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peasants, and the second from the elderly Luther's immoderate outbursts against the Jews. The most remarkable feature of these two sets of utterances in the present context is not that they mirror Luther's two kingdoms doctrine, but that they contravene principles which are central to it. In the first case, Luther forgets his own counsel that the prince should eschew severity and punish with leniency; in the second, that faith is a free work which cannot be produced by violent means. The two kingdoms doctrine affords the most efficacious remedy for Luther's own excesses.

While the continued usefulness of the three hierarchies conception may not be immediately apparent, the doctrine of the two kingdoms remains relevant today. Both spiritual and secular rule still oscillate between the realms of God and the devil. And, as at least two-thirds of the globe exists in the grip of a totalitarian ideology which is wilfully oblivious of the mystery of transcendence and of its corollary, namely the limits which are set to the exercise of secular power, mankind is summoned as never before to beware of any governmental or social system which assaults God in his *Reich und Regiment*. Meanwhile, where Christendom is still free to discharge an untrammeled prophetic ministry to the world about, its spokesmen in the several confessions and denominations often seem wont to absolutise one or other of those two half-truths which can be succinctly labelled 'verticalism' and 'horizontalism' respectively. Thus while Dr. Edward Norman's mordant analysis of present trends justly merits respect and, on the whole, assent, it must be asked whether he could in the end of the day be exculpated of the charge of rending the two kingdoms asunder by hinting that the Christian faith and political reality are not even indirectly related. Nor are voices lacking which suggest that the Church's primary task is to act as the midwife of political and social change, substituting a transient secularist creed from the faith once delivered to the saints. Martin Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms manages to combine the insight that the Church's prime duty is to publish abroad the message of both the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake and the future restoration of our vitiated human nature in eternity with the acknowledgement of the essential God-pleasingness of the performance of provisional secular tasks in faith. And his realisation of the pre-eminence of the heavenly over the earthly vocation, and of the perils which beset the Christian in both these spheres, provides a salutary antidote to the idolatry of enthusiasm which would identify p. 309 law and gospel, summoning heaven and earth and producing hell. Avoiding these pitfalls, the Reformer became the architect of a *via media* which might be trodden with profit today.

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The Early Church as a Caring Community

Robert Banks

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This article gives pastoral insights into the personal and social caring of the Early Church. The author details some of the implications of these for social work today.

Even the most militant detractors of Christianity have acknowledged that the first Christians and their successors were united by a strong bond of affection and concern. Marxist writers from Engels on have pointed to the 'revolutionary communism' of the Jerusalem church, even if they have also spoken of the experiment's essentially utopian character. Some of the earlier historians of the ancient world, who had little time for Christianity, also commended the social welfare innovations of Christians during the early years of Christian expansion. But the so-called 'communism' described in Acts was a comparatively short-lived affair and has rarely had normative status among Christian groups. And such Christian innovations as the creation of hospitals, orphanages and so on are a later phenomenon. What are we to say about the main body of Christian groups which formed a bridge between the foundation Jerusalem church and the more organised churches of the later Empire, especially the Pauline and Johannine communities about which we know the most? And do they have anything to teach us, living as we do twenty centuries later in a very different social order, about the most apposite patterns of care for others? On the face of it, it seems unlikely that this could be the case. But we should not peremptorily foreclose the issue. Christians have always had a healthy respect for the New Testament's ability to say something relevant to their own situation. Meanwhile the widespread rediscovery of lost values in more primitive civilizations—one thinks in Australia of our own Aborigines—should encourage others to check the matter out before making up their minds.

At the outset we are faced with a problem of definition. The word 'church' today refers to a wide variety of things, viz., the body of Christians in a particular locality, the building in which they meet, the denomination to which they belong, the totality of Christians in the world and even the full number of believers alive or dead. In the first century things were much simpler. The word generally signified the regular local gatherings of Christians, whether meeting as a small p. 311 home-based group or larger city-wide affair.[1] Less frequently, it referred to the ongoing heavenly assembly around Christ in which all Christians now participate, by virtue of their inclusion in him, even as they go about their everyday activities.[2] These two ideas are closely related: the local churches are the expression in time and space of their heavenly counterpart. But it is in the first of these two senses, that I shall be using the word. This means that we shall concentrate on the actual experience of community which small groups of Christians shared as they regularly met together to further their common ends.[3] Strange as it may seem, this usage of the term does not result in a more restricted view of the matter. Instead it has the advantage of preserving a vital first-century perspective.

