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# Ties that Bind: Sharing a Common Rule of Life

BY KYLE CHILDRESS

**If we are going to live the Christ-like life in American society today, then we had better do it as a body or else we will never make it. Yet growing a shared life in Christ out of our frantically busy lives is quite a challenge.**

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**I**n September 2005, Hurricane Rita blew through east Texas about a month after Hurricane Katrina had blown through New Orleans and Mississippi. The 30,000 population of Nacogdoches swelled to 45,000 with the evacuees from Houston and the lower Texas Gulf Coast. The storm did not hit us as hard as had been feared, but most of Nacogdoches was without power due to all the downed trees and limbs and debris. One of the first places to have power restored was our church building, so it naturally became a central clearing-house for our church work crews going out sawing limbs and clearing debris.

We were already housing several evacuee families and it was not long before members of the congregation moved in as well. Probably thirty to thirty-five folks moved into the church building while another twenty-five or so cleaned out their refrigerators and freezers and brought the food to the church for us to share common meals. During the day, some church members hosted the evacuee families or did child care while others did debris clean-up or volunteered at one of the other evacuee shelters in town. At the end of the day, folks would shower at home and then gather at the church for extraordinary shared meals of trout, chicken cordon-bleu, and steaks. Each night after clearing the dishes from the tables and cleaning up, some folks brought out the dominos for games of 42, while others sat around tables and carried on long conversations. You could walk down the hall and peek into a Sunday school room and see fathers reading stories with four or five little boys on pallets; in another room, a bunch of little girls were getting ready for bed. It was a good time of sharing life in Christ.

That is not all I witnessed that week. Later, after most of the people from Houston had left town, I went down to put gas in my car. By this time, the lines were short and I waited behind a man and his wife in their one-ton pickup with a dual-wheel rear-end. Guns were hanging prominently in the truck as they got out. She glared at everyone and kept the door open on the truck with the guns in easy reach, while he proceeded to fill up his two twenty-two-gallon tanks on the pickup and then fill up his many gas cans and two fifty-five-gallon drums in the back-end. I watched them, gave them a wide berth, and I felt a shiver. I was not only looking at American society in microcosm, I was also witnessing what the Church is up against. Here was an apocalyptic moment, when our society's pretense, politeness, and orderliness were blown aside. Clearly, this couple believed they were on their own; they did not need anyone or want anyone to interfere with their individual lives, and they were going to make sure they got what they wanted or needed, by any means, including the use of violence. Meanwhile, down the street was a church full of people who believed that the good life was found in sharing a common life in Jesus Christ.

For most of us, day-to-day experience does not allow us to see or know such widely divergent embodiments of life. The storm heightened the stark differences that are usually muted and covered over by our affluence, busy routines, and focus upon our own individual and family responsibilities. Most of our congregations do not live such a shared life; at the same time, the contrasting life of armed, independent autonomy usually is not so blatantly displayed as by that couple at the gas station. Nevertheless, I believe that the call of Jesus Christ is to a shared and common life in him much like what I saw our local church embody the week following the hurricane. Since it is rare to see local congregations share such a common life, and most church members have no idea such a life exists, much less is desirable, it is imperative that we look around for other glimpses and models of what a common life might look like. One of those places is among the communities of the New Monasticism movement. As a local church pastor I am interested in what the new monastics might teach us.



In *After Virtue* (1981), philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre draws several loose parallels between the current time and the decline of the Roman Empire. "A crucial turning point in that earlier history," he notes, "occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman *imperium* and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that *imperium*." Instead, under the leadership of visionaries like Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-c. 547) and others, they instituted creative new forms of monastic community that would change the face of Europe. MacIntyre concludes his study,

If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting on the frontiers; they have already been among us for some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St. Benedict.<sup>1</sup>

Over the last three decades Christians in various places around the United States, mostly unbeknownst to one another, reached the conclusion that a new kind of Christianity was needed. They sought a Christian faith that embodied the life of Jesus through intentional community in the places of poverty and blight. Some of these Christians resonated with MacIntyre’s call for a new St. Benedict and formed new monastic communities. The “New Monasticism” name was coined because of the central notion of building an intentional community around a common rule of faith, much like the classic monastic communities built their common life around the *Rule of St. Benedict* or its variations through the centuries.<sup>2</sup>

I am not suggesting that the entire New Monasticism movement was a response to MacIntyre’s analysis of our situation, or that these communities grew at the same time from a common source. But a number of them responded to MacIntyre’s call by interpreting their own intentional community and rule, or covenant, in light of St. Benedict.

