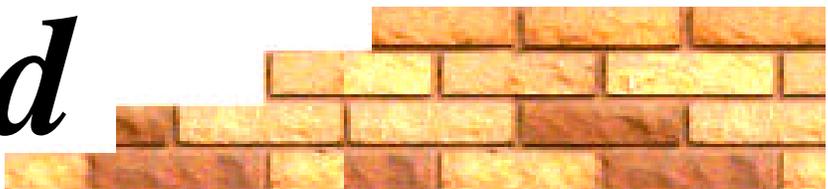


# Rebuild



*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)*

## What on Earth is the Church?

*The following is an edited excerpt from Rev. Kevin Giles' book, What On Earth is the Church? (InterVarsity Press). Although you will need to get your brain ready for a little workout (this will get a bit "theological" at times) it will be worth the brain sweat. His conclusions about the Church are radical to our Western ears (the message of the New Testament rarely can find a comfortable seat in our culture). For example, Rev. Giles challenges the idea of the Church simply being a collection of individuals. He makes the case that the Bible had no place for such an individualistic concept of Church; those living in Biblical times saw their fundamental identity as rooted within a People, not within one's private psyche. (The Christian people of*

*New Testament times could point to their congregations and say, "If you want to know who I am, look at my Community [Church]." How many of us could say that today?) He concludes his observations with the assertion that should challenge most Americans' ideas of both what it means to "be saved" as well as what it means to be Church: "To suggest that the Bible is ultimately about individual salvation, or that the church is but a local assembly of individuals ... introduces ideas alien to biblical thinking."*

*Read on and see if you agree.*

### The Church as Congregation

In Catholic theology, the word 'church' invariably calls to mind first of all the whole company of the faithful, but in much Protestant theology the same term calls to mind first of all the local community of believers. In fact, in a not insignificant strand of Protestant theology, the congregation is the church manifested in a local setting, and no other structured group of believers on earth should rightly be called 'church'. This fundamental conception of the

church finds its origins in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist tradition.<sup>1</sup>

Today it is held by many Baptists, most Pentecostals, and most of the Brethren - along with those who belong to the independent churches that are such a common feature of American life. Yet besides these groups where congregationalism is explicitly endorsed, this understanding of the church is very common in the Protestant mainline churches.

Usually those who hold this view argue that all the universal uses of the word *ekklesia*/church in the New Testament refer to believers generally, on earth and in heaven, but not to what is commonly called a denomination.

In the congregational ecclesiology, the thought that the church is basically a locally specific 'aggregation' of believers who have decided to form a

*continued inside ...*

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church, or to belong to it, is invariably close at hand. This individualistic way of thinking is one serious flaw in this conception of the church, as the New Testament is not predicated on such a view of life. Those who suggest this, or base their ecclesiology on this premise, are mistaken - for in the ancient world, communal thinking was pervasive.

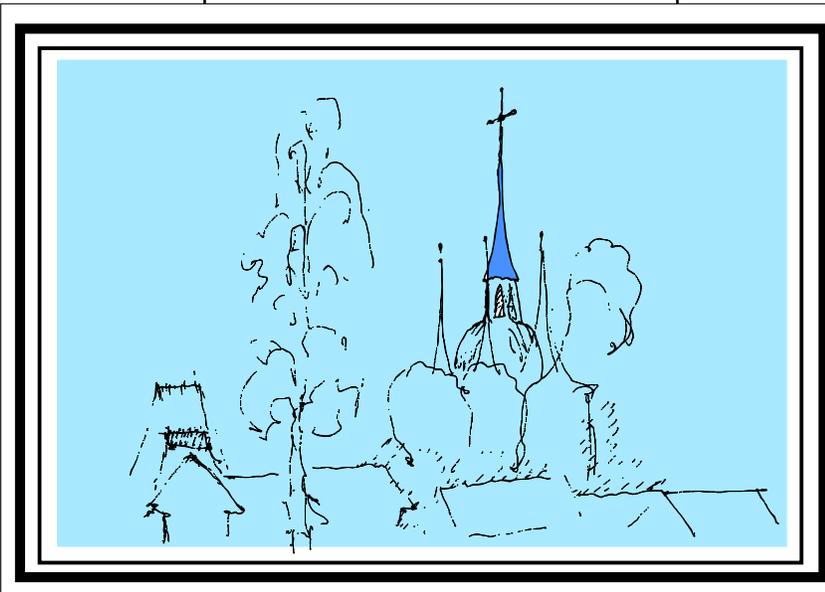
### The Church, The Christian Community

... [W]e now suggest that the best solution to the quest for the fundamental church concept, under which all other titles and descriptions of the church can be subsumed, is 'the Christian community'.

