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Practicing *Koinōnia*

Abstract: *Koinōnia* is both the origin and telos of the church's existence. It is the goal of all Christian practices, and at the same time it is something to be practiced. Nonviolent communication (made up of the interplay of observation, feeling, need, and request) provides heightened awareness of the centrality of *koinōnia* as well as skill in working toward it. It is especially helpful in situations when the peace and unity of fellowship breaks down. It can also serve as a means of spiritual growth.

One of the most powerful signs of Christ's resurrection in the early church is the profound unity experienced among his disciples: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). The depth of Christian fellowship that developed is understood to be one of the Spirit's most precious gifts. When Paul wants to bless the Corinthian church with the gifts of the Trinity, he writes, "The grace [*charis*] of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love [*agape*] of God, and the communion [*koinōnia*] of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Cor 13:14). The fellowship of community is understood to be a blessing of divine origin beyond human powers to create. What is first of all God's gift only subsequently becomes a human task or spiritual practice. While we cannot create community (*koinōnia*) out of our own mere willing it, we can gladly nurture it once we are blessed with its presence.

Christian community is subsequent and derivative because its primary locus is the communion of love and freedom that characterizes the intimate mutual indwelling among the members of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though the Father and the Son retain their distinct identity and personal integrity, they are united by the Holy Spirit, who not only makes them an indivisible

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unity but also actively brings their love into the world. Each member of the Trinity dwells wholly within each other member, establishing a bond of inseparable unity among them. God's love flows into the world, because God does not choose to exist simply for himself, but to be in fellowship with his creatures. His love is therefore the eternal source and ground of human community. The Holy Spirit not only binds the Father to the Son but also binds Jesus Christ to the church, the members of the church to each other, and the church to the world.

Jesus Christ thus joins the vertical and horizontal dimensions of our life together, uniting us through the Spirit with God and one another. Because we belong to Jesus Christ, we belong to each other as well. In Christ, our relationships with each other become a means through which God cares for us and through which we grow in faith, hope, and love. *Koinōnia* describes the spiritual fellowship that is enjoyed by those who are knit together as one body. Various translations as "fellowship" or "communion," "partnership" or "community," it is the same word used by Paul when he speaks of the bread and the cup being a participation (*koinōnia*) in the body and blood of Christ. We live in Christ and Christ lives in us by virtue of the Spirit's mediation of Christ's living presence. This participation in Christ enables us to have a part in his ministry in the world as a community joined together in love.¹

The biblical witness attests that human beings were created to live in fellowship with one another: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). Ray Anderson writes, "The picture of the solitary Adam in Genesis 2 is one of self-alienation rather than self-fulfillment. . . . The divine image is not a religious quality of the individual person, but a spiritual reality expressed through the interchange of persons in relation."² Yet often in the church we find it difficult to see any evidence of the *koinōnia* of the saints. Instead we see interpersonal conflicts that lead to entrenched power struggles, denominational factions that give rise to gnawing anxiety about whether the church can hold together, pastors who exhaust themselves trying to resolve disputes among staff, chronic disappointment that feeds latent cynicism, and leaders who burn out and leave the church or act out and do widespread harm.

While we may confess in our creed, "I believe in the communion of saints," we long for actual glimpses of it in our everyday life. How is our witness to be credible if we are constantly at odds with one another? How are we to grow in

1. See chap. 1 of Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Pray without Ceasing: Revitalizing Pastoral Care* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

2. Ray S. Anderson, *Self-Care: A Theology of Personal Empowerment and Spiritual Healing* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1995), 238.

faith, hope, and love if we fail to acknowledge our need of one another? How can the *koinōnia* we confess by faith become a living reality among us?

Because of our fallen condition, it is not likely that we will see the complete living out of *koinōnia* until the fullness of time. In the meantime, however, there are concrete practices that build up the church, that contribute to *koinōnia*'s flourishing. At the very heart of our mysterious union in Christ lies our common life of worship, prayer, and participation in the sacraments. Weekly preaching of the gospel forms, informs, and transforms believers as it proclaims the living reality of Jesus Christ in the world. Prophetic action seeks to witness faithfully to signs of God's kingdom in our midst. In pastoral care, *koinōnia* becomes visible when believers entrust one another with their burdens and afflictions, as well as their common vocation and hope.

Yet *koinōnia* is often lacking in the area of our routine, everyday interactions. How might the church truly become what it is called to be: a community of mutual care, healing, and hope? Are there skills and practices that can help us communicate in ways that contribute to the building up of trust, honesty, and mutual understanding?

Nonviolent Communication

For the past twenty years, I have taught a process developed by Marshall Rosenberg called "nonviolent communication" (NVC), which teaches people how to listen with empathy and speak with honesty. When placed in a Christian theological framework, it is the best model I know for practical training in "speaking the truth in love." In this essay, I will seek to show how NVC nurtures a kind of consciousness and teaches a set of skills that can help people to live in glad fellowship with one another, respect one another in their differences, resolve their conflicts peacefully, and contribute to one another's well-being.

In the turbulent 1960s, Marshall Rosenberg, a clinical psychologist, decided to train ordinary people in skills of empathic communication. Disturbed by the violence he experienced as a child in Detroit, he sought to develop a model of communication that would contribute to cooperation and peace. For more than forty years, he has been involved in a range of educational and peacemaking activities, including acting as a mediator between Palestinians and Jews in the Middle East, between the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, and between police and gang members in the inner cities of America. Though he clearly has a special charisma for this work, I believe that he has developed an ingenious model for teaching the skills he embodies.