Along with the problem of definition, we are faced with a second difficulty. How are we to visualise these small communities in operation? For it is not only our use of the word 'church' which has undergone change but our understanding of what it involves as well. It requires a considerable act of imagination to divorce our minds from what customarily takes place on a Sunday today and mentally recreate what happened in the house of Aquila and Priscilla in first-century Rome. To begin, we have to remember that special buildings for meetings do not appear to have been built by Christians until the third century, and even then they were largely modifications of private dwellings. Also, groups like the one in view were probably not very large: we must think in terms of a

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[1] E.g. Rom. 16:5, 23; 1 Cor. 14:23, 16, 19; Col. 4:15, 16; Phlmn. 2.

[2] E.g. Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 5:23ff.

[3] On all this, see further R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Historical Setting*, Sydney, Anzea, 1979.

relatively intimate circle centring around a host family. As well, the meetings possessed a high degree of informality and were not purely religious but also genuinely social occasions. (cf. Acts 20:7–12; I Cor. 14–26-40)There is no suggestion that they were conducted with the kind of solemnity and formality that surrounds most weekly Christian gatherings today. As E. Schweizer says, in his description of early Christian worship,

> … the togetherness of the church and its services is not that of a theatre audience, where one or several paid actors act on the stage while everybody else is looking on. Each one takes part with his special gift … the body of Christ is not a body of soldiers in which one sees at best the neck of the preceding man … It is a body consisting of members living in their mutual addressing, asking, challenging, comforting, helping of Christ and his gifts.[4]

There are also other ways in which the early communities differed p. 312 from those familiar to us. But enough has been said to dispel the worst misconceptions people frequently have and we can fill out this sketch of early church life more adequately as we go.

DIMENSIONS OF A CARING FAMILY

How fundamental a part does mutual care play in the activities of these communities? In what ways, and through what people, does it come to expression?

The first question is not at all difficult to answer. Care lies right at the heart of the early Christian idea of community. And for some very profound reasons. According to John, 'God … loves us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins. Beloved, if God so loves us, we ought also to love one another' (I Jn. 4:10) Paul insisted: 'Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who … emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' (Phil. 2:4, 5–7). As these writers saw it, God took responsibility for each man and woman upon himself and Christ fulfilled that responsibility in his life and death. As children of the one and as servants of the other, Christians must reflect that same divine attitude and undertake that same sacrificial ministry. The apostle typifies this attitude in action. 'We were gentle among you', he says, 'like a nurse taking care of her children'. (I Thess. 2:7 cf. 2 Cor. 11:28) So too his co-workers who had 'the same earnest care' in their hearts. (2 Cor. 8:16; cf. Phil. 2:20) His converts are to follow suit and in their local congregations each is to 'care for God's church' and 'have the same care for one another'. (I Tim. 3:5 and I Cor. 12:25; cf. Phil. 4:10) Practically this means putting on 'compassion, kindness, lowliness … and above all … love'. (Col. 3:12–14; cf. I Pet. 1:22) Everyone should 'love one another earnestly from the heart'. (I Pet. 1:22) Each is to exhibit 'sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart'. (I Pet. 3:7) Let all 'stir one another upto love and good works … encouraging one another … all the more' as they see the End drawing near. (Heb. 10:24–25) In short, Christians are to 'bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ': since Christ 'laid down his life for us … we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren'. (Gal. 6:2 and 1 Jn. 3:16).

The last word provides us with a further clue about the nature of this care. For the most characteristic terminology used by the early Christians to describe their relationship with one another is not drawn from that of race ('kinsmen'), nation ('citizens'), employment ('colleagues'), friendship ('comrades') or even religion ('believers'), but p. 313 instead from the family. Certainly terms lifted from these other contexts are used but less frequently or more in connection with the apostolic mission than the churches

[4] E. Schweizer, *Neotestamentica*, Zwingli, 1963, pp.335–336.

founded by it.[5] On the other hand time and time again throughout the New Testament, especially in Paul's and John's writings, it is terms drawn from family life that come before us, viz., brother, sister, father, mother, son, children and, remembering the extended character of many first-century households, also steward, servant and slave.[6] Such terms, especially the first group drawn from the inner family circle, are often accompanied by other personal expressions, e.g. 'my', 'our', together with terms of endearment like 'beloved'. (Rom. 1:9; Philm. 2:1; In. 4:1) All this indicates that the members of an early Christian group saw themselves as part of a close-knit family. (Gal. 6:10) This strengthened the sense of responsibility each had for the other. Since they were linked together in this way, what affected one necessarily affected all. (I Cor. 12–26) It is not surprising that the outward mark of this bond was the giving and receiving of a kiss. (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; I Pet. 5:14). Here the relationship between all, and the family nature of that relationship, came to tangible expression. From all this the centrality of care in early Christian community life is transparent. It is also clear that it involves not only the alleviation of others' cares but identification with them in their distress and the taking of their cares upon or into oneself.

