

Vision, Values, and Praxis for a Community of Faith

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Introduction

What follows is a set of three things. We have (1) a broad vision for a community of people desiring to live out what it means to be a certain subset of the body of Christ, i.e., a particular embodied “church”. We have (2) a list of values which are “core” to the community mentioned in such a way that they are essentially defining. A value is “essentially defining” if, if it is not held by those central to the community, the community would not be one we want to be a part of. Finally, we have (3) a list of practices (praxis) that are essentially defining in the same way as the list of values. The difference is that the list of practices describes a set of somehow-regularly-occurring actions or events, which if the community did not engage in, it would not be one we want to be a part of.

It should be obvious, given the way I described the vision, values, and praxis of this putative community, that all three are (a) experimental, (b) not intended to be universally legislated, and (c) for a certain group of people (i.e., we who are excited about it), at a certain time in the long and varied history of the church (i.e., now). They are experimental in that we cannot be sure that they will create a church body which is actually any better, different, or more Christ-like than any other incarnation of the church. What we have is a guess, a thesis, that we think is worth *trying*. Neither are the vision/values/praxis intended to be forced upon the church at large. The world is a big place and requires a diversity of Christian incarnation. What we do believe is that for us, in our time in history and in our particular physical location in the world, the incarnation of church we have in mind is the best way we can think of to be an effective and provocative appendage of the larger body of Christ. So it is easy to see how (a) determines (b) which determines (c).

All that is not to say that the church as we find it in the US doesn’t need reform (or that it does); rather, that before we can engage in such a task as reformation, we need to know something. We need to have tried something that works. That is the basic idea of such a community as I am outlining. As such this document should be read as a tentative foray into “church formation” by idealistic and passionate amateurs (in conversation with Christians past and present), but who for those very nascent properties might find out some interesting things about Christian spirituality and community.

It should be remembered that what follows is only a sketch or outline. No rigorous biblical substantiation of the validity of the values/praxis is presented or attempted. However, we are deeply committed to retaining the essence of scriptural Christianity as/when it has been transmitted faithfully through the ages, and believe that what follows is a very sound instantiation of principles found in the life of Christ via scripture. It is also probably worth

* Written after about a year of exploring community with friends in Palo Alto, CA. Thus, the content as a whole flows out of a communal context and should not be ascribed to me alone. I am (perhaps unfortunately) responsible for this particular way of organizing and writing about it.

saying that nothing in these simple lists is entirely original, but rather everything is an echo of teachers, scripture, Christian thinkers of the past and present, and so on. Even the particular way I am laying things out is probably not original.

In that vein I will add that the list of values and practices was inspired directly by observations of how Jesus did church, i.e., what things he valued and what practices he engaged in with the disciples. Our bet was that he didn't do these things in some way that we are not supposed to emulate. We believe that Christ came (if not primarily, then among other things) in order to *show* us how to live as God intended. Thus we have a good feeling about taking honest observations of Jesus' community to be the basis for something which we want to try. Interestingly, this method of doing things does not so much result in a set of propositions which are to be believed, but instead what one might call a Way, or an Order, or a Praxis. While the community is not therefore defined simply extensionally via its practices, it is (I believe) therefore surprisingly resilient to and tolerant of quite a lot of (what I think are) unimportant and oft-divisive opinions about some theological matters.

Now, let us begin.

Statement of Vision

We seek to discover the fullest possible life, through relationship with God and community with one another, by attempting to work out what it truly means to be the body of Christ. We desire to live out the love of God to each other, and to the world around us, and we want to attract others to this experiment.

Core Values

Jesus – the community is a “Christian” one, and so naturally Christ must be kept at the center in a significant way if the community is to remain distinctively and authentically Christian.

Committed Companionship – This describes a special sort of spiritual commitment between those in the community. We could gloss it as, “going through life together, for better or for worse, doing normal activities with one another.” The “for better or worse” denotes this special kind of commitment which is transcended only by marriage relationships and individual relationships with God. Without this commitment, there is not a deep enough context for the powerful trust and intimacy that defines this group of people. Practically speaking, this value also puts some sort of limit on the number of people that can be involved. From my limited experience, I'd guess this is somewhere between 10 and 20. Another practical consideration is also forced by this value, which is that of the physical proximity of those in the community. It is naturally difficult to have a community of people who “go through life together” in any significant sense if these people live at any real distance from one another. The fact that committed companionship

goes beyond seeing one another merely once or twice a week seems to imply an availability that is only possible through relative physical proximity.

Hospitality – Provision for those within and without the community. Hospitality makes people feel welcome, and it is also an important value in that it brings others into one’s life in a way that makes it difficult for one to hide herself.

Simplicity of Lifestyle – This is the value of avoiding unnecessary complexity, whether that complexity has to do with schedules, finances, projects, or even “Christian” work. The value is played out by ordering life around the things that should be at the center, rather than the things which are rightly at the periphery. This value could also be classed as “wisely managing priorities”.

Sharing of Resources – In other words, a general attitude of holding all our resources, whether financial or physical or whatever, to be up for grabs if there is a need to be met within the community (or the larger local community). There is no necessary legislation of holding finances in common, though that could be a powerful way to very clearly live out this value.

