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Perspectives on Community Living

Derek J. Tidball

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A feature both of contemporary society and of the contemporary church is the growing interest in living in communities. By the word community one is not referring to the old neighbourhood or village communities which are spoken of nostalgically as belonging to the pre-war era, nor to the meaningful social relations which take place on a greater than local scale, such as the expatriate community. In this context the word is used to denote the practice of individuals and families to commit themselves to living corporately in a unit which is larger than the unit of the autonomous nuclear family in which our society conventionally lives. The word commune might be a more precise label for this phenomenon in theory, were it not for the unnecessary connotations it sometimes carries. The contemporary practice has some parallels to the traditional form of religious communities but it is also sufficiently distinct to merit investigation in its own right.

Communities usually form around a particular purpose but the purposes are very diverse and may be of a political, economic, ecological or religious nature. Whilst the *Annual Directory of Communes in Great Britain* for 1970 only listed 40 communities Andrew Rigby has suggested, after extensive research, that there were more probably 100 communities in Great Britain by 1972.[1] Other evidence would suggest that the number of communities of all types has increased since then. A recent work by David Clark lists almost 40 communities of a specifically religious nature many of which are of recent formation.[2] In all probability the number of non-religious communities has also kept pace during the same period.

The interest of this paper is limited to those religious communities whose orientation is towards the evangelical and charismatic wings of the church. These communities are very much a phenomena of the 1970's as a representative sample from Clark's list demonstrates: Brandhall Baptist Church (founded as a community in 1974); the Jesus Fellowship Church, Bugbrooke (1973); the Community of Celebration (1972); the Community of the Word of God (1973), and Post Green Community (1973). Furthermore the growing self-consciousness of the movement is now apparent in that a Congress of Christian Communities is being planned for September 1980.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the growth of interest in community living by tracing its specific antecedents in the early 1970's and by examining the theological, pragmatic and sociological springs which underlie it. It is to be argued that the particular phenomenon of these communities cannot be adequately understood if isolated from their wider social context.

THE SPECIFIC ANTECEDENTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENT

Three recent movements, all significant within their own right, have contributed something to the growth of these communities. Their contribution has not always been direct and the contribution made to particular communities by each of the movements varies considerably in degree. In many cases a direct link between the

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[1] Andrew Rigby, *Communes in Britain*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1974), 4.
[2] David Clark, *Basic Communities*, SPCK (1977), 303-329.

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community and one or more of the movements can be demonstrated. But even where such a link is not evident the movements have been responsible for the church perceiving itself in a new light and thus the soil has been prepared, making the growth of communities possible.

The first and briefest movement which has contributed to the growth of communities was the Jesus Movement of the late 1960's and early 1970's. Their communes reflected the secular communes of their day but they were designed to insulate the Jesus converts from the contaminated world from which they were delivered and to provide a controlled life-style which was heavily dependent on strong leadership. Ronald Enroth's fairly unsympathetic study of the development of these communities[3] argues that many of them were transitory or developed in a very totalitarian direction. Nevertheless the Jesus movement contributed directly to the setting up of the Children of God community in London (1971) and, when its features were considered by many to be unhealthy, to the founding of the Jesus Family (1972). It will be noticed that this movement was a very early factor in the growth of the current interest in religious communities.

More significantly the desire for community living stems from the charismatic movement. It is by now customary to trace this particular aspect of the charismatic movement back to the renewal experienced in the Church of the Redeemer, Houston, Texas, not long after the Rev. Graham Pulkingham became its rector in 1963. As a result of the renewal extended households were established and the church quickly became a pattern of other groups which had experienced charismatic renewal. Several popular accounts of the development of the church served to spread the insights of the Church of the Redeemer to Great Britain[4] where the church is still venerated as having 'had a profound effect on thinking about church renewal'.[5] Subsequent to the renewal at Houston the Rev. Graham Pulkingham came to Britain and in 1972 founded the Community of Celebration in Coventry which later moved to Reading and then moved again to the Isle of Cumbrae and now has a number of smaller communities in association with it. The influence of the Charismatic movement with its rediscovery of the importance of depth in interpersonal relationships within the church is probably the most single important factor in the growth of community living.

The third movement is perhaps less visible to date in Britain but nonetheless influential in indirectly advocating the idea of community. It arises from those who have called for Christians to adopt a radical form of discipleship. International attention was perhaps first focused on this position at the International Congress on World Evangelisation in 1974,[6] but several influential books have been published since then both justifying and detailing the call to Radical Discipleship.[7] Basic to the call is the belief that the church should be a visible alternative community to conventional society and one in which generally accepted norms of individualism and materialism are shunned. The arguments given in support of radical

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[3] R. M. Enroth, E. E. Ericson and C. B. Peters, *The Story of the Jesus People*, The Paternoster Press (1972) and Ronald Enroth, *Youth, Brainwashing and Extremist Cults*, The Paternoster Press (1977).

[4] Michael Harper, *A New Way of Living*, Hodder and Stoughton (1973), Graham Pulkingham, *Gathered for Power*, Hodder and Stoughton (1973) and *They Left their Nets*, Hodder and Stoughton (1974).

