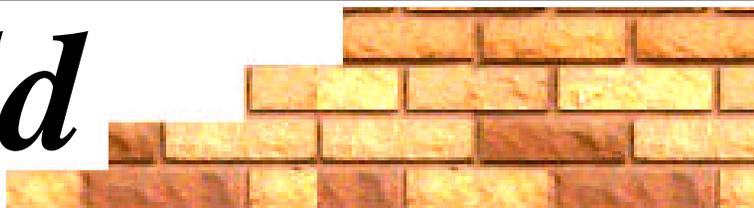


# Rebuild



*And they shall rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise up the former devastations, and they will repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)*

## Ministry: A Matter of Communion ... Not Career

*The following is an excerpt from Robin Maas' excellent book, Crucified Love: The Practice of Christian Perfection (Nashville, Abingdon Press). In this chapter (entitled "The Love of God and the Communion of the Saints"), Professor Maas makes the powerful and neglected point that ministry can only be "of God" to the degree that it is born from a love for Him and one another. Until we regain and enter into this perspective with the thrust of our lives, we will find that much of our "Christian" ministry is little more than a "noisy gong or a clanging symbol." Rebuild presents the following with the prayer that we come together and make music, and not noise.*



*Rebuild* is a bimonthly journal dedicated to the renewal of the Church through the restoration of Christian Community. If you know others who would enjoy *Rebuild*, let us know, and we would be glad to add them to our mailing list (although *Rebuild* is costly, there is no subscription fee). You can either subscribe, or terminate your subscription by contacting us via any of the following: *Phone:* 970-221-4847 / *E-mail:* rebuild@peakpeak.com / *Mailing Address:* *Rebuild*, 2136 Sheffield Drive, Fort Collins, CO., 80526. Those wishing to make tax deductible donations, can make checks payable to: "H.T.O.C.", memo: *Rebuild*. | (Fall, 1999)

### ***What Will You Be When You Grow Up?***

Do you remember how old you were the last time someone asked you, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" When I was a youngster in grammar school that question was always an important one, as it continued to be later in high school and college when I began to think not just about an occupation but of having some kind of "mission" in life. I couldn't have told you then why it was so important, but I sensed that it was. Whatever the answer we gave or received, it revealed something significant about our interests, values, and dreams. If you wanted to be friends with someone, you had to find out what they were going to be.

It's funny, but now that I teach adults ranging in age from their mid-twenties to retirement age, I find this question still being asked. Usually, the question is framed not in terms of a personal destiny in life or engagement in a transcendent cause but in terms of finding an appropriate form of ministry. "I don't know yet," they say, "what my ministry will be." The assumption is that sooner or

later they are going to find out—by graduation, they hope. The fact that most of them are in a Master of Divinity program and headed for ordination doesn't seem entirely to settle the issue for my students. To be honest, I was the same way when I entered seminary at the age of thirty-four. Rapidly approaching middle age, I had no clear sense of where this journey was going to lead me.

But that was only part of the problem. I think what really lies behind this question is the feeling most of us have that we have not yet really "grown up," because we have not yet achieved the sense of mastery and competence in life that we as children always assumed an adult must somehow have.

Grown-ups are supposed to be secure in their identity, unafraid, effective, purposeful. But for the most part, we are not like that. We keep clinging to the idea that around the next corner that elusive sense of clarity, purpose, and direction we crave will be there waiting for us. Things will suddenly all fall into place.

*continued inside ...*

This is especially true, I think, if what we do for an occupation is in response to a divine "call." A call is certainly supposed to settle things. Either God or the bishop tells us where we belong and that's that! So why is it that so many of us religious professionals are not sure that we've really landed—that we've found out what it is we're going to be, now that we are "grown up"?

connection to specifically ecclesial roles or actions of one sort or another may not be entirely helpful. *Ministry* has become such a popular and, I think, overworked term, I fear it is in danger of becoming quite meaningless. Further, I am uncomfortable when people assume that teaching in seminary constitutes "my ministry" or "my mission" in life. I never speak of it in those

the mastery or competence that I learned as a child to associate with adulthood—I doubt anyone ever does! It is because I have finally gotten just a glimpse of the mysterious connection between prayer and mission and the way in which both these realities are a consequence of what the church calls the communion of the saints.

