

# MODERN REFORMATION

## Individualism's Not the Problem--Community's Not the Solution

Jonathan Leeman



### **Individualism is the problem. Community is the solution.**

That's what they are saying. First the philosophers, sociologists, political theorists, psychologists, and theologians were saying it. Now I hear pastors, church leaders, and impressionable young seminarians saying it. Individualism is what bedevils culture and church both; community is what will save them.

Last Thanksgiving I was wholly absorbed in the sweet potato casserole on my plate when the twenty-something sitting beside me, whom I had just met and who is working on his master of divinity at a conservative Reformed seminary, threw out that increasingly common line about traditional accounts of the gospel and conversion being "individualistic." I had to put my fork down and say something-and I love sweet potato casserole; you know, with the baked pecans, brown sugar, and butter?

I know what these kinds of statements are getting at, and to a point I'm sympathetic. But we need to take caution: the communitarian impulse *can* refashion how churches conceive of their mission, their life together, the gospel, even God himself. Much of the communitarian literature is helpful. But it *can* also misconstrue and mislead.

### **The Communitarian Story**

The communitarian story goes something like this: The Enlightenment brought us radical free agency and contractualism, both of which emerge out of a grandiose vision of the individual as autonomous and supreme, like Lady Liberty perched alone on Liberty Island, exalted. Yet this proud vision has merely yielded the "disengaged self." (1) In our day, this disengaged self probably lives in the suburbs, surrounds his house with a tall fence, has Gap and Banana Republic charge cards in his wallet, sends an annual check to Green Peace in exchange for a newsletter, and possesses several friends who look just like him ethically and economically. If this stock character of ours is a Christian, we'll assume those checks find their way instead to the nearby (within thirty miles) megachurch. We'll note that he's basically indifferent toward the denizens of downtown slums. And we'll shake our heads and wring our hands with dismay when every song on his praise-song soundtrack focuses on his own relationship with Jesus and the afterlife.

As this story continues, the demise of the Enlightenment has exposed the thin, self-centered, and self-deceived nature of such a man. Our suburban acquaintance is not as independent as he thinks he is. That's why he wears pre-washed jeans and Gap khakis, just like everyone else. (2) In these postmodern times, we've discovered that every self is socially constituted "all the way down." (3) Everything that is *me* wasn't originally *mine*, but belongs to the various communities I occupy. Then it becomes *mine*; then it becomes *me*. (4) Through language, "I" am an amalgamation of everyone around me, in one way or another. (5) Relationships therefore are all important. What's more, the now globalized globe is teaching us that no individual or individual truth is universal. All is perspective. And diversifying our perspectives in the eclecticism of community is the surest path to enrichment, beauty, justice, and peace.

### **The Relational Turn**

In the social sciences, this communitarian story results from what's sometimes called the "relational turn," according to which the formerly accidental, peripheral matter of relationship comes into the substantive center of human existence (ontology). (6) We are our relationships and cannot divorce ourselves from them without an identity crisis. (7)

In theology, too, the significance of relationships (the dialectic of I and Thou) reorients every category of systematic. (8) It's observed that God's very being is defined by three persons in community; that human persons bear a "relational analogy" to God's trinitarian community; that sin is the breaking of community; that Christ brings reconciliation through his work and the

embrace of the church community; and that the eschaton will sum up all things in our participation in the divine community.

Some of the titles in this theological genre tell all: *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (1981 in English); *Being As Communion* (1985); *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (1998); *The Social God and the Relational Self* (2001); *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imaged in Our Humanity* (2005); *Trinity in Human Community: Exploring Congregational Life in the Image of the Social Trinity* (2006); and so on.

## Impact on Churches

Several lessons for churches follow from the communitarian story, say its proponents. For starters, we must recover an understanding of the church as a community of people, not an impersonal institution. (9) The institutionalization of the church can be seen in everything from the centralization of authority in the bishop, to the commingling of church and state following Constantine, to the tangled mess of committees down at First Baptist, to the membership classes and packets of the megachurch. But if relationships are what constitute the church's essence, any structures that do exist should be organic, liquid, or natural (again, consider the titles: Organic Church, Organic Community, Liquid Church, or Natural Church Development).