[5] *Towards Renewal*, Issue 18, Summer 1979, 3.

[6] *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (ed. J. D. Douglas), World Wide Publications (1975), 1294-1296.

[7] For example, Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Hodder and Stoughton (1977), Jim Wallis, *Agenda for Biblical People*, Harper and Row (1976) and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, Eerdmans (1972).

discipleship are both theological and ecological. Emphasis is given to both the supernaturally distinct lifestyle which should belong to the church and also the need to use the earth's resources and wealth responsibly in the light of its unjust distribution and diminishing ability to satisfy men's needs. One way of applying such a position to one's lifestyle in Western society is to opt out of the wasteful way of living in isolated family units each of which unnecessarily possess a whole range of consumer items and to share one's resources by

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living in a community. Not all advocates of radical discipleship have been willing to encourage community living,[8] but even so the call to radicalism has been interpreted in this way by some. The convergence of the charismatic and radical streams can be seen, for example, in the establishment of extended households at St. Michael-le-Belfry, York.[9]

Three movements then have resulted in the growing number of evangelical or charismatic communities. Participants in the movement however do not usually trace their personal involvement in community living back to these movements and since it is important when one is attempting to understand a social movement to see it from the participants' point of view attention will now be turned to focus on the reasons generally given by the participants for their withdrawal from conventional social structures and adoption of community life.

The major warrant for community living usually takes the form of an argument from spirituality and it involves two aspects. Firstly it is said that community living enables one to grow spiritually in a way not normally possible in a conventional church structure. This paper will later examine this argument in more depth and question whether it is not in fact a plea for personal growth rather than exclusively spiritual growth which, for various reasons, is clothed with spiritual dress. The second aspect of spirituality is the argument that community living is God's ideal for the church and is being explicitly advocated by the Holy Spirit at the present time. In this connection a number of allusions are made to Scripture in order to justify that community living is God's ideal and an examination of the validity of the arguments follows. Advocates of community living also refer to the pragmatic reasons for living in community and these will be detailed as well.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE BIBLICAL BASIS OF COMMUNITY LIVING

Put simply, many members of communities belong to them because they believe living in a community to be closer to God's ideal for his people than living in separated family units. Justification of this view is to be found, it is argued, in several different places within scripture and the diversity of the biblical evidence combines to make the case strong. It is to these arguments which we now turn.

(a) *In the Old Testament*

God's concern, throughout history, has been to call out of the world a chosen people who will be his 'new society, his family, his community'[10] (Ex. 6: 6f.; Deut. 7: 6-11). This position of responsibility and status first was given to Israel but in later history, because of their

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[8] Sider, *op. cit*., 91.
[9] David Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, Hodder and Stoughton (1978), 84-95.
[10] *Ibid*., 76.

persistent failure to keep the terms of the covenant has been withdrawn from them and given to the church. Even so it is argued that the disposition of God's people as seen in the Old Testament should still characterise the disposition of the people of God today and that disposition was a corporate or collective spirit not an individualistic one.

It is clear that the 'Old Testament faith knows nothing in any situation or at any time, of a religious individualism which grants a man a private relationship with God unconnected with the community either in its roots, its realisation or its goal'.[11] And one might add too that 'the central motive of moral life is the sense of community'.[12] However this is not to imply that God's ideal therefore necessarily involves a particular sociological pattern of living in community.

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Nor is it to imply, as has been implied in some communities and by some scholars, that there is little real place for the individual.

Support for the idea that the individual has little place in the Old Testament may be sought in Wheeler Robinson's idea of Corporate Personality. Since the idea was first put forward by him in 1911[13] it has exercised a remarkable influence on the interpretation of the Old Testament. By the term corporate personality Robinson means that men were treated neither legally nor morally as single individuals separate from other individuals and held personally accountable, but that they were treated as members of a group. The concept is said to explain why when Achan sinned[14] the whole nation suffered in consequence and his whole family shared in his punishment.

A recent examination of the concept of corporate personality by J. W. Rogerson,[15] however, shows that the basis of the concept may have been ill-founded. Firstly the anthropological basis of Robinson's concept was to be found in the work of Lévy-Bruhl and this is now open to serious questioning in anthropological circles. Secondly, Rogerson has identified two separate meanings which might be confused in the one term of corporate personality by Robinson. The term might either mean corporate responsibility or psychical identity. The former interpretation is well substantiated in the Old Testament but even so it needs some qualification since it would be generally accepted that the effect of the preaching of the prophets on ethical responsibility was to individualise responsibility (e.g. Jer. 31: 39-40; Ez. 18: 1-4). Vriezen,[16] however, would wish to argue that this individualism is not merely a prophetic understanding of a man's accountability but a much earlier understanding of responsibility as well and he points to 2 Samuel 9ff. for support. The prophets, he argues, were not innovative at this point but were correcting a one-sided moral collectivism which prevented a true and therefore personal consciousness of sin.

The second meaning given to the term corporate personality is that of psychical unity and it has become the more commonly used of the two. It means that the individual is unable to

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[11] W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, SCM (1967), Vol. 2, 265.

