

**JESUS AND HIS NEW COMMUNITY:
PITFALLS, IDEALS, AND REALITIES**

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Dr. Bill Warren

In Baptist circles a healthy church is one that enjoys eating together . . . often! While many of our church folk could not give precise definitions of a healthy church, they can tell us about unhealthy ones, which may be as close to a positive definition as we can get. I'm not too sure but what the same limitation isn't true for most ministers and religion professors as well. Even though we want to promote healthy churches, we struggle to define a healthy church or to arrive at a consensus about what constitutes a healthy religious community.

As Christians, Jesus is the paradigm par excellence for our understandings of God and Christian living. Likewise, an examination of the characteristics of a healthy religious community as seen in the ministry of Jesus should be foundational for our conceptualizations of a healthy church. In this paper, we will examine the ministry of Jesus as found in the Synoptic Gospels for insights into the nature of a healthy religious community.

Rather than looking primarily at the community that resulted from the ministry of Jesus, this paper will evaluate the interaction between Jesus and the dominant religion of his setting, namely Palestinian Judaism. Jesus is operating within the milieu of Judaism and reacting to it as the determinative cultural religious force for his larger in-group of Judaism. His critiques of that

religious focus and his alternative pronouncements provide insights into his concept of a healthy religious community.

In approaching the topic, the methodology will include the use of tools and understandings from the field of cultural anthropology regarding the nature and function of religion as a social phenomena. The field of cultural anthropology is dedicated to understanding how societies function; seeking to explore the what and why of the structures and patterns in social groups. In studying religion and social groups from this perspective, a clear definition of what aspects of religion can be illuminated is essential, for numerous religious traits are outside the bounds of cultural anthropological study. So the first section of this paper will present a definition of religion from the perspective of cultural anthropology.

As social phenomena within the purview of cultural anthropology, the church should fulfill certain functions in society. To be sure, the church has many functions to fulfill, including promoting the psychological health of its members, facilitating spiritual development, and supporting members in times of crisis. But from the perspective of cultural anthropology, religion and religious communities have certain functions that are especially essential for them to realize in the larger society. This study will therefore examine the concept of a healthy community not from the perspective of what is happening within the group in isolation from the larger social setting, but rather from the perspective of how healthy the community is in fulfilling the needed social functions of a dominant religion in the larger social setting. The second section of this paper will present a summary of these social functions as derived from the field of cultural anthropology. The delineation of the primary social functions of religion in society will aid in

evaluating the social health of religious communities as pictured in the Biblical texts, since those communities needed to fulfill these essential functions as part of their role in the larger society.

The results of the first two sections will then be applied to the evaluation of selected Synoptic texts. The Synoptic Gospels provide an especially rich setting for this analysis since they depict Jesus ministering in the culture of Palestinian Judaism with Judaism serving as the dominant religion to meet the social functions of religion for that context. Three groups of texts will be evaluated, based upon the anthropological categories of taboo and denunciation, idealized vision, and functional or resulting reality. First, an analysis of Jesus' denunciations of some of the existing religious taboos, practices, and leaders can serve as a backdoor to a positive statement of characteristics of a healthy religious community. The matrix of Jewish life in first-century Palestine forms the backdrop for these negative characterizations, thereby allowing a clearer conception of the contrast being drawn by such statements. The hypothesis guiding this section is that an anthropological analysis of the texts will show that Jesus denounces Jewish leaders and religious taboos and practices because they are distorting the role of religion in society for selfish ends through improper criteria for the boundary markers. A healthy religious community requires a proper focus on the status of leaders, appropriate goals of religious practices, and openness to outsiders.

Second, Jesus also presents numerous positive constructs of what he desires for his disciples to become as a community. An analysis of selected texts that present this ideal vision of social life should prove insightful for seeing the intended shape of a healthy religious community. The hypothesis guiding this section is that Jesus plants an ideal for a healthy

religious community based upon redefined relationships, open social boundaries, re-conceptualized patterns of leadership, and radical exposure of evil.

Third, the resulting community of disciples serves as an example of the idealized view in action. Selected texts that present the disciples struggling to be a united community will be examined as a balance to the idealized and “anti” views of the prior sections. The hypothesis is that the disciples exhibit an emerging community struggling with past social status conceptions, ego-centric leadership rivalries, and limited insights into relationships, but with a clear model to follow in the person of Jesus and a developing self-identity and vision that propelled them forward.