What forms does this care take and who has responsibility for it? These questions take us to the heart of the matter and we must spend some time examining them. We shall look first at concern for *physical and material needs*.

Early Christians were very practical about this. They did not view themselves as a 'communion of souls' whose only concern was each other's 'spiritual welfare'. The bodily and material needs of members were just as much their corporate responsibility. For those living within Christian households, these needs would have been met within the family context. In the ancient world, householders were under an obligation to provide for their immediate dependants, including slaves, as well as for relatives who had been deprived of their means of support, for example widows. Within a converted household, the paterfamilias should have gained a sharpened sense of his responsibility in such matters. For 'if any one does not provide for his own relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever'. (I Tim. 5:8) We hear echoes of this p. 314 household pattern of care in the New Testament as well. 'If a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn their religious duty to their own family and make some return to their parent; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.' (I Tim. 5:16). There is also a suggestion, however, that those who previously relied on the customary handouts of wealthier patrons for their livelihood (which brought with it an obligation to support the patron in any way he demanded), should overcome the pervasive Greek tendency to despise manual work and instead find employment so as to provide for oneself. It is probably this rather than 'eschatological laziness' that lies behind the injunction to 'work with your own hands … so that you may command the respect of outsiders and be dependant on nobody'. (I Thess. 4:11; cf. also 2 Thess. 3:10–12).

But within the Christian community there were others who did require help from those in Christian households. One of the problems at Corinth stemmed from the failure of people from such households to share the food they had brought for the Lord's Supper—which was, of course, a real meal not just a token one—with those who came empty-handed because they belonged to pagan households or no household at all.[7] To

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[5] So Rom. 16:17; Phil. 3:20; 1 Cor. 16:16; 3 Jn. 15; 1 Tim. 4:12.

[6] Col. 1:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 4:15; Rom. 16:13; 1 Tim. 1:2; 1 Jn. 5:21; 1 Cor. 4:1; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 4:5.

[7] 1 Cor. 11:20–22; cf. B. Winter, "The Lord's Supper at Corinth: An alternative reconstruction", *Reformed Theological Review*, 37, 1978, pp.73–82.

take another example, where there is 'a real widow … left all alone' with no-one to provide for her, the church is to step in and look after her needs. (I Tim. 5:16). But it is not only food which should be occasionally shared or widows who must be regularly helped. 'If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? (Jam. 2:16) Therefore 'it is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers … you will do well to send them on their journey as befits God's service. For they have set out for his sake and have accepted nothing from the heathen … (2 Jn. 5, 7) Alongside such instructions, we should note the many encouragements of those with houses to exercise hospitality, of those with wealth to aid others financially and of those in the position to do so to perform helpful services of various kinds.

Yet it was not only members of, or visitors to, one's own home or community to which the early Christians had obligations. They also shared their possessions with those who were geographically far distant. Paul's gathering of funds from the Gentile churches for the poverty-stricken Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem is a singular instance of p. 315 this. (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:24–29; I Cor. 16:1–4)And although it was their surplus wealth that the Gentile churches were asked to contribute, some congregations 'in … their extreme poverty … overflowed in a wealth of liberality', giving 'beyond their means, of their own free will.' (2 Cor. 8:2–3) We must also remember that it was not just lack of money, food, clothing and other such necessities that concerned early Christian churches. Loneliness, physical disability, and illness of members were also communal concerns. Although these could not always be removed, there were a number of different ways through which help might come. Visiting 'orphans and widows in their affliction', and those who were imprisoned and ill-treated, was one. (Jam. 1:27, Heb. 13:2) Prayer for the sick accompanied by some physical gesture such as annointing with oil, raising by touch, or laying on hands, was another. (Jam. 5:14–16; cf. Acts 2:3–8; 9:17, 41) Exercise of various gifts of healing also took place, as well as the occasional miraculous work, when the community contained people gifted in these respects. (I Cor. 12:9–10, 28; Gal. 3–5).

So in a number of ways early churches possessed the means for looking after most of the physical and material needs of their members, of friends and strangers visiting them, and of associated communities elsewhere. They were, in a very real sense, small-scale social welfare agencies and medical centres. Of them, when they were working properly, it could be said, as it was of the earlier Jerusalem church, that 'there was not a needy person amongst them'. (Acts 4:34) From this we can now move on to what we can call *personal and social care* in the wider sense.

