TWO

Early Stories of Intentional Community and Church Renewal

The expansion of Christianity in the Roman Empire prior to the Constantinian era was quite amazing. It was not due to strategic wielding of social influence or clever marketing. In the letter to Diogenes, written around AD 200, a writer described these peculiar people to a Roman official.

> Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind either in locality or in speech or in customs. For they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life . . . While they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians . . . and follow the native custom in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth is marvelous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners . . . Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign . . . They find themselves in the flesh and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives . . . War is waged against them as aliens by the Jews and persecution is carried on against them by the Greeks, and yet those who hate them cannot tell the reason for their hostility. In a word, what the soul is in the body, this the Christians are in the world . . . [they] are kept in the world as in a prison house, and yet they themselves hold the world together.[1]

1. Bosch, *Transforming Mission,* 211.

Christianity, at times illegal and semi-covert, by "surpassing the law in their own lives" spread to every corner of the Empire. It was not a majority religion by any means, but it crossed all sorts of boundaries, cultures, and local religious cults.

In 312 a competitor for the highest office in the land had a vision of the cross (and probably also of the power of this movement to advance his own political ambitions).[2] This vision and several military victories got him into power. Constantine made Christianity legal in 313. This was not a bad thing, but the approval of the Emperor changed the character of the church in ways that it could not have foreseen. It turned the call of discipleship on its head. It became commonplace and socially advantageous to be a Christian. Discipline lagged. The church began playing the world's game.[3]

John Wesley has an interesting quote about this change in the fortunes of the Christian religion and Constantine's conversion. He wrote of Constantine:

> I say [he] "called himself a Christian" for I dare not affirm that *he was one* . . . For surely there never was a time wherein Satan gained so fatal an advantage over the church of Christ as when such a flood of riches, and honour, and power broke in upon it, particularly the clergy.[4]

Wesley's comment about the clergy is very relevant. The change in the character of Christianity brought about numerical growth, but not the healthy reproduction of disciples. Like the growth of mainline Christianity after World War II, and of evangelicalism in the 1980s, numerical growth masked the true condition of the church. Yet the fourth century situation brought forth the first experiments in communal Christian holy living. Those experiments began with laypeople.

2. Constantine had a history of visions that advanced his political ambitions. In a 310 speech he claimed to have seen a vision of Apollo and Victory presenting him with laurel wreaths. He quoted the poet Virgil who had foretold of a saving figure who would be given "rule of the whole world." Constantine appropriated the prophesy to himself.

3. The triumphalism of Eusebius's *Ecclesiasical History* demonstrates that the interests of the Empire and the interests of the church became difficult to separate, even for pious Christians.

4. Wesley, "Signs of the Times," 529.

When we think of monasticism, we often think of the late medieval version, which was dominated by the clergy, integrated into society, and possessed of huge amounts of wealth. That is not how monastic experiments began. Most monks were lay people who responded to the perceived distance between the call of Jesus and the lack of a disciplined holy community in the church they experienced. Clergy did not lead these movements of reform.

The term laity comes from the Greek word *laos*, which simply means "the people." The laity are the people of God. The word clergy comes from the Greek word *kleros*, which means "lot," or "that which is chosen by lot." You may remember in the book of Acts, Matthias was chosen by lot from among the people to fill the apostolic position left vacant by Judas Iscariot.[5] In other words, the clergy are the laity who have drawn the short stick. What the history of monasticism makes clear is that any renewal will come from "the people" of God.

Monasticism began with individual lay Christians retreating from society to deserted places to pursue holiness. The famous Saint Anthony, who is credited with creating monasticism, was a layperson who desired to pursue a higher Christian life, gave away his possessions, and went to live alone in the wilderness.[6] Gradually a group of other seekers gathered to live near him.

The first true monastic communities were organized within a decade of Christianity's legalization by the Emperor—sometime between AD 318 and 323. They were the work of another layperson named Pachomius. Pachomius had been converted while he was in the Roman army. He had been pressed into military service against his will and local Christians ministered to him and his fellow captives. This practical evangelism paid off. When he got out of the army (without having had to fight), he converted and was baptized around 313.[7]

His desire to pursue holiness led him to try to live as an ascetic near St. Anthony, initially mentored by another ascetic name Palamon.[8] When Palamon died, others gathered around Pachomius, seeking to learn from

5. Acts 1:12–26.
6. Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, 31. See also Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 60–74.
7. Veilleaux, *Life of Pachomius,* 27–28.
8. Ibid., 40.

him. Once they numbered one hundred monks, he built a church for them, which became the center of this community of ascetics. He eventually founded eight other communities where laymen or women, with male and female lay leadership, experimented with Christian community. Pachomius "did not want any clerics in his monasteries for fear of jealousy and vainglory."[9] He is also credited with establishing the first "Rule of Life" to guide and discipline these lay communities.[10]

Dark Ages Renewal: Benedict's Communities

Even St. Benedict, whose "Rule" for monastic living guided intentional Christian experiments for generations, was a layperson. He was never ordained. Those who lived in the communities he oversaw were lay people. In fact, he never intended to found an "order" in the sense we think of it, today.