An Anthropological Definition of Religion as a Social Phenomena

What is meant by religion and how can it be defined so as to allow for social analysis across various cultures? No single definition exists, but several suggestive attempts have been made. W. H. R. Rivers sought to differentiate between magic and religion, holding that Western concepts of religion surpassed “primitive” views of magic in many ways (Rivers, 1924, 4ff). Whereas magic involved the use of rites and the power of the one performing the rites, religion was seen as comprising a group of processes dependent upon a belief in a higher power beyond the performer of the rites--a belief in a remote or spiritual God figure. Religion in its purest or highest form, then, tended to exclude the examples found in many “primitive” cultures. The Western arrogance inherent in this view is obvious, since Rivers sought to distinguish the religion of his culture as superior to that of other cultures by definition rather than research.

Émile Durkheim in his magisterial work *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* presented a definition of religion that built upon the rites and actions of religious persons rather than notions of awe or spiritual beings, thereby allowing the evaluation of the function of religion to be seen through the analysis of the resulting lifestyles (Durkheim, 1915, 416 ff.) and eliminating the need to define a distinction between magic and religion. Religion could thus be conceived as the collective consciousness of society, with the collective ideal expressed in the rites and beliefs. The universality of religion could then be explained as due to the need of all societies to uphold an idealized concept of itself that would serve as the basis for unity, corporate personality, and social norms.

While numerous critics have debated Durkheim's resulting scheme, the focus on analyzing the function of religion based upon social rituals and actions has proven helpful (see Douglas, 1966, 21ff, and 1975, 212ff, for an excellent criticism of Durkheim by one who accepts much of his work). Durkheim's equation of society as God and God as society was modified by Mary Douglas to mean that "God appears mediated by the social dimension" (Douglas, 1975, 212). But Durkheim's insistence on a marked separation between the sacred and the profane and between the social and individual has not been generally accepted.

E. E. Evans-Pritchard (E-P) wrote extensively about religion among both the Nuer and Azande of Africa (E-P, 1937), noting how the function of religion was seen in the social life of the Azande in the interplay between bad events, magic, witch doctors, and oracles. While not giving a succinct definition of religion, E-P noted that religion for the anthropologist must center on the beliefs and practices of the ordinary people and how those affect the society in all

aspects--“the minds, the feelings, the lives, and the inter-relations of its members” (E-P, 1965, 119).

Mary Douglas sought to integrate not only belief in spiritual beings into the concept of religion, but also “people’s views about man’s destiny and place in the universe” (Douglas, 1966, 28). Douglas posits that religion includes the total system of rituals, pollution and taboo beliefs, and uncleanness laws. Her work on taboo beliefs and purity laws opened new avenues for analyzing the function of religion in society.

Clifford Geertz offers a more precise anthropological definition of religion: “a *religion* is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz, 1966, 4). Religion is defined by its manner of communication (symbols), its realization of a function in society (change/shape the social character), and its manner of realization (use of authority speech).

Melford Spiro added that the essential distinctive of religion versus other cultural beliefs that may serve the same function of religious beliefs is the concept of a supernatural being, thus returning to the view of some of the earlier figures in the field of anthropology (Spiro, 1966, 95f.). He defines “‘religion’ as ‘an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings’” and evidenced in society by normative beliefs, collective rituals, and prescriptive values (Spiro, 1966, 96-97).

Besides the obvious diversity in these definitions, a limitation of the underlying approach is that religion is defined based upon its function at the social level, thus overlooking numerous aspects of religious life on the personal and even at times the micro-social levels (i.e. family level, small group level). On the other hand, a common thread running through these definitions is the focus on the function of the shared beliefs and practices of the group/society as seen by the impact on the larger society.

In this paper, I suggest the following working definition of religion: Religion is the corporate belief pattern of a people group that is integrated into the life of the members of the society through the community support of religious rituals, taboos, and boundary markers, and that is based upon a significant level of authority over the life of the community, with the goal of providing meaning and coherence to the society. While this definition does not cover the totality of religious experience, it does provide a foundation for considering religion as a social phenomena (rather than individual) that fulfills certain functions in the larger society.

An Anthropological Definition of the Social Functions of Religion

In turning to the functions of religion in society, most anthropologists see religion as fulfilling several cultural functions. Gerd Theissen has consolidated the various viewpoints into four functions of religion in society: an integrating function, a restrictive function, an antagonistic function, and a creative function (Theissen, 1978, 2). These functions work together to form different results in society, ranging from domestication to compensation, personalization, and innovation. As Theissen states, “[r]eligion can be a social cement and an impulse towards renewal: it can intimidate people and force them to conform, or it can help them to act

independently” (Theissen, 1978, 2). These four functions can be conceptualized as 1) supporting the existing social structure by integrating religious life into the current society; 2) defining group identity and social standards by placing restrictions on acceptable behavior and attitudes; 3) denouncing the gap between the ideal vision of the society and present practices, at times in a highly antagonistic manner and with the possibility of a social rupture; and 4) providing a new vision that can lead either to major reform of the existing society or the creation of a new alternative society.

