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## Images of Community and Discipleship

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**T**he image of God as one who cares for the total condition of all humans runs through the Bible like the major theme of a great symphony. It recurs over and over. Its form sometimes varies but it always reproduces the recognizable central motif. So in the Bible that image of God is sounded in different keys and through different instruments and amounts to a masterpiece of witness and affirmation.

But a great symphony includes a number of minor themes. They elaborate the beauty of the central motif, change the focus of attention, and harmonize with the major theme. They are like the implications of the central motif, drawing forth its beauty through contrasts and elaborations. The Bible has its secondary themes as well, drawn from the major image of God.

In this and the next chapter, two of those secondary themes command our attention. They are secondary because they derive from the central theme, namely, the image of the caring and active God. The biblical images of the people of God and discipleship is the first of the two and the images of God's future for humanity is the second. They are related in that they both have to do with the community of the people of God. The future of the community and its hope are articulated in the theme of God's future. Like a great symphony, the

biblical witness would be vastly diminished without these two secondary themes.

How social ministry is grounded in and determined by the images of the people of God and discipleship will become clear. Our service to other persons is shaped by our conception of the nature of the Christian community and its mission. Without these conceptions of ourselves as the people of God, our ministries are deprived of their motivation and strength, for the call to care as God cares is embodied in those conceptions.

### Human Agents of God's Care

As we survey the biblical material in search for what it has to say about the people of God and discipleship, two frameworks emerge. The first of these affirms the basic fact that humans are the agents of God's care for the whole person. The second is that those agents form a community that yields a witness to the world—a witness to an alternative societal structure. We found the basic images of God in the Old Testament affirmed in the ministry of Jesus. In a similar way we find these two frameworks constructed in the Old Testament and reinforced in the New Testament.

#### *Agency in the Old Testament*

God acts in history through human agency. This fundamental view is rooted in the exodus story as a corollary to the image of God as one who cares for the enslaved people. As we saw in chapter one, in the call of Moses in Exod. 3:7-12 Yahweh describes the divine sensitivities to the people's plight and the determination to alter those conditions. God has "come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (v. 8). How shall God accomplish this saving act? What means shall the divine compassion use to effect the release of the people? "Come, I will send you [Moses] to Pharaoh to bring my people" (v. 10). The divine redemption is accomplished through human agency.

Moses is as surprised as we are to learn that the divine power of social and economic healing is operative through a weak and feeble human agent (v. 11). Rather than effecting the marvelous release

through sheer divine fiat, God chooses to act through a human agent. Moses expresses the deference all humans feel when faced with the request to be the liberating instrument of the divine care. God does not withdraw, however, into passivity to watch the agent struggle on his own. Instead, the presence of God provides the courage and strength to fulfill the mission (v. 12).

Moses is the model of human agency for the divine care. He represents the pattern of the agency to which humans are called again and again throughout the story of Israel. In the biblical tradition he is the example to be emulated by later agents (cf. Deut. 34:10), even the Messiah himself (Deut. 18:18). The features of this model of the human agent are important, especially his task to bring to reality the conditions God seeks. God's desire for the liberation from oppression of any and every kind becomes the basis for the agent's mission.

Israel then becomes the enlargement of that agency of mission. The Israelite people as a whole have laid upon them Moses' commission to release the Hebrews from their slavery. Israel is to maintain the justice of God exhibited in the exodus event. The principle entailed in this calling of the people is articulated in the call of Abraham in which God declares that Abraham shall be a "blessing" by which "all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Gen. 12:2-3). The people of Israel, stemming from Abraham, shall be a source of divine pleasure for all humans. The covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel expresses that basic principle. In Exod. 19:6 Israel is called to be "a kingdom of priests" for the whole world. As priests, they are to be the mediators between God and the people of the world. Among other things this implies they are the means by which God's care and justice are mediated to the other nations.

In the covenant all of the people are made agents of the divine care and justice in that they are commissioned to keep the law of this God (e.g., Deut. 5:1-5; 26:16-19). In chapter one above, the law was seen as an expression of God's concern for the total well-being of the people. If now the people are responsible for the keeping of that law, they have become the agents by which God accomplishes the alleviation of those conditions that continue to oppress Israel. The covenant and the law, it may be said, are the democratization of the role of the prophet Moses—every Israelite is called to be the agent by which God's care is expressed and its transforming effects accomplished. Hence, the people of God, as a community, is the called agent of God's care for the total person.