Here we are thinking of the personal growth of the individual and social harmony of the group. These things are a major concern of all the New Testament writers and they give frequent and varied expression to it. Paul's most striking image for this is that of the body. 'For the body does not consist of one member but of many … God arranged the organs, each of them, as he chose … but … so adjusted the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior part, that there may be no discord, but that the members may have the same care for one another.' (I Cor. 12:14, 18, 24–25) Such being the case, the group should have an inbuilt bias towards helping those who are the most disadvantaged from an outward point of view. The way this takes place is through the functioning of all members of the group according to the different capacities they have been given by God. 'For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace p. 316 given us, let us use them … (Rom.

12:4–6) The result of this way of proceeding is that 'all attain to the unity of faith … to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ'.(Eph. 4:12).

There are different ways in which they may take place, paralleling the different kinds of disharmony which might arise within the individuals or the community. For example, where severe disagreement between prominent members is the problem, they need the help of a respected third party who can persuade them to come to a common mind on the issue dividing them. (Phil. 4:2–3) If a legal dispute has arisen between two members, they should put their case before someone who has wisdom gained from a carefully sifted experience of life and can decide in the matter. (I Cor. 6:1–6) When factions arise in the church between different groups, all are to be on the alert so as to distinguish those who are genuinely in the right from those who are being merely self-seeking.[8] Where differences of judgement and behavious merely concern things on which more than one point of view is legitimate, not matters of principle, a variety of opinions and practices can flourish and it is the responsibility of those with a more mature outlook to bear with those who cannot rise to it. (Rom. 14:1–15) Should a person fall into some error in behaviour, others should gently help him to his feet again, exercising care lest they repeat his mistake. (Gal. 6:1; cf. 1 Jn. 5:16)In notorious cases of misbehaviour, the whole community should take action to disassociate itself from the offending person or openly call him to account. (I Cor. 5:1–5; I Tim. 5:19–20) For the rest, all should seek to admonish those who are not pulling their weight, encourage those who feel inadequate, assist those who need help and generally show patience towards everyone. (I Thess. 5:14; cf. I Pet. 3:8; Eph. 3:4ff).

Although all should be involved in these activities, certain members of the community possessed special abilities from God equipping them to further the development of individual and group maturity. Given the close connection between teaching and pastoral care in the early church (see especially Eph. 4:11)—so often it is through something said that people receive personal help and direction—those who have the gifts of prophecy, teaching, wisdom, exhortation have a real part to play here. (I Cor. 12:7, 28). Then there are those described as bishops, deacons, helpers, administrators, givers of aid and so on.[9] It is not always clear what the functions of this second group were. Certainly they were less all-embracing than those exercised by p. 317 ministers today. In every church there were several who contributed in this way, such people were not employed in any full-time capacity and to some degree all church members fulfilled the same functions. What characterised the smaller group was not any difference of status such as that between clergy and laity. No such distinction existed in these early communities. Most probably it was not only their possession of an identifiable pastoral gift. They were also special possibilities or advantages inherent in the social position they occupied. This enabled them to function in ways that others could not, especially when combined with other ancillary gifts and their own proven community concern. Such people, if and when they turned their social advantages into opportunities for service rather than occasions for privilege, gained special respect within the church and provided it with valuable assistance. (I Thess. 5:12; Cor. 16:15–16; 3 Jn. 12).

So in a number of different ways, and through a variety of different people, some more than others but all in some degree, these early churches were able to encourage the personal growth of their members and of the group as a whole. They were, therefore, genuinely supportive and conflict-solving communities of a quite intimate and commited kind. Their practice is well-captured in the passage from Ephesians: 'Speaking the truth

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[8] 1 Cor. 11:18–19 cf. 1 Cor. 16:15–16; 1 Thess. 5:12–13 and contrast 2 Cor. 11:20; 3 Jn. 9.

[9] Phil. 1:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:8 and also 1 Tim. 3:1; Tit. 1:7.

to one another in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together … when every part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.' (Eph. 4:15–16).

NEW PATTERNS OF CARING

Does the pattern of care in these communities have anything to teach us about our approach to social work today? Before answering this, a prior question should be raised. What did the early Christian approach introduce into traditional patterns of care in the ancient world? Investigating this might isolate some distinctive aspects which will help us with our main concern.

The exercise of charity, and rendering of aid, were part and parcel of both Jewish and Hellenistic society.[10] Quite apart from the regular public donations from imperial or religious treasuries, and occasional private gifts by well-endowed persons to their dependants, the principle of mutual financial support lay at the heart of club life in the p. 318 ancient world. The first-century abounded with voluntary associations of all kinds, much as clubs exist today to satisfy a wide variety of interests. Many were formed as burial societies to ensure a respectable department from this life for their members. Some also aided members distressed by other circumstances. Through their common meals they catered for people's social needs. They also provided a reference point for people's search for identity, especially since a number of them admitted women, foreigners and slaves or were established purely by such groups. But within them all the principle of mutual financial, personal and social support was a carefully regulated affair and kept within strictly calculated limits. In this respect it mirrored the practice of philanthropy at this time in general. This worked on the principle of reciprocal return: those who gave expected something in response, loyalty perhaps, or assistance in their various causes. If other motives sometimes surfaced, e.g. the expectation of official honour being awarded to the donor, they also derived from the same principle. Even where gifts were distributed without anything being expected in return, it was on a virtually *quid pro quo* basis, with the most worthy of the recipients gaining all or most of the charity dispensed.