The most agreed upon function of religion in society is that of supporting the existing social norms and structures by way of sacralizing them. The religious system incorporates rituals that reinforce social beliefs and structures and that help the adherents make sense of the existing system and their role in the system. The religious system provides the authority base for the existing system, giving meaning to each of the components of the society, from the individual on up through the sub-groups such as families and communities until reaching the highest level of the society. At this stage religion provides stability to the society and a sense of philosophical coherence, planting an ideal vision of what the society should become, and encouraging hope that the existing structures are compatible with that ideal. (see Leach, 1977, 286).

Another function of religion is to reinforce group identity, thus restricting membership and providing distinctive practices and standards of conduct. Religious rituals can be rites of initiation that introduce members of the society into the “elite” membership of the society, with the expectation that such persons will keep the cultural mores. In first century Judaism, Sabbath observance, ritual cleansings, and dietary rules reinforced group identity, serving as boundary

markers for the group. Christian baptism serves this purpose in many church communities. In first century Judaism, the sharp differentiation between Jews and Gentiles served to reinforce concepts of Jewish superiority, with even temple space being segregated along these lines.

A function of religion highlighted in the Hebrew Scriptures is that of dissenting voice, with religion providing the prophetic platform for social critique and revitalization. Often the only dissenting voice allowed in a society is that covered by the “authority” of religion, for religion not only authenticates authority in public figures, but also it can imbue persons with the authority needed to challenge recognized but unacceptable authority. In such a role, religion can provide the basis for gaining a hearing due to already having a recognized and respected role in the society. Whereas religion plants the vision of the “ideal” for the society, the members of the society may not be trying to move toward the ideal (Leach, 1977, 286). In such a situation, religion needs to critique the social reality and call the people back to the ideal, reinvigorating commitment to striving to attain the vision for the society.

The creative function noted above by Theissen can be seen in historical perspective, but is not easily observed in a short-term exposure to the culture. Akin to the prophetic function, this aspect can lead to the positing of a new ideal for the society that, once accepted by enough members of the society, can be incorporated into the society along with the needed changes in existing mores, rituals, and/or structures. Jesus and his movement in the Jewish settings would be an example where various aspects of the *status quo* of the prevailing society were rejected and an alternative belief structure emerged with a different social ideal in these areas. Religion

becomes the fertile ground offering new visions of the ideal society and providing the impetus for movement towards these ideals (see Durkheim, 1915, and Leach, 1977).

These four functions of religion are needed in all societies, and can serve as aids in evaluating the health of religious communities by examining the extent to which they are realizing these four functions. A healthy religious community will allow for all four functions to coexist and interact so that reform rather than rupture is the result.

Now we will examine selected texts from the Synoptic Gospels in light of these four functions in order to determine characteristics of a healthy religious community as depicted in those texts.

Pitfalls along the Way: The Denunciations of Judaism

In the field of cultural anthropology, Mary Douglas among others has highlighted the role of “taboos” in uncovering a society’s positive belief structure (Douglas, 1966). Whereas the uncovering of order in religious purity concepts is difficult due to rarely finding any systematic flow or logic linking the practices or ideas, Douglas has noted how uncleanness and pollution regulations exist as means of defending the implicit religious cosmology and order, thus providing a back door into the analysis of the cosmology, ideology, and practical function of religion in the society. In first century Palestinian Judaism, a strong group/strong grid society existed with numerous taboos and purity laws. Jesus accepts many of these, yet denounces others. Based on the functions of religion noted above, we now turn to an analysis of representative Synoptic texts containing Jesus’ denunciations, centering on three aspects: 1) the functions of the taboos or purity laws in the Palestinian Jewish setting; 2) the impact of Jesus’ denunciations on the

function of these laws and the lawmakers; and 3) the insights that these denunciations provide into the social reality that Jesus envisions.

We begin by looking at Jesus' denunciations of the religious leaders who are responsible for formulating, communicating, and interpreting the taboos for Palestinian Judaism. Matthew 23 and Mark 12:38-13:2 contain some of Jesus' strongest denunciations. While caution must be exercised due to the "anti-Jewish leaders" prejudice on the part of the gospel writers, socially these texts still communicate at least one group's denunciations. Even if the total setting is difficult to recover due to not hearing from other perspectives, namely that of the Jewish leaders and others from the historical context, the importance socially of the New Testament texts is enhanced due to the perspective that is presented, namely one that includes the voice of those rarely heard from in history, the underclass, rather than solely the voices of the elite of society.