NVC has grown into an international training and peacemaking organization with teachers and trainers in Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, Russia, Asia, Africa, and North and South America. It is taught in schools and prisons, in churches and community centers, in colleges and universities. Teachers have developed curricular materials to use with children from kindergarten through high school. Practice groups are springing up all over the world. I teach a course entitled "Compassionate Communication: A Spiritual Practice" at Princeton Seminary in which NVC is central to learning the complex interpersonal, pastoral care, and leadership skills needed for ministry.

The overall aim of NVC is compassionate connection. The three major components for achieving a quality of mutual connection between parties are empathic reception, self-empathy, and honest expression. Each component has four steps: observation (O), feeling (F), need (N), and request (R). While these steps can be cognitively grasped relatively easily, the more challenging task of integrating them into one's ordinary functioning requires commitment. The third step, identifying needs, is the conceptual linchpin of the whole. Learning how to connect with one's own and others' needs is the key to transforming animosity or indifference into constructive, and sometimes even joyful, connections.

Whenever we seek to communicate clearly with others, it is helpful first to let them know which of their words or actions in particular are affecting us. If we can describe what we are observing (O) without at the same time evaluating it, connection is facilitated. Especially if we have a negative reaction to another's words or behavior, it helps simply to describe it as free from any evaluative comment as possible. Negative judgments tend to evoke defensiveness. Observations describe what is available to our senses: what we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. They are specific to time and context.

If your friend arrives thirty minutes after your two o'clock appointment, you might say, for example, "I'm puzzled because I have you down in my calendar for two o'clock." If you were to say instead, "You are always late for our appointments," you would obviously be mixing in an evaluation. Even apart from the inflammatory use of the word "always," you don't actually know that he is late; all you know is that your calendar says that he was due to arrive at two. He may have a different understanding about the time you were to meet. Separating your observation from any possible evaluation facilitates connection because it gives no offense. The intention in making an observation is to share helpful information about what in particular you are reacting to, not to criticize or lay blame at the other's door.

The second step in the NVC model is stating what you are feeling (F). We continually assess what is happening in our environment through our feeling capacities. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman argues that we are capable of appraising situations with lightening speed. Laboratories can now measure the interval between a stimulus and our emotional response to it in the thousandths of a second.³ Such speed, says Goleman, helped guarantee human survival when even a millisecond might make the difference between life and death. If a snarling dog lunges toward me, my fear reaction will send hormones to my brain that will activate my fight, flight, or freeze response before I have time consciously to assess the dog's relative danger.

Besides acting as a kind of radar for danger, our emotions are also closely tied to our thoughts. Anyone who practices cognitive-behavioral therapy or mindfulness meditation will know how intimately interwoven our emotional state is with our beliefs, judgments and thoughts. Here it becomes apparent that many of our emotions are not triggered directly by a change in the environment but rather by our rational assessment of that change. If I conclude that my accountant is cheating me, I would likely feel angry. However, if I realize that I have misinterpreted his report, my feelings would likely change. No longer believing that he is cheating me, I would feel relieved. The emotions I have depend upon the cognitive assessment I make. Learning to take note of our intervening thoughts and connect them with our emotions is a key skill in NVC.

NVC not only acknowledges the integral connection between feelings and thoughts, but it seeks deeper understanding by connecting feelings with needs (N). Assessing what we need is the third step of the NVC model. The key to developing a high level of NVC consciousness and skill lies in this step. It is a basic presupposition of NVC that we are trying to get our needs met in every moment. We are motivated to act, speak, keep silent, and move toward or away from someone on the basis of our needs. Virtually everything we do (or fail to do) is an attempt to meet a need. Thus, our "needs" are the source of our underlying motivation. What are we desiring, wanting, working toward, hoping for, or valuing at any particular moment in time? If our basic needs are being met, we might feel (for example) contented, excited, relaxed, delighted, joyful, moved, or happy. If our basic needs are not being met, we might feel frustrated, angry, sad, discontented, bored, disappointed, or anxious. In the examples I have given, the pertinent need in relation to my accountant would likely be for trust. The need regarding the snarling dog would be for safety.

3. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 2006), 23.

The need regarding the appointment with your friend might be for clarity or consideration, depending upon how you assess the situation.

By definition, needs contribute to life. Though they are often met in different ways in different cultures, needs themselves are universally shared. Thus all people have a need for food, water, clothing, warmth, and shelter. All human beings need rest. All persons have basic needs for safety, connection, community, support, respect, and understanding. People everywhere need hope and meaning. While Abraham Maslow identified a hierarchy of needs, suggesting that one cannot consider meeting the "higher" spiritual and emotional needs if one is hungry or thirsty, Viktor Frankl's remarkable book *Man's Search for Meaning* is persuasive in arguing that our need for meaning may be even more basic than our need for food.⁴

Notice that this use of the term "need" is quite different from its common use, where being "needy" can be seen as shameful or weak. In a North American cultural ethos, many persons strive to be as "independent" as possible or to appear to be as free of needs as they can be. In our culture, one risks being labeled as self-absorbed or selfish for trying to get one's needs met. One "shouldn't" ask for "too much." One student of NVC wrote, for example, "I hate needing other people and taking their time and energy. I hate it when I burden others with my pain."

