of our lives, that which is present at all times, is a hunger for God, for Life Itself. But this hunger is not one desire or appetite among others stretching out for this or that particular reality. It is not like physical hunger or sexual desire which is satisfied by a very particular aspect of reality. God is not one aspect of reality or one being among others, but is, as some theologians have put it, Being Itself. Our desire for God cannot be pointed out in the same way we might point out our appetite for food, and God cannot be pointed at in the way we might point at a bowl of cereal. We are made for God, to know and love the One who brought us into being, and who brings our lives to fulfillment. We do not know God in the same way as we know the various elements of our world. We know God in a much more intimate manner—as the One who upholds our lives and bears us up; the One who is our “refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” (Psalm 46)

We were created to know and love God, and God has given herself to us to know and to love. God is not distant, but ever-present, calling us into being, seeking to impart her life to us. If we do not realize God’s presence or hear God’s call, it may be that we have become deadened to God’s presence and call. Indeed, what Christians have meant by sin can be described as a being dead toward God. Being dead toward God, however, also means deadness toward others and a death to ourselves. C. S. Lewis, in his novel, *The Great Divorce*, depicts a bus load of phantoms, mere semblances of former selves, who travel from Hell to Heaven, and who discover they don’t like it in Heaven because everything is so real; the grass hurts under their phantom feet. The heavenly beings are solid, substantial, and growing, while the phantoms are diminishing into nothingness. The image is stark. Outside of God we lose our selves, our very being. In God we find our true selves. The basic question of our lives is Hamlet’s question: “To be or not to be” and that question is answered by our

response to the God who calls us forth into life.

Christians have used the term “sin” to refer to that basic response to God which can be described as a “No!” “No, God, I will not find myself in you. I will find myself in myself and of myself and by myself.” If our coming to be our true selves only happens by responding to God’s call, by being centered in God’s Word, then sin is living as if we can center our lives in ourselves and make our own word the law by which we live. Sin is basically idolatry and idolatry is essentially the worship of ourselves or extensions of ourselves in the form of images of self-power, prestige and status. Sin is being “curved in upon ourselves,” as Martin Luther put it. It is living life on our own terms, in and of ourselves, without regard for God and God’s Word and Call. Sin is essentially pride understood as the lifting up of ourselves over others and over the Creator. Sin is unbelief or faithlessness. It is the refusal to trust, to let go of our lives to the One who has brought us into being, who comes to bear us up and to send us forth. When Christians speak of various kinds of sins, they are recognizing that sin as unbelief or pride or idolatry bears fruit in the form of various attitudes, thoughts and actions.

Furthermore, sin escapes no one. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Disoriented values, attitudes, life-goals, words, actions are inescapable. They cling to humanity as a whole. Sin is part of the fabric of the human condition. We all carry around within us bent, misshaped, distorted attitudes and values, and we act from them. Those attitudes can be the result of our own willful turning away from God; they can also be the result of the influence of others, of a society, of a world that carries with it the many dimensions of sin and evil. Sinful ways are all around us and within us. No wonder Paul could cry out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” But then he adds, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25)

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Genesis 3:1-24
2. What is at the heart of temptation? In all our being tempted what is the primary thing we are being tempted to do?
3. Read Matthew 4:1-11.
4. How do you relate to Jesus’ temptations? Are these common temptations?
5. If someone asked you what sin was, what would you say?

## Chapter 4

# The Coming To Be of God's Presence—I

There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ships, smoothes and contains the rocker. It's an inside kind—wrapped tight like skin. No rocking can hold it down. It is alive, on its own. A dry and spreading thing that makes the sound of one's own feet going seem to come from a far-off place. (Toni Morrison, *Beloved*)

There is indeed a “loneliness that roams.” We hunger and thirst after the God who we have run from. We are like prodigal daughters and sons off in a far land, a wasteland, roaming from one end to another with no place to settle, no place to call our own. We must “come to ourselves” and come home to God, the source of our being. We are a lost people unable to find our way, in need of a “Savior”—One who will see us home. We are a people waiting for a word, for some expression, some divine call, in need of a “Prophet.” Whether or not we express our experience in these or similar words, the fundamental need remains—the need for a divine word and presence.

Throughout the history of humankind every culture and time has had its saviors or messiahs or prophets, expressions of the divine life, witnesses to God's presence. There has clearly been a felt need for saviors, for saints, for lights in the darkness. Within the history of humankind as a whole—within the one human history—there is a figure, who has grasped the lives of many, of whom it is confessed: “Here is the Savior of the World, here is the Savior for all humanity, Jesus of Nazareth.”

Christian faith confesses that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). What do Christians mean by this confession? Christians have, over the centuries, found many different ways to answer this question and what is presented here is one way among many.

We begin with the memory of Jesus as that has come to us in the New Testament. It is the memory of those who were close to Jesus and who, over

a period of time, came to recognize him as Christ and Savior. It is important for seekers to read the New Testament and the Gospels. There are also many commentaries and books by New Testament scholars that can be a great help—especially for those who struggle with literary and historical questions.

