

The Beloved Community: *A Radical Reformation*

Conception of the Church | BY CHARLES SCRIVEN

Note: This article assumes awareness that the Adventist tradition, with its roots in the Baptist, Methodist, and Christian Connection communities, reflects the “believer’s church,” or Radical Reformation experience, and point of view. It also assumes awareness of the key elements (as expressed, classically, in Anabaptism) of that experience and point of view: (1) Discipleship, or unstinting identification with Christ; (2) New Life, or growth into the mind and character of Christ; (3) Witness, or the believer’s responsibility to teach and live the way of Christ; (4) Community, or sharing of the joys and sorrows of faithful Christian life; and (5) Apocalyptic Consciousness, or the sense that Christ, at his soon return, will fully overcome the rulers and institutions of the present age.

The church is the beloved community, and the beloved community is...a mess. The beloved community is also, however, the new world on its way. It is nothing less than the body of the risen and returning Christ—existing on earth today.

The congregation at Corinth, one of the earliest, was rife with lawsuits, sexual sin, and quarrels over doctrine, idols, and food. Yet Paul, who loved and served the people there, could say that God had chosen *them* to shame and overturn the evil powers.¹

How can this be?

It’s easy enough to see why problems come in. Just consider the ideal of full loyalty to Christ. The first Adventists looked back to New Testament times and embraced this ideal themselves. But for any congregation, that ideal—that pledge to keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus—can be overwhelming. With a standard this high, you fall short. Even when you pray and work to reach the standard, you fall short. And inside the church there are always worrywarts—people more attentive to God’s commands than God’s grace—who poison the air by turning disappointment with shortfalls into constant fretting over them.

When this happens, anyone can live a jittery, unadventurous life.

Christians who are jittery look inward, obsessed with how they are doing and afraid of what God thinks. Then, in order to cope, they find fault with how others are doing. And when there is enough of all this, it saps everyone’s energy and patience, and the church turns into a community of worrywarts and faultfinders. A cloud of fear and resentment descends over everything.

Say that I myself am one of the worrywarts and faultfinders, and that I myself live under this cloud of fear and resentment. Then I will frown on others who fall short. Moreover, I will frown on those who, from a different vantage point, look beyond the gray to glimpse the sun. Sunk in my insecurity and self-doubt, I will look askance when visionaries see the world as a gift to enjoy, or give a bigger definition to discipleship than I do, or try daring initiatives, or move onto a bigger stage than I am used to. On the other hand, if I am one who looks past fear and resentment into the sunshine, while those around me stay under the cloud, I will begin to feel lonely and misunderstood. In the end, I will think the church is stifling.

Such an atmosphere can be no home for the adventurous. So the ones who are adventurous may leave—or the oppressiveness all around may gradually eat their own hearts out and make them unadventurous, too. Then they themselves will lose sight of how big a world God has made, and how many opportunities there are to be creative and to make a difference.

All this unhappiness and dysfunction results from salvation anxiety. But there is a cure for it, and the cure is a firm grasp on what we considered before, the good news that Jesus saves. Once you fully grasp this good news—and not least its message of forgiveness—the beloved community becomes, for all its faults, one of the great marvels of

divine grace. It becomes nothing less than...the new world on its way, a place where hope runs deeply, and imagination leaps ahead, like a beacon cutting through the dark. Stale sanctimony you will find—on earth it never goes away—but you will find the story of Jesus, too, and also find a people emboldened by that story to live their best and deepest dreams.

The risen Jesus, so Luke tells us, assured his disciples that they would become his “witnesses,” both at home and “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). By God’s grace, it wasn’t long until these witnesses had established a community of people who, with “glad and generous hearts,” were attempting to *be* Christ on earth (Acts 2:46). They were praising God together, taking care of one another, pursuing a ministry of healing deeds and words. All the while, they were growing—taking the story to the wider world, finding new members, enlarging the circle of compassion.

Later, Paul would say that the early Christians underwent baptism “into Christ Jesus.” By this rite, their old selves were “buried” and new selves “raised from the dead” so that, together with one another, they could “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:1–4). As Jesus, at his baptism, had come to see himself as God’s “beloved son,” so these new Christians came to see themselves as God’s beloved children.² And as Jesus, fortified by this love and aflame with new purpose, had sought to renew vision and heal humanity, so did these new Christians. They came to see, indeed, that in responding to the grace and peace of Christ, they would change the world. They would change it by keeping the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.

This they would *dare* to do. Their hope was a radical hope. Its focus was *practice*—sharing a way of life—and it galvanized their whole community to aspiration and adventure.