This view is not limited to the early concept of Israel but is found in the prophetic literature of a later period as well. In the prophetic insistence that the people practice justice in their relationship with one another a basic principle is implied: The people are envoys by which the care of God is expressed. Examples abound and have been alluded to in chapter one. Another example is Isa. 42:5-9, where it is said of Israel:

I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness (vs. 6b-7).

One marvels at how in this passage the whole people are assigned a role parallel to that given Moses in his call.

Therefore, the task of agency for God's purposes among humans is not limited to a few, elected persons within the community. It is the task of the called people as a whole. If contemporary trends have resulted in the emergence of a few "experts" whose task it is to do social ministry, while the Christian community itself sits passively by, there is something terribly amiss. The task to be instruments of the divine care is everyone's task in the divine community. If God's care is to be translated into effective action among humans, it is through the whole people of God.

That fact is expressed vividly in the later image of the suffering servant of God in Deutero-Isaiah. In four passages written in a poetic style the prophet describes one who is the servant (*ebed*) of the Lord (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12). Among the many scholarly questions surrounding these passages, the identity of this anonymous servant is of concern to us.<sup>1</sup> The nominations for the identity of this mysterious figure are varied, but it seems clear that he or she was understood to be the people of Israel or a righteous remnant of that people. In Isa. 49:3 Israel is explicitly identified with the servant. It matters little if that verse was a later addition to the original servant song. If that was the case, it only means that the Hebrew people came quickly to identify themselves with the figure of the suffering servant. That being the case, we are justified in seeing the portrayal of this servant as the vision of the role of the people of God themselves.

The function of the servant described in these four passages in Isaiah is universal, that is, directed toward the nations of the world (e.g., 42:4; 49:1, 6b). The servant is God's means of bringing justice

in the world (e.g., 42:1b, 4) and mediating God's salvation (49:6b). He or she is a teacher of the law, with all of its social mandates (50:4). That the servant's mission to accomplish all of this entails suffering (50:4-10) is the most difficult and distinctive of his or her features. Making it even more difficult, the servant's suffering is vicarious—the suffering of the innocent servant atones for the wrongs of the guilty (52:13-53:12). This song presents the startling way in which serving God as an agent for social justice and righteousness invariably leads to suffering, but it is a suffering conceived as a means of correcting the ills of society.

The point to be highlighted in these songs is that the suffering servant is a depiction of the suffering of Israel in her function as God's witness in the world. Israel is the means by which the divine justice is realized in the world. But such an agency role cannot be fulfilled without suffering. Just how suffering atones for sin and furthers justice remains unexpressed. But the point is clear nonetheless: The servant of God, the representative of God's care for the welfare of humanity, is one who faces suffering in the course of her/his task. For good reason, then, the earliest Christians understood the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth as a "fulfillment" of the image of the suffering servant of God.

Before leaving the Old Testament one further point must be raised, namely, the principle that God works through human agents beyond the scope of the people of God themselves. In other words, envoys for God's care are called out of humanity in general and not only from the community of the people of God. No better example of this point is found than the assertion of Deutero-Isaiah that Cyrus, the Persian general, is the agent by which God replicates the exodus event in the return of the exiles to their homeland. In Isa. 45:1 the prophet calls Cyrus God's "anointed" (*mashiach*). Even though Cyrus does not know God, God uses him to liberate the people from their bondage in exile. This proves, says the prophet, the sovereignty of God (45:3).

The point is remarkable, for it asserts the universal use of humans as instruments for God's purpose. But it is also instructive, for it suggests that God's concern for political, social, and economic well-being is expressed through those who stand outside of the community of the people of God. The church in its social ministry does well to note this faith affirmation in considering its bond with non-Christian movements for social welfare and its alliance with secular and humanistic agencies for human good.

The Old Testament is unequivocal in its affirmation that God's care for total human welfare is executed through human agents. God enlists humans as partners in the task of working to achieve liberation from all conditions that oppress and inhibit human well-being.

### *Agency in the New Testament*

The principle that God acts through human agency also lies at the heart of the New Testament witness. Jesus is conceived as the supreme human agent of God's care. When God chose to act decisively for the transformation of the human condition, the act took the form of an agent who was at once both God and human. The Hebraic tradition is thus affirmed and magnified by the Christ event. God does not effect the reversal of human need through divine fiat but through a humble, itinerant preacher-prophet. Human agency is attested in the incarnation. God chose to act in a flesh and blood human, who was at the same time none other than God. Even when God undertakes the direct task of agency for divine purpose, God takes the form of humanity, becoming one with those who are served. God becomes agent by taking human form.