By contrast, "nonviolent communication" (NVC) teaches that needs are qualities that contribute to life and that it is a gift to let others know what our needs are. To be connected to our needs is to be connected to our deep motivations, to the qualities of being that make life worth living. They do not point to a deficit, but rather to abundance. Some NVC trainers speak of the "beauty of the needs" as precious qualities of human being.⁵ To connect with a need is to connect with something desirable and life-giving. When "need" is understood as a fullness rather than a deficit, to connect with the need is to connect with a vital value or quality of soul.

For example, to connect with your need for affection, you might first become aware of its absence. Perhaps in recent weeks there has been little affection expressed between you and your spouse and you find yourself longing for its return. Here, to notice a "need" for affection is to experience it as a

4. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Beacon, 2006). Frankl's harrowing experience in a Nazi death camp describes how he kept hope alive through meaningful connections with others, which he believes was more fundamental to his survival than even his daily bread.

5. I first learned of the "beauty of the needs" from Robert Gonzales, whose teaching has greatly enriched my understanding of NVC as a spiritual practice.

deficit. In order to connect with it as a life-giving value, by contrast, you might ponder how much you enjoy affection in your intimate relationships. You might remember specific moments of affection exchanged with those you love and become aware of the tenderness, gentleness, and warmth that characterize those interchanges. You might even connect with “the beauty of the need” by thinking about your dog welcoming you home with exuberant wet kisses. By connecting with the beauty of the need, you no longer focus on a particular person or situation but rather connect with the quality inherent in the need itself as something you value. The process entails finding access to a life-giving quality that you cherish, whether or not it is currently a part of any particular relationship. If you connect inwardly with your longing for more affection between you and your spouse by this means, you experience it as something rich, multivalent, and filled with meaning. It is something of great value and not something to be embarrassed by or ashamed of. When you are connected to its beauty and worth, you can speak of your longing to your spouse in a way that invites him (or her) into its life-giving quality. Instead of saying something to the effect of “You never give me a hug when you come home anymore,” you might say instead, “You know, I’ve been longing for some time just to cuddle and talk. I’ve been missing our Saturday morning pillow talk ever since I started taking that Saturday morning class. Let’s find some time just to hang out and be together this weekend, okay?”

It is sometimes the case, however, that the needs motivating our behavior lie completely outside of our awareness. This is especially true when another’s words or actions stimulate strong emotional reactions. Any time we react rather than respond, it is because forces outside our awareness are at work. This is “the psychopathology of everyday life” that Freud describes so lucidly. Slips of the tongue, moments of lightning rage, or an irritability over which we have no apparent control are opportunities to become aware of significant nodal points of potential healing and growth. In NVC terms, it is an opportunity to connect with our unmet needs.

Feelings, according to Rosenberg, are never directly caused by another’s action but rather by our own underlying need. In the example of the “late” appointment, it is now 2:29 p.m. and your friend has not yet arrived. What might you be feeling? Annoyed? Worried? Relieved? You could be feeling any of these depending upon your need. If you want to know that your friend is safe, or if you want clarity about the agreed-on time, you might be worried. On the other hand, if you want to use your time efficiently and begin thinking that your friend doesn’t respect your time, you might feel annoyed, perhaps

extremely so. But if you need rest, you might actually feel relieved. You can take a much-needed break in the middle of the day and feel refreshed when he arrives. The source of your feeling thus lies in your need, whether for respect or clarity or rest, not in the other’s actions. It is not the fact of your friend’s being later than you expected that is causing your feelings, in other words; it is how you interpret that fact in the light of your needs.

NVC assumes that what the other person does or says is never the cause of our feelings. What this means practically is that no one else ever “makes us” feel anything. We alone are responsible for our feelings. One writer has remarked that the other’s actions are merely the detonator for our feelings, whereas our unmet need is the dynamite.⁶ This quip points to those familiar situations where a seemingly small provocation can set off an apparently disproportionate reaction. If you have chronic unmet needs around a particular issue, your pain may get expressed quite vehemently in response to the slightest triggering event. Working with these kinds of triggering events therefore has rich potential to bring about healing and growth. It is well worth the effort to uncover and work constructively with chronically unmet needs. Having the skill to transform pain into appreciation of one’s core values or needs reframes the experience of being “triggered” altogether. Instead of withdrawing, analyzing, or lecturing oneself on one’s obvious neurotic tendencies (“Here’s that same stupid dynamic I’ve been trying to overcome for years”), one becomes curious, even intrigued, to investigate these signs of life sprouting up. One moves gently toward the pain, inquiring into it with a caring and open attitude, for underneath the grief, rage, or pain lies an unmet need that is of great importance.

The process of finding a strategy to address the need is the fourth step of the model. Once we have clarity about what we need, we can make a request (R) that we believe will contribute to its being met. The request needs to be time-specific and doable, what Rosenberg calls positive action language. It is important to ask specifically for what you want, not for what you don’t want. Thus, you might say, “I’d like you to call me once a week,” not “I don’t want you to call me so often.” The request also needs to be specific and doable: “Would you be willing to give me a hug right now?” not “I’d like you to be more affectionate.”

Rosenberg sometimes comments that you should never agree to fulfill another’s request unless you can do so “with the gladness of a young child

6. Kelly Bryson, cited in *Connecting across Differences* by Jane Connor and Dian Killian (Brooklyn, NY: Hungry Duck, 2005), 83.

feeding a hungry duck.” In other words, requests are understood as gifts, not as demands. They give us an opportunity to contribute to another’s life, which Rosenberg believes is a fundamental human need. If you say no to someone’s request, it is likely because you are saying yes to some unstated need of your own. Conversations around requests are thus opportunities to connect with one another about both persons’ needs, which are equally valued in NVC. If the other responds to your no by blaming, coercing, ridiculing, or pleading with you, the request was secretly a demand. NVC jealously guards the freedom of each person’s choice and seeks to avoid making demands. Anytime you agree to do something out of fear, shame, or coercion and not freely or gladly, you build up resentment toward the other. You may submit now, only to rebel later. There is little chance for joyful fellowship with someone who uses his power over you to “make” you do something you do not wish to do.

