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I woke up this morning and it felt chilly. Looked at the thermometer outside and it was 19 degrees. It has snowed a little nearly every day this week. In mid-October we were cutting firewood at the ranch in snow. Nearly six months of snow and cold! I know you folks in northern Minnesota consider this kind of weather simply an opportunity for more ice fishing, but we in Montrose, Colorado will remember this—to use the language of Laura Ingalls Wilder—as “the long winter.”

Winter or not, however, it has been an exciting time for me at Spirituality Shoppe. Ever since I started this non-profit twenty six years ago [starting volume 27 of the NewesLetter!], I was always doing some other kind of work as well. Usually teaching part-time somewhere. Well, those days are over and I now can give myself full-time to the work of Spirituality Shoppe. I have never had a clearer sense of my calling. And things are opening up. . . .

I wrote the previous NewesLetter (November 2022) just before I left for the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and the Society of Vineyard Scholars (SVS) meetings. While at these meetings I had a few significant conversations. Was it time to create a new “scholar’s gathering”? Back around 2001 someone gave Spirituality Shoppe a nice donation and encouraged me to “water my ministry.” After prayer and inquiry, I invested that money in buying plane tickets, space in a nice venue, and meals, for a group of “Evangelical Scholars in Christian Spirituality” to meet for a week in a beautiful Colorado location. Back then we evangelical scholars in Christian spirituality were a rare breed and mutual support was much appreciated. We went on walks, prayed for one another, reviewed papers that were submitted and read prior to our gathering, and generally had a good time. It was such a lovely week that it became the first of a ten-year tradition of annual, one-week gatherings (after the first year, they paid for their flights and Spirituality Shoppe covered the venue). I would guess that over the years we probably had fifteen to twenty people join at one time or another. We all became great friends and lots of books and articles and shared teaching arrangements developed from those relationships. In the end we did not need the meetings like we did in the beginning and it was getting to be financially tight, so we discontinued our annual gatherings.

Now here I was in November at the ETS meeting talking to Greg Peters (author of *The Story of Monasticism*, professor at Biola University and Nashota House Seminary, and a participant of the earlier group) about all the new communities that were popping up and all the people writing dissertations on “new monasticism.” We both agreed. It seems like something is going on. I asked Greg, “Do you think it is time to start a new gathering, one more specifically related to exploring what intentional Christian community or new monasticism [or whatever it might be called] could look like in the coming generation or two?” He said “Yes,” and recommended that we put some feelers out to our networks to see what might emerge. So I sent out an initial inquiry to about twenty-five people.

To make a long story short, our group of Explorers will have our initial Zoom meeting—to plan our first face-to-face gathering—next week. We are currently about fifteen interested people, but we represent connections to hundreds of Christian communities. We are theologians, community leaders, directors of non-profits, sociologists, and more. We are men and women from different countries, different races, and different Christian traditions. Our hope is simply to get to know one another and dream together about devoted Christian life. Everybody wants a face-to-face component to this group, perhaps hosted by a different community each year. I suspect we will be reviewing essays or other material prior to our gatherings. As before, I imagine we will go on walks, pray together, and eat common meals. One new idea we have mentioned is the creation of a collaboratively-developed resource link that will guide folks to literature, websites, communities, classes, podcasts and so on for people who might be interested. I think something holy is going on here and I am excited to see what may come of it.

I repeat, I have never had a clearer sense of my calling. At the moment this calling demands two things of me. First, visiting, nurturing, and networking Christian communities. Second, research and writing.

First, visiting, nurturing, and networking Christian communities. My attention has moved from students in schools to networks of Christian communities and their leaders. I still teach, but at the moment it is more informal. A few weeks ago I was in Atlanta, visiting the Candler Formation Communities, a program where seminary students live in homes,

sharing a common house vision, writing a common Rule of Life, and celebrating common practices. We sat around a table and shared life together. I learned about the Candler program from them, and they learned about the history and wisdom of intentional Christian living from me. Already this year I have visited the Urban Ministry Institute (Taylor University, Indiana), the North American Network of Charismatic Covenant Communities (hosted by the Alleluia community in Augusta, Georgia), and the Candler Formation Communities. I have had web conferences with InnerCHANGE, the Nurturing Communities Network and Order of the Mustard Seed folks pioneering a new expression at the Waverley Abbey in England. I am scheduled to travel to Denver in June, to England and Switzerland in August, and to Mexico in September. And this is only the beginning.

Second, research and writing. The proofs for *Deep and Wide* are completed. The cover is designed. We are just waiting for the book to be printed. Similarly my abridged edition of John Woolman's *Journal* is likely to be out before September. I was at Taylor University a few weeks ago filming a set of videos to introduce each chapter of the book. It would be a good idea to do the same for *Deep and Wide*. I need to carve out the time to do this.