In the Vatican II discussions on the church there is nothing specifically said about the church as the Christian community, although communal ideas are present; however, in the subsequent thirty years, the church, defined as *koinonia* in Greek, or as *communio* in Latin, has become the most important category in Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

The Greek noun *koinonia* is found nineteen times in the New Testa-

ment, thirteen of these being in the Pauline epistles, four in 1 John, and one each in Acts and Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> It is often translated 'fellowship', but whereas the English word brings to mind first of all convivial relationships, the Greek carries the meaning of 'participation' or 'to share in'. It is built on a root that means 'common',



and it is used to denote many kinds of sharing: sharing with others in suffering (2 Cor. 1.7; Phil. 3.10), in giving money or possessions (Rom. 15.26; 2 Cor. 8.4, 9.13), in the gospel (Phil. 1.5), in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10.6), etc. The uses with the most ecclesiological content are found in the four examples in 1 John 1:2-3, 6-7. These passages speak of the fellowship we have 'with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ', and of the fellowship we have with one another as believers. ... As Christians, we are related to Christ as we share in his divine life and to one another through our common participation in the

Spirit. The word is thus used of the relationships that constitute the Christian community, the church - but, we add, never of the social reality thereby created.

Yet having noted how the word *koinonia* is used in the New Testament, it must be added that in ecumenical literature the word is most commonly taken as a *concept* that speaks of what we participate in as Christians. This is a much broader matter. It is argued that this idea is also alluded to, for example, by the Pauline 'in Christ' and 'with Christ' terminology, the body of Christ metaphor, and in the Johannine vine and the branches imagery, 'the abiding in'

symbolism, and in the teaching on the believer as being 'one' with Christ and 'one' with other believers.<sup>3</sup> This reminds us yet again that any concept is more comprehensive than any one word. In this conceptual use of the word *koinonia*, there can be no question that the church as a concrete social reality comes into view - for many of the terms and metaphors subsumed under this category are ecclesiological in nature.

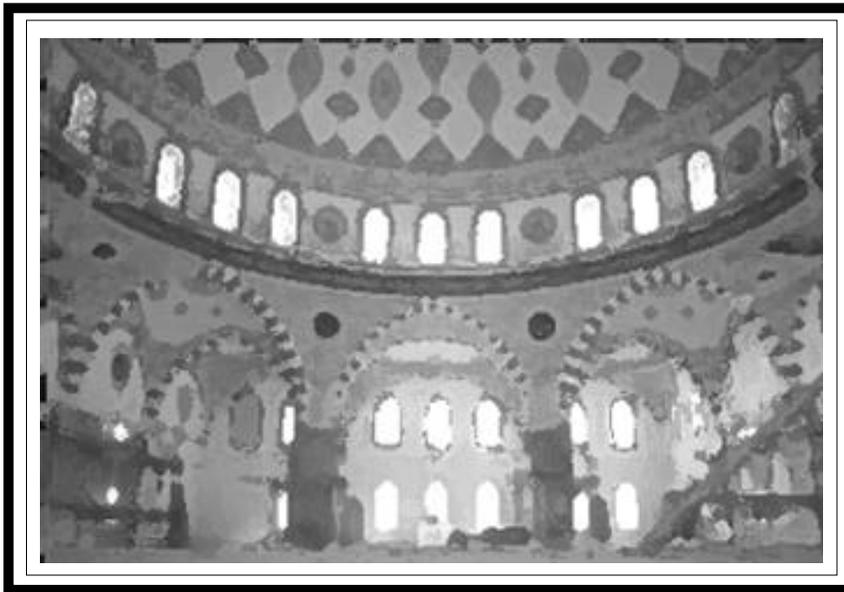
The Latin *communio* is an acceptable translation of this New Testament

word *koinonia*, for—like the Greek—its root alludes to that which is held in common, but the Greek word could also be translated equally well by the Latin *participatio* (participation). The problem, and the benefits, of adopting the translation *communio* is that, unlike the Greek noun it translates, it has both abstract and concrete force. It can be used to speak of the relationship that Christians have with Christ and with each other, and of the social reality called the church. In the latter case, *communio* (communion) is used as a synonym of *communitas* (community).<sup>4</sup>