The agency theme with regard to Christ finds its fullest expression in the theology of the Gospel of John, although it is not limited to that New Testament stream of thought (e.g., Gal. 4:4, 6; Rom. 8:3). In Johannine thought Christ is most often thought of as the envoy of God (e.g., 3:16), so that Jesus frequently speaks of himself as the one sent (sometimes *pempō*, sometimes *apostellō*) by God (e.g., 5:36; 6:38-44; 8:18, 26; 10:36; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25). The Johannine category of envoy assumes the ancient custom that the agent who is sent by a royal figure carries the authority of the one who sent him or her. Consequently, the response to Jesus is conceived as a response to God (e.g., 5:42-47).

For the fourth evangelist Christ is God's agent sent among humans to effect their salvation. But the sending of the believers is modeled after that divine sending of the son, as John 20:19-23 indicates (and to which we will return in the conclusion). In that passage the commissioning of the disciples (in John that means all believers) is related in potent simplicity. Within that commissioning come the words of v. 21: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The agency task of the believing community is parallel to and modeled after the agency of Christ himself. The profundity of that concept is hardly comprehensible. Clearly, however, Jesus is sent by God out of the divine love

(3:16) and serves God through faithfulness to that love (15:9). The mission of the community of believers is likewise an expression of the divine love and is an agency of love.

This means that the mission of the church, as it is conceived by the earliest Christians, cannot be separated from the love of God revealed in the Christ event. That love gives rise to the sending of the church, even as it gave rise to the sending of Christ, and constitutes the content of the mission of the Christian community, even as it constituted the mission of Christ. From our discussion of the images of God in both the Old and New Testaments we know that that divine love is a care for the whole person and for all persons. Hence, the church knows its mission and the nature of its social responsibility from what it knows of the God who sent Christ and who now sends the church into the world.

The agency task of the community of faith is clear in the role and function of the disciples described elsewhere in the New Testament. One passage particularly important for our purposes is found in the sending of the seventy narrated in Luke 10 (cf. Matthew 10). In the early verses of that chapter Jesus gives instructions to the seventy. Those instructions include specifically what they are to do in the villages they enter. They are to "cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you'" (v. 9). The mission of the seventy is twofold: to act and to proclaim. Notice that the healing of the physical ailments of people is given primary place but that this healing ministry is not separable from the proclamation of the good news that the reign of God has been inaugurated among them.

Luke 10:9 is important for us for several reasons: First, it highlights the fact that the ministry of the seventy is not to differ significantly from that of Christ's own ministry. As Jesus addressed the total welfare of humans in his healings (cf. chap. two), so the disciples are to do the same. The mission of the seventy is not alone to address the spiritual needs of the villagers apart from their physical conditions. Second, this command illustrates for us the way in which acts of social healing are intertwined with the proclamation of the gospel. Healing is not to be isolated from proclamation, nor proclamation from healing. Surely this commissioning of the seventy casts serious doubt on any effort to isolate what the contemporary church would call evangelism from social ministry (cf. chap. 6 below). The two are one and the same in that they are both addressed to the whole welfare of humans. They are not separable, for healing assumes the new age of

God's rule which has dawned in Christ's ministry and gives evidence of the power of that new age. Furthermore, there is no basis here in the commissioning of the seventy for the elevation of one mode of ministry over the other. Healing is not ranked above proclamation in importance, nor proclamation above healing. They are both equal and indispensable expressions of the Christ event.

But the return of the seventy, narrated in Luke 10:17-20, is equally important to our understanding of the agency of God entrusted to Christian believers. They return to Jesus amazed at and joyful over the power they have experienced: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" Moses was promised the presence of God in his mission and experienced the power of that presence in what he was able to do on behalf of God's liberating plan. Now Jesus' disciples have a similar experience. As Jesus empowers the disciples with the Holy Spirit when they are sent out (John 20:22; Luke 24:48-49; Acts 2:1-40), so the seventy have been empowered by their master.

In Luke 10:18 Jesus depicts the significance of what the seventy representatives of his ministry have accomplished, when he declares that in their acts of healing and proclamation the forces of evil have been dethroned: "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning." The forces of evil, not the will of God, are expressed in the afflictions humans suffer. As those afflictions are overcome through the ministry of the seventy, the power of evil is neutralized and made impotent. The agency of humans sent by God to serve the total human welfare has cosmic effects. It alters the nature of the whole universe in altering the conditions of individual humans in their afflictions.