Also, preaching should not be a monologue but a dialogue. Congregations should be encouraged to speak and learn from a multiplicity of viewpoints. (10)

Conversion should not so much be treated as a one-time event, because life within this community will lead to continual change and reformation. Better to speak of a conversation or at least a "continuing conversion," which like a conversation implies a continual openness to new perspectives. (11) *Semper reformandi*, right?

Central values or purposes should be emphasized, not exclusivistic boundaries (following "centered-set thinking" rather than "bounded-set thinking"). (12) Outsiders should feel embraced and encouraged to serve. (13) The old practices of membership and discipline hinder this kind of relational embrace and stop the conversation.

In general, the church's posture toward the world must be one of invitation, embrace, and the declaring of God's shalom in Christ, for "through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col. 1:20, NRSV). Any gospel that's fixated on my own salvation rather than God's kingdom work of restoring peace and justice to all of creation is "too small." (14) Jesus is not just about me; he's about the whole cosmos. I need to get over myself.

Ultimately, mission serves the purpose of communion. "Ultimately," says theologian Simon Chan, "all things are to be brought back into communion with the triune God. Communion is the ultimate end, not mission." (15) Ultimately, the mutual glorification project of Father and Son that we read about in the Gospel of John, by which they alternatively give and receive love and glory, extends to the church and then to all creation. "May they be one as we are one" (see John 17:20-26). The old hierarchies between male and female, insider and outsider, clergy and laity, must be abolished. And so, the picture of God as Lord gives way to the picture of God as Father, which then gives way to the picture of God as Friend. (16)

## Confusing Symptoms and Causes

No one writer that I'm aware of says precisely all this; but this constellation of ideas is increasingly common among academics and practitioners, evangelicals and post-evangelicals, Emergents and Calvinists. And the communitarian's story gets much right.

But I fear that its emphases-good emphases-sometimes become primary emphases and thereby confuse the symptoms for the root maladies, like pointing to a man in prison and deciding, "He's lonely because he's in prison," which is true, but which misses the point. He's lonely because he has committed a crime.

Ultimately, individualism is not the problem and community is not the solution, not directly. What then is the distinctive problem of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment culture and churches? And what's the solution? Let's consider the story again.

## The Real Problem: We Hate Authority

Communitarians and postmoderns usually begin their story with the move from pre-modernity to modernity just like I would. They acknowledge that it's a story about authority, whereby the external authority of church or tradition was replaced by the authority of one's own mind; hence the language of autonomous individualism (auto-nomos meaning "self-law"). Descartes' philosophical method, after all, begins with complete skepticism toward every external epistemological authority.

When communitarians and postmoderns come to critique this shift to modernity, however, they don't quite seek to undo it

because, well, we just can't go back to pre-modernity! (17) And they claim that Kant or others won't let them. Still, they don't like modernity's effects-atomism, radical skepticism, consumerism, and so on. They thus address the effects themselves while, ironically, refusing to address the more prickly issue of authority.

As the story continues, therefore, it's not *authority* they want to talk about, even though that's what got Descartes and everyone who followed into trouble. They just want to talk about *relationships*.

For instance, one theologian writes, "My contention is that the distinctive failures of our era derive from its failures of due relatedness to God." (18) Our problems are a matter of "due relatedness"? Well, that's sort of right. But is this how the apostle Paul or the prophet Jeremiah would have put it?: "Thus says the Lord, "I have observed a failure of due relatedness, O Israel."