In the Matthew 23 text, Jesus critiques both the practice of the Pharisees and their abuse of their social position as religious leaders for self-serving status acquisition. In denouncing the scribes and Pharisees for not practicing what they preach (23:3), Jesus in verse 4 implies that they are imposing social restrictions or taboos on others, yet without holding themselves accountable for fulfilling them. The result is that others are made to appear dishonorable, unworthy of high social standing. This unhealthy focus on community leads to leaders who struggle for the highest positions of honor, seeking "the best seats in the synagogues" (23:6). These leaders treat people as audiences destined to be impressed and existing to bestow honor upon the religious leaders based upon the public displays of spirituality and demand for titles of respect such as "rabbi" or "teachers" (23:7-10). Since the greeting of others was a social

requirement, the insistence on a certain type of greeting served to enhance the public's awareness of the superiority of the religious leaders. Whereas the function of religion and these taboos should be to create and promote group identity, providing social cement among the adherents, the religious leaders are denounced for promoting social and religious classism, with themselves occupying the top positions. Jesus strongly denounces such egotistical use of social privilege in the name of God.

Jesus' denunciation is countered by a positive statement, in which he promotes an alternative honor-shame code, with servanthood being the chief characteristic of leadership rather than self-promotion. From the standpoint of the function of religion, Jesus is shifting the focus on the need for religion to serve the populace rather than the populace serving the ego-needs of religious leaders.

In 23:13, Jesus denounces the religious leaders because of their use of taboos to exclude rather than seeking to include as many as possible: "for you neither enter in yourselves nor do you allow the ones seeking to enter to go in" to the kingdom of heaven. Whereas the restrictive function of religion is needed and being reinforced by the religious leaders, Jesus criticizes them for restricting the wrong things and for the wrong reasons. Healthy religion is restrictive based on a faith response to God, not taboos that serve the ego-needs and status seeking of the leadership. The taboos have become focused on minor matters rather than "the weightier concerns of the law: justice, mercy, and faith" (23:23).

A further denunciation of the religious leaders is recorded in Mark 12: 40-44. The leaders are accused of "devouring the houses of widows" (12:40) while at the same time making a public

appearance of religious purity through the recitation in public of long prayers. In the following scene about the widow giving her entire livelihood of two leptas to the temple, Jesus is reacting to the taboo on not giving to the temple and the pressure to do so because of the public setting of the treasury. In essence, the leaders are stealing the livelihood of this widow in the name of God and justifying it as a duty to God. The restrictive and integrative functions of religion have been misused to serve the needs of the religious leaders, who were the primary beneficiaries of the temple offerings. To be sure, Jesus applauds the action of the widow, but at the same time he denounces the religious leaders and institution that would prey upon the weak of society in the name of God instead of helping them. The religious leaders had changed religion into a means of making money and gaining personal status. Religious life was being isolated from the realities of the larger society rather than functioning to integrate the various realities into a meaningful whole. Jesus is next pictured as condemning the temple institution, the heart of Palestinian Judaism at that time, to total destruction (Mk. 13:2). A religion that abuses its constituency is not fit to survive nor its leaders fit to be followed.

Among Jewish religious practices, taboos were applied to Sabbath observances, ritual washings, and dietary laws. Jesus has a conflict over especially the first two of these three, with Sabbath observance being the major point of contention. The Sabbath taboos served as boundary markers well recognized even by Gentiles, even if not appreciated or understood by many of them (see the historical examples presented in Feldman and Reinhold, 366-373). The Sabbath was a sacred time marker, with restrictions for keeping both its role and observance sacred. By violating understood taboos regarding the Sabbath in Mark 2:23-28 and 3:1-6, Jesus and his

disciples are challenging the concepts of the proper meaning or function of the Sabbath and the purity rules associated with not only the Sabbath but the entire “sacred time” constructs (see Malina, 1993, 143). In Mark 2:23-28, Jesus’ disciples are plucking grain to eat from a wheat or barley field. Since the Pharisees are accompanying Jesus and the disciples, they likely are within a Sabbath walk of a local village where food could be obtained (Keener, 1993, 142). The resulting accusation by the Pharisees is that the disciples are in violation of a Sabbath work taboo, probably without a good cause. Jesus responds by first defending against the attack on his honor, and then by redefining the function of sacred time. For the Pharisees, the sacred time of the Sabbath served as a boundary or identity marker, restricting membership by means of the associated taboos. In his statement that “the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27), Jesus is not only rejecting the Pharisee’s sacred time map (one derived and based especially upon the temple cult), but also he is moving the function of sacred time to that of serving the needs of the society rather than being a static boundary marker. Religion exists to meet human needs, not to regulate around them. By his second statement in verse 28 that “the son of man is lord also of the Sabbath,” Jesus is planting the authority base for his declaration of an alternative vision. This new ideal and authority base can serve a creative function if accepted by the prevailing society or can become an ideal for an alternative society if social rupture occurs.