**What's Your Ministry?**

Now, a parallel question: What does it mean to be in ministry, and why do so many people these days want to claim that word for what they do or hope to do?

***"To become part of the Body whose head is the Lord Jesus is to cast one's lot with perfect, crucified Love."***

The full and loving surrender of the self to God entails first of all the surrender of autonomy as the secular society understands it. Baptism is the sacrament of surrender. In the choice to die and rise with Christ, we consent to hand over that autonomous existence in exchange for a new status of total dependence and interdependence.

The "ministry of the laity" is currently a popular concept in most denominations. We speak of "lay ministries" or "lay caregiving." Usually this type of lay ministry is understood as roles performed in the local church setting—once thought to be the exclusive purview of the ordained minister. Increasingly, seminaries are enrolling students who do not anticipate being ordained but who, like myself, envisage themselves working for the church in some other capacity. Almost anything one now does as a church member is likely to be referred to as a ministry.

terms. For one thing, I keep finding more corners to turn. For another, I think it is theologically incorrect to collapse together the career choice to work full-time for the church with ministry or mission as if they were a single category. I have come to the realization that I may never know—at least this side of the grave— what my mission or purpose in life is in regard to the divine economy. And what is more, this is probably the way it should be.

To become part of the Body whose head is the Lord Jesus is to cast one's lot with perfect, crucified Love. Even to speak of being a "member" of this Body does not do real justice to the kind of union Paul is trying to express with this image. For many, the word *member* suggests a loose conglomeration of separate identities. It would be much better, said the late Bishop John A. T. Robinson, if we described ourselves as "membranes" of the body:

This rather free use of the term "ministry" and its common

This is not because I have failed to grow up or make hard choices. Nor is it because I have not yet achieved

*It is almost impossible to exaggerate the materialism and the crudity of Paul's doctrine of the Church as literally now the resurrection body of Christ. The language of*

"membership" of a body corporate has become so trite that the idea that the individual can be a "member" has ceased to be offensive. The force of Paul's words can today perhaps be got only by paraphrasing: "Ye are the body of Christ and severally membranes thereof" (I Cor. 12:27). The body that he has in mind is as concrete and as singular as the body of the Incarnation. His underlying conception is not of a supra-personal collective, but of a specific personal organism. He is not saying anything so weak as that the Church is a society with a common life and governor, but that its unity is that of a single physical entity: disunion is dismemberment.<sup>1</sup>

It is in the death and resurrection of Christ—which baptism permits us to share—that separate selves, even warring races, become "one" (meaning a *single*) new entity. This is what Paul means when he speaks of Christ ending the enmity between Jew and Gentile.

*For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the Law. This was to create one single New Man in himself out of the two of them and by restoring peace*

<sup>1</sup> John A. T. Robinson, *The Body* (1952; reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 51

*through the cross, to unite them both in a single Body and reconcile them with God. In his own person he killed the hostility. Later he came to bring the good news of peace, peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near at hand. Through him, both of us have in the one Spirit our way to come to the Father.* (Ephesians 2:14-18, emphasis mine).

Until relatively recently, I always thought of the "new creation in Christ" as having been a renewed individual. This is a typically modern and especially Western bias that I brought to the passage. The New English Bible helps to perpetuate this misreading when it speaks of the creation of one new "humanity" by