The problem with the modern self is not merely that it's "unrelated." It's rebellious. Not just disengaged, but defiant. Not just independent, but insubordinate. Where Yahweh, the maker of heaven and earth, described himself to Moses as the self-defining, predicate-less "I am" (*ego sum* in the Vulgate), the ground of all reality, Descartes' method effectively shoved Yahweh aside, making his existence (and God's!) a predicate of his own thinking mind (*cogito ergo sum*). He established a philosophical method for asserting that we are like God, knowing good from evil. Descartes' move, like Adam's, did not merely break a relationship; it broke God's law or Word. The implications are not merely personal, but judicial. It's not just a friend who is cast off; it's a Lord and Judge. The philosophical methods we associate with modernity and postmodernity, in a sense, whisper the same line whispered by the snake in the Garden (Gen. 3:5). What the shift from pre-modernity to modernity signified, really, was that this satanic whisper gained a moral and philosophical credibility in the so-called Christian West (even if it had always been believed and practiced). In other words, the Enlightenment did not bring us radical free agency and contractualism. Genesis 3 did. The Enlightenment legitimized it.

If the distinctive failure of our era is in fact a failure of "due relatedness," then we will have to assign the magnificent weight of God's eternal Lordship and exquisite holiness to that flimsy little adjective "due." We have indeed failed to relate to God. Yet it's how we have failed to relate to him that counts. We have failed to obey him and those who would mediate his authority to us. We have failed to listen to his authoritative Word. We have failed to image his character and glory.

God is interested in a relationship with human beings, but it's *not* a relationship between two self-sovereigns-even a greater sovereign and a lesser sovereign. It's *not* a relationship of give and take, of mutuality, of reciprocity. It's *not* a perichoretic (mutually indwelling) dance, as some would put it. Rather, it's the relationship between an image-maker and an image, between a thing and the reflection of that thing, as it were, in a mirror. That's true today; that will remain true in the eschaton. (19) A *right* relationship between us and God occurs when we-like true mirrors, not carnival mirrors-reflect him and his glory rightly; when the lines and curves of our character reflect the lines and curves of his character (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 3:1-2). A biblical conception of relationship with God is therefore structured by his Lordship and authority-that we might image him and his glory rightly!

## Reorienting the Doctrine of Sin

Flattening these hierarchies subtly changes everything. Consider the doctrine of sin, for starters. Here's how one recent writer characterizes sin: "The wages of sin is death, because, if our life has its basis in our relationship to God and to other people and if these relationships are corrupted, our very life is threatened to its core." (20) That's true, but it doesn't go far enough.

The wages of sin is death not just because our sin breaks our relationship with God, who is the source of life; the wages of sin is death because we have broken his law. We have lied about his character by imaging him perversely, as does that wavy carnival mirror. In so doing, we have offended against his glorious, beautiful, holy, resplendent majesty. The wages of sin is death because God's glory is weighty and infinite, and we have fallen short of it. The wages of sin is death because God is worthy of all honor, worship, and praise, and we have blown him off. We are guilty and a payment is required.

## Reorienting the Doctrine of Christ's Work

Sin is more than a broken relationship, and salvation is more than a restored relationship. Sin is an offending against majesty, and salvation is a restoration to the adoration of majesty (21) -"having no other gods," in Moses' words; "loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength," in Jesus' words. This is why one Puritan prayer reads, "Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed, as in the greatness of the Person sinned against." (22) Part of being restored to the adoration of majesty is recognizing that our sins against him are grave indeed and worthy of his eternal wrath.

Yet when sin and guilt are downplayed, as in the communitarian conception, what becomes of Christ's atonement? Naturally, propitiation and a payment for guilt will seem superfluous. Instead, the atonement will be about the removal of shame and the restoration of relationship. (23) Individual culpability won't so much be the point. Structural breakdown is

what Christ's kingdom will be said to address.

## Reorienting the Doctrine of the Church

What I appreciate most about the communitarian thesis is its ability to crisply identify, well, the rampant individualism among Christians today. Christians today assume they are their own shepherds, and so we treat the church like consumers. Individuals join churches lightly and exit lightly, since doing so does not violate our sense of love and its obligations. We don't stop to weigh the consequences of our departure on others. We don't discuss the reasons for leaving with the pastors. We just go. We take our purchase back to the checkout counter. It's nothing personal. All in all, we ask little of others and give little in return.

What's tragic is, Christians who come and go from churches are merely mimicking so many pastors. A man comes for several years, hears of another opportunity, leaves, and thinks nothing of it. His understanding of love is devoid of any sense of long-term obligation to a flock.