The pattern established in the work of the seventy finds replication in the work of the church described in the Book of Acts. Everywhere throughout the Acts of the Apostles there is evidence of, first, the power for healing invested in the church, second, the unity of healing and proclamation, and, third, the ramifications of those acts. One example will make these three points clear. In Acts 3:1-10 Peter and James heal a man who was born lame. They are instruments of God's concern for an affliction that has marred a human life and are empowered to effectuate such a healing. But then Peter uses the occasion to announce the significance of what has been accomplished (vs. 12-26). Proclamation accompanies healing. The concern for the physical affliction of the lame man is not separable from the concern for the total welfare of all the people, and Peter calls on them to repent (v. 19). Acts 4:4 suggests the results of this event in claiming that the number

of believers grew. This pattern is repeated throughout the Book of Acts (e.g., 4:14; 8:7; 10:38; 28:10).

We should beware of two false assumptions that may weaken the relevance of these themes. The first is that the early church and the first disciples in particular were empowered to heal in a way in which the contemporary church is not. This assumption denies the existence of healing power in the contemporary community of faith, and supposes a narrow view of the way in which God empowers the church. God's healing power is not limited to the extraordinary act of effecting a cure immediately by touch or word. Less miraculous means of healing are also the empowerment of the Spirit. For example, in the church's advocacy for research on AIDS it brings the empowerment of God to bear on that terrible human affliction. As the church overcomes the hunger of humans in the world, it expresses the empowerment of God as surely as did Peter and John. If we limit our social ministry to the kind of healing that can be effected through the miracle of faith, however real that kind of healing may be, we limit God's means of overcoming human affliction.

The second assumption is that the healings worked by the early church were only a means to accomplish a spiritual mission. That is, it may be thought that the healings of the early church were wonders to attract attention to the church. They are only a means toward a spiritual goal, and the healing itself does not count as the accomplishment of the divine mission. That assumption is refuted by the biblical witness. The mission of the people of God, in both their biblical and contemporary forms, is to address the needs of humans on both the physical and the spiritual level.

### *Summary*

The score for the first of the secondary themes of the biblical symphony is clearly written. Humans emerge as the agents of God's care for the total welfare of people. We are the instruments for God's love to reach the physical, social, economic, and political, as well as the spiritual, conditions of others. God does not choose to work alone. God creates co-workers—partners—in the divine enterprise. The agents never misunderstand their role and their function. Their mission is ours by virtue of having been the objects of God's care and of having been called and sent by the divine Carer. The power for our mission, therefore, is not our own but God's. And like an executive corporate officer,

God delegates authority and power to the partners of the firm in order that its mission might be accomplished.

To be the people of God, called and set apart by the graciousness of a loving Creator and Redeemer, means to become instruments of that grace and love. It is to experience both the privilege of being loved and the responsibility of that love.

### The People of God As an Alternative Community

But the fulfilment of that agency to which the people of God are called entails more than individual and corporate actions on behalf of others. The witness of the community to the care of God for the total human welfare is found in healing and proclamation, in liberation and serving, and in caring and providing. But the biblical record points to another kind of testimony to the care of God, namely, the witness of the community as an alternative to the norms and structure of the society in which it finds itself.

The concept of the people of God as an alternative community means that the group functions within its society as a subculture. It is a society within a society, a minority group within the majority. It embraces and lives a different life-style from that of the general culture. The community is a counterculture in the sense that its life-style expresses values that stand opposed to those of the general culture. It must then stand over against the generally accepted norms of its day and time. It is furthermore an intentional culture in the sense that it consciously embraces and lives these different values as a means of effecting the life of the total culture. The people of God are deliberate, conscious, and purposeful in their effort to propagate their own norms for societal life to those outside the circle of their community of faith. They execute that fertilization through careful attention to what the character of their own communal life says to the society of which they are a part.

In this sense the biblical community is consistently portrayed as an alternative culture. That portrayal stretches again from Moses to Paul, from Israel to the Christian church. Our brief survey of the matter is intended to suggest the way in which the communal life of the people of God comprised a vital part of its witness to the care of God for the whole person and for all persons.