In Jewish circles, the reciprocal note was only minimally present.[11] For the most part the donor gave physical and social aid because he had received the same freely from God's own hands. Historically, this was grounded in the Sinai covenant, with its basis in the release from bondage in Egypt and its goal the formation of a new nation in the Promised Land. Contemporaneously, the members of the covenant continued to receive all good things from God and enjoyed as well the fellowship of synagogue life and religious brotherhood. In some groups, such as Qumran, this involved care for every aspect of the individual's life, though only by withdrawing him completely from normal society and placing him within a strictly gradated, hierarchial community. In others, such as the Pharisaic schools, ideas of reciprocity sometimes seem to have reasserted themselves, through the quest for public acknowledgement by others or private acknowledgement by God for their generosity. In the synagogue, a concern for more than just religious obligations was involved, as is evidenced by the educational, charitable and hospitality structures connected with it. Yet not everyone received the same attention; e.g. women, migrants and slaves suffered at the expense of men, native-born and male children. p. 319

[10] A. R. Hands, *Charities & Social Aid in Greece and Rome*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1968.

[11] J. Jeremios, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, London, SCM, 1969, pp.111–119, pp.126–134.

Christianity introduced novel elements into all this at the level of motive, objects, character and scope, even though its approach was built on essentially Jewish foundations and was expressed occasionally in Hellenistic terms.[12] In the first place, no longer was insistence upon reciprocity or desire for acknowledgement the motor behind charitable giving and social aid. It sprang purely from personal and communal gratitude for the experience of God's salvation in Christ. (2 Cor. 8:9ff.) In doing so, it did not demand a response from the recipient, however much it might long for a like-minded spirit to develop in his heart. In the second place, such generosity was not directly ostentatiously to the most worthy but in an unobtrusive way given indiscriminately to all. For God's redemptive kindness was not embraced by many 'wise', or 'powerful' or of 'noble birth', and in his providential ordering of the world 'he makes the sun to rise on the evil and good, and sends rain on the just and unjust'.[13] Indeed in the community it is specifically those who have least to offer that are to be treated with the greatest honour and humble service should mark the character of the giver. (I Cor. 12:23). In the third place, this exercise of care is not at all a stringently regulated affair or one that is kept within certain calculated limits. It exhibits strong sacrificial tendencies, involves the whole person in rendering service not just his resources and entails a real exposure of himself, and cost to himself, on the part of the giver.[14] Finally, it is every aspect of another's life, which comes in for concern. This includes their physical and material, personal and social welfare, as we have seen. But their growth in understanding and discernment—through the gifts of prophecy, teaching, wisdom etc. already mentioned—and even ministry to the subconscious aspects of their personality—witness the gifts of glossolalia and singing in the spirit—are also encompassed. (I Cor. 12:10; 14:1–5, 30).

Clearly, then, the appearance of the early churches inserted something new into the patterns of care that were in existence in the first century. The whole approach to social welfare that has developed in the West, and more recently in the East as well, is debtor to this Christian contribution and has been profoundly influenced by it. Does anything remain from which we can still learn of have we absorbed all the early church has to offer? p. 320

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK TODAY

We can still gain and in three different ways viz., through today's churches recapturing in their meetings enduring elements of the early Christian approach that they have neglected, compromised or formalised; through facets of the early Christian approach, in suitably modified form, providing the model upon which ancilliary Christian organisations and separate secular structures are initiated or altered; through underlying principles of care in the early Christian approach transforming assumptions often found in social work today. We shall look at each of these in turn.

(1) When functioning properly, a church is intended to promote genuine care by the members for one another. This covers all aspects of their life. People's bodily and material needs, along with their personal and social welfare, are comprehensively catered for. This does not mean that all such needs will be met in this way. There may be exceptional circumstances or difficulties which require help from specialist agencies or skilled personnel. But many of the problems with which social workers frequently have to deal

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[12] See, inter alia, K. Nickle, *The Collection*, London, SCM, 1966.

[13] 1 Cor. 1:26 and Matt. 5:46. See also Mk. 2:17; Rom. 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:14–16; 1 Cor. 12:23.