[12] Th. C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology*, Basil Blackwell (1958), 320.

[13] H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, T. and T. Clark (1911), 8.

[14] Josh. 7.

[15] J. W. Rogerson, 'The Hebrew Concept of Corporate Personality: A Re-examination', *The Journal of Theological Studies*, XXI, 1970, 1-16.

[16] *Op. cit.*, 320-325.

define the limits of his own personality and to distinguish himself from the group. Such a unity is sometimes advocated by those living in communities with the result that the individual's will and personality are submerged in the collectivity. But there is little evidence for this idea in the Old Testament and the belief in individual responsibility already mentioned would seem to conflict with it.

From this it can be seen that the people of God in the Old Testament truly did have a consciousness of their close collective identity and responsibility. It is this consciousness which is often lacking in the contemporary church and which many communities have rediscovered. On the other hand it is a consciousness which must be balanced with a rightful individualism which is also a characteristic of the people of God.

(b) *The Teaching and Practice of Jesus*

The Gospels are also said to lend support to the idea of living in community and that in two respects. To begin with the disciples of Jesus are said to have lived together as a community and pooled their meagre resources (Jn. 12: 6 and 13: 29). The difficulty of this particular argument is that it is hard to see how Jesus could have conducted his particular ministry with his disciples in any other way. The

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record of the fact that this is how Jesus conducted his itinerant ministry does not necessarily imply that the settled members of the church of today living in a very different social and economic context, must adopt the same practice.

The more important argument from the gospels stems from the radical nature of the demands which Jesus made on those who wished to follow him. Advocates of community life sometimes say that the only way to fulfil these radical demands today is by opting out of conventional society with its materialistic overtones and submit to a community. Clearly Jesus did make radical claims for his disciples to forsake their families (Mk. 3: 31-35; 10: 28-31; Lk. 14:26); to forsake their wealth (Lk. 5: 11, 27-28, 18: 18-30); to forsake even the minimum standard of private property or security (Mt. 8: 18-20; Mk. 6: 8f.) and to forsake personal ambition (Mk. 10: 35-45). In the light of these claims are not the advocates of community living correct? A superficial glance at the verses concerned together with a literalistic interpretation of them would suggest that they are. The exegesis of such verses however needs to be handled with care as the use of the word 'hate' and the references to a very different world of 'boats' and 'sandals and tunics' should indicate. Let us look at the verses concerned, then, with reference to two of the issues.

(i) Attitude to Family

Mark 3: 31-35 suggests that. Jesus was indifferent to his own natural family and had substituted a family whose ties were spiritual in their place. From Mark 7: 10 we are aware that Jesus knew the demands of the Old Testament with regard to the responsibility of a child to his family. It is unlikely therefore, unless there is some inconsistency on the part of Jesus, that Mark 3: 31-35 is indicative of his general attitude to his family. Many commentators,[17]

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[17] C. E. B. Cranfield, *S. Mark*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (1963), 143 and William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, Marshall Morgan and Scott (1974), 147.

looking at the context of this saying, argue that Jesus's natural family were trying to silence him (3: 20f.) at this point in his ministry, and so were allying themselves with the scribes (3: 22). It is on this specific issue therefore that Jesus rejects them, knowing as he does that there will always be occasions when the will of God conflicts with the desire of one's family and in such situations the will of God must come first (cf. Ex. 32: 2529; Deut. 33: 8-9).

Jesus was always prepared to demand the primary allegiance of men even where it meant that other natural ties had to be severed (Mk. 10: 28-31). It is in this light that the statement in Luke 14: 26 is to be understood. 'To hate' one's family is usually seen in the Semitic sense of 'to love less'[18] and in this sense Luke's version of this saying of Jesus is identical to Matthew's less abrasive version (Mt. 10: 37). It does not carry the overtone of a psychological hate but of a decision that the demands of Jesus come first either on the rare occasions his demands and those of one's natural family conflict or even if the settled attitude of one's family is one of conflict with God. Jesus is not therefore demanding willy-nilly that a person who wishes to become his disciple must segregate himself from his natural family as has sometimes been suggested. If this were so it would be curious indeed that he cared for his own mother even at the moment of his death (Jn. 19: 26f.).

(ii) Attitude to Wealth

The precise attitude of the Gospels to wealth has long been the subject of debate[19] and extends far beyond the purpose of this paper. The point at issue here is that

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it is not possible to substantiate easily from the gospels, as some members of communities have tried to do, that the possession of private property or wealth is incompatable with discipleship of Jesus.

In the first place it is usually assumed that the disciples adopted an ethic of poverty (Lk. 5: 11, 27-28; 18: 28f.) and this makes most sense of the Biblical text. However they could only maintain their itinerant existence because there were settled disciples who did not forsake all their property and wealth to follow Jesus and who were willing to support them. In this connection one thinks of Mary, Martha and Lazarus (Lk. 10: 38 etc.), and Simon (Mt. 26: 6) among others whose homes seem to have been at the disposal of Jesus and his friends. Francis and Theissen[20] have proposed that there may well have been a two-tier system of discipleship in operation and this commends itself in the light of the settled disciples and the convert whom Jesus expressly commands to return home (Mk. 5: 18f.). What does not commend itself is the suggestion that the itinerants were somehow more acceptable to Jesus or spiritually superior to those who were settled sympathisers of his work.