We are remembering Jesus of Nazareth, one of us, a member of the human race, a part of our history. We are reminded that Jesus was like us. As one early Christian put it: He was “one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) The confession of the church has always been that Jesus was truly and fully human; a man from Nazareth who went through the towns of Israel proclaiming the coming of God’s reign. He was at first perceived to be a prophet—although of a peculiar kind. He did not introduce his message with a “Thus says the Lord” as was typical of the prophets of ancient Israel, but rather, prefaced his words at times with, “Truly, truly, I say to you.” Jesus was also perceived to be a healer or miracle worker, but his healings were understood by his followers as signs that he was a prophet sent by God.

Now a prophet is essentially one who proclaims a “word of God” to a particular people of a particular age that they need to hear. A prophet is not simply a foreteller of the future, although at times a prophet may have something to say about the future. Rather, a prophet above all else is a messenger of God’s word, a speaker of a word from God, a revealer of God’s will. Of course, those who believe in prophets, believe that God is present in human life and is present in such a way as to let his intentions be known. Jesus believed he was called by God to a very particular mission during his earthly pilgrimage. Jesus said things like: “I was sent to . . .” or “I am come that . . .” He lived as a person under call by God. His disciples perceived him to be such a person. They responded to him as one who had “the words of eternal life,” the word of God.

It is not difficult to identify the basic theme of Jesus’ message. It was: “Repent and have faith for the reign of God is at hand.” Jesus had a great many things to say about God’s coming reign. He told many stories (parables) to illustrate the immediacy, the seriousness, the inevitability of the coming of God’s reign. He called upon his hearers to prepare themselves for its coming. Jesus’ Jewish audience was familiar with this notion of the reign of God. The notion was at least implicitly present in the Jewish Scriptures (the Old Testament for Christians) and was prevalent at the time of Jesus, a time of messianic expectations. At that time, there was a seeking for a reign of God that would bring in a new age, an age of justice and peace which would bring to an end the age of darkness and oppression (the land of Israel was at this time occupied by the Roman power and had, in fact, known a succession of occupations and brutal oppressors). Some of these messianic expectations were political (a messiah was expected to come to the aid of a revolutionary movement to overthrow the power of Rome); other expectations were apocalyptic (the messiah would come with the clouds from heaven to set up an eternal reign of God on earth). Whatever the expectations, the hearers of Jesus’ message were familiar with the idea of a reign of God. Jesus, however, took that notion and filled it with his own content, a content derived from his own sense of calling and relationship to God.

Jesus called God, “Abba,” which in his native Aramaic language meant,

“Dear Father.” “Abba” was a term of endearment and intimacy a child, as well as an adult, might use of his or her father. With that word, Jesus expressed the immediacy and openness of his relationship with God. (He could have referred to God as his mother and the meaning would have been the same.) Jesus experienced himself as united with God, as one with the Creator, and he invited others into that communion. He taught his disciples to pray “Abba, dear father who art in heaven . . .” His proclamation that the reign of God was at hand, was a way of pointing to the coming presence of God with humanity.

In his parables, Jesus taught that God’s coming to be present with us is an act of grace and mercy. God comes to be present to sinners. God is like the shepherd who goes out to find the lost sheep. God seeks a lost humanity in order to forgive and restore. God’s work of forgiveness and healing ultimately cannot be frustrated. God will be victorious. How we respond to God’s reign; how we respond to the God who becomes present to us, must be the fundamental concern of our lives. Jesus says “Seek first the reign of God and God’s righteousness . . .” We are to seek after God’s reign and God’s presence, for it is there to be found. “Ask and it will be given you; Search and you will find; Knock and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Jesus reveals a God who is available, who does not hold back from us. That we can seek after this God and come to know God is because God has already sought and come near to us.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Mark. Read the earliest and shortest gospel at one sitting. Summarize Jesus’ message.
2. Read John 10. Summarize the relationship between Shepherd and sheep.

## Chapter 5

# The Coming To Be of God's Presence—II

The message and the identity of a prophet are integrally related. Jesus' message was an expression of who Jesus himself was. Jesus announced that the reign of God was at hand and implied that God's reign and presence was breaking in upon the world through himself. This meant that how people responded to Jesus was also how they responded to God's presence. To follow Jesus meant being led into a relationship with God in an intimate way, so that God could be called "Father" (or "Mother"). Jesus' summons to discipleship was a challenge: "If anyone comes to me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me daily." The early followers of Jesus came to recognize him as "the way, the truth, and the life;" no one being able to come to God except through him. In Jesus, God comes to reign. In Jesus, God comes to be present for all humanity.

