

# The Community, Courage, and Compassion of the Christian Sociologist

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## Abstract

Christian sociologists are called to enter relationships in community, to explore spirituality with courage, and to work for social justice with compassion. First, truth is neither purely objective nor subjective, but rather personal and relational, and ultimately communal. To know is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self. Second, truth cannot be realized without the courage to make ourselves vulnerable to it, whatever it may be, wherever it may take us. The courage required to open ourselves to truth must be doubled when we are subsequently thrust into the role of a prophet. Third, truth is not for the purpose of control or power, but for love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other. Active love of neighbor is not mere sympathy or even empathy, but compassion. Community is the context of true knowledge, courage is the character required for it, and compassion is its calling.

KEYWORDS: community, courage, compassion, Christian, critical sociology, truth, prophet, social justice

N. T. Wright's recent book entitled *Simply Christian* (2006) is in the tradition of the C. S. Lewis classic *Mere Christianity* (1952), and the subsequent John Stott classic *Basic Christianity* (1959). In his opening chapters, Wright casts Christians as makers and menders of relationships, explorers of spirituality, and workers for justice. I want to contemplate these themes in terms perhaps more germane to our lives and work as Christian sociologists. I want to ponder together for a few moments this morning about community, courage, and compassion. My musings are hardly my own alone, inspired as they are primarily by Parker Palmer's *To know as we are known* (1983), and Jürgen Habermas's *Knowledge and human interests* (1971). Those of you who have heard my presentations at recent ACTS conferences will hear more than one echo of them.<sup>1</sup>

## A. Community

Habermas delineated three different knowledge systems and their corresponding interests that are applicable to sociology. First, there is an analytic sociology built on a Durkheimian commitment to systematic observation, which has interest in prediction and control of human behavior. It is critiqued as being reductionistic and naïve. Second, there is an interpretive sociology built on a Weberian focus on the meanings people attach to their social world, which

has interest in understanding human social action. It is critiqued as being non-scientific and subjective. And third, there is a critical sociology built on a Marxian dedication to social change, which has interest in human emancipation. It is critiqued as being political and moralistic. The three forms of knowledge can be summarized by saying that the first is objective, the second subjective, and the third compassionate.

Palmer argues compellingly that truth is neither purely objective nor subjective, but rather personal and relational, and ultimately communal and compassionate. Modern notions of knowledge that have traditionally been valued by higher education see knowing as the act of a solitary individual, separate from other knowers, and separate from the object known. Such knowledge is said to be objective, and is held up as the ideal, yet it ultimately puts knowers in an adversarial relationship with the world and each other. Persons whose knowledge is merely rational or empirical often lack the capacity to enter into and help create community, because they have been schooled in detachment, isolation, and finally alienation.

Contrary to objectivism, postmodern notions of knowledge that are increasingly valued by higher education also see knowing as the act of the individual, but now as little more than the unfolding of private perceptions and needs. Subjectivism replaces reality “out there” with reality “in here,” knowledge that cannot be challenged by the perceptions of another person. Ironically, and just as tragically, subjective knowledge is equally estranging and imprisoning, becoming an equally effective means of holding the other at arms-length away from the knower. Persons whose knowledge is merely interpretive or introspective have simply found another way to isolate themselves, making the other an object of no real account, and destroying the possibility of community. They come to the same sad end.

Christian notions of knowledge hold truth to be neither “out there” nor “in here,” but both. Truth is located between individuals in relationship, in the dialogue of knowers and knowns. Real learning cannot happen until we are brought into relationship, because to know something is to have a living, personal relationship with it. Personal knowledge is not just private knowledge that leads toward individualism, because a person can be a person only at the intersection of numerous other selves. Both objectivism and subjectivism are not just non-communal, but anti-communal, whereas true knowing is a profoundly communal act, a way of creating community, not destroying it. Pilate got it wrong when, with either a cynical sneer or a despairing sigh of objectivism, he infamously demanded of Jesus “What is truth?” He would have come closer to it had he asked “where” or “who” is truth, especially with the embodiment of it standing before him. Christianity revolves around personal, not merely propositional or private truth. Christian knowledge, indeed all knowledge, is forged in and dependent on the relationships of community.

Twenty years ago, Jane Cowen-Fletcher wrote and illustrated a children’s book that told the simple, charming story of a young girl. Yemi is off with her family to sell a tub of mangos in a village market in the Republic of Benin. When her mother asks Yemi to keep an eye on her younger brother Kokou, the pleased big sister proudly announces to the women of the market

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that she is quite capable of doing so all by herself. The other vendors smile and nod knowingly. Inevitably, as soon as Yemi turns her back to buy a bag of peanuts, Kokou wanders off. While Yemi searches frantically for her little brother, imagining his terrible fate, he is shown being fed by other adults, napping under their watchful eye, and playing with other children, as Yemi's mother knew he would. Reunited with Kokou at the end of the day, Yemi thanks each vendor in turn, having learned a little more what it means to belong to a community. The title of the award-winning book was *It Takes a Village* (1995), based on the ancient West African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child."