The episode in Mark 3:1-6 reinforces Jesus’ redefinition of sacred time. The religious leaders challenge him by pitting his compassion against the prevailing taboos on the Sabbath. Jesus opts to reject their taboos and be faithful to his alternative vision, with the healing of the man’s withered hand serving as an example of the proper use of sacred time. A healthy religious

community will, by implication, use sacred time as an opportunity for service rather than a means of exclusion.

In Mark 7:1-15, the Pharisees and scribes challenge Jesus over his disciples' violation of Jewish purity laws, for the disciples were eating without performing the required ritual hand cleansings. Purity laws in most societies function to provide meaning to the cultural practices, thereby defining when certain practices are acceptable and when they are out of place. These rules provide coherence to the system, allowing newcomers and children to learn how to be acceptable in the culture. Purity taboos define what is out of place for social behavior (see Malina and Rohrbaugh, 1992, 222-224). The importance of the purity laws is that they then provide the basis of classifying people, with those observing the purity laws most strictly at the top of the social classification and those not observing them at the lower end of the spectrum, depending upon their degree of non-compliance (see Neyrey, *Semeia*, 1986, 91-124, for an excellent discussion of purity laws in Mark). Therefore, the definition of what defiles a person is a key ingredient in the function of religion and the power of religious leaders over the society. The power to set the social boundaries allows the religious leaders to define themselves as being at the top of the ladder and others as being in lower positions.

In the Mark 7 passage, Jesus challenges the criteria that the leaders are using as the foundation of their purity laws. The disciples' behavior is out of place if the criteria for the purity laws are focused upon external practices. But Jesus moves the foundation for the purity laws to that of inward motives and attitudes, as seen in verse 15: "It is not what enters a person from outside that defiles him, but what goes out of the person is what defiles him."

While this pronouncement doesn't alter the function of the purity laws in the sense of providing restrictive boundary markers, it does change the nature of the markers. Internal issues such as justice, mercy, and loyalty (faith) should serve as the criteria for purity laws. Of course, the difficulty is then in ascertaining the existence of such characteristics. Due to this difficulty, such interior purity focuses characterize low group communities, groups with porous boundaries and few external identity markers.

Another area of taboos relates to in-group, out-group definitions and boundary markers. This area focused on contact with outsiders, outsiders both in the sense of those outside of Judaism and those outside of the various groupings within Judaism. As Neyrey has noted, Palestinian Judaism had a strong sense of internal boundaries and social groupings, with the following map of persons depicting the major divisions: 1) Dead Israelites; 2) Morally unclean Israelites (tax collectors and sinners); 3) Bodily unclean Israelites (lepers, the poor, the lame, the maimed, the blind); 4) Unobservant Israelites (Peter and John, Jesus); 5) Observant Israelites (the rich young man, Joseph of Arimathea); 6) Pharisees; 7) Scribes and Priests; and 8) Chief Priests (Neyrey, *Semeia*, 1986, 101). The scribes and Pharisees denounce Jesus on numerous occasions because of crossing these internal boundaries.

In Luke 7:36-50, when Jesus goes to a Pharisee's house to eat, a woman from the city, "a sinner," washes his feet in her tears, drying them with her hair and then kissing them and anointing them with perfume. The Pharisee is revolted by Jesus' lack of perception about the internal boundary markers, for Jesus should not have allowed such a woman to touch him. In response, Jesus defends the woman's actions and dismisses her with his blessing. The taboo that

the Pharisee is seeking to uphold is common in a high group, high grid society, serving to reinforce the existing social hierarchy. But Jesus reacts by refusing to honor the existing social scheme, offering instead a reinterpretation or new ideal in which in-group boundaries are greatly diminished if not obliterated. For Jesus, as seen in Mark 3:34-35, social boundaries should be determined by ones response to God, not other less important markers. Whereas religion has a restrictive function, Jesus challenges the criteria used in realizing that function.