Most new monastic communities place themselves within the long and rich Christian tradition stretching from St. Benedict through the sixteenth century Anabaptists and the Amish to pre-World War II groups like the Bruderhof and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s seminary community at Finkenwalde, Germany, and post-World War II communities like Koinonia Farm near Americus, Georgia.

My own journey as a Christian and pastor has been influenced by many of these same groups. I grew up in a conventional county-seat-town First

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Baptist Church in west Texas in the 1960s. It was a good church and I am grateful to God for the formation and faith I received in that congregation. I went off to college planning to become a lawyer, but I was called into the ministry along the way and never for a moment doubted that my vocation was to pastor a local congregation. The question was, what kind of local congregation? During these years in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, I kept looking at the witness and work of the African American church while at the same time wondering about the lack of witness and work of the white church. I also began to learn about the Anabaptist movement as well as contemporary intentional communities that were influenced by the Anabaptist and Roman Catholic traditions. I learned about Church of the Savior, formed by Gordon and Mary Cosby in Washington, D.C., in the years following World War II, and Koinonia Farm in Georgia led by Clarence and Florence Jordan. Through reading *The Post-American*, later renamed *Sojourners Magazine*, I learned of the Sojourners community in Washington, D.C., Jubilee Partners in Georgia, and many others. Eventually, I left seminary for a couple of years and moved to Atlanta, Georgia, to work with the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and live in a small intentional community called the Community of Hospitality that was closely associated with Oakhurst Baptist Church and their ministry with homeless men. It was there that I was introduced to a rule of life.

A rule of life in a Christian intentional community might go by any number of names – rule, covenant, document of commitment, oath, vows, and so on. It usually represents the foundational vision of the community, or identity statement, that all members subscribe and submit to. Whether it is multiple pages in length or can fit on one sheet of paper, it is practice-oriented. It is not confessional, creedal, or doctrinal (for their orientation to right belief, these communities have the historic Christian creeds), but it makes plain how the members live and serve together. The rule describes their roles and responsibilities in the community, including such things as their common commitment to daily prayer and worship, service to the poor, either sharing resources or holding one another accountable for their personal finances, sharing meals together, and often things such as child care, gardening, cooking, and cleaning. Sometimes the rule is read and reaffirmed by members of the community on an annual basis in order to help them remember their identity and calling.

Whenever there is conflict or misunderstanding – and living in close proximity to others, there always is conflict – the rule is part of the conversation among the members. Over time the rule is often clarified or modified with other interpretations and commentaries. What is essential is that the rule is used in service to sharing their common life in Christ and not as a form of domination. Members of an intentional community come together as a joyful response to the call of Christ. The rule is a means to ordering that joy-filled life.



I left the Community of Hospitality to return to seminary and proceed with my vocation of being a local church pastor. It did not take long for me to notice that in Baptist history and polity we had a rich tradition of church covenants that were nothing more than a rule for particular congregations. Under the leadership of Henry Jacob the first Baptist church in England, organized in London, made a covenant in 1616.

Standing together, they joined hands, and solemnly covenanted with each other in the presence of Almighty God: To walk together in all Gods ways and ordinances, according as he had already revealed, or should further make known to them.<sup>3</sup>

Churches like Jacob's that came out of English Puritanism and the Separatist movement practiced congregational forms of church government. Covenant was the "theological dynamic" for separating from the state-established church and the basis for church membership and governance.<sup>4</sup>

Puritan and Baptist colonists brought these ideas of covenant to America. Historian Charles DeWeese says, "New England Baptists were the first Baptists in America to use church covenants." It became common after 1650 for Baptist churches to be organized around covenants; they became the basis for constituting new congregations and receiving new members, and the means for maintaining the integrity of church membership.<sup>5</sup>

These covenants were written by the local congregations and reflected their particular effort to embody the New Testament vocation of following Jesus Christ in that place and time. Like the rule of a monastic community, these covenants were practical, not doctrinal or creedal, and they spelled out the congregation's practices of prayer, service, worship, and education. However, in 1833 the New Hampshire Baptist Convention approved a covenant that was to be

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used as a model for churches writing their own covenants.<sup>6</sup> After modifications, this covenant was published widely in the hymnals and educational materials produced by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. By the 1850s, many local congregations adopted this generic covenant, one that was abstracted from the particular location, time, and people making up each local congregation. Ironically, when particular covenants were

removed from local congregations and the denomination sought to standardize churches' covenants, the sense of covenantalism, of a shared common life among the members of a congregation, declined and practically disappeared. This same generic covenant was included in the hymnal of the Baptist church of my childhood. Most members considered it an historical oddity and it certainly made no difference in the life of the congregation.