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[18] I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, Paternoster Press (1978), 592.

[19] For the varying views see Dick Francis, 'Serving God or Mammon', *Evangelical Quarterly* (1979) LI, 3-21 ; Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church*, SCM (1974), Sider, *op. cit*., and G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, 'Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery', *Church Society and Politics*, ed. Derek Barker, Studies in Church History, Vol. 12, Basil Blackwell (1975), 1-38.

[20] Francis, *op. cit*., and Gerd Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus*, SCM (1978), chs. 2 and 3. One questions Theissen's conclusion (18) that even among the sympathisers there was a latent willingness to leave home. This seems unnecessarily hypothetical.

In addition we clearly do not have all the answers to the questions we would like to pose of the itinerant disciples. The synoptic gospels record the disciples as having left all to follow Jesus, but in some cases their businesses may well have been maintained in their absence for them. If this were so it would help to explain why in John 21: 3 John records the disciples as going off fishing again in 'the' (not 'a') boat. It could well be that it was borrowed or hired for the occasion but 'the article... implies that this boat is habitually used for fishing'[21] and may well therefore still have been owned by Peter or one of the others.

The proof text for the ethic of poverty is usually cited as the encounter of Jesus with the Rich Young Ruler (Lk. 18: 18-30). Even here however there is far from being a straight identification of discipleship with poverty as some would have. Jesus said it was hard but not impossible for rich men to enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Lk. 18: 24-27). Furthermore it is a mistake to universalise the demand Jesus made to this man and too readily lay it down as an unconditional demand of discipleship. Each person who wishes to follow Jesus has to face a crux decision[22] about particular issues if he really is to be a disciple. For the ruler it concerned wealth, for Legion it meant going home (Mk. 5: 18f.) for others it meant forsaking other sins of immorality or self-pity (e.g. Jn. 4: 16, 5: 6 etc.). Wealth and property are not the idol in everyman's life but each man must discover and renounce what his idol is, if he is to be a disciple.

A detailed look then at some of the gospel passages which are said to support the idea of community living is not sufficient to wholly convince one of the idea. Although it can be understood how one can see community living as one possible implication from certain practices or teaching of Jesus other implications are equally possible. Certainly on the basis of this it is not possible to argue that community living is a superior pattern for today's disciples.

(c) *The Acts and Epistles*

A number of passages from the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles are cited as evidence of the practice of community living in the early church. Again, however, closer examination reveals that the issues are not so simple as the advocates of the idea believe.

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(i) The Community of Goods in Jerusalem

The early church in Jerusalem evidently practised a community of goods (Acts 2: 44-45; 4: 32-37) which may well have been an extension of the practice of the common purse held by Jesus and his disciples. It is important to note that this practice was entirely voluntary (Acts 5: 4) and many influential people in the primitive church obviously did not dispose of their property (e.g. Acts 12: 12). Luke records Barnabas as an example of one who did pool his resources with his fellow believers but Haenchen argues that 'in reality, no doubt, the good deed of Barnabas only survived in memory because it was something out of the ordinary, not the rule'.[23]

This practice of communism could not have been expected to last long because there was no provision in it for using the resources productively and consequently it was bound to finish as

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[21] Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, Geoffrey Chapman (1971), Vol. 2, 1069.
[22] For a fuller discussion of the point see F. Peter Cotterell, "The Conversion Course', *Missiology*, Vol. II, No. 2 (1974), 183-189.
[23] Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Basil Blackwell (1971), 233.

soon as the resources were exhausted. Certainly the last reference to it in Acts 6: 1-6 is a reference to the difficulties which the early church was experiencing as a result of the community of goods and the practice is neither spoken of nor recommended subsequently. Instead the rest of the New Testament emphasises that the church exists rather by the voluntary but generous giving of its members out of their possessions (1 Cor. 16: l; 2 Cor. 8 and 9).

Some have argued that the pooling of resources in this way was responsible for the later poverty of the church in Jerusalem. However it is more likely that the church in Jerusalem was condemned to a life of poverty irrespective of its experiment because Jerusalem itself was not economically viable but was dependent on gifts from faithful Jews and the income derived from pilgrims.[24] It was inevitable that the church should share this economically precarious position. Community living was obviously no remedy.

(ii) The Household

Even less convincing as an argument for community living is the argument that the early churches were structured as extended families in households and it is this that contemporary communities are seeking to imitate. The household structure was indeed fundamental both to the recruitment of new Christians (Acts 11: 14, 16; 15, 31, 34; 18: 8; 1 Cor. 1: 16) and to the worshipping life of the early church (Rom. 16: 5; 1 Cor. 16: 19; Col. 4: 15; Philemon 1: 2), for few public buildings were available to them as meeting places. The existence of this structure had a marked effect on the presentation of Paul's gospel and ethics in that concepts of relevance to the household such as sonship, slavery and the family became prominent in his writings.