Jesus' criticism of such boundary markers is not limited to clashes with the Jewish leaders, for in Luke 9:51-56, the disciples are seeking to uphold the boundary markers by condemning the Samaritans. Jesus, however, refuses to honor such a social boundary and even rebukes the disciples for their approach.

One of the most powerful examples of Jesus' denunciation of in-group/out-group taboos is found in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10: 25-37). In this account Jesus gives a reinterpretation of the proper criteria for determining the boundaries: a neighbor is anyone who needs you to be a neighbor, regardless of prior social conceptualizations that might mitigate against associating with such a person. The expert in religious law is told to copy the example of the Samaritan, which implies learning from the example of one much lower on the social hierarchy scale, one who would normally be considered inferior and not worthy of consideration, much less contact. Like this Jewish leader, some in first century Palestine were using taboos to restrict the scope of the in-group and to reinforce a hierarchy within the in-group. Jesus denounces the criteria underlying such strategies, noting that religious taboos should not be based on a hierarchy

within the in-group members, nor should they be used to justify an arrogant attitude towards outsiders.

Based on the taboos of Palestinian Judaism and Jesus' reaction to them, the following emerge as central teachings. A healthy religious leadership will not use their positions for selfish ends, making the populace into an audience that exists to extol the leaders instead of a focus of ministry. Likewise, sacred time should be characterized by the type of attitudes and actions that occupy it, not by taboos that make the religious rules more important than the humans that religion is seeking to serve, thereby relegating compassion and ministry to a subordinate status. Also, the integrating and restrictive functions of religion as expressed through the concepts of purity laws and group boundary markers should be founded upon criteria that emphasize internal moral and attitudinal qualities rather than simply external rituals.

Ideals for Constructing a Healthy Religious Community

The enunciation of an ideal vision as a goal towards which society should strive is one of the functions of religion. But, as Leach notes, the "ideal" represented by the religious leadership and religious practice at times is more a means of supporting the present reality than a vision that leads to changes in society (Leach, 1977, 286). And the society may outwardly express an ideal without seeking to meet that ideal or move towards that ideal. The criticism of religious leaders who "proclaim but do not practice" (Mt. 23:3) is a reflection of such a scenario. Jesus, however, expects both himself and others to actively seek to live according to his new ideals (Mt. 5:48). Jesus' positive constructs of ideals are to serve as guides for his disciples as they become a community and for the larger society if they respond to his call and make the needed reforms

(although by the time of the writing of the Gospels, the hope of Judaism's positive response was rapidly fading if not totally obliterated).

A major focus of Jesus' vision for community life relates to the relational criteria and boundary markers that define the community, with three primary ethical issues defining the topic: 1) the proper approaches and attitudes towards authority (hierarchical relationships); 2) group identity and coherence (in-group and out-group relationships and boundary markers); and 3) wealth (status markers). Jesus denounces some of the prevailing approaches to integrating these areas into community life and plants alternative ideals that should govern healthy religious communities.

With respect to political authority, Jesus denounces the perspectives of some of the religious leaders who seem to waver between resistance and capitulation. The proper attitude toward the state in the teaching of Jesus, as Cullmann notes, rejects "an unconditional and uncritical subjection to any and every demand of the state." (Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, S.C.M., 1957, p. 56.) The state's demands may be met more often than not, as exemplified in Jesus' paying of the tax in Mt. 17:24-27, and in Mt. 22:15-22, the conflict story of whether or not one should pay taxes to Caesar. But religion's function as supporter of the status quo has limits. The prevailing ideology and structure-supporting lifestyles may need to be rejected or challenged, as seen in the cleansing of the temple and the denunciation both of many of the Jewish religious leaders and of Herod, whom Jesus calls "that fox" in Luke 13:32.

As a new ideal Jesus tells his disciples that leadership should be characterized by service to others rather than self-serving authoritarianism: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles rule

strongly over them and their great leaders impose their power on them. It is not to be so among you, but whoever wishes to become great will become one who helps you, and whoever wishes to be first among you will be your slave” (Mt. 20:25-27). This ideal for leadership reorients the role of religion from that of supporting and replicating existing structures that are egocentric to that of modeling structures that are grounded in a “love for others” ethic of servanthood.

In light of the temple setting, Jesus’ call would necessitate radical shifts in both the role of religion and the focus of leadership. The centrality of the temple in Jewish life and the public nature of service therein tempted the hierarchy to adopt a status-centered leadership structure, a temptation to which the existing temple leadership had fallen. The people had become secondary to the ego-needs of the leaders, with worship suffering as a result, as depicted in the cleansing of the temple. Jesus calls his society to a reevaluation of the vision of leadership that the political arena had exported to the religious world.