[14] So respectively 2 Cor. 2:3–4; 1 Thess. 2:8 and 2 Cor. 4:5–12.

should never arise in such a community. Paul once upbraided the Corinthian Christians for taking legal disputes between members to court, instead of searching out people from their own group who could judge them. By analogy, there are many situations ordinarily requiring trained social assistance which Christians should be able to handle in their own churches. There are two sides to this. The reality of Christian community life should prevent many ordinary social problems arising. It should also support people in such a way that they can cope with more serious difficulties, e.g., those arising from bereavement, desertion, divorce, unemployment, retardation and so on. In writing this, I am thinking of a number of groups with which I have been involved. Over the years these have warmly embraced within their membership, and substantially aided with their problems, younger and older persons who are mentally or socially retarded, men and women with young children deserted by or divorced from, their spouses, the recently widowed, unemployed and expelled from home, people with homosexual problems and so on. What's more, most of these groups have done this with scarcely any benefit of clergy or other specialised help, simply as ordinary people helping others to discover what it means to be part of a Christian family.

The problem is that this so seldom happens and that churches have developed structures and attitudes that hinder its taking place. The concentration of local church activities around a large central service, p. 321 generally formal in character, and around other intermediate-sized organisations defined according to age, sex and interest, means that the possibility of small, enduring inter-generational and sexually-mixed groups, in which the members are fully commited to each other's welfare and openly sharing their abilities with one another, either does not exist or is low down the scale of priorities. The early Christians certainly met in larger groups as well as in these smaller gatherings, but their life was centred on the smaller gatherings with the larger meetings growing out of them rather than the other way round. Intermediate-sized organisations scarcely existed for, on the whole, what these achieve today was achieved within the smaller and larger gathering, or through the everyday activities of Christians in their society whether as individuals or in co-operation with others. The related problem in churches today stems from the influence of attitudes derived from the Anglo-Saxon cultural ethos, according to which private matters are not the concern of others, not even one's fellow Christians, or stemming from the Pietist-Evangelical outlook, which encourages openness at the so-called 'spiritual' level, but not in other aspects of one's life, leads to a contraction in Christians' vision of community life and in the responsibility they take for one another. This failure of the church to be the church actually contributes to the present demand for expanded social services. In some cases, where church life is particularly legalistic, divisive or poverty-stricken it even generates problems in people who did not previously possess them. The proper fulfilment of the church's role, on the other hand, would for one group in society at least substantially to decrease the call upon social welfare agencies. Insofar as Christians belonging to such a community become socially more helpful to people outside as well as to those inside the group, these effects would also take place among other sectors of the population as well.

(2) The early Christian understanding of care has a contribution outside the local Christian community in another way as well. The principles enshrined in it, suitably modified to fit different frameworks and cast in a secular rather than religious key, can be implemented in the everyday world of business and leisure. That is, they can be form ulated in ways which provide models for the establishment or revitalisation of other institutions in society. Although such associations would have their own particular objects, such as the production and sale of goods, or the provision of leisure facilities, the incorporation of features drawn from early church life would result in other more basic

needs of their members being met indirectly. Co-operatives for one purpose or another are a good example of this. Here all the members p. 322 can participate in formulating the association's ground rules, in making decisions affecting important aspects of its operation, in the actual running of its day-to-day business. Here too limits can be set to its size so that the personal dimension is retained and constraints placed on its aspirations so that it reflects the actual skills and interests of its members rather than the search for maximum profit, on the one hand, or competitive glory, on the other.

My confidence in the practicability and value of such a way of proceeding rests not just on a conviction that principles of early church life can have this kind of secondary application but on the knowledge of groups which do function in this way. I am thinking particularly of a local co-operative craft shop, numbering some sixty members, which was consciously set up on modified 'early church' principles. All voluntarily share in the production and evaluation of items for sale, in decisions about policy and the association's daily operations, in manning the shop they have rented and other outside exhibitions. The co-operative aims at providing an outlet for its members' skills and a community within which they can develop their craft. Any profit made by the shop is given to charity and the size of the association is restricted so that unnecessary duplication of interests or overproduction of items is avoided. The point I wish to make about this is not that the endeavour has been successful—itself quite an achievement in our increasingly large-scale financial and profit-maximising business world—but rather the way it has drawn many women, and some men, out of their previous suburbia-induced neurotic or retirement-induced aimless existence. A number have commented on the fact that they no longer need to reach for the valium tablets or call on professional help to cope with loss of personal identity or loneliness. Through the association they have established genuine relationships with others and developed a greater sense of their own self-worth and abilities. They have also practically helped those members going through various severe strains. Indirectly, therefore, the co-operative has made quite a significant contribution to the lives of many of its members at all the levels about which we have been talking.