### The Alternative Community in the Old Testament

Israel is formed as an alternative community from its origins in the exodus.<sup>2</sup> Israel stood over against the Egyptian culture as a minority subculture. Moses cultivated a sense of the distinctiveness of Israel from the Egyptians. Israel was the object of the concern of the great "I Am" who had sent Moses to execute their liberation. The Passover story told with attention to vivid detail and shaped by liturgical interests exemplifies the distinctiveness of the Hebrew people (Exodus 12). The formation of the Hebrew people from among the *ʿApiru* (cf. chap. 1) in bondage in Egypt involved shaping them into a distinctive, peculiar people whose difference from their culture was rooted in their affiliation with the liberating God of the exodus enterprise. That affiliation meant that the God of justice stood in criticism over the systematic oppression of humans in the name of the welfare of the empowered few of the Egyptian society.

The alternative nature of the Hebraic community as the people of God is summarized in the covenant. Israel is called to be a "holy nation" (Exod. 19:6; cf. Deut. 26:19). They are set apart from the society in which they live. They are God's community, formed by divine act and subject to divine rule. As such they are a means by which God reaches the nations of the world. Their community was an evangelical one in that they are the means of spreading the truth of this caring God who is opposed to the oppression of human life.

In no less a significant way the law defined Israel as an alternative community. While it is true that the laws reflect some of the practices of Israel's neighbors (e.g., compare the Code of Hammurabi), in their insistence on social justice the legal materials describe a society in which the care of the needy takes priority over achievement and possession (cf. chap. 1). Even the land in which the people dwell is not to be conceived of as their own, for it is God's (e.g., Lev. 25:23).<sup>3</sup>

Such an alternative consciousness continued in Israel's life in Canaan. Israelites again constituted a minority subculture within the Canaanite society. They stood apart because of their bond with the God who had led them out of Egypt. So, they could not serve the *Baalim* of the Canaanites and remain faithful to their Liberator (e.g., Judg. 2:11). Their worship of the God they had known in the course of their history repudiated the fertility gods of their farmer-neighbors the Canaanites. They were persistently called to their distinctive witness as Yahweh's people. Elijah's sense of loneliness on Mount Horeb

illustrates the consciousness of the faithful believer over against the forces of the culture at large (1 Kings 19:14).

Indeed, the prophetic movement provides a clear example of the recurring call to a different consciousness throughout most of the Old Testament. In opposition to the royal consciousness that arose with David and persisted thereafter, the prophets spoke out for Israel's commitment to the care of God for all persons whatever their condition. In the story of Nathan and David the king supposes that it is within his power to claim for his own that which belongs to a lowly Hebrew soldier. David's act of abuse of his power nearly succeeds until the prophet Nathan encounters him and declares, "You are the man" (2 Samuel 11 and 12). Nathan is a spokesperson for a different consciousness than that of the king. It is a consciousness shaped by the character of the God of Israel. David's consciousness is, on the other hand, shaped by the human desire for power and possession. Nathan insists that the people of God counter the way that power is used to abuse the powerless.

The prophetic protest against the royal consciousness and its expression of the consciousness of the people of God as a just and caring community is witnessed in other figures as well. Elijah cannot tolerate Ahab's dispossession of Naboth (1 Kings 21), nor can Micaiah sanction the power play of Israel and Judah against Syria (1 Kings 22). In a political move Elisha commissions Jehu to take control of the monarchy and correct its abuses (2 Kings 9). The story continues with the classical prophets of the eighth through the sixth century in their persistence against the monarchy and other powerful rulers (cf. chap. 1).

From Moses through Ezekiel the prophetic movement involved the effort to prevent the demise of that distinctive consciousness of the people of Israel as a community committed to human justice founded on divine justice. It was a movement to keep the sense of the alternative consciousness of the people from giving way to the mentality of monarchy and power common among Israel's neighboring nations. As Walter Brueggemann has said, it was a movement to both criticize and energize. It criticized the compromising of that alternative status—that different consciousness rooted in the people's relationship with God—by those who fell victim to the cultural values of their day. It energized in the sense that it motivated a rejuvenation of that alternative consciousness.<sup>4</sup>

The suffering servant of Deutero-Isaiah pictures Israel as an alternative community, testifying to God's truth over against the societal

norms of the time. Israel represented in the servant songs is conceived of as the means by which humans can exert influence in the larger society for justice and righteousness. Even its suffering in doing so (see above) is part of the means by which its agency function is fulfilled. The assumption is that the alternative community can be a means of effecting change, of being "a light to the nations" (Isa. 49:6).