The household structure however was not an invention of the early Christians and there seems to be nothing of particular spiritual significance about it. It was a major feature of the normal social structure of their day[25] and consisted of a number of families or individuals pledging loyalty to and placing themselves under the authority of a principal family of which the head would be the father. The members of the household would usually be engaged on the estate or in the business of the chief family. Since the solidarity of the family was expressed in terms of religion we often read of the conversion of household in the New Testament. The early Christians adapted this structure to their own ends to great effect.

None of this however implies that the household structure is normative for our

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own day. The lesson to be drawn is rather that the contemporary church needs to exploit contemporary social structures in a similar way.

(iii) Authority and Commitment

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[24] Hengel, *op. cit.*, 34 and F. F. Bruce 'The Early Church's Experiment in Communism', *Shaft*, No. 18 (1977), 6-8.

[25] Floyd V. Filson, 'The Significance of the Early House Churches', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LVIII (1939), 109-12 and E. A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*, Tyndale Press (1960), ch. 3.

A further feature of contemporary community life is often its stress on mutual submission and the authority of its leaders. A strong commitment to each other which is expressed in the submission of the individual to others is often said to be a feature of New Testament church life (Eph. 5: 21, 22, 24; 6: 1, 5; 1 Pet. 2: 13, 18; 3: 1, 5). Equally, strong leadership which has a right to expect obedience is also said to be a feature of the New Testament (e.g. Paul in Gal. 1: 6-9; 1 Pet. 5: 5; Heb. 13: 17).

Many would have sympathy with the view that the church has been 'weak'[26] in these two respects, among others, in recent years. Yet care must be taken that one's desire for a 'strong' church does not lead to unthinking and unbiblical ideas regarding submission and authority. The Christian concept of submission does not imply that one should voluntarily submit to degradation nor that one should submerge one's will or personality in that of others,[27] but that one should make it a general rule to renounce self interest and give precedence to others[28] within the limits of social relationships as God has determined them.

Similarly caution must be urged with regard to the exercise of authority in the local Christian community. If we make reference only to the Apostle Paul[29] in this connection we will gain some understanding of the limit set within the New Testament itself. Paul was prepared to wield his authority against apostolic pretenders (2 Cor. 11: 14; Gal. 4: 17). But one must agree with von Campenhausen that he 'nevertheless does not develop this authority of his in the obvious and straightforward way by building up a sacred relationship of spiritual control and subordination'.[30] His authority is 'from the outset fundamentally limited'. His authority ceases the moment he ceases to imitate Christ (1 Cor. 11: 1) and he recognises that on many issues he can only offer a personal opinion (1 Cor. 7: 25). As von Campenhausen states,

> In fact his authority is of such a kind that he continually brings it to bear only with reserve, and, as it were merely requesting or soliciting compliance, and confines its full and unambiguous exercise in accordance with its essential nature, to such occasions as the true authority of Jesus himself determines.[31]

An unthinking over-reaction to a weak church may therefore ironically leave one in the equally dangerous position of being untrue to the New Testament principles.

To summarise the biblical position we may say that it nowhere implies that to live in community is to choose a superior spiritual path. At most we may say that it is a possible way to apply certain biblical principles and doubtless is the calling of God for some. The principles however are spiritual, not external, and must be expressed in every age in a way relevant to the sociological structures of which one is a part.

PRAGMATIC REASONS FOR LIVING IN COMMUNITY

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[26] For a detailed description of what it means to be a 'weak' as opposed to 'strong' church see Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, Harper and Row (1977), 84.

[27] This is a Hindu concept of submission, see John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls*, Harper and Row (1977), 43f.

[28] G. Kittel, *TDNT*, VIII, 27-46. The key word is ὑποτασσομαι whose root τασσο means to appoint or order 'with reference to a specific place position or relation vis-a-vis others'. Behind the word is the belief in a God who orders and appoints not only the physical structures of the universe but also man in his social relationships.

[29] For a fuller discussion see John Goldingay, *Authority and Ministry*, Grove Books (1976).

[30] H. von Carnpenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power*, Black (1969), 33-53.

[31] Ibid., 50.

Those who live in communities such as have been mentioned often argue for the reasonableness of their life style on pragmatic grounds and these arguments are more persuasive than those based on scripture. They largely stem from some of

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the problems created by our Western society and they show how living in community can be one solution to the problem. The pragmatic arguments cluster around two issues: relationships and resources.

(a) *Relationships*

Contemporary Western society faces a crisis of relationships. The symptoms of it are observed directly in terms of the divorce and separation rate, and less directly in the generation gap; blatantly in aggressive racialism and more subtlety in class snobbery; and embarrassingly in the growing number of one parent families or uncared for children. Many of the younger generation are learning, from the example of their parents, that family life is not the bliss which was once imagined and a growing number are finding it difficult to make satisfactory relationships. This sometimes results in introspection or bitterness and a preference for isolation rather than the painfulness of attempting significant relationships.