The church in Benedict's day was engaged in the doctrinal disputes between the East and West, which would eventually result in schism. These disputes manifested themselves in the games of the church hierarchy. In 498 two different popes were elected after the death of Pope Anastasius II. Symmachus (considered by the Roman Catholic Church to be legitimate) was chosen by part of the clergy and approved by part of the Roman senate. The same day another group of clergy, friendly to Eastern concerns and supported by part of the Senate, met and elected Laurentius as pope. For the next fifteen years, these two "popes," and their supporters, engaged in a contentious, and often violent, dispute that divided the church until 514.

Benedict lived in Rome when all this was going on. He was completing his studies in rhetoric and law and probably looking forward to a lucrative career, which would continue (what we would consider) the upper middle class style of life in which he had been raised. Although we do not know exactly why, Benedict decided to leave off his studies and leave Rome around AD 500. The main source of information on Benedict's life was written around 593 by Pope Gregory the Great who wrote that he "rejected the study of literature and left his home and his father's affairs. His

9. Ibid., 47–48.

10. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 124–30.

sole desire was to find favor with God, and so he made the religious life his goal. He withdrew then, knowingly ignorant and wisely unlearned."[11] Benedict traveled to a village about forty miles from Rome and joined a group of like-minded seekers living in community there.

In retreat from the world he prayed and studied and gained a reputation for holiness. After he was reputed to have performed a miracle, the attention from townspeople grew too great. He left that community and went to another small community living on the mountain of Subiaco. While there his reputation for holiness and discipline spread and a third community asked him to come and lead them. This did not go well. Reportedly his new community tried to poison him. He returned to Subiaco, perhaps a bit chastened.

At Subiaco others, who were seeking holiness and were dissatisfied with the ordinary life of the church, began to seek him out. Eventually there were twelve different communities in the valley. Each consisted of its own superior and twelve members.[12] Benedict oversaw them all, and they gradually developed a pattern of life that would serve as a model—one where work and prayer and study were all sacred activities to be held in balance. The Rule of St. Benedict was not written for clergy but for lay people who want to live in obedience to Christ. It was intended as a practical guide for holy community in the midst of a rebellious world.

> Listen my son, and turn the ear of thine heart to the precepts of thy Master. Receive readily, and faithfully carry out the advice of a loving Father, so that by the work of obedience you may return to Him, whom you have left by the sloth of disobedience. For thee, therefore, whosoever thou be, my words are intended, who, giving up thy own will, dost take the all-powerful and excellent arms of obedience to fight under the Lord Christ, the true King.[13]

Benedict died around 547. However, the communities following his rule of discipleship continued to spread northward and, in what we think of as the Dark Ages, were perhaps the most powerful tool for spreading the Gospel in what was then pagan Europe. In a brutal world, their evan-

11. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues of Gregory*, 3.

12. These seem much like a Methodist class meeting, each with its class leader and no more than twelve members.

13. Benedict of Nursia, *Rule of St. Benedict*, 1.

gelism was accomplished, not through coercion, but through the creation of communities of devoted lay people, striving to live a holistic and holy life of body, mind, and spirit. Today there are plenty of seekers looking for a model for creating down-to-earth yet spiritual expressions of community. What is needed are multiple examples of how to do it.

Forms of Community in the Middle Ages: The Beguines and the Brethren of the Common Life

Five hundred years later, lay people were continuing to find creative ways to live out God's kingdom. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were again times of great turmoil in society and church, especially for devoted Christian women. Marriage was not always an option. Men were scarce. The Crusades had removed quite a few and the Second Lateran Council (AD 1139) finally made it absolutely clear that married men may not enter the priesthood in the western church. Monasticism was not always attractive. Benedictine monasticism had come to mean an isolated cloistered life away from interaction with the world. Not all Christian women sensed a call to permanently renounce marriage. So women began to create their own options of faithful Christian community.

In the mid-1100s small groups of women in what is now Belgium began to live together at the edge of cities and towns.[14] They lived communally, and committed their lives to prayer and service to the poor, but they differed from the pattern that had come to define monasticism. Each community was autonomous. Each made its own "Rule" to guide communal life and enhance simplicity. Members did not take permanent vows of poverty, retaining ownership of property. They were not cloistered. Those who joined often worked in the town to support themselves and not burden the community. Neither did they take permanent vows of celibacy. Women could come into the community having been married (some even with children) and could leave the community to marry.

14. Bowie, "Introduction," 14–15. A Beguine movement began in Fiona in the diocese of Liège in Brabant. A group of women, who had been associated with a priest named Lambert le Begue in Liege who encouraged them to "live religiously," and who were later recognized as Beguines, appeared between 1170 and 1175. See also McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 7.