Rosenberg coaches people how to hold on to their needs passionately but to be flexible and creative when it comes to finding strategies to meet them. If your spouse is too tired to go out dancing, the chances are that he needs rest. If you need fun and companionship, going dancing with your spouse is only one possible strategy. If you truly value your needs and your spouse’s needs, other strategies can be considered. (You could go dancing with a friend and your spouse could stay at home and rest. You could play Scrabble tonight and go dancing over the weekend. You could stay home and read your spouse some poetry that makes both of you laugh.) Once your spouse trusts that you want to honor his needs as much as your own, he may be glad to join you in brainstorming creative strategies (unless he is so desperately in need of rest that he is already asleep).

Honesty and empathy are the cornerstones of connection: honesty about what is going on in ourselves and empathy for others. If we are unable to connect with others’ underlying needs, we cannot hear them with empathy. If we stand in judgment of them, or diagnose or label them in some way, we will fail to make an empathic connection. Obstacles to connection include language that denies choice (“you have to,” or “you must not,” or “you should”), language that expresses demands (“If you don’t do this, I’ll do that”) or that threatens guilt (“If you don’t do such and such, I’ll feel so disappointed in you”). Labeling also blocks compassionate connection: “Roger always tries to dominate our conversations; he has such a need for control.”⁷ Even clinical

7. To say that Roger has a “need for control” is labeling or diagnosing him rather than truly trying to discover his need. A so-called “need” for control is not a true need. What is generally interpreted as a need for control is usually a need for trust or empowerment or even contribution.

diagnoses can undermine empathic connection: “He acts that way because he is bipolar, or a sexual offender, or an alcoholic.” Even if considered clinically accurate, the diagnosis prevents you from truly connecting with that person in the present moment.

Working through these four steps can seem mechanical or awkward, especially at first. Yet even at their most mechanistic they have the potential to change habitual dynamics for the better. Using the OFNR outline for developing skill is similar to practicing scales at the piano. If you want to make music, you need the daily practice. Using the steps as a mental guide facilitates clarity and contributes to ease in learning. Even a little OFNR can go a long way. Just as a simple Italian phrasebook can find you a place to sleep, make it possible for you to buy groceries, or enable you to navigate your way through an unknown city, so knowing the basics can contribute to your life in fundamental ways. This is so because NVC helps you become aware of your habitual ways of communicating and provides ready tools for change. By consciously working through each of the steps, you may become aware, for example, how frequently you label or judge others, or how in certain situations you express your feelings without any real awareness of your underlying need. Or you may realize that certain feeling words are not in your vocabulary because they are somehow linked with feelings of shame. Long-standing patterns become readily apparent.

Compassionate Communication as a Christian Spiritual Practice

Marshall Rosenberg does not consider NVC to be a Christian practice, though he does emphasize its “spiritual” nature.⁸ Rosenberg, a Jew by heritage, speaks of God as “Beloved Divine Energy,” which is the basis for every human being’s connection to life. For Rosenberg, NVC arises out of his desire to manifest love by connecting with the “divine energy” in himself and others. He writes:

If we get in touch with each other’s Divine Energy, it’s inevitable that we will enjoy giving and we’ll give back to life. I’ve been through such ugly stuff with people that I don’t get worried about it anymore, it’s inevitable. If we get that quality of connection, we’ll like where it gets us. It amazes me how effective it is. I could tell you similar examples between the extremist Israelis, both politically and religiously, and the same on the Palestinian side, and between the Hutus and the Tutsis. . . .

8. See <http://www.cnvc.org/en/learn-online/spiritual-basis/spiritual-basis-nonviolent-communication>.

All we have to do is get both sides connected to the other person's needs. To me the needs are the quickest, closest way to getting in connection with that Divine Energy. Everyone has the same needs. The needs come because we're alive.⁹

Though Rosenberg does not officially align himself with any particular religion, he sees connection with the "divine" in himself and others as the goal of human existence. NVC trainers and practitioners around the world belong to every conceivable religion. In my local practice group, I listen empathically to a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Lutheran, a humanist, a Quaker, a Jew, a Greek Orthodox, and an agnostic. When we meet we focus not on these differences but rather on our common humanity, by connecting with one another's feelings and needs.

Nevertheless, if I am going to commit myself to a spiritual practice, I want it to be congruent with my particular religions beliefs. Though I greatly value the way that NVC has enabled me to know and love people with a wide range of religious beliefs, I myself am interested in NVC because I want to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. After years of study and practice, I have come to believe that NVC's fundamental principles are congruent with my understanding of the gospel.¹⁰ The joyful mutual giving and receiving that Rosenberg describes as the goal of NVC can be understood as an image of redeemed humanity: not only how we were originally created to be but also how we will one day live in love, harmony, and fellowship (*koinōnia*) with one another in the kingdom of God.