Regarding group identity and coherence, perhaps the best summary of Jesus’ ideal is found in the “golden rule” of Matthew 7:12: “Therefore, whatever you wish that people should do to you, you do likewise even to them.” Although not unique to Jesus, the insistence on this as an ideal challenged the existing honor-shame based social competition system and shifted the emphasis from that of boundaries determining behavior towards others to one of just behavior becoming the foundation for relationships without specific reference to prior boundary markers. The admonition to “love your enemies” (Mt. 5:44) expresses the same ideal. The criteria for group identity are shifted in two ways. First, the emphasis is on the attitudes and actions of the person in the in-group rather than the attitudes and actions of the out-group person. Second, the

criteria for the boundaries are shifted from that of external markers that the outsider doesn't meet to that of internal attitudes on the part of the insider. In other words, group identity is based on the positive character of the insider versus the negative traits of the outsiders. Jesus demonstrated this ideal in practice numerous times as he ministered to "out-group" persons such as tax collectors, sinners, Samaritans, women, and physically afflicted persons.

Another example of Jesus' redefinition of in-group and out-group relationships is found in Luke 9:49-50. Someone outside of the disciples' in-group is casting out demons in Jesus name. The disciples want to stop him because "he is not following with us." Jesus counters by planting a new ideal for defining the boundaries of the in-group: "for the one who is not against you is for you" (9:50). The criteria for determining the boundaries of the in-group are made fuzzy, with agreement in the larger pursuit of God's kingdom being the only boundary stipulated. But such a boundary is hard to ascertain, and so the net effect is to allow others open access to being part of the in-group if they so desire and if they are willing to commit to God's program in Christ.

The last supper provides the context for a different type of presentation of a new ideal. The ritual of the Passover celebration served to remind the Jewish people of their identity and worth as a people. They were so special that God had acted on their behalf to redeem them out of Egypt. Part of the foundation of this ritual was that of a reversal of social roles and values. Whereas slaves would normally have been of minimal value at best and could be regarded as expendable for the good of the more important social groups, in the exodus God declared Israel to be of inestimable worth. Israel, even though at the bottom of the social map, would not become a

scapegoat for the rest of society without God calling attention to the injustice and bringing liberation from the oppression. In Jesus' reinterpretation of this ritual during the Passover meal celebration with the disciples, he substitutes the present reality of himself with the historic focus of the ritual, stating that a new act of God is unfolding in his own person as he becomes the new symbol of unity and identity. The ritual of the "Lord's supper" became a new identity marker, with the meaning of the ritual to be located in the events of the cross and resurrection. The ideal that results is that true group identity and unity is to be found in commitment to the crucified Messiah, Jesus.

Another role of the centering of Christianity around the cross event has been highlighted by René Girard, the French cultural anthropologist. The Christian emphasis on the crucifixion exposes the wickedness of sin and the evil of scapegoating. Girard sees a unique contribution to religion by Christianity in that for the first time the victim of the society is put on public display as having been unjustly condemned by the society (see Girard, 1987, 73-105, or Lefebure, 1998, for a concise presentation of Girard's views, or Girard, 1972, for a full presentation). This exposure of injustice counters the practice found in religions of scapegoating their social dysfunctions and ills onto "acceptable" victims, who need not be pitied, since their death is the price of a stable society. The Jewish leaders seem to justify the crucifixion of Jesus from this stance, a focus most highlighted by John but also inherent to the trial scenes in the Synoptics. The religious leaders and crowds demand the crucifixion of Jesus even though he is presented as innocent, with the justification given in Mt. 26:25 that such is acceptable for the good of the group and their children. Jesus' unjust death is an acceptable price to them for maintaining a

stable society, even if the cost is that of not addressing serious social ills and religious dysfunctions. The wickedness of a society that engages in scapegoating is, however, exposed by a cross-centered gospel. The gospel continually highlights the fallacy of scapegoating as a social justification for running roughshod over the weaker members of society.

Jesus does not present a direct statement of this focus as an ideal, but through his reinterpretation of the Passover meal and his community's emphasis on the crucifixion/resurrection, the message could hardly have been missed. The ideal for Jesus' followers is that evil must be exposed, even radically exposed, so that a greater good can result as transformation away from evil and justice, mercy, and loyalty takes place. Even that evil that might seem justifiable due to concepts of scapegoating is unacceptable and must be exposed. And if religion becomes complicit with such evil actions, that religion must be exposed as unacceptable and in need of urgent and radical reform.