Cultural Relevance – the community I am describing is emphatically not one that retreats wholesale from the world. Rather the idea is to have a healthy engagement and a set of interfaces through which the community members as individuals and the community at large can challenge the culture around it. Such an interface, if it is to be successful, is necessarily an empathetic one—we must be discerning and observant of all facets of our local culture and the larger ones in which it is situated. Such observation and discernment will be pivotal in how we choose to present ourselves and our faith—no “evangelism” can rightly take place outside of this context.

Mercy and Justice for the Poor and Suffering – We must be aware of those around us who are particularly oppressed or downtrodden and offer them special help and grace. This value also points to a general thoughtfulness regarding ways in which societal structures contribute to injustice for certain people, and a desire for prophetic engagement with those structures.

Spiritual Discipline – We want to place a high value on prayer, meditation and reading of scripture, silence, fasting, and the disciplines that through the ages have brought Christians closer to God both individually and corporately. This value is important as it continually monitors our “lifeline” to God.

Maturing in Wisdom and Understanding – The community we envision is one where there is continual growth and maturation in all areas of life. We want it to be a context in which people learn new skills from one another, where the mind as well as the heart, soul, and body are fed and challenged. As such a high premium is placed on study and

engagement with ideas from the past and present, as well as the very difficult task which is growth in wisdom.

Core Praxis

Sharing Meals – Eating is an essential human function, and it is also an act which is traditionally a very communal one, where families or communities are able to be with one another, sharing a physical experience while connecting via sustained conversation. Sharing meals is a powerful and symbolic expression of intimacy—people do not eat with their enemies. Christ ate with “sinners” to show his love and acceptance. One of the most Christian practices of all (the Eucharist) is a meal.

Retreats – Retreats are times specifically set apart for the purpose of working on community, on the intimacy and togetherness of those involved, on the intentional deepening of relationships, and on corporate communion with God. Retreats allow for healthy and necessary escape from the distractions of our daily jobs and habits.

Wasting Time – Many of Jesus’ most profound lessons were taught as the result of observations made to the disciples while they were just wandering around, going for walks, hanging out at the temple, or whatever else. They had time to sit and make observations, and as a result of that space was a tremendous opportunity for God to work. It is good for there to be “together time” with no planned activities, no agenda, nothing to “get done”. In our modern culture this is a healthy but difficult practice, which most people studiously avoid.

Worship – corporate worship is a defining feature of the Christian body. This may be cashed out in terms of music and singing together, or it may not. There are as many ways to truly worship God as there are hearts in the community, and it is our intent to allow this diversity to flourish and overflow from heart to heart. Worship is central in that it highlights and promotes (or should) a genuine submission, corporately and individually, to God.

Regular Prayer – Christ prayed often, sometimes removing himself from things which could have “helped more people” in order to do so. This speaks of a power in communing with God with thoughts and words.

Regular Interaction with Scripture – it is scripture that keeps us Christian, and so it should be a part of our lives in many ways. “Interaction” is not always necessarily just “reading” or some kind of intense inductive study, though that can sometimes be appropriate. We have seen hints of the vast wealth to be uncovered via different ways of interacting with scripture, and want to explore that.

Generous Giving of Time and Money – This can encompass monetary donations, service projects, volunteering at local outreaches of Christian or humanist persuasions, serving in

other countries, etc... This practice is an outflow of the value of resource-sharing, and comes from a realization that we have been given much; to whom much is given, much is required. We are obligated to serve the world with a grateful heart, but this is often difficult, and so we want such activities to be regular and expected events in the life of the community, so that it may become an integral part of our individual lives as well.

Soliciting Group Discernment in Decision Making – part of the idea of this community is that in some sense our lives, spiritual and otherwise, begin to depend in some measure on those around us. We are connected in such a way that we no longer direct our paths without thought to the others. Thus the discernment of God’s will in an individual’s life becomes a community discipline. We believe this will enhance an individual’s ability to hear God, and not diminish it. This practice is also beneficial in that it involves the possibility of having to submit our desires for the good of the group—a foreign concept in our culture, but one that contains immense power and the possibility of great spiritual growth.

Involving Others in Community Practices – that is to say, there is no disconnect between who we are and what we are doing, and the larger body of Christ and/or the world around us. Appropriate interfaces between these groups are conceived and implemented in such a way that (1) we are not kept isolated and exclusionist, and (2) we can continue to challenge and be challenged by the world and the larger body of Christ, while still retaining a distinctive and powerful essence wherein we have a voice.

Postscript

It is likely that all of what has been said raises many more questions than it answers. This is indeed what has been discovered after a little while of attempting to establish a community with these characteristics. I have not even tried here to lay out many of the practical decisions which need to be made for a particular group which is trying to live out these values and practices, and am in fact pessimistic about the benefit of doing so in any case. For example, in any sort of community like the one described, there will always be issues of the balance between hard-and-fast definitions of membership, the precise sort of commitments required, how elastic the community chooses to be with regard to commitments, questions of extent of involvement in social justice efforts, how radically resources should be shared amongst members, how diverse the group should be in terms of age and marital status, and so forth. Many more points of possible tensions could be listed. Given the (largely) intractable nature of those issues, and the particular situated wisdom required to make decisions concerning them, I am quite happy to leave this document as a bare-bones outline which, at the most, hopefully inspires someone to think about the feasibility of attempting to build such a community wherever she is, with a group of people committed to exploring these questions for themselves.