Practicing Community

Suzie is the nurse in *Wit*, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning play about a fifty-year-old English professor who is dying from ovarian cancer. One day, she brings a Popsicle into the room, and her patient gladly accepts half of it. Then, taking a seat on the commode by her patient’s bedside, the nurse tells this story:

“When I was a kid, we used to get these from a truck. The man would come around and ring his bell and we’d all run over. Then we’d sit on the curb and eat our Popsicles.”

She pauses. “Pretty profound, huh?”³

Yes it is.

Suzie’s story is profound because when you do something together with others, and do it repeatedly, the experience sticks with you, and it affects your whole outlook. It shapes how you see the world, how you feel about it, and how you carry out your daily life. That’s why, from the beginning, the beloved community put *shared practices* at the center of their lives. Doing things together, and doing them repeatedly, was a key strategy for keeping focused on God, and on God’s will and way.

Much of popular Christianity thinks of a “relationship with Christ” as a personal, almost a private, matter. The relationship is not so much a connection that you and others share as a connection that you have on your own. For people who think this way, it is more natural to speak of *my* Savior than to speak of *ours*; the words *I* and *me* roll off the tongue more easily than *we* and *us*.

This reflects the individualism of today’s Western culture, and its obsession with independence and personal choice. The most mature human beings, it is thought, are the ones who thrust off dependence on others for direction. Autonomy is the ideal. For Christians who accept all this uncritically, a relationship with God may seem to depend little, or not at all, on a relationship with other human beings.

But the first accounts of the church show men and women linked inseparably with one another. Autumn leaves piled together withstand the wind; solitary leaves do not. The first Christians understood this. Through constant connection, and through practices that reinforced it, they withstood the pressures that might otherwise have scattered them into insignificance. Together, they kept their memories alive; they resisted the dominant culture; they strengthened their resolve against indifference and barbarity. Together, they embodied (though imperfectly) the risen Christ, and became the vanguard for a new humanity.

At the same time, of course, all this was God’s doing. To use Paul’s language, they were what they were by the grace of God. They worked hard to be Christian, and yet were always aware of the gifts they’d received. Their very lives and effort were a gift, and they gave constant thanks and praise to God for what they had received.⁴

One occasion for thanksgiving and praise was the Sabbath, when routine and sweaty haste came to a stop, and the first Christians found time, together, for wonder and renewal. On Sabbath, work lost its power to oppress,

monotony its power to hypnotize. Now the first Christians could awake to a heightened sense of divine presence. They could hear the re-telling of their story, adjust their lives accordingly, feel the darkness tremble when they joined together in one song. Now they could renew their watchcare over one another, and find in the friendship of the faithful new energy for mission.

On Sabbath, in other words, they stopped so that they could begin again. They stopped so that, renewed by rest, they could go forth in the peace of Christ to love and serve the wider world.

It was the same when the first Christians broke bread. Often they did this together—one body, as Paul would say, with many members. And again the story was central. You took food in the company of others, and then, in a much-repeated ritual, you heard how Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, washed the disciples' feet and afterward shared bread and wine with them so they would always look backward with thanks and forward with hope.⁵

They were called, these first Christians, to live connected and illuminating lives, and so to *be* the earthly embodiment of Christ. If you took this to require flawlessness, it would be, of course, an impossible ideal. As for the first Christians, they acknowledged that humans are flawed and goodness fragile. But they also knew that when they fell short of goodness, and hurt someone, or were hurt, they had one another for healing.

All the way back to Abraham, the Hebrew people had pursued daunting ideals. Now, under Jesus' influence, forgiveness had taken center stage. Practicing forgiveness was how the church would deal with human imperfection. The church would meet failure with forgiveness. It would meet even egregious failure—even violence—with forgiveness. That is how it would offer new life in the face of brokenness, and keep alive the hope of reconciliation and renewal. Thus the church, though flawed, would embody God's point of view on earth, and be the place where God's true colors shine through on earth.

It was not that forgiveness would be offered willy-nilly. In Matthew 18, you find Jesus putting forgiveness at the forefront. Yet in that chapter, he also envisions a disciple community in which people watch over and correct one another. For enough refusal to listen, an offender can even lose, at least for the time being, the privilege of membership. But the point, always, is the "restoration of a rupture in the community." The point, always, is healing—healing

of broken people, healing of the broken church.⁶

In Jesus' vision for all this, the watchcare involves conversation—two or three or more considering what to do in the face of disagreement. How do you reach, how do you learn from, how if necessary do you correct the offending person or group? Thus, the point when you refine your understanding of Christian life is always *practical*: it is how you enhance—how you *improve*—the life and witness of the community.