So how do you integrate the new monastics' insights and use of a rule into a local Baptist congregation? Baptist churches are the heirs to a rich history of covenantal ecclesiology but many are ignorant of it. Interestingly, many Baptist churches can be hostile to the notion of covenants, as well.

I think there is little doubt that most hostility to covenantal ecclesiology, or a common life ordered by a rule, arises from American individualism. Most modern church goers see the congregation as a gathering of individual Christian believers rather than a single body with various members. Individualism is so pervasive that it taints almost everything we say and do in the Church; therefore, almost everything we say or do is an opportunity and challenge to teach about a more communal understanding of who we are and what we do and say.

I remember, early in my present place of ministry, I was teaching on the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion, the Eucharist). The standard method of receiving the Lord's Supper in our church, like many Baptist churches, had been for the deacons to pass out plates containing individually pre-cut pieces of unleavened bread and trays with individual cups to the seated congregation. I was attempting to get the congregation to come forward to the Communion Table in groups, where they would be served together by the deacons before proceeding back to their seats so the next group of members could come forward. Knowing there was resistance, we were having a dialogue and teaching session. One of the church members spoke up, "When I sit here and receive the Lord's Supper I can block out every one else from view and I can worship the Lord in peace and quiet by myself." I responded that he made my point for me; that was exactly what we wanted to avoid. He still didn't get it.

In our individualized – some would say hyper-individualized – society, to participate in the body of Christ takes extraordinary time and effort. What compounds the difficulty is that people in congregations have less and less time to devote to God and to each other, much less serving others outside of their congregation. Busyness seems to be the number one obstacle in people's lives to following Jesus. In a conventional home (and there are fewer and fewer of those) both parents are working outside of the home for longer hours, while children run from school to soccer to choir to piano practice to baseball. Everyone eats on the run, scattered and separated from one another.

Eventually, when they reach home, they fall exhausted in front of the television before going through it all the next day. Trying to grow a common and shared life in Christ out of such frantically busy lives is quite a challenge.

Even ten years ago in our own congregation there seemed to be more time to build a common life. Some church members did not work outside of the home while others got off work around 5:00 p.m. Many of us would gather for shared meals and coordinate sharing child care; we shared gardening and construction projects, and common ministries. Now more members work outside of the home and they do not get off work until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. When we call for volunteers for a Saturday work day at a Habitat for Humanity worksite, we find ourselves short-handed because church members are at their regular jobs. Some have to work even on Sundays.

Overcoming such obstacles to grow a common life takes daily teaching and reinforcement, paying attention and making connections, and just plain old persistence. It takes working and serving together in community, sharing meals together in community, and worshipping together in community. But it also takes the willingness to make sacrifices, to simplify our lifestyles, and give up some of our desires and expectations of “having it all.”

Every Sunday for over twenty years we have ended worship with a benediction I first learned from an African American pastor. “Let’s take each other’s hands,” it begins. “Now look who you’re holding hands with, and hold on tight! Because we’re going to need each other this week.”

Several times over these years, church members in unexpected crisis have told me later, “When I first heard the news, I didn’t know what to do or who to call. Then it hit me, who was I holding hands with Sunday? And that is who I called.”

I want my people to think in terms of God and each other, each other and God – that we cannot have one without the other – and to think like this so much that it becomes habitual. It becomes so natural that it is an automatic way of thinking. It becomes instinctive.

Now, there is a very practical aspect to this. If our people are going to live the Christ-like life, then they had better do it as a body or else they will never make it. Lone individuals trying to live faithfully cannot stand against sin, death, the Powers, and the overwhelming pressure of society. Church members, as individuals, are easy pickings for the Powers of Death; they will separate us, isolate us, *dismember* us, pick us off one at a time, and grind us down into the dust. Classic monasticism knew this; old

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Baptist churches that came together in covenant knew this; and New Monasticism knows this.

A new church, like a new intentional community, can put together a common covenant as a foundational document that defines its identity and mission. But a good rule of thumb is that an existing congregation has to grow a community first and let the covenant come out of that. Strange but true, a church needs a covenant to better order the communal life of the congregation, but it takes a rich and vibrant communal life to produce a covenant. Even more, it takes a good common life to even understand the need for sharing a common rule.

## NOTES

1 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 244-245.

2 Jonathan R. Wilson, "Introduction," in *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 1-3.

3 Champlain Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea, Its Origins and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1904), 79.

4 B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 54-56.

5 Charles W. DeWeese, *The Origin, Development, and Use of Church Covenants in Baptist History* (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1973), 118-122.

6 *Ibid.*, 317.



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