We see this usage in the Apostle's Creed, in the words 'I believe in . . . the communion of saints', which stands in apposition to the clause 'one holy, catholic church'.<sup>5</sup> However, *communio* has yet a third meaning. It is also a term to speak of the Eucharist - or, to be more exact, of receiving the elements. In this it follows Pauline usage of the word *koinonia* (1 Cor. 10.16).

All three meanings of the word *communio* are legitimate, but only the meaning *communitas/commu-*

*nity* has promise as a fundamental church concept. This meaning does not reflect - the Greek word *koinonia*, but rather - as we will see in due course - the more theologically developed Christian meaning of the word *ekklesia/church*. Luther clearly saw this, for he insisted that



the right translation for the Greek *ekklesia* was the German word *Gemeinde*, which is best rendered into English as 'community'.<sup>6</sup> In this century, Karl Barth has followed him by consistently translating *ekklesia* by *Gemeinde*, which in the English text of the *Church Dogmatics*<sup>7</sup> becomes 'community'. Furthermore, Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians, in writing or speaking about the church, almost invariably come to identify this reality as the Christian community.

It is our argument that the concept "the Christian community" is the reality implied by the more developed uses of the word *ekklesia/church*. This expression profoundly captures the essence of *our* communal existence in Christ...

The strength of this definition of the concept of the church is that it reflects the basic corporate thought of the Bible, which is given new direction and new dimensions through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is a reminder that God's work in history, as it is presented in the biblical drama, involves the gathering

together of a people who are united to him and to each other. This has been admirably underlined in Paul D. Hanson's important book, *The People Called*, which traces "the growth of the notion of community over the entire history of the Bible".<sup>8</sup> In the Old Testament, God reveals himself to the nation Israel, who are chosen as his own people, but who fail time and again in their calling to be a holy people and a witness to the nations, so that in the end the prophets look to the gathering together of a holy remnant and the making of a new covenant. In various ways, the

New Testament sees these prophecies coming to pass in Christ, who gathers together the holy remnant and inaugurates the new covenant, and the new covenant community. From the beginning, this community is given form by incipient institutional structures; St. Paul argues that it is nothing less than the body of Christ, and gradually it is perceived that those who belong to this community are the true people of God. They have supplanted the Jews. There is but one Christian community, and wherever this is found, Christians form local worshipping communities to express their oneness in Christ and to encourage one another.

In coming to study the New Testament, the matter of chief interest will be the communal thinking of Jesus and the apostolic writers, and its outworking in the life of those who form this new community.

**Communalism  
Versus  
Individualism**

Why, it might be asked, has this communal understanding of the church so often been missed, or minimized, if it is so basic to the New

Testament? The answer to this question, to a large degree, depends on the age in which it is asked, but why this has been so for well over a hundred years is clear. Modern Western culture is thoroughly individualistic, and theologians have all too often read the New Testament in the light of their own cultural experience. They have

individual. Surprisingly, the two groups most guilty of this misreading of the Bible are conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists - who so often claim their theology is based solely on the Bible- and theologically liberal Christians, who unashamedly interpret their faith in terms of the prevailing culture.<sup>10</sup>



In the ancient world, the cultural setting of both Old and New Testaments, and still in those parts of the world less influenced by Western individualism, the wider community is always more important than the individual, or even the individual family unit, the nuclear family. In this situation, people find their identity in relation to, and as part of, an interconnected social world. The following are the more important communal identity markers:<sup>11</sup>

1) *The extended family or clan.* In a traditional culture, the ‘family’ to which one belongs is of most importance. The nuclear family is but a unit within this larger grouping. Thus in the Old Testament the word most commonly translated ‘family’ (Hebrew, *mispaha*) normally refers to a tribe or a clan, and in the New Testament, the Greek word *patria*, which can be translated by the word ‘family’, only ap-

imagined Jesus and Paul to be evangelists like Billy Graham, calling on people to make a personal and individual response of faith, and suggested that the church is where they will get help in living out their Christian life.<sup>9</sup> This church is, of course, the local church as a voluntary association. The wider church is of no interest, because it in no way helps the