Earlier I mentioned that prophets are bearers of a timely message or call to action from God directed to a particular people at a particular time. For example, the message Amos spoke to Tyre was different from the message he spoke to Moab, and Jeremiah spoke a different message from that of Ezekiel. We must now recognize that Jesus, as a prophet, is unlike any other prophet. Jesus is the bearer of the message for humankind as a whole. Jesus is the message himself. Jesus is the Word by which God has addressed all people. Jesus is not simply one prophet among others but *the* prophet, the one through whom all "words of the Lord" are measured. Jesus is the prophet of the End. Jesus is the one who brings into history the end and goal of all human life. In Jesus we see that the end and goal of humanity is life in the presence of God.

The first followers of Jesus could hardly see this during Jesus' earthly journey. This was especially true when they were confronted by his crucifixion and death. With his suffering and death at the hands of the Romans all seemed lost. Whatever word Jesus was, whatever his life expressed, it was hardly an expression of the victorious entrance of God's reign upon the world. It was

hardly the assured and irrevocable presence of God.

It was only in the encounter with the Risen Christ that these first disciples could clearly recognize God's victory and presence. The apostle Paul counts himself as the last to whom the Risen Christ appeared. His first letter to the church in Corinth is the earliest writing in the New Testament to give witness to appearances of a risen Jesus. There he mentions that the Risen Christ appeared to over five hundred of the brothers and sisters including the twelve disciples. Then "as to one untimely born" Jesus, Crucified and Risen, appeared to Paul.

We cannot get behind these "appearances" to their essential nature. We cannot use the accounts of the appearances of the risen Jesus to describe the "glorified" or "resurrected" life. The appearances of the risen Jesus to his followers were simply a glimpse into God's intentions for victory and liberation for all of humanity. Even the term "resurrection" is limp and insufficient for the glorious, transcending, trans-historical reality to which it points.

Whatever descriptions or explanations or images we attempt, the impact of this resurrection event shines across the pages of the New Testament. Without this resurrection reality, there would be no New Testament. The impact of this resurrection reality upon the first followers of the Crucified and Risen One set a movement in motion that cannot be halted. These first disciples' encounter with Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen, and their own involvement in that reality of dying and rising, made them men and women who "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). Paul describes the reality of being incorporated into the Crucified and Risen One. He writes of what it means to live "in Christ." Paul says that united to Christ we die with him, we die to all that would keep us from knowing God, and we become alive to God and to one another. (Romans 6)

God has come to be present in the world and to all humanity through Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God has joined himself to human suffering and brokenness, and God has been victorious over all that would destroy humanity, all that would make us less than we are called to be, all that would enslave and diminish us.

Jesus Christ can be understood as God's ultimate intention for humanity. What happened to Jesus happened for us, for all humanity. And what happened to Jesus is that God joined himself to our humanity. God has come to be with us. Therefore, Jesus is called Emmanuel, "God with us." The early creeds of the Church describe this reality as the union of divine and human natures. The Nicene creed speaks of Jesus as true God and true Human Being and the Chalcedonian creed refers to a substantial union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ. What these creeds attempt to say is that there has been a real coming together of God and humanity. In pointing to Christ, we are pointing to this coming together. What is important to recognize is that this union of God and humanity in Jesus Christ is a reality that happens for us, through Christ. In New Testament language, we are made to understand that because Jesus is the child of God, we also, through him, become children of God. We become "partakers of the divine nature," "heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ." (1 Peter and Romans 8:17)

Through Christ we, along with Christ, are received into God's presence. This is God's wonderful gift to us; it is God's gift of God's self. Furthermore, since we have been running from God, that is, sinning against God; this welcome into God's presence is a forgiving welcome. God does not hold our sins against us but graciously and mercifully receives us as God's children—in spite of our sin. Paul, therefore, thinks of this coming together of God and humanity as a reconciliation: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." We were created for a relationship with God. Instead of seeking God, we have run from God. In Christ, God has come to us, raising us up into the divine life, setting us free from the power of sin that binds us.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read the story of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection in John 18:1–20:31.
2. Why was there a cross in Jesus' life?
3. Why are there crosses in your life?
4. What was the impact of Jesus' resurrection on the disciples? On your life?



## Chapter 6

# Becoming Christian

The Creator's intention for humanity is seen in Jesus Christ. God created us for a relationship with himself, a relationship of such an intimate order that we ourselves are to become expressions of God. Each of us are to be a word of God. We are that creature who at least has the possibility of becoming an "incarnation" of the divine life, a word of God in the flesh. When the Bible calls Jesus "Savior," or "Christ," or "Lord," it is affirming that God has expressed himself into human reality in Jesus. In Jesus Christ, human being has become that being who not only can open out toward God, seek after God, but who has come to know God and give expression to the divine life. Because God has come to humanity in Christ, we can seek for God and find him. What Christians have come to recognize in and through Jesus is that God has made himself available to humanity as a whole. Jesus is the sign to us that we can seek after God as God has created us to do and in seeking we will find, for God is present, there to be found.