What the completion of these two books means is that I now have begun devoting my attention to the big project. The BIG project will take me the rest of my life and I am just learning how to describe it, let alone write it. But the research is going well. I have read about ten books and a bunch of articles since the last NewsLetter.

So let me try and explain. For decades I have heard the cries of those who long for solid Christian community. I have also heard the cries of folks who struggle to make community/church work. I have been writing Reflections in NewsLetters on this since 2006. At that same time I began “reading my way through” the original sources and scholarly studies related to the history of monasticism, writing papers and uploading them to the Spirituality Shoppe website [I am now up to the 16th century]. I became convinced of the value of “old monastic wisdom for new monastic Christians.” Yet even voicing my conviction is difficult, particularly as someone who works largely within Protestant Christian circles. Protestants—for the most part—got rid of monasteries centuries ago. I say “for the most part.” That is part of the complication, because actually you can find expressions in history and today that bear similarity to cloistered convents, traveling Franciscan friars, and more, all of which are consciously affiliated with Protestant Christianity. I have visited many, and now I visit many more.

But even the mention of “monasticism” brings up questions. And using the technical Roman Catholic words (“consecrated” or “religious” life) does not help. The questions go something like this: Where is monasticism in the Bible? Isn’t all this just a system of “works righteousness” or some kind of pseudo-Christian elitism? Shouldn’t *all* Christians be living a committed life? Doesn’t Jesus command us not to make vows? Why should we even think of vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience? Aren’t we to be serving the world rather than escaping from it? And I can go on and on. Excellent questions.

The fact of the matter is that while Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians have developed a formal field of study called the “theology of religious life,” no Protestant to my knowledge has ever written a sustained, systematic treatment of this subject [if you know of anything *please* let me know]. Protestant Christians have no way of making sense of the whole picture: history, theology, practice. Consequently, my big project is to contribute to that need by writing a three volume series, one each on history, theology, and practice. I have already made an initial offering to the “practice” side with the publication of *Deep and Wide: Reflections on Socio-Political Engagement, Monasticism(s), and the Christian Life*. Now it is time to develop and summarize my research on history in order to clarify the questions and then to begin the necessary Biblical and other research needed to address the theological big picture. Needless to say, there is no way I can “answer” it all myself. That is one reason I have facilitated this collaborative discussion among fellow explorers from different contexts. The dialogue is far more important than any single book I could write. Nonetheless, my research and writing contributes to the discussion and the discussion contributes to my research and writing. This is the way.

I am convinced that it is really the *combination* of people listening to people, careful study, and experimenting with Christian living that is most important. Any one of these alone is insufficient. For example, one of our partners is Don Davis, founder of The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI). TUMI currently trains over two thousand leaders in neighborhoods of poverty around the world. He is passionate to explore what intentional Christian community might look like in contexts of poverty. We will gather and he will listen to our musings. Conversely, we get to discover how his wisdom might contribute to our own explorations. And Don is just one partner in this collaboration!

Study, share together, experiment with life. Then do it all again. This is my calling. And I am now free to devote myself—full time—to this work.

Reflections: Maintaining Christian Unity

On February 1, I spoke at a Wednesday night church meeting here in Montrose. I had asked the leader what I should talk about and he shared how he and others were burdened with the need for unity among Christians. My message that night was on Maintaining Unity. Three weeks later I was in Augusta, Georgia, with the Charismatic Covenant Community folks and the theme for the first part of that week was “receptive ecumenism,” a phrase that was new to me. A number of these communities are made up of both Protestants and Catholics and they have thought long and hard about unity. My mind was already on the topic and this gathering only added to my fervor regarding the unity of Christ’s followers. Here, in brief, is what I want to share from my discoveries: unity is often measured by standards; unity is nearly always fostered by character.

Unity is often measured by standards. For example, doctrinal standards. We divide over modern statements or ancient Creeds and identify “unity” by who can affirm a given doctrinal summary. For example, though things were more complicated (they always are), a major bone of contention between the Eastern and Western branches of Christianity a thousand years ago was the fact that the Western Church changed the mutually approved Nicene Creed, adding the phrase “and the Son” to the section of the Creed speaking of the sending of the Holy Spirit. Since then, each side looks to the uniting of the Church through the affirmation of their own way of wording the Creed. Currently, ecumenical meetings are frequently structured around discussions over carefully crafted doctrinal statements, striving to find wording that all sides can affirm.

Then there are ethical standards. For example, we may quibble over whether Christians can lose their salvation, but we affirm our unity through our commitment to basic moral values. But what are those basic moral values? In the first centuries of Christianity it meant refusing to be employed in the theatre or making sure women wore veils. In the middle ages it could mean avoiding lending money at interest. Some groups today will not permit pastors who are divorced to join in ministry. As we all know today, many churches and denominations are dividing over ethics. We measure our unity by these standards.