The women came to be known as Beguines, probably related to the word for "beg," referring to their petitions to God. By the middle of the 1200s they had spread throughout what is now Belgium, the Netherlands, and parts of Germany. Some of them, like the Beguinage of Ghent were as large as a town.[15]

They came to be known both for their service and their mystical spirituality, which emphasized the humanity of Christ and devotion to the sacrament. At the time, the laity rarely received communion. When even traditional religious orders might celebrate the Eucharist only three times a year, Beguine communities took communion weekly or more frequently. Several Beguine women wrote and published mystical works of piety in the language of the people (rather then Latin) focused on divine love.[16] Some even took up preaching.[17] These activities did not endear them to the clerical hierarchy. But their lived piety came to define the character of Christianity experienced by the average person.

I want to jump ahead another hundred years to the mid-1300s. The church was again caught up in the games of the world and facing schism. For roughly seventy years the French controlled the papacy and the pope was resident in Avignon, France. Then in 1378, two popes were elected, an Italian in Rome, a Frenchman in Avignon. Different factions of the church throughout Europe allied themselves with one or the other of these popes, often for ethnic and political reasons. The situation got so convoluted that at one point there were three people claiming to be the legitimate pope, which was not finally resolved until the Council of Constance in 1417.[18]

In the midst of this disorder a semi-monastic movement began which had tremendous impact on late medieval Christianity. Gerhardt Groote (1340–1384) was raised in what is now the Netherlands, where the Beguines had been strong. He was the son of wealthy merchants, well educated, and intended to be a scholar. At twenty-six, he traveled to Avignon, to the papal court. Though he was not ordained, the trip secured for him a cannonry (actually two) at the cathedrals of Utrecht and Aachen. These provided him with a sizeable stipend and his life as a well-provided-for

15. McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 479.

16. Bowie, *Beguine Spirituality*, 40–42.

17. McDonnell, *Beguines and Beghards*, 343, 412.

18. The council of Constance was also where the Czech reformer Jan Huss was executed, setting the stage for the fracturing of the western church 100 years later.

scholar seemed secure. He was also noted for his debauchery and dabbling in astrology.[19]

In 1374, after recovering from a deadly illness, Groote had a conversion experience. He then wrote "our resolutions and intentions, but not vows," to guide his new life.[20] After about two years, he went to live at a Carthusian monastery, but did not take monastic vows. Instead, sometime after the elections of competing popes, he renounced his positions, distributed all his worldly possessions, and became an itinerant lay preacher throughout the diocese of Utrecht.[21]

His preaching was uninhibited. He called all people, lay and clergy, to repentance and a holy life. None of this made him popular, especially with the clergy. They did not appreciate his accusations or the disruptions to their parishes. Eventually they brought charges of heterodoxy against him. Groote issued a public protest, declaring that he had simply preached Jesus, and would submit to the judgment of the church. The bishop issued an edict that prohibited all lay people from preaching, which should have silenced his ministry. Even so, Groote apparently continued to preach through the last year of his life. He died of the plague in 1384.[22]

The results of his preaching were that some were convicted and a small band of followers (mostly lay, but some clergy) became the first group of what came to be known as the "Brethren of the Common Life." Like the Beguines, those who heeded his call to repentance did not leave the world to join a typical cloistered monastery. Instead, they remained in their vocations, whether clergy or lay, and sought to live out the call to Christ-like living in the world. They met together for mutual support, cultivation of their spiritual lives and service. Their focus became the education of the poor.[23]

The impact of the Brethren of the Common Life and their witness for holy living in the world was profound. Out of these associations developed a system of free schools, the first experiment with broadly available education in Europe. Some of the finest minds of the late middle ages

19. Van Engen, "Introduction," 36–38.
20. Ibid., 65–75.
21. Ibid., 37.
22. Van Zijl, *Gerard Groote.*
23. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, 12–37.

were educated in these schools, and some of the greatest spiritual teachers were nurtured. Thomas à Kempis, who wrote what is today still a classic of Christian spirituality, *The Imitation of Christ,* was a member of the Brethren of the Common Life.

Conclusion

These historical expressions of lay Christian community illustrate a pattern of renewal. Some come from the center of what monasticism has meant and some might seem peripheral. All convey that time and again the church (the "people/laity of God") is renewed when members of the body begin to live out examples of simple faithfulness that can be seen and imitated by the world around it. Often the "church" is judged by what happens at the level of clergy, councils and conferences. Too often the politics look little different from the world. We see the game, the endless rounds of ecclesial tic-tac-toe. Even Christians get disillusioned and become cynical. And the devil gains ground. Throughout Methodism and the larger church, God's people are finding different and creative ways to follow Christ corporately and visibly, in the world as it is. God's people don't need to wait for permission to be obedient. The history of renewal can repeat itself again. God can do, and is doing, surprising things. "The only way to win is not to play the game."