When we seek and when we find, we are doing something very human. When we find, something very divine is also happening to us. For when we find, we become aware that our finding has not so much to do with our seeking but with God's giving. There is a hymn that captures this experience: "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew; He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Savior true; No, I was found of thee." (*Service Book and Hymnal*, 473)

When that happens for us, when our seeking finds, it is, as the Scriptures point out, the work of God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit. God speaks to us—most forcefully and fully in Jesus—and God enables us to hear and receive. God hears in us. God enables us to welcome his own expression of himself, to hear the word that brings life. This is understood theologically and biblically as the Holy Spirit's work.

Becoming Christian or becoming fully the human beings God has intended us to become is an act of the Word of God and the Spirit of God. By Word and Spirit we come into God's presence. On the one hand, it is an act of the Word of God in-fleshed through others (and through ourselves). On the other hand,

it is an act of the Spirit of God who enables us to welcome the Word of God. This act of the Spirit, which is an act of welcome, is understood in one sense as faith and in another as love and finally also as hope.

Becoming Christian or coming to be alive to God's presence is an act of Word and Spirit. This is a very basic assertion of Christian theology. Becoming Christian is first an act of the Word. I become Christian through encounter with words. When I hear and respond to the message of Jesus, "Repent and have faith, for the reign of God is at hand," I am in the act of becoming one of Jesus' people. Now, it may not be exactly to those words that I respond (most likely not), and, in fact, it may not be to any words in the form of vocal expressions. Rather, it may be in the midst of the concrete living out of my life (which is itself a word—the happenings of my life say something to me) that I come to a letting go (repentance) and acceptance and trust (faith) in the incomprehensible God who has called me into being.

A young woman who is faced with the possible loss of her newborn child, in the midst of a situation out of her control, utters the words "Thy will be done" and finds peace in an act of surrender and trust to the nameless God who upholds her. A man in the early hours of the morning, struggling with the financial well-being of his family, burdened by a sense of responsibility that assumes it somehow is all up to him, reaches an end to that struggle in accepting the reality that God is God and therefore he no longer need attempt that role. A woman with cancer accepts the death she faces not in an act of despairing resignation, a kind of "what's the use," but rather a relinquishing of life to the One from whom all life flows and who reigns even through death. A white man caught in the grips of racism and nationalism sees, really sees, for the first time the destructive effects of his raising himself and his people above others. He renounces the idolatry that has given his life a false security. His renouncing is not merely an attempt at a moralistic clean-up of his life, but a fundamental acceptance of his need for confession, repentance and forgiveness; and an openness to the One in whom his true security is to be found, the One in whom a way is provided which heals and brings life. An African American woman who has felt the oppression of a society held under the sway of racism and sexism nevertheless discovers a graced self-determination and freedom which no longer serves fear nor succumbs to intimidation or accommodation.

The examples are many of the experiences of persons in the midst of life's passages, crises, disturbances, with sin and death, with love and life. In the concrete living out of our lives there is opportunity to repent and have faith. There is opportunity to walk in a new way. We are continually encountering the word of the self which God calls into being. If we have ears to hear, the word is present.

It is true that in the living out of our lives we encounter the witness of others, and that may include the explicit message of Jesus that continues to be passed on and which finds expression in the lives of individuals and a community called the church of Jesus Christ. We may hear in no uncertain terms the call to "turn from idols to serve a living and true God," a call to turn from anything or anyone we would make central to our lives and to let God be center. We hear

the word or message which encourages us to trust in the merciful God who has graciously and generously made himself available to us. Even our guilt cannot distance us from the God who has come near, but in turning to him, we find he has already approached us, waiting expectantly, a receptive and forgiving presence.

We become Christian by encountering the Word. Along with the Word, we become Christian by the work of the Spirit. The ministry of the Spirit has already been described in the examples above, for it is the other side of the work of the Word. The experience of the Spirit is the experience of acceptance, welcome, trust in the incomprehensible God who comes near in the midst of the living out of our lives; it is the “yes” of our being to the new way into which we experience ourselves being called; it is the willingness to turn from the old way when that way is “curved in upon ourselves”; it is the experience of freedom before God which willingly serves our neighbor.

When the explicit message of the good news about Jesus is encountered, the ministry of the Spirit is known in our welcome of that message and our faith in the promises of God. It is known in a hope which is more than optimism, a hope which continually seeks to move beyond the present experiences of love and faith, a hope which reaches out to the One who can never be pinned down to this or that particular experience and therefore is a hope which always expects more, always knows the best is yet to come.

Becoming Christian means saying “yes” with the whole of our being to the reality that has come into human existence through Christ. In Christ, God has expressed himself in our humanity. Through Christ, we are brought into God’s presence and begin to see the world and others from the perspective of those who live in God’s presence. When we allow ourselves to be brought into God’s presence, we become Christian (at least implicitly). When we are grasped by the message of Jesus which calls us into the reality of God’s presence through Christ, and when in the “power of the Spirit” we welcome this gift of God’s presence we become Christian, whether or not we can articulate well the ins and outs of Christian teaching.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Romans 5.
2. Describe what it is like to be a Christian.