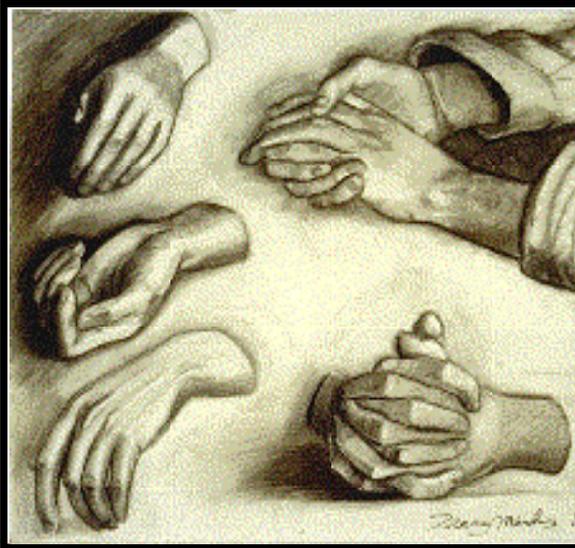
intimate than anything I ever dreamed of.

Speaking of this body to the church at Corinth, Paul clarifies what baptism means for our identity. The body is not, he claims, to be identified with any one of its many parts. If the foot were to say, "I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the body," would that mean that it stopped being part of the body? If the ear were to say, "I am not an eye, and so I do not belong to the body," would that mean that it was not a part of that body? If your whole body was just one eye, how would you hear anything? If it was just one ear, how would you smell anything? (Cor. 12:14-17)

This means a great deal more than that we simply "need" one another—that we all have different gifts to share, different strengths and weaknesses—though of course this is true. What it means is that my identity depends on *yours*. It means that I cannot fully be what I am called to be—namely, a new creature in Christ—unless you too are transformed.

I cannot stand alone as an eye, an ear, a hand, or a foot. I have neither

identity nor function apart from the operation of the whole. And whatever affects one part of the Body, for good or for ill, affects me in precisely the same way. Such is the meaning of Christian communion or what tradition calls the communion of saints.



the act of divine reconciliation. But such a notion is, I am convinced, quite foreign to what Paul was talking about.

His vision entails a union much more

The ethical implications of this vision of church are profound and very difficult to swallow. Most of us do not really think in these terms. If we did, we could never say things like, "That may be true—or right—for you, but not for me." We could not imagine even the possibility of "doing our own thing." As parts (membranes) of a single organic entity, we cannot act in isolation, even if we wanted to. What is true or good for me must be true and good for my fellow Christian. If it is not, it is *neither true nor good*. The command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves can only be correctly understood in the light of this kind of intimate union in which the future and fate of one is inextricably linked to the future and fate of the other.

As an illustration, consider the by now commonly accepted phenomenon of divorce as the solution to a troubled marriage. The world around us claims that the decision to divorce must be an individual choice made on the basis of what is best for the individual. Personal happiness and satisfaction are primary goods in American society. (Doesn't the Constitution ensure our right to pursue happiness?) I do not know whether divorce is as frequent within the church as it is without it [*Editor's note: It is slightly higher!*], but I know it is an increasingly common occurrence; and from what I can see, the basis on which the decision to divorce is most often made by Christians remains the issue of *individual* happiness and well-being.

Perhaps it is true that the divorce of a Christian couple does bring a degree of happiness and relief to at least one, if not both, of the persons

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another...”***

involved. But what does it do to the community? Does the fracturing of the marriage bring happiness and relief to the Body? Almost never. It brings pain, disappointment, discouragement, and scandal. In this way the fracturing of the family unit becomes a wound inflicted on the larger Body.

Yet how many Christians would understand what we were talking about if we were to suggest that perhaps they should reconsider their decision because of the impact it would have on the church? How many would consider valid this

claim on their loyalty and commitment?

For the same reason that a Christian cannot legitimately speak of "doing my own thing," it is misleading for the individual Christian to speak of my ministry or my mission.

There can only be one mission in which we as members of the Body are privileged to participate in some very small and partial way. The one mission in which we participate is the mission, the "sending," of God by *God*.

God the Father sends God the Son for the healing of the world and God the Spirit in the name of the Son for the sanctification of the world. Healing and holiness are the mission of God. Healing for the sake of holiness and holiness for the sake of consummation — union.