Criticism of the exclusivistic movement in Israel and its effect of narrowing the concern for God to the chosen people alone notwithstanding, we must recognize that the movement for the exclusion of others in part arose as an effort to preserve what was distinctive about Israel as God's agent for an alternative community. The easy inclusion of others in the community threatened to dilute the unique values that defined the people of God. The exclusivistic movement perhaps went too far in its zeal for the cause; it tended in its later form to define the alternative community not in terms of values and distinctive consciousness but in terms of ethnic origin. Nevertheless, its roots may well have been in an understanding of Israel as a peculiar community in the world for the purpose of witness to its God.

This image of the people of God as an alternative community standing alongside while within another culture emerges again and again in the Old Testament literature. It comes to define the people, to identify them as people called by God. It is furthermore their witness to the God by whom they have been called and liberated. Their life together, in other words, points beyond themselves to the one who formed them into community. Their communal existence is a light that enlightens the nations—a beacon directing others to this God.

### *The Alternative Community in the New Testament*

The witness of the New Testament does not significantly differ in this matter. Jesus formed a community around himself that served as an alternative to the society of his time. It was a community comprised, in large part, of the poor and the outcast, including women, tax collectors, and those called sinners (cf. chap. 2). That community existed in solidarity with the poor and their cause, and it was marked by a singular commitment to voluntary poverty and simplicity of lifestyle (e.g., Luke 10:4).

John Howard Yoder's summary of the characteristics of the community of Jesus' disciples helps us see their role as a living alternative to the society of their time.

There are thus about the community of disciples those sociological traits most characteristic of those who set about to change society: a visible structured fellowship, a sober decision guaranteeing that the costs of commitment to the fellowship have been consciously accepted, and a clearly defined life style distinct from that of the crowd.<sup>5</sup>

The disciples constituted, therefore, a corporate body with a clear sense of self-identity as distinct from the cultural values that surrounded them. Moreover, there is about the corporate body of disciples a social intentionality.

Matthew characterizes the nature of the Christian community as a peculiar form of "righteousness" (*dikaiosynē*) exceeding that of the most righteous of the culture (Matt. 5:20). In what we call the Sermon on the Mount Matthew has Jesus explicate that righteousness (5:21—6:27). If in our day righteousness has come frequently to mean a spiritual matter expressed in certain acts of piety, we should be reminded of the social dimension of righteousness in Matthew's witness to Jesus (e.g., Matt. 5:21, 24, 38). But further on Matthew portrays the righteousness demanded by discipleship in terms of "fruits" of a life (e.g., 7:16; 12:33)—the acts that comprise a life. Nor should we forget the importance attached to behavior in relationship to others in Matthew's vision of God's judgment (e.g., 25:31-46).

Matthew's sense of the word "righteousness" retains its original association with justice (*dikē*). It is out of a concept of justice in legal, political, and ethical matters that righteousness grew to take on a broader meaning. In the Septuagint the Greek word for righteousness was used to translate *sedāqah*, Hebrew for "justice." The New Testament in general, and Matthew in particular, continues to conceive of the righteousness that characterizes the Christian in terms of justice in human relationships.

That kind of righteousness distinguished the Christian community, making it a community that embraced values quite different from that of the society in which it was born. A concern for the rightness of relationships marks the Christian community as an alternative community.

The Acts of the Apostles represents the church as an alternative community in unquestionable terms. Although Luke's portrayal of the earliest Christian community may be idealized, it is nonetheless an example of what it meant to be the people of God in Christ. Most important about Luke's picture of the earliest church is his insistence

that it was a community in which physical need was cared for. In describing the church as it emerged after Pentecost, Luke even claims that the first Christians practiced communal ownership of property: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:44-45). Out of their togetherness in Christ, there arose among the early Christians a sense that fulfillment of need took precedence over possession. The violation of that principle was the most serious of offenses against God, as the story of Ananias and Sapphira suggests (5:1-6). Furthermore, when the needs of widows were ignored, provisions were made for them (6:1-6).

That Luke understood this communal life to be an effective witness to the society in which the church lived is suggested by the way he speaks of conversions to the faith aroused by the life of the community (e.g., 2:47; 6:7). The alternative community formed by Christian believers attracted others and pulled them away from the societal values with which they lived.

Paul, in no less a way, conceived of the church as a different community set apart from its culture and witnessing to what it meant to live together as the body of Christ. He gives great attention to the necessity of meeting the needs of the poor in the community and the solidarity of the congregations of the church. In 2 Corinthians he urges liberal giving to help the poor in the congregation in Jerusalem (chaps. 8-9). A similar appeal is found in 1 Cor. 16:1-4 and Rom. 15:25-27. So important is the offering of the gentile churches for the poor of the Jerusalem congregation that Paul delays his mission to Spain in order to deliver it personally to the Christians of that city (Rom. 15:28). Paul believed that support of the poor was the common obligation laid on both the Jewish and the gentile Christians of the church (Gal. 2:10).