Responding to all this, however, requires us to do more than stand up and give three cheers for community. More to the point, the New Testament does not ground the unity of Christ's body in theological anthropology. And it only briefly alludes to the doctrine of the Trinity as the ground of our unity (as in John 17). Rather, it grounds the unity of Christ's body in Christ's person and work! (24) In reconciling us to himself (Eph. 2:1-10), he also reconciled us to one another (Eph. 2:11-20).

Though I am a Baptist and a congregationalist by conviction, this is where my own tradition has leaned too far toward voluntaristic assumptions about life in the local church. The Christian life *must* be lived through the local church because that's what Christ has made us—members of his body. To claim that I belong to *the* church without belonging to *a* church is equivalent to claiming that I have been granted Christ's righteousness without seeking to put on that righteousness in ethical living. The imperative necessarily follows the indicative. We're called to submit to the authority and discipline of a local church because we have submitted to the authority and discipline of Christ (e.g., Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5; Heb. 13:17). Indeed, to say that Christians should belong to a local church merely because it's advantageous to living the Christian life misses the point that the church body is now part and parcel of a Christian's very identity. (25) An adopted son attends the family dinner table with his new brothers and sisters not just because it's good for him, but because that's what he *is*—a member of the family.

To a point then I can sympathize with the friend with whom I shared the Thanksgiving meal. We evangelicals can indeed construe the gospel and conversion too individualistically. Yet that doesn't mean the gospel and conversion are any less individual and personal. Rather, we fail to recognize the full implications of Christ's work. Union with Christ *means* union with his body and that union with the body must be put on, enacted, lived out with real, step-on-your-toes people. It's through the local church that Christians are able to display the glorious character of God in a way we cannot on our own (e.g., John 13:34-35).

## Reorienting the Doctrine of God

Implicit in the communitarian story, I believe, is a tendency toward a diminished God. Does mission serve the purpose of communion, as Simon Chan put it, or the purpose of worship, as John Piper has put it? The answer depends, again, on what kind of relationship we have in mind and what the ultimate object of God's love is—us or his own glory. One other theologian of a communitarian bent, amazingly, *seems* to place a man-centeredness right into the heart of his description of God's own glory when he defines God's glory as "God's love" for "the good of the creation." (26)

The Bible's call to obedience and submission before God's authority is rooted in his glory. The despising of authority, therefore, is finally a despising of his glory and majesty. In other words, identifying the real problem as our hatred of authority and not just individualism doesn't even push us far enough. The real problem, finally, is a hatred of God's majesty and worth.

## The Real Solution: Repentance

Western culture today is "individualistic," no doubt about it. But I believe there's a difference between a clinical-sounding sociologist's word like "individualistic" and a pulpit-pounding fundamentalist preacher's word like "disobedient" or "hates authority." But that's what individualism is. It's plain old disobedience to God. We won't get very far if we don't pull off these secular masks and call them by their old-fashioned, Sunday school-sounding names. Loneliness is not the problem. A refusal to live life on anyone else's terms is. Another way to put all this: we're not dealing with a relationship problem, but a worship problem.

The solution then is not community; it's repentance. The solution is a changing of heart and direction—in the individual! This repentance includes joining a community and making relationships. But it's joining a particular kind of community where self

is no longer sovereign and where one is called to obedience to the church as an expression of obedience to God. It's the joining of a community where God's Word and the worship of God are supreme in everything.

Entering into biblical church membership means submitting oneself to a body of relationships with authoritative structures, a body in which different members assume different roles even though together they constitute one body. What's more, all of those relationships together conspire to give worship and praise to God.