Well then, in what sense does God send us? Only in the sense that we are *in Christ*—only so far as we are functioning members (membranes) of that Body in communion with one another are we sent. God does not say, "I give you this particular mission and somebody else a different one." The mission is always the same. The agenda and the task belong to God. We are involved only if we belong to God—if we have said yes to the invitation to sell all that we have and follow Christ.

What practical difference does it make to start thinking in these terms? Suppose we no longer speak of “my” ministry or mission. That doesn’t change the reality that we are sent to different places to do different kinds of things: preach, teach, witness in the workplace, evangelize, administer, or heal. That doesn’t change the fact that some of us still don’t know what we want to do when we grow up!

On the face of it, nothing may change; but in reality, once this surrender of self has occurred — when we do in fact belong to God and live *in Christ*—then everything is as Paul says it will be: new. In this first place, recognizing that the mission is God’s and not

ours removes an enormous weight from our shoulders. We do not have to decide what our mission will be, when it will be, or how it will be. It simply will be. In the second place, once we begin to understand what it means to be a “membrane” in the Body of Christ, we will worry less about who is being served by means of us. We will begin to see that each small prayer we pray or act we perform is having an effect—usually a hidden one—on the entire Body. We are not free to choose which part of the body our efforts will

benefit. All benefit by our faithfulness; all suffer in our defection. By the same token, we will perhaps never know the extent to which our own burdens have been eased by the prayers of the saints—those here below and those in glory.

The fundamental insight here about



the essential connection between mission (*missio*) and communion (*communio*) is one that is often ignored or lost sight of: Although it is the sending of God that restores communion, it is communion that allows us to participate in the sending of God. For us, *communion precedes mission*. Our involvement in the sending of God presupposes our union with God and with one another. The union is certainly a union of wills. We must intend what God intends. But if Paul was right, it is more than a union of wills; it is an organic, in

some sense, a physical or substantial union as well. Just as husband and wife become “one flesh” in the act of union, so the individual submitting to baptism undergoes a change *in being* and is “substantially” joined to the Body of crucified Love.

If baptism is the sacrament of

surrender, then surely eucharist is the sacrament of sending. In consuming the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are consummating that substantial union with him. We are becoming one flesh and in that act of unity, our destiny is sealed. Where he is, we must be; where he goes, we must go. We do not carry him with us. He carries us with him. What he

unites himself with becomes a part of us. What he chooses for himself we receive.

In some cases—especially when mission is interpreted specifically as support for particular causes—it becomes a source of contention or frustration and burnout.

My conviction is that this contention, frustration, and burnout are the consequence of the tendency to separate mission from communion. The most

common expression of this unfortunate separation is the simplistic equating of mission with social action instead of with the action of grace. If mission is social action, then mission is something *we* do. National boards and local church councils make decisions about what "their" mission will be. Sermons are preached admonishing the laity to "get involved." Funds are raised, programs are planned and executed. In some cases, genuine social improvement results. Most often, the problems do not go away, despite persistent efforts and sometimes sacrificial commitments of time and energy.

Another expression of this separation of communion and mission comes in the very common division made between prayer and action. How many sermons have I heard preached to the effect that we can't just "pray" about something but must take action!

Such exhortations betray a very low view of the efficacy of prayer, an inability to trust the One to whom prayer is directed. Prayer is always, if it is anything at all, an affirmation of trust in the willingness and ability of God to act.

When we separate prayer and action, we are claiming *for ourselves* the primary power to act, to heal, to reconcile. If there is only one mission and that mission is the sending of God by God, then prayer is not something we do "in addition;"

prayer, as the basis for our union with God, it is the *primary* means by which we participate in the sending of God. This is especially true in the case of liturgical prayer, where the Body represents its unity and solidarity especially in the eucharist. But it is true, too, of private and

***Perfect love  
is ultimately  
a communal  
project,  
something  
that we  
come to  
together ...***

contemplative prayer. There are in the universal church religious communities of contemplative men and women whose lives are devoted exclusively to prayer. Their prayers, which are offered on our behalf, are part of the sending of God by God for the healing of the world.