The practice of conversation, then, was like remember-



ing the Sabbath or sharing the gospel meal. It was another way of keeping the community strong, another way to resist dysfunction and strengthen resolve and assure that God's true colors can shine through.

In the Adventism that grew up in response to what Ellen White called the "primitive godliness" of the early church, the Sabbath School came to be the occasion for this practice.⁷ Crisis or not, conversation would take place, and take place regularly. Being Adventist, after all, meant *becoming* Adventist—staying on the move, looking forward, always, to God's next transformation of shared life. Instead of feeling entirely at home with itself, the church would conduct a never-ending conversation.⁸ So it would guard against the ebbing of faithfulness. So it would make its journey, every week, into deeper understanding.

Never, when you follow the New Testament way, do you burrow into sheer solitude. You practice community. You do so by participating in the *practices* that reinforce community. You and others are thus connected—like

mountain climbers. And with the gift of shared strength, you become adventurous. You become adventurous enough to be an alternative to the commonplace, and even to be a revolution in the making.

Changing the World

In the year 390, a wealthy Christian woman named Fabiola, from the city of Rome, helped invent a new institution. She'd been through a divorce, but she didn't hole up inside her wounded self, didn't let the pain define her life.

Instead, she began attending to victims of disease and hunger in her city, victims the dominant pagan culture didn't really care about. Her teacher had been St. Jerome, and he said: "I have often seen her washing wounds which others—even men—could hardly bear to look at." In doing this, in giving "sufferers from the streets...all the attention of a nurse," she was founding...the hospital.

Organizations focused on the care of the vulnerable hadn't existed before Fabiola. Even the leading citizens of Rome lacked the right frame of mind, and emperors of the time, leaders among leading citizens, considered it their right to butcher and steal in order to expand and sustain imperial power. Pagans in general, both Roman and Greek, gave little attention to the vulnerable, and thought pity and mercy were pathological emotions. Plato, the brilliant philosopher, believed the best way to deal with beggars was to dump them outside the (ideal) boundaries of the community.

The first Christians, building on Jewish ideals of hospital-

ity, defied the heartlessness of the dominant culture. They cared about the poor as well as the rich, the unattractive as well as the good-looking, the powerless as well as the powerful. The hospitals that came into being with Fabiola and those who followed her drew circles large enough to include even people usually dismissed as undeserving.

Together, they were light—a beacon cutting through the dark. Today, institutions like this exist almost everywhere. But as the medical historian Roy Porter declares: "Christianity planted the hospital."⁹

Paul told the Corinthian Christians, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away" (2 Cor. 5:17). What he meant, it seems, is that a tiny filament of light can defy the darkness and bring new possibilities to view. A small number, even as few as one, can effect great change. So when a thoughtful few, joined to the church, cast off the jitters and begin to *resist* convention and actually to *be* the risen Christ on earth, the beauty of their holiness redeems the world.

Jesus had meant something like this when he told the disciples: "You are the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14). God's joyous few—the ones the book of Revelation calls the "remnant" (Rev. 14:12 KJV)—would somehow break the stranglehold of evil. And when, after Luther, the Radical Reformers objected to "Christendom," or the idea of church and society as one, they were saying that the church is the company of *committed*. You can't have a "Christian" nation, or a "Christian" civilization, where the mere fact of your birth makes you a believer. You can only have volunteer Christians who have chosen to be baptized into Christ, and whose old selves have been buried and new selves raised from the dead. Only then, does the beloved community become a "lantern of righteousness" against the dark monotony of harm and hurt. Only then does it become...a revolution in the making.¹⁰

Jews pioneered the idea of being a people who were "in but not of" the dominant, surrounding culture. It was always a costly experiment, a way of being that "required deep and unshakable conviction."¹¹ You had to have the courage to be different, to be the minority and not the majority. Jesus, himself a Jew, exemplified this courage. And the first Christians knew that anyone who would belong to a lantern community, anyone who would be true salt and true light, must exemplify it, too.

The reward of so doing is that *by being different you make a*





difference. Along with others, you are the tiny filament of light that defies the darkness. You find yourself in league with Fabiola and the inventors of the hospital. Or, to bring in a recent witness, you identify with Martin Luther King, who in both spirit and power lived at the margin of American society, yet was the key to the civil rights revolution. Or you look with pride on the Adventist pioneers of better health, who, also from the American margin, have made an ever stronger case for plant-based food and other forms of attention to bodily, as well as spiritual, well-being.