We were created to live in community, to speak and listen to one another and to assist one another with gladness. Others cannot know us unless we consent to making ourselves known. Others may be able to surmise something about us, but if we want to be fully human, we need to reveal ourselves. Karl Barth wrote of this in the section of his *Church Dogmatics* that is concerned with describing what it means to be human: "This two-sided openness is the first element of humanity. Where it lacks, and to the extent that it lacks, humanity does not occur. To the extent that we withhold and conceal ourselves, and therefore do not move to know others and to let ourselves be known by them, our existence is inhuman."¹¹

When we want to know and be known by another, we seek a bridge, a way of connecting to the other. Finding our common needs and vulnerably asking

9. Ibid.

10. See Theresa F. Latini, "Nonviolent Communication and the Image of God," in *Perspectives: A Journal of Reformed Thought* 22, no. 5 (May 2007): 10-16.

11. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 251.

the other for help forms that bridge. Barth wrote of humans, "I should not take him seriously as a human being if I did not seriously try to find the way from me to him."¹² As for Rosenberg, so also for Barth: we engage in the mutual give and take of listening and speaking, as well as offering one another mutual assistance, "with gladness":

What we indicate in this way is really the *secret* of humanity. . . . In doing so we presuppose as the living center of the whole the decisive point that they meet gladly and in freedom. . . . There is a discovery, the mutual recognition that each is essential to the other. . . . [There is] an active willing of this fellowship, a willing which derives quite simply from the fact that each has received a gift which he necessarily desires to reciprocate to the best of his ability. And if it is asked in what this gift consists, the answer must be that the one has quite simply been given the other, and that what he for his part has to give is again himself.¹³

Barth's "gladly" and "in freedom" clearly correspond to Rosenberg's emphasis on meeting another's request only when we can do so in pure gladness of heart. Both Christian theology and NVC recognize the importance of honoring the freedom of each person's choices and in understanding the "gift" character of our life together.

From a Christian perspective, the theological ground of compassionate listening is found in God's own listening to human hearts whenever we reach out to God in prayer. In Scripture we are given countless instances of God's love being demonstrated through a listening responsiveness to human need. Bonhoeffer describes the integral connection between divine and human listening in his book *Life Together*:

The first service that one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for other Christians is learning to listen to them. God's love for us is shown by the fact that God not only gives us God's Word but also lends us God's ear. We do God's work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them.¹⁴

As we listen to others, we thereby witness to the love of the listening God and impart hope to those whose story has not yet been fully articulated or fully

12. Ibid., 257.

13. Ibid., 271-72.

14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 98.

heard. Such deep listening brings both spiritual sustenance and emotional healing in its wake.

Dealing with Criticism

One of the places that *koinōnia* breaks down, sometimes irretrievably, is when we are criticized by others. Take the example of a pastor who hears criticism from one of her parishioners. She might feel hurt and withdraw from the person who has criticized her, or she might lash back at him in anger. Alternatively, she might suppress her reaction and pretend not to be hurt or angry, only to express her ire to a third party who is then “triangled in”—which only serves to perpetuate the problem.¹⁵ Yet in the everyday reality of church life, what do church leaders do or say when their preaching, teaching, administrative style, or pastoral care is criticized? What are they to do with the frustration or anger that bubbles up or boils over as they hear others criticizing their sincere efforts? How might a skilled pastor adept at NVC deal with such criticism?

NVC teaches that it is possible to hear a message in four ways. First, one hears the critical comment simply as saying something true about oneself. In this situation, the pastor might hear the negative judgment and immediately take it to heart, thinking, “I did a bad thing,” or “I shouldn’t have said that,” or even “I can’t believe what an idiot I am.” Hearing a critical message in this way has the potential to perpetuate self-doubt, shame, or depression.

A second way to hear a critical comment is to defend oneself against it by blaming, discounting, diagnosing, or judging the messenger: “Who does he think he is, criticizing my work? He clearly doesn’t have the intellectual interests that I have and so cannot possibly appreciate what I am trying to do in this situation.” The pastor might think these things to herself, or she might say something directly to deflect the criticism: “Perhaps you are unaware of the controversy in the church that I am addressing here. There have been several articles in recent theological journals that consider this an issue of great importance.” Even if this is the reason the pastor chose this topic for her sermon, she needs first to hear and understand what matters to her parishioner. By defend-

15. Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985), 37. Friedman showed how emotional triangles perpetuate stress in an emotional system and keep issues from being resolved: “The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way a third party relates to each of them or to their relationship. When a given relationship is stuck, therefore, there is probably a third person or issue that is part of the homeostasis.”

ing her choice instead of listening with empathy, she fails to learn what is at stake for him.

A third way of hearing the message is to offer oneself empathy as one listens. The pastor might say to herself, “Gosh, I feel so discouraged when I hear that. I worked hard on that sermon and really wanted to contribute to my congregation’s understanding of what I consider to be one of the most important theological issues of our time.” Notice how she is acknowledging her feeling (discouragement) and need (contribution) in this empathic statement to herself. By anchoring herself in the beauty of her own need, she is more likely to stay centered and calm as she listens to her parishioner.

A fourth way of hearing the critical message is to “translate” the parishioner’s criticism into an empathic guess about his feelings and needs. The pastor can do this either silently to herself or aloud. Thus she might say, “Are you frustrated because you’d like to understand the relevance of my sermon for our church?” or “Are you feeling annoyed because you’d like some guidance in the kinds of dilemmas you confront in your daily life?” Here the pastor doesn’t even hear criticism because her focus is exclusively on understanding the parishioner’s feelings and needs. Even if he expresses intense frustration, she knows that this is a sign that what is at stake (his underlying need) matters a great deal to him. The pastor hears not that there is something wrong with her (or her sermon), but rather how fervent his longing is for a faith that is relevant. Heard in this way, his message would not be a source of discouragement but rather an opportunity to connect meaningfully with what really matters in the life of faith. With NVC skills in hand, the pastor would be so adept at hearing criticism that she would not even hear it as criticism. Instead, she would hear the honest expression of another person’s heartfelt values and longings.