The separation of mission from communion also tends to focus our attention on the results of our efforts. Action that does not yield visible or measurable results is seen as ineffectual, and this leads to discouragement and burnout.

Consider what happened when God sent God for the healing of the world: "He was in the world / that had its being through him, / and the world did not know him. / He came to his own domain / and his own people did not accept him" (John 1:10-11).

On the face of it, the actions of Jesus as a man were ineffectual; his mission failed. The miracle of grace we call the Resurrection was entirely a work of God and none of the events of Jesus' earthly ministry, wonderful as they were, would be remembered today were it not for the Resurrection.

What right do we have, then, to demand an immediate return on our investments of love? How do we know that what appears as a failure in our eyes has contributed nothing to God's purposes? If our mission, our ministry, is the outcome of communion—of prayer—then it is not ours but God's, and we can trust that the divine purposes are being served, even when they remain entirely hidden to us. Might it not be possible that the prayers we pray and the sacrifices we make in our efforts to heal one particular hurt are applied by God to something entirely different? And isn't it possible that God can do something with our personal suffering, our sense of uselessness and ineffectiveness? Are we equally willing to be "laid aside" for God as well as "employed"? Are we ready to be "empty" as well as "full"?

If union with God is the goal of Christian perfection, then the means to that end is the communion of the saints. We cannot by our own power ever love enough or find in our own resources sufficient strength of will to resist the attraction of sin.

The elusive vision of competent maturity that kept us pushing forward when we were children is ultimately a cheat. It teases us into believing that the source of that competence and security should reside in us, and that there is something wrong with us if it doesn't. Perfect love is ultimately a communal project, something that we come to together because we are all one Body.

On the night he was betrayed, knowing that when the shepherd was gone the sheep would be scattered, Jesus prayed to the One who had sent him on behalf of his disciples that they might remain in communion with one another:

*Now at last they know that all you have given me comes indeed from you; for I have given them the teaching you gave to me, and they have truly accepted this, that I came from you, and have believed that it was you who sent me. I pray for them; I am not praying for the world but for those you have given me, because they belong to you: all I have is yours and all you have is mine, and in them I am glorified.*

*I am not in the world any longer, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us. (John 17:7-11)*

The bond of their unity, he told them, would be love. His legacy to them, therefore, was a commandment to love. The command to love their neighbor as they loved themselves they knew already. Each one had learned it in the bosom of his family. But this final commandment from their Lord was new: "I give you a new commandment," Jesus said. "Love one another; / just as I have loved you, / you also must love one another." John 13:34).

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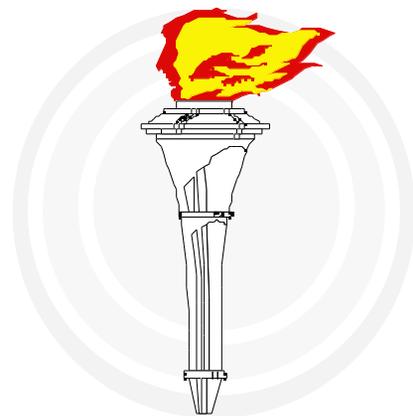
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Professor Robin Maas teaches at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., and is also the author of *Living Hope: Baptism and the Cost of Christian Witness: A Theological Reflection on 1 Peter* (Abingdon, 1999).

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***Do You Want to Find Out More About Intentional Christian Community...?***



One of the chief purposes of *Rebuild Journal* is to encourage men and women of God to rediscover the sacred call to live in Covenant love and honor with one another. If you believe the Lord may be calling you to take a closer look at intentional

Christian Community, and would like to find out more, please feel free to contact us. We are always glad to help any who are seeking clarity on this most important of matters.

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Rev. Jordan Bajis, the current editor of *Rebuild Journal*, is also the pastor of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. For the last 20 years Jordan has sought to encourage the Church to rediscover her Covenant foundations through serving as missionary, pastor, author, and lecturer.

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