‘family’ to which one belongs is of most importance. The nuclear family is but a unit within this larger grouping. Thus in the Old Testament the word most commonly translated ‘family’ (Hebrew, *mispaha*) normally refers to a tribe or a clan, and in the New Testament, the Greek word *patria*, which can be translated by the word ‘family’, only ap-

pears three times (Luke 2.4; Acts 3.25; Eph. 3.15), and in each case refers to lineage or extended family.

2) **Place of origin.** The town or city of birth (Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus) is also of great importance. It is a fundamental personal identity marker, but it can also bestow honour (Tarsus, no mean city), or question it ('Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'), depending on the public perception of the place.

3) **Nationality.** One's country - or, more importantly, what we call today ethnicity - was also highly significant. According to this category, people were stereotyped as Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Barbarians, etc.

4) **Religion or sect.** In the ancient world and in traditional societies today, religion is of such importance that it is hard for modern secularized Westerners to appreciate even dimly its social impact. The religion or sect (taken as a sub-group of the parent religion) of which one is a part determines much of life, and places the individual in a special relationship with all others of the same religion.

It is against the backdrop of this social world where people are identified by others, and identify themselves by the communal solidarities to which they belong, that the New Testament must be set. Jesus and all the New Testament writers would not have understood modern individualism. For them, the individual was al-

ways part of a larger social world and this social world was primary. To become a follower of Jesus by necessity meant joining a community, becoming part of a new spiritual family.

In English, the word 'community' is built on the word 'common'. Thus by inference a community is any group of people who hold certain



things in common.<sup>12</sup> What is common may be the most personal of relationships such as in a nuclear family, or something less personal such as involvement in a common locality or pursuit, or simply national identity - 'I belong to the Australian community'. Yet what differentiates modern attitudes to community and ancient attitudes is that for the former, communal allegiance as a general rule takes second place to individual self-realization, rights, and freedoms. In the latter, the reverse is true. Many contemporary social commentators point out that modern individualism is a novel doctrine, inherently deceptive, and inimical to the ultimate well-being of the person.<sup>13</sup> Robert Bellah, in his book *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*,

highlights its deceptive powers. He says:

There are truths we do not see when we adopt the language of radical individualism. We find ourselves not independently of other people and institutions but through them. We never get to the bottom of ourselves on our own. We discover who we are face to face and side by side with others in work, love, and learning. All of our activity

goes on in relationships, groups, associations, and communities ordered by institutional structures and interpreted by cultural patterns of meaning.... Finally, we are not simply ends in ourselves, either as individuals or as a society. We are parts of a larger whole that we can neither forget nor imagine in our own image without paying a high price.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to our modern Western way of thinking, the Bible is predicated on the belief that human beings at every level are bound together in communities of various sorts. To suggest that the Bible is ultimately about individual salvation,



New Testament Context	Modern American Context
<p><b>Cultural Perspective (One in the Many):</b> Identity is realized in relationship with the greater community - family, clan, town of birth, nationality, religious environment. No one “exists” alone.</p>	<p><b>Cultural Perspective (One Alone):</b> Identity is “discovered” by separating oneself from others, defined through education, career, wealth, performance, and how one “feels” about oneself...</p>
<p><b>View of Conversion (Covenant Based):</b> One joins him/herself to Christ and thus accepts the implications of His Covenant, <i>binding-fettering</i> (translation of <i>covenant</i> ) oneself to God &amp; His People.</p>	<p><b>View of Conversion (Individualistic, subjective experience):</b> One makes a private “decision” for Christ with no corresponding commitment to a particular group of Christian People.</p>
<p><b>Profile of Christian Life:</b> Centering one’s life and identity around living in Covenant love and loyalty (and expressing and experiencing this committed love in Eucharist, sharing, study and application of God’s word, and lives of prayer, and service).</p>	<p><b>Profile of Christian Life:</b> “Attend” church services, Bible studies, “volunteer” for ministry, “donate” some money to the church, but, in the main, center one’s attention on “getting ahead” and/or maintaining the American way of life for one’s self and his/her nuclear family.</p>
<p><b>Purpose - Vision:</b> To reflect the manner of God’s Life, the Kingdom of God; living in relationships of love where one gives and receives each others’ lives in Communion with the Holy Spirit. Being the Gospel.</p>	<p><b>Purpose - Vision:</b> Anything from “doing something great for God” to simply “raising a family,” and trying to live a basically moral life – nothing significantly different from what most moral non-believers aspire to.</p>
<p>Adapted from <i>The Bible and Church In Context, Rebuild</i> (12/96)</p>	