If, by contrast, she were to react with anger and criticism (or self-blame and self-criticism), she could still return to the subject later, listening once again for feelings and needs. If she were to lash out with a counter-criticism or defend her choice, this is likely a sign that she is caught in judgment and blame, which are generating her feelings of anger. Here Jesus’ words offer wisdom and guidance: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back (Luke 6:37–38).”

Insofar as she is judging herself or the other, she has not fully connected either with her own underlying need or with his. In order to work with her own anger constructively, she would first need to be brutally honest about her own judgments. What are the thought processes that are feeding her anger? For instance, she might be thinking, "He shouldn't be so critical. He has no idea how hard that sermon was for me to write. He has also completely misunderstood my message." This set of thoughts can be "translated" into feelings and needs as follows: "I am so discouraged because I'd like some appreciation for my efforts. It took quite a bit of courage to preach that sermon. I wanted to help my congregation see how certain global issues are integrally connected to our daily choices in the life of faith." Once she fully understands her own needs for appreciation and contribution, she can develop other strategies to address those needs. In other words, she would not set all her hopes on getting that particular parishioner to appreciate her contribution. Instead, she might ask a colleague for feedback on what he considers the sermon's strengths to be. In addition, she might explore the pain involved in not being heard with her own intention (his "misconstruing the message"), exploring the possibility that his comment is "charged" for her because it stimulates one of her own chronically unmet needs. Her deeper need may be for reconciliation with someone in her past who repeatedly triggered pain over her unmet needs for understanding.

Surprisingly, just recognizing her own unmet needs in the situation has the potential to defuse her anger. Once she fully acknowledges her need for appreciation, she can actually go on to appreciate herself for writing the sermon she wrote. In acknowledging her courage in giving this particular sermon, she has already begun to meet her own need for appreciation. Doing this process of self-empathy is very different from justifying herself or refusing to see her parishioner's point of view. In connecting with her own needs, she grounds herself so fully that she is then able to see that even though she appreciates what she set out to do, this particular parishioner's needs were not met in this instance. If she appreciates her own intention fully and gives herself the understanding she desires, she doesn't have to become defensive over the fact that on this particular occasion her parishioner didn't get what he had hoped for. Once connected with her own life energy, she is free to explore his more fully. She can look for the vibrant beauty of his needs with openheartedness. What might have been the beginning of an alienated, distant, or conflicted relationship can thereby blossom into one characterized by mutual understanding and appreciation. The more clearly she listens to his feelings and needs, the more

deeply connected she will be to what matters to him about his faith and his participation in the church. *Koinōnia* will be restored.

Avoiding Pastoral Burnout and Misconduct

Of critical concern for those in ministry (as well as for the institutions that educate and sustain them) are the issues of pastoral burnout and sexual acting out. Some pastors regularly work sixty or more hours a week, fail to take a Sabbath day of rest, do not replenish themselves with worship (where they can simply be a participant), have few friends, and are cut off from an inner sense of what they need. In addition, in the line of duty, they may experience vicarious trauma of those suffering from tragic loss or victimized by violence. "Ministry is dangerous," writes Margaret Kornfeld, "for those who are disconnected from themselves."¹⁶ Ministers may be starving emotionally or spiritually and not know it. Because their duties encourage them to become absorbed in the lives of others, they can easily lose track of their own lives. Indeed, they may be completely oblivious to their own needs until those needs clamor for attention through burnout or acting out. Kornfeld captures some of the dynamics involved:

Those who burn out often have an insatiable internal system that requires them to give to others in order to fill an inner void. At the beginning of their calling, the void seems to be filled by the community's appreciation of their outreach and caregiving. But eventually, they feel empty again and so they try harder to give to others, repeating what has not worked, leaving them exhausted.¹⁷

Such pastors experience chronic stress in their work without ever really identifying it. This kind of stress can be ameliorated by the simple practice of connecting with their own needs and then searching for reliable strategies to meet them.

Pastors need friends with whom they can be themselves apart from their pastoral role. Putting friends as their lowest priority, far below effectiveness and productivity in their work, is a telltale sign of the breakdown of *koinōnia*. As they get caught up in busy-ness, many also stop drinking deeply from the well of Scripture and prayer, except to prepare their next sermon or class. Bönhoeffer's advice to seminarians addresses this temptation. In his book *Meditating*

16. Margaret Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness: A Guide to Care and Counseling in Faith Communities* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 281.

17. *Ibid.*, 283.

on the Word, Bonhoeffer writes, "Do not ask how you should tell it to others, but ask what it tells you!"¹⁸

Sexual misconduct on the part of a pastor or church leader shakes entire congregations to the core, bringing widespread disillusionment, acute pain, and mistrust in its wake. At the heart of sexual acting out lies a similar ignorance about one's own needs. Ministers who stay in their pastoral role around the clock and who have few intimate companions with whom they can simply be themselves are in danger of losing connection with who they are. If they are starving for emotional contact and yet are unaware of their own needs, they will be drawn to the vulnerability of those who come to them for help. There they can play a "heroic" role in helping the other while remaining essentially unaware of how much they themselves long for emotional closeness. Sexual misconduct is often preceded by inappropriate self-disclosure on the part of the pastor, a sure sign that the pastor is emotionally isolated, with too few friends in whom to confide.¹⁹ Other signs of personal distress go unheeded when the pastor fails to acknowledge his (or her) feelings and needs. Feelings of resentment or bitterness, conflict that is chronic and unresolved, persistent feelings of paralysis or helplessness, cynicism or depression, reliance on status or prestige as a core source of self-esteem, recurring sexual fantasies or fantasies of emotional intimacy with a particular person, painful difficulties in one's own marriage or family of origin that are not fully faced: all of these are warning signs for potential burnout or acting out. In each case, the pastor has failed to connect with his (or her) essential underlying needs.