## Chapter 7

# Our Triune Experience of God

The doctrine of the trinity has been called, by one theologian, the higher mathematics of theology. Indeed, many Christians find this teaching of the church impenetrable, and many pastors struggle with preaching on the Sunday of the Holy Trinity. The appointed lessons do little to help. Actually, the Bible has no formal concept of God as “triune.” The notion of the trinity—of God as three “persons” in one godhead—developed over the first several centuries of the Church as Christians, teachers and bishops sought to define the position of Christ in the framework of God’s work of salvation. That their reflection led to the concept of God as triune is not surprising considering the expressions of the New Testament and the experience of Christians. The doctrine of the trinity flows from our experience. Our experience of God is triune.

We experience God as creator. (First kind of experience of God.) We are not our own creators. We are dependent for our very existence on the God who is Life. But we do not only experience God as the One from whom our life flows, but if we know God in a biblical sense, we experience God as coming near, as being present to us and for us. God has not created and then remained distant and silent, but rather has come near and spoken. We come to know God through our humanity and through others because God has united himself to us through Jesus Christ. (Second kind of experience of God.) Our response of receiving God’s presence into our lives is God’s work in us also. (Third kind of experience of God.)

Even when we know God’s presence, God remains impenetrable and incomprehensible. We cannot fit God into our categories of thought. (First kind of experience of God.) Nevertheless, we can know God as present, upholding our lives and guiding, calling us into new ways of being, new ways of loving. God finds many ways to speak to us, to get through to us, to come to expression in our lives. Christians have come to see that the expression of God’s forgiving, gracious presence in humanity is Jesus Christ. (Second kind of experience of

God.) When we receive this expression of God's presence, when we welcome the Christ of God, the graced presence of God into our lives, this also, as we have seen, is the work of God, the activity of the Spirit. How can we receive into our lives the infinite God unless the infinite God welcomes herself within us? (Third kind of experience of God.)

God is experienced as Creator (in traditional language as God the Father). God is experienced as present in the concrete reality of the world, God expressed in the flesh of her creation—in Jesus (God the Son, God the Word, God the Savior). God is experienced in our welcome of God's presence. When we come to faith, when we come to trust our lives to God's forgiving, guiding presence, that coming to faith is God's welcome of herself within us (God the Holy Spirit).

What we are describing in this triune experience is the dynamic of love and knowledge. We experience this dynamic daily when we come to know and love another person. We know another person through that person's bodily expressions of himself or herself, through vocal expressions and body language. Bodiliness is, in a sense, the medium by which another is known.

At the same time, we realize that there is always an impenetrable more to the person than that which gets expressed—we might say there is the person-in-themselves. Something of the "person-in-themselves" is revealed in the "expressed person" but there is much that remains hidden. We come to know each other through our individual expressions of ourselves.

We come to know each other in order to love each other. In addition to the "person-in-themselves" and the "person as expressed," there is the "person as welcomed,"—the person as loved and accepted by us. There is a triune dynamic in all our knowing and loving.

This dynamic is also true for us individually in relation to ourselves. We only know ourselves through our expressions of ourselves (including our inner conscious life). But we always feel there is more to ourselves than we know. Therefore, we speak of getting to know ourselves. We don't come into the world already knowing ourselves, and we will not leave the world having fathomed our depths. In our attempts to know ourselves, our true selves recede from us into what seems an infinite expanse. If our disposition toward ourselves is a healthy one, we also come to love ourselves, to welcome the expressions, gifts, achievements, extensions of ourselves. In a sense, there is (1) the unfathomable self, (2) the expressed self, and (3) the welcoming self.

We can think of the God, in whose image we were created, in the same way. There is the hidden and infinite creator God, the revealed, concrete, present God, and the welcoming, receptive God. The traditional terms are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We are trying out some other terms but the experienced reality remains the same. God the Father is the author of all life, God the Son is the expression or revelation of the Father, and God the Holy Spirit is the inspirer of faith, the one who guides into truth, who leads us to God, opens us up to God's coming. The Gospel of John, in particular, moves along these lines of expression.

Early on in the life of the Church, this triune experience of Christians was recognized, but early Christian teachers also went one step further. Not only

is God experienced as triune by us, but God is triune within herself. From all eternity, before the creation of the world, God expressed herself to herself and loved her expression. From all eternity, God communes with herself for God is love. That same communion of love is given to God's creation, to a humanity created in God's image after God's likeness.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read John 1:1-18. Can you identify the three kinds of experiences of God in this passage?
2. Read John 14:8-31. What are the differences between Father, Son and Holy Spirit in this passage? How are they related to each other?