The community concept provides such people with the opportunity to belong without making the total commitment involved in marriage. This is not to underrate the painful relationships which might be involved in the community itself. Nevertheless it is to say that in such a context isolated people have often found it possible to make relationships and have learned self-acceptance, discovered themselves and progressed towards maturity as persons.

It would be wrong to imply that communities only care for the casualties of our disintegrating society. They do not. They also have a role in providing an alternative family for those who for one reason or another have chosen to remain single. In addition David Watson has argued[32] that living in an extended family community is healthier for the family than the more normal arrangement in our society whereby nuclear families are isolated from other members of their family and each other. He argues that the healthiness of the extended family has long historical precedent[33] and further that an excessively exclusive marriage relationship is not only selfish and therefore sinful but destructive to the couple involved.

(b) *Resources*

The argument from resources stems from the fact that both the world and the church are suffering from diminishing resources and it is said that living in community uses the limited resources more responsibly and so released more resources for use by others. Many responsible authorities have warned that, given present trends, the earth's natural resources will be exhausted during the next century and even if new discoveries should extend our resources beyond that time the resulting rise in pollution will cause a decline in food production. If neither of these predictions come true the world will still be trapped by the

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[32] Op. cit., 85.

[33] For a different and more substantial view of family life, past and present see Ronald Fletcher, *The Family and Marriage in Britain*, Pelican Books (1966).

population explosion which will exhaust food supplies.[34] In the light of these disturbing trends and in the light of the present unjust distribution of the earth's resources many believe that Christians must opt out of conventional society which is characterised by greed and wastefulness.[35] Community living is one way by which excessive individual needs can be bridled and more limited resources shared without detriment to those who wish to use them. It is, as David Watson has said, 'one modest way in which we can challenge the standards of the affluent societies in which we live'.[36]

The church too is suffering from diminishing resources in terms of wealth and

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personnel and it is argued that community living may be one answer to that pattern as well. For, by sharing resources in this way a small number of wage-earners can, without difficulty, release one of their number from the need to earn his living and support him whilst he gives time to ministry within the church. If each was living in his own isolated individual or family unit the surplus monies would be spent not on personnel but on property and so-called consumer durables. Community living further enables some adventurous forms of ministry and mission to the wider community which would not otherwise be possible.

These pragmatic arguments deserve the serious attention of every Christian since they touch on issues vital to the survival of church and society. They pose important questions about how a relevant and potent discipleship can be demonstrated within society. Even so, living in community is not the only answer to the questions posed and one must respect a fellow believer who chooses an alternative solution.

COMMUNITIES IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The reasons given by the participants of community living for its advocacy must be taken seriously in their own right. However if the current quest for community is to be understood the picture must be painted on a much broader canvas than the advocates would themselves choose. The advocates, for the reasons outlined, often see themselves as more committed to God, subject to a deep work of the Holy Spirit, less contaminated by the world and in some cases as a clear and visible outpost of the Kingdom of God on earth, maybe even with eschatological overtones. On the whole, however, the advocates show little awareness of just how diverse the phenomenon of community living has been in history and is today. The diversity of the phenomenon makes one question whether a more satisfactory explanation is to be found within a sociological rather than a theological framework. To pose the question in this way is not to argue for sociological reductionism[37] but to use sociological insight to expose 'bad faith' within the church. The word faith does not have any theological connotations in this context. The phrase is one used by sociologists to describe the way in

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[34] These predictions are based on Donella H. Meadows et. al., *The Limits to Growth, Earth Island* (1971) and are cited in John V. Taylor, *Enough is Enough*, SCM (1975), If.

[35] For a development of these arguments see Taylor, op. cit. and Charles Elliott, 'Economics and Choice', *Theology*, LXXXII (1979), 10-16.

[36] Op. cit., 87.

[37] For an explanation of the relationship between theology and sociology and of the ways in which sociological reductionism can be avoided see J. A. Walker, 'Sociology and Christianity, some conflicts and their resolutions', *Christian Graduate* (June 1977), 37-46 and Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology*, Mowbrays (1975), Part 1.

which a man often limits his true freedom of choice by pretending that a certain course of action is necessary.[38] So in this case sociological insights may challenge behaviour which depends on a theological rationalisation of one's sociological situation.

The quest for community living is neither confined to this age nor to members of the Christian church. In the Old Testament there were the schools of the prophets and up to and including the time of Christ there was the community at Qumran. History has been littered with community experiments since then of which the Diggers of the 17th century, the Monastic Orders, and the co-operative experiments of Robert Owen are a few outstanding examples. Contemporary groups include a wide range of political and revolutionary communes; the some 235 kibbutzim in Israel, the Amish and Bruderhof. In fact the groups are so numerous as to have given rise to a developing research industry into the phenomenon.[39]

Many experiments in community only last for a brief period although Christian communities seem to have a better success record, if the test is longevity, than secular communities. N. J. Whitney has calculated that the average length of life for a secular community is five years compared with 50 years for a religious community.[40] Some communities end in tragedy but usually they dissolve

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because their numbers drift or fail to agree on objectives and lifestyles and so part company. Survival depends on an ability to adapt. Whitworth's research into the Bruderhof shows them to be a typical illustration of this point.[41] Founded in 1920 by Eberhard Arnold they drew much on the experience of the Hutterites and were a reaction to German bourgeois life and an attempt to re-establish older patterns of folk and rural life. They perceived themselves to be a demonstration of the Kingdom of God on earth. Today the Bruderhof consists of three pacifist communities in the U.S.A. and has almost 9,000 members. But its survival has only been possible because over time it has adapted to different locations, different generations, different goals and different degrees of involvement or isolationism. These adaptations have sometimes been made only at great expense to the community itself as the Purifications of 1958 and 1962, which resulted in the closure of all but the U.S. houses, demonstrate.