Although Jesus presented many other ideals, these at least serve as representative ones for defining a healthy religious community. A healthy religious community should hold to the ideals of servanthood based leadership in its hierarchy, social boundaries that allow the entrance of outsiders, and a commitment to a radical exposure of evil, even religious scapegoating.

Realities in an "Emerging" Religious Community

With such strong ideals and alternatives proclaimed by Jesus, one might expect that Jesus' own community of disciples would have integrated the religious ideals into their daily life easily, thus avoiding the problems that Jesus denounces. But such was obviously not the case, for the disciples struggled to implement the ideals in their community setting

In Mk. 9:33-37, the disciples are jockeying for social status, competing with each other for the highest positions of honor. Such struggles indicate that in spite of the prior ideals that Jesus had enunciated to them and the conflicts he had already experienced with the existing social map, the disciples are still strongly governed by their inherited social values and ideals. The movement from ideals to functional reality is pictured as difficult at best, even when Jesus is the leader of the group. Yet Jesus repeats his vision of the value system that the disciples need to adopt (Mk. 9:35 and 37) without strongly shaming them for their continued competitive approach to social status. In the disciples' case, the planting of a new vision of social relationships did not insure quick movement towards the ideal.

The competitive focus on gaining social status surfaces again among the disciples in Mark 10:35-45. James and John are seeking the seats of honor next to Jesus. Jesus shifts the focus of the request to one of acquired honor based upon sacrificial service as seen in his own life. James and John will have to show themselves to be worthy of those positions before God, for God is in charge of granting such social status. Social status then becomes grounded in obedience to God rather than the friendship or kinship connections.

The other disciples interpret James and John's request as a threat to their own status, and so become angry, as noted in Mk. 10:41. But Jesus restates his vision of the ideal toward which they are to be moving, using himself as an example of the ideal in practice and thereby calling the disciples to follow him in living the ideal. But obviously the disciples are struggling to live the ideal, for their prior social map for relating to others requires competitive social engagements due to only a few being able to occupy the highest positions of honor. Jesus' shift in the underlying

criteria has not impacted them enough to cause a shift from their inherited cultural system. When Jesus plants new ideals, seemingly a lengthy period of time is often needed for the ideals to impact the social realities of everyday life and underlying value systems even among his followers.

Another example of the disciples' difficulty in implementing Jesus' ideals is found in Luke 24:11, where the disciples greet the women's report about the empty tomb with incredulity. The disciples in part seem to be reflecting the Jewish social map of hierarchies, according to which women were in the lower positions and not deemed worthy of being regarded as reliable witnesses. The truthfulness of the women's report is not believed until men disciples bear witness to the resurrection. Whereas Jesus had taught the disciples that in-group hierarchies should be founded upon the criteria of internal qualities such as the practice of righteousness, love for others, and commitment to what God was doing in the person of Jesus, the disciples reverted to the social map that they had inherited. But the truthfulness of the women's report is verified in the story, making the disciples look foolish for not having believed the women in the first place.

In summary, a healthy religious community is always one in a state of becoming. No society is ever in total equilibrium (see Leach, 1977, for his reflections on the Highland Burma culture in this regard). That is, no society is ever a total reflection of its ideal vision. The disciples were no different. The ideals that Jesus had planted were functioning as correctives to the prevailing social maps, but integration into the everyday life by those accepting the new ideals was gradual.

A Concluding Overview and Summary

So how should we define a healthy religious community? No single answer exists, but according to a limited definition of religion from a cultural anthropological perspective and based upon the resulting functions of religion in society, several insights have resulted from studying various Synoptic texts.

From the standpoint of taboos, a healthy religious community requires a leadership that is not self-serving, caught up in its own ego needs instead of service to the constituency. Also, concepts of sacred time should be defined by attitudes and actions that serve the larger purposes of religion, not by taboos that become more important than the people being served. Likewise group boundary markers, such as purity laws, should be centered on internal moral qualities rather than external cultural distinctives.

The ideals of a healthy religious community should uphold servant-based leadership within its hierarchy, social boundaries that allow entrance by outsiders, and a commitment to a radical exposure of evil. The denunciation of scapegoating should lead both to the rejection of the evil pattern of scapegoating, and to an increased devotion to God and acceptance of sacrificial service to others.

While the realization of a healthy religious community is an unending process, the planting of the proper ideals, integration of these into everyday life, a commitment to living out the ideals (the basis for group identity), and an ongoing evaluation of the ideals and their implementation can lead to a healthy religious community that serves its God and society well. For churches today, part of the definition of a healthy church should come from the above insights, with reflection on the functions of a religious community in society providing a basis for continual self-evaluation.

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