For Paul the church was an alternative community in the sense of its solidarity that gave expression to a concern for the poor in any part of the church. But perhaps even more important was his vision of the church as a community in which differences were transcended in Christ. The classical expression of that vision is Gal. 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 3:11; Eph. 6:8; 1 Pet. 1:23-25). Paul may not have always consistently pursued this vision in the advice he gave the congregations to which he wrote. Nonetheless, his vision of the



body of Christ was central to his faith and stood in contradistinction to the societal norms of his day in the Greco-Roman world.

This is a vision of a community in which the ethnic origin, the social status of free or bond, and the gender distinction of persons are essentially irrelevant. The society of the church was a single, seamless fabric by virtue of its shared baptism in Christ in a day when the distinction between Jew and Gentile was a chasm in humanity, especially from the perspective of the Jews. Yet Paul's conception of the gospel was that it annihilated such a distinction. Indeed, his now famous view of "justification by faith" (e.g., Rom. 3:19-26; Gal. 2:15-16) was intended more to overcome ethnic distinctions than it was to put aside the law as a means of salvation (see chap. 6 below).<sup>6</sup> Because the Christ event was salvific for all humanity, the societal differentiation between Jews and Gentiles was of no significance. Thus Paul understood the community of Christ as a society that presented an option to that sharp delineation of humans according to their ethnic origin.

Further, J. P. M. Walsh argues that the Pauline concept of justification "must be understood in the light of Israelite and Jewish convictions about *sedeq* [justice]." Its communal dimension defines the identity of a group and has to do with

an entire way of life: the way people dealt with one another, in politics and economics and work, the whole network of relationships that constitutes the life of a people. Yahweh's "justice" was to be the measure and the animating principle of Israelite life. . . . So the question of "being justified" is not simply a matter of "righteousness." It is a question about how Yahweh's purpose can be made a reality.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, the social distinction between the slave and the free was overcome in the Christian community. Thus all social status was annihilated and all were equal before God and within the community. The most desired human condition—freedom—and the most dreaded—slavery—made no difference within the church. Likewise, the low estate of women in the Greco-Roman world (see chap. 2) was eliminated, so that men and women stood on equal ground within the body of Christ. Their life together was an effort to activate a principle upon which the church was founded and which is attributed to Peter in Acts 10:34: "God shows no partiality."

About these three categories of the cultural, social and sexual structures of society Richard Longenecker observes:

It was in these areas that the early Christians faced their greatest problems socially, realized something of the significance of the gospel for their situations, and attempted to work out the implications of the gospel for their own day. The early Christians knew themselves to be "a kind of firstfruits" of God's new creation . . . and so sought . . . to be God's people in truth and practice.<sup>8</sup>

Paul and other New Testament writers understood the distinctiveness of the Christian community in its environment as a "holiness" (e.g., Rom. 12:1; 1 Thess. 3:13; 4:7; 1 Cor. 2:12; Heb. 12:10, 14). In doing so, they continued the Old Testament theme that viewed the people of God as called to a holiness characteristic of their God. The holiness demanded of them was a peculiar morality and yielded a communal life quite different from the established patterns of the culture.

The witness of James to the character of the Christian community also suggests an alternative society. The Letter of James takes as one of its special emphases the mandate that there shall be no partiality within the church. The author insists, first, that ethical actions are integral to Christian faith (e.g., 1:22, 27; 2:14-26), then urges the impartial and equal treatment of all persons in the church without regard to their economic status (2:1-9). In fact social status is reversed as a result of the gospel, the author claims (1:9-11; 2:5; 4:6, 10). The physical needs of persons are equal in importance to their spiritual needs (2:15-16; cf. 5:14-15). The result is that James envisions a community in which a full equality is enjoyed by all, especially without distinction as to one's economic status.

Finally, the peculiar perspective of the Gospel of John evidences a sense of the Christian community as an alternative to the culture of its day. The fourth evangelist articulates the view that the church is an alien society in the world, and the world is considered the realm of unbelief, rejection, and evil. Jesus himself is the stranger in a foreign land who descends into that evil territory to reveal God and then once again ascends to his otherworldly home. The Johannine Christians understood themselves in the light of their view of Christ. Therefore, they were not of the world and felt isolated from their environment (e.g., John 17). Still, they are sent into that foreign world to minister to it.<sup>9</sup>

The Johannine perspective is radical—even sectarian—in its seclusion of the church from the world. Yet it presents the way in which the church stands over against the world, even while the church is called to service in the world. In a day in which the tendency may be to identify the church and American culture too closely, the Gospel of John is a salutary antidote. The church cannot accommodate itself to the culture without losing its distinctive role as a witness to God's will.