## Chapter 8

# The Coming To Be of God's Communal Presence

Then God said, Let us make human being in our image, after our likeness . . . So God created human being in his own image, in the image of God he created human being; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

The God who is Love and in whom there is communion, created human being for community. “It is not good that man should be alone” is the word of the Lord in the second creation story in Genesis. We know this. We make much of our individuality; we prize it highly, and yet we know we are not simply islands unto ourselves. We are what we are as individuals only in relation to others. Individual characteristics of body temperament and personality are passed onto us from others or formed in relation to others. Physiologists, psychologists and sociologists have much to say about this. Theologians will add that our individual calling and decision-making has something to do with God. We are what we are in relationship to others. We are created for relationship. We are created for the out-giving of our lives to others and for others. We were created for community.

Most of us recognize the importance of community, but we are often confused about what community really is because we experience it so fleetingly. Community is not merely an aggregate of individuals. It is not a congregation of persons each seeking to carry out their own self-seeking individual life projects, assisting others only as it is expedient for the continuance of their own plans. It is true that we can act as if that is community—every person seeking their own personal happiness and success, giving regard for others only when that is helpful for their own projects. Backs are scratched with the assumption that there will be a forthcoming back scratch in return. “If you help me with getting mine (my piece of the pie!), I’ll help you get yours.” A tenuous kind of relationship is built on such a foundation. Marriages often take on such a dynamic. But the seeds of destruction are there, for true community cannot be

formed on the basis of mutually shared self-centeredness.

We are created for community, but its basis is to be found only in that love that goes on loving no matter what, that love which forgives. Such a love heals and edifies. It is this love that Paul lifts up as the highest of God's gifts to humanity.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

It is this kind of love that is the foundation for truly human community. Divine love incarnate in humanity must find not only individual but communal expression. We are created to be a word, an expression, an image of the God who is love. We are not that expression of love merely as individuals, but as individuals in community. Paul writes of the church as the body of Christ. The church as the community of faith, hope, and love is the fleshed out, concrete expression of Christ in the world. The church is to be a sign of God's intentions for humanity in its fellowship of love and compassion.

There is no question that the church remains a congregation of sinners, even as it seeks to be a community of love. It has abundant opportunity to exercise the forgiveness and mercy that love brings. It is on a pilgrimage, and it only succeeds in its calling incompletely and in fits and starts. It remains always under call by God to become more truly itself—a fellowship of mercy and compassion, and also a people of praise and gratitude as it experiences its very being flowing from God's gracious presence and self-giving.

This, of course, means a number of things in the concrete, some we must imagine since we see so few examples. True community means the "dividing walls of hostility" between peoples, races, sexes come down. It means reconciliation. It means that we no longer count that which is in our possession as our own. Our possessions are related to God, to be used for God's purposes in service to others and in ways appropriate to our own individual callings. Luke, in the book of Acts, remembers the early Christian community in Jerusalem as a community which "had all things in common" and who "sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." (Acts 2:44-45) The coming to be of a healing, gracious community which gives expression to God's love, takes place within the context of a world of greed and selfishness, of individualism masquerading as individuality. The community of faith is that community which is discovering that its life and its security does not consist in the abundance of its possessions but rather in the abiding presence of God who has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

There are many relational dynamics that get in the way of community. Much of the ethical discourse in the New Testament is concerned with resisting those dynamics which are destructive of community and with embracing those ingredients which are upbuilding. Of special concern is the use of individual gifts.



### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Acts 2.
2. Can you relate the experience of the early church to the church today?  
How? How not?
3. What does the experience of these early Christians imply for our lives as  
Christians and as communities of faith today?

## Chapter 9

# Ministry in Community

Each of us has varying gifts or potential. These gifts provide the framework for a great many choices. All of us in the course of our lives make many decisions concerning the use of our gifts. We cannot use them all to their fullest extent. Each of us has far more potential than we can ever actualize. We are able to do far more than we will have time and space to do. We are after all “here for a time and then gone.” An army slogan proclaims: “Be all that you can be.” If we take it seriously, and attempt such a undertaking, we will find it to be a tyranny. We cannot be all that we are able to be. Therefore, in reality we choose how we will use our gifts and for what ends. That is where difficulties arise.

It is possible to use our gifts in quite self-serving, mean, inward-turned ways. It is in fact the very thing we find ourselves doing even when we do not want to. (Let’s be honest here!) Consequently, our gifts become potential not for the building up of community, the inclusion of others and for reconciliation, but for exclusion, petty rivalries, manipulation and division. Where the love of God begins to be exercised, however, first in faltering ways and then in ever more substantial ways, our gifts begin to be the very potential for the development of true community.

To see this more clearly, it may be helpful to make a distinction between gifts and callings. Human giftedness is potential. Knowing something of what we are able to do does not tell us what we ought to do. What we ought to do or, in other words, what we are called to do is known only as we live in openness to the God before whom we exist. The Bible speaks of the guidance of God’s Spirit. It is God who calls us, who gives us a vocation.