(3) The principles of early church life also have something to say to the conduct of social work itself. What follows is far from an exhaustive list of principles of early Christian community life which might be applicable to some aspect or other of social work today. Nor can I discuss in detail how such principles might find specific contemporary expression. I would simply like to identify three starting-points for a reconsideration of some of the assumptions involved in much, though by no means all, social work. p. 323

(a) Let me begin first, however, with the attitude of the person involved in social work before going on to matters of a more structural kind. One of the chief dangers inherent in acting as a full-time helper of other people lies in the development of a helper/helped distinction in one's outlook, one that tends to take hold unconsciously rather than by deliberate choice. No such rigid distinction existed in early Christian communities, even in the minds of leading figures like Paul. For while he viewed himself as a helper of others, he also saw himself as one helped by others as well, indeed by the self-same group he came to assist. His projection of a visit to a group he had not stayed with before is characteristically couched in terms of the mutual benefit each will receive, despite the special wide-ranging abilities he possesses. (cf. Rom. 1:11–12) And it was not only from the more knowledgeable or eminent people in the community that he experienced help but also from apparently insignificant and disadvantaged persons as well.[15] There is nothing so psychologically harmful to the individual who is in a position to give, or

[15] So, on the one hand, Rom. 16:2; 1 Cor. 15:17ff. and, on the other, Rom. 16:13 and Phlmn. 8ff.

psychologically detrimental to the individual in need as an assumption by the first of a '*I* am the helper, you are the helped' mentality. We are all in need of one sort or another and we can all derive help from others—however needy they themselves may be—when we are in touch with them. The adoption of a one-sided attitude is all the worse when it is done in a superior or patronising manner rather than with a genuine, not manipulative, servant or ministering attitude that alone conforms to the example of Christ. (Mk. 10:45) Yet there are aspects of the way in which social welfare is presently expressed that still tends to encourage such attitudes.

(b) This leads on to a broader problem, that is, the increasing professionalisation and institutionalisation of care in modern society. We have all been warned by Ivan Illich of the way in which the dominance of the 'medical' profession has led to the 'expropriation' rather than improvement of the community's health.[16] A pervasive mystique surrounds the professionally-trained doctor and the technologically sophisticated hospital. People become afraid of dealing with their minor physical or psychological complaints and increasingly see the doctor, or psychologist, as the only ones qualified to handle their personal problems, and the hospital as the only place where more extensive treatment can be carried out. Meanwhile health care p. 324 becomes a more and more expensive, political and impersonal affair. The decentralisation of medical knowledge and skills through equipping other than medical people and institutions to deal with a whole range of usual complaints, and more particularly, the instruction of ordinary men and women in the basics of health care, would do much to alleviate present problems. Other things that need to be done include dispelling the mystique that surrounds illness and health as well as the false expectations that many people have about them. This would involve nothing less than a revolution in professional attitudes but it is one for which an analogy lies in the pattern of care inherent in the early Christian communities. (Insofar as the church itself, and the ministerial vocation, have become over-professionalised and over-institutionalised they too need to learn from the New Testament in these respects). Social work has not travelled as far as this along the road of full professionalisation and institutionalisation as certain other groups and structures in society. Amongst other things it still draws on the assistance of people who have not had formal training and much of the work is done in the homes of those in need of help. But even this latter group are in danger of becoming professionalised at a lower level and tendencies in the direction of fuller institutionalisation are increasing all the time.

(c) There is a third respect in which early church practice is relevant today. Among social workers there is a growing realisation of the contribution that a disadvantaged group, from its own resources, can make to the welfare of the individuals who constitute it. Yet all too often the individual is still singled out from others who are in the same position and dealt with in comparative isolation from them. This can happen even when those in need require the same, or a related, kind of help and live in reasonable proximity, to one another. A much more fruitful way of approaching people whose needs are experienced by others within a reasonable distance begins by encouraging such people to meet up with those nearby who have like problems. Then, with the social worker acting as a resource person rather than leader, the group should be left to discover how best it can educate itself about the shared problem, resolve what to do about it and take practical steps to have it settled. As all this takes place, not only do the various gifts necessary for the group's proper functioning become apparent but the problem (and sometimes others as well) begins to be solved in the actual process of such people corporately seeking to

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[16] I. Illich *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, Marion Boyars, 1976. cf. also his essay in *Disabling Professions*, London, Marion Boyars, 1977.

resolve it. An attempt to do this is described in M. Liffman's book, *Power for the People: The Family Centre Project. An experiment in* p. 325 *self-help*.[17] The eventual demise of this example should not deter others from further experiments along this line.[18]

REDIRECTION IN THEOLOGICAL METHOD

As I indicated earlier, these are simply three starting-points for a reconsideration of some of the assumptions present in social work today. There are *other aspects* of Christian community life which could be investigated for their relevance here. In particular there is also the need for *specific applications* of such principles to existing problems and possibilities. If this is to be undertaken effectively however, some sort of redirection in theological method must first take place. Not just a revaluation of social work itself, Traditional ways of relating the Bible to the modern world are not fully adequate.