Whitworth concluded that communities such as the ones he studied emerged 'when value patterns and institutions were in a flux or being subjected to intensive critical scrutiny'.[42] He further concluded that an enthusiasm for community living 'is especially marked in those societies or areas of societies in which life is to a particularly high degree impersonal, anonymous and outwardly demystified and in which human relationships are largely impermanent and conducted within a framework of specific rules'.[43] Both these conclusions

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[38] Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Penguin Books (1966), 164-6. For its application to the church by a Christian believer see Robert Furbey, 'Sociology and the Christian Church' in *Christian Commitment and the Study of Sociology*, The Ilkley Study Group (nd), 74-104.

[39] Among relevant recent works, P. Abrams and A. McCulloch, *Communes, Sociology and Society*, Cambridge University Press (1976); David Clark, op. cit., Roger Curl, *Three Christian Communities*, Unpublished DPhil, Oxford (1976); John R. Hall, *The Ways Out*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1978); Andrew Rigby, op. cit., and *Alternative Realities*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1974) and G. J. M. Whitworth, *God's Blueprints*, Routledge and Kegan Paul (1975).

[40] Cited, Rigby, *Alternative Realities*, 282.

[41] Op. cit., 167-209.

[42] Ibid., 214.

[43] Ibid., 239f.

aptly describe our own society and go some way towards accounting for the rise of counter modes of living.

The researches of others, especially Andrew Rigby, supports this view. Rigby argues that communities are formed because conditions are unsettled and a recruit has become dissatisfied with his present style of life. In a community a recruit can discover a different way of living, but more than that he is able to perceive and define reality differently, and to receive mutual support for his redefinitions. Rigby uses Goffman's concept of career to trace the steps by which a potential recruit will become a member of the community. The steps are:

Step l :   dissatisfaction with life in general;

Step 2:   an awareness of the existence of communes;

Step 3:   acquaintance with a community or its members, e.g. a weekend visit, which suggests a community may be the answer he is seeking;

Step 4:   discovery of an appropriate community and initial contact with it;

Step 5:   the potential recruit must define his situation and existing ties as sufficiently free to drop out and join the alternative reality.[44]

Recruits to communities are mostly young middle class people who do not so much object to specific social wrongs as to the general values and orientations on which people in the 'normal' world base their lives. Frequent reference is made by the members of communities to the conventional values of materialism; competitive individualism; the institutionalisation of hypocrisy; hatred of the rat-race; the pointlessness of pursuing an occupation which is not particularly enjoyable and the meaninglessness of the status symbols which the normal world invests with so much importance. One member of a community highlighted the contrast in saying, 'The alternative society means people caring about one another and sharing. In straight society they are all competing and thinking about themselves.'[45] A community thus enables a person to escape from the pre-packaged process of living experienced in the conventional world and enables a

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recruit to resist the attempts of others to label him and to venture out on his own search for fulfilment.

From this we can see that communities not only relieve the pressures on individuals who reject conventional lifestyles, but also set themselves up as an example to the normal world of how life ought to be lived. Some communities go beyond even that and looking forward to the time when their way of living becomes normal and a new world dawns, they see themselves as 'seeds of a new age'.

It must be asked why, if life in conventional society is really 'not fit for human consumption' more people do not opt for a community life-style. Communitarians argue that it is either

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[44] Rigby, *Alternative Realities*, 7.
[45] Ibid., 64.

because people have been fooled by the media into thinking life is better than it is and so their false consciousness prevents them from seeing their real situation or that they see how bad it is but do not see the alternatives. Those who opt for a community life style, however, refuse to be fooled, have seen the options and will not settle for less than the ideal.

We must now turn to ask how this general sociological explanation applies to the current interest in religious communities. It may apply in one of two ways. Firstly a recruit to a religious community may well suffer from the general dissatisfaction mentioned at Step I above. In addition, however, he may well be experiencing dissatisfaction not so much with the conventional world but with the conventional church. Many members of communities are the dissatisfied and disillusioned members of conventional churches who have chosen to opt out of them. Their social world may well have been confined by the church and its activities. What others reject in the normal society is paralleled by what they see in the conventional church and they too wish to reject it. The same lack of care, personal warmth and integrity, the same concern to label and the same enjoyment of worldly prestige is often to be found within the church as well as in the world. By opting out of the conventional they are able to opt into a society where they can receive acceptance and care and allow for personal development. Since the problem was as far as they were concerned a religious one the solution chosen is also religious i.e. a religious community.