When I use the word “ought” above, I am not referring simply to what we often call moral principles like the ten commandments which have something to say to all human beings, but rather those very particular “oughts” that have to do with each individual’s calling from God. “Ought I to get married or remain single? Ought I to marry this particular person? Ought I to be a carpenter or doctor or botanist? Ought I to speak to this person? Ought I to remain silent? What ought I to say? What ought I to pray for?” The questions arise

in the course of our everyday lives. The decisions are many, most of them are made without a great deal of thought. Some often elicit a degree of tension and turmoil. We are continually seeking what is fitting to who we are, to who we are called to be. If we are coming to know ourselves as residing in the presence of God, then our decisions about the use of our gifts are increasingly made in response to God's abiding and guiding presence. Our gifts used in response to God become gifts of love, potential for the building up of community and the restoration of a broken humanity. That is the high vision of the book of Ephesians in the New Testament:

But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift . . . And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature humanity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7-13)

Augustine, an African bishop of the fourth century, wrote: "Love God and do what you please." If we love God, then what we please will conform to the purpose of God. As we grow in faith and love toward God, our perceptions will conform increasingly to God's call in our lives, and our gifts will give expression to the Creator from who all gifts flow. This expression of our Creator will be the simple beauty of community. Such a community of faith and love will be a sign to the world of God's intentions for humanity.

The key to knowing God's calling in our lives is the surrender of our selves to God. As we let go of our intentions, opinions, goals which we have sought in and of ourselves; when we let go of them to God, our vision clears. We begin to see what God intends for us and for humanity. We see more clearly how we are to use the gifts God has graced us with. God has a way for each of us individually. Each of us must discover for ourselves what that way is.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Ephesians 4, Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and 13.
2. What gifts are you aware of in your life?
3. What is your calling? (How does God want you to use your gifts in ministry to others?)

## Chapter 10

# Signs of God's Presence

Our world community is a broken community. In one sense we increasingly feel that our world and humankind are one. We have become much more aware of the interconnectedness of peoples, nations and communities. We are by necessity much more cognizant than our ancestors of a global community. And yet, the one human family and its global village is shattered by racism and nationalism, by sexism, individualism, materialism and militarism. The result is hunger, poverty, oppression, injustice, environmental destruction, and war. One race, nation, or people lifts itself above others. Individuals and groups lift themselves and their people and possessions above others. We have already named this experience "sin." It stands as the basis of broken community.

In the midst of this brokenness there is a yearning for community and wholeness. In a world of alienation, many look for signs of reconciliation and unity. Where there are such signs and where those signs have their radical depth in the healing of the human heart, in reconciliation to God and liberation from self-idolatry, there are signs of God's presence. God's presence is embodied in both individual and communal ways, since humanity is individual and communal. God's presence is certainly seen in individual acts of love, but the paramount sign and revelation of God's presence is seen in true community. Individual's who are discovering the mercy and forgiveness of God and who extend that reality to others become the building blocks of a communal temple—a sanctuary which gives expression to God's presence and provides refuge to others who drift in or are drawn in from a lonely and hostile world.

The community of Jesus Christ is to be such a sign of God's gracious, active presence. It is to be a sacrament, a means of grace and an embodiment of God's redemptive love. It is to be such a sign in it's inner workings as well as it's outward movement.

In its fellowship in the Spirit, individual members of the community of faith are words to each other. They are words of God which express that divine love that tears down the dividing walls and builds up community. The fellowship in the Spirit comes to expression in symbol and ritual and movement, in prayer and song, in the gathered community. Words spoken in prayer to God also

become words of God spoken to the sisters and brothers. Divine expressions are spoken or acted out, and there is a shared response to those words and to the Word who is Jesus Christ. There is the response of open hearts in praise and thanksgiving for God's presence expressed in the community of the Word.

All gifts and acts of the Spirit become a means by which God graciously gives himself to his people. Every act of the community of faith, insofar as it is an act of faith, is a sacrament, a means of grace. The word sacrament simply refers to a means by which God comes to be present in our lives. Christians have pointed to two central sacramental acts. Whether or not reference is made to other sacraments, Christians and churches regard these two as central, namely Baptism and the Eucharist. The life of the church as sacrament, as a mediation of God's presence, finds particular focus in these two acts. The inner dynamic of the worshiping, faithful community is governed by them and energized for its movement into the world.

Baptism is the sacrament of initiation. It is the sign of new birth. It is that concrete active word of God that proclaims and enacts God's redemptive work. We are baptized into Christ, united with Christ and into Christ's death and resurrection. In Christ we die. In Christ we are raised to new life. In that Christ-reality of dying and rising we also die to the in-turning power of sin and come alive to God and one another. Jesus said, "Repent and have faith for the reign of God is at hand." Jesus lived what he proclaimed, and the dying of repentance and coming alive of faith were consummated and confirmed in his death and resurrection—consummated for all humanity. The act of baptism is a sign of that consummating act upon our lives as a whole. "All of life is a spiritual baptism," wrote Martin Luther. In the waters of baptism, we are drowned. We die to the old life of being turned in upon ourselves. We are liberated, forgiven. We rise up out of the waters of baptism to new life, receptive and open to the reign and presence of God, alive to the Spirit and Word of God. That baptismal reality of dying and rising, of repentance and faith, must be the reality of our lives.