One year later, then First Lady Hillary Clinton published *It takes a village and other lessons children teach us* (1996). She argued that, though "parents bear the first and primary responsibility for their sons and daughters," many individuals and groups outside the family have an impact on a child's well-being. Unfortunately, it was the election year of 1996, and the seemingly self-evident point was quickly politicized in the now familiar conflation of the public with the political (Hunter, 2010). Reacting to any hint of communalism, presidential nominee Bob Dole, during his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, said: "After the virtual devastation of the American family, the rock upon which this country was founded, we are told that it takes a village – that is, the collective, and thus, the state – to raise a child....[W]ith all due respect, I am here to tell you: it does not take a village to raise a child. It takes a family." The deep meaning of community was thereby simply conflated with state intervention, and the spectre of the state's intrusion into "private affairs" roused ready resistance. Christian spokespersons, such as Gary Bauer of the Family Research Council and Kerby Anderson of Probe Ministries, chimed in, insisting on the self-sufficiency of the family, and the folly of state-assisted child-rearing. A decade later, Senator Rick Santorum wrote a full rebuttal to Clinton entitled *It takes a family: Conservatism and the common good* (2005), which was praised by conservative Christian media leaders James Dobson and Pat Robertson and promoted through their organizations. Yet two millennia ago, Joseph and Mary parented according to the same reliance on the community. As appalled as we today may be, they were not charged with parental neglect when it took more than a day for them to realize that their twelve-year-old son Jesus was not in the traveling party of friends and relatives returning from the Passover festival in Jerusalem. Evidently, it took a village to raise the Son of God.

It also takes a village to raise a child of God, such as occurs in Christian colleges and universities. Let me also suggest that it takes a village to raise and sustain a Christian sociologist, and ACTS is such a village. Like all education, sociology is not finally about social facts or theories, but about truth and troth. Troth is a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship of trust and loyalty, a form of faith. To know is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self. It is not to imbue the world with objectivity or infuse the world with our subjectivity, but to become a co-participant in a community of faithful relationships. We find truth by pledging our troth. Truth is always personal, relational, and communal.

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## B. Courage

But living in an academic community is not easy. Indeed, a comfortable community is likely not a learning community at all, and if it poses as one, it may in fact be a dangerous community. When a community comes to believe with complete certainty that it has the corner on truth, it becomes unliveable. In Jacques Ellul's image (1985), we are then pinned down as a butterfly in a museum, on display in our entire splendor, but unable to move, because everything would have been said, finished, closed. This belief that no truth could be elsewhere or other has given legitimacy to many of the most oppressive horrors of human history. Sometimes religious traditions are used to obstruct inquiry rather than encourage it, because some religious educators fear truth rather than welcome it in all its forms. And it is fear, not ignorance, which is the enemy of learning; fear is what gives ignorance its power. To pursue truth honestly is to embark on a brave adventure of mind and heart involving risk. To be an authentic student requires courage, and it is only an authentic spirituality that opens us to truth, whatever it may be, wherever it may take us.

Twenty years ago when I was a doctoral student, I took a course on Karl Marx from a visiting professor from Russia who had been trained in the Soviet system. I wrote a paper entitled "Marx on Religion – Marx as Religion," in which I first examined Marx's perspectives on religion, before exploring whether Marxism had itself become a religion. My professor commented at the end of my paper that "your research, reasoning, and writing are impressive enough, but you have not let yourself be vulnerable to the argument." And he was right. I had set out to prove what my Christian sub-culture had led me to believe about Marx before giving Marx a fair hearing. I lacked the courage to be open-minded, and had been self-defeatingly defensive. Professionally, I passed the course, but personally, I failed it. I have long since come to admire the brilliance of Marx's social analysis, to rue the naiveté of his view of human nature, and to recognize the logical fallacy of his understanding of religion. But today there is far more evidence that on political and economic matters he was far more right than wrong. More importantly, I have never forgotten how easy and futile it is to be a cowardly and therefore dishonest student. I had a fortress mentality, understanding that to be Christian was to build ever higher and thicker cognitive walls behind which to barricade my soul, and from which I would occasionally fire volleys at the outside world, while somehow at the same time trying to win them to Christ. Occasionally, when overtaken with missionary zeal, I would lower the draw bridge and dash across the moat on furtive missions of mercy, but mostly hostage-taking.

I have since repented and opened myself up to what Rowan Williams (2003) in his analysis of Christian spirituality calls the wound of knowledge. If we fear the pain of truth, or the radicalization of truth, we internalize less of it than what education makes available to us. Students who come to a Christian university only to "strengthen their faith" by strengthening their arguments for what they came already thinking and believing break troth with truth. Fierce

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atheists like Marx are countered by equally fierce Christian apologists, but we eventually learn that ferocity does not get us far, because it casts us as adversaries, and blinds us to the other's truth. In *The chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan is not safe, but he is good. So too is Aslan's truth. It cannot be realized without the courage to make ourselves vulnerable to it.