Not all members of religious communities have joined them for this reason. Recruits join, secondly, because at Steps 3 and 4 of the career outlined above the community they encountered happened to be a religious community and since it seemed to provide the alternative reality they sought they joined it as opposed to another form of community.

It seems reasonable to conclude that no matter what other motivations may be involved for those who join religious communities they are in part a symptom of a much broader dissatisfaction with conventional society which finds relief in the counter-culture of community life. Specific causes may be traced to account for the religious aspect of this counter-culture but their action nonetheless remains symptomatic of a phenomenon which is not specifically religious in origin.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In conclusion a number of tentative suggestions may be made to the disciplines or groups involved in this discussion.

To begin with sociology, it has been customary for sociologists to speak of communities as illustrations of Utopian Sects.[46] The Utopian Sect is defined as a voluntary religious group who withdraw from the world because they believe it

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to be corrupt and who aim for its radical reconstruction. They frequently adopt a communtarian structure which serves both as a model of the new society and a vehicle through which the new society is to be introduced.

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[46] Whitworth, op. cit., ix-xii and Bryan Wilson, *Magic and the Millenium*, Heinemann (1973), 9-30.

The recent practice of community living however suggests that this model may be too restrictive. Some communities clearly originated as Utopian sects and others move in the direction of utopianism, but not by any means all communities are related to utopianism. It would be more appropriate if a new model was used in which community living was the determinative factor. Among its variables one would need to have a place for its degree of exclusivism and its degree of utopianism but they would not be determinative.

To turn to theology, one might comment on the use theologians make of the word 'community'. Since R. Newton Flew's work on the church in 1938,[47] and possibly even earlier, it has been customary for theologians to speak of the church as a community. Thus the church has been described as 'the messianic community', 'the community of the New Age', 'the community of the Kingdom' and 'the eschatological community', and so on. Conversely few theologians have paid any attention to the meaning of the word community and it has often been devoid of any sociological depth. The recent works of Jurgen Moltmann[48] and Howard Snyder[49] stand as notable exceptions to this and serve as a reminder that theology cannot deal in abstractions alone but must be concerned about man in his relationship with his God and so man in relationship with his fellow men.

To turn to members of evangelical communities, one would wish to recognise that each community has its own character, its own strengths and weakness. One would also wish to recognise that as far as they are concerned criticisms of structure often miss the point for it is the creation of deep relationships through the work of the Holy Spirit which are important.[50] Nevertheless comments on the structural features of community life are essential for they can either assist or limit the work of the Holy Spirit.

The point may be made by identifying seven dimensions of current interest (see p. 78) in communities and by demonstrating the range of attitude and practice with regard to them. At one end of the range the attitudes and practices would result in a form of community living identical with that in a total institution, and so far from being a legitimate application of biblical principles it results in a denial of the gospel (Gal. 5: 1) and much personal heartbreak. At the other end of the range the attitudes and practices are equally unbiblical but do not necessarily have implications for community life, except that it would be difficult to form any Christian community of the basis of them. Between the two extremes, positions may be adopted which conform more to the teaching of scripture.

Finally one might say that the conventional church can ill-afford to ignore the phenomenon of community living since it is a reaction to the lack of community to be found within its own structures. It has often ignored the importance of interpersonal relationships and also the dimensions which are currently of so much interest among communities. Renewed examination of these aspects of church life is necessary in order that the church might become

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[47] R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church*, Epworth Press (1938).

[48] Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, SCM (1977) and *The Open Church*, SCM (1978).

[49] Howard Snyder, *New Wineskins*. Marshall, Morgan and Scott (1977) and *Community of the King*, Inter-Varsity Press (1977).

[50] For example 'On the whole... criticisms of the form almost entirely miss the point. Community in the narrow sense of an organisational structure does not exist for its own sake... Community... comes into being when the Holy Spirit effects a deep work of grace in the lives of individual men and women. That grace marks it possible for extraordinary and radical measure to be pursued. If this is the foundation then any organisational structure "lay be valid for any given circumstance' (emphasis mine). *Towards Renewal*, Summer 1979, 3. Such a position is untenable.

an authentic community and so remove the necessity for some to look elsewhere in their search for a truly accepting alternative society.

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Dimension	Total Institution	Community	Absence of Community
Separation from the world	Extreme isolation	Some separation	No distinctiveness
Attitudes to conventional lifestyle (e.g. property, recreation, sex and education)	Closed	Selectively open	Indifferent
Attitude to one's natural family	Total rejection	Acceptance	Unqualified acceptance
Style of authority	Dictatorship	Mutual finding of the will of God under guidance from appointed leaders	Absence of authority
Doctrinal belief	Dictated in minute detail	Agreement on all essentials but place for disagreement on non-essentials	Indifferent
Control of finance	Members invest all and leave total control to leaders	Pooled resources or generous giving allocated by mutual agreement	None
Range of control i.e. over day's programme or over an individual's decisions	Total	Very selective	None