In her book *Beyond Deserving: Children, Parents, and Responsibility Revisited*, Dorothy Martyn discusses the "great open secret of responsibility." She writes that "acting out"

is better used to refer to keeping subterranean matters from coming to the surface by "doing something" instead of becoming aware of those matters and thereby subjecting oneself to feeling something painful or unpleasant. In other words, "acting out" is a substitute for something else, and that something else consists of two things. The first is to become acquainted with what is happening in one's cellar, so to speak, bringing it to the surface. The second, stemming from the first, is to allow the discernment and judgment of the conscious mind to consider an action before undertaking it.²⁰

18. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Meditating on the Word* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1986), 33.

19. Kornfeld, *Cultivating Wholeness*, 290.

20. Dorothy W. Martyn, *Beyond Deserving: Children, Parents, and Responsibility Revisited*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 159.

"Subjecting oneself to feeling something painful or unpleasant" is precisely what the practice of self-connection enables one to do. One learns to acknowledge painful and unpleasant feelings; one faces shame, outrage, fear, jealousy, or helplessness in oneself and stays with these feelings long enough to discover the buried treasure hidden beneath them. The buried treasure is a bundle of unacknowledged yet precious needs that are clamoring for attention through the painful emotions.

In the case of sexual acting out, the chronic unmet need is often for emotional intimacy. But if such intimacy is completely lacking in the pastor's life and if he is unaware of how much he longs for it, he is vulnerable to acting out his desire rather than feeling the pain of his unmet need. By contrast, if he acknowledges his painful longing, he can then "allow the discernment and judgment of the conscious mind to consider" what kind of action he wants to undertake. Rather than "acting out" his feeling, in other words, he can consciously connect with the depth of his longing. If he can acknowledge the "beauty of this need" consciously, he will come to appreciate how much meaning, depth, joy, and delight emotional intimacy brings into most human lives. Only then can he decide what changes he might make to meet his need for intimacy in a way consonant with his values. In order to avoid burnout or sexual acting out, pastors and church leaders not only need a rich life of interpersonal fellowship but also skill in identifying and acting on behalf of their own needs.

Deepening Our Life of Prayer

NVC also offers tools for deepening *koinōnia* with God through prayer. At the heart of Christian theology lies the presupposition that our most basic need is communion (*koinōnia*) with God. As Christians, all of our needs and values are deeply shaped by the gospel. As John Webster explains, human beings are "not simply discrete units of personal need, but are what they are as they belong to an order of reality with certain ends."²¹ From a Christian perspective, the order of reality to which they belong is the kingdom of God. In other words, all human need can be understood in the light of the prayer that Jesus taught, that God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

In intercessory prayer, the church calls upon the compassion of God as it has been revealed in Jesus Christ. The stories of Jesus' compassion for the blind,

21. John Webster, "Response to 'What Wondrous Love Is This?'" in *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 163.

the deaf, and the lame, for the ill and the grief-stricken, have decisively shaped our imagination of God's compassion for the world. His feeding thousands who are hungry, not only for bread but for the smallest morsel of hope, feeds our faith. His astounding compassion even toward those who crucify him gives us a glimpse of the immensity of divine love. In all these ways, writes Andrew Purves, "Jesus' compassion becomes a window of access into the nature of . . . God's vulnerability and willingness to suffer with us. . . . Compassion reveals the inner nature of God."²² When we open our hearts with compassion to any that suffer, we are thereby enabled by grace to participate in God's compassion for the world.²³ Our compassion, in other words, does not arise out of our own meager resources but is grounded in God's own capacious suffering love. This theological grounding in God is critically important, because human compassion is not large enough to meet the depth of another's true need. God alone can meet the need of the human heart. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee," said Augustine.

In intercessory prayer, we listen to another with empathy and then intercede for her by giving voice to our understanding of her spirit's hunger before God. Sometimes this entails "translating" her thoughts and judgments into her underlying needs. Consider this example:

Wife: (*referring to a physical therapist*) She's a bad therapist.

Nurse: (*listening empathically to what the wife is feeling and wanting*). Are you feeling annoyed and wanting to see a different quality of care?

Wife: She doesn't do anything. She made him stop walking when his pulse got high.

Nurse: (*continuing to hear the wife's feelings and wants*) Is it because you want your husband to get better that you're scared if the physical therapist doesn't push him, he won't get stronger?

Wife: (*starts to cry*) Yes, I'm so scared!

Nurse: Are you scared of losing him?

Wife: Yes, we've been together so long.

Nurse: (*listening for other feelings behind the fear*) Are you worrying about how you would feel if he dies?

Wife: I just can't imagine how I am going to live without him. He's always been there for me. Always.

And later:

22. Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 12, 16.