Once comprehended, however incompletely, such truth must then be communicated. The courage to open ourselves to sociological truth must be doubled when the Christian sociologist is thrust into the role of prophet as conceptualized by Weber. Sociologists are not priests who speak *for* the religious establishment from within it. They are more like prophets who speak *to* the religious establishment from its margins. According to Rabbi Heschel, a prophet is one who: "(1) becomes inconsolably burdened by humanity's greed and arrogance, (2) is consumed by humanity's fallen plight and the alienating effects of greed and arrogance on individuals and institutions, and (3) rejects a spirit of acceptance among individuals and institutions toward the dominant cultural order" (Quoted in Woods & Patton, 2010:xliv). It takes courage to call for renewal of the Christian faith, to call for a return to the original essence and purity of an institutionally compromised and complacent faith tradition.

A sturdy and sensitive spirit is needed to avoid what Woods and Patton (2010) warned were the hazards of (1) depression and despair that drowns out hope, (2) arrogance that assumes superior insight, and (3) ruthless truthfulness that fails to speak the truth in love. It is not easy to talk to our brothers and sisters in Christ about the social construction of reality, structural evil, or social injustice in a way that they will listen. Nor is it sufficient to talk. Weber (1978) distinguished between emissary prophets who challenged the status quo by proclaiming a message, and exemplary prophets who challenged the status quo by living out dramatically different values. Speaking and acting prophetically makes sociology unavoidably moral, as the third tradition of critical sociology has always maintained it is and should be. It subverts the Weberian edict of value-free science, because as Desmond Tutu put it, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (Quoted in Quigley, 2003:8).

### C. Compassion

If community is the context of true learning, and courage is the character required for it, compassion is its calling. The ultimate purpose of sociology is compassion. St. Bernard of old observed that

Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity.

Others seek knowledge so that they themselves may be known: that is vanity.

Still others seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others: that is charity.

With the emergence of modern science, knowledge increasingly served a fourth purpose, power and control, and produced new forms of both emancipation and oppression. Gary Haugen of

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International Justice Mission defines social injustice as the misuse of power “to take from others what God has given them, namely, their life, dignity, liberty, or the fruits of their love and labor” (2009:72). But the spiritual goal of knowledge is not control or power, it is love. The act of knowing is an act of love, the act of entering and embracing the reality of the other. Curiosity and control may be celebrated in our intellectual traditions, but knowledge motivated by mere curiosity and control alone is what got Adam and Eve driven from the Garden. It is compassion in the form of active love of neighbor that is celebrated in our spiritual heritage. The world is not simply an objectified system of empirical objects in logical connection with each other, but an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion. Truth is an incarnation that lives, embodied and personal, the way, the truth, the life, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 14:6; 1:14).

The world is not in need of more cheap sympathy, feeling sorry *for* the other from a safe social distance. Nor are we in need of more costly empathy, feeling sorry *with* the other by vicariously experiencing the suffering of the other. What we need is more compassion, the compulsion to rise up and take action to do something about relieving the suffering of the other. It may take the form of more socially responsible personal life-style at the individual level, or more socially responsible charitable giving at the organizational level, but at some point must also include confronting the principalities and powers of this world and working for change at the systemic level. As Blasé Pascal (1688/1995) lamented, “Justice without strength is helpless, strength without justice is tyrannical. Unable to make what is just strong, we have made what is strong just.”

Ten years ago, Jim Keady was the soccer coach of St. John’s University, the NCAA Division 1 champions. As a theology student, he was also immersed in Catholic social teaching, and became increasingly distraught at the labor practices of Nike. When he refused to wear Nike clothing as a matter of conscience, he was fired because of the university’s endorsement deal with Nike. So he went to live with Nike factory workers in the industrial slum outside Jarkarta, Indonesia, on their wages of \$1.25 per day. He lost 25 pounds in one month while witnessing their 15 hour days and 7 day work weeks, encountering the local Mafia that the factory had contracted to coerce the workers and shield them from outsiders, and seeing workers put to death over disputes. When he took his concerns to Nike headquarters in Oregon and was rebuffed, he founded the organization Educating for Justice, which fights for living wages and fair working conditions for Nike’s 160,000 workers in 43 factories in Indonesia alone.

A present day Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Keady was called to compassion. He was not naively trying to change the world, but merely practicing what James Davison Hunter (2010) termed “faithful presence,” even when it is invisible and insufficient. But it was the natural outcome of his learning and love, of his truth and his troth, and without love of neighbor, we are nothing (1 Cor 13). Love is patient and kind, never envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. It does

not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth. It is personal, seeing face to face, knowing fully only as it is fully known. In the end, love is what it does, and it does not just feel empathy, but is moved to compassion. It does not pass by on the other side.

May we in ACTS go and do likewise. May we be simply Christian, as N.T. Wright urged, by making and mending relationships in community, exploring spirituality with courage, and working for justice with compassion.

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