In the first place the work cannot be done by the theologian wrestling with the Bible alone. It must become a corporate activity which includes people directly engaged in social work, as well as others who have a stake in the field. These others may come from disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, whose perspective throws light on the context in which social work is done or the factors involved in its exercise. Some may also come from among those who are on the receiving end of professional care, who, in one sense, have most to gain or lose from the way it is conducted. Representatives from such groups are needed because only they can provide the concrete knowledge and experience which enables the word to take flesh and not just remain at the level of abstract theory or general principles. Unfortunately we are not yet very accustomed to think of Christian reflection in these terms and even if we do so there is still more that is needed.

In the second place, this cannot be done by simply working out-wards from the Bible alone (or from psychology and sociology) with certain general problems in view. This is the usual way in which such endeavours have been carried out: from exegesis of the text, if a biblical source is in use (or from interpretation of a method if some other discipline is the starting point) through exposition of its meaning, to application to the present. Yet such work has not always been done along these lines. Paul, for example, often began at the other end. Taking his cue from various specific problems which had arisen in his communities, some of them quite local, even at times individual in p. 326 character, he worked back to that aspect of the gospel which could illuminate the matter, and then went on to outline general principles of action. The final step was to make some specific recommendations. The increasing subtlety of h is thin king, and its ever practical cast, owed much to this way of coming at things. It forced him to examine the gospel from ever new angles and to make concrete proposals for people to act on. In the area we're concerned with here, much could be gained from following his approach. To some extent this is already done so far as pastoral problems are concerned through papers prepared to meet issues arising in local churches at the denominational level, or through the adoption of a case-study method approach in theological colleges. But a wrestling with the less ecclesiastical or doctrinal matters that arise in local churches needs to be undertaken as well.

In the third place, we need not just theologians, social workers and others who will pool their resources in these ways. We desperately need a few who embody the concerns

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[17] M. Liffman, *Power for the People: The Family Centre Project. An experiment in self-help*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1968.

[18] See further C. Froland, 'Formal and Informal Care: Discontinuities in a Continuum', *Social Service Review*, Dec. 1980, pp.572–587.

and abilities of all three within themselves, i.e., people who are at one and the same time theologically perceptive, seriously engaged in the care of others, and alert to the psychological and sociological dimensions of their work and its actual effects upon its recipients. Here again, Paul provides the model. He was not a systematic dogmatician but an active pastoral thinker, one who was neither unaware of the broader social currents of his time nor isolated from the personal ministry of others involved in similar work to his own. Surely, for all the cultural differences between his time and ours, this is partly why he continues to speak so relevantly to us. There is a theological sharpness, realistic edge and experiential flavour to his injunctions that has the ring of authenticity about it.

Only if Christian reflection upon social work is governed by these considerations will its desired practical application be discovered, with all its challenge and complexity. Since this is the only way we will find the answers to our questions in this area, the *most essential and practical* thing that can be done at the present is the setting up of groups to work in just such a way as I have here suggested and, along with that, the questioning by some people as to whether they are being called to the kind of theological vocation of which I have spoken. Any attempt to short-circuit this way of approach will be doomed to superficiality.

So then, the early Christian communities did have a distinctive approach to care in their own time and, for all the influence that has had in twenty centuries since, their contribution today is by no means exhausted. For this to be released, however, a redirection of theological p. 327 endeavour as well as a reorientation of patterns of care are required. Only so will social work itself feel the full impact of that revolutionary new life that Christ, through the early communities, introduced into the world at large.

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Biblical Ethics in a Fallen World

John Ting

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This article raises important questions concerning the responsibility of the local church whose members lose their jobs because they act on biblical absolutes in situations which demand ethical choices.
(Editor)

I was chatting with William about a series on Christian Work Ethics which I had been giving. In the course of our conversation he made a remark which provoked considerable reflection on my part. 'You do know, don't you John, that you are regarded as a 'purist' in this area of ethics? …' I gathered people meant by this that I was an 'armchair' idealist, correct in theory but impractical in practice. For example a group of typists/receptionists told me that lying is part and parcel of their job—they claimed loyalty to their boss required this. I found it hard to accept this though I trust I had every sympathy for their