Sometimes we measure unity by experience. For example, “We don’t care if you believe in a premillennial second coming. We’re just a group of born again Christians.” So what must *born again* look like? We all know groups that make it clear that to be *really* united you need to have some extra experience: baptism in the Spirit,



entire sanctification, contemplative mastery. Experiential standards. Still others measure unity by an institutional standard. The whole point of *apostolic succession* is that we can identify the line from a current bishop back to the earliest apostles. If you are part of that line you are part of the one, holy, catholic Church. And still others—for example, groups of Russian Christians during the Soviet era—have made political alignments a measure of unity. And yes, we even measure unity by form of worship, ritual standards. (“You use the 1979 Book of Common Prayer?”)

You get my point. Christians often measure unity by standards. And indeed, there are good, Biblical reasons for doing so. “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them” (1 John 4:15). “A man is sleeping with his father’s wife. . . Shouldn’t you rather have gone into mourning and put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this?” (1 Corinthians 5: 1–2). “Submit to your elders” (1 Peter 5:5). Sometimes, in this culture, or in that situation, there are watershed issues where we just have to draw lines. John Woolman, in the 1750s, felt like slave owning was one of those issues.



We have put a lot of energy into clarifying and defending standards in an effort to establish some kind of “true unity of the Body of Christ.” My aim is not to disparage those who strive for this. I have seen fellow Christians exhibit both a generous sincerity and a willingness to learn from others in meetings designed to clarify standards. At the same time I wonder, because while we often measure unity by standards . . .

We nearly always foster unity by our character. Frankly, I believe that Woolman succeeded in persuading the Quakers to eliminate slavery from their midst not because of the strength of his arguments, though they were clear, but moreso because of the strength of his character. It is easy to point at a standard and debate—well at least some of the time. It is not so easy to make a conscious effort in prayer and life to grow in the virtues that will make us instruments of unity when it is needed. Let’s look at a few more passages of Scripture.

Consider Philippians 2:1–3. “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” On the one end there is this affirmation of unity. On the other end there is an encouragement to “consider others better than yourselves.” In between there is “like-minded,” “same love,” “one in spirit and purpose.” These are not standards we can define; it is a life we must live in relationship with others. *Receptive ecumenism* is an approach to disagreements that—instead of comparing standards—asks “How can I learn from you?” What does it take to become like-minded with others who disagree with us about ethical or political issues? How can I sacrifice my own convictions and consider others better than myself when working with a committee to choose music to use in local congregation’s worship service? Humility is not like a credit card, immediately available for use. It is more like a muscle, increasingly available as more attention is given it. I suspect that this is why Paul encourages the development of humility in this way in his letter. And if we need some model to inspire us to grow, Paul supplies us with the example of Christ Jesus in verses 5–8. Feeling situations from another’s perspective is a learned skill.

When we take logs out of our eyes, when we view the Body of Christ as a network of interdependency, when we listen—*really* listen—to another, we take Philippians 2 steps toward a unity that transcends mere standards.

Consider Colossians 3:14. This section of the letter lists a number of worthy virtues: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness (see v. 12). Then we read, “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” The unity described in this verse is the unity of the virtues functioning to nourish the believer and the church. Yet we must also notice that this passage follows immediately upon Paul’s description of the new people of God, where “there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all” (v. 11). What does love look like in the midst of racial differences (Jew/Greek) in the church? “Love is patient, love is kind” (1 Corinthians 13:4). What kind of patience sits with someone of another race to learn their story and find out why they feel the way they do about things? What does love look like in the midst of class differences (slave/free) in our church? Love “is not proud”; “it is not rude” (1 Corinthians 12:4–5). There are very subtle ways that we can be proud or rude in the midst of those who don’t dress like us, who don’t live in the same kind of home. But nothing can destroy unity like subtle contempt. Once again, love is not a standard we can nail down and enforce. We must grow into love.

Finally, Ephesians 4:3 declares plainly, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” Make. Every. Effort. It is not that we act on our own, apart from the work of the Spirit. Indeed, a few verses later the letter states: “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (v. 16). “From him . . . each part does its work.” My point here is simply to say that unity requires effort: experiments, failures, revisions, messy conversations, permission to allow *that* person to go on and on (“every supporting ligament”). I think that the predisposition to make every effort to keep unity is something of character. It is not just a matter of proposing a standard and then giving permission for another to edit it a bit. No, there is more here. It is the commitment to see the relationship through till we are built up in love. The spirit of “making every effort” is something that requires an investment. It must become part of the culture of a congregation, a community, a people of God.



Like you, I watch the accusations launching from this side to that in the midst of our differences. As I said earlier, it is easy to name standards and blame others for failure to conform. But I wonder. I wonder if I should be turning the light on myself, taking the log out of my own eye, blaming not the failure of uniformity to standards, but my/our failure to mature into the character of humility, love, and effort required to maintain the unity of the Body of Christ. Not easy, but perhaps essential.

May the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be with you all.
By God’s Grace,
Evan B. Howard