23. See *ibid.*, 60–81.

Wife: . . . I don't know how I am going to get through this alone. I haven't anyone . . . not even to talk to, except with you here . . . now. Even he won't talk about it. . . . Look at him! (*Husband remains silent and impassive*). He doesn't say anything!

Nurse: Are you sad, wishing the two of you could support each other and feel more connected?

Wife: Yes. (*She pauses, then makes a request*) Talk to him the way you talk to me.

Nurse: (*wishing to clearly understand the need that is being addressed behind the wife's request*) Are you wanting him to be listened to in a way that helps him express what he's feeling inside?

Wife: Yes, yes, that's exactly it!²⁴

Notice how the nurse basically ignores the wife's criticism and judgments, first of the physical therapist and then later of the husband. Instead she focuses entirely on what she hears as the wife's feelings and needs in this dire situation. Empathically putting herself into the woman's shoes, the nurse guesses that the woman is desperate for meaningful connection with her husband before he dies even though she lacks skill in giving voice to this desire. With the nurse's support, she is able to ask for help in talking with her husband in what may be the last conversation of their life together.

As the dialogue continues, the nurse goes on to draw out the husband in the same empathic way, listening for his needs with sensitivity and care. She quietly facilitates a conversation between husband and wife that enables them to share their love and grief as they are about to be parted from one another. Had the nurse been a pastor, he or she could naturally have taken the opportunity to bind the husband and wife into a time of prayer, asking God for what they needed. Indeed, the concrete help the nurse offers this couple is itself an answer to the woman's unacknowledged prayer. The nurse's offer of help, in other words, can be understood as a sign that God has heard the woman's cry of anguish. Expressing the longings of another's heart in intercessory prayer strengthens *koinōnia* both vertically and horizontally. Such a prayer would enable the husband and wife to connect intimately with each other at the same time that they connect with God through prayer.

Similarly, when we pray for ourselves, we search within for the unexpressed longings of our hearts. In other words, our prayer is deepened through our increased skill in identifying needs. Instead of going directly to our requests

24. Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: Puddle Dancer, 2003), 105–6.

(all the things we long for God to “fix” in our lives), we meditate on the nature of our true need. When we become aware of feelings of discouragement, we may come to realize how much we need strength and courage from God. If we are disappointed in ourselves, we may identify our need for integrity or a capacity for more honesty. The process of connecting with needs is not a mechanical one, but rather a growing awareness of how all of our needs are finally rooted and grounded in God. They are not in the end human qualities at all, but rather gifts from above: “And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19). “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil 4:4-6). When we pray, we give voice in honest, vulnerable expression of our own heart’s longing. Prayer connects us to God and to all the needs fulfilled in him.

Scripture is replete with images of human need being fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the light of the world, fulfilling our human longing for illumination, wisdom, and understanding. As the bread of life, he fulfills each person’s need for daily sustenance, both body and soul. As the water of life, he assuages the thirst of the soul that aches for justice and peace, for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Scripture also underscores our fundamental need of one another. In the body of Christ, the church, we recognize our profound need for community, for mutual care, forgiveness, and love: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor 12:21). Our attempts to be self-sufficient are revealed as signs of our fallenness and sin. We need one another fundamentally. As Barth wrote, “My humanity depends upon the fact that I am always aware, and my action is determined by the awareness, that I need the assistance of others as a fish needs water.”²⁵ He later went on to say that my humanity also depends upon the fact “that I need to give my assistance to others as a fish needs water.”²⁶ Hence mutual and reciprocal care lie at the heart of what it means to be human.

The Christian image of the kingdom of God conveys the sense of “the beauty of needs” as qualities of being better than anything I know of. The kingdom of God is a place of abundant life, goodness, and the fulfillment of every joy. The marriage feast of the Lamb evokes an image where human hunger, both physi-

25. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 263.

26. *Ibid.*, 264.

cal and spiritual, is fulfilled. The lion and the lamb lie down together in peace. The rivers of righteousness flow down with a mighty roar. Justice and peace kiss. The hungry are fed, the lame leap for joy, those who were once in darkness now walk in the light. Unfathomable joy comes in that resurrection morning when God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. Thus when we seek to identify needs, our own or another’s, we are engaging in a spiritual practice that leads to prayer. In prayer, we identify the specific needs motivating us in a particular situation, but all our needs point us to God and to our longing for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.

Conclusion

Koinōnia is both the origin and telos of the church’s existence. It is the goal of all our practices, and at the same time, it is something to be practiced. Non-violent communication provides heightened awareness of the centrality of *koinōnia*, as well as skill in working toward it. It is especially helpful in situations when the peace and unity of our fellowship breaks down. When NVC is practiced as a spiritual discipline, members of the body of Christ will have practical tools for dealing constructively with criticism, avoiding pastoral burnout or acting out, and in deepening our life of prayer. At more advanced levels, NVC can also help church leaders to mediate conflict between parties, teach parents how to raise their children with love and respect, and promote real dialogue between parents and teens or husbands and wives. These leaders can help their parishioners heal from profound regret over choices they have made as well as find healing from past trauma.²⁷ Gifted practitioners can bring healing to whole communities in pain by helping them to hear one another’s needs in situations of profound grief or estrangement. While these more complex applications of NVC lie beyond the scope of this essay, even the most basic incorporation of NVC can deepen, sustain, and restore, again and again, our life together in the body of Christ until that day when our *koinōnia* with God and each other is manifest in its fullness.

27. See the forthcoming volume tentatively titled *Compassionate Communication: A Christian Spiritual Practice*, by Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger and Theresa F. Latini.