Most Christians don't think of themselves as repenting or, analogously, submitting when they join a church. Maybe they feel lonely and join the church for fellowship. Maybe they have considered the biblical arguments for church membership and become persuaded that it's the right thing to do. Maybe they've never thought about it at all and have just done what all the Christians they know do. But whatever their conscious experience, joining a church is fundamentally a matter of repentance and submission. It's not simply a matter of "joining" or "committing" or "due relatedness." It's certainly not a matter of joining some club with various membership privileges, as when one joins a country club. Insofar as the word "member" carries that connotation in Western minds, it's an unfortunate word to use. Still, it's a good word to use, because submitting to a local church and becoming a member is an external enactment of what it means to submit to Christ and become a member of his body. It's keeping the imperative of what Christ has accomplished in the indicative. Submitting to a local church on earth, in the language of Christian ethics, is *a becoming of what we are* in heaven.

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- 1 [ [Back](#) ] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1989), 143-58.
  - 2 [ [Back](#) ] Colin Gunton calls this the "homogenizing abolition of particularity," in *The One, The Three, and the Many* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 46.
  - 3 [ [Back](#) ] Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 11.
  - 4 [ [Back](#) ] Sandel, 55-59.
  - 5 [ [Back](#) ] Taylor, 36.
  - 6 [ [Back](#) ] F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 11-36.
  - 7 [ [Back](#) ] Sandel, p. 179; cf. Taylor, 27.
  - 8 [ [Back](#) ] See esp. F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology and Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).
  - 9 [ [Back](#) ] Much has been written on this topic. A good chapter-length introduction is in Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded edition (New York: Image Books, 2002), 39-54; for a book-length introduction, see Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); a Protestant version of the argument occurs in Colin Gunton, "The Church on Earth: The Roots of Community," in Colin E. Gunton and Daniel W. Hardy, *On Being the Church: Essays on the Christian Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 48-80.
  - 10 [ [Back](#) ] See O. Wesley Allen Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach* (WJK, 2005); Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Zondervan, 2005).
  - 11 [ [Back](#) ] See George R. Hunsberger, "Evangelical Conversion toward a Missional Ecclesiology," in *Evangelical Ecclesiology*, ed. John Stackhouse (Baker, 2003), 123-26; Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Eerdmans, 2000).
  - 12 [ [Back](#) ] See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Baker, 1994), 110-36.
  - 13 [ [Back](#) ] See Dan Kimball's story in this regard in *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 160-61.
  - 14 [ [Back](#) ] Hence, the theme for *Christianity Today's* 2008 Christian Vision Project is "Is Our Gospel Too Small?," to which the answer is apparently "yes." Go to <http://www.christianvisionproject.com>.
  - 15 [ [Back](#) ] See [http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/06/the\\_mission\\_of\\_the\\_trinity.html](http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2007/06/the_mission_of_the_trinity.html).
  - 16 [ [Back](#) ] Jürgen Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 114-21, esp. 118.
  - 17 [ [Back](#) ] For example, the famous missiologist whom many Emergents and missional writers build upon, David Bosch, writes, "It is futile to attempt nostalgically to return to a pre-Enlightenment worldview. It is not possible to 'unknow' what we have learned....The 'light' in the Enlightenment was real light and should not simply be discarded. What is needed, rather, is to realize that the Enlightenment paradigm has served its purpose; we should now move beyond it." In *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 273-74.
  - 18 [ [Back](#) ] Gunton, 38.
  - 19 [ [Back](#) ] Contra Moltmann, God's Lordship does not dissolve in the eschaton, because we will still be images, not image-makers.
  - 20 [ [Back](#) ] Tom Smail, *Like Father, Like Son: The Trinity Imagined in Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 238.
  - 21 [ [Back](#) ] Cf. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 39.
  - 22 [ [Back](#) ] From the prayer entitled "Humiliation" in *The Valley of Vision*, ed. Arthur Bennet (Banner of Truth, 2002 edition), 143.
  - 23 [ [Back](#) ] A number of the authors we've been mentioning could be referred to, such as Colin Gunton or Tom Smail. For a quick introduction to the argument and a response, see Steve Jeffrey, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sachs, *Pierced For Our Transgressions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 249-63.

24 [ [Back](#) ] Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 89-91.

25 [ [Back](#) ] Cf. Sandel, 148-50.

26 [ [Back](#) ] Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 62; also 39. I say "seems" because his statements are brief and could use further elaboration.

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