### *Summary*

The New Testament, like Old, depicts the people of God as an alternative community. The life the church has in Christ transforms the character of their communal existence. It produces a community marked by a distinctive righteousness, intent upon the care of the needy within their circle, and committed to an equality quite unlike the practice of the culture in which the church resided. It is a communal life evoked by the nature of the act of God in Christ—an act that gives expression to a God who “shows no partiality” and who is passionately committed to the needy. Their life together expresses their faith as truly as do their verbal confessions; their life together witnesses to the gospel as clearly as do their proclamations.

Through the church as the alternative community, then, God seeks the dissemination of the good news that a new age has begun—an age that marks a new possibility for human social life. Human sin created the necessity of a divided humanity. God's redeeming act in Christ gives birth to the prospect of a new humanity, united and living at peace with one another. In the words of Ephesians, Christ “is our peace, in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two” (2:14-15).

### **Conclusion**

In summary it is clear that the biblical witness calls Christians to be agents of divine care in the world. Through our actions on behalf of others we are the bearers of God's care to the society of which we are a part. But the biblical witness also lays upon the community of the people of God a necessity that we be an alternative community,

standing as a testimony to the kind of societal life God desires for humans. Agency for the divine care for the total welfare of all people is a matter of being as well as behavior. By its example, the church makes its witness to the world and offers a critique of those values that divide people and allow for the oppression of many to the benefit of a few.

The alternative community the Bible describes, then, has a number of features. First, it is formed by the character of the God who has acted to bring the community into existence. The justice and care of God become expressed in a community that practices that justice and care. Second, the community formed by this God, therefore, is committed to a set of values that stands in opposition to those embraced by the society of which the community is a part. The community of God's people is ruled by the God who has formed them, and the divine values take precedence over social norms, customs, and mores. Third, that alternative set of values modeled in the community calls into question what the society values and practices. It functions, in other words, as a judgment of the cultural values of the day.

But, fourth, it also offers the culture an option—another way of life to that which is the norm. Hence, the alternative witness of the people of God is a call to freedom. The community proclaims in its life together that humans can be freed of the pressures to conform to societal values and to perpetuate the established powers. Finally, in that call to freedom implicit in the life of the community there is a call to faith in the God whose liberating actions are embodied in the people of God. With such a call to faith the people of God complete their witness to the one to whom they owe their lives and freedom.

Needless to say, the contemporary church knows the struggle between the community life implicit in the gospel and the norms of its society. That struggle is a persistent one that is not easily resolved. But the resolution of that struggle lies at the heart of what it means for the church to have a social ministry. For without the foundation of a community that gives expression to God's liberating care and justice, the efforts of the church to minister beyond its own membership do not maintain credibility. To nurture a community that is an alternative to the power structures of the world, to the indifference of modern life, and to the inequality of relationships on which society is based is to fuel the engines of social ministry. In the words of Hendrik Berkhof, “We shall only resist social injustice and the disintegration of community if justice and mercy prevail in our own common life and social differences have lost their power to divide.”<sup>10</sup>

The witness of the alternative community is one dimension of the responsibility of the people of God as agents of the divine liberation. The acts of God's human agents for the needy and oppressed comprises the other dimension of that responsibility. Together they round out the full task of a people called to be the means by which the care of God becomes channeled into the world.

But the church lives with an eye focused on the future, even as it lives out of the history of the past and attends to the present. That future dimension of the life of faith will be examined in the next chapter.

## Notes

1. On this question and the servant songs in general, cf. the classical discussions in Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*, 187–260; Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*; and North, *The Suffering Servant*.

2. Much of this discussion is based on the insights of Brueggemann in his brilliant book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, although it is expressed in different ways. Cf. the very useful discussion from a more conservative position in Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, chap. 7.

3. Cf. Brueggemann, *The Land*.

4. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, chaps. 3 and 4.

5. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 46–47.

6. Cf. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* and Dahl, "The Doctrine of Justification."

7. Walsh, *The Mighty from Their Thrones*, 157.

8. Longenecker, *New Testament and Social Ethics*, 94.

9. Kysar, *John*.

10. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 42.