One twentieth-century giant among theologians with roots in the Radical Reformation was John Howard Yoder. "Social creativity," he wrote, "is a minority function." For him, the church was not only an alternative to business as usual, but also, by its example, a sign of hope and an architect of "restored humanity." In a sentence on the church as lovely and evocative as the dawn of day, he said: "The confessing people of God is the new world on its way."¹²

That is the ideal, or better (from a believer's standpoint), the reality: the beloved community is the new world on its way.

But when problems boil up in the church, how can this be plausible?

I have a friend who one day told my colleagues and me, at the college where I work, that hypocrisy "is bad, but the existence of hypocrisy is good." When we first heard this we were puzzled. But we came to see the point. If your ideals are so low a troglodyte can reach them, that's hardly wonderful, hardly a reason to stand tall. It's like saying you

have a moral vision and it's to keep out of jail, or stay sober at breakfast, or tell the truth for ten minutes. If you aspire to be way below average, you can say you're not a hypocrite, but so what?

When you think about it, you want ideals that stretch you so far you might not reach them. And from day one, that's been at the heart of the Hebrew response to God.

All the way back to Abraham, the Hebrew people have pursued daunting ideals, impossible dreams. A single family would bless all families? The church would be Christ on earth? A mere remnant would be a revolution in the making? Yes, that was the idea.

Life with this family, this remnant, was often underwhelming, disappointing, maddening. Still, the best people *believed*. It wasn't optimism that kept them going, it was *faith*. All that was good was God's. Their hope, however outlandish, was good, and like every ounce of effort they put in, and like their very lives, it was... God's. God's dream. God's gift. God's work.

The divine patience somehow reinforced this sense of things. As underwhelming, disappointing, and maddening as they might be, God would not give up on them. God was always ready to open another door to yet another beginning. And if God did not give up on them, they would not give up on God.

That patience, that readiness to forgive, came not only to define the idea of God, but also to define the ideal response to God. Saying Yes to God meant saying Yes to the people God had made. With Jesus, this sensibility took center stage. As God did not give up on you, you did not give up on others. Meeting failure with forgiveness was how to deal with human imperfection.

And that is why the faults of the beloved community do not doom its revolutionary project. It remains, though imperfectly, the embodiment of divine forgiveness, and just for this reason it can provide, despite the faults, a "facilitating environment," a framework, that is, for the development of trust and moral sensitivity.¹³ It can provide enough support, enough patience, and enough hope to nourish and sustain a Fabiola, a Martin Luther King, a band of health researchers at Loma Linda University.

What is more, the beloved community can provide enough of these to nourish and sustain... *us*, and, by its shared practices and outlandish hope, embolden *us* to live our best and deepest dreams, and actually to *be*, by God's grace, a revolution in the making. ■

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Notes and References

1. For the problems, see the first few chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In his first chapter, though, he can say (1 Cor. 1:28) that the Corinthian members have been called to shame the “strong” and “reduce to nothing things that are....” A few lines down (2:8)—here is a clue to what he means by the “things that are”—he speaks of the “rulers of this age” who have “crucified the Lord of glory.” Unless otherwise noted, scriptural quotes in this paper are from the NRSV.

2. See, for example, Romans 12:19 and 1 John 2:7.

3. Margaret Edson, *Wit* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), 66.

4. See 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10, 57; see, too, Chapter 12 for the sense of Christian life as a gift.

5. On the church as the body of Christ, see 1 Corinthians 12, especially verse 27. On footwashing, see John 13:1–12. For Paul's account of what came to be called the Lord's Supper, see 11:23–33.

6. I rely here on James William McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, 2d ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 1:225–27.

7. In *The Great Controversy*, 464, Ellen White associated such godliness with “apostolic times.” What happened then provided guidance for what happens now.

8. McClendon speaks from his Radical Reformation perspective, of “never-ending congregational conversation.” *Ethics*, 225.

9. For the story and the final quote, see Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York: Norton, 1998), 88. For the account of pagan sensibility, I depend also on Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), 212.

10. The “lantern” metaphor is from Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier, and is quoted in Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1981), 102.

11. James William McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 2:356.

12. John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1998), 315, 373. The words on social creativity are reminiscent of a famous quote—hard to pin down; it may be from a newspaper interview—attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

13. The quoted phrase appears in remarks on infancy by pediatrician Donald Winnicott. See Martha Nussbaum's discussion of Winnicott in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 185, 186, and 224–29.