or that the church is but a local assembly of individuals who are bound together only by their personal associations, or that each individual congregation is in no profound way linked with other congregations, introduces ideas alien to biblical thinking. Those who suggest such things reflect their own cultural values, not the values of the biblical writers.

<sup>1</sup> So P.T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1912).

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous studies on the uses and meaning of this word - the most recent to hand being J. Reuman, 'Koinonia in scripture: Survey of the Biblical Texts', unpublished paper WCC Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Spain, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Much more could be said on this, but see the useful

discussion in Avis, *Christians in Communion*, pp. 14-30.

<sup>4</sup> In medieval Latin, *communio* can be used as a synonym of *communitas*. See C. Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, vol. 2 (Niort, 1893), p. 452.

<sup>5</sup> On this, see the comment by Brown, 'Koinonia', pp. 155-6, and ns. 5 and 6; and in more detail, J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, Longman, 1972), pp. 388-97.

<sup>6</sup> See Luther's discussion of this matter in T. G. Tappert (trans.), *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg, 1959), pp. 416-17.

<sup>7</sup> Published in Edinburgh by T. & T. Clark, vol. 4, 1956, pp. 653-701.

<sup>8</sup> Published in San Francisco by Harper & Row, 1987, p.6.

<sup>9</sup> No contemporary, competent New Testament scholar would endorse this picture. It is agreed that Jesus and Paul see their work as the gathering of the elect people of God of the last days. There is an inherent communal goal to their ministry.

<sup>10</sup> Lohfink, *Jesus and community*, pp. 1-6, argues that modern individualism is the greatest obstacle to be overcome by present-day exegetes who want to understand what the New

Testament says about the church.

<sup>11</sup> On what follows, see B. J. Malina and J. H. Neyrey, 'First Century Personality: Dyadic, not Individualistic', in J. H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Massachusetts, Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 67-96.

<sup>12</sup> The word 'community' is an important term in the social sciences, but with no one fixed meaning; one writer gives 94 definitions. D. and J. Jary, *Collins Dictionary of Sociology* (Glasgow, HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 97-9, say the term has 'both descriptive and prescriptive connotations in popular and academic usage'. Yet despite debate about the term, three broad meanings can be identified in the sociological literature. The first concerns geographical location; a community is a group of people in a bounded area. The second understands community to refer primarily to a network of social relationships. And the third assumes that a community is a group of people with some quality of relationship with one another.

<sup>13</sup> See the discussion in S. J. Grentz, *Revisoning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1993), pp. 148-62.

<sup>14</sup> R. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, University of California, 1985), p. 84.

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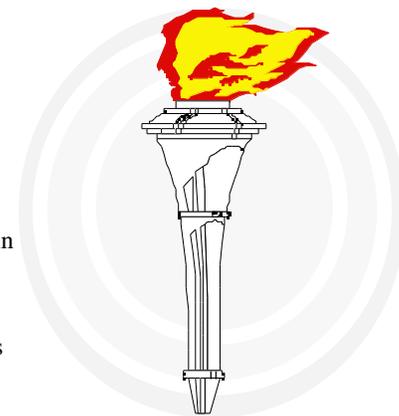
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Kevin Giles is an Anglican minister and consultant theologian for World Vision Australia. He is the author of *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* (Harper-Collins).



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One of the chief purposes of *Rebuild Journal* is to encourage and challenge men and women of God to consider living in Covenant love and honor with one another; to enter into a way of life that supports practical discipleship. If you believe the Lord may be calling you to take a closer look at what intentional Christian Community is all about, and you would like to find out more, we would like to invite you to contact us. We can provide resources

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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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