This reality of dying and rising is sustained and invigorated by the communal act of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. This second central sacrament is a communal word, the focused expression of that gathered community which is sustained by the Word of Life in-fleshed.

The meals Jesus had with his disciples, like all family meals were special affairs. The last meal, especially memorable like all last meals, was held fast in the memory of the followers. On the night before Jesus was crucified, knowing that he was about to be betrayed, he took the basic staples of life in his hands. With the bread he said, "This is my body given for you." With the wine, "This is my blood shed for you." In the reenactment of this meal, Christians, through the ages, have participated in Christ's sacrifice. In the act of this meal of thanksgiving, Christians receive again and again the Word of Life which comes in the flesh of the bread and wine and gathered fellowship. The broken body of Christ and his out-poured blood becomes the sustaining reality of the church not only in its inner dynamic in worship but also in its life in the world. Christ comes to his followers in this meal, binds them as a community and imparts

power for their witness.

The church's participation in the broken Christ is then lived out in the brokenness of the world where its witness to God's reign and presence must be daily expressed. The power received in community, through the gifts and sacraments of the community energizes God's people for their witness. They are sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to express Christ to the world. Receiving within themselves the One who "gave his life as a ransom for many," they also learn to "lose their lives for Christ's sake and for the good news." In this way they fulfill their calling to be yeast, salt and light in the world.

### **For Reading and Reflection**

1. Read Romans, chapter 6.
2. Read Luke 22:13-20.
3. What does your baptism mean to you?
4. What does the practice of Holy Communion mean to you?

## Chapter 11

# Signs of God's Presence in the World

Becoming Christian is the coming-to-be of God's presence. That has been our theme. In Jesus Christ, God has come to be present in humanity. Jesus is *the* Sign that God, the Creator, has not remained distant and silent, but has come to abide in our humanity and that that abiding life shines even in the face of death.

God comes to abide in us, not only as individuals but as community. Just as Jesus gathered around him followers who lived in expectation of the coming reign of God, so the Christ-community has continued through time and is under call to be a sign of God's reign and presence in the world. The church is to be the bearer, in word and deed, of the good news that God's reign and presence have indeed broken in upon a crippled world. The church can only be that bearer and sign as it remains open and receptive to the work of the Spirit and Word of God. The church must continually become Christian. It must continually receive God's abiding presence, increasingly become an incarnation of God's love. In word and deed, it is to give concrete, fleshly expression to God's loving, gracious presence.

We can be clear on some of the forms that expression takes. Where human beings are involved in the needs and hurts of the world, where they are bearing the burdens of those around them, where they are increasingly viewing those around them as sisters and brothers, where they are truly listening and welcoming, where they are showing mercy and compassion, there God's gracious presence is coming to expression. How that expression comes to be in each individual is dependent on each individual's gifts and calling. The rich diversity of expressions of love is determined, in part, by the indefinite variety of differences of individuals and cultures. Thanks be to God!

The incarnate expressions of God's loving presence are not limited, however, to individuals or to the community of faith in relation to individuals. Rather, it is as church that God's abiding presence can come to expression before social,

national and global communities. To the extent that the church of Christ gives expression to God's reign and presence, it is an incarnate word to human community in general. And, to the extent that it truly reveals God's reign, it is a thorn in the flesh of society and the prevailing status quo. The church is called to be a word of God to humanity, a word that calls the human family beyond its present configurations which are in great part determined by sin and social egotism. Consequently, the church can always expect to be in confrontation with the society and world in which it finds itself.

The church is called to be a prophetic community. Just as the prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed God's word and future, just as Jesus proclaimed the arrival of God's reign, so the church is that community which is to live out and speak out God's word and future. It must continue in word and action to announce that reign of God which is always arriving but is never completely here and which, therefore, critiques and overturns all present realities. The church points to God's gracious coming by being a foretaste and sign of what the coming reign of God is like.

The church, in its witness, cannot be content to speak and live the word of God from individual to individual. It must address societies and nations, groups and corporations. How could it be otherwise? Racism, sexism, materialism, greed, arrogance, selfishness come to expression not only in individuals, but in institutions and structures of society. God's transforming reign and presence must come to be felt in every aspect of human life. Christians need have no illusions about societies or the world being transformed into God's reign. We must expect that only at the end. And yet we stretch out for that day in the power of the Spirit, enlivened with a lively word and vision to be a sign and effective witness, like yeast in a loaf of bread or light in the darkness.

### **For Reflection**

1. What do you believe God is calling the church to do in the world in our day and time?
2. What is your church's mission?
3. Write your reflections on where you believe the Spirit is leading the churches on the south side of Chicago. What kind of mission of God is the Holy Spirit placing on your heart?

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